

サハーニー平和のために旅行しますー Safarni: Travelling for Peace

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Educator Raphaëlle Ayach believes that peace can begin with the simple act of breaking bread together. The Ashoka Fellow created an innovative education program for children, based around the idea that emotional connection between individuals from different cultures would increase acceptance of diversity. In April 2016, she introduced her approach in Japan, at the International Christian University. *Every Child is a Global Citizen* is the motto of Safarni, the internationally regarded initiative founded by Ayach. The organisation aims to promote diversity by organising “Travel Adventures” in communities. During these programs, children aged 8-12 meet hosts from another country who introduce them to their culture. What makes this program uniquely successful is that it provides a chance for children to get to know and interact with new friends from different cultures. The opportunity to form a relationship with someone new gives students time to see a person who may look or talk different than them as a friend rather than as a stranger, foreigner or enemy. What makes the program sustainable is the incredible network of volunteers who are committed to the program’s vision of a more peaceful and tolerant world.

In keeping with International Christian University’s mission to educate global citizens, a group of Masters students partnered with civil society organisations in Tokyo to bring Safarni to Japan. The partnership involved a training workshop for ICU students and Japanese teachers, young people and local volunteers passionate about intercultural education. The training was held at the ICU campus, followed by a one-day Safarni Travel Adventure. During the Safarni travel, 18 children ‘visited’ Egypt and the Philippines, a rare opportunity to meet people from other backgrounds, and to “travel” abroad. A mix of children took part in the premier Safarni travel adventure at ICU. Some came from the local Mitaka area, while others were children living in welfare institutions in Tokyo supported by the Japanese NGO Mirai no Mori. This field note aims to explain the intercultural program held at the university that ultimately led to a similar field research project in Egypt. Preliminary results confirm the program’s mission and belief that when children are encouraged to make connections with people of different cultural backgrounds their tolerance is increased and prejudice and stereotypes are decreased.

Safarni Intercultural Workshops

Program Synopsis

Safarni means “Let’s Travel” in Arabic. The organisation, based in Egypt, provides virtual travel adventures for children to connect with humans from around the world. Safarni passports in hand, children board an airplane (in a room turned into a “plane”) and “fly” to another country. For example, they might travel to Brazil. After landing in “Brazil”, they enter another room that is decorated like Brazil, with Brazilian music playing. Real Brazilians welcome them and show them local dances, language, games, and sites. These Foreign Friends speak in their own language to the children, with a facilitator acting as interpreter. Children become accustomed to hearing a different language and the culture shock that often accompanies this experience. Because Safarni doesn’t want children to leave with the mistaken impression that other countries are utopias, the children learn about a social challenge in the country they visit and they brainstorm ways to address it. At the end of their adventure, the Foreign Friends share food they prepared from their culture. After a day of discovery, children get back on their plane and “fly” back home. The goal is that they discover the diversity of both the world, and their own country, without leaving their neighbourhood.

Program Background and Goals

The Safarni team is ambitious. They believe that the emotional connections that children form with the Foreign Friends during their journeys will impact their thinking in the long-term. When a Safarni traveller hears about different countries, cultures or religions in the future, they will have a personal, positive, reference point – one that guards against prejudice. Raphaëlle modelled the project on her own experiences. The personal relationships

she formed during her own travels had changed her perspective of the world, and made her more inclusive. She wanted to give the same opportunity to children in Egypt.

‘Know your enemy’ is famous advice adapted from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. But it arguably has equal significance in the art of peace. Getting to know people from a rival or disliked group has been shown to reduce stereotyping. Psychologists beginning with Gordon Allport in 1955, call it Contact Theory, and many studies have proven that when people from divided ethnic, racial or religious groups cooperate and work together towards a common goal, their prejudice decreases.

The children who take part in Safarni travel adventures are those who would never normally meet people from different cultures. Safarni started in Egypt because that was where Ayach was living at the time. However, a lack of diversity is an issue in many places in the world. It doesn’t depend on class or education or geography. Safarni has extended and taken different forms in Germany and Turkey as well as in Japan, and it has the potential to expand further.

Safarni Research in Egypt

Research Questions

The event in Japan inspired a broader research project about the impact of Safarni, currently being carried out by ICU Masters student Madeleine Logan in Egypt. The research project has two major questions. The first one is: How does Safarni impact on children’s acceptance of diversity? The second one is: How can the organisation, and organisations like it, best track and quantify impact? These questions are being answered with the help of 12 Safarni volunteers who have been trained as data collectors. Over a period of three months, they are carrying out a series of Pre and Post-test activities with more than 100 children

taking part in Safarni programs in Cairo.

Methodology

Pilot studies. Data collection tools were designed with the input of Egyptian children. A group of six children who had participated in Safarni before were consulted on the layout of the surveys, and gave feedback about how questions could be re-worded to make them more easily understood. They also helped choose the photos and words used for an activity about racial prejudice. Changes were made after this initial consultation, before another pre-test was conducted with a different group of children, who gave further feedback. Often, research about children does not involve children in the design process. This consultation process was designed based on the recognition of children's unique perspectives by researchers like Mary Kellett, and the ladder of children's participation created by Hart in 1992.

First assessment. Children visit a data collection room on the first and last day of Safarni, where they visit three stations. At the first station, they answer a short survey based on the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale, but with questions adapted to make them more child-friendly and relevant to the Egyptian cultural context. The survey includes a series of statements about people of different nationalities and religions, and asks the children whether they agree or disagree with them. During this survey children are also asked to identify Egypt and Africa on a world map. In previous Safarni seasons, when children have been shown a globe and asked what it is, many have guessed it was a soccer ball. Some children said it was "Planet Egypt".

Second assessment. In the second activity, photos of four groups of children of different races are presented, and respondents are asked to say how many children who share this race are polite, clever, bad and stupid. They are then asked to tell the data

collector anything they know or think about people of this race. This activity is based on previous social psychology research methodology, and is designed to test levels of prejudice among children.

Third assessment. The final activity is arguably also the most important because it gives children a chance to express themselves freely beyond the narrow confines of a survey or the activity briefly described above. It is something called a Body Map. Children are given a sheet of paper with an outline of a body, which they decorate to look like themselves. They are then asked a series of questions about foreign people and countries, based around the parts of the body. For example: For the eyes... Where do you see foreigners? For the ears... What do you hear about foreign countries and people? The head... What do you know about foreign countries or places? On the first day of the Safarni season, their responses are written on the left hand side of the paper. On the final day, data collectors ask a similar series of questions. Answers are written on the right hand side of the paper. Children's responses are transcribed and coded in QDM Data Miner and quantified using the program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Code.

Open assessment. On the graduation day, children are also asked to draw their best memory from the whole Safarni season. Many children Safarni works with are illiterate, and drawing is a less intimidating way of expressing themselves away from the privileged world of numbers and letters. This activity is based on the Draw, Write and Tell methodology, and children are asked to explain what they have drawn and data collectors record their answers. This is a very important element because adult researchers in the past have made the mistake of bringing their own interpretations to the drawings of children – interpretations that could be incorrect. The goal of this activity is to understand the most impactful aspects of the Safarni program from the perspective of children – a perspective which could be very different from

that of adults.

Challenges and Limitations

Language and translation has been incredibly important and challenging throughout. For example the Safarni team had many discussions about how to refer to foreign people during data collection. Many of the children that Safarni work with have little to no education. Most do not know the word for foreigner in Egyptian Arabic. And even if they do know it, this word is mostly used to describe white people, rather than all non-Egyptians. So if this word was used, it could either: be simply misunderstood, or would test attitudes towards only a small segment of people. Instead the team chose the term, Not Egyptian. This is not a commonly used term, and children without a clear concept of geography or different countries found it difficult to comprehend what Not Egyptian meant. In most cases they have only ever interacted with Egyptians. So in the second round of data collection, all data collectors were given a series of smiling headshots of people of diverse ages and races and introduced them as “Not Egyptian”. This gave the children a visual representation, which helped avoid confusion.

In the pre-test survey, the Safarni team wanted to find out whether the children they worked with had travelled abroad, as a test for their pre-existing exposure to different countries and cultures. However, this simple question presented a surprising challenge. In Egyptian Arabic, the word for Egypt and Cairo is the same. Egypt is called Masr, and colloquially Cairo is also referred to as Masr. So asking “Have you travelled outside of Masr?” could be interpreted as either Egypt or Cairo. The word for “country” – balad – is very similar to the word for countryside “baladi”, so asking ‘have you travelled to another country’ doesn’t clear up the confusion. Meanwhile, the word for “nationstate” is beyond the comprehension of most children who Safarni works with. In the end, the team decided on the wording:

Have you travelled outside of Egypt? As suspected, many children responded ‘yes’, but then mentioned a town or city in Egypt. This is probably due not only to the language issue but also the fact that many children don’t have a concept of geography, other countries, or where they are situated in the world.

Other mistakes were rectified before the second round of data collection. The first script for the prejudice activity conflated race with nationality. This wording was chosen in an attempt to make the activity easily understood by the children. In daily life in Egypt, black people are all referred to as Africans and white people are “Europeans and Americans”. To make the activity easy, the initial script mirrored these categorisations. But it was later re-worded because it was reinforcing the false idea that the colour of somebody’s skin was directly linked to their national identity and culture. This was a dangerous idea to replicate in Egypt, where darker skinned people from the south have been left out of the dominant national narrative. Even simple things like how we mark the surveys have had to change. During the first round, data collectors crossed the boxes the children chose, but they complained: Why did you give me a cross? Have I done something wrong? So this was changed to a circle. This research project will continue until November 2016 and will form the basis of Logan’s M.A thesis.

Preliminary Results

Although the research is not slated to finish until late November, preliminary results from the first Safarni seasons are positive. Before participating in Safarni, children were observed to be fearful of foreigners and had limited interactions with people of different backgrounds. They shared that they knew of other cultures through television programs, seeing strangers on the street and overhearing stereotypes. After experiencing Safarni students were able to explain what they learned about new cultures and the new friends they met. Their fear of

the unknown had been replaced by a positive and curious attitude. In the pre-test, only 7% of children were able to correctly identify Egypt and Africa on a map but at the end of the program over 40% answered correctly. The children also showed increased levels of thinking and analysis as each day progressed as they travelled to new places and met different people. For example, on the first day of one season when the participants travelled to China, their first question directed to their new Foreign Friend was, “Do you eat cockroaches?” In contrast, on the last day of the program their first question on their trip to India was, “How do you say the word for *tea* in your language?”

Conclusions

Although the results are only preliminary, they are encouraging and suggest that even a relatively short time spent getting to know people from different cultural backgrounds can shift a child’s attitude. This lines up with the key goal and mission of Safarni, which is to celebrate and educate youth about diversity in the hopes of creating a more tolerant and inclusive world. Children not only learned about different places and made real, human connections with new friends but they learned ways to interact with people who are unfamiliar to them. They exhibited the potential to grow from visit to visit and their questions and comparisons became increasingly more complex – they made important and meaningful connections between countries and people.

Now, more than ever, our world is in need of innovative, creative and effective intercultural programs such as Safarni to prepare our youth for a challenging future. Amidst the prejudice, racism, division that stems from ignorance and fear, Safarni gives future global citizens the tools to make real relationships and dispel stereotypes. The program seeks to achieve peace by nurturing the innate curiosity of children as they grow into more globally

aware adults with high levels of tolerance and a keen appreciation of diversity. In a planet as broken as ours is today, what goal could be more important?

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