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PEER GROUP AND MENTAL HEALTH: EMPOWERING YOUNG IMMIGRANTS AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

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The aim of the thesis project was to organise a peer support group for young immigrants, to empower them after the COVID-19 pandemic. This target group was chosen for the project because studies show that the mental health of young immigrants had been especially affected by the pandemic. The working life partner of this thesis was Pro Lapinlahti Mielenterveysseura, which is an organization that arranges different events, activities and exhibitions related to mental health. One of their projects called MIITTI, aims to support integration through cultural events, artistic activities, and exercise. Our project was based on the MIITTI method, developed by them under the umbrella of Pro Lapinlahti, to provide young immigrants a safe place to share and connect with other participants in a relaxed setting.

This project was implemented in July of 2022, with a total of four meetings that included activities as well as open discussions about mental health related topics. For that reason, this thesis contains definitions and information on mental health, coping mechanisms and peer support groups. During the project it was observed that there was clear demand for peer support groups for young immigrants, since many people expressed their interest in participating. At the end of the thesis, we also included the feedback from the participants, which was analysed, so that the findings can be utilized to organize similar groups in the future.

Keywords: Mental Health, Peer Group, Immigrant Youth, Pandemic Effects, Empowerment, Peer Support, COVID-19.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of years, society has shifted, and people have been forced to adapt in every aspect due to the pandemic of COVID-19. It is known that the pandemic affected people in diverse ways. The pandemic especially affected young people, and more specifically, those with an immigrant background. Young people are at a crucial stage in their lives, and the strain can be more prolonged for them. The lack of human contact may have caused symptoms that, in certain cases, require long-term treatment. (Niinistö, 2021.) According to statistics, the loneliness and distress of those who moved to Finland, increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Skogberg et al., 2021).

This thesis aims to empower young immigrants from the ages 18 to 29 through a peer support group. The age range of the participants was based on the Youth Act's definition of young adults (A 1285/2016). In the meetings, we applied the MIITTI method by promoting new connections, sharing personal experiences, and doing different activities together. At the end of each session, an open discussions were used to create a sense of belonging and thus improve the mental health of the participants. Through the conversations, participants learned that others had faced similar struggles as immigrants in Finland. Some of the topics discussed were related to coping mechanisms, mental health and the impact emotions can have on social interactions. Furthermore, the objectives were to provide a safe space for participants, promote open discussions of mental health related topics, and empower participants by allowing them to share about themselves and give them coping tools for the future.

The need for providing peer support groups in English was essential because due to the pandemic many young immigrants became isolated from others, and it had prevented them from being in social contact as before. This became evident from the number of people that wanted to participate in the group as well as the commitment from the participants in each session. Our work-life partner, Pro Lapinlahti, supported the implementation of this project and will be able to use the feedback we collected as well as our results and analysis for the development and implementation of new groups that target young immigrants.

2 BACKGROUND AND PARTNERS

Immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Finland, and on its current scale; the proportion of the population with foreign backgrounds is still small on an international scale. In 2019, Finland had a total of 423,500 people with foreign background, which was about 8% of the total population. (Ministry of the Interior, 2021.) As immigration increases in Finland, there will also be more demand for mental health services. In particular, the mental health of young immigrants needs to be supported. Moving to a new country and getting to know a new language, environment and society can cause a person stress and burden. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022). Thus, it is important to provide support and security for young immigrants. A young person needs at least one reliable adult in their life. However, if the young person does not receive support at home, youth work can be the alternative.

Because of the importance of youth work, there are already established groups from different organizations. That provided us the opportunity to reach our target group through organizations that were already working with young immigrants. However, for this project, we chose to cooperate with an organization called Pro Lapinlahti Mielenterveysseura ry, more specifically with their project MIITTI, due to the nature of this thesis and the work they do to promote mental health and well-being.

2.1 Pro Lapinlahti

To briefly provide more context about our work-life partner organization, Pro Lapinlahti Mielenterveyseura ry was founded in 1988 in Helsinki and cooperates with the Finnish mental health organization: MIELI. It operates on the premises of the former Lapinlahti Psychiatric Hospital. The goal of the organization is to promote people's mental health by organizing various activities, events and projects. (Lapinlahden Lähde, n.d.)

For the planning stage of the sessions, the work-life partner organization supported this thesis process by providing data about their methods and existing groups, resources, and social media platform to initiate contact with our target group. Having

them as a partner and being able to use their materials and data in addition to their support, facilities, and connections; were also of use when developing and implementing this project. We were able to use Pro Lapinlahti's resources and support to impact participants through this project while reinforcing and promoting their well-being.

Pro Lapinlahti is also involved and cooperates with several organizations, which supported this project from the start. One of the projects developed under the umbrella of Pro Lapinlahti is called MIITTI. MIITTI has several events that go in line with what we wanted to achieve with this thesis, which is why we cooperated with it for the planning of the sessions.

2.1.1 The MIITTI project

As mentioned above, MIITTI is a project that started as part of Pro Lapinlahti to develop a model that includes everyone while creating connections and interactions with others, regardless of people's backgrounds. To do so, they arrange several activities, groups, and events that follow the same basic idea: allow people to meet while loneliness is reduced, and equality is promoted. (MIITTI, 2021.)

The model developed and used by MIITTI focuses on creating events and workshops for and from the people. In practice, this means that people can freely join and decide how much they want to share and how they want their participation to be within the MIITTI community. Their events are free of charge and no labels or categories are needed to participate. Providing a safe space, appreciating individual talents, and seeking to reach commonness within people are the basic rules that they go by. (MIITTI, 2021.)

For MIITTI and Pro Lapinlahti, there is always the need to provide spaces and activities to meet other people, build interpersonal connections, and have a safe space to share (MIITTI 2021). As mentioned above, their activities are varied and aim to reach people from different backgrounds and age groups, but in practice most of the participants the organization works with are adults. One of the main needs that MIITTI has is to be able to reach young people, even though they do not limit their activities

by age. Consequently, we saw the opportunity to develop this thesis project to support our target group while helping the organization introduce a younger community to Lapinlahti.

3 THESIS PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Workshops and peer groups can be beneficial for people from different minorities and cultural backgrounds (Komulainen, 2021). According to the Institute of Health and Welfare, promoting the mental health of immigrants helps immigrants integrate better into society and increases their well-being and health. Emerging mental health issues may have an impact on immigrants' daily lives and their ability to integrate into a new environment. (Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022.) In a survey by the Institute of Health and Welfare, it was found that immigrants who moved to Finland during COVID-19 reported an increase in experiencing loneliness and isolation and being the target of avoidance and discrimination. (Skogberg et al., 2021.)

From our part, there had always been an interest in mental health related topics We knew mental health would be our focus when discussing possible topics for this thesis. Considering the negative effects that the pandemic had on people's mental health in the past couple of years, it was a relevant topic to work on. We knew from first-hand experience how difficult it can be to be a young person, and current information and research mentioned previously show that it is even more so for a young immigrant.

3.1 Thesis Aim

Before planning and developing our project idea further, we had to think about the aim for it. When talking about aim, we refer to the main purpose of our thesis project. For our possible aim we wanted to combine the need our work-life partner had with the information available on the needs of young immigrants in Finland. For that reason, we decided that the aim of this thesis was to empower participants through a peer group while promoting social interactions and providing a safe space after the COVID-19 pandemic. When we talk about empowerment, we take the World Health Organization's definition and define it as a multidimensional process that promotes self-awareness and control over one's life. It can result in changes within a person's social conditions and sense of belonging. (World Health Organization, 2010.) Through our sessions, participants had the chance to share about their lives while gaining a better understanding of themselves and their coping mechanisms.

Our aim, however, was not to have therapy sessions but focus on empowering and providing a safe space for our participants. Throughout the sessions, we discussed different coping mechanisms and tools for participants to use when dealing with difficult situations. That way, they could be better prepared for future obstacles that they may face. Knowing how we could have implemented the activities or sessions differently also gave more insight into the participants' needs and how to reach them in the future. We hoped to understand our target group's needs better, share coping tools with them and hopefully promote the development of future groups for young immigrants.

3.1.1 Objectives

After defining the aim of this project, we had to plan and set objectives to reach it. It was important to focus on how to define the objectives because addressing the aim of the project is not enough. Objectives are supposed to conduct the path and show how the aim is achieved. It is also crucial for the objectives to be as precise as possible; and by using SMART, we were able to shape the objectives more precisely and clearly. (Martin et al., 2010.) SMART is an acronym for the five areas of the objectives' analysis: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. To reach our aim, we set three objectives for this thesis project. We chose to apply the MIITTI method during our sessions because we wanted to establish peer group meetings in a relaxed and less formal setting and a safe environment.

Firstly, we wanted to provide a safe space for participants where they could share about their lives while being able to interact with each other. Connecting with other people who are in similar situations can bring a sense of belonging within the group and the community. The information that participants shared was insightful because it was received first-hand from our target group. Setting this objective was key to understanding the needs of the target group after the COVID-19 pandemic and it aligned with the need our work-life partner had to reach them. See TABLE 1 below for the SMART analysis of the first objective.

TABLE 1. SMART analysis of the first objective for this thesis project.

Objective 1: To provide a safe space for the participants in the peer support group.	
Specific	As facilitators, we wanted to understand the target group's needs and experiences while empowering them, which is why providing a safe space for them during the sessions was key.
Measurable	Common ground rules about respect and confidentiality would be established during the first meeting with the group. Feedback from participants would help us understand whether we succeeded during the meetings or not.
Achievable	Applying the MIITTI method was a way to help us achieve this objective because everybody came as the expert in their own life. We had access to materials and support from our work-life partner: Pro Lapinlahti. Also, one of this thesis' authors had been previously involved with MIITTI groups and activities, which was a favourable starting point for this peer group.
Relevant	Considering most organizations' activities were on hold during summer, it became evident that the target group needed a safe space to interact with others after the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis' work-life partner also had the need to reach our target group and provide a safe space for them to connect.
Time-bound	This objective was carried out throughout the sessions twice per week, from the 19th of July to the 28th of July of 2022.

Additionally, we set the objective to promote open discussions about topics that were related to mental health, emotions, and coping mechanisms, among others. Through those discussions, participants could share their experiences, and we could also get a better understanding of the needs of the group for the development of future groups. Open discussions were established as part of every group meeting to give participants the chance to gain self-awareness and share their perspectives. Below, in TABLE 2, the SMART analysis is explained in more detail for the second objective.

TABLE 2. SMART analysis of the second objective for this thesis project.

Objective 2: To promote open discussions about topics such as mental health, and coping mechanisms, among others.	
Specific	As part of our development and implementation processes, open discussions were included after bonding activities during every meeting. Those discussions would be about topics related to mental health and their experiences as young immigrants living in Finland.
Measurable	Participants could freely decide what to share and how to discuss these topics. Their feedback after each meeting would help us understand and further develop the implementation of open discussions for the group.
Achievable	Since the MIITTI method focuses on maintaining a relaxed setting for participants, open discussions were designed by us as facilitators, as part of every peer group meeting we held.
Relevant	Through open discussions, participants could gain self-awareness and share their perspectives. These contributed to the fulfilment of this thesis' aim and getting a

	better understanding of the target group's needs and struggles.
Time-bound	Open discussions about these topics were held during every meeting we held from the 21st of July to the 28th of July of 2022.

Lastly, we set the objective to share tools and coping mechanisms to empower participants, for them to use in future situations. By allowing participants to recognize their coping mechanisms and hearing their peers, we wanted to promote self-awareness and understanding that everyone is different and has their tools, but everyone can learn from each other. As facilitators, we had to prepare ourselves by finding information on coping mechanisms and tools available for this specific target group. In one of the sessions, we had the support of the Urban Nature Centre of the Lapinlahti area (Kaupunkiluontokeskus) to reach our objective. In the table below (TABLE 3), there is more detailed information about our analysis for this objective.

TABLE 3. SMART analysis of the third objective for this thesis project.

Objective 3: To share tools and coping mechanisms that empower participants for the future.	
Specific	Participants had the chance to reflect on their coping mechanisms and tools and share them with the group. As facilitators and social services students, we prepared ourselves by finding information about relevant available tools and coping mechanisms that participants could use in the future.
Measurable	There were three peer group meetings designated to discuss coping mechanisms and share tools based on information we had compiled.
	The meetings and open discussions led to finding a need regarding the kind of support and tools participants needed. Some material

Achievable	was prepared and shared with them in the peer group. One of the meetings was done in cooperation with the Urban Nature Centre of the Lapinlahti area (Kaupunkiluontokeskus), which has previous experience with coping mechanisms and tools.
Relevant	We wanted to support participants in any way possible beyond the peer group we implemented. To do so, we prepared them for upcoming obstacles or adversities by giving them tools they could use, to empower them for the future.
Time-bound	During the meetings of July 21st and July 28th, 2022, we shared self-care tools and information about coping mechanisms.

4 KEY CONCEPTS

To understand the relevance of this thesis project and what it entails, there needed to be information and definitions of the key concepts related to our thesis as well as the reason behind why we chose them. Each concept will be covered individually and explained to get a more accurate picture of the topic. In addition, in our thesis, we may use terms or methods that will need to be explained further as they become relevant to understand the purpose of our work as a whole.

4.1 Mental health

To better understand our target group and address mental health, we must first define it. By delimiting the subject, we wanted to approach the issues from a socio-emotional aspect by asking participants how their relationships and interactions changed, whether they had been able to be in social contact, and how social isolation affected them. We wanted to help participants understand themselves better and identify the factors that help them care for their mental health. To do so, it was important for them to think about themselves, their mental state, and the affecting factors. The need for mental health services has increased in recent years in Finland, as it has been seen on various social media platforms and in the news. The pandemic has raised the number of calls to the crisis hotline and the number of therapy referrals. (Valkama, 2022). In the following sections, we will also review the mental health situation in Finland.

Mental health is a broad concept that is difficult to explain briefly. However, there are many issues connected to mental health, and in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of mental health and its importance. A considerable amount of research has also been done on how much mental health affects a person's ability to function and contribute to society. Mental health problems have been found to increase morbidity, disability, and premature mortality. Unfortunately, it is highly typical for countries' resources directed toward mental health care to be insufficient, unfairly allocated, or inefficiently used. As a result, several countries have a major lack of care that has not been able to be improved. People with mental health problems are more

vulnerable to stigma, social exclusion, and prejudice, which worsens their distress. (Pan American Health Organization, n.d.)

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health refers to a state of well-being in which an individual obtains their abilities, can cope with normal life stress, is also able to work productively, and be a part of a community. Examples of mental health problems include mental illness and psychosocial disabilities, as well as other mental health conditions associated with significant suffering, incapacity, or risk of self-harm. Exposure to negative social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental factors such as poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental deprivation, can raise a person's chance of suffering mental health disorders. Mental health is usually determined by socioeconomic, biological, and other environmental factors. It is a basic human right for everyone to be able to have good mental health. As a result, there is a great need for mental health treatments.

There are cost-effective public health and cross-sectoral strategies and interventions to promote, protect and restore mental health. Individual social and emotional skills and healthy social contact, as well as proper education, employment, and a sense of belonging in society, are factors that protect against mental health disorders. However, exposure variables vary, because not everyone is exposed to mental health problems in the same manner. The mental well-being of people suffering from mental health problems is more likely to be worse. However, to protect citizens' mental health and enhance it, mental healthcare must consider the requirements of persons suffering from mental health disorders on an individual basis. (World Health Organization, 2022.)

There has been a lot of discussion in Finland about what is called the "Mental health bomb" caused by the pandemic, which has raised awareness about mental health. However, there are still changes to be made and concerns about the nation's health. Mental health has been plagued by the fear of illness, financial situation, stress, and sleeping problems. The years of the pandemic were quite significant in the lives of young people; since the lack of social interactions can cause symptoms, which in turn, can require longer-term treatment. MIELI is an organization that through discussion forums has shown young people's increasing need for support. (Niinistö, 2021.) This

thesis project aims to be part of the response and support that targets the promotion of mental health and empowerment of young immigrants in the country.

Efforts have been made to revive citizens' mental health with various projects. The National Mental Health Strategy was published in 2020. The mental health strategy aims to guarantee the relevance of the work in this area through the year 2030. Different experts from many fields who were chosen by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health participated in the strategy formulation. As part of a larger effort to promote people's overall health and well-being, the plan will concentrate on creating services, putting a suicide prevention program into place, and raising awareness of mental health issues in people's daily lives. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022.) In addition, low-threshold conversation support is offered in Finland through the crisis phone for mental health services and the Sekasin-chat as a method to provide individuals a place to talk about their life. The Sekasin-chat is one of MIELI's online discussion chats designed for people from 12 to 29 years old that need support or are looking for a safe space to talk (MIELI, n.d.) The number of contacts increased throughout the COVID-19 period, and more volunteer emergency workers are desperately required. The number of individuals utilizing these services has risen; with the Sekasin-chat receiving over 170,000 contacts from young people every year, but just one in every five being responded to. There were around 300,000 crisis calls in 2021, compared to 100,000 before the COVID-19 outbreak; and the number of crisis calls has increased even more in 2022. (Koponen, 2022.)

Positive mental health is a component of a person's overall health and well-being; it is critical to an individual's well-being and capacity to operate. Positive mental health can refer to psychological resources, such as the ability to deal with adversity, opportunities to influence one's own life, hope and a sense of control over one's life, the presence of satisfying social relationships, and a positive perception of oneself and positive self-esteem. The goal of healthy mental health is to get away from disease and problem-solving. Positive mental health has been shown to improve physical health, quality of life, academic success, and health behaviour. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022.)

4.2 Coping mechanisms

Mental health goes hand in hand with coping mechanisms because they refer to a person's innate ability to defend themselves and their mental health against harmful factors. When a person experiences something stressful and distressing, the human body tries to put itself in a defensive mode (Stenberg & Stenberg, 2016.) Coping mechanisms are people's more active ways of dealing with situations and acting under pressure. As people mature, their coping mechanisms develop, and new suitable methods are often found as well. These coping mechanisms include, for instance, expressing and managing emotions, exercising, engaging in creative activities, reading, listening to music, or putting an emphasis on the good things in life. (MIELI, 2022.)

According to its definition, coping is an individual's response to reduce the physical, emotional, and psychological load associated with stressful life events and daily problems. Therefore, strategies are responses that effectively reduce unwanted psychological "load". The effectiveness of the survival strategy is based on its ability to reduce immediate distress and combat it, although it also helps with psychological well-being in the longer term. The coping reaction reduces the pain and tries to work as efficiently as possible. From the individual's point of view, the stress factor can be looking different than the outsider's, this can mean that other people do not necessarily understand the situation because they do not experience it the same. (Snyder, 1999.)

According to the WHO guideline "Doing What Matters in Times of Stress", there are several strategies for dealing with stress and adversity. The handbook includes a variety of practical skills and knowledge that guided us in our sessions. During the discussions, we talked about different coping tools participants had and what they did to relax or cope with stress. We wanted participants to reflect on themselves, their values, and their hobbies by focusing on themselves through games. As stated by the guidebook, values are used to describe what kind of person an individual is or wants to be, also how individuals want to treat others and the world around them. In stressful situations, difficult thoughts and feelings can trap individuals, and that can pull them away from what their values are. Focusing on paying attention to others and living by their values helps manage stress much better. (World Health Organization, 2020.)

4.3 The effects of COVID-19 on the socio-emotional state

COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on student's mental health, with Yle News saying the demand for mental health services has grown exponentially with the pandemic. The pandemic has also prevented students from physically going to school; therefore, students have not been able to interact with their classmates and friends in the same way as before. This may significantly impact students' socio-emotional skills, as pupils have experienced anxiety and depression due to COVID-19 and thus sought relief from mental health services. (Niinistö, 2021.)

Socio-emotional development begins at a young age and continues into adulthood. Socio-emotional skills refer to, e.g., interaction, empathy, and emotional recognition. It has been found that a lack of emotional regulation is usually associated with poor physical and mental health; the socio-emotional state, deeply impacting mental health. (Rose et al., 2008.)

When we talk about the socio-emotional state in our thesis, we refer to how our participants' emotions and relationships were affected by COVID-19. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's mental health have also been the subject of several studies and surveys. According to an extensive systematic literature review carried out by the Child Psychiatry Research Centre of the University of Turku, depression, anxiety, psychological burden, and loneliness among young people increased during the pandemic (University of Turku, 2022). According to the KOTT Survey, there were few opportunities for social contact during the COVID-19 outbreak and national restriction measures in the spring of 2021, for which a sense of community has decreased (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). Furthermore, according to the spring 2021 school survey, loneliness increased in all the respondent categories, with around a tenth of boys and a quarter of girls reporting suffering from loneliness extremely frequently or continuously (Aalto-Setälä et al., 2021). For this reason, we hoped that the meetings would provide a space for young immigrants to share their experiences and potentially identify with the experiences of other participants.

4.4 Peer support

In our thesis, we use the terms peer support and peer support group, but our project differs from regular peer support groups. Since we applied the MIITTI method, we combined an activity with the sessions and, finally, saved time for open discussions. Our intention was not to ultimately plan what would be discussed, we wanted to guide the discussion between the participants and, if necessary, come up with talking points and suggestions.

Peer support is typically used among individuals who are in the same position or have had similar experiences in life. Participants have the chance to share their experiences in what is called a peer support group and, therefore, receive support from their peers during challenging times. People who receive peer support have more confidence in the future and a better comprehension of their own experiences. Listening to another person's survival stories or similar experiences to what they have gone through provides them with strength and hope. Loneliness and anxiety can also be alleviated through peer support. Peer support has also shown to minimize the likelihood of exclusion, guilt, and fear. Sharing similar experiences helps a person's mental health, and it may be a lifeline for many people coping with mental health challenges. (Mielenterveystalo, n.d.)

Peer support can discourage antisocial behaviour such as bullying and exclusion. Peer support groups can offer emotional support, mediation, counselling techniques with an emphasis on information, peer tutoring and mentoring, among others. Peer supporters, on the other hand, are typically volunteers, and peer support members participate freely in the peer support group. The non-judgmental nature of peer support enables an open and honest dialogue between participating individuals. Peer support groups can be formal or informal, but they always need fundamental listening skills, empathy for someone who is experiencing social or emotional challenges, a problem-solving attitude to interpersonal difficulties, and a willingness to receive help. (Cowie & Wallace, 2000.)

The activity of peer support groups is goal-oriented, thus not anyone can participate in them. The purpose of the peer support group is that people in a similar situation or who

have experienced the same crisis can share their experiences and get social support and new perspectives. Peer support groups are usually closed, and group members stay the same throughout the group. In peer support groups, it is important that the group members, group instructors, and structure remain the same from start to finish. Peer support group sizes are usually small because it enables all group members to be heard and interaction is easier. (Levamo & Heikkinen, 2021.)

Experts by experience are used in peer support activities. Expert-by-experience practices include information about customer and patient experiences in the creation of services and facilitate consumer orientation and the implementation of services. According to the National Mental Health and Substance Abuse Plan (2009 - 2015), the perspectives of the experts by experience have been widely used in the field of mental health work. Peer agencies and experts by experience have been developed over the years and are increasingly being utilized in the social and health sector. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022.) Equal encounters, individuality, and cooperation were found to be important in experts by experience. Developing the utilization of experts by experience also requires a long-term approach to taking care of their resources. The activity of an expert by experience can be an empowering and participatory experience since it allows participants to consider themselves as active actors and influences as opposed to only being service users. (Falk et al., 2013.) During the sessions, it was important to keep in mind that participants were the experts in their experiences and lives. Everyone should have the chance to share about themselves to enrich the group.

4.5 Empowerment

According to the World Health Organization, empowerment in the context of mental health refers to the capacity to decide upon, affect, and control events in one's life. The implementation of an empowerment approach promotes the service user's qualities, resources, and abilities to be recognized and developed. Empowerment is recognized as a central part of health promotion and prevention of disorders; and it enables individuals to actively improve their mental health and connect with healthcare providers positively. (World Health Organization, 2010.)

Empowerment suited our project idea perfectly because our meetings were designed to create a relaxed setting. At the meetings, we covered essential subjects and allowed our participants to suggest themes for discussion. To empower the participants, we gave them the opportunity to select how the group meetings would proceed and provided them the space to talk about their own experiences. We intended to add empowerment as a component of our thesis because empowerment is about the individual having the ability to make their own decisions and to influence on how to care for their well-being. We believed that by being empowered, our participants could gain new perspectives and influence their own decisions while bringing out their strengths. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021.)

4.6 Previous projects

In Finland, other peer support groups are also organized concerning the mental health theme. The organization MIELI Mental Health Finland conducted the "Mental Health and Wellbeing in Multicultural Finland (MIOS)" project from 2018 to 2020. The project aimed to increase mental health awareness and improve migrants' mental health. MIELI also created the TOIVO peer group model, which allowed participants to choose what to do together and then talk about any emotions that emerged because of the activity. (MIELI, n.d.)

For young people, several peer support groups have also been established. Groups organized for young people usually help them find meaningful leisure activities, and hobbies, increase social skills, and support independence. HelsinkiMissio, for instance, provides a variety of complimentary services as well as assistance for young people. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021.) At the moment, there is also an ongoing project called 2020-2023 Together for adulthood - Forward in Life (YEE), which supports the integration and inclusion of young people. The development work aims to meet the economic, social, and health needs of young people. The goal of the project is also to prevent inequality and marginalization that increased during the pandemic. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022.)

5 DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND METHODS

For this thesis, we wanted to cooperate with an organization or a project that works daily with young people or people with an immigrant background and focuses on the promotion of mental health. Having contact with potential participants through organizations, universities of applied sciences, integration groups, and other relevant places; as well as getting any connections from our partner organization, was a key factor in our thesis process. By approaching young people from an already existing group or by using our work-life partner's social media resources, we had better chances of getting participants and forming our group.

5.1 Development process

Considering the objectives for our thesis, our target group, and our topic; our goal was to develop a series of meetings. We had a rough plan of what we wanted to do as part of our project, but the first step was to meet Pro Lapinlahti representatives to talk about their needs as an organization, the kind of support we could get from them, and other details about our cooperation. After that, we agreed that the plan was to meet participants four times and provide a safe space by building a peer support group for them to connect and share with each other. Each session would start with an activity such as walking outdoors, cooking together, taking a moment to meditate, etc; to promote integration and self-awareness through the recognition of everyone's coping mechanisms.

We also wanted to have open discussions during each meeting to give the participants an opportunity to talk about mental health, life in Finland as a young immigrant, and life after COVID-19. The topics for the sessions were thought by us, as facilitators, to invite participants to share about themselves, connect using commonness and help them understand that others may be going through the same adversities as them. However, keeping in mind that the interactions may lead to deeper topics, we were prepared to share the definition of mental health, how emotions can affect interpersonal relationships, coping mechanisms, and how the pandemic of COVID-19 could have affected or changed those. Ultimately, we wanted to discuss topics that the

participants were interested in or were relevant to them. Understanding concepts in a simple way and being able to talk freely about how everyone interprets them, opened a path to discussion, vulnerability, and empathy.

As Komulainen mentions in the Finnish Refugee Council's guidebook, peer support groups can help participants improve their perception of themselves and allow them to recognize their strengths and what resources they have access to. Additionally, listening to others while also being listened to may help them receive other points of view and realize they are not alone. (Komulainen, 2021.) Therefore, we thought that these kinds of workshops would be valuable and needed for people who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, planning, implementing ideas, and developing peer groups such as this one, require plenty of time and proactivity.

5.1.1 Participants

Our target group consisted of young immigrant people between the ages of 18 to 29 that lived in Helsinki, Finland. We chose this age group because according to the Youth Act (A 1285/2016), those under the age of 29 are considered young adults. One of our objectives was to establish a safe environment for them; therefore, we kept the group small and limited the number of participants to ten. We included our participants in the project by listening to their feedback and adapting the activities of the meetings to their interests and needs. We wanted to encourage them to participate more in social groups, as participation can prevent mental health issues and exclusion (Mielenterveystalo, n.d.)

Our work-life partner organization organizes and offers a variety of activities, such as cooking, cultural events, languages, art, and sports, among others (MIITTI, 2021). However, when talking with them about their needs, it became evident that not many young people join their MIITTI events and reaching them had shown to be challenging. Also, since many young immigrants experience loneliness, participants needed to have the chance to meet new people and try new things in a group context where they felt safe and could relate to their peers (Mielenterveystalo, n.d.)

5.2 The MIITTI method

Considering our target group and what we were trying to achieve, we considered that forming a group where participants could share their personal experiences in a relaxed setting would help them realize they are not alone. During the sessions, we applied the MIITTI method, by welcoming young people and allowing them to interact in a casual setting. The method developed by the MIITTI project aims to promote well-being, mental health, and a sense of community and inclusion. Their method focuses on creating a relaxed and low threshold setting to provide people with a safe space where they can interact, listen to each other, and have fun. (MIITTI, 2021.) Those were aspects that we also wanted to promote within our group, which is why applying this method would align with the interests of the participants. Having participants propose activities or topics also helped shape the group to fit their needs, which made the interactions more meaningful.

Communicating with the participants also required an assertive approach so they could support each other and have a conversation with us and the group simultaneously. Assertiveness, in practice, translates to understanding and recognizing their opinions and points of view, while finding some balance and still setting boundaries as to what was not accepted or tolerated. Within a peer group, everyone should get an opportunity to share what they want to share while respecting others' boundaries. (Pipas & Jaradat, 2010.) The activities of our group were designed to be the starting point for participants to create a bond while having a safe space to socialize and develop self-awareness.

5.3 Risk Assessment

One of the biggest concerns when developing this kind of project, was the commitment from the participants, especially considering their ages and the nature of the group. Whether it was related to an emotional reason, a life situation, or a lack of commitment to the project, there could always be participants who no longer wished or could not attend all the sessions, and those situations always needed to be taken into consideration. Participation should not be forced in any way, and it was important to let the participants know that the group would meet more than once and that what they decided to share was important for this project. Having an open first meeting that starts

with a discussion of the expectations regarding the participation and then closing the group at the rest of the sessions can contribute to a sense of security. (Komulainen, 2021.)

During the meetings, there was always the chance that participants would share deep personal life details or emotions, and as facilitators and moderators, it is necessary to encourage openness and vulnerability. However, since participants are bound to have different experiences or opinions, one should always promote respect and listening to others. Setting up this kind of group was a risk when discussing personal topics, but as facilitators, we needed to rely on each other and make sure to address any situation that may arise. It was also important for us to keep in mind the needs of our work-life partner so that our project could be used as an example for the similar projects organized in the future.

To get a better idea of what needed to be done and whether it would be viable or not, we did a SWOT analysis of the project idea as part of our risk assessment process. SWOT is a tool that can be used in diverse situations and stages, but it helped us understand and plan the development of the peer group project in a more complete way (Quincy et al., 2012). The name of the tool (SWOT) is an acronym for the areas it identifies: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (Quincy et al., 2012). By doing a thorough analysis of the project idea before the implementation, we were able to set expectations and prepare ourselves to guide the sessions. Even though there were many weaknesses and threats both from internal and external factors, there were also several strengths and opportunities when it came to this peer support group.

As seen in the SWOT analysis below (see TABLE 4), we had many strengths and opportunities thanks to our previous studies, our work-life partner, and the timing of our project after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our weaknesses were mostly related to our lack of experience as group facilitators and the difficulty that Pro Lapinlahti had when reaching a younger target. Uncertainty was the biggest issue to face because it was both present in our weaknesses and our threats. Possible lack of commitment and the dates we had chosen were a threat to our project because people could not want to join the group during summertime.

TABLE 4. SWOT analysis for our thesis project.

Strengths	• Our work-life partner provided support and connections. • We had the possibility to have a budget to support our activities. • We had knowledge from previous studies. • We are young adults ourselves, so we had ideas on how to reach young participants.
Weaknesses	• This was our first time as group facilitators, so we did not have any similar previous experience. • The formation of a new group can lead to uncertainty. • The Lapinlahti area is not well known among many young adults, so our work-life partner's social media could not be enough to reach participants.
Opportunities	• There was a need for people to socialize after COVID-19. • Young people can be more open to new connections and groups than other age groups. • During summer there are fewer activities, which could allow the group to work better. • Our work-life partner had the need to reach young adults. • We could cooperate with Pro Lapinlahti's partner organizations for our sessions if we wanted.
Threats	• We needed participants to commit to the sessions and the group. • Despite our many ideas reaching young adults can still be challenging. • Most people had trips and other things planned for summertime. • Other organizations or groups had already been formed.

Our analysis gave us a good idea of what to expect and what we should prepare to face during the implementation phase of our project. In every project, there is the opportunity to develop it further, and this project was set to be the starting point for upcoming ones for our work-life partner. Since we were developing something that

had not been done before with the MIITTI method and our target group, we knew that there would be things to improve. For that reason, any possible weaknesses or threats could be seen as opportunities for future groups.

5.4 Practical implementation

At the beginning of July, we started reaching out to participants by using MIITTI's social media resources. Participants were recruited through several social media platforms, including Instagram, MeetUp, and Facebook. We also published a poster that we designed (see APPENDIX 1) on Facebook, in groups suitable for our target group. It contained basic information about the project and our contact information. For the registration process, we used a Google forms survey where those interested could enter their basic information (see APPENDIX 2).

We expected to have six to eight participants to join our workshops, with a limit of ten. By keeping the group small, everyone would have more chances to speak, and it would be easier to manage while keeping a low threshold. We had a total of 8 participants joining our meetings, with the number changing throughout the meetings because of unexpected issues or last-minute schedule conflicts. All participants that joined the group found out about the group through the MeetUp platform through our work-life partner's publication.

Our goal was to implement our project at the end of July 2022. We got the contact information for instructors for different activities we planned, and that Lapinlahti offers to the public. We contacted the Pro Lapinlahti leaders to arrange an exact time for the activities and we then started planning the sessions with more detail. In the end, we were able to agree with one facilitator to cooperate with us for one of our meetings. The sessions were held twice a week for two weeks. The intention was that each activity would last about 45 minutes and we would use 30 minutes for the final conversation. We were aware that time changes may occur, and some sessions took longer than we had originally planned. (See APPENDIX 3)

Our work-life partner, Pro Lapinlahti, helped us by brainstorming options for the activities with us and the associated costs. They gave us a budget which was used for the catering of the meetings and materials. In addition, Pro Lapinlahti has a partner, Kaupunkiluontokeskus, who offered the group a guided nature education session in one of our meetings. Our main responsibility was to guide the discussions and make our participants feel comfortable. Since we applied the MIITTI method, it was beneficial for us that one of the members of this thesis pair has personal experience with the MIITTI project. In this way, we were able to successfully implement it and use it accordingly. The table below (TABLE 5) shows the detailed timeline of our thesis process from the drafting of the project until the end of its implementation.

TABLE 5. Thesis development process

Date	Description
May 30th, 2022	We met with the work-life partner and discussed logistics, possible permit requirements and their needs to plan the group based on those factors.
June 29th, 2022	Planning and organization of the peer group sessions.
July 3rd, 2022	We started sharing the poster and registration form using different platforms on social media (Facebook groups, MeetUp, Instagram) and reaching out to organizations that work with young immigrants.
July 3rd to July 15th, 2022	Registration was open during these dates for those interested in participating in the peer group.
July 15th, 2022	We contacted the participants and welcomed those that were part of our target group to the first meeting.

	The group meetings started twice per week and the thesis project was implemented.
July 19th to July 28th, 2022	

5.4.1 Meeting 1: July 19th

We scheduled the first meeting with the group, and five people attended. First, everyone told their name and age, and some of them shared where they were from and their life situation, such as if they were studying or working. Most of them were studying in Finland. Some of them also shared that they joined our group because they wanted to socialise and meet new people, and they did not have anything planned for these weeks and wanted to enjoy the summer. Then, we explained our thesis and the purpose of these meetings. We also went through the common rules: everyone should respect others' opinions, be respectful and give everyone a space to share.

As a starting activity, we played a get-to-know-you bingo. The purpose of the game was to get people to know each other more and share things about each other. Bingo was a good way to discuss whether they had something in common. Participants were active and social; they seemed to enjoy the game and the discussions. We also played the "would you rather" game, talked about different things and shared our thoughts. Those games helped the group to get know each other more and discuss different topics. At the end of the session, we wanted to hear what participants would like to do in the upcoming meetings and how they felt after the first session.

5.4.2 Meeting 2: July 21st

We had agreed at the end of the first meeting to have a picnic outside. We had a total of eight attendees that day because not everyone could join in the first meeting. At first, we played ice-breaking games because three new people had joined the group. All participants were engaged and open about themselves during the games. Following that, we had an open conversation about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it had affected everyone. During the discussion, it was discovered that many people had felt similar feelings of loneliness and anxiety during the outbreak. We also had a brief

discussion on mental health and shared the mental health self-care tool to our participants (See APPENDIX 4). The mental health self-care tool's purpose was to make the participants reflect on themselves, what makes them happy or unhappy in their lives and consider their coping mechanisms. After that, participants wanted to play the Finnish game "Mölkky" together. It was a new game for many participants; therefore, they were eager to play it and work together in teams. At the end of the game, we thanked everyone for attending and reminded them of the schedule for the following week.

5.4.3 Meeting 3: July 26th

For this meeting, we had a total of six participants and, we cooperated with Lapinlahti's Kaupunkiluontokeskus. It is the urban nature centre of the Lapinlahti area, and they organize nature-related activities for the public (Lapinlahden Lähde, n.d.) The guide from the nature centre had prepared activities for us to do in nature. First, we went outside, where we warmed up, everyone took turns telling their names, favourite animals, and then proposed a stretching movement for everyone to repeat. Following that, we stretched and meditated as the guide explained about the history of Lapinlahti and Finnish nature to the whole group. Then we conducted gratitude practice, where everyone chose five objects from the surrounding area and reflected on what they are grateful for with each item. Afterwards, each participant picked a power animal from the guide's cards and described why they chose that animal. After the activity, we discussed the value of nature and how it can impact mental health, socialization, and self-awareness. Our participants were able to consider concerns related to mental health since we talked about it during the meeting. Providing our participants with social support and coping tools are factors that can help to promote positive mental health. (Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). Participants said they appreciated the session and that expressing positive thoughts was eye-opening and relaxing.

5.4.4 Meeting 4: July 28th

Seven participants attended the last meeting, and we agreed that everyone could bring something to eat and share with others. We began by preparing the food and then we

grilled it together. Surprisingly, time flew by, and we did not have much time left after preparing the food; however, the participants were not in a rush to leave so we could prolong the session. After that, a representative of our working life partner came to talk to the participants about MIITTI and its forthcoming activities; to which they appeared to be very interested in joining.

Following that, we had an open conversation in which we addressed topics such as hobbies and other activities. The group members appeared to be having a good time and seemed to be much more open and daring in starting conversations. Finally, we requested honest feedback from the participants by asking a few questions about the group, sessions, and their experiences (See APPENDIX 4). The participants said they were mainly happy with the sessions; there were things to improve and ideas to develop, but overall, they felt good after the meetings.

6 EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS

Developing and implementing a project requires plenty of planning and assessment to make sure that any necessary adjustments take place. The last part includes the evaluation of the project as a holistic event to analyse whether the objectives were reached or not, what worked or would need to be improved, as well as providing a reference for future projects and developments. The effectiveness and usefulness of the project come to light during the evaluation process. (Mcneish & Scott, n.d.) Outcomes need to be prioritized according to the goals, which for this project were focused on the implementation of peer support sessions that promoted social connections within the young immigrant community in Finland.

6.1 Evaluation process

For this thesis project, it was necessary to continuously evaluate the sessions and develop them with the participants as the group progressed. The evaluation of the process helps determine how the project may be improved upon or adjusted as needed. It also ensures that the target group's specific demands are fulfilled. The process evaluation also outlines the objectives and standards that will be used to evaluate the results, and it measures the project's accomplishments and relevance. (Suarez-Balcazar & Harper, 2004.) To support the development of the sessions, participants were asked for feedback in two different ways: one at the end of each session and one final feedback on their entire experience within the peer group at the end of the project. All the feedback was received verbally and freely. After each meeting, we wrote down the feedback and comments so that they could be compiled and shared in a general way with our work-life partner. It was also essential for us to reflect on the organization as well as the development of the peer group sessions.

As mentioned above, the first kind of feedback was collected after each meeting through open discussions and communication. This means that after every ending discussion there was time for the participants to share their thoughts, wishes, and opinions about the activities and conversations that took part in that day's session. As facilitators, this feedback was very important because the participants' interests and

suggestions would be taken into consideration for the planning and implementation of future meetings. The group required constant development to reach the goal of listening to the target group and involving them throughout the process as much as possible.

At the end of the project, there was a closing discussion where we gathered final thoughts and the concluding feedback on the participants' experiences and thoughts about the group. The main reason to have this kind of feedback collection was to get a better understanding of the needs of the target group for the development of future peer groups. Based on the feedback, we were also able to evaluate the objectives of our development process and how well we succeeded in our goals. Collecting the final feedback started with everyone sharing how they felt during the sessions and in the group, after which we asked them questions such as "how do you feel about the group and these kinds of groups in general?" and "what would you change or improve within these group sessions?". See Appendix 5 for more questions that participants were asked during the final feedback.

6.2 Evaluation tools

Several tools can be used when evaluating a project, and it was important to choose the one that could analyse the information gathered in a way that allows others to understand it altogether. For the analysis of this project, we used two different tools: group discussions and self-assessment. These tools were directly interconnected with the development methods because they both gave us, as facilitators, the information used for the analysis of the project. (The Robertson Trust, n.d.)

Group discussions served as an evaluation tool because, in the context of this project, they gave us information about the sessions from the participants' perspectives. Open-ended questions and the promotion of conversations among participants were key when doing the group discussions. Each participant was able to give their perspective, be an active listener, and compare their experience in the group. (The Robertson Trust, n.d.) This was of great use, because a lot of information was provided, and it happened as part of informal conversations that were packed with information about this project's impact on the participants.

Self-assessment notes were the second tool that we used for this evaluation process because we were able to keep notes about the implementation of every meeting as the project was ongoing. Contrasting what our perspectives were and how the meetings took place, allowed us to make changes and adapt the sessions as the group progressed. Personal reflection can be a great tool for facilitators because the information is written down as soon as possible, and therefore it gives a wider viewpoint when going through the information from the start of the project until the end of it. (The Robertson Trust, n.d.)

As facilitators, we both took separate notes after each meeting, we put the information in the same Word document to see each other's comments. This also helped us combine and compare them later, to make sure the assessment would be more complete. In the end, our thoughts and comments about the peer support meetings did not differ much, and we realized that we had mostly identified the same things. Considering this was our first time implementing a project of this kind, constant review and adaptability went hand in hand with the self-assessment processes.

6.3 Evaluation results

As mentioned before, brief feedback was collected after each session and one final feedback was received about the whole experience in this peer support group. Throughout the initial meetings, participants pointed out that they wanted to have the opportunity get to know each other on a deeper level, especially in the form of icebreaking games and activities within the group. Most of them showed interest in getting to know the area, listening to each other's experiences in Finland and their home countries, and trying to find common interests. By using different activities and promoting open discussions, the participants were given the chance to become aware of their situations while learning from others and listening to different points of view.

After receiving the initial feedback from the participants, the information was used to adapt the following meeting plans and plan future activities. That allowed the group to be developed constantly according to the group's needs and interests. Open and constant communication were important aspects during the sessions with the

participants but also between facilitators to be on the same page and work collaboratively.

Many of the participants had already been a part of other kinds of groups, but it was mentioned that they usually became messy, unstructured, and repetitive. Therefore, as facilitators, we wanted to make sure that the activities were also connected to Finland or the Lapinlahti area. To do so, we played several games and learned about Finnish nature and the old Lapinlahti hospital during one of the sessions. We also had the opportunity to walk around the area and share about MIITTI's recurrent activities for participants to consider after this peer group.

During the last session, all the participants said they were happy to have had a space not only to meet peers and discuss topics freely but also to enjoy the summer and get to know the Lapinlahti area. The closure feedback gave insights into the target group's needs, points of view, and interests. Not everybody had the same things to point out as others, but there were many points in common that most of the group agreed with.

The fact that there were two sessions per week made them feel more committed to the group and gave most of them a sense of belonging, as if they had known each other for longer. The majority said that after COVID-19 it had become more difficult to socialize, especially for those who moved within the past year, were studying online, or had limited Finnish language skills. Even though there were many games and activities during each session, they expressed their wishes to have even more meetings to keep building a bond with each other.

Another thing that was mentioned was the need for these kinds of groups, as they would have wanted us to organize more meetings and not limit the meetings to just four. By having more meetings, they felt they could have shared even more and create deeper connections. Additionally, some of the participants shared that due to a cultural point of view, and the fact that the goal was to involve them in the decision of upcoming activities, they felt that there were some short quiet moments. In practice, a few of them said they felt the need to try to come up with small talk, but that it was difficult because they did not know each other that well at the start.

It is important to mention that there were many people interested in participating in this peer group, but due to availability issues or being outside of the target group, they could not participate. For this peer group we only considered those who represented the target group. The chart below (CHART 1) shows that those who registered were from very diverse ages, which was interesting because it shows the need for peer support groups of this kind for people of all ages, but especially for young adults. At the same time, it provides future facilitators an idea of people interested in similar activities.

CHART 1. Ages of the people who registered for the summer peer group.
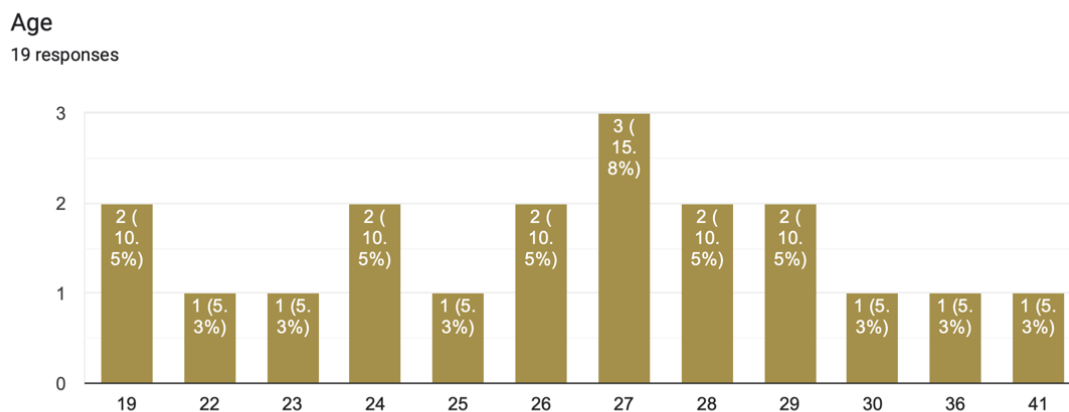
The outcomes of this project also show that peer support groups were interesting for people from different backgrounds and life situations. The Chart below (CHART 2) gives a good representation that people wanted to socialize and share their experiences with others. However, in terms of our target group, young immigrants who had been in Finland for less than a year or more than five years showed more interested in such events.

CHART 2. Background information of the people who wanted to participate in the sessions.

How long have you been in Finland?
19 responses

- Less than a year
- 1 to 2 years
- 3 to 5 years
- More than 5 years
- Born in Finland
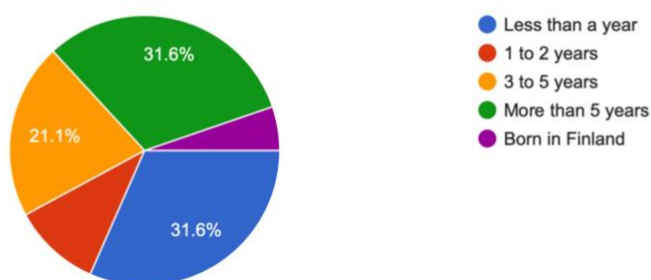
Overall, the feedback we got from the participants was mostly positive, with a few things that could be improved for future groups of this kind or this target group. This project was used as an opportunity to apply the MIITTI method, but at the same time, try something new while supporting the future development of new kinds of groups that focus on young people from immigrant backgrounds. In practice, that goes hand in hand with our work-life partner's needs because through feedback it is possible to understand the needs of the target group and how to reach them.

On the other hand, this is very relevant when talking about the participants themselves, because having feedback about a peer group can give way to the development of more groups in the future. Being able to understand what interests of the participants is one of the key points when organizing events or support groups for young immigrants. This means that they could have access to more events, groups, and activities that are designed for and with them. Projects such as MIITTI can continue to provide safe spaces and target young people, especially after COVID-19 because the feedback showed that there is a need for them after the last couple of years. Whether it is because people moved to Finland during the pandemic, they wanted to meet new people, or for other reasons; people had the interest to socialize and create new bonds with people in similar situations as them.

One of the biggest outcomes of this project were the layout and feedback collected from these activity-led sessions that organizations such as Pro Lapinlahti could use to adapt and reach possible participants. Overall, the project had a lot of acceptance from the target group and the means used to reach them proved to be successful. Taking

what worked for us during this project can lead to further development and support our work-life partner's future activities for this target group or peer support groups.

6.4 Work-life partner's feedback

As facilitators of this thesis project, insights about the target group's interests, experiences, and needs were received and analysed. However, we also felt the need to add the perspective of our work-life partner as part of our analysis phase. We stated previously in our thesis that there was an identified need from their organization but understanding their point of view and sharing their feedback in this thesis is key when evaluating our development and implementation processes. Through email, we were able to receive information on how the MIITTI project perceives our thesis' project and the development of a peer group for young immigrants using their already existing model.

Considering the current situation regarding young immigrants in Finland, it was very relevant and needed to create a group such as the one in this thesis. Through their events and activities, MIITTI's project workers could notice how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected people with immigrant backgrounds. Many immigrants were worried about their family and friends living outside of Finland and social connections decreased even more during the pandemic. (M. Mustajoki, personal communication, October 21, 2022.)

There was a lot of uncertainty, a sense of hopelessness, and tiredness from the participants that MIITTI had, but even so, people wanted to participate in events and have more activities organized to improve mental health and socialize. Given the restrictions and limited staff resources, however, they could not provide as much support as they would have wanted. Therefore, this thesis project was a way for MIITTI to reach a younger audience and open the doors of Lapinlahti to more people who can later join their activities.

They believe that our peer group was very beneficial for them as well as the participants. Since we held our sessions in July, we were able to fill in the gap that some organizations had left because it was summer, and most activities were on hold.

The feedback and experiences that MIITTI obtained from our participants and thus will be used for the planning and implementation of future groups and activities. (M. Mustajoki, personal communication, October 21, 2022.)

7 ETHICS AND RELIABILITY

When working with participants, clients, or people in general within the social work field; it becomes important to understand the ethical responsibilities and guidelines established to ensure ethical practices. The National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics in Finland (ETENE) explains that the key is to appreciate and respect people's rights, their freedom to choose for themselves and issues that concern them and give people fair and equal treatment. Human commonness should be the starting point to make sure that people are treated fairly. However, one still needs to be prepared to face issues and solve them through ethical discussions and trying to understand different perspectives. (The National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics, 2012.)

As facilitators, it was important to keep in mind the focus of the peer group sessions to understand any ethical aspects that surrounded this project. We had to prepare for sensitive topics, personal opinions and opposite ideas to be shared, but trying keep in mind that people always needed respect. Understanding the diverse backgrounds our participants had, made it necessary for us to have cultural awareness. That means that, as facilitators, we needed to be aware of our own struggles and privileges, while embracing and respecting the diversity of the group. From body language to the way things were communicated, there needed to be respect, openness, and the recognition that everyone is unique and an expert in their own experiences and culture. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021.) This is something particularly important not only for our group but in general for the social work field.

Before starting the group and reaching possible participants, we signed a thesis agreement document with our thesis partner. In it, there were responsibilities and expectations from each of the parts regarding ethics, confidentiality, and data collection. This was one of the starting points of the thesis process, according to what is proposed by The Rector's Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE) recommendations. (The Rector's Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, 2020.) After that, we had a conversation with our work-life partner, and we were informed from the start that we would not need to have consent forms for

the verbally collected feedback during our sessions or any kind of research permit (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2018).

To bring more reliability to our project and thesis, we wanted to include participants' feedback in our results to make sure their voices were heard. Since they shared about themselves and trusted us with their opinions, experiences and needs, we wanted to share those as accurately as possible. However, memory cannot be reliable at times, which is why we wrote down what happened, what was discussed, and the kind of feedback we received after each meeting. That way, the information shared would be more reliable and based on freshly collected data from the participants. By doing all that, we were able to go back to the information at any point and use it when appropriately within this thesis.

Since the feedback was collected verbally only, it can be difficult to prove the reliability of the shared information by us. We considered having written anonymous feedback but decided that verbal feedback would give participants the chance to share their opinions at the same time. Also, verbal feedback allowed everyone to hear what others had to say and reflect on others' perspectives. Considering that one of the objectives we had was to promote openness and social interactions, having this kind of feedback collection helped support those objectives too.

Bearing in mind that our target group was young immigrants, it was essential to understand that participants needed to remain anonymous to respect their privacy. The nature of the topics that were brought up during the open discussions could be sensitive, so there was always the need to promote open communication and respect for personal boundaries. Consequently, participants' data would not be disclosed in any way in this thesis to minimise all the risks that might affect their privacy. Personal information as well as detailed contents of the open discussions will remain private according to the EU General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act. (The Rector's Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, 2020.)

We wanted to promote open discussions, but we needed to make sure that participants were aware that the peer group was developed as part of the implementation process of this thesis project. This was something that we mentioned and explained to them from the start, so they would understand that the feedback received would be shared

in a summarized way with our work-life partner and in this thesis. (The Rector's Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, 2020.) They all agreed to take part in this thesis project and gave verbal consent after being informed.

As it was mentioned above, the information that was shared will not be discussed outside the group and we told participants that they always had the choice to stop sharing if they wished to do so. As facilitators, we wanted to establish a safe space without having to come up with an extensive list of rules that may limit the way participants act within the group. Therefore, it was important to make it clear from the start that everyone needed to be respectful towards everyone else and that confidentiality was part of the group. (The Rector's Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, 2020.)

8 CONCLUSIONS

It is known that there was an increase in the number of young people who needed support or being heard after the pandemic (Koponen, 2022). Our thesis aim was to focus on empowering young immigrants from the ages 18 to 29 through a peer support group after the COVID-19 pandemic while promoting social interactions and providing them with a safe space. As it was mentioned previously in this thesis, peer support groups can help develop a sense of community and belonging while reducing exclusion and promoting open dialogue (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). To reach our aim, we provided a safe space for the participants because they shared about themselves and their struggles, promoted open discussions about mental health related topics during all our sessions, and shared tools and coping mechanisms for them to have for future situations. We were successful throughout our meetings and reached our objectives based on the overall positive feedback that we received from those who participated in our peer group and the feedback from our work-life partner.

During the planning and implementation of our project, we applied the MIITTI method, which our work-life partner Pro Lapinlahti had previously developed through their project MIITTI to promote social connections, mental health and well-being, and openness while reducing loneliness. (MIITTI, 2021.) In practice, this meant we created a safe space and relaxed environment for participants to connect with each other while doing activities collaboratively in every meeting. We succeeded in applying this method because across the meetings participants were active by listening, sharing, and talking about their needs and experiences as young immigrants living in Finland. As facilitators, we were able to receive valuable information about their needs and perspectives.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave room for foreigners to become more negatively affected, both mentally and emotionally speaking. That is what recent surveys have shown about the impact on the general well-being and health of foreigners living in Finland. (Skogberg et al., 2021.) We were surprised to find out that there was a clear demand for peer support groups in English, since many people registered and showed

their interest in participating in the group. Our participants shared their feedback and overall thoughts about the group we organized, which helped us understand what worked and what could be improved for future groups. The main finding was that young people were eager to participate in different groups where they could meet new people. In addition, participants said that it has been difficult for them to make friends as foreigners, but even more so after the pandemic, which had affected their mental health. For this reason, the group was used as a way for them to meet new people and socialize while feeling better emotionally. The organized meetings also benefited the participants through bonding activities, by being a part of a group and making new connections.

8.1 Obstacles

Unfortunately, there was not enough time left for some of the end discussions, therefore, we were unable to address mental health and coping techniques as much as we would have wanted. It is important to consider the times for every activity as well as the open discussions because they are important for understanding the target group. Since it was the first peer group that we facilitated, we noticed that there are improvements to be made and weaknesses to strengthen. We planned our meetings to follow the schedule we set for each activity, but in practice, it was not easy to manage the time. Since we wanted to allow participants to speak, we found ourselves not wanting to interrupt or change the activity to promote open discussions. Participants stated that they would have wanted more sessions because four sessions were not enough to give a bigger sense of belonging and allow deeper connections within the group. Unfortunately, due to our tight schedule with our thesis no more meetings could be arranged.

8.2 Professional development

Throughout this thesis process and project implementation, we were able to polish our professional skills and put into practice what we have learned previously in our social services studies. As facilitators, we learned that the project process could be complicated and require multiple steps. We also needed to have a backup plan for

everything in case we encountered obstacles and be prepared for sensitive topics to arise. We both learned a lot about facilitating peer support groups from this experience. Being a facilitator for social meetings can be demanding and trying to include everyone in the discussion may be difficult. It can be challenging to give everyone the opportunity to speak while giving them adequate room to do so but it was important to be prepared to have hard discussions and understand different perspectives. (The National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics, 2012.) At first, we had some difficulties guiding the discussions fluidly, but with time, doing so become more natural.

Lastly, we gained professional confidence because of the project and the feedback we received; therefore, participating in such areas of work in the future will be more familiar to us. Despite our weaknesses, we were able to work collaboratively when writing this thesis and developing our project. Dividing the tasks but still revising our work together helped us organize and plan better. Being able to lean on each other as facilitators and thesis partners helped us reach our goals and develop ourselves professionally.

8.3 Recommendations

Considering the need from our work-life partner to reach young immigrants, our results and findings should be used as a reference point. The importance of developing projects or facilitating peer groups that aim to support foreigners and especially young people becomes evident given the interest our target group had for our peer group. To better understand mental health concerns in the field of social work and social services, we must first consider where the issues originate and discuss more profoundly on them. To do so, peer support groups are a good way to connect with this target group and gain deeper insight into their issues. (Komulainen, 2021.)

We recommend that Pro Lapinlahti and MIITTI take advantage of their social media platforms even more to advertise peer support groups and their activities well in advance. Most of our participants came from the MeetUp platform used by our work-life partner, which shows that they could also reach young immigrants for their events. Trying to figure out the target group's needs, and interests based on our findings could

bring different results for them and their reach. Our work-life partner also has a big platform and network of partners that they could take advantage of when promoting their activities. During the project, we were approached many times and asked if there were more events like this, which proves there is a need for projects such as this one, and people are interested in improving their well-being and mental health through social contexts.

Professionals in the field should be aware of how the pandemic has affected the mental health of young immigrants, more specifically their sense of belonging and relationships with others. Through support, people can be empowered, and their resources and coping mechanisms can be improved by giving them the right tools. However, peer support groups can have a positive impact on the participants if the facilitators understand their needs. (Komulainen, 2021.) All the feedback we collected was shared in a general way in this thesis document for future reference regarding these kinds of events for upcoming groups and new developments. This is not only for our work-life partner organization, but also for anyone interested in discussing mental health related topics and empowering young people.

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APPENDIX 1. Summer activity peer group poster

APPENDIX 2. Registration form

Contact and basic information form for people interested in participating.

1. Name:
2. Phone number:
3. Email:
4. Gender:
    o Male
    o Female
    o Prefer not to say
    o Other:
5. Age:
6. How long have you been in Finland?
    o Less than a year
    o 1 to 2 years
    o 3 to 5 years
    o More than 5 years
    o Other:
7. What is your occupation?
    o Student
    o Stay-at-home parent
    o Full-time employee
    o Part-time employee
    o Unemployed
    o Other:
8. Would you be able to participate in all the meetings (4 in total)?
    o Yes
    o No
    o Other:
9. Activity suggestions, questions, or requests:

APPENDIX 3. Implementation of the sessions

Dates: week 29 – week 30

Number of participants: 6-8.

	Duration	Program	Participants
Meeting #1: 19th of July 2022	90 minutes.	First introductions and discussion of ground rules, group expectations. Everyone played a small game to get to know others.	Facilitators (Sanni and Adriana) and 5 participants.
Meeting #2: 21st of July 2022	90 minutes.	Picnic and icebreakers and outdoor games to get to know each other better. After the activities, there was an open discussion about mental health and COVID-19.	Facilitators (Sanni and Adriana) and 7 participants.
Meeting #3: 26th of July 2022	90 minutes.	There was a guided nature activity, walking around the area and getting to know about the Lapinlahti area and Finnish nature. Afterwards, open discussion between the group about socialization and understanding ourselves.	Facilitators (Sanni and Adriana), a guide from Kaupunkiluont okeskus and 6 participants.
Meeting #4: 28th of July 2022	90 minutes.	Grilling and potluck as a shared activity, final thoughts about the group and previous peer support group experiences. Participants got information about other groups and activities in the area. Final feedback is collected about the group and everyone's perspective.	Facilitators (Sanni and Adriana), a worker from the MIITTI project and 7 participants.

APPENDIX 4. Mental health tool

APPENDIX 5. Questions asked during the final feedback session

1. How do you feel about the group ending?

2. What did you think of the sessions overall?

3. What would you have changed in the sessions?

4. How do you think these kinds of groups can be improved?

5. What would you have liked to do or see in a group like this?

6. How did you find out about this group?

7. What kind of activities would you have wanted to do as a group?

8. Why did you want to participate in a peer group like this one?