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Supporting Refugees and Newcomers:

A Case Study in the Essex Westford School District of Vermont

Ciara Ertle

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Master of Arts in TESOL degree

at SIT Graduate Institute

Brattleboro, VT

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Advisor: Elizabeth Tannenbaum

### Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank the school professionals who agreed to an interview for this paper. I really enjoyed talking with everyone and learning about their experiences working with English Language Learners (ELLs), refugees, and newcomer students and families in our district in Northern Vermont. I gained insight and perspective that will be useful to me beyond this paper and into my future career as an ELL teacher. I would also like to thank Superintendent Beth Cobb and the Essex Westford School District for allowing me to take a closer look at the inner workings of the ELL program and explore how our community is set up to support our students and their families. And finally, I would like to thank all of our professors; Dr. Elka Todeva, Dr. Marti Anderson, Dr. Susan Barduhn, and especially Dr. Leslie Turpin and Professor Elizabeth Tannenbaum for leading a few members of my cohort through the Refugee and Displaced Persons seminar that inspired this whole project. I am so grateful to all of them for sharing their expertise and guiding us as we discovered our passions in the field. And beyond that, thank you to Professor Elizabeth Tannenbaum for being my advisor and supporting me on this project.

## Abstract

The ELL classroom is incredibly diverse in many ways. Not only is it possible for many different countries and multiple races to be represented, but each student comes to the classroom with experiences unique to them and what has happened in their life. Care needs to be taken that we treat them as individuals and support them, in whatever way they need, to be successful and integral parts of the community. This is especially true for refugee and newcomer students. Like other ELL students, they are faced with trying to learn class materials without a full grasp of the language they are being taught in. They are both trying to navigate their own identity and figure out where it meets with the identity of the new culture that they find themselves in. But in addition to this, refugees and newcomers may have faced traumatic experiences, whether from displacement, war, or some other event. In schools across the United States there are ELL teachers trying their best to support, advocate for, and teach ELLs and refugee students. They work as both teacher and social worker in many cases and often struggle with a lack of resources to help best serve their students and their students' families. This paper will explore some of the methodologies and resources that are being used in the field, in particular, Whole School Approach, Participatory Approach, and Restorative Justice Pedagogy. Following that there will be a breakdown of observations and interviews from a case study I conducted in the Essex Westford School District in Vermont. This case study will be primarily composed of professionals in the community who work with ELL students and their families. It will explore what methodologies and resources are currently in use and what teachers would like to have or implement beyond what they have readily available or given to them by the schools.

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## Introduction

This topic is near and dear to my heart for multiple reasons. First, is the fact that my grandmother immigrated to the United States from Chile and I have grown up learning about her story and what she went through moving to, raising a family in, and spending much of her life in a country that was not her own. Second, though my experience was vastly different from that of refugee and newcomer families in the United States, I have also lived abroad alone in a country where I did not speak the language fluently. I taught English in Japan for four years and through doing so gained a new perspective. I learned in some small ways what it feels like to struggle through the simplest daily tasks, or more recently, how to navigate and stay safe during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic in a language you are not fully comfortable in. But I understand that as a white U.S. citizen, I had a lot of privilege when choosing to live abroad. The fact that it was completely my choice to move to Japan illustrates the privilege I had. I also had more help than families coming to the U.S. receive. I moved to Japan with a specific company that works with the local governments. We had people from city hall help us set up our new lives and continue to help us with anything we needed as long as we were in the program. We also had many families volunteer to host us and introduce us to their country. We even had a group in our city that organized little bus day tours around the prefectures. Even though I wasn't fluent in Japanese when I arrived, I never felt lost or worried for my well-being. In fact, when I got sick my first week in my new town, my supervisor from the Board of Education himself drove me to the hospital and translated for me. It was because of all of this help that I began to look closer at what refugees and newcomers go through in my own community and see how I could be of better service to these people and my community as a whole.

I learned a wealth of information through the Refugee and Displaced Persons seminar in the beginning of the second year of my degree program and I knew looking forward that I would want to turn my attention more directly onto the town I grew up and now teach in. After returning to live in Vermont, I began working in the Essex Westford School District in Chittenden County. I have the experience of teaching English abroad, but now as I learn to adjust my teaching to the U.S. context, I realized I wanted to learn as much as I could about the systems in place and talk to professionals currently working in the community to find out what resources they need or would like to have. In this paper, I will review some research on different teaching methods currently being used around the country to support young refugee or newcomer students. Then I will explore and highlight what I learned from the professionals I interviewed about the work that they do every day.

### **Whole School Approach**

Whole School Approach (WSA) is a teaching method that was outlined by Professor Katherine Weare in 2015. Weare worked in conjunction with the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in the UK, reviewing best practices for mental health in the classroom. She published an article entitled, "What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools? Advice for Schools and Framework Document" that discusses the conception of a WSA. It occurs very naturally in schools with passionate teachers and administrators. In this approach, all members of a school community hold equal responsibility and take active roles in maximizing the learning experiences of all students. It is a collaborative method constructed to improve student learning and support their wellbeing. Every school has unique needs so this method will not be applied the same universally to all schools,

but the main premise is that if the school prioritizes working together to support the students, both the school and the students will benefit.

Refugee children might have many things in common like interrupted schooling; possible limited literacy in their native language, multilingualism, a lack of English language skills, or trauma. But each individual child still has their own experiences and even though children might come from the same country, their educational and social needs may be completely different (Matthews, 2008). Their needs must be met as individuals, and because each child has such a wide variety of individual needs, a good method is the WSA. It is particularly important for refugee children that there be some stability in school. They should feel like school is a safe place for them. An example of this method in practice is described by a high school principal in Walla Walla, Washington,

A systematic attempt was made by teachers and staff at Lincoln High to transform the culture and interactions at the school in order to become sensitive and supportive of such heavily traumatized youth, and to increase their resilience and their capacity to learn. Four systemic “virtuous cycles” were identified as having been implemented at the school, each reinforcing different values and behaviors—among teachers and staff, between teachers/staff and students, and among students themselves—all supporting a safe, supportive learning environment. Since these changes were made, fewer discipline problems and suspensions have occurred, and the school has achieved a higher student retention rate. (Sporleder, 2017, p. 292)

Community is not only limited to the ELL classroom. There are many ways that the school as a whole can support them, starting from curriculum and stretching to social events and community outreach. If the entire school can come together to create a stable environment for these students,

it will decrease vulnerability and allow students and the students` families to be more successful in school and in their future life. “Whole-school approaches highlight preparedness to address pre- *and* post-displacement issues that make the present acceptable and provide ‘hope for the future’” (Matthews, 2008). Welcoming them to the unfamiliar environment and providing the tools they will need to be successful in school and beyond gives them security and allows them to fully participate in their new home. It can give these children more confidence, allow them to build new relationships, and in turn, nourish the entire school and local community.

To create an optimal English language education program... requires that we think of learners as individuals, members of the school community, and members of the town or city community as well. To lead our schools, we must collaborate with our students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders. (Zacarian, 2011, p. 13)

Communication between the students, their families, and the school must always be open in order for everyone to remain on the same page. The school should provide the students ways to create short-term goals and define their dreams with open lines of communication. “If schools are to support the education of refugee students, they must take seriously their capacity to socialize, acculturate, accommodate, integrate, involve and care” (Matthews, 2008).

For the WSA to be implemented successfully and meaningfully schools need to work closely with and get to know students and their families so that no knowledge gets taken for granted and all students can receive equal learning opportunities. A challenge of implementing this approach is possible lack of planning time amongst teachers and school staff, but planning should be done with all stakeholders involved to better serve the students and help ensure everything runs smoothly (Zacarian, 2011). An example of this is the push-in model or co-teaching. If the teachers have time for co-planning, they can create lessons that serve both the

ELLs and the monolingual English-speaking students (Zacarian, 2011). ELLs are participants in the general classroom as well and so need the time and communication between their teachers to be fully part of their class. When teachers are working interdependently and collaboratively, the push-in model works most effectively. Instead of just one segment of English lessons, the entire school day becomes a learning opportunity.

### **Participatory Approach**

Participatory Approach is under the umbrella of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) because it involves using topics for specific purposes. Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire created it in the late 1950s and it has multiple facets. One main idea is that the topics students study should come from real issues or situations that affect the students' lives. It is different from connecting content to something students have learned before. Lessons must be connected to students' lives in a way that compels them to learn more. If the topics directly relate to them, they should become more engaged and interested (Zacarian, 2011). Another tenet of the Participatory Approach is the idea that having students focus on real issues will empower them to be proactive in their own learning and their own lives. Language learning can be used to help solve social issues. (Bryers et al., 2014). Lastly, students should be in control of their own learning while collaborating with teachers and classmates to gain motivation and interest in the learning topic. There is a lot of dialogue in a classroom utilizing Participatory Approach and most of the learning focuses on the students' realities. To do this, it is important that teachers get to know their students and students' families.

Freire was aware, however, that participatory curricula would not come about just by asking people what they wanted to learn, especially if those people had little or no experience of education or had been educated in a very traditional system. Instead, he proposed that in order to plan an educational programme, educators (or ‘facilitators’) needed to immerse themselves for a period of time in the daily lives of the students’ communities and identify critical social issues, which would then become the basis of the curriculum. (Bryers et al., 2014, p. 12)

The ELL classroom is a terrific opportunity to explore the Participatory Approach. It provides a space where students and teachers can explore and reflect together. Often, refugee or newcomer students have their voices silenced or do not have the opportunity to discuss what goes on in their daily lives. This approach allows them to discuss their hardships, talk about their interests, and create action plans to move forward in a safe space with the support of teachers and peers. Some topics that come up may be politically charged or sensitive, but rather than being afraid to cover them, they can become central to the ELL lessons. (Bryers et al., 2014).

An example that ties Participatory Approach to Whole School Approach in the ELL classroom is a study published in 2019. Song and Buchanan wrote about a study done on a reading program for second graders in an urban school in the Midwest United States. In the program, non-fiction texts related to the students’ daily lives were selected and sent home. The students read these books with their families and then came back to school to discuss them. There were two main focuses for the study. One was to help students who struggled with reading, practice their literacy skills. The other was to help parents and caretakers be active participants in the students’ literacy because when the parents get involved and communication

opens between the schools and the families, students' literacy levels have proven to vastly improve (Song & Buchanan, 2019).

Using a brain-based model, the brain is a connection maker in that it takes what is known and connects it with what is not known. Learning occurs when these connections are made, but not all connections occur through academic experiences. They occur via students' personal, cultural, language, and world experiences as well. (Zacarian, 2011, pp. 124-125)

This demonstrates how integral family involvement can be in a students' education. The connections made to the students' lives prompted easier learning. Participatory Approach and Whole School Approach are related in that the aim is to maximize learning experiences.

In this particular study, the students very quickly became engaged in the topics. They began to ask "Why?" questions and request more books to read, eventually even choosing their own books that piqued their interests. "The participatory approach proved to be an effective pedagogy to engage ELLs, using their experiences and cultures to empower curiosity and interest. They were learning to read and reading to learn (Song & Buchanan, 2019). Throughout the program, students' confidence levels increased, and they became empowered through thinking, discussion, and progress. They gained many non-cognitive skills and developed their English proficiency with the support of their teachers and families. "Alienation, a deciding factor in student disengagement in academic work, is defeated with fully engaged and inclusive participation. Young literacy learners, with the support of teachers and families, are capable of overcoming limitations and become engaged users of literacy" (Song & Buchanan, 2019). The students became proactive in their own learning because they could see how their reading topics related to their lives. They were given the opportunity to discuss their own hardships and the

reading topics in the classroom and at home which led to engagement both in learning literacy skills, as well as solving social issues. This idea is a key part of Freire's pedagogy on literacy. He criticized the "banking method" of teaching where a teacher gives the students information that they assume they need. "Instead, he advocated educational processes where students' lives, local cultural norms, and issues become the content for learning... In this way, the teacher is no longer depositing information but is rather allowing learning to emerge from within the students" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 171). Using real-life issues from the students' lives engages them into developing intrinsic motivation and a desire to continue their own learning.

### **Restorative Justice Pedagogy**

Restorative Justice Pedagogy is another way to make sure that the classroom and school is a safe and welcoming environment that can fully support its learners. It suggests that since everything in the universe is connected, we are all intricately connected with each other. Everything and everyone has their own inherent worth and everything that they do affects everyone else both positively and negatively. We all make important contributions to the community (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2017). Restorative Justice (RJ) attempts to heal through balance. Through Restorative Justice, misconduct is not considered a violation of school rules and the institution, but instead a violation against the people and community inside the school. To repair the damage that has been done, "schools should practice participatory, deliberative democracy" (Evans et al., 2013, p. 57). Students aren't punished for wrongdoing; instead the focus is put on the community bonds they have broken and how to repair what has been damaged.

This process emphasizes accountability and community healing, especially in a school setting. "Rather than being treated as an external group upon whom rules are imposed, students

are treated as integral members of the community who assume responsibility for maintaining harmony. Connected to community coherence is the notion that when harm is done, there is an inherent obligation to address the harm” (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2017). Students are held responsible when their actions affect others in the community and vice versa. The school is also held accountable to meet the needs of all students. But when rules are assigned without discussion and differing perspectives, they don't end up serving the needs of the students or the school. Educators should not project what they feel students' needs should be, but instead should ask first-hand what the students' needs are and be attentive to that. This is also applicable when working with the students' families while helping them get acclimated to the new community. To fully support the refugee and newcomer families, dialogue should take place every step of the way with open lines of communication between teachers, students, schools, and families.

There are many methods of putting Restorative Justice into practice. Evans et al. (2013) names “victim-offender mediation or reconciliation, restorative conferencing for resolving conflict, and peacemaking circles” as just a few. These could be applied as a whole-school model or more focused in individual classrooms. With all these methods, the focus is on collaborative problem solving and meeting students' needs rather than dealing out punishments.

Restitution should serve to meet the needs of the victim, restoring the relationship between the victim and the offender. Further, the effectiveness of a restitution plan is contingent on the offender developing and being responsible for the plan, rather than having that plan imposed on them by an authority figure. In this way, the restitution becomes not only a way of repairing harm but also an opportunity to learn. (Evans et al., 2013, p. 59)

Restorative models allow open conversations between victims and offenders, which gives them the opportunity to listen to and work with each other to produce solutions that serve them both best. This democratic approach “will result in improved relationships between and among students, teachers, schools, and communities (Evans et al., 2013, p. 63). It will also result with refugee and newcomer students able to share their perspectives and form strong relationships with other members of the school and local community.

There are some challenges associated with implementing Restorative Justice. There is a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding what exactly it looks like in a school setting. More discussion needs to take place on how to bring this method successfully into more schools, especially when schools have punitive models of discipline already in place (Evans et al., 2013). There may be resistance against change or difficulty fully implementing Restorative Justice if a school has been functioning one way for a long time, but when used, it has the potential to create a more restorative and collaborative community. It might already be occurring in some schools in smaller ways that can be built upon with scaffolding for teachers, administrators, students, and families.

They recommended spending the necessary time for discussion and dialogue about school practices, as opposed to unilaterally deciding to implement RJ. [They] also recommended involving the entire school community in these discussions, including students, parents, faculty, administrators, and custodial and kitchen staff. (Evans et al., 2013, p. 62)

No matter what, the decision to implement Restorative Justice should be a discussion amongst the whole school community, not one forced on the school. This approach is being used in schools all over the country. One example is Edward H. White Middle School in San Antonio

Texas. They began a plan in 2012, to build RJ into the whole school over a 3-year period. In the article, “Ed White Middle School Restorative Discipline Evaluation: Implementation and Impact”, Doctor Marilyn Armour describes the very interesting results of their program’s rollout.

There are numerous reports of major changes in students’ character and behaviors from Year 1 to Year 2 and after RD encounters. Although there is recognition of exceedingly challenging students, some of whom are unresponsive to RD, teachers are less critical of RD 9 as non-productive and instead request more intensive RD interventions or view the issues as related to a student’s lack of maturity. Teachers report less need for RD interventions because their classrooms are calmer and teachers are able to respond quickly to students whose behavior is becoming disruptive. (2013, p. 8)

It takes time to implement this approach well across the whole school and there is an adjustment period, but it brings positive results to the school community. This approach and the two others discussed previously are interrelated in many ways. Separately they are being used effectively across the country, but all of the resources noted that when used in tandem they could produce brilliant results. These methods could be a significant help in supporting refugee and newcomer students and their families.

### **Other Strategies**

Beyond these overarching methods there are also a lot of resources on day-to-day strategies that can help schools support their ELLs and their families, especially those who are refugees or newcomers. These are strategies that can be utilized by everyone from homeroom teachers, to ELL teachers, to administrators. If everyone in the school works together with

parents and students using these strategies, it will create a stronger community within the school with bonds of understanding formed between all members.

Firstly, it is a particularly good idea for all staff that work with ELL, refugee, or newcomer students to learn as much as they can about their ethnic and linguistic background. It will help to connect the students with the programs and services that will help them the most (Breiseth et al., 2011). Some of the more obvious information is immensely helpful like what country they come from, what languages they speak, if they've experienced formal schooling before, and if they have faced any sort of trauma event or disaster. Beyond that it would also be a good idea to learn about diverse cultural traditions and expectations that the students and their families may have. Even though students may come from the same country, it does not mean that their experiences are homogenous, so getting to know individual expectations and experiences is essential. Some of this information can be gathered through surveys or phone calls, but teachers can also learn this information by holding meetings or casual gatherings with the families of their students and with the students themselves. They could have dinners together or community gatherings where everyone can learn more about each other. Having this knowledge will help create a welcoming and respectful environment for the students and their families and can be used to teach other members of the school community about new cultures and perspectives (Breiseth et al., 2011). It will also give the teachers a foundation from which they can build upon the ELLs prior knowledge and a foundation for communication between the school and the families.

Having a welcoming environment for both the students and their families is vitally important. If they are fully welcomed, then they can feel like a part of the community from the very start. They need to feel visible in the school.

ELLs are often treated as an invisible minority, but ELLs and their families should “see themselves” throughout the school: On the walls, through student work and photos, in the classroom, with books and lessons that incorporate their experiences and traditions, in school-wide cultural activities, in the faces of staff and volunteers who come from similar backgrounds. (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 9)

There are many ways to make refugee and newcomer students feel seen from the moment they walk through the front door of the school. Some more ideas are posting signs around the school in multiple languages, having bilingual books in the library, creating a welcome DVD or welcome kit in multiple languages, or creating a program in which other students or parents volunteer to give tours of the school to new families (Breiseth et al., 2011). It even comes down to the scheduling of the school day and school year. When the school is aware of cultural events or activities that take place for all of their students, they can make sure to include them when thinking of scheduling for the whole school. There may be days where students from one culture who all celebrate a particular holiday take the day off school. If teachers are prepared for this, they can recognize the holiday in the classroom and prepare for the students’ absence so that they do not fall behind. The teachers can incorporate the events into lessons and invite the students or their families to share their traditions with the whole class.

Of course, one of the biggest challenges for schools is communication. How to create and maintain open lines between refugee or newcomer families? This begins with a reliable translation process. There needs to be formal translation in place so neither side becomes frustrated and to avoid miscommunications that could lead to the forming of barriers. “What does not work... is sending notes home in English, talking slower or louder, using students to translate, or asking a friend or relative to translate confidential or detailed information (Breiseth

et al., 2011, p. 15). Schools need to be proactive when it comes to communication. It should also be kept in mind that there may be families with limited literacy skills. In this case, phone calls or home visits might be implemented more often. If a staff member is hesitant to talk in person, it might be helpful to offer staff training in simplified English (Breiseth et al., 2011). Other parents could become resources to help communication with newcomer families as well. Parents with bilingual skills can be given training to assist in meetings or with translations.

When starting off it would also be useful to ask for families' preferred form of communication, whatever is most convenient to their schedule and accessible, preferred language, and obstacles that they may face. This is all essential information so that families can be kept informed of school policies and procedures such as absences, meals, healthcare, academics, assessments, homework, special services, and extra-curricular activities. Understanding of these things may be taken for granted unless care is taken to explain everything to new families. School liaisons are a perfect example of a bridge between the school and families of ELL students. They often carry a lot of this work on their own shoulders trying to keep open communication between the two parties. They translate, provide essential information, and do social work every day to make things run as smoothly as possible. Finally, it may be useful to create a branch of the PTO comprised of ELL parents organized by language. They can meet separately and jointly with the larger PTO. This representation will allow them to share input and ideas and again show that they are a visible part of the school community with their own say (Breiseth et al., 2011). They know what they need and should be allowed to speak for themselves. Everyone can learn from each other and help to make the school work for all students.

Beyond that, how much native language use in school is necessary for comprehension and English learning? It is often believed that the use of native languages would hinder a student's ability to learn English and participate in school, but a lot of research has been done and the results clearly show that "strong native language skills contribute to ELLs' academic success throughout their education – in their native language and in English" (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 13). When their skills in their home language or languages increase, it is beneficial across the board for all their academic learning. Instead of starting from the ground floor to build a whole new house, it is far more effective to build upon what the students already know. If a student already has a solid foundation, it is a much better jumping off point. It saves time and effort both for the students and the school.

By the time young children enter school, they have already had three to five years of language learning experiences. While they have the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive skills that enable them to be meaningful participants in their home communities, a good number of students do not come to school with the same package of literacy-oriented, cultural, linguistic, and cognitive skills. This is an important distinction because, fundamentally it has been found that literacy skills obtained in one language transferred to a second language. (Zacarian, 2011, p. 26)

Home language use should be encouraged and built upon, and schools should look for ways to support bilingual development. Training could be provided to teachers and staff in bilingual development and bilingual resources could be offered to students. Whenever possible, students' home languages should be included.

## Case Study Introduction

Before focusing in on the Essex Westford School District and my case study, I want to give a brief overview of Vermont's history with refugee resettlement. Vermont's current population rests at around 626,000 people and is one of the least diverse states in the country. But, for its size, Vermont does resettle a lot of refugees. "Given its relatively small population, Vermont has historically welcomed an outsized proportion of all refugees accepted into the U.S. each year. While Vermont has about 0.2 percent of the population of the United States, the state received at least 0.6 percent of refugees resettled in 2011 and 2012" (Suozzo, 2019). Since then, refugees have come here from many different countries including Vietnam, Bosnia, Iraq, Nepal, and more. A large majority of these refugees get placed in Chittenden County as it is the county with the largest population in the state and it houses both the state capital and the largest city of Burlington. As of 2017, refugees make up nearly a tenth of the population in the towns of Chittenden County that they are placed in (Bose, 2018). That year 236 refugees were placed in the state and in 2019 there were 115 placed (Suozzo, 2019).

EWSD, the district that I both work in and looked at as a case study for this project, is one of the school districts in Chittenden County. Many towns in this county have a high percentage of refugees, such as Burlington and Winooski. Because of its location in Vermont, a fairly significant percentage of refugee and newcomer students get placed in EWSD as well. We have families from Nepal, Somalia, Bhutan, and many other places. So it was the perfect place to begin to take a closer look at what teachers are already doing every day to support students and families and what resources they would like to have at their disposal.

## **Methodology**

### Data Collection:

There were two different ways that I collected data for this project. I did a review of recent research and literature on the topic and I conducted interviews. I focused on literature that discussed refugee students and ELL programs, especially anything concerning Whole School Approach, Participatory Approach, and Restorative Justice Pedagogy. I looked at a lot of literature geared toward school leaders and administrators because those resources would fully describe the reasoning for using certain methods of support over others and how to build a better school community. And lastly, I looked at some literature written about Vermont and refugee students (Hurwitz, 2017) to learn about what is going on in the rest of the state and see how it specifically relates to the school district of my case study.

I chose interviewing over surveying because I did not want just surface level answers from many people. I instead preferred to interview fewer people while being able to go further in depth and have a fuller discussion. By interviewing I would be a part of the conversation and could ask for clarification or elaboration whenever I needed it. In a normal year I would have conducted in-person interviews, but this year because of COVID-19 it wasn't safe to meet in person, so I decided to conduct all my interviews virtually over Zoom. It wasn't what I expected the interview process to look like, but it had its own upsides. Because meeting virtually allowed more flexibility, we were able to find more convenient times for everyone and the interviews could be as long as we wanted them to be.

### Participant Recruitment:

To begin the project, I decided to first contact Superintendent of the Essex Westford School District, Beth Cobb. I currently work in the school district as a paraeducator so I had some connection with the school already, but I wanted to get permission to move forward and her recommendation for people to interview. At this stage in my research, I knew that I just wanted to interview school professionals and professionals in the community who work with refugee or newcomer students and families. I decided to keep the scope of the project a little narrower so that I could use my time more effectively and focus completely on the perspectives of the teachers and other educators in the district.

Once approved, I was able to move forward with my interviews. I talked to an ELL teacher who I met through work, and they agreed to be my first participant. I was then invited to join in on the ELL teacher meeting that is held monthly in the district. I was able to introduce myself, my degree program, and my project and ask if anyone would be willing to talk with me. I acquired two more participants from this meeting. After that I was given the name of one of the multicultural liaisons that work for the district and they agreed to be my fourth and final participant.

#### Interview Process:

I prepared interview questions and sent them to my participants ahead of the interview along with a consent form that they needed to sign and the proposal for my project. Once they had time to look everything over, we scheduled one-on-one Zoom interviews. I decided to audio record each interview solely for the use of referring back to the information during the writing process. Participants were informed of this ahead of time and given the option to decline. One participant declined and instead I took notes during their interview. All of the participants gave

me permission to include excerpts from their interviews in this paper but their identities will be kept anonymous at their request.

### **Perspectives from ELL Professionals in Essex Westford School District (EWSD)**

Question 1: What percentage of the students that you work with are refugees?

When I wrote this question, my intention was to learn about how much the ELL professionals interact with refugee and newcomer students on a regular basis. The answer from everyone was a daily basis. But I learned something else from the responses to this question. Most of the participants brought up how broad the term refugee can be. Participant 1 said that a lot of their students were labeled as asylum seekers rather than refugees because they were in the country while waiting to be classified under refugee status. Participant 2 pointed out that there were also families where family members came into the country as refugees, but the student was born in the United States. They taught me that the term refugee is extremely broad, newcomers may or may not be refugees, refugees may or may not be newcomers, and that there are many others with different identifications. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee is defined as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, memberships or a particular social group, or political opinion” (2017). Refugee status is granted based on specific government requirements and comes with a specific legal status. So, I reflected on what I learned from this question and from the very beginning of the interview process, I learned better ways to phrase my questions and be more inclusive throughout the entire paper.

Question 2: Are there particular methods you have seen or used at school or in your classrooms. Are they helpful?

This was a question for the three ELL teacher participants, and again I learned that I needed to be more specific in my wording. A lot of the responses I received were that there is a plethora of methods, so I decided to focus the question a little more and ask what methods they use regularly in their work. Participant 1 described their daily schedule of mixing push-in, pull-out, and co-teaching. For the push-in model, they go to many different classrooms and support students during writing, reading, or other academic times. At other times they pull-out students to come to the ELL office to work together in small groups or one-on-one. This time is set aside for whatever the students need to work on and happens regularly. Participant 1 also co-teaches with the homeroom teacher sometimes when there are a lot of ELL students in a class.

“And generally, I try to plan with those third-grade teachers so they kind of scaffold ahead of time. It doesn't always work, but I provide graphic organizers that they use with the group... So, it's a lot of push and pull out and one-on-one. I can only have, because of COVID, three kids in my room so that that limits what my pull-out groups would be, but generally actually the thrust of the district is to push-in when we can.”

The only times where pull-out is really needed is with complete beginner, newcomer students or when ELL students are spread out among many different classes.

“And I think next year moving forward, co-teaching would be ideal if they were all in one classroom and I could just focus my efforts there. As it is, I have to pull two of them

and then push in... I think it's going really well in the second grade where I'm co-teaching.”

It would be more efficient to have ELL students grouped together in the same classroom and do more co-teaching for that class. Participant 1 said that the biggest problem with this tactic is the lack of planning time. But that it would be interesting to try and see how they can make it work together.

Participant 2 said that they use a lot of different pedagogical approaches as well. They use the pull-out model to focus on individual content and language objectives with students, but a lot of their day is spent with the push-in and co-teaching models.

“Coming right out of school, co-teaching and that kind of stuff wasn't really talked about. I still do a lot of pull out, but I also spend the last 2 hours of my day in the 5th grade classroom teaching literacy to the whole class. So tomorrow we're splitting the class and I'm teaching like the heavily scaffolded group, and she's teaching the less scaffolded group, so I love the co-teaching model.”

Like Participant 1, they said that they love the co-teaching model but have difficulty finding time to plan with the homeroom teachers.

“But time is ridiculous... there's no time, so trying to merge the content and language objectives is hard. I spend a lot of time, [trying to] push into the classroom and pull out so that when [I'm] pushed in [I know] what's going on. I've been doing this so long I can get a lot of information without actually sitting down with the teacher and talking to him about it.”

Overall, Participant 2 wants to focus on relationship building, connecting with students, and finding out what works best for each individual.

Participant 3 talked about how they might use certain methods without really thinking about it because they are the most natural choice for the students. An example they gave was Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This method links physical movement to new verbal input such as new vocabulary. Participant 3 said they often “use these methods naturally without thinking about specifically using TPR.” And again, like the two previous participants, they said that they prefer co-teaching and collaboration, especially in the middle school level. They also mentioned that they “researched what other schools and districts were doing and co-wrote a curriculum for elementary school that has been utilized in different schools in the district.”

Question 3: What scaffolding or resources exist in this school district that support refugee students and families? What works for you and your students? What does not?

I had a lot of interesting responses to this question from all four of the participants. Some things I was aware of beforehand from growing up in the school district and now working in it, but there was a lot that I did not know as well. Participant 1 brought up the translators and liaisons that the district uses to communicate with students and families.

“So, our district has a large list of interpreters for many languages, and they're excellent. I mean they know the families that live in the community and they're really responsive.

The interpreters are extremely helpful. That being said, I don't want to just rely on them all the time. I want to make my own best effort to contact families and take out that step.

And I want to encourage teachers to do so as well.”

The second part of my question asked if the participants have noticed anything that's not working well. Participant 1 brought up communication about public health, specifically now because of COVID-19, and an overreliance on email when communicating with families. With the public health piece, some families of ELL students have gotten lost in the health communication loop and these students are missing more school than is necessary.

“As far as quarantining, they might live with several families in a house or several generations in the house and so when somebody quarantines, or somebody gets sick and everybody else has to quarantine. So some kids have missed a lot of school, not because they've had COVID, but because people in their house keep getting sick from close contacts and there hasn't been the best communication between the Public Health Department and these families to let them know when they can come back to school or what the timeline is. There should be more staff at the Public Health Department or more caseworkers to let families know what the guidelines are.”

When referring to an overreliance on emails, Participant 1 said that teachers often send emails to parents because they are busy and email is very convenient, but there can be a problem with that. “Not everybody is going to get it or [be able to] read it.” They suggested that teacher training would be an effective way to fix this problem.

“I think the teachers are great and they're very open minded, but they haven't necessarily had a lot of training yet working with ELL families. It's nobody's fault, I think it's just something that needs to be addressed. There should be more training and not just a one-time workshop, like an expectation. What's good for ELL students is actually good for the class as a whole.”

Training for teachers would benefit not only the ELL population and newcomer students and families, but the entire school community.

Participant 2 also brought up the liaisons and interpreters in the district. “We have 56 interpreters. We only have liaisons like cultural family liaisons for the Nepali population and Somali population. They work more as liaisons, but one is full time.” They are the bridges between the schools and the families and do a lot to help. As for other resources, Participant 2 said:

“The truth is, I literally don't even order anything anymore because I don't find that any programs work. Students are so individual in their needs and you can't buy a program and then try to work with the students' content because they're not going to match. The only time that I find a program works is with a complete newcomer with zero English.”

They said that the pre-made programs are too one-size-fits-all to be used effectively with all students.

Participant 3 mentioned summer camps and programs that I had never heard of before. They said that Parks and Recreation does a lot “getting kids in camps for the summer and working with translators to help the families.” There is also a summer school in place “to support families. [This] changes every year based on what the families need and what the school can provide. With COVID this year they will pay for transportation to the school. This year there will also be an ELL only summer school.” Participant 3 also talked about a training program in place in their school that they designed and instruct. It is meant to be a staff training program involving working with ELL students.

Participant 4 said, “Essex School District is a really welcoming place for the students from any other country. All the staff are welcoming and nice, and we do have kindhearted and experienced ELL teachers in every school.” They also talked about another point that I hadn’t considered. EWSD has some opportunities for students that other local districts do not have. The biggest example they mentioned was the Center for Technology (CTE) at Essex High School. This is a practical school program attached to the Essex High School. Instead of just taking regular high school classes, the students at CTE can take classes on Cosmetology, Automotive Technology, Childhood Education, Dental Assisting, and many more. CTE has so many different programs for students to learn useful skills to help them in any career they might be interested in.

“Sometimes the students who come from other countries, the education system is really different as compared to the United States. If students are not able to pass the grade, they can repeat the grade many times. So, because of that, sometimes we do see these students who come in grade like 9 at the age of like 18 or 19. And then for those kinds of students we do have the practical school. They have a lot of a different programs. That's the best part that I see in the Essex School District.”

Having a practical school is an asset for all students, but especially for students that might have had interrupted schooling and want to find other skillsets. They said that this is one of the best resources in EWSD.

Question 4: How much are the refugee families involved with the school and their students` education? How do you communicate with families?

All of the participants had similar responses to this question. They all talked about how it was entirely on a case-by-case basis and different with every family. Participant 1 mentioned that the cultures that her students come from often have a different perception of what school should be and what parent responsibilities are. “Some cultures, the mindset about education, is that it's very much the teacher's responsibility, like the teacher is the authority. Not in any malevolent way... it's just traditionally it hasn't been the parents' rule to take a big role in education. It's more like I trust you as your role.” Participant 1 also said that at the beginning of the year they ask all their families how they would prefer to stay connected. Especially this year with COVID-19, it was important to find out what kinds of communication worked best for the families so that the ELL students don't fall through the cracks.

“After a few weeks, you know, we kind of figured out this is the best way to get them on to the meeting. Maybe it's a text to mom, maybe it's a text to the student's phone, maybe we used an app called remind, which was kind of like an interface between texting and an email. But a lot of families, either because they're not literate or the email is just not a thing they use, if classroom teachers were sending out something via email, whether it was a notice or a link or whatever, or if it was something that was in seesaw, which is a platform. If it was buried somewhere, some parents weren't seeing it, not necessarily specifically refugee parents, but ELL students in general. So just trying to facilitate that and figuring out if a text [or a phone call] is the best way.”

Because of going the extra mile to reach out to families this year, Participant 1 said that they have gotten to know the families even better than previous years. It ended up being a small blessing in disguise.

The individuality of different families was discussed by Participant 2 as well. They said that:

“It just depends on the family. Even culturally there's no blanket statement I can make... It's very, very individual and it depends on how many kids they have, how many jobs they have, if they speak English or not... I have some very close relationships with families, and then I have families that are really hard to engage, so it's the whole spectrum.”

They also use many various methods to stay in contact with the students and the families, depending on what works best for them. They translate what is necessary, but also try to use other forms of communication whenever possible. “Depending on the family... I don't get every single little thing translated. But yeah, it's everything, it's texting, emailing, calling translators. You know, you just get to learn your family.”

With family involvement, Participant 3 had similar responses to the first two participants. They said it “really depends on family and family structure, sometimes when students are home it is expected that they are responsible for siblings or cooking (especially girls), at home is not school time. Some families are not involved.” But they also brought up community events that have taken place in the past to encourage family involvement. There was an “international potluck [with a] huge response from the community. [It was] focusing in on teaching culture and involving the whole community.” There was also “food tasting. Working with one of the cultures represented in the school, [they would] ask for a nut-free, simple recipe. Kids prepare the dish together for the whole school and families come to help serve it at lunch. [It was] like \$100 to serve the whole school.” Participant 3 also described what a normal non-COVID year looked like for family communication. There were “home visits, going through backpack and school supplies, helping the family to prepare to send their student to school. This is helpful in

developing a connection with the family. They would also normally do a school tour before starting or on the first day.” This year with COVID, they had to change course and do things a little differently. “Now, [communication is] mainly through phone calls and emails.”

Participant 4 talked about the perspectives of families from their own country when it comes to involvement in the school.

“It's very little like, it's all a culture thing in the back country. I don't know about the other countries, but in [their country], the school and the teacher, they are responsible for whatever that happens in the school and if something happens, the family didn't like to hear that from the school... They expect that the teacher will manage all these things that happen in school because that was the culture in the back country. Also, the student, if they didn't learn then some families may think that it's because like the school is not functioning well. The teacher is not focusing. And families... they have not been engaging a lot, not participating a lot with the schools because they think that the schools and the teachers are the one who can build up their kids in the educational life.”

It is up to Participant 4 to listen to the expectations of the families and of the school and try to help ease the communication and expectations between the two. For communication, Participant 4 said that “most of the time I do, like phone calls and oral translation. Most of the population speak fluently in [their language] but they never went to any like formal school in an education system so not all my families read and write, but they speak fluently.” When they receive newcomer students and families, they also do home-visits and in-person meetings. “When the kids are new, I still need to do a registration. At that time, I do go. It's very hard. I have a location and it's very hard for the new families to know where [it is]. In the beginning I do go visit them and help them to fill out all the registration paperwork.”

Question 5: What are some problems that the families and the students face when they first get placed in Vermont?

Participant 1 talked about the support that newcomer families get from local institutions and how it needs to be more long term.

“I’m thinking about the support that families get. I don’t know what the networks are, I think, from my experience, a lot of it is just family connections or good-hearted people from the community. Oh especially, I think with like in Nepali families who may have come here with an organization. They get a certain amount of money but it’s pretty short term, I think. After six months you’re on your own or after a year you’re on your own, and that’s really not a lot of support.”

They believe that the newcomer families need support beyond the first year. Especially now with COVID-19, they need more help than ever “navigating the system, getting a stimulus check, or learning about access to different community resources when [their] family is in crisis.”

Participant 2 and Participant 3 brought up topics similar to Participant 1. Participant 2 said, “I imagine you know the obvious, cold weather, stuff like that, but just in general. It’s crazy, you know some of these families come, they have nothing. They have no English. They have no idea what’s going on.” Participant 3 said that it should be an “ongoing process, not just at the beginning.” Participant 3 also brought up some other interesting issues such as transportation and student organization. They said that “before this school year there was no bussing in the Essex Junction schools. Kids were often late to school.” They also talked about helping students outside of the classroom. “[We need] to help support students with their work they must do at

home, especially for the middle school students. [We also need to] help the students organize school and life, teach students what is important to our school culture (unfinished work will be a detriment, etc.), and help the students not dressed for the weather.” An idea they had to help with the last issue would be to “send home photos of clothing items the students need and give vouchers for a rummage sale where they can get some of these things.”

Participant 4 talked about the experiences of the families they work with and their own experience moving to Vermont. One issue is the snow. “The families from [their country] the weather is a big change and like it's very hard like even for myself, I'd never seen it snowing. When I got here, that was the first time I saw this. And it's very hard to know how to cope with this.” But overall, Participant 4 said that there are a lot of positives to being placed in Chittenden County, Vermont.

“Vermont is a really small, friendly community and I don't see many more challenges. In other states it is very hard for the people to reach grocery stores and hospitals, but here in Vermont, the Refugee Resettlement Program they try to place all the newcomers within Burlington and Winooski, which is more convenient to the hospitals and some other stores, banks, and all those.”

It is their opinion that the places where a majority of Vermont's refugees get placed are fairly convenient for accessing the stores and other locations the families may need.

Question 6: What would you change about the resettlement process? What resources would you like to have in the community? In the school? How can the community better serve the refugee resettlement program and the refugee families?

This ended up being the most exciting question for me because every participant was prepared with ideas, either new practices they would like to implement, or even new positions they would like to create to better support refugee and newcomer families. Participant 1 talked about Asset Based Instruction and changing teacher perspectives. They recommended the book, *Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress* by Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Alvarez-Ortiz, and Jude Haynes.

“It's all about changing your perspective. Especially for kids who've been through trauma, whether it's abuse or trauma through the immigration process, it's about not thinking ‘oh poor them, it must be really hard.’ Rather seeing it as an asset. Not an asset that they went through this pain, but more that they're resilient. Or thinking about the assets of their parents... recognizing their parents did a whole lot of stuff just to get their family here to this country, their persistence, their willingness to make sure their kids get to school every day and that they're well fed. Just seeing different aspects of children and families, rather than taking the deficit view of how they're behind or how, how their second language is interfering.”

Changing teachers' perceptions of refugee or newcomer students and their families is the first step to getting them the support that they need.

Participant 2 told me about one aspect of bringing new students into the district that could be more efficient with the creation of a new position or program. Because ELL teachers are working hard to support many ELL students, when a newcomer student enters the school, it can be extremely hard for the ELL teachers to find time to give them the support they need with an already full schedule.

“You know it's very much a social work job and unfortunately we're not really given that time. So, it's February and you have a full caseload and you're really, busy and a newcomer family plops down, and you have to drop everything and do everything, sign them up, get their health forms, vaccines, translators, coats classroom, food... My dream is that the district could have a newcomer program.”

They want to implement a newcomer program where all new students would come to school and immediately start this program and “they get a newcomer curriculum for however long it takes them until they're ready to enter into the mainstream classroom.” Or if a program wouldn't work, then perhaps someone to handle all the paperwork and supporting the families. “I think just a dedicated person that does all the registration paperwork... It's hard to know where our job ends and Vermont Refugee Resettlement starts. Honestly, that's the part of my work I love but I don't have the time. I don't have the resources.”

“The only problem I was going to say is what do they do when there aren't newcomers? It would have to be split with something else. They could go a few months and develop curriculum. I'm sure there's lots they could do. But the thing is if that person is also running the newcomer academy, they probably always have a few students. They have [a newcomer academy] in Burlington. They have a dedicated newcomer program in Burlington and it's really cool.”

They suggested that it could even be a part time position if necessary.

Participant 3 had many ideas for new practices that could be implemented in the schools. One was a cultural orientation to the school. They wish that “there were time dedicated in the beginning and the middle of the year. But would have to be outside school hours so that families

could come according to their schedules.” Another idea was similar to Participant 2’s idea for a new position. Participant 3 also suggested creating a position for an Intake Specialist, “someone dedicated to doing all the paperwork so that multiple people do not have to fill out the same paperwork for kids from the same family.” And finally, echoing an idea from the previous question, they said that there needs to be “more support for the families beyond the first year.”

Out of the four participants, Participant 4 had the most suggestions for steps we could take to better serve the refugee and newcomer community. First, they wish that there were more liaisons hired to take some share of the work since alone, Participant 4 works with over 50 families. “In Winooski and Burlington, I know the population is higher than Essex, but also the population is growing up in Essex, so I wish we had like more... to help the students that are new.” Especially now with COVID-19, they wish there were more help to pass information from the Department of Health to the families.

“I’m getting more emails from the Department of Health and I have to do translations for every family and sometimes if one family gets exposed then like we have to find out close contacts and we have to teach them what quarantining looks like. And state guidelines like traveling and all those things change every day.”

They also wish that there be more support at school for the refugee and newcomer students, especially at the high school level.

“For the kids who join the high school as a new student in the US, it’s a challenge in the beginning. It’s very challenging, I know that they already have a friends, but for school stuff, they are having a problem because of language. We should have more support than just ELL teacher in schools. At every school we have an ELL teacher, and they are doing

all that they are supposed to do, like working really hard for those kids, but still, if we had extra hands, that would be great.”

And finally, Participant 4 also discussed another resource that would help the families they work with beyond the school community. The families, especially senior citizens, need a place to gather to socialize and support each other.

“Most of the refugee population, they're trying to be more outgoing and gathering, but here in Vermont we don't have a lot of like common places where they can go and see each other. Especially for the elder people here who don't go for work and who stay at home. Those population are more isolated here because they don't have a place where they can go and hang out with their other friends.”

It's exceedingly difficult for these people to get to places that we do have like the mall because of language barriers and transportation accessibility.

### **Conclusion**

The main idea behind my research and this case study was exploration. I am learning how to teach in an entirely new context here in the U.S., so I turned to research in the field and the words of my fellow teachers. I wanted to learn as much as I can about the systems in place and talk to professionals currently working in the community to find out what resources they need or would like to have. I learned what is being done in the greater academic field and on a much smaller scale in my own school district. I have learned that the schools, teachers, and other professionals in the Essex Westford School District work tirelessly to support all their students and are always trying to find the best ways to help the refugee or newcomer students and families. I learned that we need to pay attention to student and family needs and that the best results come from when the entire school and local community work together to help our students. Open communication is key. In the future I plan to keep these discussions going, both in my own work and in the community. Once I begin to work as an ELL teacher I also hope to continue exploring the all the different approaches and methods. I will continue to learn for the rest of my career. It is not possible to learn all there is to know on this topic because the field is always changing, and each student is entirely individual. So, moving forward, I plan to work together with the other educators and professionals in my community to build an environment that suits the students and enriches their lives. In this way, everyone can be successful.

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