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Practicing Self-Advocacy for Displaced People in the English Language Learner Classroom

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Master of Arts in TESOL Degree at

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Abstract

This study is comprised of a literature review of best practices for working with displaced people and interviews with teachers of refugees. The author found that self-advocacy is multifaceted and that promoting self-advocacy is a key way to support learners in advocating for themselves and their communities. As borders become less porous, there will be more refugee crises, and more language teachers will be needed. Best practices for teaching languages include seeing students as cultural experts, teaching and encouraging resistance, being a trauma-informed practitioner, teaching legal rights, and making room for students to choose what they learn.

Keywords: Displaced people, English Language Education, Social Justice, Self-Advocacy, ESL

Table of Contents

Abstract

Introduction..... 4

 Teacher and Researcher.....5

 Research Context.....7

 The Research Question.....7

Methodology.....8

 Data Collection.....9

 Participant Recruitment.....9

 Interview Process.....10

Literature Review.....11

Study Design and Results.....17

 Data.....17

 Analysis of Data.....31

 Finding and Interpretation of Data.....31

Conclusion.....33

 Summary.....34

 Suggestions for Future Research.....35

References.....37

Introduction

“Nobody has a ‘no voice’ We have to abandon such thinking. Some voices are louder or receive more consideration. But everyone has a voice.”- Roxane Gay

As an educator, I frequently contemplate this quote. How can I make sure that students’ voices receive the consideration that they need? The students that tend to receive the most attention are my loudest speakers. To combat this, I try to check in with my quieter students frequently. It may be through writing a quick note or having a short conversation at the end of class. However, this does not cut it for all students. As a teacher, how can I support students to advocate for themselves?

In a traditional classroom, the teacher holds the most power. However, how does this change when teachers and students share power? Adding another layer of complexity, how does this change when teachers are actively striving to learn from refugees, asylum seekers, and people who have faced forced migration, or in other words, displaced people?

In this paper, I look at the power-dynamic in the classroom through Gaventa’s “Three-Dimensional Frame”. Gaventa follows the philosophical nature of John Mills and Steven Lukes, but then builds his own system to elucidate three types of powers. There is the traditional “A has power over B,” which compels B to do A’s bidding. The second part looks at how B can manipulate A to have more beneficial choices for B. The third views people as secret influencers. The third is also where Gaventa breaks away from Lukes and Mills. Gaventa looks at oppressed people and how they can leverage community power to influence change (Gaventa, 1982). This is where oppressed people find their own agency to change systems around them.

In this project, I use Gaventa's framework to examine what best practices support displaced people in learning how to self-advocate in the classroom and how these practices transfer to social justice. I interviewed teachers to understand their role in power building for self-advocacy and spoke to program organizers about their self-advocacy stories and how their views can translate into learning exercises for English-language learners.

Teacher & Researcher

In February of 2020, as COVID-19 initially spread, I was evacuated from China to Thailand alongside nearly 200 others. At the time I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guiyang, Guizhou. Not weeks earlier, we learned the Peace Corps was ending our program because of tense U.S.-China relations. A week after being evacuated, we were told that we would not return to China, and instead return to the United States. It was a surreal experience as it was before the world would realize the worldwide impacts of this Covid-19 pandemic. During this liminal period, we had the opportunity to advocate for our program at the Peace Corps National Advocacy Day at the U.S. Capitol. On that day, Peace Corps China was the largest group advocating for less political interference in Peace Corps work. This powerful experience showed me the value of community organizing and advocacy.

As the world went into lockdown, I started looking more into this power. I took an online class at Columbia University called "Protecting Children in Humanitarian Settings" which contained a section on ensuring that children had agency in times of humanitarian crises. After this course, I started working for the Biden campaign in Wisconsin, organizing in my community in Milwaukee. Seeing the power of people coming together for common causes built critical hope in me and gave me tools to organize more community advocacy events.

After the 2020 election, I worked for CASA, an organization that mainly works with Latinx immigrants. Their approach to teaching falls under “Popular Education”, which emphasizes the value that students’ experiences bring to disrupting unequal power in the classroom. In the first week of classes, representatives in Maryland were attempting to pass a bill that would allow Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) access to Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) records, which if used could “out” undocumented immigrants. CASA leapt into action and informed our students what was happening and how they could make a difference. My students and I worked together to create videos and letters to send as testimonials to their representatives. Ultimately the bill was rejected which was eye opening for me and helped my students realize their social capital, if they practiced power like in Gaventa’s framework .

Research Context

I currently work in the field of public education at a high school in Washington D.C and use Zoom as my main platform for conducting research. This means that I am able to interview people across the continent from my living room. On the one hand, this makes my research a lot more convenient and accessible, but on the other hand, I have not benefitted from the energy and exchange that comes with in-person interviews.

I am also interviewing people amidst two refugee crises. In August 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban, which prompted tens of thousands of Afghan people to leave their homeland. In March 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine leading (at the time of this writing) to what the United Nations estimates to be 3.1 million Ukrainian refugees. These events placed a heavy strain on organizations I reached out to, which made it difficult to access candidates to interview because they were expanding their programs to reach the needs of an influx in refugees.

Research Question

My research question blossomed during my evacuation experience in the Peace Corps and bloomed as I worked in community organizing. It was exhilarating to train people to advocate for themselves and then see my students in turn teach their peers those same tools, reminiscent of my work on the Hill in D.C. while advocating for the Peace Corps. During my teacher training at CASA, I was encouraged to discuss ICE with my students in my first week of teaching. This startled me as I had been assigned novice English students. I did not want to teach about ICE in my first week as I thought that it would make students uncomfortable.

I was informed that this needed to be done because a bill was coming forward and that the organization needed testimonies from students at every English level. At the suggestion of my supervisor, I used pictures to demonstrate the possible effects of the bill should it pass. I remember introducing the topic and immediately piquing my students' interest. Some students shared what they heard or experienced with ICE; others shared their apprehensions about ICE. As we discussed the bill, some students asked about their rights. Students shared what they knew with each other in a mixture of Spanish and English. As a teacher, this was moving to see. We may not have been on topic, but students took over the conversation and were able to use each other to find out pertinent and relevant information. Ultimately, most of my students chose to write a few sentences in English about how the bill would affect them.

A second time I observed my students' community power was during the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines. Many students were considered essential workers, but they were not receiving the compensation or protection that they deserved. Before CASA had a vaccine clinic, students were desperately looking for places to get vaccinated. One evening, a student said they

were not feeling well due to the vaccine's side effects. Multiple students started asking questions about where they could get vaccinated. Again, the students changed the trajectory of the lesson and started helping each other get what they needed.

These two examples were not isolated incidences, and it was empowering to see how our small group facilitated students finding jobs, getting health care, and advocating for themselves. When the term ended, I was assigned a new group of students, but these students did not engage with each other like my previous class. Students did ask questions, but they were typically directed at me. The roles were clearly defined. I was the teacher. They were the students. Instead of harnessing community power and co-learning, this class depended on my perspective. I reflected on the differences between these two classes, and it led me to formulating this project's research question: what are the best practices for teaching self-advocacy in the classroom? More specifically, how can we empower displaced students to feel confident in self-advocacy?

Methodology

To conduct research, I implemented "Grounded Theory", and conducted the interviews with six candidates via Zoom, taking handwritten notes during the process and recording the interviews in order to transcribe them afterwards. Afterwards, I compared the data from each interview in a cyclical fashion, however due to the variety of experiences discussed in each one, it was difficult to code the information. As a result, I include summaries of each interview and analyze common themes that occur from the data through the lens of Gaventa's framework of power, specifically the third branch which observes community power in relation to dominant culture or power structures.

Data Collection

In addition to using interviews as a means of data collection, I also employ a literature review, divided into three parts. I begin with psychological research with the intention of uncovering trauma-informed practices that have worked successfully for displaced people because many displaced people experience trauma, and teachers should recognize the affects this has on learning. In the second part, I examine programs that promote social justice and community power. The final part of the literature review distills classroom practices that promote agency for students. These three parts fuse together for a more holistic approach to teaching self-advocacy in the classroom.

I divide the interviews into two groups: program managers and teachers. While interviewing program managers, themselves former refugees, at organizations that promote social justice for refugees and displaced people, I wanted to learn about their self-advocacy stories. With the second half of my interviews, I asked teachers of refugees about the practices that they used to promote self-advocacy in the classroom.

Participant Recruitment

As previously stated, there are two refugee crises occurring as of researching and writing this paper. The people working in these spaces are stretched thin, so it was difficult to find participants. I emailed organizations that work with refugees and leaned on my personal network via social media and word-of-mouth. Ultimately, I was able to find two interviews by tapping into my school network at the School for International Training. I also contacted two people who are in my Peace Corps network and contacted a former colleague from when I taught English as a Second Language (ESL). Interviewees were not compensated financially for their time.

Interview Process

After participants expressed interest in being interviewed, I sent an email with a consent form and a Zoom link. At the start of the interviews, the interviewer confirmed consent to record. After verbal consent was given, I started recording and reminded participants that they could skip a question or end the interview at any time. Interviews started on time and lasted between fifteen to thirty-three minutes. I occasionally asked follow-up questions during the interview to gain more clarity from participants. There were two sets of questions asked: one for program organizers and one for teachers. They are as follows:

For Program Organizers:

- What is your cultural background?
- What made you decide to do this work?
- In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?
- How did you learn self-advocacy?
- What do you wish teachers knew about working with displaced persons?
- Is there anything you'd like to note about building self-advocacy that we haven't discussed?

For Teachers:

- How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?
- In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?
- What do you do to build students' agency?
- How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?
- What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

After the listed questions, I asked if there was anything else that interviewees wanted to add. When each interview ended, I stopped recording and thanked the participants.

Literature Review

In my research, I analyze case studies that review how programs facilitate and support agency for refugees and displaced people. My research is organized into three categories: psychological research, program practices, and classroom practices that promote social justice and self-advocacy.

In 2020, the American Journal of Community Psychology published a study by the Society for Community Research and Action on multilevel interventions that involved refugees from Afghanistan, Great Lakes regions of Africa, Iraq, and Syria. They observed if having a six-month co-learning program would decrease depression in refugees. Some of the markers they looked at were English proficiency, acculturation, social support, and emotional distress. The study had 143 participants who were randomly assigned an undergraduate learning partner who had been intensively trained as part of the program. Depending on how many family members there were over the age of five, students were assigned one to three people per family. Families were randomly selected to be a part of the control group. Depending on the amount of stress indicated through a bilingual verbal survey, families were put into different buckets of emotional trauma. This was done so that learning partners would not be assigned multiple high-stress families. Overall, there was improvement in English proficiency, acculturation, and emotional distress for participants who had learning partners.

A study entitled, “Ethnographic Case Study of a Community Day Center for Asylum Seekers as Early-Stage Mental Health Intervention in Canada”, suggested another approach for those experiencing forced migration. They based their study on the Day Center, an organization

run by former refugees. The intent of the Day Center was to welcome new arrivals and create a community space that had classes, trainings, health resources, and welfare access. As another method for early intervention, they proposed that new refugees volunteer at the center.

According to the study, this program increased refugees' sense of safety and security, stronger bonds, and support networks. Because the program is run by former refugees, practitioners have first-hand knowledge of the immigration system in Montreal, which can help refugees find the resources that they need. Researchers in the study said, "these findings constitute preliminary evidence that the Day Center may function as an early-stage mental health intervention for asylum seekers, with implications for psychiatric morbidity, adaptation, and the capacity to develop or thrive after experiences of persecution and trauma (Chase & Rousseau, 2017)."

This first section has considered mental health protections and the importance of feeling a sense of belonging through language learning, having a co-learner, and formerly displaced people helping currently displaced people. However, both of these studies were carried out on a small scale and do not highlight what specific practices were used to promote mental health supports. In the next part, I analyze community organizations that discuss the education of refugees.

In "Conceptualizations of Power and Agency Among Members of Refugee Communities in the State of Colorado," a 2020 study about refugees from Nepal and Burma, authors Ramos and Sarubbi emphasize that practitioners should avoid deficit thinking when working with refugee populations. Deficit thinking being making assumptions about what students cannot do. Instead, educators should leverage students' skills. The authors also recognize that there is a disconnect between power and perceptions of power held by the participants of their study, specifically citing Gaventa's emphasis on a strong awareness of inequity.

Within their study they look at refugee parents and their connection to their children's education with partner community program, RISE. Parents from both groups noted that they did not feel involved in their kids' education for reasons relating to their own level of education or the lack of readily available interpretation. These ideas fall into the first two branches of power - access and *lingua franca*. The study proposes the need for longer support for refugee families through local support agencies that have staff who are culturally responsive and multilingual. A positive example highlighted in the study is when RISE helped parents mobilize in Colorado, allowing them to have a say in their children's school board elections. As a result, parents were able to address their needs for better communication between schools and families.

An Italian study by Dr. Dovigo also supports community-based services. Dr. Dovigo observed unaccompanied children and refugee families with school aged children. He proposed an alliance between schools, social services, and community organizations. However, at the end of the study cracks emerged in intercultural training for teachers and professionals working in the field. The author noted an "implicit 'vulnerability' view," which took away from the diversity of experiences and at times was patronizing toward students or their families (Dovigo, 2019). The strongest recommendation was that professionals working in the field of displaced people should develop a basic shared level of skills that fight the implicit biases against refugees. Caliskan, a professor of education in Turkey, conducted a study on principals of school programs that worked with refugees. He recruited participants who claimed they were supporters of social justice for immigrants. Set in Turkey, host to the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world, Caliskan wanted to see what schools looked like with social justice leadership (Caliskan 2020). His data revolved around four main points: the characteristics of school principals as social justice leaders, Bronfenbrenner's ideas about micro and mesosystems and

how they influence school principals, ways exosystems influence principals' social justice practices, and macrosystem dynamics play in principals' practices. Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory makes the case that one's microsystem is immediate environment. The mesosystem is connections, the exosystem is one's indirect environment, and the macrosystem is social and cultural values. Together these systems make up a student's social environment and how they see and develop in the world. For Caliskan, he wanted to know how principals saw their students. Principals may not have been able to control the macrosystem, but they could have some control over student's microsystems in how kids were educated.

According to the study, they found that principals were largely concerned with economic inequalities and how they affected refugees. The principals instated systems that responded to the individual needs of each refugee instead of formal and general responses. This means that no system was set in place. Each person made their own decisions. Principals saw the gaps in their systems and built relationships with volunteer organizations and NGOs. The study states that this work would not be sustainable without these organizations. Caliskan also made the case that formal training was needed to support principals in making large-scale changes.

This second section has highlighted the accomplishments of local organizations. There is a theme of recognizing the agency that immigrants have by avoiding deficit thinking. In the next section, I discuss specific measures taken in classrooms to support students using their agency.

For professional educators there are things that can be done to support students with self-advocacy. First, teachers should recognize that students are advocating for themselves by attending classes. English classes are often marketed as an essential for finding work, but that is not always why students join them. Dr. Kisiara's 2020 study identified six main reasons why students joined classes: dignity and privacy, independence and self-reliance, self-advocacy,

support for family and community members, citizenship and livelihoods, and prior experience with foreign languages. It should be noted that students' reasons are not limited to these categories.

Kisiara gave specific practices that teachers can implement to support students. Understanding why students decide to come in the first place and building on their lived experiences is one way to validate and start to understand a student's "why." Teachers should reflect their students' lived experiences in the classroom and should consult students for their goals when designing student learning outcomes. The main focus for classes should not only be related to classwork as it may impede learners' intrinsic motivations. Rather, teachers should seek to understand how each individual student best learns and what helped them attain their other languages. Kisiara also recommends finding opportunities for students to use their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills outside of the classroom, which can help students learn from each other.

Dr. Karam's study, "Resisting and Negotiating Literacy Tasks: Agentive Practices of Two Adolescent Refugee-Background Multilingual Students", looks at the teacher-student role and how impactful it can be for positive and negative resistance in the classroom, resisting here meaning the refusal to comply with academic content. The researchers attended English Language Learner (ELL) classes taught by two different teachers and picked two students who showcased resistance. One teacher was a novice ESL teacher who was required to follow the state curriculum, and the other, a veteran teacher who was able to create her own curriculum. In the novice teacher's class, the student resisted by not working on assignments. In the veteran teacher's classroom, the student renegotiated the assignments because he perceived the

assignment as being stereotypical of his identity. Both of these students exemplify agency by advocating for their beliefs.

In the second teacher's classroom there are valuable lessons for practitioners. Multimodal tasks like using digital literacy and connecting it to the topic can help students use their own creativity. Engaging students in their preferred language and making space for them to teach something that they know can be a way for students to resist living in a mostly English-speaking society. Finally, the study suggests teachers look for opportunities for students to resist. For example, "Just Because" poetry can be a creative way for students to express their beliefs and capture their own feelings while resisting social pressures. Even questioning the author can provide examples of resistance to advocate for one's own view.

Another creative way for students to express themselves is data recording through photography. Dr. Fassetta's study entitled, "Using Photography in Research with Young Migrants: Addressing Questions of Visibility, Movement and Personal Spaces", focuses on children taking pictures and using them to tell stories. Children took photos of what they saw and then discussed them in classes with their peers and teachers (Fassetta, 2016). It gave opportunities for students to show what was important or of interest to them. Furthermore, when students share their narrative, it has the further benefit of building agency. A 2014 study by Lenette, Cox, and Brough, a team of psychologists, propose digital storytelling as a medium of expression. In their research they found refugee participants took agency over their narrative through video, pictures, and narration and even encouraged people around them to do the same.

It's vital that practitioners be well trained in refugee-centered care. The research I have presented highlights the importance of a general understanding of mental health and how to create meaningful relationships. Many of these studies involved small, local volunteer

organizations that supported refugees, with one of particular interest to my research being led by former refugees at “The Day Center”. I have also demonstrated classroom activities that support students in being able to self-advocate for their own stories and academic learning. How can these ideas be duplicated on a larger scale?

Study Design and Results

This study uses interviews to receive qualitative data around teaching and agency building practices. I asked each participant the same questions, occasionally asking clarifying questions. I recorded all of the interviews and took notes by hand. The results of each interview varied based on what teachers practiced. When looking for a program manager, I was only able to access one source. Most of the information came from teachers, who all highlighted different methods. The data included features a summary of each interview.

Data

Interview 1 Nai

Question 1: What is your cultural background?

Nai fell into two categories of my research, program organizer and teacher. His family was asylum seekers from Southeast Asia, he spent time teaching while in the Peace Corps, and presently he works at an organization that supports refugees and asylum seekers. Because of his experiences, I placed him in the category of program organizer.

Question 2: What made you decide to do this work?

He chose this work because he saw the need for more support systems for displaced people. He identified that, “things fall through the cracks.” When he and his family came to the United

States, there were not organizations that gave a lot of support. The charter school that he and his siblings attended connected them with an International Rescue Committee (IRC) youth group. He also recalled attending an after-school assimilation camp. However, he did not feel as if his family was fully supported during this process.

Question 3: How do you see your current work as advocacy?

Nai works for a nonprofit that looks to empower asylum seekers and other immigrants fleeing violence and seeking safety in the metropolitan area of D.C. He manages a community program that empowers asylum seekers to be ambassadors. Many of the asylum seekers he works with were activists in their home communities, so they have some familiarity with advocating for themselves and their communities. Nai's organization hosts listening sessions that comprise of topics like housing, health care, and immigration. The listening sessions are based on what participants of the program want. His organization connects their immigrant ambassadors with U.S. government officials to conduct client-led interviews in English. These meetings are not recorded, but the ambassadors set the meeting topic with the goal of supporting positive policy changes for immigrants in the United States.

Questions 4: How did you learn self-advocacy?

There were two stages to Nai's path towards self-advocacy – school and home. Nai talked about his middle school ESL class, describing it as a warm and supportive environment. He said he, “always look[ed] forward to that class because there were other kids, who might not look like you, but who [could] kind of understand what you are going through versus like your regular classes.” This class helped build his self-confidence.

Follow-Up Question: In ESL group what built your confidence?

Class was a safe place. He had a teacher who was Romanian who he kept in contact with as he progressed to high school. He told me that after class, students had a different energy level that made the day feel more positive.

What Nai saw at home and at school were different. He needed to navigate cultural differences, and he saw himself self-advocating at home. As an immigrant, he saw his family “keeping their heads down,” and he took pride in being American in a different way. He felt like he needed to stand up for his beliefs. When he was in high school and college, he felt like he was in a bubble he focused on his needs. He felt like his bubble burst when he joined the Peace Corps in Burkina Faso as he had a lot of time to contemplate. In his host community, he saw needs and reconsidered advocacy.

Question 5: What do you wish teachers knew about working with displaced persons?

Nai brought up the perspective that teachers and high school and college counselors should be more aware of the tensions that exist. As he went through the process, he said he felt mildly misunderstood by those endowed with the responsibility of helping him. He also reflected on the importance of learning about generational wealth and financial literacy. A tension he specifically experienced was with the perception of “credit” in his hometown versus in the United States. According to his family’s culture, owing money is bad, but in the United States, credit is needed to function.

Question 6: Is there anything you’d like to note about building self-advocacy that we haven’t discussed?

For the last question, Nai said, “I’m still working on it,” mentioning how it’s one thing to advocate for others, but it can be difficult to for oneself.

Interview 2 – Julie

Question 1: How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?

Julie works in Colorado as a preschool teacher and has worked with displaced people for four years. In her community, refugee students are integrated alongside native-born toddlers, and she was expected to teach preschool and English to displaced students.

Question 2: In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?

Answering in two parts, Julie answered that she spends most of her time with the children of displaced people. She occasionally conducts home-visits, a customary role within her work. These home-visits have helped her create more of a personal connection with families. She and her team also give families seeking support referrals for health insurance and other organizations. She also sees her job as advocacy because she teaches children how to speak English. Julie stated, “whenever you are teaching kids, you are teaching them to be advocates for themselves.” Language helps people ask for what they need and negotiate conflicts. She went on to say that this is the point of preschool, highlighting specifically how this stage teaches children bodily autonomy. She teaches students that you don’t need to put up with hitting or mean words.

Question 3: What do you do to build students’ agency?

For agency building, Julie helps students express themselves. She told me that it may seem repetitive, but she and her coworkers constantly model the process of saying what they like or

dislike. For example, if a teacher sees or hears bullying, they will address the child that was on the receiving end of unkindness. A teacher might say, “I notice that you look unhappy,” and wait for feedback from the child. Then based on the student’s response they may ask, “do you like this?” After a typical answer, the teacher will probe and ask, “how would you tell him that you didn’t like that?” After sorting through the issue with the child, the teacher may advise the student to tell their bully how they feel. Julie does not look for an apology from the toddler-perpetrator, but instead wants to ensure that the child who was hurt has the opportunity to tell the other student that they didn’t like what happened, which can help to empower that student.

Question 4: How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?

Julie said her district provides significant training around trauma. She said that it’s important to be aware of what students may be going through and she keeps in mind the places that families and students are coming from - that kids and their families will need extra support adjusting to a new place with a new school system that may have been chosen for them. Additionally, their school has social workers and a school psychologist as a supportive resource for both teachers and families.

Question 5: What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

Julie did not identify any formal activities, but instead shared that the ideals of self-advocacy are woven in throughout the day. This might include community building exercises with students and their families such as checking in about feelings. Julie emphasized that teachers do not force feelings. Instead, a teacher may ask, “how are you feeling?” or, “what can I do you help you feel

better?” She models the language or negotiation and supports students to use this language until they are more skilled in expressing themselves.

Julie ended with this: “preschool is not about letters and numbers. Preschool is about learning that you are a valuable person. You need to learn to stand up for yourself and be kind to other people.” She emphasized that students have a right to say they disagree, but it’s important to be kind and respectful.

Interview 3 –Taylor

Question 1: How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?

Taylor spent a semester in 2021 paired with an organization in Durham, North Carolina. He was paired with a man from Western Africa.

Question 2: In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?

Taylor saw his work as advocacy because classes were based on what the student wanted to learn. The student chose to study for his driver’s exam, a task necessary for the student’s success in Durham. The student described the public transportation as a barrier for commuting to work and also noted that he didn’t want to be a burden to his co-workers. Being able to pass the driving test offered him a form of self-reliance.

Question 3: What do you do to build students’ agency?

To build agency, Taylor offered encouragement and practice opportunities. Additionally, they used this time to chat about other experiences his student faced. Due to the one-to-one nature of the class, they were able to make a flexible schedule, which meant that the student had agency over his own time and scheduling needs.

Question 4: How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?

The flexible schedule offered the student time when needed, but both Taylor and the student were consistent about the cancellation process and finding time in the week to meet. Taylor used multiple quizzes to build the student's needed test skills. He also mentioned that being patient and talking through the student's worries related to the tests were helpful.

Question 5: What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

Taylor identified listening and sharing as ways of supporting self-advocacy. When the student had doubts about passing the written driving exam, Taylor offered encouragement. Taylor could point to the quizzes that his student passed to dispel his self-doubt. Ultimately, the student passed the written exam and is now able to drive himself to work. Although this may seem like a small feat to some, this showed the student his power of self-advocacy. He identified his own need and found the support that he needed to be successful.

Interview 4 – Elizabeth**Question 1: How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?**

Elizabeth started her work in the 1980s working in Southeastern Asia. She led teacher trainings and classes. At times she worked with the U.S. State Department. Currently, she is working in Vermont facilitating classes with Afghan refugees.

Question 2: In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?

Elizabeth sees her work as advocacy because she teaches students to speak up for themselves. In class she creates a safe space for students to play and experiment with language. In her most

recent work, she thinks of potential barriers that students may face like issues with a landlord or a sponsor. (In later questions, Elizabeth provides more detail to the advocacy she built.)

Question 3: What do you do to build students' agency?

Elizabeth stated that since students live within the same communities, they can often help each other to build advocacy skills. While there are general topics that must be discussed in Elizabeth's classes, students drive the conversations. The teachers make room for students to share what they learned on their own and talk through the process of what happened. Students give the first input, and if they find a culturally appropriate solution, the group practices the language skills. However, if they cannot reach a consensus, the teachers will steer students to other options for solutions.

Question 4: How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?

At Elizabeth's current location, most of the people volunteering with the program are alumni of her program. This means that practitioners adapted an "I, It, and Thou" approach. There is a triangle of teaching, co-learning, and mastering material and as experienced educators, the volunteers and teachers utilize a similar philosophy and lens to teach. Elizabeth gave an example of students who didn't want to fill out a name card. Instead of pressing the issue, it was more important to recognize that the students needed more time. Another trauma-minded example Elizabeth provided was recognizing that people did not want to leave their children alone. To support students, the program found child-minders who were all retirees with advanced degrees in child development. Adult students could sit at the front of the room while people in the back played with and taught their children. If a child needed a cuddle, they could immediately check

in with their parent, and alternatively, if parents were worried, they could turn around and see their child.

Another aspect of being trauma-informed was not asking about family. In many language units, one of the first topics is family, but in this program, they did not broach family immediately. The program waited for students to express their thoughts on family. Students expressed wanting to celebrate Nowruz, a traditional spring festival, and Elizabeth noted that she was worried because this was many students' first holiday separated from families. Instead of letting worry take over, Elizabeth took the lead from her students and saw it as an opportunity to celebrate their culture.

Question 5: What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

Elizabeth noted that when she began her current work in Vermont, they did not have any curriculum. They had some requirements from the U.S. State Department, so they used the mandatory topics to ground learning, but they strived for students to have the opportunity to drive the classes. Now Elizabeth uses the "Language Experience Approach" so students can share what they knew about the topics of the week. This also helps students express their current experiences if they wished to divulge them. She also uses role-plays and board games to build confidence with the language. Elizabeth is passionate that learning does not need to be boring, and that students can build their skills and self-advocacy abilities while having fun. Another activity that she mentioned was circle sharing. The students see each other nearly every day, so having time to share their experiences over the last 24 hours can be helpful for students to advocate for their needs while building community. Students can build on one another's ideas and make their own meaning. Finally, Elizabeth noted her book on picture stories, which again helps students create meaning and even express their own stories.

Question 6: Is there anything you'd like to note about building self-advocacy that we haven't discussed?

When asked if there was anything to add, Elizabeth added that each group has two to three teachers. All of the teachers co-plan lessons. This ensures that there are no gaps for students.

When selecting teachers, they ensure that students will have roughly the same ratio of male to female teachers.

Interview 5 - Rebecca

Question 1: How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?

Rebecca has worked in the field of displaced people since 1985 with immigrants from Latin American, Africa, and Afro-Caribbean countries. She currently works in Maryland supporting immigrants and displaced people.

Question 2: In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?

In the past, Rebecca worked in the field of legal services for people fleeing domestic violence. Currently, she sees her work as tangible advocacy because she supports the passing or blocking of national, state, and county laws. She integrates this information into what she teaches and directs teachers to place this information into the classroom setting.

Question 3: What do you do to build students' agency?

Members of the organization that she works for which includes immigrants and displaced people, vote on three issues to focus on for the year. On the teaching side, she brings empowerment into the curriculum. This is a way for students to voice their concerns while also growing their language capabilities. The goals were typically introduced in students' native languages. When

these events occurred in person, there were tri-lingual translation services. Students were then able to present their ideas to lawmakers. With COVID-19, Rebecca's organization pivoted to virtual work, which included recordings and letters. With every step, the curriculum was designed to incorporate what students wanted and needed to learn. Rebecca emphasized that the curriculum also added what students may not know they need to know such as talking to representatives.

Question 4: How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?

Rebecca answered this question with the question, "if I didn't have something, what would be important to me?" She continued by highlighting Maslow's hierarchy of needs and then discussed "listen[ing] with feelings," which includes verbal and nonverbal cues. She mentioned the importance of asking if a student needs time and trying to add a specific ask instead of putting the burden on the student. For example, if a student did not participate in class, she may ask the student if they need time, if they want to leave, or if there is anything that they want the teacher to know. The final part she mentioned empowers students to know their rights.

Question 5: What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

With specific activities, Rebecca mentioned that she uses role plays, letter writing, and email writing. These skills can help students learn to put things in writing if they are having issues at work or with a landlord. They also can help students learn to navigate language.

Question 6: Is there anything you'd like to note about building self-advocacy that we haven't discussed?

Rebecca spoke to the importance of seeing one's students as holders of knowledge. Teachers can build on their students' strengths and give space for students to remember their past. She gave

the example of asking open-ended questions that were not too broad. For instance, she recommended asking a question like, “who prepares food in the house?” instead of asking, “what is your culture?” Asking questions like this can allow space for students to divulge what they choose to, while also giving space to be vulnerable and reflect. Asking about students’ home countries can give them an opportunity to share their pride and knowledge.

Interview 6 - Bill

Question 1: How long have you worked in spaces with refugees and displaced persons?

Bill stated that he spent roughly three years working with known displaced people. In 1987 in Thailand, he worked with refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam after the Vietnam war. After his work in Thailand, Bill taught ESL at a public school in rural areas of Vermont. Bill retired from teaching in 2021. When the Afghan refugee crisis began in 2021, Bill volunteered to teach in Vermont.

Question 2: In what ways do you see your work as advocacy?

Bill separated this question into a few parts. First, he addressed his work in public schools. He stated that most of his advocacy work consisted of working with administration and teachers to understand where his English language learners come from. He said that where he worked there was not a lot of multiculturalism or multilingualism, which pressured his students and made them feel marginalized. By creating an awareness with staff about this marginalization, Bill saw this as a piece of advocacy.

The second part of Bill’s answer reflects on his working directly with refugees. He saw his work as advocacy because the Vietnamese people he worked with were former farmers and at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder in their homeland. He saw that part of his work as showing human potential. Some students did not think that they could learn, and he created learning

opportunities for students. He wanted his students to know that they had the capacity to create a new life in a new place and be successful.

The third piece relates to his current work. When Bill reflected on his past, he expressed regret over not emphasizing preservation of students' culture. Now it is his goal to advocate not for full assimilation, but instead for integration. He wants students to be able to preserve their culture in ways that works for them.

Question 3: What do you do to build students' agency?

In this section, Bill emphasized students' goals. Many students are trying to find jobs and housing. With this in mind, Bill and his two co-teachers made a unit around specific vocabulary for students. Bill teaches the highest level of English in the Vermont program, so there is space to teach specific language. His team tries to plan lessons around similar jobs that his students held in Afghanistan, so they can leverage their former experience to get jobs in their field. He teaches Professional level jargon, and he helps students with their pronunciation, so that a non-sympathetic listener can understand their points.

Question 4: How do you do this with a trauma-informed mindset?

When speaking about trauma-informed practices, Bill recalled a quote he heard at a training. "No dysregulated adult has ever regulated a deregulated kid." He said that he tends to be old-school when working. He mentioned his younger colleagues and how he saw them deescalate situations. He said that in his heart he wants to be able to support but doesn't feel like he has the language or skills developed to be a teacher and counselor. He gave an example of a student that he saw crying. He asked her what was happening, and she shared her worries. Her daughter, who lives in Afghanistan, did not call her for four days. She and her daughter talked every day, and she did

not know if her daughter was in hiding or even alive. Her daughter has a visa to come to the United States, but the Taliban will not permit her to leave. Bill reflected that he did not know how to comfort the student. He could only listen. Bill wished that he had ten more years of training so that he could have a better strategy to ease her anxiety.

Another part of trauma-informed practices that he emphasized was building a classroom community. By creating a safe place, he ensured students felt like they could share and be supported by their peers and teachers. Bill worked with three other teachers to plan and teach. Having three teachers, two male and one female, was another way to be supportive. An example of this was when a female Muslim student asked if she had to shake hands when greeting people. The male teacher said yes, but the female teacher said no. Bill was in the middle, and he didn't know how to respond. The female teacher explained that shaking hands may be an American custom, but it did not have to be followed and to not feel obligated to do anything, especially if it violated her beliefs. The student felt comforted because in her culture, shaking hands with a man is forbidden. The class went on to think of ways to reject handshaking and ways to politely explain beliefs. This is an example of how multiple perspectives can be a trauma-informed practice.

Question 5: What activities do you use to support students in self-advocacy?

For self-advocacy activities, Bill talked about the role plays. He mentioned having daily journals for students to use to reflect. The prompts varied, but generally were future focused. A common prompt was, "what do you want to happen in the next week?" Another activity was student shares. It was meant to be a warm-up, but when a student shared, another student wanted to add on, empathize, or commiserate. This allowed students to learn from each other while creating an

atmosphere for bonding. Students had many opportunities to be heard by their peers. Students also had self-knowledge shares. This could be about something they knew a lot about. Teachers paired this with information that students needed to learn, so students would have the skills to more fully express themselves. A final focus was question asking. Bill wanted students to hone the ability to ask questions, so they could clarify meanings. He knew that this skill would be essential for students as they joined the workforce.

Analysis of Data

At the start, I looked at the Zoom transcripts and edited them while reviewing the interview video files. When I noticed the varied results, I decided to summarize each interview for clarity. Some of the questions invited overlap, so I placed them according to where they fit best with the main questions. I was the sole researcher and altogether, there were six interviewees. Two interviewees were in their mid-twenties to early thirties. The other four participants have worked are over forty and worked in the field of education for over twenty years. I interviewed three people who identify as men and three who identify as women.

Finding and Interpretation of Data

Looking through the data, I knew that I had many valuable perspectives from people who spent various amounts of time involved with displaced people. There were multiple dimensions of advocacy, which provides a larger view of what advocacy is. First, navigating cultural tensions at home and at school. This brought the question of how as educators can we make space for students who are experiencing this dichotomy? Then there was speaking up for one's feelings and needs, which applied to the youngest learners, but also is applicable to all learners. There was being able to direct learning and choose the trajectory of the course. In another interview, we discussed being able to communicate in one's own language and utilize their expert cultural

knowledge. Cultural expertise also came up in the literature review, which means not only sharing with groups of similar backgrounds but also groups of diverse learners. I also learned about developing skills that seem non-language based like driving, which can lead to independence. There also is power in knowing laws and legal rights like being able to vote or write a letter in support or against a bill. There was teaching the power of being able to take risks to exercise human potential as learners. Finally, there was being able to reflect on learning, and its benefits.

The first theme that stood out to me was flexibility. Flexibility looked like adapting topics to fit students' needs, being willing to hand the class over to students to share their thoughts and trying to make accommodating deadlines for assignments or vocabulary lessons. Even though there was flexibility, teachers spent time with intentional planning that reflected what students wanted to learn. This theme also arose in the literature review showing the benefits of providing flexibility with assignments while having students choose how they want to tell their stories. It is important to give educators examples of flexibility so they can use it in their own practices. Not everyone will have the same options for flexibility, but it's a way to meet students' needs and give students space to advocate for themselves and their needs.

When asking how people saw their work as advocacy, here were two things that I noticed. The first part related to Maslow's basics and shows the importance of linking students to the services that they may need, such as legal services, insurance, or food programs. As a teacher, I know these needs must be met for learning to occur. However, through language acquisition, more of these needs can be met because students will be able to express their general or precise needs which leads to the second part, skills. The teachers I spoke with wanted students to attain the skills necessary for expressing their needs. My interview findings were consistent

with the literature review in that being able to speak and read in English helps give students more agency in their day-to-day lives. By having the skills to express, displaced people do not have to try to depend on a system that is guessing for needs.

Trauma-informed practices were different in each interview. While Bill relied on their peers and another person identified listening with feelings as a key way to support, Elizabeth used their program as a way to keep families together, allowing parents to learn with their children in the same room. Nai recalled his youth and identified the influx of joyful energy in his ESL class. Although he did not mention trauma-informed practices, I wonder what his teacher did to support her students. The varying practices in interviews and the literature review speak to a need of more training around best practices to provide teachers with an expansive toolbox to support displaced people and refugees.

The theme that was consistent throughout all my interviews with long-term practitioners was the use of activities. The most common activity was role plays. Teachers identified that students learning from each other was key, so they offer students a chance to express themselves together in different situations. Another activity was group sharing. Students could go through their days and empathize with other each other's experiences or build mini lessons in the moment. After this, the most commonly mentioned activity was journal and email writing. In the literature review, poems as a form of writing were used to help students describe feelings. This leads me to wonder how the use of various forms of writing should differ depending on the age group.

Conclusion

The literature review supports that learning English is important for the physical and mental well-being of displaced people living in countries where English is the primary language.

The interviews demonstrated that language provides the basis for self-advocacy. This is why people come together as young toddlers in preschool. They learn to negotiate the conflicts that they experience. When teaching English, teachers should recognize students' agency. Teachers can empower students by building on their strengths and bringing in their prior knowledge.

In the classroom space, teachers can cultivate an atmosphere where students can kindle or rekindle their ability for self-advocacy through spoken language, poems, journals, and emails to local government. In language classes, teachers can use activities like role-plays, circle check-ins, and student-led curriculum to build agency within students. By learning one's rights and being able to articulate them, students can take power to make the changes that they want to see in their new community.

Summary

This project started by looking at voice and how some voices receive consideration while others are ignored. So often refugees, asylum seekers, and more broadly, displaced people have their stories told for them through newscasts. In the literature review, studies point to the value of learning the language of people's host countries. There is value in being able to tell one's own story. The Colorado RISE program demonstrated the power of parent's stories and using them to leverage for change in Denver. This does not just include the power to tell one's own story, but the value in creating community and supporting one another. The Day Center in Montreal showed the value in refugees helping one another to build self-esteem and lower depression rates. These organizations changed power in communities.

Next, deficit thinking was addressed, which in Gaventa's framework is a key element of reclaiming power- shirking the idea that one does not have power. This led to the end of the literature review where teachers gave their best practices to support students such as negotiating

tasks, poetry, and using different mediums of art to tell their stories. Students pushed against assignments to better meet their needs. Instead of saying they were not capable or completing something, alternatives were given.

Finally, the interviews looked over ways to build power and community in the classroom. Five teachers and a program manager shared their stories of how they build advocacy. In the interviews, participants were focused on skills that students already had and emphasized building on what students know. They created spaces to make students feel comfortable and be their authentic selves.

Suggestions for Future Research

In a future project, there would be value in asking a wider range of teachers for their best practices. This could focus on what is happening in the classroom in a new country where students will settle or compare it to best practices in a refugee camp. Another critical angle for future study would be to ask more former refugees for their insights such as, “what are teachers missing when they try to think of potential barriers?” Checking in with Vermont’s program for Afghan refugees to see how living on campus was effective compared to another program that helps place people with jobs and English skills, would be useful to measure growth in language and students’ views of what they learned. Would there be more examples like Nai’s about the importance of credit? Could financial literacy be another umbrella of expectations for English immersion lessons?

In both my interview with Rebecca and Elizabeth the theme of talking about “home” emerged. In future research, I would be interested learning trauma-informed best practices in addressing the topic of family. Are there differences in outcomes when teachers provide specific class time for this topic or whether students thrive better when they can divulge that information

once comfortable? Does this look different depending on the student's home cultures? What is the best way to ask students for their point of view?

Another strain for study is trauma-informed practices. Displacement itself is already a traumatic event, but this has now been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the wider field of education focuses on trauma, will this change how English Language Education grapples with it? In this study, some teachers expressed uncertainty in best practices, and they wanted more supports. What are more direct trauma-informed supports for learners? There is significant work to be completed in this field of study. As climate change worsens, borders are less porous, there will be more refugee crises that will arise. We need more trauma informed practices that will help people flourish in their new homes and promote community power.

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