

Community Voices: Resettled Youth Use Their Writing to Reposition Themselves

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Abstract:

Resettled youth often face many challenges while enrolled in schools, such as expectations to quickly assimilate and acquire English language and literacy skills or being positioned in deficit-oriented ways. In this article, we use qualitative methods to seek to understand how resettled youth positioned themselves as authors and use their writing to reposition themselves in a two-week summer writing camp. We argue that educators and scholars need to reframe traditional ways of teaching and learning literacy and consider the diverse cultural and linguistic identities resettled youth bring with them by paying attention to the ways in which they represent and negotiate their identities through their writing. Using the following questions to guide our inquiry—In what ways do resettled youth in a writing camp position and reposition themselves in their writing? How do these positionings relate to how they express their identities in their writing?—we show how the recently resettled youth position themselves as authors of important stories. We also show how they repositioned themselves from vulnerable to resilient individuals and from despondent to hopeful and aspirational youth.

Keywords: writing | English language learners | ELL | community-based literacy programs

Article:

Since the passage of the refugee act in 1980, the United States has resettled over 3 million refugees, a number that continues to increase as newly resettled Afghans make their home here (US Department of State Refugee Processing Center (RPC), Citation2022). These displaced individuals are often fleeing war, persecution, or environmental disaster in their homelands. When enrolled in schools, resettled youth often face significant challenges, such as being expected to assimilate quickly; receiving instruction that may not be culturally responsive or available in their home languages; having to rapidly acquire language and literacy skills in English; and possibly being inappropriately placed in special needs classrooms (Bal, Citation2014; DeCapua & Marshall, Citation2015; Dryden-Peterson, Citation2016; Duran, Citation2017; Fredricks & Warriner, Citation2016; Hoff & Armstrong, Citation2021; Hos, Citation2020; Li, Citation2018; Martínez & Montaña, Citation2016; Roy & Roxas, Citation2011; Ryu et al., Citation2019).

Recognizing the difficulties resettled youth navigate, we take the stance that educators can learn a lot from them and their stories and should consider their identities and how they position themselves. Drawing on data from a two-week summer writing camp with resettled youth, we utilize normative and macro constructs related to the instruction and learning of resettled youth, who are commonly overlooked and underserved (Hos, Citation2020; Mosselson et al., Citation2017). Specifically, we reject the traditional idea of resettled and immigrant students as struggling writers and/or learners, and the habit of positioning them in deficit ways (Bal, Citation2014; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, Citation2000). Instead, we argue for opening up learning spaces in which resettled students can acknowledge and use their abilities to the fullest potential. Thus, we posit that the repositioning of resettled students insists on changing deficit perspectives that shape localized and institutional instruction.

Our inquiry was guided by two main questions—In what ways do resettled youth in a writing camp position and reposition themselves in their writing? How do these positionings relate to how they express their identities in their writing?

We begin by explaining how identity construction and positioning theory provided a theoretical framework for this work. Then, we situate our study within related literature, which examines the obstacles resettled youth face in schools and how storytelling supports writing practices. Next, we explain in more detail the context of our study and our research design. Finally, we present the major findings from our research, which shows how the youth positioned themselves as authors of important stories and repositioned themselves from vulnerable to resilient individuals and from despondent to hopeful and aspirational youth.

Theoretical frameworks and related literature

To examine how youth navigate and negotiate their shifting identities within their writing, we situate our study within the following areas of scholarship: identity construction, positioning theory, educational obstacles, and storytelling as a strategy for supporting resettled youth's writing practices.

Identity construction

Literacy practices are socially, historically, culturally, and politically situated (Barton & Hamilton, Citation2000). Within that frame, we understand that literacy is a tool for constructing and enacting identities (Gutiérrez, Citation2008). Identities are “self-understandings” which people “tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland et al., Citation1998, p. 3). In order to construct and enact identities within specific contexts (e.g., as a writer), people take on discourses (e.g., beliefs and choices about content, style and grammar) and behaviors (e.g., meeting with a writing group) related to those identities.

Understanding literacy and identity construction involves an examination of people's literacy practices, including how they are connected to their values and beliefs about language, literacy, and identity (Scribner & Cole, Citation1981). Through making choices about language, people seek to communicate particular ways of being and position themselves and others in ways that reflect multiple identities and power relationships (Beijaard et al., Citation2004; Frankel & Fields, Citation2019).

Previous scholarship on writing identities shows that learners' identities shape how and what people write and are related to their cultural and linguistic capital (Clark & Ivancic,

Citation1997). Scholars have used identity frameworks to examine the school experiences of resettled and immigrant youth (Daniel, Citation2019; Kennedy et al., Citation2019) and found that writing can help people make sense of their identities and develop agency in oppressive spaces (Blackburn, Citation2002; Martin-Beltran et al., Citation2020). Some research examines how teachers can create spaces for identity work within the classroom (Frankel & Fields, Citation2019). For instance, Beauregard et al. (Citation2017) examined how a nine-year-old Palestine refugee made sense of his identities through drawings, allowing him to alternate between his wish to affirm his Palestinian identity and his wish to avoid it. Other studies illustrate how students construct identities within new places. In one example, Bash and Zezlina-Phillips (Citation2006) examined how the identity work of refugees in London involved both locally perceived needs and global interests, which the authors termed glocal identities. This suggests that much learning occurs as students recognize their resilience and “act as managers of their own, many-sided, frequently fluid, identities in their search for cultural anchors” (p. 15). Similarly, Oikonomidou (Citation2010) explored how female refugee youth from Somalia in high school formed identities that transcended boundaries between their community, their cultural backgrounds and histories, and their perceived futures. Implications call for more spaces that recognize and facilitate students’ complex identity work.

Research also shows how learning contexts as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal factors can foster or hinder a learner’s beliefs about their writing identity and ability (Cremin & Baker, Citation2014; Daniel, Citation2019). In a study about how the context of an urban charter school shaped the academic identities of newly arrived Muslim Turk refugees, Bal (Citation2014) found that students were often sorted into generic institutional identities, such as “English Language Learners” and “racialized learners,” positioning them as lazy or disabled and frequently pushing them into special education courses.

Our concern over the potential effects of such undesirable positionings led to our writing camp and this study. We seek to understand how educational spaces can provide opportunities for youth to construct positive identities of themselves in their writing and express multiple sides of their identities.

Repositioning

We also draw on the concept of repositioning to build on the understanding of identity construction. Repositioning, specifically referred to as third-order positioning, is linked to positioning theory, which suggests that individuals situate themselves and others along storylines, related to both past experiences and cultural ideologies (Bullough & Draper, Citation2004; Holland et al., Citation1998; Van Langenhove & Harré, Citation1999). Moghaddam and Harré (Citation2010) argued that positioning theory is about “how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others” (p. 2) in particular contexts. Within those discursive events, individuals “ascribe rights and claim them” for themselves and “place duties on others” (p. 3). Positioning, then, is related to membership and belonging within specific groups, such as a U.S. classroom or an after-school writing program. Thus, positions are relational and contextual. As a result, students, for example, can take up or are assigned positions in relation to one another (e.g., struggling student) as well as to specific contexts (e.g., school).

Ellsworth (Citation1997) challenges educators not only to take note of how curriculum and instruction opens opportunities for students to take up positions within “relations of knowledge, power, and desire,” (p. 2) but also to be aware of the moments when mismatches occur between

assumed positions and actual experiences. As students, then, the choices they make, and the choices that are made for them, change their position in relation to normative “constructs of a discourse or a social system” (Berghoff, Citation1997, p. 8).

Researchers have used positioning theory to show how students position themselves and each other within schools (Clarke, Citation2006; Leander, Citation2002; Yoon, Citation2008). Other studies have focused specifically on how teachers position students during classroom interactions, illustrating how teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and discourses about students shape the identity positions as learners within the classroom community (Hall, Citation2009; Reeves, Citation2009; Vetter, Citation2010; Wortham, Citation2003).

Recent literature is demonstrating how marginalized students reposition themselves – referred to as third-order positioning–within various learning spaces, both in and out of school (Amthor, Citation2017; Cun, Citation2020; Golden, Citation2017). For example, Cun (Citation2020), worked with four Burmese children to understand their language and literacy practices. She conducted home visits and interviews to better understand her participants’ culture, educational experience, and literacy learning as they resettled in the U.S. Cun (Citation2020) found that resettled children reflected on the initial difficulties they encountered when starting school and repositioned themselves as being more capable while also holding aspirational goals for their future careers. Similarly, Frankel and Fields (Citation2019) reveal the inextricable link between identity, agency, and positioning in an in-depth case study of one middle grade student (born in the U.S. but self-identified as Mexican). In tutoring sessions, he pushed back against being categorized as disengaged or resistant by reappropriating the traditional norms of tutoring. This was manifest in his repositionings that connected, redirected, complicated, and deepened his inquiry, in acts of self-authoring that revealed his very active and capable meaning-making. Such work has the potential to provide insight for literacy educators interested in creating spaces for marginalized youth to reposition themselves.

Obstacles in education

Resettled youth and their families must learn to navigate new school systems, which may be quite different from those in their home countries. Rather than moving toward understanding and recognizing the value of diversity (Grant & Wong, Citation2004), many schools promote hegemonic/deficit-oriented practices (Duran, Citation2017; Fredricks & Warriner, Citation2016; Li, Citation2018; Ryu et al., Citation2019) and assimilation into mainstream culture (DeCapua & Marshall, Citation2015; Dryden-Peterson, Citation2016; Duran, Citation2017; Hos, Citation2020; Roy & Roxas, Citation2011; Ryu et al., Citation2019) as a way to address differences. Studies show that schools lack targeted policies and educational frameworks to support students from resettled backgrounds (Taylor & Sidhu, Citation2012). The organizational structure and division of work in high schools and middle schools “are fundamentally incompatible with the educational needs of immigrant students” (Hos, Citation2020; Mosselson et al., Citation2017; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, Citation2000, p. 55). For example, secondary schools are organized according to subject areas. As a result, teachers are specialized in specific subject areas and have pedagogical experience and knowledge teaching their content. Consequently, most educators do not have a background that has prepared them to work with multilingual learners or with children who have experienced trauma (Damaschke-Deitrik et al., Citation2022; Fredricks & Warriner, Citation2016; Lucas et al., Citation2008; MacNevin, Citation2012; J. Stewart, Citation2011; Urdan, Citation2011). Added to their trauma, many resettled youth have had adverse educational

experiences such as uncertainty about instruction, lack of predictability about schooling routines, and interrupted schooling (Nilsson Folke, Citation2018). Additionally, classroom instruction may not be culturally responsive, especially when educators' backgrounds are different from their students'. For example, instruction for multilingual students that does not promote the use of multiple languages (to help access new language learning) and the pressure to meet language and literacy expectations at an accelerated rate serve as barriers for academic success (Martínez & Montaña, Citation2016).

Moreover, students from resettled backgrounds state that alienation and discrimination are the greatest barriers to their academic achievement (Amthor, Citation2017; Hoff & Armstrong, Citation2021; Oikonomidoy, Citation2010; Portes & Rumbaut, Citation2001). As resettled children struggle with displacement and a new language, a resulting lack of belonging can have a profound effect on their ability to adapt (Fisher et al., Citation2000; Portes & Rumbaut, Citation2001). Instead, educators benefit from listening to the voices of resettled youth to inquire into their perspectives and experiences while valuing their unique skills (e.g., global perspectives, resilience, multiliteracies; M. A. Stewart, Citation2014), inform instructional practices, and strengthen school-community relationships (Enciso, Citation2011; Zoch et al., Citation2018).

Despite educational challenges, resettled youth are persisting and bringing valuable contributions to new communities, often serving as change agents for a more equitable society (Ryu & Tuvilla, Citation2018). It is this possibility that we wish to promote and understand more deeply. Pausing to listen to resettled youth's stories, aspirations, and identities as writers allows us to grasp the complexity of their lives and use that to support them in the classroom.

Storytelling to support writing practices

The literature we reviewed suggested storytelling as a way for resettled students to express their history and identities in agentic ways. For example, Perry (Citation2008) examined three young Sudanese men and their use of storytelling to maintain their sense of community and identities. As a cultural practice the young men were familiar with, storytelling provided a "meaningful context for literacy learning" (p. 335). In a similar study, Oikonomidoy (Citation2010) used the narratives of high school students from Somalia to search for the "hidden meaning" in their writing. The author recognized in their narratives a disconnect between how the students were taught and how they wanted to be taught, as the students found it difficult to relate to the school material and wished teachers were more encouraging and appreciative of diverse languages. These findings support the use of culturally relevant materials and the practice of exploring students' stories to understand the nuances of students' needs and their strengths (see also, M. A. Stewart, Citation2014). Especially against the backdrop of the cultural mismatch refugee youth often experience, one National Writing Project affiliated study (Crandall et al., Citation2020) concluded that "young people deserve spaces to write and share their lives [i.e., their stories] across the literal and figurative boundaries that often separate them" (p. 607). Each of these examples suggests important applications of third-order positioning in which individuals display agency by repositioning themselves against a backdrop of negative positioning.

Scholars have also examined the use of digital tools for storytelling and composing (Pandya et al., Citation2018). For example, focusing on three brothers' practices on the computer, Gilhooly and Lee (Citation2014) recognized how digital literacies can provide a means for resettled youth to reposition themselves as writers. The use of the Internet provided the brothers with an ability to socialize and maintain connections to a broader community. It also gave them new ways to be

creative and produce digital texts that expressed their identities. Additionally, McGinnis (Citation2018) used digital testimonios in an ELA classroom to provide unaccompanied immigrant youth opportunities to share their migration experience, as well as reposition themselves as writers of important text. The use of digital testimonios provided youth with a myriad of digital tools/methods to share their narratives on the decision-making process to migrate, their migration journey, and their experience at the U.S./Mexico border. Likewise, Kendrick et al. (Citation2022) found that digital storytelling helped immigrant and refugee students articulate complex understandings, develop digital literacies, communicate in digital spaces, and affirm language identities. Thus, digital storytelling opened up a myriad of opportunities for the students to develop valuable literacy skills and explore their identities as multilingual students.

In sum, storytelling offers a promising strategy for engaging and supporting resettled youths' writing practices. Drawing on this literature, our study examines youth's storytelling practices when they wrote in a supportive environment that made digital tools available and valued their diverse backgrounds and multiple languages.

Methods

This study is part of a larger project spanning multiple years that aims to understand how to support resettled youth in their literacy development. In this article, we focus on the experiences from one summer. We draw on qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, Citation2009) and a repositioning lens (Frankel & Fields, Citation2019) to understand how the youth make sense of their world and their experiences and identities through writing.

Context

Our project takes place at a university in a large county in North Carolina. There are currently over 60,000 immigrants living in this area, representing 120 languages and 140 countries.

Our team

Our team consisted of three university faculty members, two doctoral students, two undergraduate assistants, two camp instructors, and various volunteers. The authors of this article, who were also the researchers—the faculty members and doctoral students—all have experience working in multilingual settings from elementary to high school and adult settings. We are all middle-class females; two of us identify as Asian-American, one as Black, and two as White.

The youth

Working with support networks in the area, over 30 resettled youth were recruited for our writing camp and 21 consented to participate in our research study. Their home countries included Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Malaysia, Nepal, Syria, Tanzania, and Thailand.

The writing camp

The writing camp took place for three hours each day across two weeks during the summer. We called the camp Community Voices because we wanted to provide an opportunity for diverse voices within our community to be heard. We divided the youth into two groups depending on their age—ages 12–15 in one class and ages 16–19 in the other.

Each class session consisted of community-building activities, mini-lessons, individual and group writing time, sharing time at the end, and daily conferences to provide individual feedback. Across the two weeks, each youth individually wrote at least one piece of writing that they took through the writing process (e.g., brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, publishing), shared on the last day through orally reading their piece, and had their work published in an anthology. The daily mini-lessons were focused on writing personal narratives, including writing poetry. The youth mostly wrote individually, but we often incorporated group or partner writing so the youth could try out strategies presented in the mini-lessons. There was no set of writing prompts to which students responded; instead, they were encouraged to write freely and in the language of their choice. Some of them chose to write only in English while some did write in multiple languages. For the final piece, all of them wrote in English. We provided examples such as blackout poetry, “I am” collages and poems, vision boards, life mapping, and technological platforms for telling their story such as storyboards and FlipGrid, where students would tell their story orally. The youth had pen and paper available as well as laptops and a wide variety of art supplies for creating maps and visual models.

In addition to paying close attention to the kind of writing we engaged the youth in, we were also mindful of how we positioned the youth. As we assembled our team to work with the youth, we were careful to ensure the team held similar asset-based perspectives so we knew we would position the youth as capable and resilient rather than lacking or damaged. It was important that this was communicated to the youth as we interacted with them. At all times we were encouraging and treated the youth as if what they had to say and write was valuable and communicative, and that they were capable of creating their chosen work.

Data collection

The doctoral students and one of the faculty members focused on data collection, which included writing observational field notes, conducting semi-structured interviews, writing analytic memos, taking photographs of student work, and organizing the youths’ digitally produced work in a cloud-based storage system. Field notes were taken about the youths’ writing practices using an observation protocol exploring questions such as: What are participants writing about? What languages are they writing in? What do they say about who they are writing for or what they want to communicate? Semi-structured interviews took place every day, lasting approximately 5 to 10 minutes (approximately 50 to 100 minutes total per youth) and were selectively transcribed. These interviews included questions such as: Why did you choose to write that story and in that format? Who would you want to share your writing with? What do you want other people to know about your writing? Do you normally write with others in school or do you just write by yourself? Do you have to write for all your school subjects or is it just in reading or language arts?

Data analysis

We employed qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, Citation2009) to design the study and analyze the data using inductive and recursive methods (Corbin & Strauss, Citation2015). To begin data analysis, we transcribed student interviews and organized the data sources together in a shared cloud-based storage system for easy access by all researchers.

Next, we independently used open coding to analyze each of our data sources. We assigned each of us four or five youth whose data (interview transcripts and writing samples) we read line by line to engage in open coding (i.e., noting single words or short phrases to explain the data). In addition, all of us read the field notes and analytic memos line by line for open coding. During this stage, we met regularly to discuss the emerging codes and make adjustments to the codes in order to establish consistency (e.g., “wrote about their family” and “included a description of their family” were changed to “writing about family”).

Once this stage was complete, we engaged in axial coding to reduce the codes and draw connections between them. This allowed us to systematically develop categories, validate relationships between codes, and then expand the categories by providing refinement and development. For example, the code “writing about family” was added to a larger category “writing about forms of support” which also included codes for “writing about friends” and “writing about home.” Table 1 provides an example of this category development.

Table 1. Example of category development.

Category	Codes	Description	Example from Data
Writing about forms of support	Writing about family	Writing about the love they have for their family; focusing on positive experiences with family	I would like to come with my family but they could not come here because my mom lost her leg. She can not walk far away, also I love so much my family. I had to leave my family behind. (Dawit)
	Writing about friends	Writing about making new friends; Learning to speak with new friends	I went to school and I try to speaking English with my friend and my siblings. This is a new language for me. (Gloria)
	Writing about home	Providing background information about their home country; reminiscing about home	Thailand is a nice place to visit, the people are nice, and the food is great:) ... The houses are made with wood and bamboo. The wood and bamboo are very tall. I lived nearby a river and flowers and trees were in front of my house. (Nani)

Throughout this process, we prioritized establishing inter-coder reliability. We did so in the following ways. First, since we all coded the field notes and analytic memos, we were able to reach consensus on the codes that emerged from these data sources. Secondly, we examined the data sources for the youth we did not originally code for in order to offer another perspective on the first reviewer’s codes. At least one or two of us read back over someone else’s coding of the data. We met weekly to discuss our codes and resolve discrepancies. Axial coding also allowed us to note shifts in the youths’ positioning in their writing. Additionally, we used this time to triangulate the data by considering multiple data sources to support our assertions.

Finally, we engaged in selective coding to focus on considering how the youth repositioned themselves away from deficit perspectives and oppressive experiences. We drew on positioning theory for this analysis. Specifically, we took note of how the youth repositioned themselves in their writing. For example, we noted that Nani (all names are pseudonyms), in her final piece,

positioned herself as someone who was too nervous to leave her house when she first moved to the U.S. Later, she repositioned herself as someone who has a lot of friends in the U.S. and is learning “to read, write, and speak English.” We took note of such shifts as a “repositioning of self over time.” Table 2 provides an example of this stage in the coding process. We also took note of specific storylines to make sense of the narrative that is unfolding in the written text. Within the example above, we noticed that Nani wrote a narrative of hope for reconnecting with her family and village in Thailand, while also being proud of her accomplishments in the U.S. This was a common storyline found in the written texts of the youth.

Table 2. Example of using positioning theory for analysis.

Data	First Order Positioning	Third Order Positioning	Storylines
[Excerpt from Nani’s final piece] In my first day of America I was so nervous to go outside. After three days, my cousins came to my house and said. “Let’s go outside and play!” The next day, I started to get along with other people and have a lot of friends. When I started to go to school and I went to my first class, there were so many kids in the classroom. I felt like they were all looking at me. I was so nervous that I froze like an ice. At the time I didn’t understand English, but now after one year I learn a little English. Coming to America has changed me a lot. I have learned how to read, write and speak more English. I miss my home in Thailand because I have a lot of memories of my friends and family.	Positioned self as overcoming obstacles Positioned self as nervous and not wanting to leave her house when she moved to the U.S. Later, positioned self as someone with a lot of friends and learning how to speak/read/write English. Positioned herself as missing her family and friends at home, while also becoming more comfortable in U.S. Positioned self as having an important story to tell	Repositioned self from someone who was too nervous to leave her house to someone who has friends and has learned to speak/read/write some English	Hope for reconnecting with her family and village in Thailand, while also being proud of her accomplishments in the United States.

Findings

Now we provide an illustration of the themes through examples that include students’ voices and show how they used their writing to communicate resilient perspectives in the face of personal struggles and demeaning experiences from their past. When provided with choice and open-ended writing opportunities, most of the youth chose to write about personal experiences related to their immigration. We did not ask the youth to explicitly share the details of what forced them to flee their home countries, but most of them were forthcoming about their histories. We honored the stories they wanted to share by listening and providing space for them to do so. We first present the findings to show how the youth positioned themselves as authors of important stories. Then, we discuss how the youth 1) repositioned themselves from vulnerable to resilient individuals and 2) repositioned themselves from despondent to hopeful and aspirational youth.

Positioning themselves as authors of important stories

In interviews, the youth reported that in school, authorship was equated with writing “correctly” in English, with academic writing emphasized and with little choice about the content of the writing. As a result, they were often positioned as struggling writers, which is a common occurrence in U.S. schools (Bal, Citation2014; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, Citation2000). Instead, at camp, the youth were provided with open-ended writing opportunities and were able to be storytellers of unique and passionate stories that often involved sharing difficult experiences and reflecting on how they changed or what they learned from those experiences. Thus, the youth used storytelling and their writing practices (Gilhooly & Lee, Citation2014) to position themselves as authors with authoritative stances in telling their stories.

For example, Rekah was a native Nepalese who wrote about her mixed feelings with regard to immigrating while simultaneously constructing her understanding of what it means to be a middle schooler. In her writing, Rekah worked through the difficult transition to middle school and took up the identity of someone who is an author of an important story from which others can benefit. In her final words she wrote:

As I’m writing this today I said to myself “why was I so nervous [in her first year of the writing camp]?” To my past self I would say “don’t be so nervous you wouldn’t learn anything if you hadn’t taken a leap, you wouldn’t have made new friends.” To people reading this, you can’t go on in life being afraid of everything or being nervous–this might stop you from doing what you really want to do and you can’t let fear get in the way.

Rekah used her writing to tell her story of transition and to share with her readers a powerful insight she had learned about herself. Specifically, when returning to her second year of camp, and reflecting on her insecurities during the previous year, she claimed that she had realized, “I have a story to tell!” In this way, Rekah adopted the identity of an author. She does go on to shift from writing about what she would tell her past self to speaking directly to the reader when she says, “To people reading this ... ” This shift in voice shows how Rekah understands how others might learn from or make connections to the story she tells.

Dawit, a 17-year-old from Eritrea, wrote about his painful experience of having to leave his family behind. He wrote:

When I was leaving my country at night, I hid from soldiers but they saw me and they tried to catch me. I would like to come with my family but they could not come here because my mom lost her leg. She cannot walk far away, also I love so much my family. I had to leave my family behind.

He fled to a refugee camp in Ethiopia and created a family of his own. He explained:

I stayed there [in Ethiopia] two years without family, and life was hard because I lived with 10 people in one small house. Those people were under 12 years old, so I decided to take care of them because they are younger than me. I love them more than anything. Also, I always told them don’t give up and don’t drink alcohol or smoke and they listened to me. Some of them want to go back to Eritrea, but it is

dangerous because soldiers can kill you. Also, some people are trying to sell you to outside of the country.

Later in his story, he explained that he was able to get to the U.S. with the help of UNICEF because he needed surgery and stable medical care. He wrote about currently living with an American family, attending high school, and playing soccer. He concluded his writing by expressing how thankful he is. In this story Dawit positioned himself as an author with an important story to tell. He shared aspects of his identity that transcended boundaries (Oikonomidou, Citation2010), such as being a caretaker, and wrote to express his grief and celebrate his recent successes.

Although most of the youth told stories of resettling in the U.S., some chose other topics. For example, Jesus told a story about how he learned to read. He wrote:

I was homeschooled in Malaysia, but I was always a book lover. In my house, one room is almost covered in books. I went to school at church at Jalan Alor. My school taught me to talk in English. Malaysia taught me how to read. Reading is entertaining but not only reading changed my life.

Here, Jesus positioned himself as an author who wrote about how reading changed his life. Within this narrative, he wrote about reading with his father when he was two to three years old. He wrote, "I just remember I feel happy that I learn how to read. I feel kind of special that my dad give time to read." He then taught his younger siblings how to read. He described how he felt closer to his middle brother because they could talk about what they liked to read. Jesus also wrote about the books that have made an impact on him, including fictional stories, book series, and nonfiction books about Earth. He wrote, "I realize how books can change my life." At camp, when writing his own story, he realized how hard it was, including finding the right words to convey the right meaning. Through writing his own story, Jesus positioned himself as an author who wanted to convey how important reading was to him and his family.

All of the youth at camp positioned themselves as authors of important stories to tell. Many of the stories expressed how they successfully navigated the difficulty of an experience, while others shared what they were grateful for and hoped to pass on to others. These positionings most likely occurred because the camp opened up opportunities for the youth to write a story of their choice in a genre of their choice. Camp instructors supported them through the writing process at every step and encouraged them to tell a story that was meaningful to them.

Within those stories, we noticed a pattern of repositioning. In other words, we noticed how youth talked about how they positioned themselves at one moment in time and how that positioning shifted over time within their narratives. We discuss those repositionings below.

Repositioning from vulnerable to resilient individuals

In their writing, many of the youth illustrated how they repositioned themselves from vulnerable to resilient individuals who had the capacity to recover from difficult life experiences. For example, Ahmed, a newly resettled Syrian, demonstrated his resilience and persistence in learning multiple languages when faced with discrimination and hardship. Ahmed began his story by discussing how he was negatively positioned by others due to his language and cultural barriers when he was originally resettled in Turkey before coming to the U.S. He shared about an altercation he had with a peer because he was not able to speak Turkish. When adults intervened,

his friend blamed Ahmed and told them that he was saying “bad words.” In response, the adults told Ahmed that he was “a bad child and you say bad words and you’re a liar.” As a result, he felt powerless because he could not defend himself and tell the truth.

Later in his story, Ahmed explained that he was determined to learn Turkish so that he could “speak with people and friends and defend my rights.” With hard work, he learned Turkish and reflected in his writing:

My story that I learned from my life is when the person is going to any place in the world, he has to learn the language of the country before everything. I felt bad when I was not speaking Turkish to defend myself and say the truth, but after all that when I learned Turkish, I became very happy, and I can speak with the people and say the truth to defend myself.

Ahmed quickly adapted to learning a new language. Instead of being defeated by not knowing a language, he repositioned himself from “a bad child who says bad words” to someone who can defend himself and “say his truth.” Such work illustrates the resilience and persistence it takes for youth to learn new languages and become a member of a new culture. He prefaces his story with his current academic achievements (e.g., acceptance into the National Honor Society) to show how capable he is, repositioning himself as resilient.

In another example, Pogba repositioned himself as a resilient individual in a story about being born in Sudan and immigrating to Libya, Egypt, and then finally the U.S. His family left Sudan because it was difficult to find a “safe place” to live. Pogba explained that they lived as refugees in Egypt for eight years. He wrote:

Egypt was a beautiful country but, Egypt life was difficult [because] there wasn’t human rights. My family was having a hard life to make enough money to pay bills and we had no car so we pay to ride a bus, but sometimes my parents had no money for my sister and me to go to school, so then we walked for a long time with dad.

About moving to the U.S., Pogba wrote: “No one in my family knew English to talk to people. But there was a community center. They helped put me and my sister in school and help with homework and take us to trips.” He said that it was hard to make friends at first because he did not understand the culture and how to speak English. After working hard with teachers at school, he learned English in five years. He ends his writing by emphasizing the importance of help and expressing gratitude for how much he has learned and for the friends he has made. Thus, Pogba repositioned himself from being a person who “was having a hard life” and could not make friends or speak English (vulnerable) to a confident English speaker living in a supportive community (resilient).

Abasi was another youth who illustrated resiliency through his writing. Abasi’s parents were born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and he was born in a Tanzanian refugee camp. When he was finally able to move to the U.S., he wrote that he left one brother and three sisters behind who “cried because they were going to miss us.”

When in the U.S., Abasi stated that he was frustrated with not knowing how to speak English. In his story he talked about a time when his sink was broken and he thought that the water was going to flood the apartment. He wrote:

And I was scared to tell my mom because I scare her a lot. The neighbor helped call the man to fix the sink. She only spoke English. And I showed her the broken sink to communicate with the man who fix it. And then I wanted to learn English so I can communicate by myself and not calling our neighbor anymore.

After several years living in the U.S., Abasi felt confident in his English and wrote, “I can even translate [for] a person or people that speak my language and we can also understand each other.” Thus, Abasi used his writing to reposition himself from being frustrated and scared to a confident person who can successfully communicate his needs and help others with English (“I can even translate.”). Abasi’s story illustrates his resilience and ability to recover from the difficulties that he experienced as a resettled youth.

Repositioning from despondent to hopeful and aspirational youth

In addition to using their writing to reposition themselves as resilient in the face of severe challenges, the youth also repositioned themselves as being hopeful and having aspirations for the future. One youth, Gloria, began her story by explaining that she and her family were slaves in Democratic Republic of the Congo, describing the myriad oppressive situations she and her family found themselves in, surrounded by corruption. She wrote about not having enough money to go to school and buy the things they needed. At this point, Gloria positioned herself and her family as powerless and despondent. Later in her story, she wrote:

Now we come to America. We went to school, me and my brother and my two sisters. Now my parents are happy because they moved to come here to an American state. Me too, I’m happy. My mom too, she is happy when she sees me. I went to school and I try to speaking English with my friend and my siblings. This is a new language for me.

Here, Gloria repositioned herself from a despondent youth to a hopeful, happy individual in school with her family and friends (“Me too, I’m happy.”) The way in which Gloria chose to end her story shows how she has adopted a hopeful stance for living in the U.S. She created a hopeful narrative associated with learning a new language in a new country.

In another example, Nani wrote about juxtapositions when she wrote about Thailand. She began her writing by describing her life from a nostalgic perspective, “Thailand is a nice place to visit, the people are nice, and the food is great.” Nani used this opening paragraph to tell the reader what a nice place Thailand is and describes the houses and landscape, helping the reader to visualize her home country.

Nani’s writing goes on to explain that she lived with her grandparents in a village while her parents lived in the city to work. While she remembers Thailand fondly, she also brings up the injustices created from the financial hardship her family endured, offering a nuanced view of her country in a way that highlights the complexity of one’s feelings about “home.” Specifically, she wrote about how nervous she was when she first moved to the U.S. After three days of hiding in her house, she went outside, played with other kids, and attended school. She wrote:

I didn’t understand English, but now after one year I learn a little English. Coming to America has changed me a lot. I have learned how to read, write and speak more

English. I miss my home in Thailand because I have a lot of memories of my friends and family. I will never forget my family and my village people. One day I will see them again.

Here, Nani repositioned herself from someone who is scared, nervous, and missing her friends and family to a confident English speaker who is successful in school. Here, she unpacked what “home” meant to her while also using her writing to make sense of her identities (Martin-Beltran et al., Citation2020). In this text, Nani illustrated her hope for reconnecting with her family and village in Thailand, while also being proud of her accomplishments in the U.S.

In our last example, we meet Say, who came from a Thailand refugee camp called Mae La. Her parents were from Myanmar (Burma). In her story, she wrote that

the Burmese military are taking over our land and farm and would even burn down our home. The Burmese military and government in Myanmar always want to destroy the Karen people and do not want them in Myanmar. And if the Karen people don't listen as they are told they would hurt or kill them and even the children too.

She described the school in the refugee camp as “dirty, old, and nasty” and stated that she “would get hit from the teacher” if she did not follow the rules. At this point, Say positioned herself as unhappy and despondent while living in the refugee camp. Later in the story, she wrote:

I was very excited to come here because I heard many good things how life is like in the U.S., so I was very happy and can't wait to come. So far I like it here and glad that I have the opportunity to get here while some other people who was left in camp wanted to come here and have the freedom and education, but can't. In the camp there wasn't education for the children. Now that I'm in the U.S. I want to take this chance to work really hard, so I can go back and help my people there who are in need of help and teach the children there and have better schooling for the children.

At this point, Say repositioned herself from unhappy and despondent to a hopeful (“I was very excited to come here ...”) and empowered individual (“I will take this chance to work really hard, so I can go back ...”).

All of the youth, like Gloria, Ahmed, and Say, chose to share their difficult experiences through a hopeful lens. They relied on hope and looked forward to a desired life of education and peace. Some of them aspired to use that education to make changes in the lives of the people still living in refugee camps.

Discussion

This article harnesses insights from positioning theory to amplify the well-established connection between writing and identity work, specifically among resettled youth. We contend that positioning theory—third-order-positioning in particular (i.e., agentic repositioning made in new contexts)—plays an instructive role in these efforts. Youth's stories from this project made clear that

opportunities and support for such positioning and repositioning were imperative and should be a focus of our work. Together their voices highlight an essential link between identity, writing, storytelling, and third-order-positioning for resettled youth.

In exploring the research question—In what ways do resettled youth in a writing camp position and reposition themselves in their writing?—we showed that third-order-positioning emerged as a particularly prevalent and powerful focus in reviewing the youths' stories. Our findings extend other work that shows how youth reposition themselves within learning spaces (e.g., Cun, Citation2020; Frankel & Fields, Citation2019) by showing how writing provides an additional opportunity for resettled youth to reposition themselves as agentic and capable. Our analysis allowed us to see youths' narratives as repositioning work that illuminated the agentic resilience of their lives, a vital part of their identity work. For instance, consider how Pogba, Gloria, and Ahmed worked with profound background struggles to reposition themselves as resilient, persistent, and able to learn new languages. Their narratives, more than just fulfilling a writing task, provided opportunities for the youth to reposition themselves in these ways (Frankel & Fields, Citation2019; Hoff & Armstrong, Citation2021).

With that said, third-order-positioning provides an invaluable lens for understanding the stories youth tell. That is, storytelling can be a key element of identity work, but the efficacy of this pairing can be amplified when educators understand how to look for and interpret repositionings that occur within the stories. This suggests that educators should adopt a learner-centered stance and consider how students' identities inform their writing and can guide our instruction. Moreover, educators need to think about how to make visible to youth that their identities and repositionings matter, inform our teaching, and are important sanctioned ways of pushing back against negative positionings by others. Thus, third-order-positioning can be a relevant theoretical framework (Van Langenhove & Harré, Citation1999) for educators to use when aiming to honor varied narratives and open needed spaces for repositionings against restrictive experiences and deficit perspectives.

This work also contributes to research addressing the value of identity work and storytelling for resettled youth in particular (Daniel, Citation2019) coupled with strategies to break down barriers resettled youth may experience (Oikonomidoy, Citation2010). Through an exploration of the research question—How do these positionings relate to how they express their identities in their writing?—we show how the youth consistently harnessed the writing undertaken in the camp to express their identities and be storytellers. For instance, we saw how Rekah used her writing to explore her identity as an author of an important story; how Jesus explored his identity as a reader through his writing; and how Say represented herself as empowered in her writing. This builds on other research that also shows how identity construction can occur through writing (e.g., Beauregard et al., Citation2017; Blackburn, Citation2002). Future research should strive to further understand how these opportunity structures can be more widely utilized in learning spaces.

Despite the plethora of obstacles resettled youth may encounter in educational systems (Damaschke-Deitrik et al., Citation2022), we know that educators can learn from resettled youth and support their learning. Incorporating opportunities for storytelling through writing and utilizing repositioning theory and identity construction as frameworks for understanding their writing are promising practices for beginning to dismantle some of the obstacles the youth face.

Implications

Several implications for practitioners and educational institutions emerged from our work. Specifically, this study illustrates three ways in which educators and researchers might work with resettled youth in the future (described below): 1) the centrality of enacting (not just claiming) a genuinely asset-based lens even when it means questioning and rethinking our own ideas, 2) the importance of dismantling the cultural dissonance forced on so many refugee youth by honestly honoring their culture, heritage, community, identities, languages; and 3) the empowering nature of letting literacy work actually center on and emerge from the students' connections with their own culture, heritage, identity, and voice (which can occur in a classroom as easily as a camp). These three elements can be used to improve teaching practices and educational research with resettled youth.

One way that educators can improve practice and/or research with resettled youth is by committing to an asset-based perspective regarding refugee youth. This contrasts with a national (macro) backdrop that often portrays languages other than English (and speakers of those languages) as deficient or problematic, and adopts a deeply rooted whiteman perspective (Fredricks & Warriner, Citation2016; Urrieta, Citation2009). Such schools can actually recreate inequality by restricting the types of knowledge, skills, norms, behaviors which are valued and honored. Even in official curriculum, particularly commercially published materials, schools also control the "legitimate knowledge" that they allocate for certain groups. Ryu et al. (Citation2019) illustrate this in the ways in which Chin refugee youth were bullied, misunderstood, and despised by citizen youth and teachers in school, while their own narratives demonstrated that they were hardworking, tough, and joyful. Additional research has consistently demonstrated that students have better and more positive learning experiences when they are taught in a non-deficit manner and when their existing knowledge is honored (Hos, Citation2020). We consistently positioned the youth as capable and resilient rather than lacking or damaged, including rethinking our own plans and restructuring camp to communicate and affirm that view. One example of this was completely redesigning our daily plans for camp when students needed affirmation and community, rather than efficient writing lessons. We suggest that educators engage in critical reflection about the assumptions they might be making about students in the classroom. In addition, educators would benefit from time and support to modify curriculum to fit the needs of students in their classrooms. More research would benefit from the ways in which schools are able to listen to the needs of students and modify curriculum, despite the push for more scripted curriculum and high-stakes assessments.

One common experience of many resettled youth in U.S. schools and institutions is confronting a cultural dissonance created by the singular expectations, discourse styles, and modes of school-based ways of thinking and learning in U.S. educational institutions, often leaving them feeling confused and alienated (DeCapua & Marshall, Citation2015). Resettled youth have been exposed to many valuable informal ways of learning, however, this type of learning contrasts with learning in the U.S. school system, based on the Western-style model of education predicated on logic, analysis, and reasoning. As an example, Roy and Roxas (Citation2011) document how teachers and staff at a school conflate what they perceive as disruptive behavior of Bantu refugee students—ranging from girls wearing headscarves and long skirts to students' supposed lack of interest in learning—as rooted in Bantu culture. The youth find themselves having to negotiate between being respectful of school norms while honoring religious beliefs. Counter-stories from Bantu students and parents reveal their desire to learn and achieve academically, despite struggling

with hostile instructional settings. Our findings extend others' work by showing how writing that honored their perspectives, and at times challenged normative perspectives, provided an opportunity for resettled youth to reposition themselves as agentic and capable. The Community Voices camp emphasized the value, richness, and power of students' heritage, culture, language. Campers learned about each others' background, cultures, languages and were allowed to draw from their family, their history, and their community. They were invited to advocate for or speak to a particular issue of importance to them. We also suggest opening more opportunities for students to write personal narratives and share those narratives if they are comfortable doing so. Other assignments might include family histories in which students have the opportunity to share their family histories if they have access to the resources to do so. More research would benefit from how schools as institutions find more ways to do this.

All of this reveals the empowering nature of centering learning on the students themselves. It reflects the value of framing resettled youth not as mere recipients of literacy/writing instruction that is decontextualized or curricularized, but as individuals who have an agentic role in their own academic and identity development. A precondition for the kind of empowerment described here is selecting topics and designing meaningful questions and tasks that call for authentic uses of language. The open-ended and personal nature of the writing opportunities (i.e., multilingual, multimodal, of-their-own-choosing, at-their-own-pace) of the writing camp differed markedly from the limited writing opportunities the youth reported experiencing in school (e.g., depersonalized, short, fill-in-the-blank, grammar-focused). Students were encouraged to flexibly and creatively draw from their full linguistic repertoires to contribute to timely conversations about topics that matter to them and to society at large. We encourage teachers and researchers to embrace and explore students' multiple ways of using language and attentively respond to students' meanings and preferences (topic, language, style, purpose, product) in order to strategically expand language resources in a way that strengthens students' own voices.

The narratives shared in this article illustrate how the camp supported resettled youth in positioning themselves as individuals with important stories to tell and repositioning themselves as resilient individuals despite challenges, and as hopeful and aspirational youth. Moreover, this kind of writing instruction could be used in both informal and classroom spaces. Such affirming, culturally responsive, student-centered strategies serve to both amplify students' own voices, and affirm their right to speak at school and beyond (Uccelli et al., Citation2020).

Limitations

It is important to note that the context of the camp shaped these experiences in important ways. The instructors and other youth consistently situated the writers as capable and resilient, which invited the youth to take up that positionality. As a result, we observed youth enact this identity, repositioning themselves away from "struggling students" toward persistent, capable writers. Part of this process involved allowing the youth to have choice about the languages they composed in. Many of them did choose to write in multiple languages in camp, and then ultimately, they all wrote in English for their final pieces, which was possibly prompted by the fact that English was the common language for all of them and the instructors. We think it is important to note, however, that we value all the youths' languages, and we believe it is important for youth to be able to use and maintain their other languages. Learning English should not come at the expense of losing or displacing their home languages. This is especially important as we consider that languages have different social statuses.

We also recognize that this study occurred across two-weeks in a summer camp, which is brief given that a typical school year is closer to 37 weeks. At the same time, the fact that we were able to learn so much from the youth and they were able to produce such moving works in a short amount of time shows how much is possible to accomplish when youth are provided with space to write and be positioned as writers. Because we focused on the writing camp, we were not able to observe other aspects of the youths' educational experiences, such as their regular classroom instruction. We also met at a university with readily available resources (e.g., instructors, technology) and without stressors that might exist in traditional schools such as high-stakes testing. Therefore, it is imperative to extend this work into more traditional schooling spaces, borrowing insights here to continue developing a more-broadly-applicable canon of strategies.

Conclusion

As we listen to youths' stories, their words move us to call for teaching practices that promote the use of their stories to open dialogue about inequities and transformation within the broader community. As seen here, storytelling, identity work, and repositioning operate in tandem to propel us toward this goal. Using youths' stories to showcase how they use their writing to reposition themselves in powerful ways can highlight their resilience and aspirations and help others to move beyond assumptions they may make about youth. At the same time, we are challenged to be respectful of how we label individuals, with the recognition that the term "refugee" is merely a label but does little to actually convey who they are. With their rich complexities, they are so much more than just someone who fled an oppressive situation (Daniel, Citation2019). We encourage other educators and scholars to listen to the voices of resettled youth and provide opportunities for youth to show how they reposition themselves, such as through their writing like we did. Doing so can provide a deeper understanding of resettled youth, which can inform and push for more equitable educational practices.

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