

“Let Your Voice Lead You”: Critical Community-Building to Support the Writing of Recently Resettled Youth

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Abstract:

This study examines the use of critical community-building—using dialogue as a collective to support, listen to, ask questions, and assist each other in thinking in critical ways—to support resettled youths’ writing during a summer writing camp. Through encouraging the youth to use their home languages, by celebrating their cultures, honoring their experiences, and fostering peer relationships, we established a sense of community and a supportive writing space. The authors offer insights into their work and implications for educators in more traditional classroom spaces as well.

Keywords: community building | young writers | writing | self-expression | education

Article:

Since the passage of The Refugee Act of 1980, the United States has resettled over 3 million individuals, often fleeing war, persecution, or environmental disaster (UNHCR). Unfortunately, when resettled youth enroll in schools, educators are often unprepared to address their needs, such as not knowing how to support individuals who have experienced trauma in ways that do not position them as victims (Keddie, Citation2012) or how to support learning English and literacy skills from non-deficit perspectives (Lucas et al., Citation2008; MacNevin, Citation2012; Stewart, Citation2011). One particular challenge is how to support resettled youths’ experiences with meaningful writing instruction as an alternative to focusing on writing standards and assessments that emphasize correct grammar, conventions, and low-level writing tasks such as worksheets, note-taking, and short-answer responses (Applebee & Langer, Citation2011; Gillespie et al., Citation2014). Instead, authentic writing provides an opportunity for resettled youth to use their full linguistic repertoire and their lived experiences to scaffold their writing. It is not our contention that grammar and writing conventions are unimportant or that they should not be taught, but students need to start with meaning-making as a way to develop their writing skills. They are complex beings that have important stories to tell and need opportunities to write about topics that are relevant and familiar. Youth from resettled backgrounds can especially benefit from grappling

with their momentous experiences through writing and sharing with an audience (Ryu & Tuvilla, Citation2018), while simultaneously experiencing the full writing process (Samway, Citation2006).

One core practice that supports resettled youths' authentic writing includes telling their own stories through writing so as to allow them to make sense of and express their identities (Beauregard et al., Citation2017; Daniel & Eley, Citation2018; Perry, Citation2008; Oikonomidou, Citation2010). Digital tools for composing also offer multiple methods for writing that can allow resettled youth to connect meaningfully with broader communities, be creative, and aid with word choice as they might use their first language in order to access English (Gilhooly & Lee, Citation2014; López-Bech & Zúñiga, Citation2017; McGinnis, Citation2018; Pandya et al., Citation2018). Across such practices though, it is essential to be mindful of learning contexts—both formal and informal—and how intrapersonal and interpersonal factors shape writing (Cremin & Baker, Citation2014); how to push back on deficit perspectives that position resettled youth as incapable or problematic (Bal, Citation2014; Enciso, Citation2011); and how to strive for inclusive environments that foster a sense of belonging where diversity is celebrated (Block et al., Citation2014; Symons & Ponzio, Citation2019). We therefore posit that the first step to support their authentic writing is through the creation of a safe and trusting environment, i.e., critical community-building (Bettez, Citation2011). We do so by drawing on our work with resettled youth (ages 16–19) in a summer writing camp, with the following research question guiding our inquiry: How does critical community-building support resettled youth's writing in a summer writing camp?

Critical Community-Building

Two key frameworks informed our understanding of critical community-building. First, hooks' (Citation2003) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* conceptualizes community as a pedagogical revolution that disrupts traditional norms and values, to create spaces that elevate historically marginalized voices. We then use Bettez's (Citation2011) Critical Community-building (CCB) framework, which defines the tenets of CCB as “interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical questioning, assist each other in critical thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege” (p. 10). These conceptualizations of community-building move beyond community-building as an act of belonging, as traditionally defined, toward community-building as a space for students to build critical consciousness to understand and navigate themselves, others, and their communities. We postulate that such critical community-building provides transformative writing experiences that allow students to write authentically.

While community-building is a “buzz-word” in education, there exists a lack of literature that addresses how critical community is fostered in deep and meaningful ways, especially for resettled youth. This article hopes to address how CCB can be used to disrupt traditional writing practices to centralize writing as a collective process that encourages resettled students to express themselves authentically and freely. For us, creating a critical classroom community that fosters students' authentic writing required us to create a dialogic space where students felt supported and could listen, ask questions, and build trust while writing and sharing their personal stories.

Community Voices: The Writing Camp

Community Voices, the writing camp, took place for two consecutive summers at a university in a mid-sized city in the southeastern U.S. where 150 languages other than English are spoken. We recruited youth from refugee support networks in the area, with about 40 youth participating each summer. The camp lasted 3 h a day across 2 weeks, with the youth divided into two groups depending on their age. The youth immigrated from parts of Africa, Asia, Syria and Latin America.

The Researchers

Our team consists of three university teacher educators and two doctoral students. We are all former public-school teachers, with our experience ranging from first grade to high school. Two of us are Asian American, one is Black, and two are White. Collectively we speak three languages—English, Nepali, and Spanish. We are all cisgender, middle class, able-bodied women whose teaching and scholarship acknowledges our own privilege and challenges in equitable practices.

The Research

To learn more about how CCB supported the youth's writing, each day of the camp, we collected observational field notes, semi-structured interviews, analytic memos, and photos of the youths' work. We have approximately 15 h of audio recordings from discussions and interviews, which were selectively transcribed based on which recordings most helped us understand the youths' experiences. The semi-structured interviews took place every day at the camp and lasted approximately five to ten minutes (50–100 min total per youth). Interview questions were about their in and out of school writing practices, the strategies in the camp that helped/hindered their writing, and the purpose behind their writing in camp.

Our data analysis employed a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, Citation2014) to code data based on our research question. We engaged in open coding to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data. This resulted in codes broadly reflecting elements of CCB (e.g., active listening, dialogue, critical question posing), such as writing and sharing stories with campers or using model texts that included multiple languages. We then engaged in axial coding to make connections between categories. An example from our axial codes was “vulnerability” in relation to sharing writing and telling personal stories. We related this code to CCB's tenets of dialogue and active listening, which often involved an element of vulnerability regarding power and privilege. Finally, selective coding occurred to systematically relate core categories to other categories, validate relationships, and refine categories that needed more development.

Our Approach to Teaching Writing—CCB, Home Languages, Cultures, and Experiences

We reframed traditional ways of teaching and learning to write to honor students' need for their cultural and linguistic identities/stories to be affirmed (e.g., Daniel & Eley, Citation2018) by basing our writing camp on three tenets—choice, language flexibility, and multimodal composing (Cun, Citation2020). For example, we adopted translanguaging approaches (García & Kleyn, Citation2016), encouraged the youth to use their home languages, celebrated their cultures, and honored their experiences. We also shared different formats/genres for writing and multimodal

composing. For example, we asked a local poet to come and share his work. He supported the youth by having them work together to write poems about what poetry is, sounds like, and feels like. As an example of translanguaging (García & Kleyn, Citation2016), the youth were encouraged to write their poems with at least one line in English and one line in their home language. The youth then shared and translated their work for each other.

Knowing that we also needed to establish a sense of community if the students were to know and trust each other (core elements of CCB), we began with a Responsive Classroom Morning Meeting structure (Kriete & Davis, Citation2014) to elevate students' voices and support CCB. Morning Meeting included: (1) greeting each other; (2) sharing about oneself with peers by providing questions/comments; (3) a group activity that built cohesion by asking students to work together on a quick task; and (4) a morning message written by the instructors to inform students about the day. We also wanted the youth to recognize that writing can be collaborative, so we included morning quick writes with a partner (sample questions: Who do you write for? What counts as writing?). These CCB strategies were designed to establish a foundation from which to grow our writing community and elevate the voices of the youth.

Insights

We know the CCB approach we employed did not match the youths' school writing experiences, as many shared adverse school experiences. They reported being surprised they did not have to write in English at camp and that writing in their home language was acceptable (field notes). Two themes emerged to demonstrate the impact of CCB: Building a Critical Writing Community and Growing as a Writer in a Critical Writing Community.

Building a Critical Writing Community

During both summers of the camp, we saw that CCB helped build trusting relationships. The youth positively described being in our setting and working together in small groups that "feel like family" (field notes). For example, on the third day of camp, Rashid wrote "Feeling better at [our camp]" in his graphic organizer as he brainstormed ideas for a piece he was writing called "I am from Pakistan."

Moreover, sharing is an important part of the writing process, and we wanted our youth to build relationships so they would feel comfortable sharing daily. We found that in order to get there, we needed CCB to help minimize feelings of awkwardness and inadequacy, two feelings that our youth expressed. In addition to having experienced intense and often traumatic situations, the youth had varying levels of English proficiency. We recognized this was a challenge to their writing and sharing. With the CCB attention to building peer relationships, we quickly noticed youth opening up with each other. We paid close attention to how they formed relationships, such as how they chose to sit in a circle and seemed excited to share with each other (field notes). For example, in our field notes, we wrote, "yesterday Karina shared she was shy, today she is participating in the whole group share, but yesterday she did not...Progress!" Another noticeable difference was with Chika. Toward the beginning of camp, we observed that she chose not to share. Another youth encouraged her by saying, "Don't be shy, we're all people here" (field notes). Later, we noted "Chika has become much more open and comfortable with her campmates. She was more willing to share today than she has been previously" (field notes).

We also noticed that the youth were less embarrassed to speak up even if they wrote about difficult experiences and if they were not comfortable using English. For instance, Ana wrote a letter for her parents. She wrote in Spanish, knowing this is the language her parents would read it in. Her letter focused on thanking her parents for all they have done for her and acknowledging the hardships they endured. An excerpt translated into English included:

You left everything to come to a place with nothing to give us a better life, and I know this decision was not easy. You have always done your best for us. I know I don't always say thank you for everything. I would like to repay everything that you have given me, but you all deserve the whole world.

Despite being an extremely personal letter, Ana openly shared her letter with her peers and translated it into English to read aloud so they would understand.

Another example of a youth being willing to show their vulnerability is when Kezia wrote her poem about herself and her experiences in Togo:

*I feel people's pain
I touch people's trouble
I cry for people but
I pretend to be strong in front of them
I say calm down to them
I am a student looking for something
I want the world to be perfect to us but
I wonder why are there bad people
I see people cry for pain
I hear people torture others so
I understand that the world is perfect, we complicate
it ourselves*

We acknowledge that the youth's willingness to share about their lives before emigrating from their home countries took courage and opened them up to feeling vulnerable. It appeared that being in a supportive, trusting environment made it possible for them to form relationships and tell their stories. As camp progressed, we observed how the youth became at ease with each other, sharing materials, giving each other ideas, and speaking in English and their home languages. We even noticed them using slang with each other (e.g., "yaas girl").

On the last day of camp, everyone was encouraged, but not required, to share their work. One of the youth from Syria, who was not able to read or write in his home language or in English, felt safe enough to share his story through the artwork he created. The group was incredibly supportive and excited about his work. Repeatedly, as less experienced English speakers and writers came up to share, the group patiently waited for them to share their work and continued to encourage and support them. We believe the attention we gave to CCB helped make this kind of risk-taking and collective support possible. Unlike more traditional forms of community-building that might serve merely as an icebreaker on the first day, we continued to implement CCB activities daily, with emphasis on the youth sharing their knowledges, dialoguing with each other, and working collaboratively as they grappled with the writing process and issues of power and privilege.

Growing as a Writer in a Critical Writing Community

We began to notice that when home languages, cultures, and experiences were valued in camp, the youth appeared to both write and share more. Youth began using what they learned from teachers and peers during the CCB activities (e.g., Morning Meetings) to adjust their writing. Moreover, when students worked collaboratively, we noticed that they used the Morning Meeting space to demonstrate the different writing strategies that supported them, such as storyboarding to get their ideas down, Google Translate to help them articulate their thoughts, and telling their stories aloud before writing them down. As youth demonstrated these strategies, we also observed peers being more likely to practice these strategies when we moved into independent writing. The ability to choose what language to write in also opened up different possibilities, as did practicing with peers.

We found that exposing the youth to different writing models as part of the CCB activities was a way for them to learn about ways of composing. For example, after their sessions with the local poet, multiple youth took up writing poetry. One youth, Moureen, initially wrote a sequential narrative about her experience coming to the U.S. without her parents. She talked about the pressure she puts on herself to be the best, and how she learned to listen and trust herself to make the right choices. After trying out poetry, she decided to adjust her traditional narrative to a poem, titled Smile from Your Heart. As illustrated in this excerpt, her poem expressed her inner strength and voiced encouragement.

*Let your voice lead you
Occasionally you got to listen to your heart
We all know what is good and not good for us
Stay on the good track*

Reflecting on Our Experience

School curricula, practices, and policies that are not designed to consider the perspectives, histories, cultures, and languages of marginalized youth ignore the fact that “sustaining the cultural ways of being” of non-dominant individuals has been shown to serve a vital promotive and protective function (Paris & Alim, Citation2017, p. 4). In Community Voices, the youths’ resettlement experiences brought them together. However, the youth had different beliefs and values because of their religions or home countries. We knew that we needed to acknowledge this tension and enable a strong connection with their heritage culture/language coupled with a sense of safety in their new community. As such, we worked to craft a space that would allow all voices to be heard, while simultaneously making sure everyone felt safe and supported. For example, we noted the youths’ initial discomfort with home language use and engaged them in dialogue about that concern. Support and respect for native language, while honoring students’ efforts to learn English, can be a crucial starting place for working with an immigrant and refugee population (Cartmell & Bond, Citation2015). Multilingual, multimodal, and nontraditional writing choices, therefore, became a hallmark of our camp.

Another key factor for using CCB included the teachers’ positionality. The youth found it helpful to have a teacher who looked like them and shared similar experiences. For example, the look of surprise and relief on the face of one youth when Pratigya spoke to her in Nepali was priceless. However, it was just as crucial for all teachers to be open and vulnerable with the youth.

When asking the youth to write about personal experiences, we needed to be open about our own experiences as well. Thus, CCB provided a way for us to disrupt the traditional power hierarchies typically encountered in classrooms.

Implications

The power of CCB is that it is a tool that teachers can use to enact the spirit of a supportive environment for writing—encouraging an openness to writing, sharing, and disrupting elements of privilege and power within the traditional classroom experience. Valuing students' real-world experiences and perspectives, teaching with language and culture in mind, and building relationships can help build a dialogic classroom where all students receive an equitable, just, and culturally sustaining literacy experience (Paris & Alim, Citation2017).

Teachers can foster the content of youth's writing first and foremost, allow for oral storytelling, encourage translanguaging practices, and ensure access to digital tools to support writing, while introducing conventions such as grammar in later stages.

Doing such work is complicated by the demands of scripted curriculum and standardized exams that teachers are expected to navigate. In addition, schools often value certain kinds of writing (e.g., persuasive or literary analysis), which narrows opportunities for students to share their stories in a genre they prefer (e.g., poetry, blogs). With that said, teachers can create low-stakes writing opportunities in which students can write about topics of their choice. For example, teachers have used occasional papers (Martin, Citation2002; Vetter, Citation2011) as a way for students to write about an opportunity in their lives. These papers could be assigned once per grading period, be read out loud to the whole class, and promote discussion, and could be assessed for completion instead of style or syntax. This offers students opportunities to share their stories and practice writing in a low-stakes way. Teachers can build on these papers to support students as they learn how to write in more academic genres.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we were able to use CCB to co-create a space where youth wrote and shared their experiences, even within the confines of a ten-day camp. The youth listened attentively to their different experiences—life in refugee camps, feelings/challenges with parents, and difficulties transitioning to public schools. They also discussed their writing struggles and grew to be open and receptive to feedback from their peers.

Understanding resettled youths' writing identities requires teachers to center their teaching on the students, de-centering standard English conventions of writing, as youth bravely share the stories and lived experiences at the heart of their writing.

Moving forward, we believe CCB holds promise for supporting students' writing and opening space where their voices can lead them. Teachers can foster the content of youth's writing first and foremost, allow for oral storytelling, encourage translanguaging practices, and ensure access to digital tools to support writing, while introducing conventions such as grammar in later stages. Understanding resettled youths' writing identities requires teachers to center their teaching on the

students, de-centering standard English conventions of writing, as youth bravely share the stories and lived experiences at the heart of their writing.

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