Teaching Refugee Students in Arizona: Examining the Implementation of Structured English Immersion

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Abstract

With an increase in children from refugee backgrounds entering schools around the world, it has grown increasingly important to examine educational policy design and implementation to understand how policies shape teachers' interactions with this student population. This article focuses on Structured English Immersion, the language policy that frames the educational experiences for refugee students in Arizona. Through a review of the literature and data collected from teacher interviews, we explore how teachers appropriate a restrictive language policy to construct *de facto* policies in their classrooms. Innovative practices that teachers employ are highlighted, and recommendations for further research, policy, and practice are provided.

Keywords

Refugee education, language policy implementation, educational policy

Introduction

In recent years, an unprecedented number of people have been forcibly displaced from their homes by war, violence, and persecution (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017a). Those that cross international borders seeking asylum are required to register with the UNHCR as a "refugee", which the office defines as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, 2010). Currently, more than 22.5 million individuals hold refugee status, half of whom are thought to be children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2017a). Refugees are often forced to escape their countries of origin abruptly, leaving behind family, friends, and many aspects of their home cultures. The very nature of being a refugee means having one's life upended, implying a transitory lifestyle with a great deal of uncertainty. The process of relocating to another country can be especially traumatic for children, many of whom have experienced conflict and instability in their country of origin (e.g., Bromley & Andina, 2010; Pigozzi, 1999).

In resettlement contexts, schooling can provide a sense of normalcy for refugee children, while also supporting healing from past

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traumatic experiences and helping them adapt to their new surroundings (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Pigozzi, 1999). Teachers, in particular, may provide a consistent presence in the lives of their students, helping newcomers adapt to classrooms through cultural and institutional navigation (Hones, 2002). In the United States, where the placement and instruction of refugee students, like other English learners (ELs), is typically guided by each state's official language policy, English as a second language (ESL) teachers play an especially important role in their educational experiences (Capps & Newland, 2015; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). Although various studies document the failings or inappropriate practices of teachers working with refugee students (e.g., Birman & Tran, 2015; Dávila, 2015), few have examined language policy as a dynamic, sociocultural process that plays a central role in how teachers interact with this student population (McCarty, 2004). Additional research is thus urgently needed that highlights how teachers' sensemaking and appropriation of language policy is mutually constituted by their interactions with and discourse about refugee students.

As such, it is crucial to address pressing questions about how teachers enact language policies in ESL classrooms with refugee students. Considering the important role that teachers play in the lives of refugee children, understanding their perspectives could shed light on how teachers balance adhering to official policy mandates with supporting refugee students' needs. This study examines teachers' appropriation of Structured English Immersion (SEI), the official language policy in Arizona. It also highlights the importance of teacher training to support the needs of resettled refugee students in U.S. schools, specifically in Arizona, which ranked sixth among all U.S. states for refugee resettlement in 2016 (Radford & Connor, 2016). Our work is grounded in the following research questions:

- How do teachers describe their experiences working with refugee students in Structured English Immersion (SEI) classrooms?
- How are teachers appropriating policy to meet the needs of refugee students?

In the following section, we frame the context of education for refugee children around the globe, from countries of first asylum to resettlement. We then highlight relevant studies linking ideologies about language, immigration, and globalization to the current policy context in Arizona. Following that, we provide our theoretical framework and describe our research design. Finally, we will present our data and discuss their implications, along with recommendations for future research.

A Global Education Crisis

The UNHCR (2018) recommends three possible solutions for refugees after fleeing their country of origin: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to a third country. One key aspect of the UNHCR's mandate is to support refugees in rebuilding their lives after fleeing their country of origin, and scholars have suggested that education may ease the transition for children, who often struggle to adapt to a new culture (Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2009). However, research also suggests the effects of years-long conflict and prolonged displacement have rendered education in any of these situations extremely challenging (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). In recent years, conflict in the Middle East, especially in Syria, has contributed to what many scholars are calling a global education crisis, which has impacted the educational experiences of refugees in all three UNHCR-supported contexts.

Voluntary Repatriation

If the situation has improved and the environment is considered safe, refugees are

encouraged to return to their country of origin, which is the primary durable solution under the UNHCR (2018). Schools in this context can be a sanctuary for children to recover from traumatic experiences and begin to hope for the future. In addition, education has been shown to be a preventative measure to fight against recruitment of child soldiers, abduction and trafficking, and gender-based violence (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). However, research on educational opportunities available to refugees after repatriation is limited due to political turmoil and barriers to researchers entering zones of conflict (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Integration

Another UNHCR-backed solution for refugees is integration within their country of first asylum, which can be a gradual and difficult process due to overstretched public service sectors and fragile political and/or financial institutions. Nearly 90% of refugees live in developing nations bordering their country of origin. Due to the influx of refugees in recent years, many of these countries are facing challenges in providing quality education to children with refugee status, including overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and limited educational resources (Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, & Nieswandt, 2016). Refugee children may also be denied educational opportunities due to school fees and other policies that indirectly prevent their access (Qumri, 2012). The exodus of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt since 2011 has been so extensive that it is altering the demographics of these host countries and causing significant tension in their education systems (Culbertson & Constant, 2015). The UNHCR (2015) estimates that fewer than half of the children who have fled from Syria to neighboring countries are enrolled in formal schooling. Coupled with the fact that many of these children faced interrupted schooling in Syria, this crisis has the potential to rob an

entire generation of Syrian children of an education.

In Europe, an estimated 1.8 million refugees and migrants have crossed the Mediterranean Sea to seek asylum since 2011, and more than 30% are estimated to be women and children (Ahad & Benton, 2018). Nearly 500,000 formal asylum applications were received in Germany alone in 2015, and the tide of refugees arriving in Europe continues (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2016). With the sudden arrival of thousands of children during this crisis, school systems in Europe are also facing overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and a lack of funding for teacher training (Ahad & Benton, 2018). Without adequate training on issues related to refugee students, teachers in Europe often lack the information they need to support students with experiences of trauma and complex educational backgrounds (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2016).

Resettlement

The final durable option available to refugees through the UNHCR is resettlement in a third country when their needs are not being met in their country of first asylum (UNHCR, 2018). Only the most vulnerable refugees, whose safety, liberty, or health is at risk in their countries of first asylum, may be presented by the UNHCR to possible resettlement countries (UNHCR, 2017b). Those selected are provided with permanent resident status and access to civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by citizens of their resettlement countries. Yet, research indicates that the educational needs of resettled refugee students are not being met (e.g., McBrien, 2005, McWilliams & Bonet, 2016), and that schools in resettlement contexts tend to focus on language-learning issues rather than addressing the social and emotional needs of refugee students or facilitating their access to mainstream curricula (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Resettlement in the United States

The United States typically admits nearly two-thirds of refugees that are resettled each year worldwide (U.S. Secretary of State, 2017). In the 2016 fiscal year alone, the United States resettled 84,995 refugees, up from nearly 70,000 resettled each of the previous two years (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). Trump's 2017 Presidential Determination of 50,000 admitted refugees was met on July 12, 2017 (Hauslohner, 2017), bringing the four-year total of resettled refugees to approximately 275,000. Over 40% of these resettled refugees are thought to be children who are enrolled in U.S. schools (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017). Looking at these statistics, one can conservatively assume that approximately 110,000 refugee students entered the U.S. school system from 2014-2017. This influx of refugee students could have significant implications for educational systems, especially in under-resourced, poor, urban areas, where refugee families are typically provided housing (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013). Despite this influx, refugee students are not easily identified in U.S. educational data because their refugee status is not often tracked. As a result, educational researchers have written little about the schooling experiences of refugee students in the United States (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017).

The existing educational research in the United States has generally lumped refugees together with other types of ELs and failed to differentiate their experiences from those of other students from migrant backgrounds. According to Taylor and Sidhu (2012), the "invisibility of refugees in policy and research has worked against their cultural, social, and economic integration" (p.4). While some characteristics of refugee students might be similar to those of other immigrant students in the United States, there are key differences that make their experiences unique. In terms of their migration, refugees are typically forced to flee their home countries suddenly, without prior arrangements in place (e.g., housing, finances,

familial support) (Tadesse et al., 2009). Significant trauma experienced by refugee children before resettlement may also contribute to posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and mistrust of authority figures, including teachers (Amthor & Roxas, 2016; McBrien, 2005; Sinclair, 2001). These feelings may be exacerbated by the bullying or humiliation that refugee students are often subjected to in schools as a result of displaying different customs, languages, or traditions (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). Given these distinctive circumstances, there is a demand for theoretical conceptualizations from which to analyze refugee students' complex experiences in U.S. schools (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013; Dávila, 2015).

Finally, while there is a scarcity of studies on refugee students' academic experiences in the United States, even less has been written about teachers working with this student population (Roxas, 2011a). More research is urgently needed to account for how micro-level interactions with refugee students are related to educational policies and macro-level ideologies about ELs, and refugees, in particular (Johnson, 2009). Just as personal beliefs and previous experiences have implications for teachers' instructional practices, so too do external factors such as societal ideologies about linguistic diversity and immigration. In Arizona, "the epicenter of the contemporary immigration debate in the United States" (Heineke, 2015, p. 844), anti-immigrant sentiments and monolingual ideologies have led to restrictive language policies that stigmatize ELs, including refugees, and the use of their native languages in schools (Valdés, 2005). To set the policy context relevant to refugee students in Arizona schools, we first provide an overview of monolingual ideologies in the United States, followed by a description of the design and authorization of SEI in Arizona.

Monolingual Ideologies in the United States

Attitudes toward linguistic diversity have shifted throughout U.S. history and have been linked to debates about immigration and educational policy (English & Varghese, 2010). Language policies, in particular, represent the accumulation of societal ideologies related to language, immigration, and globalization, which can be generally described in terms of either assimilationist or pluralist perspectives (Hornberger, 1998). In Arizona, language policies have served as a tool in the forced assimilation and marginalization of immigrants and indigenous populations (Warriner, 2007). In the early 20th century, Native children in Arizona were brought to boarding schools, made to adapt to Anglo traditions, and required, often forcibly, to speak English at all times (Trennert, 1979). In the mid-20th century, Mexican-Americans suffered similar discrimination as school districts across Arizona began implementing segregation based on English-language proficiency. Though the state never officially administered segregated schools, government officials informally sanctioned school segregation, which provided ELs with less experienced teachers and fewer educational resources (Powers, 2008).

Bal and Arzubiaga (2013) argue that language policies over the past three decades have perpetuated hegemonic ideologies that portray the linguistic and cultural practices of ELs as inferior, and ESL teachers as "fixers" of the deficiencies inherent in EL student populations. As the student population in the United States has become more linguistically and culturally diverse, language policies have become more restrictive and more centered around improving standardized test scores. As a result, language policies in many states diminish learning opportunities for refugee students in favor of designing unchallenging curricula around meeting accountability measures (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017). In addition, refugee students are often segregated in ESL classrooms with other ELs, limiting their abilities to connect linguistically and socially to other groups of students (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017).

Structured English Immersion

In the fifteen years leading up to the passage of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, an influx of immigrants and more conservative political leadership had begun to shift attitudes towards ELs in the United States (de Jong, 2008). By the time NCLB was passed, English-only language policies had already been adopted in 23 states, and the act shifted the federal government's focus from equal provision of resources to equal outcomes (Wiley & Wright, 2004). While NCLB gave more power to the federal government to influence educational policies, the act weakened the government's role in protecting the educational rights of ELs and, effectively, decreased support for bilingual and primary-language instruction (Arias & Faltis, 2012; Hopkins, 2012; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007).

In the wake of NCLB, advocates of English-only instruction gained support in states that had become more restrictive in regard to their bilingual programs. Ron Unz, a successful businessman with political aspirations, capitalized on these conditions to champion three successful voter initiatives restricting bilingual education in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. In June of 1998, voters in California approved a law titled *English for the Children* (Proposition 227), which required school districts to provide English-only instruction to ELs that had not yet met state English-proficiency requirements (Wiley & Wright, 2004). With Unz's support, similar, but even more restrictive, measures were eventually passed in Arizona (Proposition 203) and Massachusetts (Question 2) (de Jong, 2008). When the ballot initiative Prop 203 passed in 2000, Arizona became the second of three states that mandate English-only instruction to ELs.

Structured English Immersion in Arizona

Following the passage of Prop 203 in 2000, the Arizona state legislature adopted a policy prescribing SEI as the official model of instruction for ELs, who constituted approximately 15% of all students attending Arizona's public schools (Jimenez-Silva, Gomez, & Cisneros, 2014). The basic principle required English-language instruction to precede content-area instruction in order to "accelerate EL's English language development and linguistic preparation for grade-level academic content" (Clark, 2009, p. 43). Between 2000 and 2006, the vast majority of instructional programs that had been in place to serve ELs in Arizona were dismantled and replaced with an SEI model that many teachers considered confusing and loosely defined, resulting in a wide variation of English language instruction across the state (Davenport, 2008)

In 2006, as a response to inconsistencies in SEI programs, the state legislature authorized the English Language Learner Task Force, which was charged with selecting a prescribed model of SEI for ELs in Arizona (Heineke, 2015; Lillie, Markos, Arias, & Wiley, 2012). Shortly thereafter, the legislature also introduced new training requirements, allowing public school teachers, principals, and superintendents working with ELs to complete a newly developed SEI endorsement in place of the previously required bilingual education or ESL endorsement. Following this mandate, the number of Arizona teachers completing bilingual and ESL endorsements dropped significantly (Hopkins, 2012). The new SEI endorsement required the completion of just six coursework credits, compared to 24–27 for the bilingual and ESL endorsements, and significantly lowered the training hours needed to earn an endorsement (Garcia, Lawton, & de Figueiredo, 2010). Since the changes in teacher-training requirements, many scholars have argued that SEI-endorsed teachers are less prepared than those with bilingual or ESL endorsements (e. g., Heineke,

2015; Lillie et al., 2012). Studies have also suggested that teachers certified with bilingual and ESL endorsements use more appropriate instructional strategies (Hopkins, 2012) and have more positive perceptions of ELs in their classrooms (Rios-Aguilar, González-Canché, & Moll, 2012).

In 2007, the Task Force approved a four-hour model of SEI that was based on a time-on-task principle regarding the time needed to master a language before moving to content-area instruction (Gándara & Orfield, 2010). One key aspect of the 4-hour model is that it requires that ELs be separated from their schoolmates already deemed "English-proficient" for a minimum of one year while focusing on English-language development in place of grade-appropriate academic content. In recent years, numerous studies have condemned the policy by pointing to low student achievement (García et al., 2012; Hopkins, 2012), declining graduation rates (Lillie et al., 2012; Mitchell, 2017), and psychological trauma (Gándara & Orfield, 2010) experienced by ELs in SEI classrooms. However, few have focused on the role of ESL teachers in Arizona or the impact of policy interpretation on their instructional practices (Heineke, 2015). The few studies that have prioritized teachers' perspectives in the policy implementation process have generally focused on how teachers are enacting SEI to support and connect with Latinx students in their classrooms (e. g., Combs, González, & Moll, 2011; Heineke, 2015). While this research has contributed to our understanding of the relationship between macro-level policy decisions and teachers' use of languages (Combs et al., 2011), teachers' discourse within teacher study groups (Heineke, 2015), and instructional practices (Lillie et al., 2012), they have not informed our understanding of the experiences of teachers working with refugee students in ESL classrooms. In examining the implementation of SEI in the state of Arizona, we aim to contribute to the existing literature that has suggested that SEI mandates have marginalized ELs, especially

refugees, in terms of the educational opportunities available to them (e.g., Arias & Faltis, 2012; Heineke, 2015; Johnson & Freeman, 2010; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2012). We also analyze how teachers are appropriating this language policy to support and connect with refugee students with unique learning needs in their ESL classrooms. We are particularly interested in the ability and willingness of educators to appropriate policy in creative and unpredictable ways.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the seminal work of Teresa McCarty (2011), we adopt the view of policy as a social practice that operates within a larger sociocultural system, which most often codifies and advances the interests of those in power. Bal & Arzubiaga (2013) claim that English-only language policies in the last 30 years have promoted hegemonic ideologies that conceptualize the cultural and linguistic practices of minority students as deficits. From this perspective, teachers are seen as "fixers" of the deficiencies that refugees and other minority students bring to schools. Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead (2009) link language policies to the labels (e.g., EL, pre-emergent) that accompany them to claim that ideologies proceed and work through the policy design and implementation process to set limits for individuals belonging to specific sociocultural groups. One example of these limits is the standardization of English by language policy, which acts as an ideological mechanism in perpetuating social and linguistic inequality (McCarty, Collins, & Hopson, 2011). Schools, in this framework, operate as state-controlled discursive sites where those ideological mechanisms are deployed.

Sutton and Levinson (2001) present a sociocultural view of policy that suggests policies are continuously negotiated throughout the implementation process. At each level of an educational system, various agents across macro- and micro-contexts interact with and are influenced by each other to design and implement policies. Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) metaphor of policy implementation as an onion describes multiple layers of agents, contexts, and processes that interact with each other in various ways. The layers include "legislation and political processes (at the outer layers), states and supranational agencies (in the middle), and classroom practitioners (at the heart of the onion)" (Menken & García, 2010, p. 3). At each layer, the practices and discourse of various agents reflect their goals, values, and beliefs. Policy, in this approach, has been described as a dynamic process that stretches across time, sociocultural contexts, and engaged actors, and policy implementation has been likened to a "link in the chain of policy process in which all actors potentially have input" (Johnson, 2009, p. 142).

In addition, policy is both top-down and bottom-up, authorized and unauthorized (Johnson, 2009; McCarty, 2011). Authorized policy establishes normative guidelines about what should be done, with rewards and punishments based on adherence to policy mandates. For example, enforced by government mechanisms and grounded in popular ideologies about language, authorized SEI policy frames teacher-student interactions in ESL classrooms (Levinson et al., 2009). Unauthorized policy, on the other hand, develops spontaneously, separate from the governmental agencies that are responsible for making official policy. As teachers make sense of authorized policy and adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of their refugee students, they are, in effect, creating new, unauthorized policy (Levinson et al., 2009). Two concepts are central to the conceptual framework we use to examine how teachers interpret SEI and how those interpretations are mutually constituted by their interactions with and discourse about refugee students: (a) *appropriation* (Sutton & Levinson, 2001; Levinson et al., 2009), which represents teachers' enactment of policy to fit their

sociocultural contexts and (b) *discourse*, which describes the instantiation of teachers' thoughts, actions, values, and ideologies as forms of texts or talk (Anderson & Halloway, in review; Fairclough, 2009).

We use the term *appropriation* to refer to interpretive instructional practices with refugee students, constrained and enabled by authorized SEI policy mandates, but with space for teachers to exercise agency in their classrooms (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). When teachers appropriate policy, they are effectively making new, unauthorized policy in their local contexts (Levinson et al., 2009). Appropriation may also include outright resistance to authorized policy, which constitutes an action in and of itself. As busy, engaged professionals, teachers must act according to their ways of knowing, seeing, and being (Cohen & Ball, 1990). In order for teachers to implement educational policies, they must reconcile their instructional practices and their students' learning practices with their own knowledge, beliefs, and values. Through their sensemaking and enactment of official texts, teachers can shape policies to take advantage of their students' educational resources even in the face of potentially restrictive language policies (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Stritikus, 2003). Teachers may also begin to view themselves not solely as recipients of official policy texts, but as powerful actors with the potential to make what they consider more appropriate policy in their classrooms (Creese, 2010; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Hjelle (2001) argues that through policy appropriation, teachers may "challenge the ideological aspects of their cultures that serve to maintain their subservience, including questioning of reflecting on, and taking action against the dominant culture in such areas as competition, sexism, racism, stereotyping" (p. 25). This is especially true for language policies, which can shape how ideologies about language are "played out interactionally between teachers and students, students and their peers, and schools and communities" (Warriner, 2007, p. 346). By

adopting the term appropriation in place of negotiation or implementation, we comment on how teachers absorb official policies to incorporate discursive and structural resources into their personal interests and motivations.

To examine the rationale behind teachers' appropriation of SEI policies, we analyze *discourse*, or "their spoken and written language (i.e., text) that portrays underlying thoughts, actions, beliefs, and ideologies" (Anderson & Halloway, in review, p. 13). We operationalize this term by analyzing relationships between teachers' language use, stated instructional practices, and commentary in interviews that relate to teaching refugee students. SEI, as an official language policy, represents an authoritative assimilation perspective in regards to English language instruction and positions ELs as linguistically deficient. This societal ideology is either taken up or appropriated by teachers in their local contexts (Warriner, 2007), which is represented by their discourse, or language they use to speak about refugees and interactions with their students. An analysis of teachers' discourse can lead to insights into how they navigate tensions between macro-level ideologies and structures and their own experiences, beliefs, and values.

Methods

An interpretive, qualitative research design guided our data collection and analysis, focused specifically on educators' realities constructed from their interactions with resettled refugee students within the social contexts of their schools (Crotty, 1998). The primary goal of this study is not only to contribute to the existing research and fill a gap in the literature, but, more importantly, to provide educators in Arizona (and elsewhere) with examples of how others are supporting refugee students' educational experiences. Employing a qualitative design allowed us to reach an in-depth understanding of the complex experiences of educators working refugee students in Arizona.

Participants

In total, six educators were interviewed over the course of the 2016-2017 academic year. The participants were recommended through the authors' connections established while working with a local refugee resettlement organization. In selecting the interview subjects, a deliberate effort was made to ensure that the participants had extensive experience working with refugee student populations. All teachers selected to participate were ESL teachers working in Arizona, including three primary school teachers and one secondary school teacher. Each of them had had 10 or more refugee students in their classes in the previous year. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a primary school principal and a secondary school guidance counselor. The principal was the leader of a school that had over 200 refugee students enrolled in the 2016-2017 school year. The guidance counselor interviewed was the EL counselor, responsible for working with all refugee students at her secondary school. All participants were working in urban public schools with total enrollment numbers between 800 and 2,000 students, and with large numbers of refugee students. In addition, all of the schools were public Title I schools operating SEI programs to satisfy policy requirements by the state of Arizona.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews with the six research participants, which took place over the course of one academic year. The interviews were semi-structured, with prepared questions that incited conversations, but also left room for follow-up questions. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and focused on teachers' experiences with refugee students and their implementation of SEI. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed word-for-word shortly after the conclusion of the interview session. This allowed for immediate reflection and a chance for clearing up any confusion.

Minimal grammatical or syntax changes were made to the language used by the participants to preserve each individual voice and manner of speaking.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was used throughout all phases of the research to orient our analysis to the perspectives of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Consistent with interpretivist grounded-theory tenets, the participants in this study all had extensive experience in the education of resettled refugee students, which provided insight into this social process (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis for this study was both recursive and iterative, with analysis occurring repeatedly throughout the duration of the project and each step dictating the direction of future analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the first phase of analysis, we utilized active codes to organize the data as they appeared in the interviews and surveys (Charmaz, 2006). We continuously referenced the codes throughout the analysis to look for similarities and differences across the data sources. This process allowed us to take stock of the data with the initial active codes before suggesting patterns in the data to account for participants' feelings, beliefs, and assumptions represented by their discourse and stated instructional practices.

Researcher Positionality

All coding decisions and interpretations of data reflect our own ontological, epistemological, and methodological predispositions. As employees and volunteers for a local refugee resettlement agency, we have both worked extensively with resettled refugee students inside and outside of school. Some of our experiences with local refugee populations include conducting intake interviews when families arrive in the United States, registering students at local schools, and teaching middle- and high-school students at a summer camp for refugees. As white, middle-class American citizens, we are cognizant of our

advantaged positions in U.S. society, and we realize that we will never be able to fully understand the precarious positions in which resettled refugees often find themselves. Additionally, as researchers who do not speak any of the languages predominantly spoken in the countries of origin for most refugees resettled in the United States (UNHCR, 2017b), we understand that we will almost certainly be viewed as outsiders in refugee communities. Despite these considerations, we hope that our experiences with local refugee communities will allow us to adequately investigate this important topic and contribute to the existing literature.

Findings

During the interview process, educators were asked about their experiences working with refugee students, what they saw were the biggest challenges facing this student population, and how authorized SEI policy impacted their abilities to support their learning. In general, the interviewees were eager to talk about refugee students and did not appear to hold back on describing their thoughts or experiences. A few of the teachers displayed very emotional responses about their work with refugees. Below, we outline the most prominent themes that we identified from the interviews.

General Feeling of Unpreparedness

The biggest theme identified throughout data analysis was the general feeling of unpreparedness expressed by the educators. The teachers and counselor had all received their master's degrees in education, and the principal had received her doctorate. The teachers all sought out SEI endorsements and had received training in their teacher preparation programs to work with ELs. Despite their extensive educational achievements, the educators felt that they were unprepared to work with refugee students. Teachers, in particular, attributed their lack of relevant training to teacher-training requirements under SEI, specifically those regarding the SEI endorsement.

This gap in training left an impact on these teachers and several of them stated that they were forced to use a trial-and-error approach when they started working with refugee students. The principal took intentional steps to provide additional differentiated professional development for her teachers working with refugee students. Her recommendations for refugee-specific training went even further:

> *"In a perfect world, we have a college of education program specifically designed to meet refugee families' needs. Cultural awareness, sensitivity, language needs, just the whole gamut... we're doing some differentiated PD now, we're pulling our EL teachers together and we have a district academic coach who is now supporting them. But it's so multi-leveled. That's what I'm trying to do here at my home [school]."*

One teacher said that she sought out her current position at the school because she knew it was extremely diverse. Upon receiving her teaching certification, she began working with students from all different linguistic and cultural backgrounds: *"I was expecting to have a room full of Spanish speakers and it was a room full of Iraqis. And I was sort of in shock, 'How am I going to do this?'"* Likewise, another teacher felt confident in her ability to teach, but experienced self-doubt when it came to teaching refugee students:

> *"You know when I first came, he [the principal] told me that I would be in the SEI class, which I am highly qualified to do. They didn't tell me anything about the refugees, that it would be refugees at all, not even one refugee. That was a total surprise. And at first, after the first week, I didn't know if I could do it. I went back to (the principal) and I said, you know, this is very unfair. I said, you need to give me a little bit more history on this situation. It's unfair to me and to the kids, because they're probably not going to get*

what they need to get at the beginning until I understand what I need to give them. And he agreed, but he said, you're still the most qualified for it. I didn't think I could do it, and he said, you can do it."

When it came to specific training for working with cultural or diverse populations, none of the teachers felt that they had received adequate training. One teacher was very conclusive when asked about her training on working with refugee students. *"Never. It was never mentioned. I specialized in ESL education for my Masters and it was never mentioned in any class. I knew nothing."* Another teacher proposed specialized training for teachers who are newly working with refugees, *"I just think that the teachers that are getting them aren't getting enough pre-advice, training, knowledge, something."* This perceived lack of training left an impact on these teachers and many of them spoke about feeling completely unprepared when starting to work with refugee students.

Teachers Appropriating SEI Policy
Another theme that became clear during several interviews was that teachers felt restricted by the prescribed model of SEI, and they appropriated the policy to support their students' educational needs. A large portion of the responses took to heart policy decisions, with each of the teachers questioning or altering the policy on their own in a way that could be described as subversive. Some teachers used practices that might be counter to what SEI policy or school norms dictate.

Under SEI guidelines, the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) is the gatekeeper exam for ELs in Arizona. All students who have been identified as second language learners on a home language survey are required to take the AZELLA test, and students' scores determine appropriate placement for instruction in ESL classrooms during their first academic year (Arizona Department of Education, 2016).

In response to the frustrations with the AZELLA, one teacher described the tension between student placement and teachers' recommendations:

"I've got student who just came she is pretty fluent, but for some reason on the AZELLA test she did not write the essay, she just left it blank. So, she's in very super easy classes, and she doesn't need to be. She speaks English. She's with kids who are learning the alphabet and she's sitting there... and you can't move the kid. It's the law. So, what the teachers do, we are just moving them anyway and lying about it. We could get in serious trouble. Like if anything happened to the kid and the kid is in the wrong class... so we just do it secretly."

Another teacher argued that strict adherence to the standardized testing and SEI has led to a "dysfunctional system":

"They tell us not to teach the first three weeks. Which I have never heard...ever. It's so that counseling can switch kids around. They place kids randomly. My two-hour literacy block is just kind of a holding pen. If you want kids tested for special ed[ucation] it really never happens. The State has turned the AZELLA test into a bible. There's hundreds and hundreds of cases."

The SEI teachers were acutely aware of the needs of their students and had much to say about what they struggle with the most in the classroom, yet were limited in what they could provide according to state policy. When asked what refugee students need most, the participants did not deny the importance of learning English, but most felt SEI guidelines made it more difficult for students to learn. The principal described his issues with SEI very clearly. In the following quote, the principal refers to two tests, the AZELLA and the AzMerit

test, the standardized test administered yearly to all students in grades 3-12 to determine if state standards are being met. According to the principal, both proved to be a challenge for teachers and newcomer refugee students:

> *"Normal language acquisition theory says that it takes 3-5 years [to learn a language] yet our AZELLA testing says its one year so that's a big problem right there. And I don't feel it's appropriate, honestly, it's a travesty that we make especially new refugee students sit through an AzMerit test when they are monolingual. It's a disservice. I am so torn on that."*

Teachers also felt that SEI hindered students' relationships with other teachers and staff on school campuses. Under the 4-hour block model of SEI, ELs must receive a minimum of four hours of English language instruction per day. These guidelines effectively segregate refugee students in SEI classrooms and results in other teachers at the school having very little experience with this student population. In several instances, our participants described interactions where the refugee students needed to be defended.

> *"When we go to P.E. some of the teachers know that my class is... "special". They really are. And them some of them don't (understand) and then they'll be like "why isn't this kid listening?" and like, they don't understand what you're saying to them. And then they (teachers) always say something to me like, "What's wrong with this kid?" They don't know what you're telling them to do. A lot of people don't understand it until they've actually done it. Like today I kind of snapped at somebody today because somebody was yelling at one of my kids to tie their shoes and I was like he doesn't know how to tie his shoes and he doesn't know what you're telling him to do."*

Other problems have arisen with how the entire school campus responds to refugee students and the seeming segregation of refugee students from the rest of the campus. One teacher attributed this to the placement of ELs into classrooms based on SEI. She explained that ELs were in the same classroom regardless of their language level. She explained that when the students were integrated by level, they were all able to help each other, though some of the higher-level students were not progressing. Presumably, this was the cause for the change in classroom structure and the reason why a single teacher's refugee student numbers are so high. Another cause for the change could be attributed to the large numbers of new students arriving in Arizona at a pre-emergent level. Consequences of this placement policy, however, mean that certain teachers are continuously educating more refugee students with very different needs.

The principal had a unique perspective on teacher accountability that she felt was unfair to teachers of refugee students. Her experience was particularly insightful since she had the task of monitoring her SEI teachers who have large numbers of refugee students to teach:

> *"And it's hard...I'm constantly pumping up my teachers. The four most important things for an SEI classroom are that they're safe, they're respected, they're loved and they're valued. That's it. That's all I ask of you."*

The principal reported hand-selecting which teachers would work with refugee students because she knew the challenge would be great and she wanted to utilize teachers who would be able to last. She went on to explain what is expected of these SEI teachers:

> *"So, when that progress comes much slower than a regular classroom and teachers aren't prepared for that it can be very defeating. But now the state says something different, their performance pay says something different. Constantly reassuring them to find those small steps*

they're making every day towards that big progress. But when you have regular Ed teachers who become SEI teachers and they're constantly comparing them and looking at our pacing guide going, how can I do this? It's very challenging and you have to be able to value those teachers."

With her unique understanding of the needs of refugee students in her school, the principal was able to exert some form of control based on her own opinions of what is best for their learning. Taken further, the principal's statement also reflects a keen understanding of what is going to make for a successful SEI teacher with refugee students.

Discussion

The experiences resettled refugees have in U.S. schools are shaped by implementation of policies that situate their context in this country and plays out within power regimes through a dynamic process that involves sociocultural and ideological factors. Teachers are at the heart of this process and often act as the "final arbiters of language policy implementation" (Menken & García, 2010, p. 1). Regardless of the context, there are typically opportunities for policy appropriation in schools, where the official text comes to life. Experiencing how power is constructed through language and language policies, educators may begin to view themselves not solely as recipients of official policy texts, but as powerful actors with the ability to make unauthorized, *de facto* policy in their classrooms. Not only do our findings shed light on educators' complex experiences working with refugee students in U.S. schools, but they also hold significant implications for policymakers and educational research moving forward.

Implications for Policy

In the context of monolingual ideologies and politicized nature of education in Arizona,

educators have been ill-equipped to face the challenges refugee students may face due to English-only policies that push diverse students to the outskirts or force them to assimilate. Findings of this study support the work of scholars that argue that individuals providing educational services to refugee children should receive specialized training to help them understand the unique needs of these students (Kirk & Cassity, 2007; MacNevin, 2012; Naidoo, 2012; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Roxas, 2011b). Rather than reducing training requirements for qualification to work in classrooms with refugee students, our findings indicate that states should provide incentives for higher certification and specialization in teaching refugee populations. Learning from international training initiatives may also help connect the experiences of refugee students in pre- and post-resettlement education contexts. The Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergency's (INEE) *Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises, and Early Reconstruction,* which were created in 2006 to support the learning of vulnerable children in conflict settings, has very rarely been studied or utilized in third country resettlement contexts to support refugee students in Western educational settings. The application of the INEE Minimum Standards in resettlement contexts could provide more evidence for teacher training that is suitable for the complex context that educators in the U.S. are experiencing (Burns & Lawrie, 2015).

The INEE sets standards and provides guidance to humanitarian agencies and governments delivering education to refugee communities in host countries, supporting education for children in conflict, and for helping to rebuild education systems after a conflict. In many of these countries, navigating cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences is a top priority. In American schools, cultural differences and gaps continue to grow between teachers and their students, which now include

increasing numbers of refugee and non-refugee immigrants (Hones, 2002). These gaps further necessitate the need for educational policies that support cultural and linguistic diversity. On a global scale, the INEE could also be a platform for teachers and policy makers to learn from each other. Educators in countries of resettlement can inform the practice of working with refugee children in countries of asylum or conflict through the shared knowledge of the Minimum Standards and education in emergencies.

Implications for Future Research

Our findings also indicate there is a growing need for research that examines the relationship between educational policy formulation and implementation, especially in regard to the specific needs of refugee students. Various studies have examined the implementation of SEI and its effects on primarily Latino student populations in Arizona (e.g., Combs et al., 2011; de Jong, 2008; Heineke, 2015), but none have considered how teachers are enacting this policy to support the needs of a refugee student population that has grown considerably in recent years. The subversive practices of teachers in our study are indicative of their willingness to find solutions to challenges refugee students are facing as a result of SEI, and may be seen as a result of the policy's inflexibility. The participants' personal experiences with and assessments of refugee students' biggest needs seem to be driving the appropriation of policy to support their refugee students. Based on these personal experiences, additional research into the policy implementation process is warranted.

Limitations

This study also presented limitations that could be addressed in future research. For instance, a greater understanding of the impact that language policy may have on refugee students could be examined from in-depth interviews with students themselves. Additionally,

participant observer methods could be explored to view the daily interactions of refugee students with their teachers and other students in classrooms. Finally, a longitudinal study that followed newly arrived refugee students during the few years in an Arizona classroom would further highlight the long-term impact of SEI on refugee students' educational opportunities.

Conclusion

Refugee children around the world face daunting challenges when accessing education of quality or substance. Understanding, at least in part, some of the experiences that teachers have had in working with this student population will provide a basic foundation for exploring the needs of teachers in resettlement education contexts. Herein, our results fill problematic gaps in the literature to initiate a review of current U.S. educational policies, specifically those dealing with language, which, in turn, affect teacher-training policies. Contributing to an understanding of how training programs can better prepare teachers to work with refugee students, this study sheds light on teachers' needs to be effective in newly diverse classrooms. Results highlight the important role that teachers play in helping students adjust to education in the United States and also call for a comprehensive training program that includes training on trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches. Finally, by ensuring teachers are prepared for entering the classroom with their diverse body of students, implications can be drawn to support not only the growing refugee student population but also the teachers who work with them on a daily basis.

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