





MFA Design for Social Innovation Thesis School of Visual Arts May 2024

Designed by Maggie Wong for the teachers who taught us the love of learning for the children who teach us to remain in wonder



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Personal Story

As I think about the people who have been pivotal in my journey as a student in my childhood, I think of my fourth grade teacher, Ms. Sha. She was my homeroom teacher in a time of great transition. I was 9 years young when my mom and I moved from Hong Kong to Houston, Texas right before the school year began. Ms. Sha went the extra mile to get to know us, to make sure our concerns were heard, and that I was set up with the right language and social support I needed to feel welcome and safe. I felt connected because she also shared the language of my family and understood our culture. She became a part of the village that I heavily leaned on. She was my advocate as I navigated a whole new world that is the American education system, in a new neighborhood, in a new city. An anchor in a time of change, she was present when I felt lost, disconnected, and inadequate to master class assignments like those in American history and culture. Her dedication to all of my classmates' successes became an inspiration for me to take notice of the needs of children and families who have had to start over and navigate life with resilience.

Twenty years later, I unexpectedly reconnected with her at a work meeting. I was working at a social service agency that served a diverse demographic of immigrants in the heart of Houston's Chinatown. Ms. Sha was now Dr. Sha, a principal, and unbeknownst to me at the time, a board member of the Education Department where I worked. She was still unapologetic in her advocacy for children's education and wellbeing, and it was something she had instilled in me deeply in every way she cared for me as a student.



From 2000...



...to 2020

Key Terms

Entities and government sectors that are mentioned in this thesis involves specialized terms that are specific to their own use. To ensure clarity and understanding, below are the definitions of key terms used in this paper.

Asylum Seeker: A person who has left their country due to persecution and serious human rights violations and is actively seeking international legal protection in another country. They are individuals who have not yet been legally recognized as a refugee and are waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Asylum cannot be sought from an embassy or one's home. Individuals can only apply for asylum when physically present in the United States or at a designated port of entry.

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CR-S):

During principal evaluations, schools and leaders are assessed using the CR-S framework, established by New York State in January 2018 to address biases and inequalities. This framework, rooted in a cultural perspective of learning and human development, recognizes diversity as a valuable asset for education. Its goal is to help educators create a student-centered learning environment that:

- 1. affirms racial and cultural identities and fosters positive academic outcomes
- 2.develops students' abilities to connect across cultures
- 3. empowers students as agents of social change
- 4. contributes to an individual's engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through critical thinking.

Department of Education (**DOE**): The government department of New York City that manages the city's public school system. It provides primary and secondary education to over 1 million pre-kindergarten to grade 12 students in 1,500+ schools, and employs approximately 79,000 teachers.

Educational equity: Educational equity is providing every child with the resources necessary to foster their academic and social growth. It is working towards ensuring equal academic outcomes for all students, by eliminating perspectives that link their success or failure based on social or cultural background. This involves addressing inequitable practices, examining biases, and fostering inclusive multicultural environments for both adults and children, while also recognizing and nurturing the students' unique gifts, talents, and interests.

English as a New Language (ENL): A program where language arts and content-area instruction are taught in English using specific ENL instructional strategies and resources. The two types of bilingual programs in New York City public schools are: 1) Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) and 2) Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE). For more details, visit <u>nysed.org</u>.

English Language Learner (**ELL**): A student who speaks a language other than English at home and needs support learning English. All ELLs receive ENL where students are taught to read, write, and speak in English with support in the child's home language. It is important to understand that ELLs are not a monolith.

New York State Education Department (**NYSED**): The department of the New York state government responsible for the supervision for all public schools in New York and all standardized testing, as well as the production and administration of state tests and Regents Examinations.

Refugee: A refugee is a person who has fled their own country due to the risk of facing serious human rights violations and persecution from which their own government cannot or will not protect them. Refugees do not get to choose the country where they will be resettled, though they are likely to be resettled where they have family members. After a thoroughly vetted process that involves background checks and medical screenings, they are connected to resettlement agencies to support their transition once they arrive.

Social Emotional Learning (**SEL**): A process through which students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to thrive in school and beyond. These competencies, identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), are: (1) self-management; (2) self-awareness; (3) responsible decision-making; (4) relationship skills; and (5) social awareness.

Transitional Bilingual Education (**TBE**): A program that offers students of the same home language the opportunity to learn to speak, understand, read, and write in English while continuing to learn academic content in their home language. The students' home language is used to help them progress academically in all content areas while they acquire English.

Context

My journey in this project started when I connected with a friend who works as an elementary school educator in New York City. The love she had for her students was palpable. She revealed that in 2022, she experienced a major shift in her long-standing teaching career due to her school's integration of students from asylum-seeking families.

In the bigger picture, more than **180,000** asylum-seekers have passed through New York City since Spring of 2022.¹ Currently, families with children represent 78% of the asylum-seeker population in NYC funded shelters. This encompasses **36,000** children and youth who arrived in the city as their families sought asylum from the political turmoil, healthcare and economic instability in their home countries.¹ These children vary in their culture and language, with many coming from South America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Number of Newly Admited Students in Temporary Housing Enrolled in NYC Public School (K-12)^{2*}

 3,098	8,016	11,220	18,331	21,599	31,257	33,840	36,901
September	November	January	June	September	November	January	March
2022		2023				2024	

*The New York City Department of Education does not track immigration status for students; however, it does collect housing status information at enrollment and is therefore using the number of newly enrolled students in temporary housing since July as a proxy for students from families seeking asylum³. Likewise, the number of students enrolled in schools as English Language Learners were also used as a proxy.

Several federal laws and regulations are in place to protect children under such circumstances and have contributed to the sudden uptake of school enrollment:

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that all children in the United States are entitled to equal access to a basic public elementary and secondary education regardless of their actual or perceived race, color, national origin, citizenship, immigration status, or the status of their parents/guardians. Under this act, local education agencies (LEAs) are required to provide translations of all documents necessary for school program access.⁴

Title VI, subtitle B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) states, "Students, including unaccompanied youth, must be enrolled immediately in a school in the school district where they are temporarily living." These students are also immediately eligible for free school meals.⁵

Chancellor's Regulation A-780, issued on April 18, 2019, is a summary of changes that updates and supersedes Chancellor's Regulation A-780 dated June 29, 2009. It conforms to "the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, and ensures that homeless children receive the programs and services that children with permanent residences receive, including services provided under federal programs."⁶

Exploring the Scope of Research

As I engaged directly with children from asylum-seeking families and their educators to understand their lived experiences, I remained mindful of potential consequences, including class disruptions and the risk of triggering trauma. However, I was still curious about the factors at play for someone who experienced a drastic change in environment and culture. As a result, I asked three community members whose life was connected to the well-being of the asylum seekers. by way of either volunteering, their line of work, or whose children attend a school with asylum-seekers to retrospectively consider a past journey of

transition. Participants were given prompts and were asked to write on a swatch color card that visually represented their responses.



I wondered about	I remember feeling	What helped my adjustment was



Responses from participants mentioned fears, uncertainty, and questions that lingered in their mind when they recalled a time they moved from one place to another. They elaborated about frustrations due to the inability to fully communicate their thoughts, while also feeling a mixture of both excitement and loss. Lastly, they shared how personal interests like favorite foods, being in nature, connecting with their faith, friends, and family helped their sense of security during their adjustment. Even though these participants spoke English and grew up in the U.S., there were many layers of complexity during an adjustment period. It made me consider how much more amplified these thoughts and feelings are for asylumseeking families and children.



In addition to staying on top of news developments, I surveyed New York City's Project Open Arms, a 9-page guideline designed to assist with student enrollment. mental health, transportation, and translation services. I also examined the Newcomer Toolkit. a 5-chapter digital file developed by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), which includes an overview, sample tools, and resources for educators who work directly with immigrant students and their families. ^{7,8} Most of the content available at the time of access addressed best practices for enrollment tailored toward the upper grades of middle and high school. It offered a few paragraphs of suggestions catering to the elementary level.

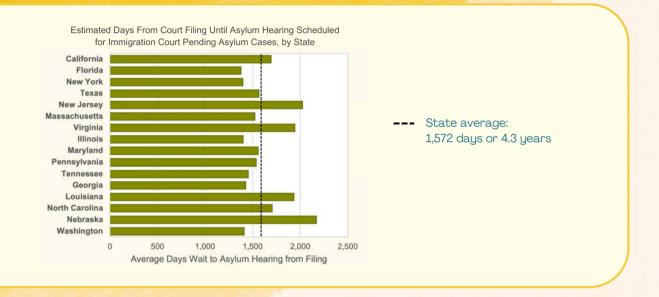
I also connected with a fourth-grade teacher who taught at an elementary school on the west side of Manhattan, and she eagerly shared some resources she had personally created for her asylum-seeking students. It was then that I realized how likely it was that many teachers across the boroughs were creating new materials themselves to ensure that their classrooms were inclusive and relatable to their new students. I started to wonder how the enrollment of students was impacting schools and what might help teachers support their asylum-seeking students.





Family Challenges

As of 2022 in New York, the estimated average wait time from the date that the families' asylum claims was filed to when their hearings will be scheduled is currently at 1,393 days, or 3.8 years.⁹



Because asylum-seekers and refugees share a well-founded fear of persecution without the option to return home after crossing national and/or international borders, I conducted research to find out more about the impact such drastic change has on individuals.

> "Extended waiting periods for asylum are linked to declining health, whereas female refugees were found to be more prone to reporting both emotional and physical health issues. The detrimental impact of prolonged asylum waits on emotional well-being persists even 21 months after settlement."¹⁰

Thinking about parents/guardians and their close relationship with the children under their care, these findings made me aware of the unseen factors that impact students' wellbeing.

School Challenges

In an effort to learn more about the school landscape, I reached out to Joel Troege, Director of Long-Term ELLs, Newcomers, and SIFE at the New York Public School Department of Multilingual Learners. He provided valuable insights into the education system, its leadership structure, and the state of the then newly arrived students. Three major challenge areas surfaced in our conversation:

- **Drastic increase in enrollment:** NYC has schools that have been designed and are ready for newly arrived students, such as Newcomer High School in Queens. However, the surge in numbers was still significant enough to impact how a school functions day to day, especially at the elementary level.
- Bilingual programs may be enrolling asylum-seekers for the first time: Schools that have had bilingual programs are linguistically ready to welcome students who do not yet speak English but may not have ever had newcomers to address their needs specifically.
- **Students below grade-level:** When asylum-seeker students arrive at a school, they are enrolled in a class according to their age group, even if they have experienced interrupted education that leaves them several grades behind. Even if teachers are equipped linguistically, the discrepancies bring a whole new challenge.

On average, U.S. students attend school for 8,903 hours over their first nine years in school.¹¹

With students spending an average of almost 1,000 hours a year in school, this amplifies the importance of creating school environments that can provide a sense of long-term safety, security, and support to prevent further negative impacts on the mental and physical health of asylum-seeker students.

While integrating immigrant and refugee students isn't new to NYC, the rapidly changing landscape among government policies affecting asylum seekers posed funding, facility, and resource challenges from the grassroots to the federal level.¹² Some schools lack funds to hire staff for newcomer English learners, while others struggle to find bilingual teachers due to shortages.¹³ Among media sources covering the early development of

Brief Timeline of Developing News Surrounding Asylum Seekers in New York City



January 2, 2023 Schools around the city experienced a sudden uptake of students from temporary shelters.

January 9, 2023

New York City processed nearly 3,100 asylum seekers in its shelter system, including 835 individuals in a single day.

June 1, 2023

City of New York opens Asylum Application Help Center to connect individuals with legal assistance and file asylum applications.

Aug. 5, 2022 The first bus of migrants sent by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to NYC arrives at the Port

Authority Bus Terminal.



Aug. 19, 2022

The Adams administration announces "Project Open Arms," a plan to support asylum-seeking families to enroll their children in school.

March 7, 2023

Mayor Adams releases "The Road Forward," new blueprint to support asylum seeker crisis moving forward. this news, I found that not many articles were written from the voice of teachers from within the schools. I held onto the assumption that all the changes may have stirred up uncertainty and kept educators on edge. It was because of this that I committed to hearing from educators first hand.

September 20, 2023

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas announces the extension and redesignation of Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 18 months.

October 16, 2023

New York City officials announce 60-day shelter stay limit for asylumseekers with children.



January 9, 2024

The first wave of migrant families are forced to reapply for a shelter placement after the controversial 60-day policy starts taking effect.



January 16, 2024 Bank Street College hosts equity event on supporting migrant students.

June 22, 2023

U.S. Department of Education releases "Newcomer Toolkit" to help state, local, and school leaders who directly serve immigrant and refugee students.

November 8, 2023

NYC Department of Education Division of Multilingual Learners launches "Support Immigrantorigin Students Professional Development Training Series".

Community Partner

P.S. 130 Manhattan is a public school in District 2 located in the Chinatown-Little Italy section of New York City. P.S. 130 serves PreKfifth grade and has 585 total students. 88% of teachers have three or more years of teaching experience, with the most veteran teacher having 38 years of experience.¹⁴ It has a robust art program that partners with organizations like Inside Broadway, National Dance Institute, and more. With a demographic of over 76% of students who are Asian, P.S. 130 is also equipped with bilingual programs, Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) and Bilingual Special Education (BSE), to build knowledge and learning of academic subjects in Chinese and English.

The school space is home to the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) and the Apex for Youth Saturday basketball club. Students at P.S. 130 include children and grandchildren of shop owners in Chinatown. Many faculty and staff members also attended P.S. 130 during their childhood, which contributes to a strong sense of community not only within the school but also in the surrounding neighborhood.

The school received 103 asylum-seeking students to date, with 56 currently enrolled. The majority of these students speak Spanish as their dominant language at home.

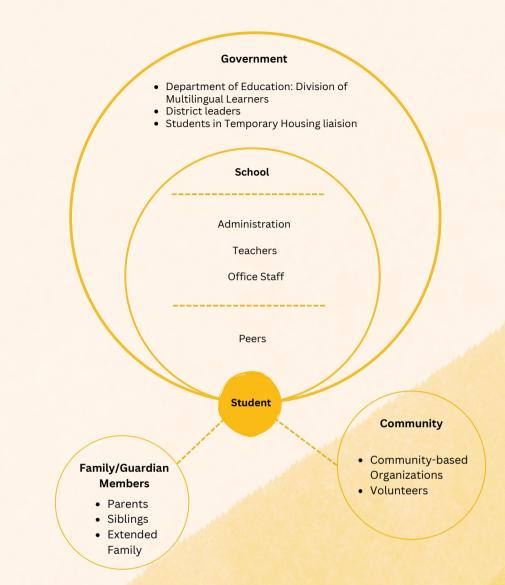






Principal Renny Fong Vice Principal Beena Thomas & Jennifer Samphaoron

Support System of Asylum-seeking Students





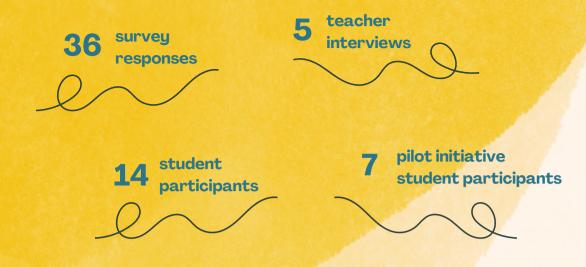
2023 New Families Welcome Event



Family Welcome Room for intake



How have schools been impacted by the enrollment of students from asylum-seeking families?



Observations and Interviews

I conducted in-person interviews with four P.S. 130 teachers and the school's counselor to better understand how schools had been impacted since the enrollment of students from asylum-seeking families. Questions focused on how teachers were experiencing this change, what practical resources they had found helpful, and how they have navigated this change thus far. The teachers revealed that they felt caught in between the quality of education they wanted to provide and the demands from the increased number of students per class. As trusted relationships were built between parents and school staff, the parents also sought help in areas that were "beyond the scope of what the school was able to provide".

Teachers, nevertheless, showed a desire to learn more about the students, but language and cultural differences were often a barrier to building deeper relationships with asylum-seeker students. Teachers were put into a position to respond quickly to meet students' needs, yet resources were not reaching the teachers at the time they needed them.

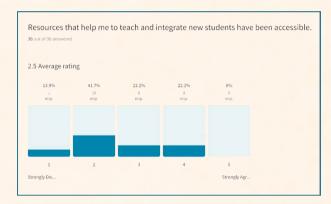
"We got a phone call one day in January from the Department of Education that the new students are coming in tomorrow. First few months, I was just constantly going. Everything I had to do had to be pushed aside. It was both physically and emotionally draining."



-P.S. 130M office staff

Survey

To gather a more encompassing viewpoint so that responses are truly representative of teachers, I sent out a 28-question school-wide online survey to teachers prior to a school-wide workshop, to assess how the enrollment of asylumseeking students has impacted them.



Main areas of inquiry

- How have teachers been impacted professionally and emotionally as they navigated through the change?
- What are teachers' priorities and how have they shifted?
- What are their current resources and networks of support?
- What challenges are teachers facing since students' enrollment?

Workshop

From interviews, I learned that P.S. 130 had routine horizontal meetings with same-grade teachers, whereas cluster teachers typically meet with their co-teachers. To encourage idea sharing, I facilitated a workshop during the professional development hour with over 32 teachers present in order to discuss how they have changed as a school in response to the enrollment of asylum-seeking students. I arranged for the breakout groups to mix teachers from different grade levels who do not regularly meet together. I also introduced Adaptive Leadership principles as a tool to help them face change and navigate their newfound challenges. The workshop created a space for teachers to connect with each other about shared experiences and best practices.



A March 11, 2024 P.S. 130 teachers in cross-grade break-out discussion groups



▲ Teachers' notes on team values and hopes for their students

Insights

Small group and One-on-ones

Since the new students are coming in with different experiences with education and different levels of English, teachers reported that they prefer to work with them in small groups or one-on-ones and that it is challenging to meet all their students' needs. Teachers also expressed a desire to connect with students relationally.

Basic needs

The majority of teachers reported that they prioritize meeting students' basic needs. Families ask for the school's assistance to get basic health care needs and legal advice. The school hosted two clothing drives, one in the Winter and one in the Spring for asylum-seeking families. Even more, though, families have been turning to the school for emotional support. While families don't always trust government authority, the school is a government agency where they do exhibit trust. Students feel like school is a safe and consistent place for them. Even though some students have been reassigned to different shelters in other boroughs, families still choose to bus them back to P.S. 130 because of the care they have experienced there.

Increase confidence

Teachers reported that they focus on building students' confidence as increasing students' confidence helps them learn new information and practice new skills.

Improves ability to receive information

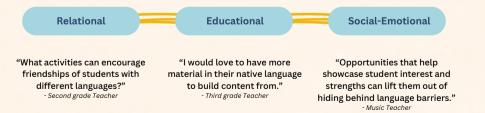
Meeting students' basic needs builds security and helps students better receive new information, which prompted P.S. 130 to hold the two clothing drives since their enrollment, in addition to serving families breakfast every morning.

Increase academic performance

Meeting students' basic emotional and physical needs help them perform academically.

Existing Curricula

As part of District 2's push for equity, the entire district started implementing Heggerty, a daily 5-minute motion-based phonemic awareness program, and Fundations, an evidence-based Orton-Gillingham phonics program, that provides explicit instruction about spelling rules in all K-2 classrooms. Teachers reported that while these programs have been great tools to engage both new and existing students alike, they fall short in helping students understand complex themes in stories. P.S. 130 counters this with a book of the month, which features nuanced stories about immigration, disabilities and other important themes. The books of the month sometimes coincide with the same month's theme.



As I spoke with teachers, I learned that the majority of their academic resources to accommodate these students were created by themselves. Addressing this challenge came with a range of emotions, from compassion that drove their determination and collaboration to heightened stress and doubts about their impact. Whether small or on a grand scale, the integration of asylum-seeking students required a shift in perspective to consider what resources could address needs and enable them to remain committed to the whole child approach.

Whole Child Education

One of the key insights was realizing how the social-emotional wellbeing of students is intricately tied to their ability to learn and connect with others, affecting their confidence and sense of identity. Teachers wanted specialized support that addresses the students' relational, educational, and social-emotional needs. Teachers' responses revealed that their priorities reflect the guiding principles outlined in the Whole Child Approach framework, which ensures healthy development for students to learn and thrive.¹⁵



Considering this framework and teachers' input, the following questions took shape and became key inquiries guiding the project's next steps:



How can students learn how to manage their emotions and build coping and conflict resolution skills to establish a place of physical and emotional **safety** for themselves?

How can students collaborate with teachers to set goals to improve their skills while exercising their creativity so that they are attuned to their education and remain **engaged**?

What aspects do I need to consider so that students are **supported** through personalized teaching and individualized attention?

How can I best identify the types of **challenges** that motivate students to give their best academically and socially?

How can I work with families to identify what success means for their child?



What tools can help address the necessary learning focuses in school?

Exploring the Potential of Diverse Children's Literature as Educational Material

I held a workshop within the DSI community among classmates to explore the potential of using diverse children's literature as an anchor for classroom lessons. Participants were given roles as teachers, illustrators, and children's book authors to take on specific perspectives as they work together in collaboration to create a 30-40 minutes lesson plan that included objectives, required materials, and an interactive activity.

Learnings

Ranging from a matching game of texture and food vocabulary to identifying emotions such as fear through card decks, participants shared that they felt a lot of flexibility in creating a lesson plan as there were many elements within a single book that they could draw from. Each page was visually filled with character emotions, perspectives, and reveals something new from the story plot. Even in the process of planning, individuals learned at least one thing they did not previously know about another culture or another person's experience.

The lesson plan outlines that resulted from this workshop gave me confidence in the potential of building a curriculum that has visually engaging and meaningful content aligned with the learning objectives outlined in state standards.





March 27, 2024 ► DSI students explore major themes exhibited in children's book stories and create second grade lesson plans during prototype workshop.



Over 32 themes were identified between five children's books to use as lesson plan inspiration, including but not limited to:

- Family: intergenerational kinship, culture
- Emotions: joy, fear, disappointment
- Values: togetherness, self-awareness, community, empathy
- Transition: change, uncertainty



Reinforcing Learning Through Art

Lesson Plan Development: Potato Stamping

Valuing proximity when engaging with community work, I began as a volunteer at an afterschool program held by P.S. 130, which was designated to provide art enrichment for K-1st grade students from asylum-seeking families. Students who attended spoke Spanish as their first language and had varied educational backgrounds, ranging from one formal year of schooling to none. After two consecutive weeks of learning about seasons, during which students explored fruits and flowers, the afterschool teachers and I collaborated on a lesson plan to guide the students through a 5-step Plant Cycle in both English and Spanish. We prompted students to share their own experiences with plant growth and engaged them in a digital plant cycle game. To reinforce learning, I created and led a potato-stamping activity to provide students with a tangible and creative way to engage with the process.

Hypothesis

Offering a creative experience for the students to acquire new skills can provide additional support to foster their academic and social-emotional development. Being intentional about what to incorporate in art activities can increase meaningful interactions between teachers and students, fostering curiosity about students' interests and strengths.

Learnings

Students were so mesmerized by the large example we showed that they jumped up from their seats. They transferred what they learned about a root fruit conceptually to tangibly experimenting with its textures and scents through the art project. The act of carving the potato and painting offered numerous opportunities for students to learn new action verbs and descriptive words as we instructed them to repeat after us in English. Teachers noticed which student worked through this activity with ease. We utilized the Google Translate app for more complex instructions and small talk as we were limited in our Spanish. Students showed remarkable attention to detail and creativity in their use of materials. Each student proudly took home their own colorful creation.

One student candidly shared that she had already learned about plant cycle and became less engaged during the lesson. This made me realize the value of assessing students' interests and prior knowledge to inform future lesson planning. It also prompted us to reconsider how we communicate the potential uses of art materials to encourage personal expression, as some students felt constrained by the tools provided. However, our limitations turned into an opportunity to exercise social-emotional skills such as sharing and patience while waiting their turn. Students also displayed confidence when asked to stand in front of the class and interact with the digital game we had prepared. This made me realize how a core component of students' learning is to give them the limelight to showcase what they have learned.



Integrating Literacy Objectives

With an afterschool class of eight Kindergarteners, where one Spanish-speaking student was integrated with general education students, I initiated a lesson surrounding a children's book reflective of Afro-Latinx culture. The book, "Plátanos Are Love" by Alyssa Reynoso-Morris, highlighted the beautiful dynamic of intergenerational connection and brought students into the context of the Latinx culture through food and Spanish words written into the story. I created a game, Sight Words Rainbow, in accordance with kindergarten and early first-grade reading standards focused on common sight words. We exercised word recognition, self-expression, and phonetics through words chosen from the book.











Hypothesis

Children's book stories that highlight a culture that is not the dominant culture of a class can provide learning content that engages all students while also acting as a valuable tool to boost engagement for students from asylum-seeking families.

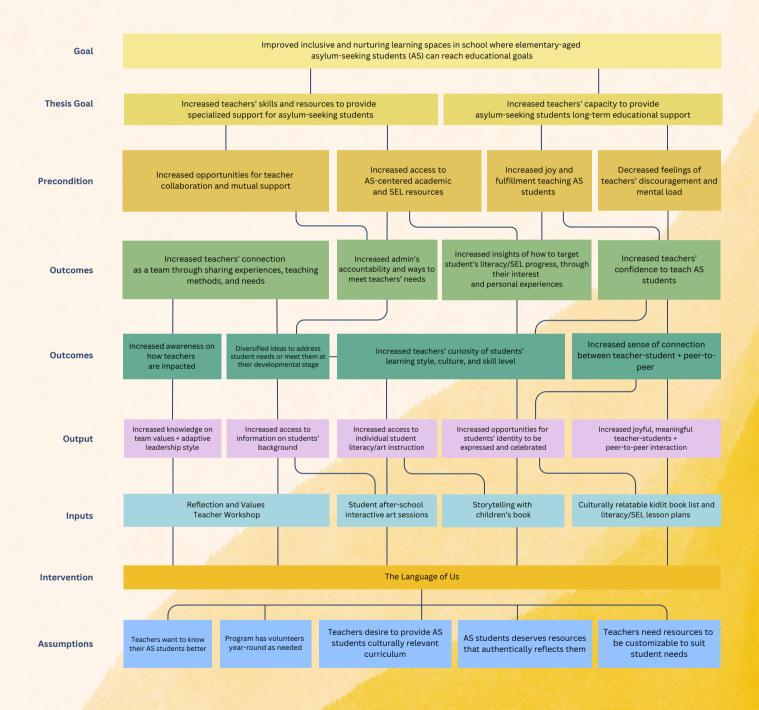
Learnings

The lesson concluded with an art activity that tied back to the story, adapting a food item that reminded them of home into the book's title, (i.e. "_____ Are Love"). From rice to pasta to papas fritas, each student showcased what reminded them of family.

The success and engagement of this activity opened up the potential for scaling up similar lessons. I began compiling a list of children's books, sought recommendations from children's bookstores, and incorporated elements that would support a learning environment where students could feel seen and be motivated to contribute freely.

Theory of Change

My theory of change to support elementary educators teaching asylumseeking students in New York City addresses aspects at both the faculty and student level. In order to improve inclusive and nurturing learning spaces in schools where asylum-seeking students can thrive as a whole-child, the goal is to increase student-centered specialized support for teachers and increase teachers' capacity to administer the support long-term, as students require sustained periods of learning to acquire academic mastery and form their identities.



Theory of Change Narrative

For teachers to receive specialized support for asylum-seeking students and increase their capacity to provide long-term support, I am addressing the following preconditions:

- Opportunities for teacher collaboration and mutual support
- Access to asylum-seeker-centered academic and social-emotional resources
- Teachers' sense of joy and fulfillment in teaching asylum-seeking students
- Emotional and mental load that teachers face when supporting students

Opportunities for teacher collaboration and mutual support can be increased by fostering connections among teachers through sharing their lived experiences and needs, and by recognizing how they are affected individually and as a team. To establish the necessary openness and respect for such dialogue, educators must become aware of their shared values and move towards practices of Adaptive Leadership to address the changes brought about by integrating asylum-seeking students. Workshops and facilitation guides that create space for such dialogue need to be implemented to enable this collaboration.

An increase in access to asylum-seeking student-centered resources can be achieved by enhancing the administration's understanding of teachers' needs and their accountability to meet those needs. The precondition of group gatherings for collaboration, mentioned earlier, establishes a platform that should be widely shared, thereby increasing group awareness of the issues that need addressing. Teachers can then assess asylum-seeker students' learning progress and identify areas where additional support might be necessary. Such collaboration creates a space where early-career educators can connect with mid-career and long-term educators to exchange ideas and resources, thereby sharing best practices that can benefit the entire school community. To heighten awareness of students' needs, teachers must cultivate curiosity about students' interests and capabilities by having access to individual instructional opportunities. An increase in joy and fulfillment for teachers teaching asylum-seeking students can be achieved through gaining and applying knowledge of students' personal interests, capabilities, and cultural contexts. This shift is expected to lead to an increased sense of connection between teachers and students, as well as among peers. Strengthening these relationships leads to teachers better understanding their students' academic and social-emotional progress, which gives teachers more accurate insight into how to target these growth areas for each student. As teachers feel more assured in their ability to meet students where they are in their learning needs, more teachers can become better advocates for these students' needs, thereby increasing their confidence to make an impact in students' lives. This decrease in emotional and mental load that individual teachers have to take on also increases the overall capacity for providing students with long-term support.

To achieve these outcomes, the following interventions must be in place:

- After school, literacy-based academic and social-emotional learning program that offers students hands-on activities to express their voice, culture, and personality.
- Workshop facilitation guide for discussion among teachers to assess the progress of asylum-seeking students under their care.
- Briefings on students' cultural context to help teachers formulate a bigger picture perspective and overcome cultural misunderstandings that might be barriers to creating emotionally safe spaces in schools, a priority that often precedes learning.





The Language of Us is...

"The Language of Us" is a children's book-based art curriculum initiative that provides educators with academic and socialemotional learning resources to support early elementary students from asylum-seeking families. It can be integrated into an existing afterschool program or used as a lesson plan for the classroom. The vision is to bring to life children's books that specifically reflect the cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds of asylum-seeking students while providing hands-on activities where diverse students can engage with their own or their classmates' interests and lived experiences. With these lesson plans as tools or inspiration, teachers can save time planning, focusing on interacting with students and assessing student progress while using culturally responsivesustaining educational resources and adapting lessons to strengthen literacy and social-emotional skills.

Core Values

Joy: Create experiences that gives joy to students to deepen their connection to learning.

Celebration: Provide opportunities to celebrate students' identity and culture, encouraging them to contribute their perspectives and connect with their peers.

Compassion: Diversifying the literature used in lessons shows kindness by meeting students where they are and honoring their heritage. It reassures them that they, alongside their advocates, can embrace their culture while navigating the world.

Connection: Engage students academically, socially, and emotionally through hands-on activities, creating an environment for collaborative discovery and idea-sharing.

Why Children's Literature?

Social-emotional Benefits

Storytelling provides children with many psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined communication skills. The use of narrative in teaching literacy has been found to lower the level of anxiety, building the capacity for students to take risks in their classes.¹⁶ As students build familiarity with stories, a calming environment can also be generated through storytelling. In addition, a study has found that social-emotional learning approaches are most effective when the intervention is designed with a specific context or culture in mind.¹⁷

Vocabulary Exposure

Children's books expose a considerable amount of words, whether by phonetic recognition or sight words, helping students gain familiarity to language:

- Children's Illustrated Books: 500-1,000 words, Age 4-8, typically 32 pages long
- Children's Books: 1000-10,000 words, Age 7-8

Cultural Representation and Identity Formation

Utilizing diverse children's books as teaching materials can demonstrate solidarity by drawing attention to various cultures, challenging stereotypes, and diffusing the fear of the unknown or unfamiliar by fostering curiosity. It also allows children to see themselves represented in stories, explore different perspectives, and take ownership of their narratives.



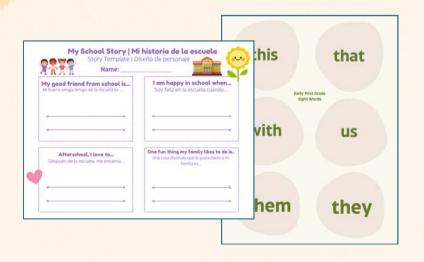
What It Entails

Lesson Plans

Considering students' interests and literacy levels observed from previous classes, I developed lesson plans focused on children's books representing the diverse cultures within the student body. The structure of this program organizes themes into three-week segments, covering topics of the Self, Family and Community, Nature and Animals, and the World. Each segment includes objectives, instructions, and suggested activities aimed at promoting projectbased learning. Additionally, material lists are provided to encourage inquiry, play, problem-solving, and collaborative actions, fostering creative expression, peer interactions, and personal identity.



Worksheets and Printables



Free downloads of worksheets and printable activities to help enforce lesson objectives.

Awards and Incentives

Teachers are provided with awards that students can redeem at the completion of each session. These gifts serve to motivate students to engage with each session with anticipation, curiosity, and commitment. Gift inventory can be replenished with the support of community members and artists.



Children's Book Database

Drawing from personal research and recommendations from local children's bookstores, I curated an illustrated book database that showcases stories highlighting the nuances and elements specific to diverse cultural narratives. Organized by themes, language, authors/illustrators, grade range, and culture, this database offers teachers a selection of literature representing their students. With a focus on reading level for 4–8 year-olds, it addresses the lack of early grade resources, enriching classroom libraries with inclusivity and representation. Illustrated books are a familiar tool in the classroom and increase the likelihood for teachers to incorporate them into their lessons.



Theme

Grade Cultu

Culture Language

Affirmation Card Exchange

A whole child approach emphasizes the importance of a learning environment that fosters feelings of safety and belonging, recognizing that emotional well-being is integral to academic success. As confidence grows, so does learning. These cards can be used as conversation starters for students to discuss challenges or meaningful experiences with teachers and fellow classmates, to create a place where students feel valued, heard, and understood.



Pilot Lesson

We piloted Unit 1 with seven Spanish-speaking students, focusing on the topic of identity by emphasizing the uniqueness of names. After reading the children's book "What's Your Name?", we asked each student to prominently write their name on a poster, allowing us to observe their writing skills. The session concluded with a bookmaking art project using pressed flowers to reinforce their letter comprehension. This lesson sparked organic discussions about student nicknames given by their families, fostering recognition of their individuality and affirming their identity.

Observations

Students awaited their turn by raising their hands, anticipating their opportunity to write their name in front of the class. During the art project, when it was time for the more complicated step of folding the inner pages of the book, several students sought teachers' help, verbalizing in English what they needed support with. Throughout the lesson, when passing out materials, teachers used those moments as opportunities to teach classroom behaviors such as turn-taking and following directions. The creative freedom allowed students to create something unique to their preferences, and they felt proud of what they were able to create.



Learnings

- **Modeling** is an important part of a successful lesson, especially for new concepts or approaches. This is done through showcasing a finished product, demonstrating the needed skills while explaining each step and the reasoning behind it, offering students a visual and verbal representation of the task they are expected to perform.
- Teachers evaluate the effectiveness of a lesson by asking these questions:
 - **Engagement and evidence of creativity:** Are students participating? Are they being creative or just copying your example?
 - Application: Are they using what they've learned outside of the class?
 - Behaviors: What kind of classroom behaviors are students showing?
- The story allowed students to **connect** with and **share** about their lived experiences. Students eagerly shared in Spanish with teachers multiple times until we grasped the specific details about their lives they wished to convey.





Monitoring and Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and its influence on reaching the Theory of Change assumptions, each lesson unit can be measured by the key metrics below. This will support the continuous iteration of this initiative to maximize positive impact on teachers and students.

Thesis Goal Key Questions:

Μ

E

Μ

Ε

- Does The Language of Us contribute to creating a more inclusive, nurturing learning space for asylum-seeking students?
- Does The Language of Us increase access to resources among teachers to support asylum-seeking students?
- To what extent did The Language of Us increase student feelings of inclusion through the school curriculum?

Increased opportunities for vertical teacher collaboration and mutual support

- How many times have teachers attended workshops?
- How many times have facilitation guides been used for workshops?
- How many volunteer or guest speakers are invited to host a program workshop in a given school year?
- In what ways did the workshops add value for teachers?
- What did teachers take away from the workshops?

Increased access to asylum-seeking students-centered academic + social-emotional learning resources

- How many culturally responsive books and literacy-based lesson plans are in the database?
- How many teachers from different grades adopted the activities/resources for class use?
- How many after school lesson plans are adapted to state standards to supplement class lessons?
- Students' self-reported measures of their enjoyment of lessons, helpfulness of activities to help them learn something new
- Students' feedback on the type of activity that was most effective to help them understand concepts taught previously
 - Number of students showing mastery of lesson objectives they used to struggle in after using resources

Increased teachers' joy and fulfillment teaching asylum-seeking students

- Number of educators reporting increased sense of fulfillment
- Percentage of teachers reporting that they understand their students' interests better
- Percentage of educators who feel that they gained insights into students' lives that would positively impact their teaching
 - Percentage of educators feeling more hopeful that they can make an impact in their students' lives
 - Feedback from teachers on the usefulness of the resources
- E Observations of students' input and degree of participation during lessons

Decreased teachers' feelings of discouragement and mental load

- How many teachers report being more confident to teach AS students?
- How many times in a day does a teacher express concerns about managing teaching AS students and general students?
 - Teachers' self-reported measures of their emotions, focus, hopefulness
 - Teachers' self-reported measures of meeting their own expectations of their classroom progress
 - Teachers' self-reported measures on achieving personal goals
- E Teachers self-report of their sense of openness to engage with asylum seeking students
 - Interviews/surveys with teachers about their before and after implementing The Language of Us on their knowledge of and relationship with students

Environmental Impact

Considering the environmental impact of this program is integral to my responsibility as a designer to evaluate its impact to Earth's resources as well as the wellbeing of communities impacted.

Positive Climate Impact

Upcycling: Activities planned in The Language of Us program curriculum seeks to minimize waste through the upcycling of materials, which help give a second life to items that would otherwise go to waste.

Education: There are ample opportunities in the duration of each session, such as a clean-up routine, that can be utilized to pass on knowledge about ways to care for the earth and respect for materials through collection, recycling, and handling of scrap materials.

Literature: As expenses on children's books can add up over time, borrowing books from local libraries can serve as an alternative to purchasing books. In the case that teachers desire to purchase their own copies, literature is typically considered as a classroom asset to be preserved. Should books be rotated out, partnerships with local bookstores with a <u>Little Free Library</u> or periodic book drives can mitigate the impact of discarding books by giving them new life elsewhere.

Mitigating Negative Impact

When purchasing materials online, one might consider the impact of purchasing materials online, contributing to carbon emissions from delivery services.

Utilizing classrooms to host lessons would contribute to the usage of energy and power. When possible, lessons could be scheduled to allow for the use of natural light and instructors can be mindful to switch off Smartboards and computers when not in use.

Alternative Impact: No Action

Choosing not to intervene also has its own impact on the environment, especially from a social perspective.

Missed opportunity for development and skill-building: Hands-on craft activities have proven to be beneficial for building critical thinking, resilience, self-confidence, and maintaining focus even for the most reluctant readers. Arts and crafts help young children develop their sense of self through engagement as they discover what they enjoy doing and how far to push their creativity boundaries. The no-action alternative would lead to a missed opportunity for students to build self-awareness, patience, confidence, and critical thinking skills.

Continuation of Current Situation: Without the intervention, it would lessen the amount of inclusive content that asylum-seeking students need to be reflected and acknowledged in classroom material. It would also take away small group opportunities that would address growth areas, deepen their understanding of content, and account for cultural nuances. It may also result in minimal participation from students who may be less likely to speak up in a large group on matters and contexts unfamiliar to them.

Unexpressed needs: Students are able to use art as a medium for communicating emotions and thoughts they hold internally. Without the prompting of the intervention, the unique needs of asylum-seeking students may go unnoticed and impact their academic and social-emotional development.



Supporting Teachers

Partnering with P.S. 130 and seeing the faces of their students reminded me of those seemingly fleeting but foundational years as an elementary student myself. I hope that any individuals who choose to advocate for children's education never depart from the experiences of teachers who know the ins and outs of their students' capabilities, personalities, and stories. They truly know their students the best and give themselves daily as they advocate for their success.

Ways to Help Teachers Feel Appreciated:

- Provide gift cards for classroom or personal use.
- Write personalized letters about their impact. Words of affirmation and encouragement go a long way.
- Send an email telling the principal how great teachers are doing and the impact they're making.
- Bring snacks, flowers, and coffee.
- Gift them supplies for their classroom.
- Leverage your networks and consider what other support they are asking for.

May we all take a moment to consider the impact of the teachers in our own lives. May we all consider how to thoughtfully advocate for them so that their joy would be filled as they build up a kind and compassionate future generation through education. The last time I felt lucky was in fifth grade and my teacher was giving away a goldfish. She put all our names in a hat and miraculously drew mine. I was so excited, I cried. The fish only lived two weeks but, I loved him. It was years before I realized my teacher likely rigged the draw. Moments before, she had, in fact, whispered rather conspiratorially, that it just *might* be my lucky day. I was such a lonely kid and having a hell of a time adapting to the U.S. after living abroad and I think Mrs. Edelstein figured I could use a win. Of course the universe is full of deep magic, but I think most miracles can be traced back to someone's profound and quiet kindness.

- Joy Sullivan

Additional Resources

Organizations Equipping Educators to Support Asylum-Seeker Students

- **ImmSchools**: Immigrant-led nonprofit transforming schools into safe and welcoming spaces for undocumented students and families
- **STRONG for Schools**: Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) is an evidence-informed, school-based intervention for immigrant and refugee youth (K-12th grades). STRONG aims to build resilience and address psychological distress associated with the newcomer experience from a culturally contextualized lens. STRONG is delivered by school mental health clinicians and is comprised of 10 group sessions, one individual student session, and teacher and parent education sessions. Elementary and Secondary versions are available. STRONG is currently being implemented in schools throughout Canada and the United States.

NYC Public School Resources

- <u>A Leader's Resource for Welcoming Newly Arrived ELLs in NYC Public Schools</u> (Released August 2023)
- <u>Community-based Organizations</u> (Interactive Map)
- <u>Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework</u> (CR-S)
- Multilingual Community-Based Organizations in NYC

Leadership Development Resources

• **SCARF Assessment**: Developed by neuro-leadership expert Dr. David Rock, the SCARF Model evaluates the following five key domains impacted by organizational change: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. This assessment benefits individuals collaborating in diverse group settings by helping participants understand their sensitivities towards social drivers within each domain. It gives insights into how their roles and work environments influence their current engagement levels, and how to improve collaboration and capacity to provide more impactful training and feedback within teams.

Trauma-informed Resources

- Professional Development Module: Trauma-informed Practice.
- <u>Trauma-informed care resource guide</u> Crisis Prevention Institute. See additional resources on Page 12.

Materials Resource

• <u>Materials for the Arts</u> (MFTA): A program of NYC Department of Cultural Affairs with a warehouse located in Long Island City which collects surplus materials and redistributes them for free to public schools and nonprofits with arts programming. With an MFTA membership, registered organizations can get supplies by appointment and direct donations online listing. For more information, visit https://www.nyc.gov/content/mfta/pages/.

Anti-bias Education Resource

• Learning for Justice (LFJ): LFJ is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center that offers free educational resources and community engagement opportunities with a goal to promote diversity, equity, and justice in schools. The project works with educators, students, caregivers and communities in: 1) Culture and Climate, 2) Curriculum and Instruction, 3) Leadership, 4) Family and Community Engagement

Next Steps

The vision for The Language of Us is to expand its impact by increasing the selection of lesson plans centered on a diverse array of illustrated children's books and involving community members and families in the development of this initiative.

Expand Resources:

Continue to refine lesson plans with educators to coincide with students' target growth areas and add to the database of diverse children's books.

Community Collaboration:

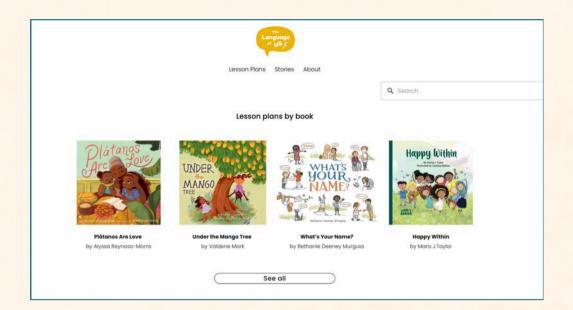
Collaborate with children's illustrators and authors to improve the visual activities and form visitation engagements for authentic storytelling. In addition, invite local artists to offer their artistry talents by supplying items of reward or avenues to feature their work.

Buddy Program:

Implement a buddy program between older grades with younger grades to partner for reading and activities to strengthen relationships between students, build a sense of togetherness, and create leadership opportunities among student body.

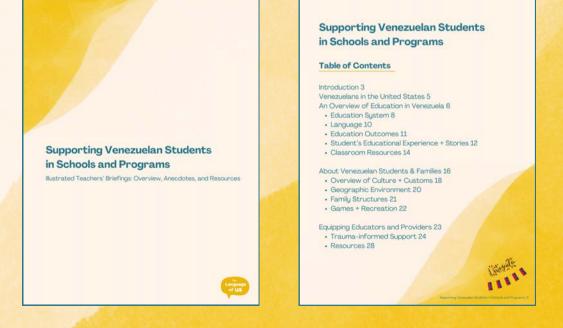
Family Involvement:

Engage families of students to participate in an end of semester showcase where they can celebrate the achievements of their children as well as take the opportunity to build relationship with teachers and administrators.



Teacher's Briefings

Collaborating with community-based organizations and children's book authors/illustrators, The Language of Us aims to create visual briefings to provide descriptions of the education system of a students' home country, family structure, cultures and experiences they hold dear, and other relevant anecdotes to help educators and advocates gain a better understanding of the students' culture and context.





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Family

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Thank you











