

Finding my participants: A hidden population

AMY CORP

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My research project for my faculty development leave was to study how public schools in my state support newcomers. Newcomers is the term that describes anyone new to the country regardless of their legal status. Most newcomers require specific educational support to learn English (Jasemi & Gottardo, 2023) and to cope with traumas (Lembke, et al., 2024; Rae, 2024), while trying to acclimate to the American educational system. Some newcomers come with limited or no prior education (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2022). My research question was: "How do public schools (in my area) support newcomers who do not speak English or Spanish?" My state is second in receiving newcomers (Migration Policy, 2022) and welcomed over 9,000 refugees in 2024 (Refugee Processing Center, 2024). My university is located near a metroplex that hosts thousands of newcomers from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Bhattacharjee & Corbett, 2023). My goal was to interview principals and teachers who work with these specific student populations. I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the academic support they provide to English language learners (ELLs) and to assess the effectiveness of these supports in facilitating ELLs' language acquisition.

Given the significant number of newcomer students in my area, I anticipated a relatively swift process for answering my research question. I planned to achieve this by conducting online research on district websites and by directly contacting school leaders and teachers who worked with these newcomer populations. I expected to discover a wealth of training for teachers who have non-English students on their campuses. I also expected newcomer students to have direct instruction on learning to speak and read English. I expected to easily identify these campuses and interview the faculty who work with newcomers.

Incident

I did not find a wealth of training for teachers with newcomers. I did not find direct instruction in English. Most shocking and frustrating, I struggled to identify campuses with large populations of newcomers. So, I did not find the participants for my study. Only one district listed campuses with newcomer classes on their website. I discovered three districts listing newcomer centers but in reading more, I realized these centers were for registration and to connect families with community services, not for supporting newcomer students in learning English. Based on the population of refugees in the area, I was certain more campuses were teaching newcomers.

My next approach to finding these students and their teachers was to analyze state education reports by campus. However, I encountered a significant obstacle: These

reports categorized students by race, which gave no ethnic identity or country of origin. This meant that newcomers from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were identified as “White,” while those from Africa were categorized as “Black/African American,” and those from Latin America as “Hispanic/Latino.” Next I reviewed the state education agency’s home language reports. This resource allowed me to identify districts with high concentrations of ELLs, but I could not determine which campus they attended. The lack of information about these students infuriated me. Their presence in our districts is clear, yet the impossibility of uncovering their numbers and the support systems meant for them felt like a deliberate erasure by the state. It was not just a data gap; it screamed of intentional invisibility—as if by not naming them, they hoped no one would notice their absence.

Impact

This frustration forced me to look beyond the public schools to nonprofits that work with public school students to determine support for newcomers. Two programs that supported public school students were accepting volunteers. The first program focuses on teaching English to refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. They teach English to adults during the day and provide preschool in English for their children. They work with elementary students in summer and after-school programs. The other nonprofit I volunteered with, partners with one public school whose students are mostly Middle Eastern refugees. This nonprofit focuses on students’ reading by pairing one volunteer with one student for a 45-minute session weekly.

Although I could not do research on such short notice, I volunteered with both agencies, and began right away. I volunteered 1 day a week with an afternoon PreK-4 class and stayed for the after-school program with the first organization. The school-specific organization was delayed and reorganized so I only tutored with this organization for a month before the semester ended.

I gained personal experience in how daunting it is to communicate with students who do not know English (or Spanish). In PreK-4, students were typical 4-year-olds who enjoyed learning through playing and participated in “circle time” which introduced a letter and its sound each week and played with these sounds during silly songs and with gestures. Within my semester of volunteering most students were speaking some English and saying the sounds of the letters learned so far. At the elementary reading program, I tutored a third-grade boy who barely knew the sounds of the alphabet, yet his class was required to use and meet third grade reading standards. After a month of

tutoring sessions, I did not see growth in reading. I would not expect him to pass the third-grade state assessments.

Resolution

Public school buses brought students after school to the first nonprofit, so I inquired and learned where these students went to school. I then pulled those schools' report cards and saw that indeed these campuses' emergent bilingual population were failing on state assessments (only third through fifth grade is assessed). The second nonprofit met on an elementary campus with a high population of Middle Eastern students. Speaking with the counselor at this campus, she explained how faculty and staff struggled to support students in third grade and above in learning English. Teaching English language acquisition skills while teaching grade-level standards in reading was too much for teachers, even when they had an aide who spoke one of the home languages of the newcomers.

In speaking with leaders of each non-profit I finally understood the foundational problem: American schools educate all children and only use an age-to-grade system. If you come to America at age nine or above, you are not learning to read or write because these skills were taught earlier. There is no state system for learning to speak, read, or write English for older students. How does this meet the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, which requires schools to respond to the needs of students with limited English?

Reflection

The significant challenges of locating newcomers through our state records and public school websites forced me to seek out nonprofit organizations. Ironically, it was working through these nonprofits that I learned where newcomers were attending school. Volunteering gave me personal experience in teaching newcomers and understanding firsthand the difficulty in supporting older newcomers in learning English. I believe I have experienced the answer to my research question: "How do public schools (in my area) support newcomers who do not speak English or Spanish?" I believe the answer is they do not for students beyond second grade. Apart from a handful of newcomer classrooms in one district, I found no evidence that these students entering at age 9 or above receive language acquisition skills to learn English in elementary school. I witnessed and spoke to teachers who struggle to help them

understand English while teaching grade-level standards in English language arts (built on prior standards of learning to speak, read and write in English).

This crucial information only came to light through persistent inquiry, beyond the standard state and district data. What valuable insights could your inquiries reveal within your locations? What population is being ignored or overlooked in your state? Find out, and push districts to be forthcoming about student populations.

Recently, I began my inquiries again but with my local district and found a promising connection: The bilingual education leader—a former colleague—shares my concern. Her office diligently tracks the first languages of all emergent bilingual students during their initial assessments. They have a vision for supporting older students' English language development but need resources and community partners—a wonderful opportunity for our university to step in and become a part of the support they desperately need.

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