Refugee-Background Youth Workers as Agents of Social Change: Building Bridging Relationships One Story at a Time

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Abstract

In the context of an established research-practice partnership with the Hope Resource Center, we piloted The Stories Project, a narrative inquiry study alongside refugee-background youth workers and U.S.-born community members. Our inquiry explored the process by which storytelling could be used to humanize and advocate for refugee-background youth in the United States. Data sources included interviews, dialogue session recordings, participant artifacts, and researcher memos. Findings centered the voices of refugee-background youth workers as they honored each other's unique perspectives and life experiences as well as recognized each other's shared humanity. Collectively, the youth workers identified the importance of being vulnerable, humanizing the refugee experience, and building advocacy as ways to promote social change.

Keywords: youth workers, refugee, storytelling, bridging relationships, social change

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If you know how to learn about other cultures, people and what it is like, it kind of opens up your world and you get a wider perspective. It will help you in the long run.

—Pawan, Hope Resource Center young leader

Unprecedented global migrations are making schools and communities worldwide more culturally and linguistically diverse than ever before. However, anti(im)migrant and anti-refugee sentiments—promulgated through media and political rhetoric—are also on the rise. Currently, over 82.4 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2021). Of these 82.4 million people, 26.4 million have been granted official refugee status, and of those 26.4 million refugees, around half are under the age of 18. When forcibly displaced, people *have* to leave their homes due to extenuating circumstances that are putting their lives, and often family members' lives, at serious risk (M. M. Suárez-Orozco & Michikyan, 2016). Prior to the U.S. government's restrictions placed on (im)migration in 2017, close to 90,000 refugees resettled in the United States each year, but in 2019, the national number of refugees resettled in the U.S. dropped to just 30,000 (Refugee Processing Center, 2020; UNHCR, 2021). Under the current administration, the U.S. has begun welcoming more refugees into the country, a large number of whom are Afghani due to the U.S.'s withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 (Youssef & Lubold, 2021). And yet pervasive xenophobia and systemic marginalization of resettled refugees remain among the most pressing issues of the 21st century.

In Newtown, U.S.A. (pseudonym), a small city in the upper Midwest, over 15,000 former refugees who are superdiverse

(Vertovec, 2007, 2019), representing different ethnic groups from over 48 countries of origin and speaking over 40 different languages, now reside. A local grassroots, nonprofit, community-based organization, the Hope Resource Center or HRC (pseudonym), offers year-round, educational programming in Newton for "newcomers" (i.e., anyone who identifies as new to the community, regardless of [im]migration status). Since 2017, Carrie (one of the authors) has been co-constructing a research–practice partnership (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) with the HRC. Together, we have been researching and developing innovative, community-based educational programming and instructional approaches to support refugee-background youths' social and academic well-being. This narrative inquiry sought to unpack the refugee-background youths' experiences with and pushback against xenophobia. Specifically, our inquiry explored the process by which storytelling could be used to challenge the negative perceptions of refugees in the United States according to refugee-background youth workers (Baldridge, 2018) at one of the HRC's summer youth camps.

In an effort to center the refugee-background youth workers' stories, to learn about who they were and their perspectives, our project—affectionately called The Stories Project by all involved, including researchers, HRC staff, and youth workers—was designed to run in tandem with the HRC's 2019 summer camp for newcomer youth in the Newtown community. Collectively, our intention in doing so was to create a designated and recurring time and space for the camp's refugee-background youth workers to reflect upon and dialogue about their experiences as mentors, to share stories from their past and present lived experiences, and to illuminate the vital role the youth workers and their stories could play in challenging the all-too-often negative perception of refugees in the U.S. today.

Conceptual Framework

We frame our argument around youth as agents of social change. Specifically, we theorize that social change, such as the challenging of systemic xenophobia and marginalization of refugees, can be accomplished through refugee-background youth workers' building bridging relationships with U.S.-born community members through telling stories. We discuss these three concepts—youth workers, bridging relationships, and storytelling—as they pertain to social change.

Youth Workers as Agents of Social Change

Although marginalization of (im)migrant-origin and refugee-background youth is particularly pronounced in U.S. schools (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2014; Bigelow, 2010; Nieto, 2016; C. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), schools alone cannot sufficiently address this issue (Symons & Ponzio, 2019). Educators in community-based educational spaces, or youth workers (Baldridge, 2018), play a vital role in the lives and education of marginalized youth. Across settings in and out of schools, youth work is distinguished by its focus on the youth themselves and their lives rather than a particular institution's goals or standards (Fusco, 2012). As Baldridge (2018) argued, "youth workers are an essential component to the ideological and cultural practices of transformational learning with counterhegemonic community-based educational spaces" (p. 5). Through building meaningful relationships, youth workers are also agents of social change, as they can advocate for marginalized youth in educational, social, and familial spaces.

Free from school systems' constraints yet well aware of them, community-based youth workers can provide educational experiences that are culturally responsive, rigorous, and relevant for the youth themselves and the sociopolitical realities of their lives (Baldridge, 2018). By engaging youth in critical analyses of the historic and systemic marginalization of their own people in their communities, youth workers can support youth in understanding the sociopolitical contexts of the challenges they face and developing the necessary skills and knowledge to become leaders and agents of social change (Baldridge, 2018; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). In communities of resettled refugees, in particular, youth workers in community organizations play a vital role in supporting the social, emotional, academic, vocational, and economic well-being of refugee-background youth and adults (Forrest & Brown, 2014; Mott, 2010; Shadduck-Hernández, 2006; Symons & Ponzio, 2019). Therefore, to create long-term, sustainable change, educators in and out of schools must work together, and *with* and *for* community members, to build a network of advocacy for (im)migrant and refugee-background youth and families.

Social Change Through Bridging Relationships

According to Dryden-Peterson (2010), "bridging relationships" among (im)migrant and U.S.-born community members are built not only by making an effort to have social contact with individuals of different backgrounds; they are built by developing deep relationships with mutual respect. These bridging relationships work to expand our identities by promoting critical perspectives, sharing stories, developing scholarship, and engaging in activism collaboratively. In fact, research has shown that intergroup dialogues with participants of diverse social identity groups promote perspective taking, changes in negative stereotypes about a particular group, critical consciousness about power structures and systemic inequities, and communication skills (Frantell et al., 2019). Such "interculturality" (Dervin, 2016) is a dynamic, human-centered process created by people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who build meaningful relationships with and among one another.

In order to achieve bridging relationships, the "oppressors" and the "oppressed" must work together to break down and build up knowledge (Freire, 1968/2003). Freire called this dialogic work—our collective calling to work in action and reflection toward humanization—the "people's vocation" (p. 43). True revolutionary work that leads toward bridging relationships, however, requires oppressors to work on educational projects *with*, not *for*, the oppressed. For Freire, performing this work means the oppressors must give up their own power and look to the oppressed for leadership and solidarity in an endeavor toward liberation. Building this meaningful bond between the oppressor and the oppressed, then, can develop youth workers in community-based spaces as "resistors and educators" (Baldridge, 2018, p. 5).

Storytelling as Social Change

Storytelling has long been a form of resistance, a process through which knowledge is shared, and a tool for building solidarity. Listening to people's personal life stories can help us learn about others as individuals as well as help us develop a sense of connectedness to other people, which can lead to activism (Grange & Miller, 2018) and foster antiracism (Bell, 2020; Milner & Howard, 2013). To combat "master narratives," members of historically marginalized groups can share counternarratives based on their personal lived experiences as a way to advocate for themselves and their communities (Bigelow, 2010; Chávez-Moreno, 2020; Grey & Harrison, 2020). In turn, such stories can inspire advocacy and social change on a broader scale. When considering how stories can be used to promote social change, the quality of the listening (i.e., the genuine receptivity of the listener) matters. Research has shown that the nonjudgmental exchange of narratives can reduce prejudice toward outgroups (Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Sharing stories can therefore support the building of bridging relationships (Dryden-Peterson, 2010), but for this process to occur, both the storyteller and listener need to be vulnerable (Brown, 2007; Kalla & Broockman, 2020). As Brown (2007) explained, "Courage gives us a voice and compassion gives us an ear. Without both, there is no opportunity for empathy and connection" (p. 43). This shared vulnerability, empathy, and connection can then lead to mutual humanization (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). When people's lived experiences are centered, they have the opportunity to recognize their stories as valuable and also build relationships on the basis of what makes them both unique and similar (Norton & Sliep, 2019). Across culturally and linguistically diverse landscapes of practice, this type of "global meaning making" (Tierney, 2018, p. 407) involves decolonizing educational spaces, valuing the fluidity of border crossing, interrogating who benefits from our actions, and shifting to an ecology of eclecticism versus exceptionalism (Tierney, 2018).

To contribute to this body of research, the present project heeds Tierney's (2018) and other critical scholars' calls for a type of education that disrupts traditional, Western-oriented approaches to teaching and learning. Although this work needs to be performed in schools, and in many ways, it could be argued that schools should be centering this kind of work, out-of-school spaces are better equipped to cultivate such educational approaches and opportunities. The present study aimed to center the lived experiences of a superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007) group of refugee-background youth who served as community-based youth workers (Baldridge, 2018) at the HRC's 2019 summer camp, asking: How can bridging relationships and storytelling practices

among refugee-background youth workers and U.S.-born community members effect social change?

Situating Our Work

HRC's mission is "to cultivate a welcoming, thriving community that collaborates with refugees and newcomers through education, engagement, and support." The majority of refugees who resettle in the Newtown community come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Bhutan, Burma, and Eritrea. Regardless of a person's (im)migration status, everyone is welcome to attend the HRC's programs. Every summer, the HRC offers a 5-week summer camp for middle and high school newcomers, featuring project-based, experiential learning, with a focus on developing campers' English language skills through acquiring life and entrepreneurial skills, building friendships across different cultures and languages, and learning more about resources for enrichment that are available in the local community. Employing a distributed mentorship model (Khasnabis et al., 2013), each summer the HRC hires young leaders (typically high school or college-age youth with refugee backgrounds who are former campers) and

volunteer interns (typically college-age, U.S.-born, English-dominant speakers) who serve as teaching assistants and mentors. Although the young leaders and volunteer interns' roles varied slightly, for the purposes of this study, we consider both groups as youth workers in this community-based educational space (Baldridge, 2018).

The Stories Project

In collaboration with the HRC, we designed and facilitated a global civic engagement course, referred to as The Stories Project, for the 2019 summer program's youth workers in an attempt to provide youth workers with a dedicated and recurring space and time for reflection. Following Internal Review Board approval, 11 interns and young leaders, representing diverse cultural, educational, geographic, and linguistic backgrounds, with ages ranging from 17 to 23 (Table 1), chose to participate. As part of The Stories Project, the interns and young leaders kept daily journals and gathered together once weekly for 5 weeks to engage in reflective dialogue about how they, and the campers, built relationships and worked together across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

With the interns' and young leaders' per-

Table 1. The Stories Project Participants

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Languages	Age
Sam	Burma	Burmese, Zomi, English	19
Marta	Colombia	Spanish, English	17
Ana	France	French, English, Spanish (some)	22
Pawan	Nepal	Nepali, English	19
Zahara	Sudan	Zaghawa, Arabic, English	18
Halo	Sudan	Masalit, Arabic, English	23
Nam	Thailand	Karenni, Burmese, English	21
Preeda	Thailand	Karenni, Burmese, English	19
Gilly	U.S.	English, Farsi	21
Lyla	U.S.	English, Japanese (some), Spanish (some)	19
Annabeth	U.S.	English, Arabic	20

sonal lived experiences at the core of The Stories Project curriculum, each of the 2-hour reflective dialogue sessions followed a similar structure: an opening circle in which we—researchers, youth workers, and representatives of the HRC staff—came together to connect with one another and share reflections from the ongoing summer camp; small group break-out sessions for sharing stories from our personal histories; and a semistructured whole group time for engaging in interactive activities (e.g., self-portraits, collage, games) that supported self-exploration (i.e., identity work) and informal casual conversation.

Methods

Researcher Positionality

Since January 2017, Carrie has been collaborating with the HRC in the co-construction of a research–practice partnership. As a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Education and a community-engaged scholar, Carrie collaborated with the HRC to develop research projects related to the literacy and language aspects of the HRC's instructional programming. With The Stories Project, she and her team incorporated opportunities for participants to leverage multimodal literacies and languages throughout the project for purposes of civic action and creating educational resources for teachers. As a cisgender woman who was born in the United States, Carrie identifies as an emergent bilingual with English as her first language and Spanish as her second.

At the time of The Stories Project, Laura (the first author) was a doctoral student in the Department of Teacher Education. She identifies as a White "trylingual" cisgender woman with varying levels of familiarity with the English, Spanish, Swahili, and Korean languages. Laura volunteered with a nonprofit, community-based organization supporting North Korean defectors while teaching in South Korea, and she volunteered as a child care provider for the HRC's adult English as a second language (ESL) program for 2 years.

At the time of the study, Lindsay (the second author) was a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction and Teacher Education with a focus on literature, language, identity, and multilingual learners. She identifies as a White bilingual (English and Spanish) cisgender woman from the Midwest. She has experience directing a community literacy coalition and teaching in urban bilingual secondary schools in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

We acknowledge that this study may have had limitations due to our positionalities as White American women working with refugee-background youth. Therefore, we took a Freirian stance in implementing this study, foregrounding the transnational wisdoms of our youth worker participants, and positioning them as experts, co-teachers, and coresearchers. For example, in the larger research–practice partnership, some of the youth workers have joined Carrie as coauthors, working to publish their own stories. In The Stories Project, the dialogue sessions were cofacilitated with refugee-background HRC staff members, and the youth workers determined which stories were (not) told and how they were told. Although we were intentional about the design of the project, we want to acknowledge that our identities inform the lenses with which we understand and relay the youth workers' stories. The authors of this article believe we each have an individual responsibility to continue to work toward social justice within and beyond the scope of this study.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is an epistemology, a theory, and a qualitative research method that recognizes the "truth" of a particular issue or set of circumstances as inherently subjective and dependent upon the people involved in the research enterprise (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather than trying to mitigate human factors and bias, researchers who use narrative inquiry lean into the inevitable subjectivity of the social sciences and make the personal, social, and cultural narratives of the researcher and the participants a central focus in how data is generated, analyzed, and interpreted. Aligned with Freirian (1968/2003) notions of teaching and learning needing to be rooted in the students' lived experiences, in the present study, we employed narrative inquiry to humanize the research process and engage in research practices that center the lived experiences of refugee-background youth workers in community-based education spaces.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources included pre- and post-interviews with each of the 11 youth work-

ers, video- and audio recordings of the five 2-hour dialogue sessions, researcher memos, and participant artifacts (self-portraits, journal entries, etc.). Interviews were one hour in length (on average), semistructured, and audio/video recorded. In addition to transcribing all 22 interviews, we identified select portions of the dialogue session recordings to be transcribed based on our guiding question: In what ways might bridging relationships among refugee-background youth workers and U.S.-born community members and their sharing of stories lead to social change?

For this article, we center data generated through one particular small group conversation during the final reflective dialogue session. This conversation among young leaders (Pawan and Halo) and interns (Lyla and Nam) was facilitated by HRC staff member and former refugee Archy. After transcribing the necessary data, we engaged, first, in a round of inductive coding called *process coding* (Saldaña, 2016) to tease out participants' ideas, based on their collective work within the summer camp, of how bridging relationships can be built between refugee-background and U.S.-born individuals. According to Saldaña, process coding aids in the search of actions and interactions as a person works toward achieving a goal or solving a problem. For each participant, we used process coding to identify an ordered series of actions; these steps were then illustrated as flowcharts.

As an example of process coding, consider the following excerpt from Nam's post-interview (Figure 1). In response to a question of how negative perceptions of immigrants in the U.S. might be changed, Nam explained the snowball effect of storytelling. By telling a story, the listener's interest is piqued. When Carrie repeats this process back to her, Nam adds further detail to the process, explaining that by piquing the listener's interest, the storyteller is helping the listener to become aware or even involved. The use of the word "then," near the end of her response, signals a new step in the process. The listener becomes the storyteller, an advocate for the original refugee-background storyteller. Nam's final process for effecting change based on this excerpt, and others like it, will be shared in the Findings section.

After generating a process-based flowchart for each of the five participants engaged in this particular small group conversation, we then engaged in a second-cycle coding

Figure 1. Process Coding Example

method known as *pattern coding* (Saldaña, 2016). This coding approach allowed us to look across the five processes for common categories, themes, or concepts. Pattern coding illuminated three commonalities: vulnerability, humanizing the refugee experience, and advocacy.

Findings

We have chosen to organize the findings conceptually around the importance of being vulnerable, humanizing the refugee experience, and becoming an advocate. We draw on the words of just one or two of the youth workers to illustrate each theme even though all of the youth workers, for example, spoke of the importance of being vulnerable.

Vulnerability [Archy]

Archy was born in Bhutan, but due to political unrest during the 1980s, he and his family were forced to move to Nepal as refugees. After living in a refugee camp for 18 years, he and his family resettled in the United States in 2008 through the International Organization for Migration. In 2012, Archy joined the U.S. Army as a behavioral health specialist, serving what he calls "this beautiful country" for 6 years. Currently, he is working as a staff member at the HRC, helping newcomer refugees transition into their new lives in the American Midwest. As a staff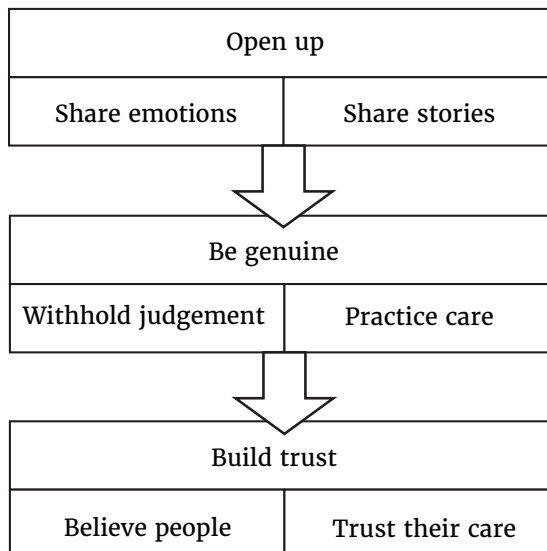 member at the HRC, Archy worked as a teacher in the 2019 summer camp and helped to co-facilitate The Stories Project. During the final dialogue session, Archy shared his thoughts about the importance of storytelling in the process of opening up, being genuine, and ultimately building mutual trust (see Figure 2).

Referencing an earlier conversation about his experiences being harassed during his military service, Archy explained that he was generally hesitant to trust anyone because of "what [he'd] been through," but as he began listening to others' stories and sharing his own during The Stories Project, Archy started to build confidence and trust in others, saying, "I don't trust anybody, no matter who they are, what they are, but from this place [the HRC], I started believing in people." For Archy, telling his own story and listening to others' stories helped him to believe that by opening up, he might be able to heal:

> I don't know how to cry anymore because I cried so much in my life. . . . But I just get the feelings but not like crying. I want to. I just want to cry, cry, cry and feel like everything is out of my body. So, I'm just waiting for that day, and I hope this place [the dialogue session] will build me to get those things.

He observed that in a space like The Stories Project, there was no judgment, and everyone was willing to show who they genuinely were. Because of these dynamics, he said,

Figure 2. Archy's Process of Building Trust

Open up	
Share emotions	Share stories

Be genuine	
Withhold judgement	Practice care

Build trust	
Believe people	Trust their care

"I started trusting in people that they care for us." Archy experienced a transformation in his own willingness to be vulnerable and came to the conclusion that storytelling is a way of building trust with one another: "Little drops of water makes a mighty ocean. Same way, like, little Stories Projects can bring us changes and make changes to our community and entire world one day."

Humanizing the Refugee Experience [Pawan]

Pawan was born in 2000 and raised in a refugee camp in the southeast corner of Nepal. His camp was one of seven Bhutanese refugee camps where over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees lived due to religious and ethnic persecution. Pawan moved to the United States when he was 10 years old. He attended middle and high schools in which English was the dominant language. Although he used Nepali to communicate with his family and Nepali friends, reading and writing Nepali were not part of his educational experience past the age of 10. Transitioning into U.S. schools was challenging for Pawan as it is for most, if not all, refugees. Not knowing much English upon arriving here isolated him from other kids. He recalled other students making fun of his accent and bullying him. Upon sharing these memories in our final dialogue session, Pawan became visibly upset. His voice began to shake as he pounded his fist into his thigh. Archy, Pawan's uncle who was facilitating the dialogue and sitting next to Pawan at the time, admitted that he had never known about Pawan being bullied. Archy pointed to Pawan's sharing this untold story as an example of the safety and acceptance The Stories Project and the summer camp had cultivated.

At the time of the project, Pawan was 19 years old, living with his parents and about to begin his junior year of college, majoring in mechanical engineering. At camp, Pawan was a young leader. In his reflections on himself as a youth worker, Pawan expressed his empathy for the youth in the camp. He, too, had a refugee background and had to learn English as an additional language. He, too, felt isolated and frustrated in middle school. His empathy informed how he worked with the students and how he validated their experiences while also encouraging them to take advantage of the camp as an opportunity to learn.

When asked what he thought people should know about refugees, Pawan continually returned to the importance of empathy and recognizing each other as fellow human beings. In his post-interview, he explained:

> Some people have this idea that people coming from other countries are bad or here to steal their jobs. But they are just like them, trying to work, make a living, and have a better life. If they are not open to the idea of them being just like them, then I don't know. Their mind will stay as it is—if they do not see them as people, then how can they change?

When asked how to combat negative perceptions of refugees, Pawan said:

> I think stories like this are a great start, and getting them out globally would be the best. Some people's mindsets do not change by hearing stories. They might need to meet up with people and really get to know them.

Throughout the project, Pawan's perspectives and stories pointed to the power of humanizing one another (Figure 3). Stories are

Figure 3. Pawan's Reasons for Sharing Stories

Why we should listen to and tell stories	Build shared understanding
	Identify shared experiences
	Confront difficult narratives or emotions
	Let yourself be vulnerable
	Recognize refugees as "humans just like you"

a great starting point, but to truly dismantle xenophobia, we need to "get out globally" and get to know people who are, in many ways, different from ourselves (e.g., country of origin, language, culture, religion).

Advocacy [Halo and Nam]

Above, Archy mapped out a process for learning to be vulnerable and to build trusting relationships, and Pawan emphasized the importance of using these relationships to humanize refugee-background members of the community. Halo, a young leader, and Nam, an intern, both of whom had refugee backgrounds, extended these processes a step further to include advocacy.

Halo

Halo was born in 1996 in Western Sudan during the second Sudanese civil war. He spent the first 8 years of his life in a small village, where most people were from the same tribe and spoke the same language, Masalit. When he was 8 years old, the militias attacked his village, and he and his family were forced to flee across the border into Chad, where they took refuge in a camp. For his first 2 years in the refugee camp, Halo took classes in Arabic: "There was Arabic, math, and English. If you studied Arabic, you didn't have to pay. For English, you would have to pay." But school fees were not the only hurdle to learning English; school policy stated students had to be 18 years old to study the English language. Undeterred, Halo would often hide in the back of the English classroom, hoping not to be discovered. After 11 years in the camp, Halo and his family had the opportunity to emigrate and resettle in the United States.

Adapting to life in the U.S. was difficult for Halo. A few weeks after he arrived in 2014, his resettlement caseworker told him that he was too old to go to high school. At the age of 18, he had "aged out," a common hurdle many refugee-background youth face upon resettling in a new country. Once again denied the education he so desperately wanted, Halo was determined to find a way to learn English. Eventually he found an alternative high school program designed specifically for refugee-background youth and earned his diploma.

During his post-interview, when asked how the summer camp and The Stories Project impacted the people around him, Halo spoke of the power of building relationships, a process that began with a single word:

I'm going to say hi to them. This is the way we have to know each other. That's the first day. A few days later, we become friends, and we know a lot of things and our stories, our past stories and then how they affect us. . . . When we share these stories, we feel like we are from, we are family, we are same group of people.

"Hi" is a small first step in connecting with the refugee-background youth at the HRC and the Newtown community. However, Halo recalled a time when "hi" was all he knew. When Halo first arrived in Newtown,
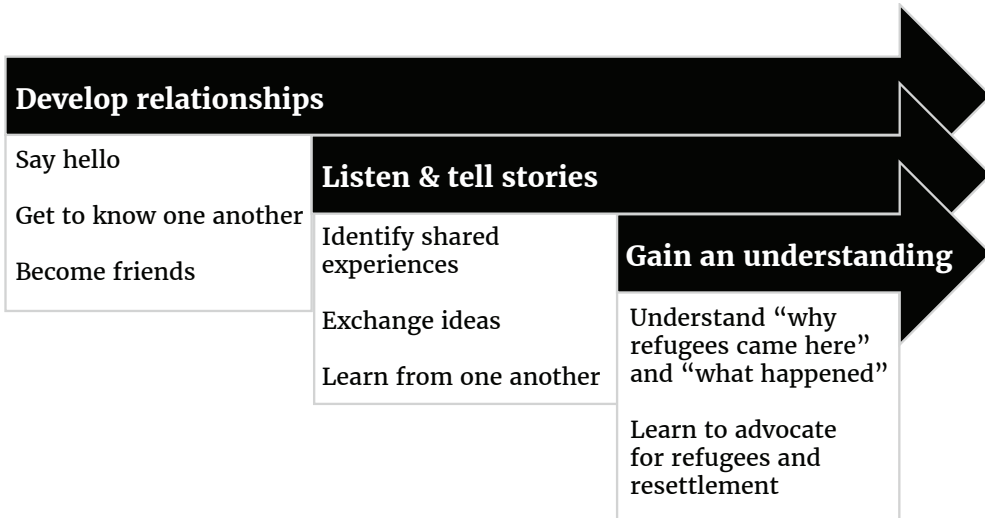
I don't know English. And when I meet people, I just raise my hand because I know the word hello. But then if they say hello, I don't know how to respond. . . . I just raise my hand and they just raise their hand.

Whether saying hello or raising a hand in greeting, for Halo, this simple gesture opened the door for friendship and the sharing of stories: "I like telling the stories and hearing the stories; it maybe connect our experiences and then we also learn from each other. . . . Maybe our experience connects each other. We also sharing our ideas and learn from our skills."

When asked what people need to know about refugees, Halo explained how the sharing of stories can lead to understanding, even advocacy (Figure 4). Halo shared, "Some people, I would say, some people they don't know why the refugees come here. . . . But they need to know about their stories, and why they came here." Halo added that to change the negative perceptions of refugees in the U.S.,

They [refugees] gonna tell them why they are here and then they also need to explain like what happened to them and what bring them to the new place. . . . Some people, when they hear these things, they say "you need more refugees here" or "we need more refugee people to came here to save their lives." This is what they need to focus on.

For Halo, the process of effecting change through increased advocacy in the Newtown community begins with a single word or gesture and builds over time to foster a

Figure 4. Halo's Process of Effecting Change

Develop relationships

Say hello

Get to know one another

Become friends

Listen & tell stories

Identify shared experiences

Exchange ideas

Learn from one another

Gain an understanding

Understand "why refugees came here" and "what happened"

Learn to advocate for refugees and resettlement

trusting, bridging relationship within which stories can be shared. These stories then inspire community members to enact change, becoming advocates for the refugee-background youth within their community.

Nam

In the summer of 2019, Nam was 21 years old, enrolled in nursing school, and training to be a certified nursing assistant. Her parents had fled Burma, now known as Myanmar, for Thailand before she was born. Nam, who was born in a refugee camp, resettled with her family in the United States when she was 11 years old.

Prior to being an intern in the summer of 2019, Nam attended the HRC's summer program as a camper for 2 years and as a young leader for 1 year. She also helped resettled refugee community members by serving as a volunteer translator in the local hospital. She is pursuing a career in nursing with the intention of returning to Thailand to provide medical care for refugees because, although she was not yet born when her parents fled Myanmar, she knows her family's history, and she is well aware of the dangers people face as they are fleeing and crossing borders due to persecution. As Nam so clearly stated, whether here in the United States or back in Thailand, "I stand myself as a refugee. I believe I can make a change to better for the refugee person, like me and my family."

Although Nam did not consider herself a storyteller, Nam reflected on what she had learned from The Stories Project:
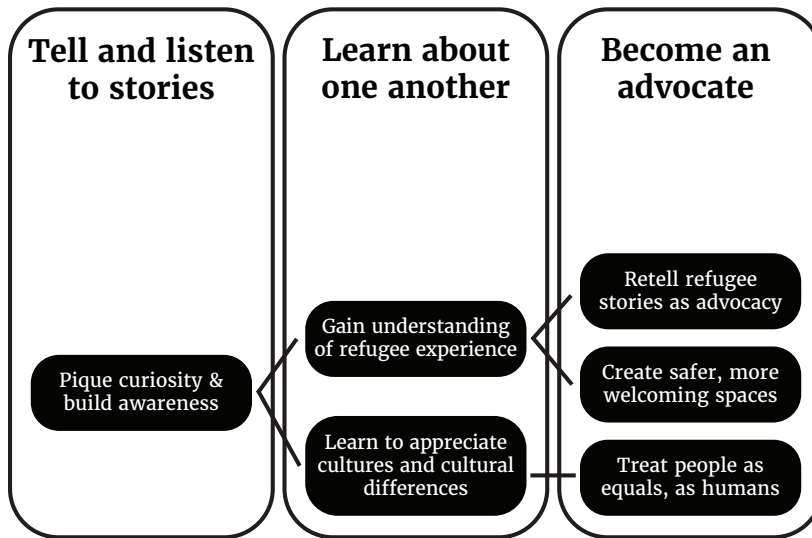
This Friday afternoon project here is also make me think of who I am before and now . . . it's completely changed my mind sometime. It was like "I don't know even know who I am." But getting to know this project here, it make you more of who you are and then, you know, your complete personality. . . . Before I was super scared to show who I am. Now I feel like I am completely okay. 'Cause I just learn more.

Nam explained how people can learn more about refugees by listening to their stories, which, in turn, can dismantle negative perceptions and inspire people to fight for refugees' rights (Figure 5):

It's always about people who fight for it, you know? You just give people a little speech, and the people get interested about it. . . . People get more aware of it. Some people might even participate in there. And then they started to get more people to know. And to get more people to understand it. . . . Just show them who you are, and just tell them who you are. And soon it will change it.

Through Nam's wisdom and willingness to share her perspectives on issues relevant to the marginalization of resettled refugees in the United States, she provided a clear and actionable directive for how relationships among refugee-background youth and U.S.-born community members can be built and

Figure 5. Nam's Process of Effecting Change

Tell and listen to stories	Learn about one another	Become an advocate
Pique curiosity & build awareness	Gain understanding of refugee experience	Retell refugee stories as advocacy
	Learn to appreciate cultures and cultural differences	Create safer, more welcoming spaces
		Treat people as equals, as humans

how these relationships can lead to advocacy for resettled refugees in the U.S.

Discussion

Findings from this narrative inquiry reveal how sharing personal stories can contribute to building bridging relationships among refugee–background youth and U.S.–born community members. Through sharing stories about their past and present lived experiences, refugee–background youth workers and U.S.–born community members in this study learned *from* and *about* one another. They cultivated meaningful friendships. They honored each other's unique perspectives and life experiences as well as recognized each other's shared humanity. Archy, for example, spoke of the vulnerability required in both the telling of and listening to stories. As Archy explained, the willingness to be vulnerable is dependent upon trust. Once trust is established, stories can be shared and heard without judgment. Withholding judgment is essential for sustaining the courage required to share personal stories (Brown, 2007; Kalla & Broockman, 2020). As Pawan demonstrated, the sharing of personal stories enables both the storyteller and the listener to recognize one another's shared humanity. Humanizing refugee–background youths' experiences is one of the most powerful antidotes to the perpetuation of racism, marginalization, and xenophobia (Bell, 2020; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Milner & Howard, 2013) and

an instigator of advocacy. Through recognizing a person's inherent dignity, coupled with understanding their struggles and the ways in which systems of oppression have perpetuated those struggles, Halo and Nam illustrated how refugee–background youth workers' personal stories are catalysts for advocacy and social change. As the findings from this study show, refugee–background youth workers play a significant and vital role in sustaining and growing the well–being of their own communities as well as in dismantling harmful misconceptions and systemic marginalization of refugee–background youth in the United States.

Storytelling as Advocacy

For refugee–background youth workers, such as Pawan, Halo, and Nam, telling stories is one way to advocate for themselves and their fellow refugees (Grey & Harrison, 2020). When refugee–background youth share their stories, they humanize notions of refugees more broadly. As allies, U.S.–born community members can partner with refugee–background youth to, in turn, listen and share what they have learned. In sum, for the purpose of social change, sharing stories among people of different backgrounds must be a bidirectional, mutualistic process. It involves both telling one's own story and listening to others' stories with openness and a willingness to be vulnerable (Kalla & Broockman, 2020). With this vulnerability, we recognize our shared humanity. When we recognize our shared

humanity, we are inspired to take action, socially and politically, to ensure all people's human rights are protected and all people have the resources and freedoms necessary to live an opportunity-filled life.

Cultivating Interculturality and Global Meaning Making

Community-based educational experiences, like The Stories Project, in which the roles of "teacher" and "learner" are shared by everyone involved, where learners' stories are the center of the curriculum and learners work together toward a common goal, can promote building bridging relationships among U.S.-born and refugee-background individuals. In The Stories Project, the participating youth workers worked together as a team of interns and young leaders, and as such, they were united through a common purpose: supporting the growth of the younger newcomer youth in the HRC's summer program. Our findings confirm the power and importance of membership in intergroup dialogues (Frantell et al., 2019); when the members of the group are also, simultaneously, working together as a community or team (e.g., teachers, artists, athletes), they are united by their shared investment in the success of their collaboration (Dryden-Peterson, 2010). The weekly dialogue sessions provided a space outside the refugee-background youth workers' collaborative teaching context to reflect upon (1) what they were learning, both individually and collectively, from their shared experiences, and (2) how their current experiences were fuel for reflection upon and reconciliation with their individual histories and past experiences.

Although much of what participants—both U.S.-born and refugee-background youth workers—learned about interculturality (Dervin, 2016) came from building relationships with the youth enrolled in the summer camp whose languages, cultures, and past experiences differed from their own, the weekly reflective dialogue sessions provided opportunities for global meaning making (Tierney, 2018). Because the HRC camp model provided opportunities for distributed mentorship (Khasnabis et al., 2013), everyone involved in the camp was positioned as both a teacher and learner. This deliberate flattening of typical status hierarchies is essential for traversing cultural and linguistic borders with the genuine intention of understanding ourselves, one another, and the systems of oppression that perpetuate a sense of separateness and inequitable power structures (Freire, 1968/2003; Tierney, 2018). From the stories and perspectives the youth workers shared during the reflective dialogue sessions, along with pre- and post-interview data, we saw evidence of participants' increased recognition of and appreciation for linguistic and cultural differences and a realization of their commonalities and shared humanity.

Implications

As educational researchers who work in community spaces, we have an obligation to engage with community members in ways that build trust and avoid perpetuating or inflicting more harm. This goal demands the highest standards of integrity in our thoughts, words, and actions. Our work with the refugee-background youth workers would not have been possible without our research–practice partnership (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) with the HRC, which, by 2019, had been established over a period of 2 years and several prior projects. The Stories Project was the result of a network of trusting relationships and our mutual, continual care of those relationships.

Research–practice partnerships (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) have recently become recognized as one of the most valued approaches in educational research. Creating mutually beneficial research–practice partnerships requires—on the part of university-based researchers—a commitment to learn alongside and amplify the voices of youth workers within the community whose lived experiences and emic perspectives enable the co-construction of new knowledge that is essential for addressing the persistent and insidious issue of xenophobia in and out of schools. Collaborative, community-engaged models of research that value the building of long-term, mutualistic relationships among stakeholders from across the community—particularly those who have been historically marginalized, such as refugee-background youth—hold promise as a pathway forward and toward sustainable structural, social change.

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