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Youth from Refugee Backgrounds Positioning their Identities through Reaction Videos

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Abstract

This ethnographic, qualitative case study empirically explores how six youth from refugee backgrounds positioned their identities through design choices in producing reaction videos—a popular YouTube genre—at school in their settlement context. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identified three ways in which youth took ownership of how they were to be perceived by their classmates and teachers, establishing their identities in the classroom through: (1) knowledge brokering; (2) navigating gaze; and (3) playfully disrupting cohesion. The study makes a timely contribution to helping language and literacy researchers, educators, and teacher-educators better understand how digitally composing in YouTube genres such as reaction videos can be used to affirm the identities of youth from refugee backgrounds in school settings.

Keywords: refugee-background youth, identity, English learners, positioning, digital multimodal composing, media production

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This article empirically explores how six youth from refugee backgrounds positioned their identities through their design choices in composing reaction videos at school in their settlement context in Western Canada. Reaction videos are a popular genre on YouTube, where typically young people record themselves watching a video for the first time to communicate their experience of the video (Kim, 2016). Reaction videos are a form of digital multimodal composing (DMC), the use of digital tools to make meaning with multiple modes (e.g., languages, visuals, sounds, gestures; Hafner, 2019). We view the out-of-school literacy practices of youth from refugee backgrounds as foundational to their literacy engagement in school, and subscribe to the notion that students who are at risk of underachievement are considered "disadvantaged" only insofar as the school does not recognize their background experiences as valuable and build on them (Cummins et al., 2015). The study was guided by the following research question: How do youth from refugee backgrounds position their identities through design choices in their reaction videos produced at school in their settlement context? We present our findings for the benefit of language and literacy researchers, educators, and teacher-educators who seek creative ways for schools to respond appropriately to the background experiences of youth from refugee backgrounds in their settlement contexts.

Literature Review

As Canada is increasingly committing to refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2017), there is a critical need to understand the diverse multiliterate practices, resources, and

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challenges of learners from refugee backgrounds, so they can be better supported to engage cognitively and affectively in school learning, and achieve their potential. Youth from refugee backgrounds constitute a unique heterogeneous population of emergent bi/multilingual students in Canadian classrooms, who have diverse experiences of schooling, levels of literacy in their first language(s), and proficiency and literacy in additional languages (e.g., Warriner et al., 2020).

We use the term ‘youth from refugee backgrounds’ to acknowledge that “the refugee condition is typically—and ideally—a short-term label rather than a permanent identity” (Shapiro et al., 2018, p. 24) and that this diverse population may face particularly grave educational challenges—as compared to youth from other migrant backgrounds—due to the forced nature of their migration and to the likelihood of difficult experiences, such as war, interrupted schooling, and resettlement, among others (e.g., McBrien, 2005).

Importantly, youth from refugee backgrounds may experience deficit perceptions of their identities at school in their settlement context (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Such deficit perspectives usually focus on what youth lack, devaluing their resilience and their social, cultural, semiotic, and intellectual resources, while diminishing their self-perceptions and educational possibilities. Scholars and educators (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2018; Warriner et al., 2020) have called for asset-based and desire-centered educational approaches that focus on the resources of youth from refugee backgrounds as unique and powerful assets. Attending to how students from refugee backgrounds are discursively positioned or position themselves in settlement-context classrooms is of particular importance for such pedagogies (Cun, 2020; Karam et al., 2020), as repeated

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positionings from a deficit perspective can diminish students while incremental positionings from an asset perspective can empower them (Golden & Pandya, 2019).

In a Canadian study documenting stakeholders' perceptions of what evidence-based approaches lead to successful outcomes for learners from refugee backgrounds in the Vancouver Lower Mainland, Barber (2019) found that while acquiring English as soon as possible is the first priority, helping learners develop a range of skills including digital literacies should be emphasized. In a large-scale Canadian study focused on supporting newcomer and refugee-background youth, Stewart and Martin (2018) reported that a key component of culturally safe and responsive teaching is engaging students' survival stories rather than their trauma stories.

A growing body of research, including in Canada (Cummins et al., 2015; Cummins & Early, 2011; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Early & Kendrick, 2020), suggests that pedagogies that employ forms of multimodal composing, including *digital multimodal composing (DMC)*, engage emergent bi/multilingual students' in language and content learning, empower them, and affirm their identities (see review in Smith et al., 2020). These pedagogies are powerful in that they draw on and cultivate emergent bi/multilingual students' communicative repertoires, including their literacy practices across national, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries (their transnational literacies; Duff, 2015; Lam & Warriner, 2012). Studies (see review in Michalovich, 2021a) have shown that youth from refugee backgrounds may harness the digital and multiple modes of meaning making in DMC to express their identities and their competencies, strengthen their social networks, as well as frame their own representations of themselves, often challenging stereotypical conceptions (e.g., Emert, 2013; Leurs et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2012). Johnson and Kendrick (2017) showed how digital

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storytelling, a form of DMC, offered unique opportunities for refugee-background youth in a Western Canadian school-district’s transitional class to communicate complex feelings and difficult personal experiences, while affirming their identities. As the challenges associated with adjusting to life in a new country can be tough topics in classrooms, DMC may support refugee-background students in recognizing themselves as composers with experiences, identities, and stories worth sharing (Pacheco et al., 2021).

Studies have also shown that a play-based pedagogical approach to DMC affords adolescent learners opportunities to perform imagined identities and explore new perspectives (e.g., Kendrick et al., 2018). For example, a study of newcomer youth in a Canadian school showed how they were able to experiment with and take on different imagined identities through role-play in different filmmaking roles, such as video editors (Michalovich, 2021b). However, few studies have explored how youth from refugee backgrounds employ DMC at school in their settlement contexts to position their identities, especially employing popular YouTube genres such as the reaction video. Addressing this gap in the context of asset-based approaches to the education of youth from refugee backgrounds is the study’s core objective.

Conceptual Framework

We draw from complementary theoretical perspectives in understanding DMC as a literacy practice. First, we take a *sociocultural, multimodal approach to literacy*, according to which literate agents draw from and negotiate various socio-historically provided communicative resources, which mediate how they enact meaning as social action (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 2009). We understand DMC as an umbrella term for

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digital design processes that harness some of these communicative resources (Hafner, 2019), taking an expanded multimodal view of literacy as ranging over multiple modes of meaning making, such as the linguistic (including multiple languages), visual, spatial, gestural and audial modes (New London Group, 1996). Furthermore, since composers draw on their interests and desires in how they express meaning in their multimodal texts, we understand design choices in DMC as mediated actions that reflect some of the complexity of composers’ identities in particular moments in time. Therefore, multimodal texts serve as rich artifacts for exploring composers’ identities, provided that researchers have apt access to the composing contexts and processes.

For this reason, we also draw on a discursive and relational understanding of *identity as positioning* (Golden & Pandya, 2019; Harré & Langenhove, 1991), with positioning defined as “the discursive construction of stories and relationships that build meaning and make an individual person’s actions intelligible” (Golden & Pandya, 2019, p. 212). Importantly, when a person takes a position, there are responsibilities, duties, and rights (a moral order) associated with that position (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

An identity-as-positioning approach links how people are positioned or position themselves in various contexts (Harré & Langenhove, 1991) with their identity, i.e., “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 4). Identity is understood as dynamic and changing over time, a site of struggle where people assume and withdraw from multiple subject positions that might conflict with each other. Importantly, DMC may echo not only composers’ identity positionings, but also their identity investments (Norton, 2013), i.e., the social

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and cultural capital that learners currently possess and that which they desire to obtain, as well as their imagined identities and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983).

This conceptual framework couples a *sociocultural, multimodal approach to literacy* with an understanding of design choices and processes in DMC as mediated actions that employ multimodal communicative resources for *identity investment* and *positioning*. The perspectives are complementary in that they guide us in tracing how and why youth from refugee backgrounds positioned their identities through their design decisions in their DMC processes at a particular moment in their lives.

Methodology

Study Design

The study is based on a qualitative case study design with a multimodal ethnographic approach, attending to how multiple modes of communication are used in particular social and cultural contexts (Dicks et al., 2011). It is part of a multiyear participatory video study led by Amir (Author 1) with youth from refugee and migrant backgrounds at a secondary school in a large city in Western Canada. Furthermore, the study is situated in the context of a larger research project, led by Maureen (Author 2) in collaboration with Margaret (Author 3), involving a team of researchers exploring the language and literacy needs, challenges, and practices of children and youth from refugee backgrounds in classrooms across Canada. Ethics approval for this study was provided by the university's Behavioral Research Ethics Board.

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Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a secondary school in a large Western Canadian city, with approximately 15% of the school population, of approximately 1000 students, designated as English Language Learners (ELLs) at the time of the study. According to the most recent 2021 School Plan, home languages include English, Tagalog, Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Amharic, Farsi, and Arabic. The school hosts several district-wide programs for learners with a range of designated learning needs, including, for example, an intensive English language learning and social-emotional support district-funded program for learners with varying levels of English who have experienced little success in school.

Based on participating teachers' recommendations and priorities, we invited all students from two classes to collaboratively plan, improvise, film, and edit videos in which they reacted to and commented on videos of their choice. One class was the district-funded program. The other class was an ELL level-two (BC Ministry of Education, 2017) writing class for students showing progress in developing their English language skills. Ten students and six teachers in total consented to participate in the study.

In this paper, we focus on the reaction videos project as a case of a DMC project for youth from refugee backgrounds and share illustrative and telling examples from six participating students, including commentary from their teachers (all participants are identified with pseudonyms). We selected those six students from the larger group of 10 students who gave consent because they all came from refugee backgrounds (students from other migrant backgrounds are identified in the paper as peers).

Table 1

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Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Time in Settlement Context	English Writing Level*	First Language(s)
Abbas	Male	15	Syria	3 years	3	Arabic, Turkish, **Kurdish **Arabic,
Ahmed	Male	17	Syria	4 years	1	**Turkish, **Kurdish
Amna	Female	15	Syria	3 years	3	Arabic, Turkish, **Kurdish
Haafiz	Male	13	Syria	4 years	2	Arabic
Maia	Female	17	Sri Lanka	5 years	2	Tamil
Nemesh	Male	13	Sri Lanka	5 years	2	Tamil

Note. * Based on a five-level scale of provincial ELL standards (BC Ministry of Education, 2017)

Note. ** Spoken only

Haafiz, Abbas, Amna, and Ahmed had their schooling interrupted (between 2-7 years) as they escaped with their families from the Syrian civil war to Jordan or Turkey and were eventually resettled in Canada. Nemesh and Maia did not have their schooling interrupted. Their fathers left for Canada because of the civil war in Sri Lanka and they joined later with the rest of their family members.

Procedure

In this study, two English language teachers and one researcher (Amir) invited

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emergent bi/multilingual students from ELL classes to compose their reaction videos during class time. The project was anchored in provincially mandated English Language Arts curriculum goals, such as "to enable students to become competent and effective users and creators of a wide variety of texts in diverse contexts, including digital texts" (BC Ministry of Education, 2018). Therefore, the project did not replace other activities for participating students, but rather enhanced them. All learners who chose to participate in the project were joined by Amir, an experienced filmmaker, who guided them in rotating groups of 2-4 students throughout the project, spanning 40 hour-long sessions between February-March 2020. The non-participating students worked on print literacy tasks with the classroom teacher.

A key pedagogical approach that Amir employed in structuring learning activities was the use of role-play (Michalovich, 2021b); the explicit assignment of roles (e.g, director, editor) for each student to structure students' collaboration in DMC. Each student played the role of a director, editor, videographer, interviewer, or interviewee at any given point. For example, as directors, students had the last word on the final cut, as editors they had a responsibility to offer suggestions to their peer-directors and implement their requests. In taking this play-based pedagogical approach to DMC, we assert that students' identity investments and positionings can be affirmed in school settings by carving out spaces for play across the curriculum and across modes (Fisher et al., 2017). This approach enables youth to "perform and practice, in a school setting, new roles and identities that are currently beyond their reach, as a stepping stone to becoming competent in DMC practices" (Michalovich, 2021b, p. 28).

For each group of 2-4 students accompanied by Amir, the project consisted of the following steps: (1) participants played the roles of interviewer, interviewee, and

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notetaker, asking each other questions to help them brainstorm ideas for topics of videos that they could react to (e.g., *What kinds of videos do you like to watch? What would you like to see changed in the world?*); (2) participants shared possible videos in relation to their interests, challenges, and aspirations, from which they then chose one video to react to; (3) participants played the roles of interviewer, interviewee, and notetaker, asking each other questions about their chosen video and taking notes (e.g., *Who is the audience for the video? What do you feel about the video?*); (4) Amir facilitated writing workshops, in which participants supported each other in developing written scripts from the notes (1-3 paragraphs) for their reaction videos; (5) participants played film-set roles (e.g., director, videographer) as they filmed their reaction videos; (6) participants played the roles of editor and director as they edited each other's reaction videos in Adobe Premiere Pro; (7) the videos were presented to teachers and other students in an online screening (due to COVID-19).

Data sources

Data sources were collected throughout the project (February-March 2020) and during follow-up post-projects interviews (March-June 2020), a screening session (June 2020), and a focus group (with teachers; June 2020). Data comprised audio and computer-screen recordings of all composing sessions (including students' interviews with each other), youth's video and audio footage, field-notes, and audio-recordings of the online screening session and formal and informal conversations with youth and teachers.

The formal, post-project interviews with the youth (30-60 minutes each) were held online in English through Microsoft Teams (used by the school), due to the

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COVID-19 lockdown (except for the interview with Nemesh, held in school before the lockdown). Students connected either from home (during lockdown) or from school (post-lockdown). Questions were mostly about the project (e.g., *Were there any moments in the project that you got stuck or nervous? What do you like best about your video? Why?*), with some questions related to students' background (e.g., *How is your experience of settling in Canada?*).

Data also included commentary from the youth's teachers, two of whom taught the students from the district-funded program (Jeremy and Irene) and one taught the students in the ELL writing class (Robert). Teachers' commentary was generated in informal conversations throughout the project, in the online screening session (~70 minutes) and a focus group (~90 minutes) held by Amir (with questions about their perceptions and practices teaching refugee-background youth).

Data analysis

Data were imported into ATLAS.ti, including automated verbatim transcripts of all verbal utterances, which were synced with audio or visual data, and then revised (for errors). We employed reflexive thematic analysis in ATLAS.ti 9 with an inductive approach, following the six stages of thematic analysis as specified by Braun and Clarke (2021): (1) Amir familiarized us with the data through viewing, reading, listening to the data, as well as annotating and writing analytic memos about data relevant to our research question; (2) Amir generated initial codes to collect pieces of data that were similar (e.g., *Design choices: Revealing the set*); (3) together, we began developing themes that might group codes together in clusters of prevalent data (e.g., *Knowledge brokering*); we followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) definition of themes as patterns of

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meaning in the data that are broader, more abstract and/or conceptual than descriptive codes, relevant to the research question, and fairly pervasive in the data; (4) we reviewed potential themes (and supporting data) repeatedly as a group, looking for how they reflected through each participant; (5) we defined and named the themes (e.g., *Playfully disrupting cohesion*); and (6) we produced the manuscript.

We acknowledge our positionality as researchers who engage with youth from refugee backgrounds without the lived experiences of forced migration, and we have sought to approach the information they shared with us with utmost respect and humility. All three authors have a history of volunteering in the school. Amir is a researcher and filmmaker who recently immigrated to Canada from Israel. Maureen and Margaret are Canadian researchers with considerable experience working with children and youth in Canada and East Africa. Amir, while collecting data, reflected through daily memo entries in ATLAS.ti about how students perceived him and how that might have shaped the information they shared with him, based on ongoing experiences in the field. Although students clearly perceived Amir as a professional adult filmmaker whom they came to know in the many months of volunteer work preceding data collection, care was taken by Amir to not be in a position of authority comparable to that of a teacher, which students seemed to endorse, allowing for more open and playful behavior (e.g., student pranks about broken equipment) that at times resembled a relationship with an older sibling. These reflections guided data collection processes and were shared at different times with the participating teachers, who also noted this unique position of Amir, adding the importance of the trust established through a consistent, persistent, and responsive presence. We believe that this level of researcher embeddedness in the field and rapport with participants was key for the success of the

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project, including the play-based pedagogical approach, and for our ability to address the research question.

To data analysis we brought our shared interests in exploring the affordances and limitations of multimodal (including multilingual) forms of meaning making for learners resettling in Canadian schools, and in our personal investment and involvement in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in education systems in Canada and beyond. Amir's embeddedness in the field was complemented by the perspectives of Maureen and Margaret as researchers working with youth from refugee backgrounds in other contexts. Our *reflexive* thematic analysis consisted of negotiated interpretations; in-depth and continual interrogations of emerging inferences, taking care to examine, question, and ultimately justify them through our different positionalities.

Trustworthiness was thus enhanced by long-term involvement in the field (from January 2019 to March 2021), rich data types and sources, a constant search for discrepant evidence, reflexive awareness through memos (Maxwell, 2012), and our collaborative multimodal analysis that incorporated different interpretive perspectives (Low & Pandya, 2019).

Limitations

As a qualitative case study, our research is ultimately limited to a particular, multi-layered context, involving specific data types, project (including duration and timing), classes, school, district, country, and researchers, teachers, and students during a certain time in their lives. Nevertheless, we contend that a qualitative case study with an ethnographic approach, if developed in sufficient detail, is a most valuable methodological approach to tease out situated meanings, processes, and contexts

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(Maxwell, 2012) associated with classroom practices, particularly DMC and especially with underrepresented populations. This enhanced purview should allow researchers and educators alike to examine the applicability of our findings, and indeed—their limitations—in other contexts and where conditions are different than those of this study: for example, different classes (e.g., mainstream), schools (e.g., community school), researcher positionality (e.g., teacher-researcher), scope of data collection (e.g., including participants’ homes), and the participants themselves (e.g., refugee-background youth from other countries).

Findings

Analysis led to the identification of three thematic patterns of how youth positioned their identities in the classroom through their design choices in composing their reaction videos. Each pattern highlights a distinct way in which youth took ownership of how they were to be perceived by their classmates and teachers at this moment in their lives.

Knowledge Brokering

Producing their own reactions to their chosen videos allowed learners from refugee backgrounds to position themselves to their classmates and teachers as knowledge brokers, agentive learners who have assets to contribute to others, rather than deficits to overcome (Roy & Roxas, 2011). By collaboratively discussing, writing, filming, and editing their reactions to their chosen videos, youth positioned themselves as expert knowledge brokers (see Figure 1), be it on music and culture from their home country (Amna), politics or conflicts of their home country (Nemesh), their experience

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of being a refugee (Haafiz), or their understandings of aspects of their settlement context's culture, such as forms and styles of fitness and well-being (Ahmed), time management (Maia) or camping stereotypes (Abbas).

Figure 1

Still Frames from Participants' Reaction Videos and Total Video Length (min:s)

Abbas (5:44)	Ahmed (6:40)	Amna (11:51)
		
Haafiz (3:31)	Maia (3:09)	Nemesh (2:43)
		

Amna was particularly agentic in positioning herself as an expert, as she used her reaction video to translate (from Arabic to English) and explain a Syrian music video. In her reaction video, she also explained how singing and listening to such music contributed to her wellbeing. Indeed, throughout the planning, writing, filming, and editing sessions, Amna would continuously hum various songs in Arabic, a fact that speaks to the potential of DMC to harness students' investment in and enthusiasm for multiple modes of meaning making (including multiple languages). In the opening sequence, Amna performed a paragraph that she had written collaboratively with Ahmed and Amir:

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Today we're gonna watch a video that is, uh, about love and loss [...] The mood that the video invokes is sadness. The boys are from Syria [...] they speak Kurdish, Arabic, or Turkish. Maybe a little, little bit of English. They write their own lyrics. [...] I like their music because when I get angry I watch the video and it makes me calm down. Those boys are heroes because when they sing a song, they make people calm down and make them feel better. They choose their words carefully, and those words resonate with people. I am going to give you some examples from lyrics. [...] every word, it has meaning in it, has a thousand meanings in it. So, like, let's begin the video.

Amna received enthusiastic and affirming responses to her reaction video from students and teachers, which supported her positioning as a knowledge broker. One example is the feedback she received from her teacher, Jeremy, during the online screening event:

I really love that she opened up this musical genre to me, right? [...] that's something we don't really see in our Western music, right? Like, informal music being played like that [...] and I really got to feel the emotions of those singers through Amna's translation, really like deep and hard subject matter to talk about or to translate, so she did a great job with that.

The other students also positioned themselves as knowledge brokers through their reaction videos. Maia, for example, shared her growing interest and knowledge about time management, which helped support her busy life and many responsibilities—caring for younger siblings at home, working to help support her family, studying at school, and participating in a community-based youth leadership program. Nemesh reacted to a one-minute video about Sri Lanka, his home country, by the Israeli-

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Palestinian YouTuber Nas Daily. He explained the generic conventions of Nas Daily's videos, for example that he visits different countries to share one-minute videos about them and includes many local people in his final shots. Yet Nemesh also vocally expressed his criticism of Nas Daily's video in his reaction video: "He only shows the parts where it [Sri Lanka] is developing and he does not show the parts where it is not developing." Nemesh highlighted that the developing parts are mostly those that the Sinhalese people inhabit, whereas his people—Tamils—live in poor conditions, especially since the civil war.

Importantly, some students seemed to develop a sense of themselves as knowledge brokers as the project evolved. Haafiz, for example, sought to replace the video to which he had initially planned to react (a game-stream video). Following the choice his close friend Nemesh made, Haafiz searched for a video by Nas Daily about Syria, his home country, which he had not visited for seven years. However, Haafiz could only find a Nas Daily video about Syrian refugees in Greece. It was only when Nemesh and Amir mentioned to Haafiz that his experiences as a Syrian refugee were of much interest that Haafiz decided to react to Nas Daily's video about Syrian refugees. By the time Amir held the post-project interview with Haafiz, he had already positioned himself as a knowledge broker about refugee experiences: "I'm a refugee and the, the, like the people around the video is a refugee so... And I know how they feel, like when somebody leaves their home because of war." Haafiz's positioning of his identity as a knowledge broker was also affirmed during the online screening session, when one of the teachers invited him to share and talk about his video with her students.

Whether they were sharing their knowledge on time management, their refugee experiences, fitness and wellbeing, camping stereotypes, or the conflicts or cultures of

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their home countries, all six students positioned their identities to their peers and teachers—through their reaction videos—as knowledge brokers, agentive learners with assets to contribute rather than deficits to overcome.

Navigating Gaze

During the video production process, it became evident that through their reaction videos, students not only positioned themselves as knowledge brokers; arguably, they also positioned themselves as transnational navigators in a particular moment in time. In their choice of design and development of the content for their videos, they navigated their own gaze and the gaze of the viewers toward certain communities and cultures to which they gravitated (at the time) with respect to their cultural identities, including as youth from refugee backgrounds. Some students left their migration and cultural backgrounds “out of frame”, seemingly expressing a wish for assimilation (a type of acculturation strategy; Berry, 2019) in an imagined settlement-context identity. Others incorporated their cultural and refugee backgrounds “in frame”, seemingly expressing a form of integration (another type of acculturation strategy; Berry, 2019), seeking to maintain those backgrounds as central to their imagined identities but leaving room for social and cultural influences of the settlement context. As explained below, this pattern raised important questions among teachers about the potential reasons for students’ positioning of their refugee experiences and cultural backgrounds as part (or not) of their identities in the classroom at given times. For us, these design choices represented students’ positioning of themselves as transnational navigators, negotiating their multiple connections to different cultures and spaces (Duff, 2015) and pulling themselves toward or away from certain imagined

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identities and communities in different spaces and times.

Navigating gaze was most evident in the stark differences between Amna and her twin brother Abbas. While Amna reacted to a Syrian music video in Arabic, Abbas reacted to a popular video by an American sports and comedy group (Dude Perfect) mocking camping stereotypes. Amna's expression of attachment to Syrian culture and music through her reaction video was already mentioned in the previous theme. Conversely, Abbas shared in his video his knowledge about outdoor experiences (which he gathered in the settlement context), his favorite parts of the video, and his critique of some of the stereotypical campers ridiculed in the video. He also visibly laughed with the YouTubers performing the funny camping stereotypes. It almost seemed like Abbas, who was wearing a t-shirt on which the word "Canada" was printed, was seeking a seat at this group's table, paralleling Amna's reference to the Syrian boys as "heroes" and her apparent wish to sit and sing by their side.

Importantly, while both Amna and Abbas used YouTube for learning purposes, Amna said that most of the videos she would watch were in Arabic or Turkish, because "we are Muslim, we read Kuran, we pray", and Abbas said that he mostly watched videos in English—tutorials, comedy sketches, trick shots, and others. In the post-project interviews, while Amna mentioned the exhilarating sense of affirmation that she experienced from telling her migration story in different school contexts and expressed an interest in doing that in a future film project, Abbas explicitly mentioned his preference at the time not to share his migration story in a future film project. This echoed a comment Abbas had previously made to his peer-interviewer in the early stages of the project: "don't go way too deep [with the questions]", Abbas had said. This divergent approach to dwelling on their past experiences, especially as refugees,

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which was evident in Amna and Abbas's choice of videos and development of content for their videos, was particularly explicit in that same early-stage interviewing session, when Amna pressured Abbas's peer to ask him "what causes him to come to Canada", and Abbas immediately responded "Nothing, I'm just, nothing, I'm just a refugee".

When Abbas's peer then stated the question to Abbas in his voice, the following dialogue ensued:

Peer: What made you come to Canada?

Abbas: Ah, I don't know about that, but my family knows.

Amna: Here's the thing. They brought us here—

Abbas: They brought us here to be safe.

Amna: Our future. To be safe. And hard was life, eh, hard, hard, life was, eh, hard, in Turkey and Syria. And in Turkey there were nothing. Like, there were no job for Syrian people, especially Syrian. And they were mean to everybody. Some of them they were nice, but they were mean. And also, like, more than one time somebody stole my dad's money. They stole his phone. They stole a lot of things from him.

These remarks all provide meaningful and crucial context for understanding Amna and Abbas's design choices in their reaction videos as means to position their identities with regard to their migration and cultural backgrounds. As Amna turned her gaze toward her past experiences in Syria and Turkey, she also navigated the gaze of her reaction-video viewers to her home culture. Contrarily, as Abbas turned his gaze away from his past experiences as a refugee, mostly avoiding discussion of it in the classroom, he also navigated the gaze of his reaction-video viewers to the North-American male culture represented by Dude Perfect, which might have represented a part of his imagined settlement-context identity. We argue that through such direction of their own gaze and

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the viewers' gaze, these youth positioned themselves as transnational navigators, looking into different places and times to anchor their imagined identities and communities, sometimes with significant efforts that implied potential tensions about aspects of their experiences and identities that they wanted to move away from.

Other students exhibited similar approaches in navigating gaze toward or away from aspects of their cultural and refugee backgrounds. Ahmed and Maia tended to navigate their and the viewers' gaze to their imagined settlement culture(s) by exploring, respectively, a video by the American professional bodybuilder Steve Cook (about fitness and wellbeing) and a video by the American YouTuber Amy Landino (about time management). In his video, Ahmed compared his life (post-settlement) to Cook's life, with no mention of his pre-settlement experiences or culture(s). Similarly, Maia focused in her video on her adoration of Landino's time management tips.

Conversely, Nemesh focused on his home country, Sri Lanka, in his reaction video, and Haafiz discussed his unique knowledge as a refugee in his reaction video. Through their design choices, students positioned their identities as transnational navigators, maneuvering and steering their own and the viewers' gaze to different cultural artifacts and practices and to different spaces and times. In doing so, they tried to pull themselves toward or away from certain imagined identities and communities in different places and times.

Teachers speculated about potential reasons for students turning their and the viewers' gaze toward or away from certain cultures and migration-related experiences. For example, Irene raised the possibility that students anchored their attachments to cultures and experiences in their home countries to be seen and affirmed, or to use their story as social capital ("currency"). She also suggested that anchoring their attachments

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to settlement cultures and experiences might be rooted in the emotional precariousness of evoking difficult knowledge from their refugee backgrounds, a limited sense of safety to share, the degree of communicative competencies (especially in English) to share their stories, or whether the events occurred when the students were too young to remember in detail. For varying and complex reasons, students positioned their identities in the classroom through their reaction videos as transnational navigators, dropping their anchors in different places and moments in time to pull themselves toward or away from certain aspects of cultures and migration-related experiences.

Playfully Disrupting Cohesion

All students conformed to the scripts and conventions of YouTuber videos, which were familiar to them, including a variety of gestures to capture and sustain the attention of viewers and remarks such as "Hello guys, welcome back to my channel." Furthermore, all students displayed playful and lighthearted behavior in their interactions, including the filming of mistakes and playful takes, carnivalesque texts that are traditionally edited out of the central media product (Pandya & Mills, 2019). However, two boys (Ahmed and Abbas) and one girl (Amna) explicitly sought to include such bloopers and playful takes *within* their final cuts.

All three students included the "action" or "cut" remarks from the beginning or ending of takes. Also, Amna included moments in which she was fiddling with the microphone's wind muff on camera, Abbas and Amna included idle moments in which they seemed distracted, and Amna and Ahmed included moments in which they sought or received assistance out of frame (from Amir or their peer-videographer). In Amna's editing sessions with her peer-editor and Amir, Amna made more and more agentive

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choices to include playful or blooper moments in her video, resolutely responding to Amir's questions about whether she wanted to include such takes with a resounding "Yes", even when her peer-editor suggested otherwise so as not to disrupt the cohesion of the video. This design choice was consistent; the following excerpt from an editing session shows Amna agentively insisting to include a moment in which Amir assisted her out of frame:

Amna (*in video*): And he's saying [*the singer in the video*] "you were all my life in this world. Why... you have been cheated again? Why?"

Amir (*in video; off screen*): Why have you cheated?

Amna (*in video; smiling to camera*): Why have you cheated?

Amna and her peer-editor burst out laughing in the editing room.

Amir: You want to keep this or?

Amna (*laughing*): Yes.

Amir: You don't want to cut this?

Amna: (*laughing*) No, no, no, I lik-it's good.

Amir: 'Cause it's funny?

Amna: (*laughing*) Yeah.

Moving to Ahmed, beyond including his "Action!" and "Cut, bro!" remarks (similar to Amna and Abbas), Ahmed also insisted on including a music track in low-volume ("Skechers", by the Pakistani-American YouTuber DripReport) that had nothing to do with the topic or tone of his video. However, the popular track, which described a boy's sexual interest in a girl through his obsession with her light-up Skechers, clearly served to balance the serious tone with which Ahmed verbally introduced himself and the video he was going to react to. Furthermore, at the end of Ahmed's reaction video, he

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agentively requested to include "my dance", footage of him imitating dance moves from the Skechers music video, accompanied by the music in full volume. Ahmed's teacher, Jeremy, interpreted this design choice as Ahmed's attempt to position himself as a playful, sexual person: "Ahmed, you know, never really displays himself as a, like, a sexual person, but [...] the only times are those little playful dances that he does, right?"

By including playful and blooper moments in their final cuts, the three students disrupted the cohesion of their videos, reminding viewers of the constructed nature of the film set (breaking the fourth wall), and resisted their potential positioning as fully-on-task composers or "good students" (Brooke, 1987). Moreover, through these design choices, they were able to bring forward their playful personalities to the center stage of the composition, positioning themselves to their classmates and teachers as lighthearted and humorous, and in this way gain more social capital among them while engaging in a meaningful language and literacy learning experience. This inference was further supported by both Amna and Haafiz, who especially appreciated the funny moments included in other students' videos, but also by two teachers' comments (Jeremy, Robert) in the screening session, as they appreciated how the videos conveyed, through their multimodality (especially the visual, sonic, and gestural modes), each student's "unique style", "personality", "humour", "energy" and "presence". By playfully disrupting the cohesion of their videos, students pushed back frames that might fix or essentialize their identity-positions in a uniform way, positioning their identities as playful, humorous, and dynamic.

Discussion

Our analysis of youth's design choices shows three ways they established their

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identities in the classroom through reaction videos: knowledge brokering, navigating gaze, and playfully disrupting cohesion. Drawing from a sociocultural, multimodal approach to literacy (New London Group, 1996), we understand youth’s reaction videos as artifacts, identity texts (Cummins et al., 2015; Cummins & Early, 2011) that echo their identity positions (McVee et al., 2021) and investments (Norton, 2013). As the youth shared their knowledge multimodally on real-world issues, they were able to position themselves as knowledge brokers, to perceive their knowledge as a form of expertise, as social and cultural capital they possessed, which also explained their investment in this DMC project. This finding aligns with similar studies that highlighted how youth from refugee and migrant backgrounds could be cast as experts or knowledge holders once their cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge is valued as a classroom asset (e.g., Emert, 2013; Wilson et al., 2012).

Our participants also positioned themselves as transnational navigators through their design choices to direct their own and the viewers’ gaze to different places and times, navigating different imagined identities and communities. Previous studies have shown how youth from refugee backgrounds employed digital media production to maintain their connections to family and friends across national boundaries (see review in Michalovich, 2021a). Leurs et al. (2018) showed how such transnational practices may present tensions for youth, as our study has shown through youth’s divergent design choices in DMC (e.g., Amna and Abbas). As youth traversed these sometimes troubled waters—whether and how to situate themselves with regard to their refugee experiences and aspects of their cultural backgrounds—they positioned themselves as navigators setting their and the viewers’ eyes on anchors that they chose for their identities (their identity investments). These anchors, also representing the social and

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cultural capital youth aspired to further develop, were made tangible through multiple modes in their reaction videos. Arguably, they also encapsulated students' anticipation of how others might perceive them, and their attempt to fit or resist such perceptions. Navigating these multiple connections and ties to different cultures, spaces, and times is common for transnational students (Duff, 2015), especially when they try to ascertain the extent to which their transnational experiential knowledge is acceptable in classroom literacy practices (Lam & Warriner, 2012). The extent to which their transnational identities are affirmed in the classroom may influence their investment in learning (Darvin & Norton, 2014) and the kinds of acculturation strategies (Berry, 2019) their DMC artifacts might imply, as evident with Abbas and Amna's divergent design choices.

In relation to the play-based pedagogical approach to DMC, we argue that reducing the seriousness of consequences of errors and setbacks, and carving out spaces for play and experimentation strongly facilitated the identified patterns, but especially the third one, playfully disrupting cohesion. As youth designed their reaction videos in an environment that allowed for playfulness and experimentation, they were able to position themselves as lighthearted and humorous, resisting their potential positioning as fully-on-task composers and disrupting what Pandya and Mills (2019) called the "silence and solemnity of schooling" (p. 13). It may be that similar to what Pandya (2019) reported in her study of children's DMC in a dual language context, youth's positioning as playful, humorous resisters also served to liberate them from "other, more weighty, emotions" (p. 55) and from social orders that might essentialize or lock them in undesired positions. This thematic pattern also echoes previous studies' mention of strong audience awareness and enhanced engagement among young

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composers as tied to moments of humor (including blooper videos) either incorporated (or not) in learners' DMC artifacts (e.g., Hellmich et al., 2021; Pandya, 2019). Our study shows that through a play-based DMC environment, youth's investment in their social capital among peers and teachers was affirmed, further enhancing their engagement in designing their reaction videos.

Lastly, positioning theory guides us not only to employ the location metaphor to identify how people discursively position themselves in various contexts (including through multimodal artifacts; McVee et al., 2021), but also to explore the potential storylines and rights and duties (moral orders) associated with these positions (Harré et al., 2003; McVee et al., 2021). We argue that knowledge broker positioning afforded students possibilities to craft storylines in which their past, present, and future experiences and strengths could be connected and fostered. In such storylines, they have unique contributions to make in their classroom settings for the benefit of themselves and keen audiences who might seek their expertise on these topics in future interactions. Yet this positioning also entailed a level of duty and responsibility for the accuracy of the information shared, for representing it faithfully, and for communicating it successfully. It might thus be that entering this moral order of rights and duties afforded youth not only an asset-based perspective on their knowledge, but also stimulation to deepen and expand it to better represent and communicate it.

We also contend that as youth positioned themselves as transnational navigators, they sketched a storyline, temporary and unstable as it may be, about their acculturation strategies (Berry, 2019) and how they envisaged their relationships to different cultures, experiences, spaces and times across national boundaries (Duff, 2015). This positioning also entailed rights and duties, as youth directed, maneuvered, and steered their own and

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the viewers' gaze to different cultural artifacts, practices, spaces and times. On the one hand, students claimed their right to different imagined identities and communities (Norton, 2013), but also bore the responsibility for the tensions raised, such as the pushback that Abbas experienced from Amna with regard to what he knew about his refugee background or was willing to dwell on.

Lastly, we argue that by positioning themselves as playful, resolute, resisters who contest essentialization, the youth laid out a storyline in which they were no different from others in their lightheartedness, humour, and desires for connection, friendship, and intimacy with others. Indeed, by disrupting the cohesion of their videos through their design choices, youth not only positioned themselves as lighthearted and humorous, but also claimed their right to be playful in their learning (Fisher et al., 2017), to compose multimodally and playfully in their language and literacy learning at school. Aligned with that claim was a responsibility to keep an out-of-school genre such as the reaction video playful and flexible, and not institutionalized by schooling practices to the point where it loses its allure or locks them in the role of the "good student" (Brooke, 1987).

Conclusions

The study contributes to helping language and literacy researchers, educators, and teacher-educators better understand how digitally composing in YouTube genres such as reaction videos can be used to affirm the identities of youth from refugee backgrounds in school settings. We illuminated how youth's design choices in producing their reactions videos highlighted the diverse and rich ways they chose to position their identities in their classrooms, including the associated storylines, rights,

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and duties.

Youth designed their reaction videos in ways that positioned them as knowledge brokers, transnational navigators, and playful, resolute, resisters who contested essentialization. These identity positions: (1) highlighted the youth as agentic learners with assets to contribute rather than deficits to overcome; (2) emphasized the importance of asking how and why youth from refugee backgrounds, as transnational navigators, maneuver and steer toward or away from certain imagined identities and communities at certain moments in time; and (3) reinforced the importance of play-based approaches to DMC that afford youth opportunities to learn and reimagine themselves through play, bolstering their relationships with peers and teachers and circumventing the fixity and essentialization that can often circumscribe classroom literacy practices.

Thus, we recommend that educators design units of study exploring digital multimodal composing in safe *and* playful learning spaces. We encourage exploration of innovative pedagogies that bridge in- and out-of-school literacies and afford teachers opportunities to know their learners, including their often invisible assets and imagined identities. DMC in YouTube genres is one such practice that can be powerful both in enabling youth from refugee backgrounds to position their identities through producing authentic multimodal digital artifacts, but also for language and literacy researchers and educators to see them beyond a deficit-oriented perspective as the agentic human beings they are, bringing rich arrays of social, cultural, semiotic, and intellectual assets to the classroom. We recommend that schools, programs, and classrooms explore culturally responsive policies and pedagogies that draw innovatively through DMC on refugee-background youth's interests and full range of communicative repertoires,

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helping them to safely and playfully position themselves anew in storylines that go beyond common deficit narratives and trauma stories, strengthen their identity investment in language and literacy learning, and foster their sense of belonging in their settlement contexts.

Given the need for appropriately responding to the background experiences of culturally, linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse youth, so that they will no longer be entrapped in the position of "disadvantaged", there is much promise and importance for language and literacy researchers and educators to learn how youth from refugee backgrounds can be empowered in novel and creative ways through DMC.

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