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**ScholarWorks**

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MDS/BAS 495 Undergraduate Capstone  
Projects

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## **Breaking Down Language Barriers: English Language Development of First Year Refugee Students in Idaho**

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### **Introduction to your Capstone Project**

This project focuses on one approach to offering assistance toward refugee and immigrant families during the process of resettlement in their new environment and building their future. Refugees and immigrants face many challenges during their resettlement process including prejudice from their receiving community, cultural barriers, and language barriers. This incoming community deserves the support of the receiving community from one human to another. This approach focuses on providing assistance in the English language development of refugee high school students to reduce the amount of stress and pressure that comes with navigating language barriers in everyday activities.

### **Section 1: Innovative Approach**

This work brings together the perspectives of hands-on community support and education. By actively engaging with the refugee community I am able to further understand what I am able to do to support the community needs. The innovation of this approach starts with recalling and connecting material and ideas from previous courses paired with reaching out to previous instructors to gain a better sense of direction in finding an ideal scope for the goals and realistic timeline of the work needed to complete this project. This was difficult because the desire to want to help without knowing where to start or what would be most impactful can feel overwhelming and become a deterrent. Once a decision was made about which barrier to focus on, it became easier to find appropriate sources for volunteering and traction came much quicker than anticipated.

The sources I started with included previous professors from courses that inspired my interest in this topic, including University Foundations 200 Ethics and Diversity. We focused on

immigration and border policies in this course during the fall of the 2020 election. I was frustrated with myself that I didn't already know about these policies, but learning about them leading up to the presidential election was really interesting - especially because we discussed opposing views as a class. My professor from that class, Gregory Heinzman, was the first person I contacted to get started. I asked him for help with guiding my direction in which organizations to reach out to. He was quick to respond to me and his suggestions were encouraging and helpful in giving me some starting points in my research. He suggested that I look into The Agency for New Americans, The International Rescue Committee, and the Idaho Office. I also reached out to my Child Development professor, April Masarik, because I had stayed in touch with her through social media where she occasionally shared information linked to supporting refugees. I inquired with her for guidance and was pointed in the direction of the Idaho Office for Refugees' website, which helped me get a feel of the landscape in resettlement here in Idaho. While scouring their website, I came across some community outreach and education information. I found three organizations to reach out to via email: the English Language Center here in Boise, the Learning Lab located in Garden City, and the contact for Boise Schools volunteering.

### **Section 2: Emotional Intelligence**

The initial task of this project was to prioritize support for the teacher of the classroom and be available to the needs of her individual students. I quickly developed a partnership with Mrs. Weeks as a weekly volunteer in her EDL1 class at Capital High school. After spending a few weeks getting to know her and her 8 students, I interviewed Mrs. Weeks to learn how she started her path towards her career and her previous experiences in this field. I was inspired by her story that started in her childhood memories of helping around her mother's classroom in

Mountain Home, Idaho. She had also traveled to several countries during college. She shared that her time away from her home country was her most valuable learning experience in connecting with refugee students who come to the United States. I requested her feedback on my interactions with the students to strengthen my skills and maintain awareness of others. Through a deeper understanding of the need for improved resources in the EDL classrooms, I am able to convey the message to more people in our community who may also wish to engage in supporting this group through volunteer work.

My research is valuable because it is easy for people in my position to not get involved. As a white female who was born and raised here I don't have to worry about how to communicate with a majority of the Boise population to do things such as apply for a job, buy groceries, assistance with public transportation, etc. It is really important for those of us who do experience the ease and freedom of navigating through our daily lives to recognize where we can be better partners to the new members of our community who have similar life goals as we might and would benefit from our time and attention.

### **Section 3: Creative Thinking**

The framework of this approach started with previously acquired information from courses taken in prior semesters and utilizing those skills to navigate my interests and develop the scope of my project. I am grateful for what I have learned from my peers and instructors over the past couple of years. It has been a source of inspiration to push myself out of my comfort zone and into action. Learning more about how difficult it is for people who are trying to resettle into new countries paired with understanding the policies that surround legal migration and how we "protect" borders was really unsettling to me. I still have much to learn and I enjoy the

feeling of curiosity. Learning about things that directly impact other human being's lives, such as how we handle the policies surrounding borders and immigration, their experiences in navigating a new country, and how our receiving community reacts towards newcomers made me realize how unaware I have been about these issues. I want my children to have experiences interacting with their community so that they do not grow up fearful of change and are able to adapt, coexist, and appreciate diversity. My approach fosters my decision to take action and become involved directly in the community, where I am able to meet other volunteers and learn about more opportunities to build a solid network and continue to learn how I can support the refugee community in Boise.

#### **Section 4: Your Innovative Solution**

Through the course of my project I worked directly in an ELD1 class with eight students, many of which were refugees, who had resettled here in the past year. Of the eight students there were four separate languages, some first-second grade English reading levels, and some brand new students who were starting at learning the alphabet. Mrs. Weeks was able to create workshops that dedicated more time with teacher-student reading groups once she had my weekly commitment. After a few weeks, we teamed up with an additional group of volunteers and allowed us to dedicate one on one time with each student focused on developing their reading skills. Remaining curious through the process and asking questions positioned me to further engage in volunteer work while building relationships with the students, teachers, and other volunteers.

#### **Section 5: Results**

This project provided benefits to both the refugee community and the teacher I assisted through volunteering. The refugee community benefited from having another English speaking adult in the classroom where the teenage students were able to have more focused attention and assistance when working on their reading assignments. They were able to engage more with the books they read by choosing their own reading topics, many of which included learning about how to prepare for getting a job in the United States and other skills they will need in the future. The teacher benefited from having another person in the classroom to reinforce her instruction by assisting students one on one. She was able to strategize ways to personalize the learning to match individual needs. Mrs. Weeks is also in the final months of her first pregnancy and was happy to have assistance with carrying materials to and from the library.

This project provided a positive impact on refugee students, their families, their teacher, and myself. I received positive feedback from Mrs. Weeks, stating that the students enjoyed working with me, asking if I would like to continue to volunteer during the spring semester. I was pleased to hear this and am looking forward to continuing to volunteer after the holiday break is over.

Additionally, I was suggested by Mrs. Weeks to support in another role, as a test administrator for ACCESS. I further connected with Anita Parpart, who is rebuilding her ACCESS team, about an opportunity to administer testing for the 1,600 refugees that will need it in the upcoming spring. I feel I am still just in the early stages of understanding how to positively impact this community and have a lot to learn. However, I am really looking forward to networking with the group of teachers I have engaged with so far to see where I can make a difference.

### **Section 6: Different Approaches**

My solution leaves a lot of room for growth and further exploration of ways to become involved in supporting the refugee community. It has led to more opportunities, such as being recommended as an ACCESS Test Administrator and connecting with organized volunteer groups. Having an open approach reduces the limits and allows me to welcome new experiences with the intention of learning as much as I can.

Now having more information about the community that I am working with, I would be less hesitant to reach out because I have more resources and a better understanding of ways that I can effectively contribute. I am happy with my approach and focusing on helping refugees learn to read English because this is a huge barrier and with attention it can relieve them of further obstacles and stress as they build their futures.

### **Section 7: Conclusion**

The method I chose for my project was to take action with assisting our refugee community through volunteering at a local high school because I felt that was the most impactful way that I could start engaging immediately with limited skills and knowledge since I had not been involved previously. I learned that with the increase of refugees coming to the United States from various countries and the lack of resources that teachers currently have, they are struggling to meet the demands of equipping students with the necessary tools and skills to give them the best education for their future. I learned the value of dedicating just a fraction of my time to volunteering in their classroom to help them learn to read English can help them prepare for nearly every path they will take in their future, from driving to working or higher education and communicating with their peers, teachers, and eventually bosses.

Each stakeholder benefited from my project. The refugee students benefited from more individual time with a teacher who could dedicate their time and attention to their personal needs and tailor their training and education weekly to excel their reading skills and answer their questions. The teachers benefited from having additional help in their classroom and being able to implement their ideas successfully, such as workshops where the teacher to student ratio was smaller and more focused, reducing the amount of stress they feel in properly preparing the students for testing and continued education. The families of the students benefit greatly from having volunteers dedicate their time to providing focused attention on their children so that they can further their education and/or career goals in the future after acquiring English language skills. They also benefit from being able to learn English from their children at home, which they can also use to enhance their engagement with the community and ability to find jobs themselves if they do not already have a resource for learning English.

The skills I acquired from this project was learning to trust my instinct and intuition. I was nervous about jumping in because I am not bilingual and did not think I would be an asset in this environment, but showing up and caring about connecting with the students proved to be the most important skill needed. I was able to build connections with several students through one on one reading sessions, received positive feedback from teachers and volunteer organizers, and was invited to continue to participate in their classroom. Being confident in my intention and purpose for this project was highly beneficial, as this is something that I typically struggle with. I tend to second guess myself, but within this environment it felt natural and offering my skills in reading and writing was impactful to the teacher and students.

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