Investigating Refugee Secondary Student Perspectives on Models of Engaged Learning & Teaching

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Abstract

How should schools engage with South Sudanese refugee secondary students and enhance their teaching and learning? A recent doctoral thesis with ethics-approved research investigated South Sudanese refugee secondary students' learning experiences in Adelaide, South Australia. Whilst the RSD (Research Skills Development) Framework and the subsequent family of models called MELT (Models of Engaged Learning and Teaching) were not applied in the original analysis, the interview data displayed clear signs of the students' strong affective and cognitive acets of learning (A-F). These different facets have been called "facets of research" in the Research Skill Development framework. The classic MELT model pentagon was used to create a distinctive and new MELT model of engaged learning and teaching to provide learning signposts, insights and understandings for teachers of refugee secondary students. Examination of the students' perspectives did not reveal a linear progression of the facets, from A to F, but rather a movement back and forth with certain facets being mentioned more frequently by the participants. Such findings can help teachers become more aware of the unique journey of refugee secondary students towards achieving their own learning autonomy.

Introduction

As background for this paper, the Research Skills Development (RSD) framework is 'a conceptual framework for the explicit, coherent, incremental and cyclic development of the skills associated with researching, problem solving, critical thinking and clinical reasoning' (Willison, 2006). It contains six facets of research which outline the phases students can move through to both search and discover to gain a degree of autonomy within the research process as a whole. In the past, 'Autonomy' has been regarded as 'disposition' (Willison, Sabir, & Thomas, 2017, p. 2); however, a degree of autonomy as student-initiated is essential not

only for the development of research skills required for studies at higher levels but also for entry into the future field of work. Studies have shown that the explicit teaching of the Level 1 Prescribed Research, for example, used by academic teachers, has been generally regarded as the first step for tertiary students to learn research skills in the embryo form aided by close support and instruction. The subsequent direction of student progress towards more independence passing through the Levels has been shown as a moving backwards as well as forwards, depending on the context, task and student ability (Willison et al., 2017). Overall student and academic use of the Levels has indicated not only an awareness of the skills required for each Level but has also opened conversations and reflections for both parties on their use (Willison, 2012, p. 905; Willison, Le Lievre, & Lee, 2010, p. 33).

The MELT (Models on Engaged Learning & Teaching) are a later development of this conceptual framework to fit a wide variety of research and learning contexts. The MELT family of models includes the Research Skill Development (RSD and RSD7) framework; Work Skill development (WSD) and Critical Thinking Skills (CTS) and presents an opportunity for teachers to design, adapt a model to fit their own particular learning contexts. A MELT model describing the refugee secondary students' affective as well as cognitive phases of learning could benefit their teachers' awareness of the students' learning journeys. The model would enable teachers to develop an appreciation of the students' capacity to reflect on and gauge their own progress towards achieving autonomy as learners. To date there has not been a MELT model designed especially for refugees, nor indeed any secondary school students, to assist and inform their teachers.

In terms of the context for South Sudanese refugees, who are the focus of this study, they were traumatised and distressed upon arrival from the continuing life experiences associated with war and dislocation in their country (Henley & Robinson, 2011; Joyce, Earnest, De Mori, & Silvagni, 2010). Their knowledge of the Dinka language, their mother tongue, was confined to oral rather than written expression and represented the strong oral tradition of their country over the past centuries (Perry, 2008). Their command of the English language was similarly limited to minimal knowledge, past use and fragmented formal 'schooling' (Sudanese Online Research Association, 2011). Entry into mainstream Australian schooling where English was the language of instruction represented almost unsurmountable challenges and ongoing problems for the refugee school students. Whilst Intensive English courses termed NAP (New Arrivals Program; epartment for Education and Child Development, 2016) have been offered for refugee secondary students in South Australia, learning problems and challenges were often magnified once they enrolled in the mainstream secondary schools.

Research Gap

In the light of these serious linguistic and learning hurdles, little information is available concerning the personal learning styles or (in MELT terms), the models of learning and teaching engaged in by South Sudanese refugee secondary students in Adelaide, South Australia. There have been several studies advocating explicit and genre teaching approaches (Ferrari, 2014); a personalised relationship between teachers and refugee students (Dooley, 2009); use of their prior learning (Hammond & Miller, 2015) and use of the creative arts (such as dance and drama) to unlock their responses to learning and self-expression (Taylor, 2013). Despite such studies, a research gap still exists in understanding the particular learning requirements of South Sudanese secondary students, originating in and driven by their authentic voices and views. Transcribed interview data from an earlier study have been used here as the basis for developing an appropriate MELT model based on the students' comments on the models of teaching and learning that they had found engaging. All secondary students in South Australia are required to devise a Personal Learning Plan (PLP; SACE Board of South Australia, 2017a); undertake a Research Project (SACE Board of South Australia, 2017b) and achieve learning outcomes for all their subjects in order to obtain their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) certificate. Whilst there has been research on teaching methods for refugee school students, there is a research gap as to their personal views on how they learn best and what learning problems they encounter. Since the MELT model has taken into account affective and cognitive facets, it can provide a useful guideline for educators of refugees in all sectors.

Conceptual Frameworks and Methodology

The original study's research methodology was based on open-ended semi-structured interview questions of nineteen South Sudanese refugee secondary students and two South Sudanese teachers. Single interviews of around an hour were held with students mostly in the senior years of their secondary studies. The interviews were all held in the student's schools and the teachers' work premises. The recorded interviews were later transcribed for analysis.

The theories of humanistic sociology and symbolic interactionism underpinned the original broad investigation into the students' cultural values and relationships in three learning contexts : in Southern Sudan; mainstream schools in Adelaide, and during the process of attempting to adapt into Adelaide society. However, in this present inquiry, only the perspectives of the students in schools in Adelaide are included in the analysis. The two researchers coded the student responses and met regularly to discuss classifications of the individual students' responses, to find any disagreements and come to agreement about the coding. The analysis was done in terms of relating what the refugee students felt to be engaging learning and teaching to

the MELT Model's original facets of research, all within the students' experience of schooling in Adelaide. The actual words and phrases from students' recorded comments have been used. This allows us to define the facets of engaged teaching and learning in the Model from the perspectives of the South Sudanese refugee students.

Findings

It is important to understand the school context in which this research is situated. English was the compulsory language of instruction in the mainstream secondary schools and the research data revealed that most students were limited to oral rather than written literacy of their mother language, Dinka. Their knowledge of English was very limited. The school curriculum contained unfamiliar subjects. There were assignments, oral and written, which presented almost unsurmountable problems and mysteries. Their teachers expected completion of all school tasks and in the main 'assumed' the refugee students were capable of doing so.

Figure 1 presents a MELT Model framework of the analysis of the students' comments on their experiences of learning and teaching in the South Australian classrooms. Each of facets A-F has been built up to capture the significance of the learning in the refugee students' own comments and incorporated into Figure 1. Following the earlier models, each facet was given a title in terms of two verbs, explaining the key learning actions involved at each stage. A key question related to the learning stage was used as a subtitle. The students spoke extensively of their feelings in experiencing many and repeated obstacles to their learning, as well as their sense of delight and achievement when learning was successful. There were extreme and vacillating responses such as excitement and disorientation in their initial arrival. These swings in feeling have been captured in the model in the two adjectives which are used to highlight the range of affective responses in each facet. From the comments of the students, it was also felt appropriate to adjust the order of the facets. This MELT diagram therefore has been described and ordered in terms of all the refugee students' own perceptions of their learning in Australian schools. In addition, the number of times each facet was mentioned was recorded in a frequency count (Table 1).

Facet A, for example, has been labelled with the subtitle "**Embark & Wonder'**, to reflect the essence of what the students said. This is followed by the question: *Where are we going?* The two affective adjectives, "excited" and "disorientated", reflect the feelings experienced by LM1[1] about living [and learning] in South Australia '[as] excited...In classrooms and a lot of Caucasians, a lot of shock. We look different'. Similarly, LF9

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[1] The notation for the students is as follows: M=Male; F=Female; N=Catholic college and L=specialised government school for languages.

at first thought South Australia was 'a lovely place, a family place to grow up in comfortable [environment]' but also experienced people who were 'hard-headed [who said] 'Go back to your country'. We were 'all seeking to belong, [but] feeling like an outsider can be horrible'.

Whilst the refugee students repeatedly spoke of the valuable new 'opportunities' to study and achieve in Adelaide, they were 'curious' and markedly 'puzzled' as to the appropriate direction and application as in B: **Find & Search**, *What do we need to do?* For example, LM6 tried to submit his Religion assignment to the receptionist at his new school's front office but was confronted with 'I'm not your slave'. He replied 'Sorry, please show me and I'll sign my name'. Whilst LF5 discovered 'too much writing, but there are other teachers who are 'good at writing [and] know[s] how to teach you and make you enjoy the subject'. LM8 found that 'the bad teachers separate the classroom [and are] not going to do anything about it. [Whereas] the good teachers don't have favourites [and there is a sense of] belonging'.

Phase C: **Communicate & Respond**, *Who can help us?* illustrates the students as 'determined' to take up their studies despite often being 'frustrated' that not all teachers either understood their learning struggles or were willing to assist in class or afterhours. LF15 largely enjoyed seeking help from her teachers. Her 'history teacher [was] cheerful and fun. He [would] use group and ask questions [as in group discussion] then later we'll do the tests. I like groups. I don't mind…. [In free lessons] they have teacher. They just sit there. [However], the library staff are helpful'. On the other hand, NM3 found that 'sometimes the way they speak to you [and the] tone of their voice. I don't take any notice of it'.

Phase D: **Evaluate & Reflect**, *What will work best?* This phase depicts students as 'Discerning & Anxious'; they repeatedly assessed the success of their learning efforts. NM4 decided that he 'liked working and enjoy being more independent. It's a lot easier for me. I can do tasks with others and I'm right with that but mostly I enjoyed just working, kind of doing my own thing my own way'.

Phase E: **Organise & Manage**, *How can we cope?* shows students as 'Creative & Concerned' whilst accessing their prior learning in Southern Sudan, choosing school subjects such as Dance and Drama. Many students enjoyed pursuing creative subjects such as Art and Photography in which they felt they could make a unique contribution. The common expertise in sport also assisted their choosing suitable subjects for their compulsory Research Projects. LF10 launched into her choreographing [the] 'whole year 7 concert' together with her taking up formal Dinka language studies as 'now it's becoming really important to speak at community events'.

Phase F: **Analyse & Apply** *How does this work for the future?* can be seen as the final phase in which the students, both 'Constructive & Unsure', launched themselves into utilising recurrent ideas and successful strategies sourced mainly from teachers but also from a few peer class members they had 'picked up' along the way. Many students analysed their learning styles and worked on these in their school subject study choices. NM3 was notable for his research project which tried to answer the question: 'How can the quality of education be improved for refugee students?'

It proved insightful to count the number of times each facet was mentioned (Table 1). The most commonly discussed Phase, at an average of nine times by the respondents, was C. This was described by **Communicate & Respond,** in which students repeatedly approached their teachers and other school staff for practical help and assistance. The second most widely reported, on average seven times, was Phase E, in which the students relied on their past learning of skills, together with useful and familiar content, for the new subjects. Phase F was next as the students enthusiastically ventured forth with 'tried and successful approaches' to achieve some successes. Phase D, mentioned an average of six times, was the fourth and necessary stage of **Evaluate & Reflect**, upon their newly gained but unfamiliar knowledge and experiences. Phase A, mentioned two to three times, illustrated the starting-point close to arrival in the new country and Phase B was the least mentioned, on average, one to two times, as the refugee students searched for practical help from their teachers. It should be noted that the students tended to move across and between these facets as they saw the need.

Table 1. Order of Frequency of each facet in refugee student interviews[2]

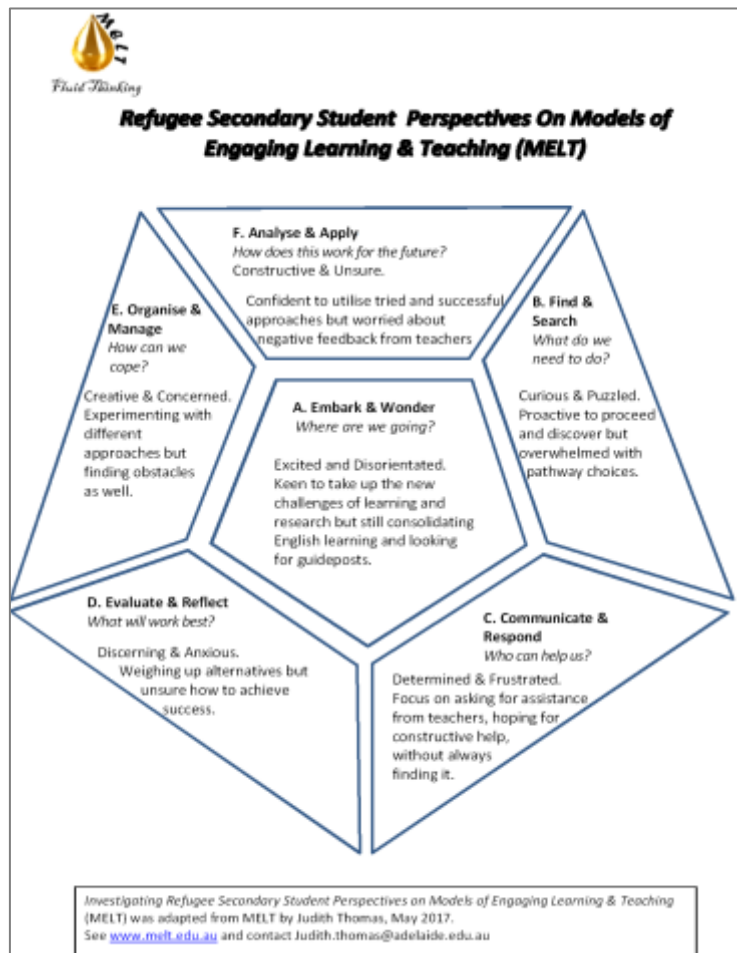| Facet	Frequency for 19 students
C. Communicate & Respond	**178**
E. Organise & Manage	145
F. Analyse & Apply	126
D. Evaluate & Reflect	123
A. Embark & Wonder	71
B. Find & Search	36

Conclusion

We recommend using this new MELT model, based on data containing the authentic views and voices of South Sudanese refugee secondary students, for teachers to trial. Further experimentation could follow for

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[2] Two students requested a second interview at school to talk in greater depth.

primary schools and the various tertiary sectors as more students undertake higher studies in their quest for employment. Understanding how these students view support from teachers as crucial (Thomas, 2017, chapters 6 & 7), in their undertaking and managing their learning trials and tribulations, could provide a significant breakthrough for their unique contribution and welfare in Australian society and beyond.

Figure 1

Refugee Secondary Student Perspectives On Models of Engaging Learning & Teaching (MELT)

F. Analyse & Apply
How does this work for the future?
Constructive & Unsure.
Confident to utilise tried and successful approaches but worried about negative feedback from teachers

E. Organise & Manage
How can we cope?
Creative & Concerned. Experimenting with different approaches but finding obstacles as well.

B. Find & Search
What do we need to do?
Curious & Puzzled. Proactive to proceed and discover but overwhelmed with pathway choices.

A. Embark & Wonder
Where are we going?
Excited and Disorientated. Keen to take up the new challenges of learning and research but still consolidating English learning and looking for guideposts.

D. Evaluate & Reflect
What will work best?
Discerning & Anxious. Weighing up alternatives but unsure how to achieve success.

C. Communicate & Respond
Who can help us?
Determined & Frustrated. Focus on asking for assistance from teachers, hoping for constructive help, without always finding it.

Investigating Refugee Secondary Student Perspectives on Models of Engaging Learning & Teaching (MELT) was adapted from MELT by Judith Thomas, May 2017. See www.melt.edu.au and contact Judith.thomas@adelaide.edu.au

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