

“I DON’T COME AND PRESENT AS A TEACHER:” A POSITIONING ANALYSIS OF REFUGEE TEACHER IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study examined how a female refugee English teacher residing in Bangkok, Thailand, positioned herself in relation to her teacher identity. We collected four conversational interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, as the primary data for our study. Drawing on Bamberg’s (2004) three levels of positioning, the analysis of this study involved three main steps. First, the study examined how she positioned herself within her narrative. Subsequently, the analysis explored how she positioned herself in relation to others and how these interactions shaped her positioning. Finally, both positioning analyses were integrated to understand how she positioned herself vis-à-vis refugee and teacher discourses, within which she positioned herself and was positioned by these discourses. Through these positionings, the participant adeptly navigated her roles to construct her teacher identity, addressing the complex realities of the refugee classroom context and developing a teaching approach that met the specific needs of her refugee students, while reclaiming her agency and resisting the dominant narrative that perceives refugees solely through a lens of vulnerability and the traditional educational narrative that prioritizes formal credentials and elitism in academic practices. Our findings extend positioning theory from the context of forced migration.

Keywords: identity, narrative, positioning, refugee, teacher

Introduction

Teacher identity has been a popular topic, attracting scholars’ attention to professional identity, agency, and self-perception within stable educational settings (Pishghadam et al., 2022; Yazan, 2018). However, little is known about how teachers, specifically refugees teaching other refugees, construct their professional identities in informal, precarious settings. While both mainstream and refugee teachers play key roles in educating their students, there are important distinctions. Specifically, refugee teachers face diverse challenges, including addressing students’ varied needs, such as traumatic experiences that affect their emotional well-being (Ellis et al., 2007; MacNevin, 2012), and teaching students from mixed cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

Refugee teachers also find their roles intertwined with their students, as both share the social status of being refugees. Being both a refugee and a teacher places



them in an ambiguous space. At this borderland, teaching sets them apart from their students, granting them distinctive agency to reclaim their dignity. Thus, their professional identity as teachers becomes a site of contestation between their struggle and a means to assert that identity and transform their suffering into purpose. Hence, their classroom practices represent a borderland discourse in which they navigate the tension between vulnerability and empowerment.

As mentioned earlier, the investigation of refugee teachers' identity remains understudied. Among the few related studies, some examined Syrian teachers' ideological positioning (Karam et al., 2017), the pedagogical challenges of teaching students with refugee backgrounds (Colliander, 2018), and their need for external social support (Karkouti et al., 2021). Despite their value, these studies treated refugee teachers as objects of study with specific ideologies, or as passive recipients of development programs, rather than as active autobiographical subjects. These studies provide information about the conditions surrounding refugee teachers but offer limited insight into how they interpret their lived experiences across displacement.

This study aims to address this gap by foregrounding refugee teachers' identity construction through the exploration of their lived stories. By doing so, our study contributes to the discussion of how professional identity is enacted amid precarity and the challenge of forced displacement. Additionally, our study extends positioning analysis by applying it to the context of displacement. In this sense, positioning acts as more than a discursive strategy but becomes a site of survival, resistance, and dignity.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Positioning theory as an analytical lens

This study utilizes positioning theory, a framework that helps us to understand identity as a dynamic, fluid process that evolves within the context of an ongoing discourse (Bamberg, 2006). It is a discursive process in which people position themselves and others within a conversation (Davies & Harre, 1999). As individuals narrate their experiences, they are active participants in identity work, constructing their positions and those of others (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). These positions are not fixed but are continuously negotiated and shifted through language and interaction (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Teachers in migratory and refugee contexts

Although studies of refugee teachers who teach refugees are limited, adjacent research offers relevant insights into how migratory backgrounds shape professional identity. For instance, Ennser-Kananen and Ruohotie-Lythy (2023) analyzed the professional journey of a migrant teacher in Finland, illustrating how her migratory background influenced her professional positioning. Similarly, Yip et al. (2022) examined professional transitions and identity construction among 10 immigrant teachers in Australia; their results indicate that factors such as perceived social position, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and employment status substantially impact these teachers' identity transitions. These studies collectively highlight that migration-related experiences and context-specific factors play a significant role in shaping teachers' professional identities, offering useful parallels for understanding refugee teachers who teach refugees.

Outside these two adjacent contexts, studies that specifically investigate refugee teachers began to emerge. Yet they primarily focus on the roles and challenges refugee teachers navigate. For instance, González-Doğan et al. (2024) examined the obstacles faced by teachers who come to the US as refugees. The study demonstrated that their knowledge and experience were marginalized and that they faced significant barriers to credentialing. One of the closest matches for a study investigating refugee teachers' identity is a recent study by Yeo (2024), which explored how eight refugee teachers in the protracted camp in Mae La, on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, constructed their professional and social roles while living in a liminal space and uncertainty. The findings reveal that refugee teachers' identities are shaped by the interplay of cultural preservation, the challenges of displacement, economic survival, and community recognition.

While illuminating valuable insights into professional roles and the structural barriers that refugee teachers face, these studies fall short in examining refugee teachers' identity construction, how they discursively position themselves, and how they are positioned by discourse. Although barriers likely affect refugee teachers' identities, the process of positioning that shapes who refugee teachers become has yet to be analyzed. Building on these studies, our study extends the mainstream discourse on teacher identity into an underexplored context, addresses a gap in the existing literature, sheds light on the complex interplay between positioning and identity construction, and potentially contributes to a more inclusive understanding of teacher identity.

Bamberg's three levels of positioning analysis

We drew on Bamberg's (2004) narrative positioning framework to examine how refugee teachers construct their identity in their narratives, treating it as a contested lens rather than a neutral tool. Unlike Labovian analysis, which centers on temporality and detailed event structure (Labov & Waletzky, 1977), or self-dialogical theory, which examines the interplay of multiple I-positions (Hermans, 2001), Bamberg's analysis focuses on how identity is interactionally accomplished in discourse (Bamberg, 2004).

Bamberg's (2004) narrative positioning centers across three interconnected lenses. At level 1 (*story content*), narrators position themselves and others, whether characters are portrayed as active, passive, or vulnerable. Level 2 (*social interactions*) focuses on how speakers position themselves "vis-à-vis their audiences within the interactional world of the telling" (Bamberg, 2004: 139). At level 3 (*broader social context*), the focus is on the speakers' positioning in relation to mainstream social discourse, whether they align with or challenge its ideologies at the macro level.

Bamberg's (2004) positioning analysis has been utilized to investigate the construction of teacher identity. For instance, Barkhuizen (2009) examined how Sela, a preservice English teacher, envisioned her future professional identity. His study showed that Sela dynamically positioned herself alongside others to construct her identity, and that mainstream social and ideological discourses shaped her positionings. Similarly, Kayi-Aydar's (2018) study of pre-service Latina teachers revealed that their identity construction was shaped by how they positioned their multicultural background to resist the monolingualism discourse. Likewise, Mansouri (2021) applied Bamberg's framework to investigate identity positioning

of Iranian EFL teachers. The findings demonstrated that labels such as native vs. non-native and institutional policies significantly affected identity formation.

However, positioning analysis has been criticized for favoring episodic agency at the expense of biographical coherence and may risk underemphasizing how people are positioned by broader structures beyond their full control (Brockmeier, 2015; Deppermann, 2013). To address these limitations, we not only analyzed our respondents' positioning across the narrative but also attended to level 3 as a space that both enables and constrains their positioning. Hence, we approach the framework as a generative heuristic rather than a definite lens to examine how our focal participant, Yolanda (pseudonym), makes sense of her identity.

Method

Setting the scene: Refugees and refugee teachers in Thailand

Despite being a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention Act, Thailand has been hosting refugees for years, both camp refugees living alongside the Thai-Myanmar border and urban refugees residing in urban areas such as Bangkok and its neighboring provinces. Both types are classified as illegal immigrants under the Thai Immigration Act 1979 (Khai, 2025). While urban refugees have more mobility freedom compared to camp refugees, they lack legal recognition (Ward, 2014) and face an ongoing risk of arrest and detention, living in the poorest neighborhood, and rely on inadequate aid from UNHCR or INGOs, and often engage in 'illegal' work (Jayangakula, 2024).

Within such a systemic vulnerability, urban refugees are unable to access work permits. Therefore, they can only engage in informal and low-paying jobs. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation by employers who take advantage of their illegal status (Hammad, 2017). Meanwhile, some refugees find their niche volunteering as teachers at community centers, giving rise to a new identity: refugee teachers. Although these positions offer minimal financial compensation, they provide an opportunity to regain a sense of purpose, dignity, and professional identity in exile. By refugee teachers, we refer to refugees who teach their fellow refugees within their community or in donor-funded projects operated by INGOs or the UNHCR's implementing partners. We do not refer to mainstream teachers who volunteer to teach refugees. We focus on refugees who teach English, given the crucial role of English for the future resettlement of urban refugees.

For most, the only opportunity to teach English is in the English courses organized by UNHCR or INGOs. To qualify for this volunteer position, refugees must pass an English test and an interview. After that, they must complete a month of teacher training and assistantship. Once they finish these procedures, they are assigned to their own class, provided with standardized modules, and given a modest monthly stipend for teaching three times a week (Personal Communication, September 2022).

On the surface, this may suggest a straightforward capacity-building model; underneath, however, is a paradox of identity. Refugees are hired precisely because of their shared experience with their students, yet they differ from them in their role as knowledge holders. They receive a stipend but do not have legal work authorization. They help students prepare for future mobility while their own future remains unseen. It is in this in-between-ness, the grey area between teacher and

student, documented and illegal, and between past career identities and present precarious realities, that their identities are navigated and constructed.

Research design

We chose narrative inquiry as our research design for two primary reasons: its suitability with the vulnerable status of our participants, and its close alignment with positioning analysis. First, this design is particularly suitable for refugee teachers because it prioritizes their perspectives and provides a platform for them to exercise their agency through storytelling (Swedberg, 2020). For refugees whose lives are often narrated by others, an opportunity to express a distinct perspective can be a space to reclaim their authority and to contribute new insights from underrepresented areas of inquiry (Ishihara & Menard-Warwick, 2018).

Another reason is that narrative inquiry's framework includes temporality, sociality, and place to investigate lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These dimensions shaped our engagement with participants' stories. Temporality helps us trace how our participant's professional identity evolves. Sociality foregrounds their inner world and social relationships. Place directs our attention to the context in which their stories unfold. These dimensions operate simultaneously, aligning with Bamberg's three levels of positioning. Temporality deepens level 1 by contextualizing characters' portrayals within their biographical time. Sociality enriches level 2 by sensitizing us to the relational dynamics of the interview. Finally, place anchors level 3 in social conditions and cultural norms. As such, narrative inquiry and positioning analysis are closely interdependent. Narrative inquiry provides space to generate storied data on identity, while positioning analysis offers analytical lenses that allow us to interpret the identity work embedded in our participants' stories.

Research participant

Yolanda, the focal point of our study, is a remarkable research participant from an African country. She volunteered to participate in our study because she met our purposive sampling criteria, including being a refugee who had taught other refugees for at least one year and being over 18 years old. At the time of data collection in September 2022, Yolanda was 36 years old. Despite not having a formal teaching degree, she held a BA in Agribusiness and had prior teaching experience in an agricultural extension program. In that program, she taught farming techniques to farmers before fleeing to Thailand in 2019. During our data collection, Yolanda held a volunteer teaching position at one of the refugee learning centers in Bangkok, where she taught English to adult refugees aged 18 to 35.

Data collection

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (Approval No. KMUTT-IRB-COA-2022-041) on 23 August 2022, before data collection. Yolanda provided informed consent prior to joining our study.

The inquiry took place over four relational meetings, during which Yolanda's experiences were co-constructed within Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework of temporality, sociality, and place. These meetings were treated as an ongoing relational dynamic rather than a standalone interview process. The four

meetings provided opportunities to revisit and narrate experiences across time (temporality), to foster and enrich the investigation of personal and social factors (sociality), and to situate this work in the context of urban refugees (place).

The audio recordings were transcribed using a clean verbatim method. Repetitions, false starts, and fillers were removed for clarity. Grammatical structure, including errors, was preserved to maintain originality. We considered this approach appropriate for our study. Our focus was on the content analysis of participants' narratives, so preserving the paralinguistic elements was unnecessary (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006).

Data analysis

Following our data immersion, in which we read our data multiple times, we analyzed Yolanda's narrative using the three levels of positioning analysis, which interconnected across levels. At positioning level 1 (story content), we coded how Yolanda positioned herself and others in the story. For example, we analyzed whether Yolanda identified herself as having a positive mindset, being empowered, or being vulnerable. Following that, we examined the content of Yolanda's story by listing the events in her narrative to establish a sequence. At positioning level 2 (social interaction), we examined how Yolanda positioned herself toward the interviewer. Here, we coded whether she positioned herself as an expert, a community representative, or a refugee seeking sympathy. At this level, she performed her identity work both in the act of telling and in the story. At positioning level 3 (sociocultural context), we analyzed how Yolanda positioned herself vis-à-vis the broader discourses. References to cultural norms, values, and social expectations about refugees and English teachers in Yolanda's narrative were coded and classified as either reinforcing or challenging the sociocultural norms surrounding these groups.

In practice, these levels are often intertwined. One narrative moment can enact positioning across all three levels. At these intersections, where content, interactional stance, and discursive work intersect, Yolanda's positioning is richest. Finally, to ensure the credibility of our findings, we cross-referenced our analysis for accuracy and consistency. When discrepancies occurred, they were discussed until a consensus was reached. We then shared our initial analysis with Yolanda for member checking, which allowed her to review and confirm its alignment with her perspective, or identify any inaccuracies (López-Zerón et al., 2021).

Positionality

We navigated our position in a liminal space, neither fully insider nor outsider. We gained access to our participant through a friend who works as a regional director of refugee services in Bangkok. This positioned us as a trusted figure, fostering trust and rapport between the participant and us. However, we remained reflexive about this position to avoid jeopardizing our neutrality; Yolanda understood that we were solely researchers, not an extension of our friend's organization. We carefully balanced this delicate position, continually negotiating it by being ethically attentive, mindful of power dynamics, ensuring voluntary participation, protecting autonomy, and safeguarding anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Our study aimed to investigate how Yolanda positioned herself in relation to her teacher identity. We present our findings in three emerging themes based on Bamberg's three levels of positioning (2004): 1) I'm a teacher with an agricultural background and an English privilege, (2) I always tell them we're learning together. I don't come and present as a teacher, and (3) In terms of not having a teaching certificate, yes, I felt like I was not a real teacher.

I'm a teacher with an agricultural background and an English privilege.

Yolanda's teaching journey in Bangkok was driven by her need for additional income. However, this income was still not enough to support her niece, who was battling cancer. Despite these hardships, she found refuge and reasons to smile through her teaching role. This allowed her to feel like any other regular person living a meaningful life. She stated that teaching gave her a reason to continue living with a feeling of purpose. Rather than dwelling on negative thoughts or remaining idle, she sought opportunities to make a difference for her family and herself. She described:

*When I applied, I was like, I was taking care of my niece, a cancer patient. Then she's the one who gave me the adverts because B** sent them to me. So, I was like, I should have my, you know, I remember I sent the application around midnight. Because I was like, okay, we need it financially; we need something, it's not much, but this can help us. And I wanted the strength to have something to do, not just to sit and relax and be sad for myself at some point. I don't want that.*

When asked to describe herself as a teacher, Yolanda's narrative demonstrated her strong sense of self and how she wanted to be perceived. She asserted her confidence as in the following excerpt:

I describe myself as a teacher having an agricultural background. I used to work with farmers in rice fields and would do training. So, I had an experience of presenting and teaching, and at church, I once had an opportunity to teach a group of a level of some children. So, I had the idea of like, when you're teaching, you need to do this, you need to plan, you need to give them questions. With the farmers, you are imparting knowledge. My previous audience was the farmers, so that's already teaching, it's not different. The only difference now is that I must do a lot of research on teaching English.

From this excerpt, we can infer that although Yolanda may have lacked prior English-teaching experience, her agricultural background and teaching at church in her home country have provided her with valuable insights into teaching. She drew parallels between her teaching experiences with farmers and teaching children, underscoring the need to understand and adapt to the specific needs and knowledge levels of her audience. While teaching farmers and teaching English might have

some differences, she acknowledged that research is needed to adapt her teaching methods effectively to the new context of English instruction.

Apart from her agricultural degree and teaching experience, Yolanda emphasized the benefits she gained by having English as the official language in her country. She sought to share this linguistic advantage with her students:

I think I'll put it this way. To me, take it as, what can I say? Because English is the official language in my country. So, it's an added advantage. So, when it comes to, I'm teaching someone in an international language, I just feel like okay, I'm really helping this person, but it's not like they have to pay me for that. So that they can also be able to be like me or to be like the other people they're going to meet.

Yolanda emphasized her proficiency in English, her country's official language. This accidentally put her ahead of her students. Many of them had begun learning English in Thailand. Recognizing the importance of English in refugees' lives, especially for their future resettlement in English-speaking countries, she was committed to helping her students acquire the language. Her statement, "So that they can also be able to be like me or to be like the other people they're going to meet," underscores her empowered position and her desire for her students to achieve a similar result. She believed that "knowledge is power," and "she wanted her student to feel that power too."

Yolanda's narrative reveals dynamic positionings. At one moment, she positioned herself as an effective teacher with an agricultural background, and at another as a proficient English user. Yolanda's embrace of these positions and her deliberate positioning within them reflected her confidence and attitude as an English teacher. She exhibited full agency, consistently using "I" to assert her autonomy in sharing her experiences and constructing a robust identity.

I always tell them we're learning together. I don't come and present as a teacher.

In positioning herself toward the interviewers (the authors), Yolanda presented herself as a refugee due to her shared social status with her students. Her positioning demonstrated a sense of unity and camaraderie among a group of people who are all refugees. She said:

I always tell them that we are learning together, number one, and number two, we are one, we are family, because we are here, not in our country, all of us in this class, including myself. We are all refugees; we've fled from our countries to come in for rescue here.

As her narrative revealed, Yolanda framed her positioning by adopting intersubjectivity tactics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010) to emphasize shared experiences as a refugee. Through this approach, particularly the tactic of adequation, "We're one family, we're not in our countries," Yolanda fostered a strong sense of solidarity with her students and promoted equality among a group of individuals who had faced significant challenges and upheaval in their lives. Importantly, by positioning herself as a refugee to the authors, Yolanda established her authenticity

as an insider to speak about the refugee classroom issue and invited the first author to understand that her teaching approaches were foregrounded in shared experience. By positioning herself as a refugee, she actively performed identity work, in which the classroom story she told served as her means to position herself to the authors.

In her classroom practice, however, Yolanda navigated the complexities of enacting her shared identity with her students alongside her identity as a teacher, as seen in the following excerpt:

And you know, just bearing in mind that these refugees, there are a lot of things at the back of their minds. So, you need to know what to say and what not to say. Some topics may be sensitive. Let's say we are learning vocabulary about crimes and justice. So, probably some of them are running away because of crime. So, I sometimes ask them, "Are you comfortable with this topic?" If they are not, then I will skip. The main goal is to learn, but they should feel at home. I also told them we are learning together. I don't come and present as a teacher.

Yolanda's narrative not only illustrated the complexities of embracing shared identity with her students and her role as a teacher, but also the contrast between the refugee classroom and the traditional language classroom, where teachers typically hold full authority over lesson delivery. Here, Yolanda actively negotiated her power as a teacher to establish a secure and friendly classroom environment for her students. It is important to note that Yolanda's narrative does not present the negotiation as settled, unproblematic norms. Instead, it is a fragile achievement, achieved through her deliberate discursive practices as she navigated the tension between her role as a teacher and the complex needs of her refugee students. This is evident in her statement, "You need to know what to say and what not to say," which highlights that she still holds control over the content, but rather than approaching that control through authority, she exercises it through the lens of care.

More importantly, her question, "Are you comfortable with this topic?" functions as a key discursive practice in which the negotiation of power becomes clearly visible. Her approach, which welcomes students' voices and allows them to take ownership of their lessons, implicitly challenges the traditional discourse of teacher authority. It is through her act of asking that the negotiations take place; her willingness to "skip" the subject shows a transfer of power with measurable impact. Moreover, she discursively constructed and negotiated her identity by reframing her position and explicitly rejecting the traditional teacher role, "I also told them we are learning together. I don't come and present as a teacher." Here, she convinced her students (and probably herself) that the old 'recipes' did not apply.

However, rather than being accepted as the way things are, her practice remained open to challenge, for example, from students who prefer a more traditional teacher role. More importantly, her statement, "I also told them," suggests that she actively negotiated her egalitarian teacher identity with the dominant expectation of a directive teacher role. Ultimately, Yolanda's classroom is a site of discursive work where the ongoing negotiation of power, her response to the needs of refugee students, the dominant teacher role discourse, and her own teacher identity are in a constant interplay.

In terms of not having a teaching certificate, yes, I felt like I was not a real teacher.

In her narrative, Yolanda positioned herself within the discursive practices associated with her role, primarily defining herself through her race and teaching experiences. Throughout her narrative, she consistently constructed membership categories to set herself apart from others. She expressed this as follows:

Because we, people from Africa, people have different perceptions. Yes, but what I know is, in each continent, in each country, there are people, you know, I wouldn't want to use poor, I want to use vulnerable people. So, it's fortunate that I'm not that kind of vulnerable. I wasn't that kind of vulnerable person in my country. I used to go to work. So, when I'm here, when I'm outside of class, of course, people look at me like, you know, "Is that kind of African who is vulnerable?" But when I'm with the other students, we are happy together, we share our experiences about our countries. They're interested in knowing about Africa, you know, so it's pretty interesting. And it makes me happy, it makes me feel so welcomed when they accept me as I am.

Yolanda challenged the preconceived notions or stereotypes associated with being an African refugee by focusing on her competence, aimed to counter any presumptions that may undermine the abilities and potential of refugee teachers. Her positioning sought to disrupt monolithic narratives about African refugees, highlighting the diversity and richness of the refugee population. Additionally, her emphasis on how her students' interests in Africa and their acceptance of her as their English teacher, despite her race, might reflect her strong attachment to her identity before becoming a refugee teacher.

However, she found herself conflicted by the notion that ideally teachers should possess a teaching degree to be considered "real" teachers. On the one hand, she felt that not having a teaching degree made her question whether she truly qualified as a "real" teacher. On the other hand, her experience of teaching English put her in a position where she had to assume the role of a teacher. Yet the absence of such a degree did not deter her from fulfilling this role. Instead, she acknowledged her previous teaching skills, acquired from training farmers, and her current English teaching role as the factors that allowed her to behave and be a real teacher:

Of course, they have bachelor's degrees and they have studied. I myself do not have that. In terms of that [not having teaching certificate], yes, I felt like I was not a real teacher, but I'm already a teacher. So, I should behave like a real teacher. Yes. It's very important. Yeah, by the paper on paper, I'm not a teacher, right? In terms of a certificate or whatever. But because I'm in this field already, I should act like a real teacher. And I think I've been a teacher since like, my field of agriculture, because we train farmers. So, in extension, you train farmers in agricultural extension. So that's already teaching.

The excerpt shows Yolanda’s ambivalence about teaching without a teaching degree. Her positioning reflects certain norms and values in the larger social context. The dominant discourse often perpetuates certain standards, such as the requirements of a teaching certificate to legitimize someone’s position as a teacher. Yolanda might question why a teaching certificate is considered the only legitimate pathway to becoming a teacher, especially when her experience and expertise in her subject matter could be equally valuable in an educational setting. By challenging these norms, she sought to redefine what it meant to be a teacher, particularly for individuals from underrepresented communities.

Discussion

Our study investigates the positioning of a refugee teacher in relation to her teacher identity construction. We present a summary of Yolanda’s positioning and its impacts her identity construction in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Yolanda’s positioning

Category	Yolanda’s Positioning	Identity Construction
Level 1 (story content)	Yolanda identifies herself as a teacher with an agricultural background and English language privilege.	A practical, legitimate refugee teacher
Level 2 (social interaction)	She invokes her refugee status to establish authenticity with her audience and negotiates this identity and her role as a teacher in her classroom practice.	
Level 3 (socio-cultural context)	She challenges traditional stereotypes of Africans as vulnerable by showcasing her professional skills and experiences. She rejects the credential-based authority that often excludes practitioners like her.	

As Table 1 demonstrates, Yolanda’s positioning across the three levels reveals a complex interplay of personal, relational, and socio-cultural contexts. She navigates multiple layers of identity, shaped by her lived experience as a refugee, her social interactions, and the dominant discourse of refugees and teachers.

At the first level of positioning, Yolanda strongly asserts her identity as a teacher, drawing on her previous teaching experience and training farmers in her country. Her positioning at this level illustrates her agency over victimhood, rather than allowing her refugee status to define her solely. Her intentional emphasis on her expertise rather than her refugee background is consistent with the notion that positioning serves to shape how one is perceived and that identity is not a fixed concept but rather emerges through the process of storytelling (Bamberg, 2011). Through narrative construction, she constructs an identity that values professional skills over refugee status and implicitly resists being defined only as a refugee. Additionally, her positioning within the story content aligns with Manzi et al.’s (2024) view that identity is multifaceted and interacts with various aspects that together shape one’s identity.

At the second level of positioning, Yolanda invokes her refugee status to establish authenticity as an insider to us. At the same time, she negotiated this

identity in her classroom practices, as her shared refugee status with her students does not automatically erase the tension of being their teacher. This suggests that positioning is an ongoing process of identity work rather than a one-time discursive achievement (Bamberg, 2011). Within this level, Yolanda’s positioning highlights both the opportunity and the challenge of sharing an identity with her students. Her refugee identity grants her immediate rapport and trust, a concept Bucholtz and Hall (2005) describe as adequation. However, this closeness also poses a pedagogical challenge she must navigate. The question is, how does a teacher who is identical to the authority assert her authority if she positions herself as one of their students? Yolanda navigates this position by fluidly shifting between her roles as a family member and as a teacher. Her case reveals that identity is fluid, relational, and an ongoing process of negotiation (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Additionally, Yolanda’s positioning at this level also illustrates how English teaching within refugee classrooms diverges sharply from English teaching in the mainstream classroom, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Yolanda’s teaching approach vs. the mainstream classroom

Aspects	Yolanda’s Classroom	Mainstream Classroom
Positioning	Co-learner	Authority figure
Power relations	Egalitarian: co-construct knowledge by co-deciding lesson content	Hierarchical: teachers fully control the content
Teaching approach	Trauma-informed approach: providing emotional support for students	Academic outcome is prioritized with minimal or no intervention on students’ emotional background
Student identity	Validates students’ lived experiences	Rarely addresses the students’ personal background

Table 2 reveals that Yolanda’s teaching strategy deviates significantly from mainstream teaching practices because she focuses on promoting students’ agency and recognizing their displacement-related traumas. First, her teaching approach acknowledges her students’ trauma while building epistemic trust through shared lived experiences. She does these to support refugee students who often feel disconnected from others (Baker & Naidoo, 2023). Her role extends beyond teaching language (Cohen, 2023) because she provides psychosocial support, offers empathy, acknowledges her students’ past experiences, and selects teaching materials thoughtfully to avoid causing discomfort and ensure that everyone feels safe and at ease (Khalifa et al., 2015). Yolanda’s methods not only promote equality but also cultivate a warm classroom atmosphere, a crucial factor in teaching refugees (Hayward, 2017). This perspective is invaluable not only in refugee classroom contexts but also for mainstream teachers working with vulnerable students.

At the third level of positioning, Yolanda’s positioning transcends beyond what happens in her story content and relational dynamics to make a claim about who she is in relation to the dominant discourses of refugees and teachers. These two discourses shaped how she found the answer to the question “Who am I” within the broader discourse (Barkhuizen, 2022). We present the interplay of Yolanda’s positioning within the socio-cultural context in Table 3.

Table 3. Yolanda’s positioning vis-à-vis the dominant discourse of refugees and teachers

Socio-cultural discourses	Yolanda’s Positioning
Refugee discourse:	
• Socially isolated	• connected with her students and the refugee learning center
• Vulnerable	• resilient, having professional capital (BA degree, employment experience)
• Passive victim	• agentic, contributes her English skills to her community
English Teacher discourse:	
• Formal credentials	• Experiential knowledge
• BA in teaching English	• BA in Agribusiness
• Professional criteria for initial access to teaching	• Community selection
• Professional career choice	• A means to reclaim identity

As Table 3 reveals, there is a fundamental tension between Yolanda’s positioning and the master narratives of refugees and teachers. In contrast to the mainstream discourse that portrays refugees as vulnerable, often depicting them as socially disadvantaged and isolated (Müller-Funk et al., 2023), Yolanda’s narrative disrupts this portrayal through her academic and linguistic capital, her pre-displacement professional experience as a trainer for farmers, and her current role as a volunteer English teacher in a refugee learning center. Simultaneously, she resists the traditional narrative of academic hierarchy by underscoring that teaching skills are universal, aligning with the notion of adaptive pedagogy across disciplines (Freire, 2000).

While Yolanda might reclaim her agency through her act of resistance, her role as a volunteer teacher can also be read as emblematic of the systemic constraints she seeks to resist. Bourdieu (1986) would argue that without institutionalized cultural capital, Yolanda will find it challenging to transcend her marginalization in this professional discourse. Without teaching credentials, she will remain in a marginal position regardless of her pedagogical skills. Hence, her agency is enacted within a narrow spectrum of opportunity, a limitation that those focusing only on empowerment might overlook. Additionally, her positioning, in which she navigates dominant discourses by using teaching to reclaim her agency, adds distinct layers to her identity construction. To scholars like Malkki (1995), who are cautious about romanticizing the inspirational refugee narrative, Yolanda’s case might create a new archetype of the “super refugee” (Mahrouse, 2021), which might implicitly position other refugees who cannot engage in a similar form of agency as less agentic or inspiring. Notably, through teaching, Yolanda resists the structural barriers that force refugees to remain unseen and socially excluded (Vigil & Abidi, 2018). However, a psychologically oriented stance might suggest that Yolanda’s deep identity investment in a ‘resistance’ mode could lead to psychological distress or emotional burnout if her circumstances change or the avenue to exercise her agency is closed off (Vallerand, 2016).

Finally, the complexity of Yolanda’s story transcends the binary opposition between empowerment and vulnerability. She is neither a passive victim as often depicted in the master narrative, nor a heroic figure of resistance. Rather, Yolanda’s

narrative reveals the tension between individual empowerment and navigating systemic barriers, and how these dynamics shape her identity construction, shedding light on how professional identity is constructed within a refugee context.

Conclusion

At a theoretical level, Yolanda's narrative contributes to the limited literature on positioning and teacher identity in displacement contexts, shedding light on the dynamics of positioning and identity formation in such settings. Our findings demonstrate that being a refugee does not necessarily equate to being powerless and lacking agency. The hardships Yolanda has endured have not deterred her from exercising her agency; instead, they have made her mentally stronger and empowered her to live as a survivor, not a victim. Moreover, Yolanda's narrative challenges the legitimacy of teaching in the mainstream educational landscape, which often privileges credentials and devalues lived experience, while offering a new perspective: that teaching serves as a tool to reclaim her identity and to resist systemic barriers. Additionally, the findings of this study have the potential to positively impact real-world practices and policies for INGOs and other stakeholders involved in refugee issues. Understanding a teacher's narrative, such as Yolanda's story, can help these organizations develop a more informed and empathetic approach tailored to the specific needs of education for displaced learners, ultimately striving towards a more equitable and enriching educational experience for all.

One key aspect of our study is that we do not seek to generalize them to other teachers or contexts, which aligns with similar qualitative studies. Importantly, Yolanda's narrative serves as a success story that does not apply to refugees lacking linguistic and professional capital. Her empowerment story, which focuses on only one small aspect of urban refugees, does not eliminate the challenging realities they face as they navigate the complexities of living in a country that is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which our study may not fully capture. Additionally, it is worth noting that our study relied heavily on interviews as its primary data source. A future study could gain richer insights by combining interviews with classroom observations to examine how teachers' positioning within their narratives is reflected in their classroom practices and teaching approaches.

Beyond the methodological limitations, the findings of our study highlight several considerations for future research. First, we might wonder whether Yolanda's discursive approach in negotiating her teacher authority is a peculiarity or representative of the pedagogical approaches practiced by refugee teachers. A comparative study investigating how different refugee teachers from diverse contexts navigate the tension between their authority as teachers and curriculum goals could yield valuable insights into the pedagogical orientation of refugee teachers. Second, the finding demonstrates that Yolanda negotiated her classroom strategy to foster a friendly classroom atmosphere that catered to the emotional needs of her refugee students. However, this study does not assess the efficacy of this approach. Future studies may explore the impact of such a strategy on students' well-being. Ideally, a longitudinal study that incorporates student voice and classroom observation would provide insights into this issue. As a final thought, we

return to Yolanda's perspective, "I don't come and present as a teacher," which elucidates the kind of teacher required in her classroom setting.

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