



# Toward Co-Design with Refugee Youth: Facilitation Through a Social-emotional Framework

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines facilitator and refugee youth co-design for a summer program and asks: “how do researchers and interns understand ‘facilitation’ and ‘co-design’ in a summer program with refugee youth?” We highlight interactions with Rbekka, a refugee youth who participated in programming since 2015. We share findings that help us understand how expansive social emotional learning (SEL) and co-design create an assemblage of relationships and mutual space of learning that resists adult/child binaries and puts relational care and justice into practice.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Children.**

## KEYWORDS

Co-design, Social-emotional Learning, Facilitation, Refugee

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Existing work urges researchers, practitioners, and—more broadly—adult facilitators, to include ‘youth voice’ and support ‘youth agency’. In response, co-design and participatory research with youth have emerged in out-of-school or afterschool programs

[2]. For many refugee and immigrant youth, they are positioned as recipients of charity and rarely invited to contribute to programming through a co-design process. Positioning refugee and immigrant youth as co-designers critically expands notions of social emotional learning skills that support youth acclimation and mental health [7].

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need to support mental health and practitioners in youth programs and school districts, and practitioners doubled down on SEL as a key framework for supporting youth. Authentic SEL responds to students’ cultural contexts, affirms those contexts, and addresses traumas. SEL toward abolition encourages programs to attend to the cultural contexts of youth to support positive development [9]. However, SEL curriculum often follows rigid scripts and scholars have noted that mainstream SEL falls short of “repairing the cultural contempt of hegemonic miseducation” [5]. Furthermore, SEL curriculum seldom attends to nor affirms the cultural contexts or social conditions of students which negatively impacts the health and wellness of students of color [5, 15, 16]. Numerous reports bridge SEL efforts towards positive development for refugee youth by inviting them as a co-designer for the programs they participate in. Concretely, this means training facilitators to refuse prescriptive views of youth and create openings for youth to draw on their existing skills and experience to co-design. Yet, *how* co-design proceeds without tokenizing youth, what relational interactions emerge, and what facilitative moves support co-design needs further articulation.

In this paper, we explore “how do researchers and interns understand ‘facilitation’ and ‘co-design’ in a summer program with refugee youth?” We highlight interactions with Rbekka, a refugee youth who participated in programming since 2015. We share notices and tensions that help us consider how social emotional learning (SEL) offered a framework for thinking about facilitation and youth co-design.

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## 2 BACKGROUND

In a review of literature on participatory design and participatory action research with youth, [3] identifies a lack of consensus around the meanings of 'co-design' and 'participation'. 'Co-design' is seen as a tool for empowering research participants and intended "to give the end user or directly impacted community a voice in determining their own experiences and futures" (p. 16). 'Participation' falls along a spectrum dependent on context and relationships. Co-design has been aligned with participation that unfolds as a space for mutual learning [3]. That is, participation surfaces as a transfer of knowledge between members of a design team. In this paper, we look at interactions between facilitators and youth that demonstrate shifting ideas around participation and co-design. We locate moments when space opened up for mutual learning and when facilitators supported youth participation as co-designers by drawing on their social emotional learning training to reflect on their practice.

In response to the layered traumas inflicted by a global pandemic, educators, practitioners, and researchers made urgent calls to support the mental well-being of youth through social emotional learning (SEL) [18] and to reimagine teaching and learning that center care and social emotional development [1, 6]. SEL toward abolition propounds practices that center relations of care between educators and youth and acknowledge the complexity of diverse cultural contexts and identities [13]. Abolitionist SEL attunes youth to oppressive material and social conditions, and raises critical consciousness toward transformative justice [4], dreaming of otherworld futurities [10–12] and charting abolitionist paths that lead to collective flourishing [14].

An SEL framework sharpens the relational work needed to support co-design. Adult facilitators play a critical role in supporting youth as co-designers, however, it is not clear how adults and youth negotiate roles and responsibilities together. While well-meaning researchers and adult facilitators assume a hands-off role, this perpetuates notions of 'pure' youth-led engagement [17] that simply does not exist. Therefore, we examine how facilitators made sense of co-design and reflected on their facilitation through a social-emotional learning framework that moves beyond. Our findings illustrate nuanced dynamics and concrete practices that can inform future co-design efforts with youth that support their acclimation and development.

## 3 METHODS

This work is situated in an ongoing research practice partnership with Refugees Around the World (RAW), a nonprofit refugee resettlement organization. The cases discussed draw on a corpus of fieldnotes, memos, audio and video recordings of program planning and implementation sessions, and interviews with adult facilitators since 2017. The research team coded for moments that demonstrated 'facilitation', 'youth co-design', and sensemaking around SEL. We used intercoder reliability by completing multiple rounds of coding the data and interviews in order to come to a shared understanding of relevant moments that represented facilitation and co-design.

From coding we identified reflections from facilitators and interactions with youth that sharpened our insights about how an

SEL framework shapes facilitative practices and supports youth co-design and co-facilitation. We identified moments of messiness and tension, too, when applying SEL frames within facilitative practices for adults and youth. We focus on interactions with a youth named Rbekka to trace how facilitators made sense of their facilitation and how SEL offered a clear shift in this sensemaking over the years and in various iterations of programming and training. From this we offer two cases from 2022 that build on Rbekka's ongoing participation in programming since 2015. In one case, facilitators intervened to position Rbekka as a co-facilitator during planning meetings and in the second case, Rbekka offered a facilitator an alternative recipe for making slime. Ultimately, Rbekka's participation in the program highlighted moments when the roles and responsibilities of adults and youth were brought in productive tension. These instances respond to our question regarding co-design with youth that initiates shifts in facilitation.

## 4 STUDY CONTEXT

The program ran for four weeks, four days a week for three hours. Youth were picked up and dropped off each day by facilitators and programming was held in a library makerspace and classroom on a university campus in a mid-sized city in the midwest. In prior iterations of the summer program, youth were not invited to contribute and adult facilitators did not receive training beyond what was needed to write case notes or fulfill a background check. In previous summers, facilitators were enrolled in college and incentivized to volunteer due to course requirements. In summer 2022, the research team and youth program coordinator piloted a model where youth were invited to be part of a planning team and co-design programming. Anticipating youth joining alongside siblings, the team pursued a model for siblings and families to participate together. Therefore, some youth on the planning team were as young as five years old and joined meetings with older siblings. All youth had been resettled in the U.S. at least three years prior. The planning team consisted of the youth program coordinator, youth program intern, three researchers (two graduate students and one undergraduate), and between 8 to 20 youth.

The goals of the program were to invite youth to co-design their program, center SEL in our relational practices, and have fun. Planning meetings were held virtually to minimize contact and the spread of COVID-19 (summer, 2022) and youth shared their ideas for structuring the program and activities. The youth also visited the lab makerspace for a day to familiarize themselves with the space and tools. Because the researchers recognized the need to re-engage fun and connection due to isolation resulting from the pandemic, we prioritized connecting kids with each other and the adult facilitators by engaging icebreaker activities and playing games. Fun was one way to focus on the social emotional needs of youth and establish relationships in the group that are necessary to sustain co-design work long-term. At the end of our planning, youth decided on a name for the program: Fun Summer Program (FSP).

Prior to the summer program's start, RAW interns received SEL training to understand what it was and how it might shape facilitation practices. SEL training emphasized reflective practices for facilitators to notice their own feelings and responses to youth.

Facilitators were encouraged to bond and establish relationships of mutual trust and respect with each other and to show up authentically for the kids by drawing on their own experiences as refugees or immigrants. Establishing a self-reflective practice and positive facilitator relationships was key to facilitators making sense of SEL skills and values, embodying them, and modeling it for youth.

## 5 BIO:RBEKKA

Rbekka resettled in the U.S. from Iraq with her mother and two younger brothers in 2015 and participated in after school and summer programming. I (Sarah, first author) met Rbekka in 2017 when she was 7 years old. She was outgoing and friendly, often the first kid to rush toward the jump ropes and balls in the gym and start up a game with other kids (Field Notes, 2017). During icebreaker activities, she would blurt out responses and ask David, the youth program supervisor, many questions about the program for the day (Field Notes, 2017). David once commented that it was hard to believe Rbekka was the same quiet girl who rarely spoke when she arrived in 2015 (Field Notes, 2019).

Rbekka was invited to be a part of the core planning team for FSP 2022. At the time, she had technically timed-out of the program's services, but could still choose to opt in if she wished. The researcher who invited Rbekka considered her a potential source of support to other youth who were recently arrived and acclimating themselves in the U.S. Rbekka once shared that she wanted to be a teacher when she grows up (Field Notes, 2021; 2022). Over the years facilitators began engaging Rbekka as a co-facilitator: accepting her offers to help set up materials and the space for activities, connecting her to peers who needed help troubleshooting during hands-on making, or inviting her to share her technical knowledge and experiences with technological tools with the other youth (Field Notes, 2019; 2022).

### 5.1 Case 1: Planning meetings – Invitation to Notice Others as Facilitating Equitable Participation

In prior years, Rbekka's frequent interruptions during instructions or moves to initiate things ahead of the group felt challenging and frustrating at times for adult facilitators in the program (Field Notes, 2018). Facilitators engaged in various responses to Rbekka in order to demonstrate that they heard her while staying mindful of the broader group. Sometimes it was asking her to wait until they finished speaking, other times it was tapping one adult to focus on her (Field Notes, 2018; 2019).

After facilitators underwent SEL training in 2021 and 2022, there was a shift in how they approached including Rbekka. For the planning meetings, the adult team picked up on Rbekka's enthusiasm to lead and facilitate. Rbekka was invited to join the video call for planning meetings early and was encouraged to notice other kids in the space who had not shared anything and invite them to also participate (Field Notes, 2022). The adult facilitation team asked Rbekka to help as a facilitator in the meetings that followed. Rbekka noticed and invited kids who had not spoken during the meeting to participate (Field Notes, 2022). Rbekka's awareness of how much space she took up and how she made space for other kids reflected skills like mindfulness and self-awareness that are core to SEL. By

inviting and positioning Rbekka as a co-facilitator during planning meetings, she began to attend to her peers and this opened up space for more noticing and equitable participation.

### 5.2 Case 2: Slime Activity—The Role of Authority and Acknowledging Power

In summer 2022, one of the interns, Omar, reflected on an interaction with Rbekka when they were making slime together. On a table at the front of the room, Omar had ingredients and was mixing batches to distribute to each child. Rbekka came up to the table and offered an alternative ratio for the slime recipe from the one that Omar was using. Omar recalled feeling overwhelmed by the amount of kids in the room, concerned about distributing and rationing materials, and shut down by Rbekka's interventions, which led to him brushing off Rbekka's suggestions. In our experience as researchers supporting facilitators with hands-on making, we have found that adults often shared similar feelings of being overwhelmed during activities. One intervention has been to position kids as co-facilitators with the activity toward lightening the mental load and tasks for activities that adults often assume. In post-interviews, Omar reflected on what it means to be a facilitator. He recounted this moment and imagined different facilitative moves he would have made to invite Rbekka's interventions as an opportunity to share facilitative roles and expertise. He recognized that in the moment he felt the need to maintain control over a room and "instead of letting go of the idea of control—which is rooted in Western ideas", "walls start[ed] coming up" (Interview, 3/8/2023).

These reflections highlight tensions for adult facilitators as they make sense of SEL that shifts away from emotional or physical control toward practices of bodily autonomy and dignity [8]. In hindsight, Omar shared how he would have approached the role differently. Instead of thinking about facilitation as leadership he would have seen it as "sharing the power". Alluding to religious and cultural associations, Omar also shared how "being older doesn't inherently mean having the power". In the future, he talked about seeing Rbekka's suggestions as a moment to engage her as an equal. These reflections signal a larger, and more complex picture of how co-facilitating with youth and toward abolitionist SEL ends takes shape. That Omar recognized how power is present and at work in the space, signals how he made sense of his own facilitation and imaginings about future facilitative moves that are equitable and rooted in care. Moreover, Omar's reflections begin to open up the complexities of power intertwined with marginalized cultures and religions in the United States.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Interactions with Rbekka demonstrate how facilitator roles and relationships shifted and moved toward supporting participation as a mutual space of learning [3]. Over the course of partnering with RAW, our research team employed various methodological and theoretical frameworks to help shift and shape facilitation practices and the structure of the program. In 2021 at the time of isolation and virtual programming, the team centered SEL and explored connections between SEL and co-design. An SEL framework informed how facilitators and youth connected and it positioned facilitators to reflect on ways they opened up space for youth to contribute

to the design and direction of programming. In this way, we invited youth to co-design and through SEL, prioritized creating an environment for relationships between youth and facilitators to thrive. For example, we found that intentionally recruiting interns that connected with the kids through language and shared cultural frameworks established relationships that made it safe to ask more sensitive questions (Interviews, 2022). Further, as shown in Case 1 we saw how shifts in SEL training helped facilitators enact inclusive practices and an open-endedness not just for activities but in the relationships they built with youth and the invitations they made to participate.

We found that our reflections and practices as facilitators shifted when we navigated moments where youth made contributions that challenged our expectations and assumed practices. This occurred when Rbekka offered a different ratio for the slime recipe but it also shaped the design of the program well before it started. As a STEM and hands-on making focused research group, we hoped to incorporate technological tools and maker activities. Instead, youth in the planning meetings suggested ideas to visit the zoo, make slime, and host a pajama movie night (Field Notes, 2022). The research team moved to support these activities and at the end of the summer, numerous youth on their way home talked about how fun the program was for them (Field Notes, 2022). As we saw in Case 2, facilitators that felt challenged in the moment continued to think about how youth interventions shaped their facilitative. In their reflections, they weighed in cultural and religious contexts of youth that shaped the way they thought about SEL and facilitation. This case helped interns see facilitation and co-design as needing careful attention in moment-to-moment interaction and through reflection. Further, we see moments like this as a reminder of youth agency within the co-design process: when they choose to assert themselves and how facilitators slow down, listen, and reflect.

This work offers clarification around SEL efforts on two levels. The first is SEL efforts that acknowledge and support youth and facilitator wellbeing through co-design. Co-design rooted in abolitionist SEL opens space for dynamic goals, priorities, and dreams that support youth toward meaningful participation. Co-design coupled with expansive SEL highlights the assemblage of relationships across and between youth and adults that resist adult/child binaries and puts relational care and justice into practice. Though not shared in this paper, there were moments when youth engaged with other youth that supported SEL as an assemblage of relationships. For example, when youth came into the lab makerspace, those with prior experiences using tools like 3D printing pens shared their knowledge with others and guided them step by step through the making process (Field Notes, 2022). Youth together came up with the program name “Fun Summer Program”. Second, through SEL training, facilitators were encouraged to embody SEL values and skills themselves thereby integrating it in their facilitation. Through reflections on their feelings and experiences, facilitators modeled SEL skills and were able to rethink their practice to further encourage youth to engage in those same skills and participate. Even after the program, facilitators continued their sensemaking and reflection, which considers how holding relationships at the center of programming had a long-term impact.

## 7 IMPLICATIONS

Co-design is messy. It is not straightforward and not an equal split of work and ideas between youth and adults. Instead, co-design highlights the relationships that are being made, engaged, and reflected upon. Rather than think of co-design as a list of action items that gets assigned, we see co-design as a mutual space of learning where adults and youth work together toward shared and distinct goals. For the adult facilitators in Fun Summer Program, their SEL training positioned them to consider or value the various ways that youth contributed and recognize moments when roles and responsibilities shifted. This surfaced tensions when facilitators found themselves defaulting to practices and assumptions rooted in adultism. Despite challenges with enacting roles interchangeably between youth and adults, we found that an SEL training and framework helped adult facilitators consider interactions and future practices that noticed and honored relationships with youth and moments when they intervened.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Co-design with youth underscores that relationships rooted in care and mutuality are indispensable to the work. Co-design that draws on an expansive SEL framework resists idealized versions where labor and thinking around program designs is neatly and equally distributed. Instead, co-design evolves and develops alongside relationships: resisting binaries of good or bad, expert or novice, useful or not useful, success or failure. As adult facilitators reflect on their relationships to youth and adjust their facilitative practice, we find that goals and implementation—in the moment and imagined—shift accordingly. We hope that this developing work provides a useful framework and considerations for facilitators engaging in co-design with youth to attend to the relational dynamics that make co-design with youth equitable and inclusive.

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