

## **Illuminating the Margins: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Refugee-Background Students' Schooling Experiences**

We share our critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a collaborative conversation among five refugee-background students (RBS) in North Carolina, USA who discussed their high school experiences during a 10-week critical literacy program. We were guided by the research question: how do RBS talk about their high school learning experiences? The study aligns with *Lighting the Way* by showing how RBS illuminate hidden discursive and emotional realities of schooling while envisioning more just educational futures.

CDA is interested in communication with a special focus on discourse and how it contributes to and reinforces, or challenges power differences (Fairclough, 1995; Vine, 2023). By exploring the language features within communication, CDA identifies features such as representations, positionings and ideologies and offers critique of these aspects of social life. We analysed the ways RBS talk about their schooling experiences and what broader aspects of social life, such as how they were/are positioned as learners, might be usefully critiqued.

Drawing on Fairclough (2003), we assembled a CDA toolkit to analyse the language choices in the conversation. The toolkit comprised experiential, expressive, and relational vocabulary including lexical metaphors; language of affect including rising or falling volume in voice, quickened pace, changes in cadence, stress on certain words, and awkward laughter; and epistemic and deontic modality.

Our analysis shows how systemic inequalities, language barriers, and exclusion shaped their school experiences. Specifically, the findings reveal that high school was experienced as stressful, traumatic, and frustrating; however, students also describe how they pushed back against these conditions, demonstrating agency despite inequitable circumstances. Implications for teachers include centering student agency and cultivating learning spaces that affirm identity and value all students' contributions. These implications resonate across contexts, as educators in Australia, like those in the United States, continue to grapple with anti-immigrant sentiment.