

Summary

This writing sample, formatted using MLA Style, examines a unique demographic of people that are underrepresented and in need of advocacy. Children and ELLs are individual groups that each suffer from oppression. Children who are ELLs are therefore doubly oppressed. The intersection of technical communication and oppressed groups of people is a rich area of study that encompasses various aspects of language, culture, power dynamics, and accessibility. It is the modern duty of the technical communicator to seek out and centralize marginalized members of society. Research on minority groups is an integral part of technical communication that can help lead to social justice.

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The Doubly Oppressed: Children as ELLs in the U.S.

When studying Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is easy to consider numerous demographics of oppressed people. However, children in the United States are an oppressed class that rarely gets recognition. Non-native English-speaking children are doubly oppressed in the United States because of both culture and age. The research compiled in this analysis focuses on the discrimination that children face and instructs ESL teachers on how to empower the child ELL by granting them autonomy in the classroom. Young ELLs cannot be liberated in areas of their lives without first being liberated as autonomous people. This analysis evaluates the implication that children benefit from having a sense of control in the classroom, whereas in other areas of their lives they are powerless.

Oppression is a formal, politically determined status. Oppressed classes tend to possess distinguishing physical or cultural traits. Oppressed classes are vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and violence. They experience unequal treatment, have less power over their lives, and are aware of subordination. The attitudes and desires of the oppressed are often manipulated by the conditions of their oppression, so they appear to voluntarily consent to their own oppression (Cudd 17). Children meet numerous official requirements that constitute an oppressed class, but their oppression is not taken seriously. People often express intense disdain for categorizing children as an official oppressed class. When discussing oppression, people tend to compare oppressed groups to other oppressed groups. They believe that, while children are an

obviously disempowered group, vulnerability does not equal oppression. To prove that children are an oppressed class, we need only consult facts. Children are an age-related minority who are prioritized within the context of family only. They are not seen as individuals separate from their parents (Barth and Olsen 3-5). The division between children's rights and parents' rights is therefore convoluted. Children should not be seen as their parents' property, and their wants should be acknowledged, but this is rarely the case. Only five states in the U.S. allow children ages ten years or older to consent to their adoption, and in several states, children's preferences are not considered in custody battles until the child is well above the age to understand their situation and voice their desires. Furthermore, children can be committed to group homes or psychiatric facilities without their consent and without consideration of the child's perspective that conflict between parent and child is caused by parental misconduct. The idea that children are oppressed has largely been rejected outside of the context of child protection and labor laws. The U.S. is the only country in the United Nations that has chosen not to ratify the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC promotes the understanding of children as autonomous, competent human beings. The CRC gives children a voice in court proceedings that affect them and declares children neither property nor objects of charity (3-5). In the United States, children are not seen as members of society and are denied citizen participation. The CRC advocates for a child's right to participation, but, in the U.S., a child's right to participate is overridden by their parents' right to decide for the child (Lee 691). The federal government has never seriously tried to ratify the CRC because they fear that ratification will upset parents and deny them the ability to control their children's lives.

Giving parents and other adults complete control by only valuing adult voices and ignoring children's voices creates a realm of privacy that allows physical and emotional abuse to go

undetected in numerous environments such as the home, school, daycare centers, etc. (Cronin 388). Not treating children as autonomous people causes children to be at an increased risk of exposure to violence. Despite legislation created to protect children against violence, there are exceptions that allow children to experience assault that would be illegal if the victim was an adult (Barth and Olsen 3-5). Corporal punishment against children is widely practiced in United States' homes, and it is still practiced in some schools today. Over 90% of toddlers are spanked or punished in other physical ways, and nearly 50% of adults recall receiving corporal punishment as children, despite substantial research that proves spanking has harmful rather than beneficial effects (Youssef, et al.). Child rearing practices involving physical force differ among cultural groups which can make it difficult for a child to understand if they are being physically abused. Adults in the United States feel anger and disgust toward those legally deemed child abusers. The government claims to protect children from abusers. However, in reality, U.S. society as a whole perpetuates an abuse culture that affects all children and inevitably hinders their emotional development.

Children are passively and actively denied resources. Adults must report other adults for child neglect and/or abuse because children's claims are often overlooked. There are many places that children cannot go alone such as the doctor's office. Most states require parental consent for a child to see a doctor. Furthermore, parents must give permission for a child to consent to sexual education. Children in the U.S. cannot sign a contract or give legal consent regardless of the situation. If a minor gets pregnant, the options are delegated to the parents of the minor rather than the pregnant minor (Barth and Olsen 5). Children face other significant stresses due to powerlessness. They cannot make decisions on issues that affect their futures such as climate change. Research revealed that 82% of children in a 50-child study expressed negative feelings

of fear, sadness, and anger when asked about environmental issues (Strife 37). A majority of children in the study also discussed their concern of an impending apocalypse and/or the end of the world. These results suggest that many children are “ecophobic,” or fearful of environmental problems (37).

To intervene in children’s oppression, Onora O’neal suggests that we must create institutions to monitor those who have, or are responsible for, children in order to enforce children’s rights. The rights of children should be a public concern, not a private matter (445). People who take care of children, whether they be parents, family members, teachers, or nannies/babysitters have obligations to them. Children have a right to care of an appropriate standard that is not always granted to them (447). The official recognition of children as an oppressed class would reap extensive benefits. It could expand legal protections and services for children. Official recognition as an oppressed group draws resources to a group’s population. Ageism is a term used to describe discrimination against people based solely on their age, but nobody ever uses the term to describe the discrimination that children face based on their age. Most current federal aid programs serve older Americans while very few services are available to children or families with children (Barth and Olsen 5). Furthermore, the juvenile justice system is overflowing with opportunities to improve, such as granting children the right to representation to avoid unjust sentences such as life without parole, which continue to be placed on children in the United States (6). Children’s standpoints should be considered to improve the quality of children's services because there have been problems in basing service delivery to children on adult-defined generalizations of children’s needs (Mason 35). Policy recommendations reflect adults’ claims about childhood, not children’s. Even when children’s standpoints are included in research to develop social programs, their voices are “constrained, defined, and measured within

a framework of measures, outcomes, and indicators imbued with the values of their definers who are adults” (35). The ratification of the CRC would help children the most by granting them their human dignity. The CRC has been effective at establishing legal structures around the world that revitalize pre-existing laws on children. Ratification of the CRC would change norms regarding U.S. children for the better, but there is no way of knowing if the United States will ever ratify the CRC. Despite inaction from the government, educators, especially ESL and/or bilingual teachers, must provide students with the critical and emotional tools to navigate injustices in their lives.

Being a child is stressful enough without further worries, but non-native English-speaking children face double the number of burdens that accompany oppression because they are both culturally diverse and underage. These children are not seen as equals to adults at school or in their homes, yet many are tasked with adult duties such as translating documents for their parents, working, etc. They experience pluralism both culturally and as people. Children feel like people and are expected to perform duties like other members of society, yet they are simultaneously excluded as members of society. Children experience stress like the adults around them, but their stress is often ignored or diminished by adults. They cannot be liberated in society if they cannot be liberated in their personal lives. Anti-racist pedagogy teaches ESL instructors to strive to incorporate students’ cultures into class curriculum, but, before that can happen, children must ultimately be treated like human beings. It is imperative for instructors to build relationships with students’ parents to better understand the culture of the student, but instructors must remember that the parents are not the student. The student is their own person with their own needs, likes, and desires that they themselves can express. If they cannot efficiently express their needs, it is the teacher’s job to provide them with opportunities to

express their needs. Voicing their needs to adults can be extremely scary, especially to children whose cultures emphasize the division between children and adults. There is extensive literature on home vs. school relations and the effects of ethnicity and social class on children's academic performance. Instructors must respect the emotions that come with the child living a cultural double life and the etiquette that has been ingrained into them at home. In the first years of life, children interact solely with their parents and other family members, learning power structures and experiencing justice and/or injustice in the context of their homes. Being treated as an equal to an adult may be extremely uncomfortable for them at first and might take some time to adjust. They may feel that they are disrespecting the teacher, so the teacher must continually reinforce the idea that the child is not being disrespectful.

Many U.S. classrooms do not grant students autonomy. The lack of autonomy in the classroom is reflected by the lack of critical thinking used in the classroom. The teacher typically outtalks the students three to one (Cohen and Grant 183). Teachers ask the questions and fish for short answers from the students. Meaningful discussion is typically discouraged among elementary students. Teacher-led classrooms disserve children, especially ESL students. Instructors of teacher-lead environments tend to see children as buckets that they can dump information into, robbing them of their humanity. According to research, many teachers believe that their sole responsibility is to present material to students (183). Teachers must change their ways of instruction to grant young students autonomy. Instructors can begin to rectify the rights of children by empowering students. Empowerment is "the event of critically appropriating knowledge to broaden one's understanding of themselves and their place in the world, as well as transform their situation for the better" (Sleeter 3). Instructors should educate their students about oppression and injustice in age-appropriate ways and open the conversation for them to

voice their thoughts. They may not be able to speak their minds freely at home, so it is imperative to give them the space and language tools, such as relevant vocabulary words, to speak their minds in the classroom. There are numerous other ways that teachers can grant students autonomy as well. Instead of following strict lesson plans, teachers can listen to their students, contemplate their needs, and formulate assignments to best serve their needs.

Instructors who want to elevate children's voices traditionally apply participatory methods in the classroom (Berson 4). The Participatory Approach, created by Freire, aims to empower students through *doing* rather than traditional teacher-led instruction where students sit quietly and listen without actively engaging. Through the participatory approach, students take ownership of their learning. Cooperative learning, i.e., students collaborating with other students, is encouraged in the participatory classroom. The teacher can listen as the children discuss with each other, and many times a generative theme will appear. Generative themes are topics that interest students. Children learn best when the classroom topics interest them or are relevant to their lives. Another way to uncover generative themes in an ESL classroom is to give students a loose prompt to illustrate such as, "Draw your best day ever." The teacher can come up with whatever prompt they want, but they must make sure that the prompt is not too specific because a specific prompt will limit the students' interpretations, and the children will not have as much to talk about when sharing their drawing with the class.

Research compiled by the CDC shows that students are more comfortable when they feel their teachers are open to their ideas and allow them to make choices regarding their learning and schoolwork ("Student Autonomy and Empowerment"). Some instructors grant autonomy to children by allowing them to help create the classroom rules. Another way instructors grant autonomy to children is by letting them temporarily assume the role of the teacher. Furthermore,

instructors should allow children to make choices frequently. If numerous generative themes arise during classroom discussion, instructors should allow students to vote on which theme they would like to learn more about. Simple changes in a classroom will boost children's self-esteem and reinforce to them that they are people.

Unfortunately, it is not feasible to completely alleviate the oppression experienced by children, especially non-native English-speaking children, but helping students develop resilience is one of the few ways that instructors can work toward protecting children while respecting their autonomy (John 21). Edith Grotberg created a set of concepts derived from the International Resilience Project that can be used in a variety of contexts of work with children. Grotberg defined resilience as "a universal capacity which allows a person, group, or community to prevent, minimize, or overcome the damaging effects of adversity" (21). Through a study made up of 589 children across the world, Grotberg concludes that every country draws from a common set of factors to promote resilience in children. The three most common resilience factors are "I have," "I can," and "I am" (21). The phrase "I have" references a child's social capital, as in supportive relationships that the child can call upon when needed. Sometimes students do not have a supportive person in their lives, and it becomes an educator's duty to fill that hole as best as they can. It is important for students to know that they can communicate with their teacher when they are feeling sad, angry, or frustrated because it affirms the child's ability to use support (21). The phrase "I can" references a child's competence, or what they feel that they can do. "I can" encourages children to think for themselves and/or face challenges and danger. A child's view of their own competence relates to their feelings of worthiness. The phrase "I am" relates to the child's sense of self in the present, perception of what they contribute to unfolding events, and whether they are equipped to conquer difficult circumstances. The three

factors aid in granting children autonomy and position children to be agents of their own protection (22).

The compiled research of this analysis points out the oppression that children, especially non-native English-speaking children, face in their lives. To empower children, adults must accept that children are the experts of their own worlds. Children should be allowed to be involved in all decisions that affect their lives to have a more equal role in power dynamics with parents and other adults. This does not mean children should be able to make decisions completely by themselves, but that their voice should be acknowledged during decision-making processes. Society must shift from paternalistic values that teach that adults are all-knowing, and children know nothing. When talking about oppressed groups, the term “empowerment” is used a lot, yet empowering a group that is not formally classified as oppressed is not simple. The notion of “empowerment” implies that without adult-designed participatory methods, children cannot exercise their agency (Berson 5). Therefore, power imbalances still exist in research that is aimed to help children. Power is often seen as a commodity that can be transferred between individuals, but power is not an object that can be possessed. Power is a process that is reinforced through interactions (5).

As doubly oppressed individuals, non-native English-speaking children are granted little to no autonomy. Instead of intensifying students’ feelings of powerlessness, instructors can empower students by allowing them to express themselves and make choices. Instructors cannot prevent oppression that children face outside of the classroom, but instructors can help students gain the emotional tools to endure oppression. Until the United States takes further action, the classroom may be the only place where children feel like people.

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