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# Karen–Burmese Refugees’ Cultural Perception of Formal Education

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Karen–Burmese Refugees’ Cultural Perception of Formal Education

by  
Veronica Williams

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Veronica Williams under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Veronica Williams

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Name

January 24, 2017

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Date

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## **Abstract**

Karen–Burmese Refugees’ Cultural Perception of Formal Education. Veronica Williams, 2017: Applied Dissertation, NOVA Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: refugees, English language learners, students with interrupted formal education, refugee parents

In the U.S. the population continues to diversify as refugees find residence within its borders. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Refugee Resettlement Statistics (2012) of those refugees fourteen thousand and twenty identified themselves as Karen refugees from Burma. In the context of education, teachers are confronted with the language development of English Language Learners (ELLs). At the researchers school site the ELLs population include; immigrants, refugees, and Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). Although it is known that refugee students have limited formal education, which creates difficulty for them to access content and develop their English language proficiency (Decapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009), there was a paucity of data of the cultural differences of Karen refugees’ parents experiences with formal education systems compared to those of other refugees. The researcher conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) case study grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) with the aim to analyze the personal experience of Karen refugee women who relocated to an urban city located in the northeastern United States as parents of students in the U.S. public school system. After the conclusion of the study following dominant themes arose: family, limited formal education, communication and cultural representation. One major implication constituted the need for inclusion of families’ and students’ cultural knowledge into school systems and curriculum. Considering the cultural gap, it is important that teacher training programs and administrators prepare teachers with strategies for incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into their pedagogy. Another implication of the study was communication between multilingual refugee families and American schools. Institutions working with refugee communities should prioritize interpreting and translation.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Contextual Information**

The United States of America is viewed as the land of opportunity, but is it the reality in the U.S. school systems for refugee children who have been forced out of their home countries due to war or tragedy and misplaced into a foreign system with limited formal education? The intent of this study was to examine the educational challenges Burmese-Karen refugee students with interrupted formal education, face at the researcher's elementary school. The elementary school's population is 40% English Language Learners (ELLs). The school serves students in grades Kindergarten-6 with over 600 students.

### **Description of the Problem**

The U.S. population continues to diversify as more immigrants and refugees find residence within its border's. In 2012, the United States had 58,238 refugees from across the world resettle in their borders. Fourteen thousand and twenty were Karen refugees from Burma. Two hundred and fifty-five of those Karen refugees were resettled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (U.S. Department of Education, Refugee Resettlement Statistics, 2012).

This trend affects the educational system as the need for Second Language Education increases. Within the educational system, ethnic Karen students are identified as English Language Learners. As indicated above, there are two distinct types of ELLs, those with formal education in their first language and those with interrupted formal education. Decapua and Marshall (2007) pointed out that a "key factor that influences ELLs' academic success is their prior exposure to literacy and formal education" (p. 160)

ELLs who did not have exposure to literacy and formal education had difficulty accessing the content in the curriculum and developing their English proficiency. Hos (2012, p. 50) pointed out that “many refugees have arrived from war-torn countries or refugee camps where they have had little or no opportunity to engage in the type of learning that is valued in U.S. schools” (p. 50). This description identified refugees, as the highest need ELLs in the U.S. school system including refugees from Burma of Karen ethnicity.

At the elementary school where the researcher is a teacher, there were English Language Learners with formal education and literacy skills in their first language and those with limited formal education in their first language. According to Decapua and Marshall (2011), the latter group has greater difficulty in acquiring content and developing English language proficiency. Of those students at the elementary school with limited formal education, the majority were refugees from the Karen State in the Union of Myanmar (Burma). These students had suffered psychological and physical trauma, which widened the gap between them and their peers (Hos, 2012).

At the researcher’s elementary school, 24 students were identified as Beginning English Language Learners in Grades 3-6. After receiving ESL instruction for two report periods, these students’ growth was measured using the WIDA MODEL (Gottlieb, Cranley, & Cammileri, 2014). The WIDA MODEL is an assessment used to measure students’ language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The composite score gives a holistic view of the student’s English language proficiency based on the four domains. Eleven of the 24 students were Karen refugees from Burma. They made an average of .4 composite levels of growth on the WIDA MODEL (Gottlieb, Cranley, &

Cammileri, 2014). The other 13 English Language Learners made an average of 1.52 composite levels of growth on the WIDA MODEL.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem studied in this dissertation is the reasons for the English literacy proficiency gap between refugees from the Karen State in Union of Myanmar (Burma) and other English Language Learners at the researcher's elementary school. Although it is known that refugee students have limited formal education, which creates difficulty for them to access content and develop their English language proficiency (Decapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009), there is a paucity of data of the cultural differences of Karen refugees' parents experiences with formal education systems compared to those of other refugees. From observation of Karen refugees, there was a need for further research to better understand the Karen refugee parents' experiences with the education system in the United States and how it affects their children.

### **Audience**

This study may have an impact on educational practitioners and Karen refugee students by helping practitioners better understand Karen refugee students' unique needs and provide educational supports that will allow these students to be academically successful. The findings of the study are meant to contribute to the body of educational research providing a basis for theorizing and further research about the special needs of refugee children in the education system.

### **About the Researcher**

The researcher is the ESL teacher/coordinator at an elementary school in an urban city in the northern United States, and the school is the site of the study. As the ESL

teacher and site ESL coordinator, the researcher works closely with the Migrant Education and Refugee Resettlement agencies that work with Burmese-Karen Refugees.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experience Burmese-Karen refugees had with the U.S. public school system in a Northeastern urban city in the context of students who perform at a lower English proficiency attainment as compared to other ELLs in the school. This was done by interviewing Burmese-Karen refugee students' parents.

### **Definitions of Major Concepts and Terms**

*Karen Refugees* are refugees from the Union of Myanmar formally referred to as Burma. Karen people are an ethnic group from the Karen state in Burma along the Union of Myanmar/Thailand Border (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2011). Karen refugees have sought refuge in camps along the border in Thailand and some have resettled in the United States and Australia.

*SIFE* – Students with Interrupted Formal Education refers to the population of English Language Learners who have “experienced lack of schooling due to war, migration, lack of educational facilities, cultural dictates or attended schools in their home country that lacked highly trained teachers and resources” (Decapua et al., 2009, p. 2).

*ESOL* - English for Speakers of Other Languages (Philmore, 2011).

*ESL* – English as a Second Language (Miller, 2009)

*ELL* – English Language Learners (Decapua & Marshall ,2011).

*ASR* - Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Philmore, 2011).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Theoretical Perspective

The theory based on the role of culture and society on the development of the individual's higher order thinking is the sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky (1978). This theory was primarily used to study the mechanism by which children's relatives, community, society, and culture have on their ability to develop higher order thinking and learning skills. Sociocultural theory indicates that learning is twofold: the social level and the individual level. The implication is that children develop skills from their interactions with people around them who have more advanced knowledge and skills and through their culture first, eventually leading them to apply acquired skills independently (Lantolf, 2006). Sociocultural theory supports the framework of culturally responsive teaching in the instruction of a second language (Lantolf, 2006). Lantolf (2006) stated that "words construct thinking, and human learning and development are inherently embedded in social relations" (p. 660). Understanding and modifying instruction based on students' culture and their experience with formal education systems impacts the effectiveness of developing English language proficiency and academic success. While examining the effectiveness of second language instruction, the reporting and evaluation of the following studies look at how or whether researchers and practitioners use students' culture and community to support students' learning.

As the U.S. immigrant population continues to grow, educational policy and strategies develop to support the diverse need of these students. This population makes up the English Language Learners in U.S. school systems (Hornberger & Link, 2012). Decapua and Marshall (2011) classified these ELLs into two groups: ELLs with literacy

in their first language and Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). English Language Learners with literacy in their first language have the ability to transfer literacy skills when they are learning English while literacy is another language barrier for SIFE learners when trying to acquire English proficiency (Decapua & Marshall, 2011).

### **History of Bilingual Education in the United States**

Bilingual education in the United States has been an issue of political debate since the country was founded. Researchers Ovando (2003), Kim, Hutchinson, and Winsler (2013), and Nieto (2009) have identified political and social events, which have affected the policy of bilingual education in the United States of America.

Ovando (2003) has identified four major periods in the American bilingual education history. These periods include the Permissive Period from the 1700s to the 1880s, the Restrictive Period from 1880s to the 1960s, the Opportunist Period from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the Dismissive Period from the 1980s to present day (Ovando, 2003).

During the Permissive Period in the 18th and 19th century the federal government was uninvolved in the languages which were taught in public and private schools. During this time large European communities developed in the United States. These communities “promoted their language, religion, and cultural loyalties” (Ovando, 2003, p. 4), while still participating in the civil life of the United States. In the 19th century these communities fought for pluralism, and many states authorized bilingual education in public and private schools (Ovando, 2003). Some of the languages that were taught in public and private schools in the 19th century included German, Dutch, Polish, Czech, French, Italian, and Spanish. Ovando stated that, although the policies were tolerant for

European immigrant languages, the policies, “neglected the treatment of conquered and colonized groups and non-White immigrants” (p. 3).

During the Restrictive Period from the 1880s to the 1960s the United States began to develop repressive policies towards bilingual education. Ovando (2003) discussed the repressive Indian language policy, which was “part of a cultural genocide campaign to civilize Indians” (p. 5). Another major policy in the late 19th century that led to outlawing bilingual education was the founding of the Immigration Restriction League. In the Early 20th century Americans began to fear “the importation of foreign ideologies into the United States,” (Ovando, 2003, p. 5) which then led to the Naturalization Act of 1906. The 1906 Naturalization Act pushed assimilation into American society by issuing a policy that all immigrants must be able to speak English to be naturalized citizens.

The biggest catalyst of the Restrictive Period was World War 1. Ovando (2003), stated that the war led to anti-German hostility and a push towards monolingualism in the classroom. German was quickly eliminated from schools and was portrayed as un-American. This led to state policies that dictated English-only instruction (Ovando, 2003). During this time immigrants and English language learners participated in Americanization classes, which “had an ethnocentric stance presenting U.S. cultural patterns as being more desirable than the immigrants’ ancestral cultures and languages” (Ovando, 2003, p. 5). During the early 20th century the “sink or swim method” (Ovando, 2003, p. 6) was the predominant method of instruction for English-language learners.

The 1960’s brought the Cold War and the civil rights movement to the United States and led to the Opportunist Period. Ovando (2003) stated that after the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957, the federal government created the National

Defense Education Act in 1958. With a push towards science and math education, also came foreign-language education. Ovando (2003) emphasized that, although foreign language education for English monolinguals was promoted, school policies were “destroying through monolingual English instruction the linguistic gifts that children from non-English language backgrounds bring to school” (p. 7).

Linguistic diversity began to reemerge in public and private schools in the 1960s in the wake of the Civil Rights movement (Ovando, 2003). As a result of the Civil Rights movement in 1965, the Immigration Act terminated the Naturalization Act. After the Immigration Act, the United States had an influx of Asian and Latin immigrants, which created a need for bilingual education. In their brief history of bilingual education Kim, Hutchinson, and Winsler (2013) pointed out that in 1968 Congress passed an amendment to the Title VII Elementary Education Act known as the Bilingual Education Act. This act allocated funds from the federal government for bilingual education programs for English Language Learners. Kim, Hutchinson, and Winsler (2013) noted that nonetheless it “did not require schools receiving funding to actually use a second language in the classroom” (p. 4). Advocates for bilingual education for ELLs fought the legal system stating the language minority students’ rights were being violated. In 1974 the Supreme Court found in the case of *Lau v Nichols* that “the equal treatment of English-Speaking and non-English speaking students did not constitute equal education opportunity and, therefore, violated non-English speaking students’ civil rights” (Ovando, 2013, p. 9). The Supreme Court reasoned that the “responsibility to overcome language barriers that impede full integration of students falls on the school board and not the parents or children” (Nieto, 2009, p. 64). After the court’s decision in *Lau v. Nichols*, the ruling



“brought about further legislation to ensure that ELLs received services to help them succeed” (Kim et al., 2013, p. 4). The *Lau v. Nichols* decision influenced the development of bilingual education. The act stated that all school districts must provide bilingual education when there are at least 20 ELLs of the same language present as well as ESL learners so that these students also develop language proficiency (Ovando, 2013).

Another case during the Opportunist Period was *Castaneda v. Pickard* in 1981. This case solidified the guidelines that school districts must follow to provide adequate instruction for English Language Learners. Ovando (2013) highlighted a three step test used to determine whether school districts were taking action which included: “The school must be anchored in sound educational theory, adequate resources and personnel must be evident in the school program and the school program must reflect sound practices and results” (p. 10). Programs that developed during the Opportunist Period include the two-way immersion program model (Kim et al., 2013), structured immersion programs, where native languages are not used, but specialized ESL instruction is provided, including partial immersion programs transitional bilingual programs and developmental bilingual education (Ovando, 2003).

The tide would change again in the 1980s during the Dismissive Period. Ovando (2003) stated that the “politics of language education during the Reagan and George W. Bush administration supported anti-bilingual education” (p. 12), such as the No Child Left Behind Act that encourages the mainstreaming of ELLs into English-only classrooms before they reach English Proficiency. Activists across the country began pushing for the return of the “sink or swim” (Ovando, 2003, p. 6) method at a time when language minority populations continued to increase. In 1996, Congress attempted to pass

a law that would have given “non-English speakers only two years to learn English, increased funding for English immersion programs, and given preferential funding to programs implementing the 2-year limit, thus curtailing the establishment of continuation of two-way bilingual programs” (Ovando, 2003, p. 13). A defender of bilingual education in the 1990s, President Clinton, pushed for the elimination of this law.

Ovando (2003) stated that although research supports the effectiveness of two-way bilingual education, and that the Supreme Court has found that it is a constitutional right for English language learners to have bilingual education, there continues to be political resistance. This is evident, according to Ovando (2003), by proposed policies in the 1990’s such as “English Only, U.S. English, English First, Proposition 187, and Proposition 227 seen collectively as instruments of the politics of resentment toward massive immigration countries, especial Asia and Latin America” (p. 14). Kim, Hutchinson, and Winsler (2013) argued that while the “United States is concerned with its standing in the global market, but remains less concerned with providing children with the language tools necessary to be competitive in the global market,” all children, not only English-language learners, will be at a disadvantage compared to their peers in the global market.

### **Bilingual Education in the United States**

Hornber and Link (2012) stated that one in five students in the United States is the child of an immigrant and that in the years 1995-2005 the English Language Learner population grew 56%. Although, according to Hornber and Link, it is known that the ELL population is growing, there has been little policy developed to support bilingual education that develops English proficiency and fosters first language literacy. The

authors' study questioned how educational policy could "reorient to build on students' rich varied language practices to facilitate successful school experiences and greater academic achievement" (p. 261). They collected data from bilingual and multilingual programs from around the United States in four different school sites where 70% of the schools' lower elementary students were Spanish speakers. The total number of students in the study was not identified in the journal article. Observations and interviews were conducted at the four school sites. They compared the success of students from ELLs building biliteracy with ELLs in English-only frameworks. After completing a qualitative study they conclude that ELLs with literacy in their native language have more resources to achieve academic success than those without.

### **International Bilingual Education**

Bilingual education research has been conducted internationally as well. Zhang and Koda (2014) conducted a study in Northeastern China with native Chinese speakers who were learning English as a foreign language. Zhang and Koda referred to the current research that analyzes bilingual education. The researchers discussed how current research found that the development of morphological awareness in language learners' first language transfers and develops the learners' second language. Zhang and Koda (2014) concluded the need for further investigation since the research focused only on one particular type of morphological awareness such as the derivational morphology in English and Spanish and the compound awareness in Chinese and English.

Zhang and Koda (2014) proposed two research questions to guide their inquiry: "to what extent do compound and derivational awareness contribute to reading comprehension in L1 Chinese as well as L2 English" (p. 60); and "Can the two types of

morphological awareness in L1 be transferred to facilitate reading comprehension in L2 and vice versa” (p. 60).

The researchers used a quantitative method and collected data through a questionnaire, nonverbal group tests using Raven’s standard progressive matrices, and the following tasks: morphological, affix, compound structure, morpheme discrimination, picture selection, and story comprehension. The participants in the study included 245 sixth-grade students from a public elementary school in Northeast China: 136 were boys and 109 were girls. All of the participants spoke Mandarin Chinese as their native language and had four classes in English a week for four years. At the time of the study each participant had previously received 350 hours of formal education in English language and literacy.

At the conclusion of the study Zhang and Koda (2014) observed that when compound awareness was explicitly taught in Chinese, students were able to successfully transfer the skill in English. The researchers found that “Chinese compound awareness contributed uniquely to English reading comprehension” (p. 70). The researchers noted that Chinese and English share compounding as a productive word formation process and may account for the transferability of the skill. On the other hand, when derivational morphology was explicitly taught in Chinese it did not transfer over to derivational morphology in English. The researchers concluded that “derivational morphology is productive in and typical of English, but Chinese has only a small number of derivational affixes” (Zhang & Koda, 2014, p. 70), and may be a contributing factor to the lack of transferability. This study stresses the importance of literacy in the students’ first language for the development of literacy proficiency in their second language. Another

inference they highlighted was the importance of teaching similar morphologies between languages when developing a students' second language literacy proficiency.

### **Education in Burmese-Karen Refugee Camps**

Researchers have also been examining the education that language learners are receiving in refugee camps abroad before they are resettled in the United States, Australia and United Kingdom. Oh and Van Der (2008) stated the importance of the educational system in refugee camps along the Burma-Thailand border with Karen refugees. Oh and Van Der Stouwe determined that, although the educational policies and practices in place support inclusion, other components of the current educational models have an exclusionary effect and inflame ethnic conflict in these camps. For example, Christian Karen people represent the majority of staff in refugee camp schools and have often marginalized Muslim and Buddhist Karen refugees. The educational systems in the camps prohibited married and/or pregnant teens from attending schools, although in the camps "adolescents frequently opt to marry" (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008, p. 601). The study is based on data collected from six of these refugee camps on the border of Thailand and Burma of the Karen ethnic group. The data were collected through interviews of 182 of these Karen refugees and were analyzed through the lens of the three dimensions of the analytical framework of inclusion: access to education, quality, and educational management structures (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008). After the study was completed, the survey results indicated the three dimensions of the analytical framework of inclusion are not sufficiently supported. For example, although education is provided in the camp, cultural norms within the ethnic groups keep pregnant adolescents from participating in programs. The current programs are underfunded, thus affecting the

quality, and the programs are managed in a Burmese traditional school setting where instructors' personal beliefs further alienate Karen ethnic subgroups, according to Oh and Van Der Stouwe (2008). With the inconsistency of the programs and the exclusionary nature of the current education programs, it was concluded that Karen refugees entering the United States, Australia, or United Kingdom had little and/or interrupted formal education.

### **Instructional Effectiveness**

Noting that many refugees, such as the Karen refugees from Burma have limited or interrupted formal education, the researcher has concluded that it is vital to examine research that focuses on educational strategies used for supporting English Language Learners with interrupted formal education. Gahungu, Gahungu, and Luseno (2011) indicated that some research has been done to address the needs of students with limited and interrupted education and strategies for supporting them in the U.S. school system. However, Gahungu, Gahungu, and Luseno argue there is a need for more information on refugee students who have parents who are illiterate in their first language, and/or who have been removed from their culture, and/or who have been traumatized by war, and/or who have received little-to-no formal education, and/or who have little understanding of school norms. The authors identified these students as “Culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE)” (p. 3). The authors' research problem was focused on the “need for effective integration of students who come from a different cultural context” (Gahungu et al., 2011, p. 3) into U.S. Schools. Their research focus was on what strategies teachers and support professionals can use to effectively integrate culturally displaced students with truncated formal education into U.S. schools. Gahungu

et al. collected interview data from four Burundian refugee families: information on current-state educational systems, students' cultural backgrounds, language, highest level of schooling in their refugee camps, the students' ages upon arrival, the grades the students were placed in, the grades attended, whether they dropped out, whether they enrolled in ESL, and whether they received GED instruction. Gahungu et al. concluded that the current foundation of education in the United States does not support these culturally displaced students with truncated formal education and therefore these students are unable to reach their full educational potential. The authors further concluded that educators who used the following principles helped students reach their full educational potential: teachers and the school community working together as a family, a meaningful learning process, oral transmission of materials, group learning and shared responsibilities, accelerated learning, and empowering culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (Gahungu et al., 2011).

Another study that examines the instructional effectiveness for refugee students with interrupted formal education was conducted by Decapua and Marshall (2011). The authors observed that most English Language Learners receive English as Second Language instruction based on the written word. However, they argued, this form of instruction does not support the subgroup of English Language Learners referred to as Students with Interrupted Formal Education since they lack literacy in their native language. The written word becomes another barrier for those who haven't broken the code in their native language and therefore are unable to transfer literacy skills. They investigated what instructional model teachers can use to adapt their instruction to facilitate the active engagement of SIFE learners. Decapua and Marshall collected data

from one classroom with an unspecified number of SIFE and a teacher piloting a new instructional model referred to as the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP). Decapua and Marshall find that the current strategies used to instruct English Language Learners is firmly grounded in western-style schooling and does not adequately support SIFE learners. The authors concluded that when instructors use the MALP their instruction is more effective for these students.

Another study that sheds some light on effective forms of instruction for refugees with interrupted formal education comes from Miller (2009) who identified within the English Language Learner population a specific group of learners that have challenges accessing grade-level content. Although ESL instruction is implemented, refugee students are struggling because, according to Miller, they are “facing the compounded difficulties of minimal literacy in their first language, learning complex content in a new language and struggling with limited science vocabulary and conceptual development due to interrupted schooling” (p. 572). Miller was investigating what pedagogical approach and educational resources would be required to support science content for English Language Learners and SIFE learners. Miller collected data from focus group interviews with two ESL teachers and one science teacher, 23 students’ work samples and a student/teacher questionnaire. Miller’s review of the 23 student questionnaires at the end of the study showed that students rated the academic support resources designed by the author as either useful or very useful. This study indicated that diagrams, word activities and expanded dictionaries that include picture scaffolds assist ELLs with limited formal education to access science content (Miller, 2009).



Studies on instructional effectiveness for students with interrupted formal education have also been done in the United Kingdom. Philmore (2011) examined the importance of English language acquisition for refugees in the UK “since language forms the fundamental barrier to employability” (p. 318). Currently, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the government-funded program aimed at developing refugees’ English language proficiency. Philmore’s study focused on whether current ESOL programs developed by the Learning and Skills Council were effectively increasing the English proficiency of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ASR). Philmore conducted interviews with refugees and ESOL instructors and collected statutory data recording retention and achievement of ASR learners. The author used this information to determine whether the system in place was meeting the needs of the ASR learners. All interviewers collecting data were multilingual and trained on research ethics. One hundred and thirty-eight ASR learners from 20 different countries of origin were interviewed. Philmore indicated that all participants in the interviews viewed learning English as a main priority. Although all interviewees found ESOL to be essential, their satisfaction with the ESOL classes were low: “27% of the communicators dropped out, 34% of the improvers dropped out and 43% of the higher learners left their courses” (Philmore, 2011, p. 323). The quantitative data showed that, at the entry level, 63.2 % of the ASR learners passed the ESOL exam, at level 1, 59.28% passed the ESOL exam at level 3. Only 40% met the ESOL exams standards at the highest level. These results indicate that the current ESOL programs in the UK developed by the Learning and Skills Council are not meeting the needs of most ASR learners.

Australian researchers joined in on studying the instructional effectiveness of curriculum being used with students with interrupted formal education. Miller and Windle (2010) stated that current research on refugee students has focused mainly on their welfare needs. Although this research is important to understand refugee students' needs, according to Miller and Windle (2010), it "has not articulated pedagogical strategies to inform language and literacy learning" (p. 31) for refugee-background students. Miller and Windle's focus was to determine how existing literacy pedagogy frameworks were supporting low-literacy-refugee-background or struggling ESL students. Miller and Windle collected data on six current programs, which were designed to support low-literacy ESL students using a rubric based on the work of Cummins (2010), which identifies three key areas of attributes for a school identified as being effective for English Language Learners. Miller and Windle determined that no current program reviewed fully meets the diverse needs of refugee students with limited formal education. After the authors reviewed the analysis of the six current programs, they determined that of the three key areas of attributes for school which are effective for ELLs, as identified by Cummins, the six programs met the first two key areas: coherent school organization/leadership and affirmation of student community and identity. Miller and Windle concluded from the data that the current programs need further development to support the third key area—formal instruction designed to develop linguistic and metacognitive awareness—to successfully support the learning of low-literacy refugee students.

Lesniewska and Pichette (2016) examined instructional effectiveness with regard to preschool-aged learners. Lesniewska and Pichette found that there was a paucity of

research around the second language acquisition of preschool-aged English Language Learners in a preschool setting, and that “after closer inspection, of some 2200 papers on second language acquisition less than 1% involved children who did not know how to read or write” (p. 18).

The research questions that guided the inquiry of Lesniewska and Pichette (2016) were: “Are words presented in songs better than those presented in stories, Do combined input sources (stories and songs) yield better recall than a single source of input, are words for animate concepts better recalled than those for inanimate concepts, and are children who are above average in L1 (first language) lexicon to be better at learning L2 (second language) words” (p. 22).

The participants in the researchers study included 24 children. Fourteen participants were boys and 10 participants were girls. The sample’s ages ranged between 39-59 months old with an average age of 48.4 months. The location of the study was a day care facility in Quebec, Canada. The participants’ first language was French and they had limited exposure to English prior to the study.

Lesniewska and Pichette (2016) used a quantitative method in which they measured the participants’ outcomes using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in both French and English to establish a baseline and measure the growth after the study. The study involved four weekly group meetings where a research assistant used story telling and songs to teach a second language. All weekly group meetings were led by one research assistant who received training from the researchers prior to the study.

The researchers found that 39% of the participants were able to recall vocabulary that had been presented in a story and that 25% of the participants were able to recall

vocabulary that had been presented in a song based on the Peabody Vocabulary Test in English (Lesniewska & Pichette, 2016). According to these results the researchers concluded that words presented in stories were recalled better than those presented in song.

The researchers (Lesniewska & Pichette, 2016) also sought to determine whether recall would be higher when vocabulary was present in both songs and stories. The results of the study indicated that 36% of the participants were able to recall vocabulary that had been presented in both stories and songs, while 31% of the participants were able to recall vocabulary when presented via one input source. The researchers found that the difference was not significant when trying to determine whether recall was better when the participants were exposed to vocabulary in stories and songs, versus when exposed to vocabulary from one input source.

Another question the researchers sought to answer was whether animate concepts would be recalled more often than inanimate concepts. Lesniewska and Pichette (2016) found that 45% of participants recalled animate concepts while 25% of the participants recalled inanimate concepts. Based on these findings the researchers concluded that animate concepts were better recalled for beginning second language learners.

Finally, the researchers sought to determine whether children with an above average lexicon in their first language would acquire second language vocabulary at an accelerated rate. The researchers found that there was “no significant correlation between L1 (first language) lexicon and L2 (second language) recall” (p. 28).

The results of this study provide some evidence that hearing language through story telling and songs can build the second language vocabulary for second language

learners who can not read or write in their in their first language. However, the low percentages 39%, 25%, and 36% show that this type of instruction did not support more than half of the participants in their acquisition of a second language.

### **Assessing Language Learners**

In an article in *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices*, Fairbairn and Fox (2009) noted how the English Language Learner populations in the United States and Canada have grown at a rapid rate. In the United States the number of immigrant children identified as ELLs rose more than 57% from 1996 to 2006 (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009). Fairbairn and Fox stated that by 2006, 10% of the total school population were ELLs. In Canada the ELL population continued to grow as well. In 2006, the ELL population rose from 20-50% in Canada (Fairbairn & Fox, 2011). Fairbairn and Fox (2009) discussed that the “similarity between the United States and Canada is that the challenges associated with educating increasing numbers of ELLs have been exacerbated by educational policies based on accountability agendas, outcomes-based curriculum, and standards-driven testing that do not comprehensively take into account the unique needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners” (p. 510-511).

Fairbairn and Fox (2009) listed recommendations for test developers in the United States and Canada with the goal of helping them design assessments that were inclusive of ELLs. Fairbairn and Fox’s (2009) recommendations were: “ensure that test language is accessible; include graphic/visual support on tests; adjust the test development process to include local and situated perspectives; increase research on ELL test processing and feedback on the test; recognize the centrality of test taker feedback and response in testing process from design through development, validation, and use; norm test and

clarify score reports in relation to different student populations; develop ELL-specific test preparation support as part of the test development process; and continue to investigate test accommodations” (pp. 14-18).

Fox and Fairbairn (2011) used these recommendations to review the WIDA consortium’s ACCESS for ELLs assessment. The ACCESS for ELLs annual assessment is used to measure the language proficiency level of English Language Learners in the United States. Fox and Fairbairn (2011) described the assessment as “a large-scale, high-stakes, standard-based, and criterion-referenced English language proficiency test administered in the USA” (p. 425). The ACCESS for ELLs is administered every year to more than 840,000 English Language Learners in grades K-12 in 24 states according to Fox and Fairbairn (2011).

Fox and Fairbairn’s (2011) review sought to answer “How well does ACCESS for ELLs meet the eight requirements set out by Fairbairn and Fox (2009) for the development of tests for ELLs?” (p. 428). The first criterion that the reviewers examined was whether ACCESS for ELLs ensured that the test language was accessible to the ELLs being tested. According to Fox and Fairbairn (2011), the assessment is tiered to match the language proficiency level of the student being assessed. The proficiency tiers and language differentiation were designed to make the test language accessible to ELLs.

Fox and Fairbairn’s (2011) second criterion was whether ACCESS for ELLs included graphic/visual support. The authors found, on review of the assessments, that they contained color illustrations, photos and maps. The review suggests that the ACCESS for ELLs met the second criterion set by Fairbairn and Fox (2011)

Another criterion was whether ACCESS for ELLS adjusts the development process to include local and situational perspectives (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011). Fox and Fairbairn stated that “one key way in which this consideration is addressed is through the development of test items by educators” (p. 428). According to Fox Fairbairn (2011), these items are then reviewed by staff from the Center of Applied Linguistics, reviewed by educators from the affiliated states again and finally field-tested. The ACCESS for ELLs met the third criterion set by the reviewers.

The fourth criterion set by Fox and Fairbairn (2011) was whether ACCESS for ELLs increased research on ELL test processing and feedback on tests. According to the reviewers one of the ways the WIDA consortium continues its research is by collecting demographic data and comparing their results. Fox and Fairbairn (2011) stated that “investigation into students language development growth patterns is being conducted by WIDA staff” (p. 429). Fox and Fairbairn (2011) acknowledged that WIDA has continued research, but suggests that “research specifically linking a range of subsets of students would be an excellent expansion” (p. 429)

The fifth criterion set by the reviewers Fox and Fairbairn (2011) was whether ACCESS for ELLs recognized the centrality of test taker feedback and response in the testing process. Fox and Fairbairn (2011) found that feedback was collected from test-takers during field testing for the writing and speaking items on the test. The reviewers acknowledge that this feedback is important, but state that WIDA should also collect feedback from test-takers on the reading and listening items of the ACCESS for ELLs to meet the fifth criterion. Fox and Fairbairn (2011) suggested “an on-going feedback process to provide essential test validation evidence and support the validity of inference

drawn from test performance” (p. 429). Fox and Fairbairn’s (2011) review revealed that the ACCESS for ELLs did not meet the fifth criterion.

The next criterion set by Fox and Fairbairn (2011) was whether ACCESS for ELLs was a norm test and that reported scores were based on different student populations. According to Fox and Fairbairn (2011), ACCESS for ELLs tailors their score reports for different stakeholders, meeting this requirement. The reviewers stated that due to the large number of ELLs who take the ACCESS for ELLs, “score reporting should be expanded to address the texture of ELL population served by WIDA” (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011, p. 429). An example that Fox and Fairbairn (2011) provided is norm data around the relationship between “number of years in English Language development programming and scores in different language domains” (p. 429).

The seventh criterion set by Fox and Fairbairn (2011) examined how ACCESS for ELLs created ELL-specific test preparation support in their development process. The reviewers described how ACCESS for ELLs had warm-up items and practice questions in each section to give the test-takers time to familiarize themselves with the assessment (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011). However, Fox and Fairbairn (2011) noted that many high stakes assessments publish a complete sample test to “expand fairness” (p. 430). The ACCESS for ELLs does not publish sample tests because the WIDA consortium tries to avoid educators’ “teaching to the test” (P. 430). Fox and Fairbairn (2011) stated that the ACCESS for ELLs does not satisfy the seventh criterion since test-takers have had little to no experience with the test booklets, time limits, rubrics and tasks while being expected to perform their best.



The final criterion set by Fox and Fairbairn (2011) was whether ACCESS for ELLs continues to investigate test accommodations. The reviewers identified this as a strength for the assessment. The review described that in each state administrators of the ACCESS for ELLs had the autonomy to set guidelines for the accommodations. WIDA also provides guidelines for the states and educators to reference (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011).

In South Africa, Cockcroft (2016) conducted a study that examined assessments that measure vocabulary development of bilingual learners. In the study, Cockcroft compared the assessment used to measure vocabulary and working memory of bilingual learners' first language and second language. Cockcroft's research question was "do verbal working memory tests provide a fairer means of assessing bilingual learning than measures of vocabulary" (p. 78).

Cockcroft's (2016) study included 120 participants in first grade at English medium schools in South Africa. The researcher did not include the number of English medium schools used in the study. Sixty-two of the participants were boys and 58 were girls. The population consisted of 67 native English speakers and 53 English Language Learners. The English Language Learners spoke either isiZulu or isiXhosa belonging to the Ngami cultural group. The participants were pulled from populations of low and high Social Economic Status (SES) schools. Of the English-speaking participants, 30 came from a high SES school and 37 came from a low SES school, and of the English Language Learners, 29 came from a high SES school and 24 from a low SES school (Cockcroft, 2016).

Cockcroft (2016) used a quantitative methodology for her study. She measured participants' nonverbal intelligence using the Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices,

their vocabulary using the British Vocabulary Scale and the Boston Naming Test, and their working memory using four verbal subtests from the Automated Working Memory Assessment. All data were analyzed twice, once with raw scores and once with z-score transformations.

Based on the data, Cockcroft (2016) found that “the monolingual group outperformed their bilingual peers on expressive and receptive vocabulary” (p. 83). The researcher said that this finding was unsurprising given that monolingual students have been exposed to more English than their Bilingual peers. The researcher also found that when testing the participants’ simple and complex memory the data showed that the native English speakers and the English Language Learners performed equally. Cockcroft proposed that “there was also no bilingual disadvantage on the verbal working memory measures. This suggests that tests of verbal working memory are able to give an indication of whether the articulatory rehearsal and storage process of the phonological loop are developing appropriately in the bilingual child, even when the child is tested in a second language” (p. 84). In conclusion, Cockcroft stated that when testing second language learners, assessments of verbal working memory should be included. The researcher also suggests that these tests could help differentiate between native English speakers, English Language Learners, and English Language Learners with a disability.

### **Refugee Experience**

Research has been conducted which examines the refugee experience. Hos (2012) found that refugees with limited formal education represent one of the largest growing populations in the public school system. Hos claimed that although this population is continuing to grow exponentially, “few research studies have sought to understand the

experiences of these children and their families in acclimating to U.S. classrooms and communities” (p. 5). The author noted that because of lack of English proficiency and cultural familiarity, these students are more likely to fail and/or drop out of school. Hos argued that therefore there is a need to find educational strategies that support refugees so that they can succeed in school. The research question Hos asked in his qualitative study was “What are the experiences of adolescent refugee students with limited formal education in the newcomer program at an urban secondary school?” (Hos, 2012, p. 9). He collected data through observation, interviews and participant writing. Hos was seeking to “understand the behavior of a particular social or cultural group in naturally occurring settings” (p. 54). The data were collected during a summer international program in the school year 2010-2011 at an urban secondary school. The sample consisted of 19 students identified by the researcher using convenience sampling. Hos found that refugee students and immigrants with interrupted formal education struggle with poverty, live in poor neighborhoods, and attend schools that are in bad physical conditions and marked by failure. Nonetheless, interviews and observations showed that the refugee students were appreciative of the opportunities they had in the United States. The students in this study were noted to benefit from an instructor who created predictable routines, integrated student culture and embedded a sense of ownership of their learning. Hos suggests that more research be done on the effects of providing professional development for administrators on the needs and experiences of refugee ELLs with interrupted formal education.

Another study that examined the refugee experience was conducted by Hauch, Lo, Maxwell, and Reynolds (2014). The researchers stated that “the United States has

admitted close to 76,000 refugees in 2012” (p. 331). The study discussed the challenges that health care providers and agencies face with new influxes of refugees who have experienced trauma due to war, poverty, and political suppression (Hauch et al., 2014). The refugee group studied was predominantly Southeast Asians. The study specifically examined the experiences of refugees from Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq who came to live in Charlottesville, Virginia. The study’s research question was “what factors influence the acculturation of refugees who resettle in Charlottesville?” (Hauch et al., 2014, p. 333). The qualitative methodology used for the study was grounded theory. The researchers collected data through one-hour-long phone interviews.

The researchers analyzed the data by looking for common themes among the cultural groups. Four major themes emerged when looking at influences for acculturation: English-language proficiency, social support, financial support, and expectations for and satisfaction with life in the United States.

The researcher found that “refugees with greater English-language proficiency experience less stress in the acculturation process” (Hauch et al., 2014, p. 340). The Iraqi participants were the majority of participants with the greatest English Language instruction and native language instruction prior to migrating to the United States. Hauch et al. (2014) stated that “a refugee’s literacy in their native language is related to their ability to learn other written languages in their country of resettlement” (p. 340). The researchers found that this explained the difficulties the Burmese and Bhutanese participants had developing English Proficiency since they did not receive literacy instruction in their native country and their native language.

The second theme that emerged was refugees' ability to acculturate when they had social support. The researchers found that "refugees who had greater social support from family, community, and/or institutional programs throughout the acculturation process experience less stress" (Hauch et al., 2014, p. 342). They observed that the Bhutanese and Burmese families relied on their larger family groups for support, and when removed from the refugee camps, their families were often separated which led to emotional distress. In contrast, the Iraqi participants required less social support from family or ethnic group.

The third theme that emerged was that refugees with greater financial support experienced less stress. The Bhutanese refugees in the study had the greatest proportion of employed participants and had resided in the United States for over a year and therefore reported less stress as a result of possessing financial support and health insurance. On the other hand, the Burmese and Iraqi refugees had a difficult time finding employment and had resided in the United States for less than a year, all of which led to higher levels of stress owing to lack of financial support and health care (Hauch et al., 2014).

The final theme that emerged was refugees' premigratory expectations and degree of satisfaction with life in the United States. The researchers found that the Burmese and Bhutanese refugees lived in refugee camps before resettling in the United States where their standard of living was lower. Since Burmese and Bhutanese refugees had experienced living with a very low standard of living, their housing accommodations provided by the refugee resettlement were viewed as comfortable and led to less acculturative stress. Conversely, Iraqi refugees reported to the researchers that they had

stable jobs and were living comfortably before the war that caused them to seek refuge in the United States. The Iraqi refugees had suffered an economic downturn and therefore had more stress related to their satisfaction with life in the United States (Hauch et al., 2014).

Shakespeare-Finch, Schweitzer, King, and Brough (2014) conducted another study that analyzed the refugee experience in Brisbane, Australia. The researchers focused on the refugees from Burma. They contextualized their study by describing Burma's instability since it received independence from the British in 1948 and more specifically how the country has deteriorated since a military coup in 1962 where minority groups have faced persecution from "ethnic cleansing at the hands of the military government" (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014, p. 312). The researchers continued to build context when they emphasize the challenge Burmese refugees face as they transition from a collectivist society to the individualist society of Australia. The research question was "how do refugees demonstrate resilience and growth in the midst of extreme hardship?" (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014, p. 315).

The research methodology used in the study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The researchers conducted interviews of refugees from the following ethnic groups in Burma: Karen, Kachin, Matu, Rohingya, Chin, Burmese, Kayan, and Arkam, all of whom were resettled to Brisbane, Australia. The researchers had interpreters during the interviews. The study included 25 participants: 12 men and 13 women. The sample ages ranged from 20 to 58 years old. Seventeen of the participants identified as Christian, 4 of the participants identified as Buddhists, 3 of the participants identified as Muslim, and 1 person did not identify with any religious group

(Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014). All of these participants spent time in refugee camps that border Burma, such as Thailand, Malaysia and India, before entering Australia (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014).

The researchers analyzed the data by initial coding of the interviews and then applying a reflection approach to review codes. After crosschecking the data the following themes emerged: distress, coping, and posttraumatic growth (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014).

The participants who left Burma to reach Australia shared a common theme of distress. This distress was attributed to a constant fear of violence, scarcity of resources, and difficulties in acculturation (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014).

The researchers highlighted the strengths and resources of refugees from Burma. While enduring extreme trauma from the military brutality in their native country and adjusting to a new country, the participants shared a theme of coping and posttraumatic growth. The participants coped with their situation with hope for the future be it for children, political activism, or education. Another way participants coped with their situation was with support from their family, community, churches, and settlement agencies. The participants exhibited their posttraumatic growth with a shared appreciation for life, faith in a higher power, focused priority on the education of children, and compassion for others. A participant is quoted in a way that illuminated the theme of posttraumatic growth: “those experiences push me to go forward, so when I see challenge here, I think these are small challenges compared to before, so it is a stepping stone. Those experiences give me strength” (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014, p. 325).

### **Culturally Competent Instruction**

A review of the literature on instruction of language for refugee students with limited formal education makes it evident that there is a need for instruction that is culturally attuned to the needs of the refugees. Decapua and Marshall (2010) referred to multiple studies: Marshall (1998), Gay (2000), Ladson-Bilings (1995), and Nieto (2004), which all focused on English Language Learners who lack English proficiency, have limited-to-no native language literacy, and limited formal education. These past studies have included instructional features such as small group instruction (Marshall, 1998), collaborative work (Marshall 1998), differentiated instruction (Nieto, 2004), scaffolding strategy development (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), sheltered content courses (Marshall, 1998) theme-based instruction (Marshall, 1998) and academically challenging curriculum with language modifications (Marshall, 1998). Although these practices have been in place, Decapua and Marshall (2010) pointed out that “high drop out rates have shown that they have been unsuccessful for students with limited or interrupted formal education” (p. 159). Decapua and Marshall addressed the question of whether an instructional model that considers cultural factors in learning sets up students with limited or interrupted formal education for academic success. They collected data from one classroom with SIFE students. The authors did not indicate how many SIFE students were in the class. The teacher who participated in the study used their understanding of both high- and low-context cultures to understand the difference between pragmatic and academic skills. The teacher-designed activities such as class surveys and shoebox activities to support students to conceptualize content. Decapua and Marshall determined that if teachers develop a “multicultural competence in both the high context cultures and



low context cultures learning paradigm and understand the difference between pragmatic and academic orientation” (p. 170), they can begin to design classroom activities that will help to support their students making the paradigm shift.

More research that may bring hope to educational practitioners working with refugees comes from Nykiel-Herbert (2010) who reported that many educators consider cultural and linguistic diversity as a valuable resource for English Language Learners in the classroom. Nykiel-Herbert concluded that it is evident that instructors are not using culturally relevant instruction to support their students’ academic success since ELLs “are consistently at a higher risk of academic failure as compared to the regular American student” (p. 2). The main focus of Nykiel-Herbert’s study was on how culturally relevant instruction impacts the academic performance of ELLs with interrupted education. Nykiel-Herbert stated that culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy uses "cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes and thus empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (2010). In the study, Iraqi refugees in the United States engaged in oral story telling, after which stories were transcribed. The stories were used as the texts that instructors built literacy instruction around to build English reading proficiency. The study consisted of 11 refugee students from Iraq with limited formal education from third grade to fifth grade. The students received the culturally relevant instruction in a self-contained classroom with a certified ESL teacher and a doctoral candidate of anthropology. The author collected data from audiotapes of class sessions. The data include transcripts of taped lessons, out-of-classroom story-telling, photocopied samples of student work and observational material. The Language Assessment Scales Reading/Writing (De Avila & Duncan, 1990) was the tool used to

measure the students' academic performance. After 12 months of culturally relevant intervention, 6 of the 11 students scored competent (highest) on the LAS R/W test by the end of the study. These six students who scored proficient were the only English Language Learners out of 77 to move from non-literate to competent in one year in the school where the study took place (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010).

The literature on English Language Learners identified two distinct groups of ELLs: those with literacy skills in their first language and those with interrupted formal education. It is also clear that, of the two groups of ELLs entering the school systems, those with limited formal education are at a higher risk of dropout and academic failure. Gahungu, Gahungu, and Luseno (2011), Phillmore (2011), Decapua and Marshall (2011), Miller (2009), and Miller and Windle (2010) have begun to analyze these issues by studying the instructional effectiveness of teaching strategies with refugee students with interrupted formal education, analyzing the refugee experience, and applying culturally competent instruction.

### **Summary**

Although research has been done on specific refugee groups, such as the Iraqi refugees discussed by Nykiel-Herbert (2010), Burmese-Karen refugees in camps along the Burmese and Thailand border (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008), and Burmese refugees in Australia (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014) there continues to be a paucity of data on the cultural differences related to educational attainment between Karen refugees and other refugees in the U.S. education system.

An examination of the theoretical perspective with regard to second language acquisition and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) has offered guidance for what

instruction for language learners should be. According to sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the implications it has on second language acquisition, instructors of ELLs should understand the cultural dynamic of the Karen refugees to develop effective language instruction. Based on the current literature and sociocultural theory, there is a need for further research to better understand how to support Karen refugees' ability to access content material and grow in literacy language proficiency. The gaps in the knowledge base include information about the Karen refugee experience in the United States, Karen refugees experience with American schools, and culturally responsive teaching practices for Karen refugees.

The topics covered in this literature review provided a foundation for the importance of examining the experiences of Karen refugee parents who have children in American schools. Using a phenomenological case study approach to understanding the experiences of Karen refugees could add to the body of research on Karen refugees in the United States, and could assist practitioners to better understand their Karen refugee parents and students.

### **Research Questions**

1. What cultural values did Karen refugees whose children attend an American elementary school reveal about themselves?
2. What relationship trend appeared between Karen refugee parents' perceptions of education and their students' English literacy proficiency development?
3. What challenges did Karen refugee parents experience at an American elementary school?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study was to analyze the personal experience of Karen Refugee women who have been relocated to an urban city located in the northeastern United States as parents of students in the U.S. public school system. The researcher analyzed the unique experiences to determine the possible effect it has on parent involvement in their children's education in an American school.

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research focuses on making meaning of a specific phenomenon. Phenomenology is an approach that studies a specific experience or phenomenon that helps the researcher understand the lived experience of the participants in the study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) examines the shared lived experience of a group of people (Smith et. al., 2009). Creswell (2013) states that in a case study, the researcher aims to “develop an in depth understanding of a single case” (p. 97). A case study is a qualitative approach where the researcher, “explores a real-life, contemporary bounded case through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97).

A case study, combined with IPA, was chosen as the methodology for the study since it focuses on a specific group, Karen refugee parents, at one elementary school. The researcher delved deeply into the experience of a group of Karen refugee parents to gain insight into the experiences of Karen refugee women who have relocated to an urban city in the northeastern United States and are parents of students in an elementary school

located in that city. The case study interpreted and analyzed the experience of Karen refugee women through detailed and indepth interviews with participants, field notes, and an exit interview of Karen refugee parents at an elementary school.

The researcher used open-ended questions to facilitate an interaction, “which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 60). The researcher used data collected from the interviews to provide a basis for analysis of the transcripts.

### **Participants**

According to Creswell (2013), “in a case study, 4 to 5 participants should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis,” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). These four participants were identified through referral from gatekeepers, from the researcher’s contacts, and snowballing. Snowballing is defined as an identification of new participants from individuals who were previously identified from gatekeepers and researcher contact who agreed to participate in the study (Mokua, 2012). For this study, the participants were selected from a group of Karen refugee women who have been relocated to the region where the researcher’s school is located and who have students enrolled at the researcher’s elementary school.

### **Data Collection Tools**

According to Creswell (2013), case studies must use multiple sources of data. For this study the researcher used one-on-one interviews, field notes, and a face-to-face exit interview to gather data. This form of data collection is preferred because they elicit detailed stories, thoughts, and feelings from the participants.

For this study, the researcher developed a set of open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) that followed a constructed interview schedule. The use of a schedule is designed to facilitate comfortable interactions with the participants, with the view of enabling them to provide a detailed account of the experiences under investigation. The researcher used open-ended questions with the purpose of encouraging the participants to talk about their experience at length.

The researcher developed the interview questions (Appendix A) and asked for feedback on the questionnaire's validity from a focus group of two Karen refugee women, who did not participate in the study, but who are familiar with the phenomenon being studied. A qualitative research professor and the researcher's dissertation chairperson reviewed the interview questions to verify content and face validity. Feedback from the focus group was used to modify the instrument. Content validity was determined on these instruments after agreement on face validity.

**One-on-one interview.** According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009), "in-depth interviews allow participants to tell their own stories in their own words" (p. 58). The one-on-one interviews were conducted in person in the presence of a Karen interpreter and within the interviewees' homes to ensure the participants' comfort. These interviews elicited demographic information, stories about personal experiences in relationship to the phenomena studied, and responses to general questions.

**Face-to-face exit interview.** The face-to-face exit interview, i.e. member-checking questionnaire (Appendix B) gave participants the opportunity to review and verify the data obtained. The exit interview also allowed participants to introduce additional information subsequent to the previous one-on-one interview.

**Field notes.** Field notes were used as a data source that was analyzed in the study. The field notes were taken using a journal to record observations of the environment, where interactions were observed.

**Validation.** The researcher used one-on-one interviews, face-to-face exit interviews, and field notes to check for validity.

Harper and Cole (2012) state that member member-checking “is a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview and allows for participant verification” (pp. 510-511). Member-checking was used as another form of validation during face-to-face exit interviews where the researcher sought feedback from the participants. Participants were able to review the data collected from the one-on-one interview and verify whether what was collected matched their experience and beliefs.

## **Procedures**

**Design.** A letter that included the purpose of the study was sent to the district’s executive school officer and site principal in order to secure the permission of the gatekeepers. With permission, the researcher gained access to Karen refugee women who have students enrolled in the researcher’s elementary school.

Before data collection, the researcher created a filing system with divisions for the following documentation: (a) the informed consent forms, (b) notes made during the interview, (c) notes made during the data analysis process, (d) the transcripts of the interviews, (e) the draft transcription and analyses of the interview that were presented to the participants for validation, (f) confirmation of validity of transcription and analyses of

the interview, (g) all additional communication between the participants and the researcher, and (h) pseudonym codes.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher and interpreter made recruitment phone calls to potential participants using the recruitment phone call script. When potential participants said that they were interested in participating in the study, the researcher sent home a translated consent form and a letter explaining steps for returning the form with their child. The consent form was translated into Karen and outlined the importance of the study, number of questions, contact information of the researcher, contact information of the interpreter, risks and benefits to the participants, participant anonymity, and the right to withdraw up to the point in which data analysis begins. To protect the anonymity of the participants pseudonyms were used in interview transcripts, data analysis, and for data reporting.

Participants were given one week to accept the invitation and return the informed consent form. The participants acknowledged that they accepted the invitation by signing the consent form. After two weeks from the date the invitations were sent, the researcher, with support from the interpreter, called the potential participants who had not responded in order to reduce nonresponsive rate. After the researcher received the signed consent forms, the researcher filed the consent forms in a locked cabinet.

The researcher, with the support of the interpreter, scheduled days in which the researcher would meet one-on-one with the participants to administer the interview using the participant scheduling call script. During the phone call, the researcher, with support of the interpreter, confirmed the dates and times of the interviews.



After the schedule was created, the researcher and interpreter conducted the interviews and recorded the responses using audio recording and a field-note journal. The one-on-one interviews were conducted at the researcher's elementary school with the researcher, participant, and interpreter present. With the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded using a Sony ICD-BX140 Digital Voice Recorder. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All recordings and notes were stored in a locked cabinet.

After all the interviews, the researcher transcribed each audiotaped interview onto an electronic file. The researcher wore headphones while transcribing the interview to protect the participants' identities. The researcher used pseudonyms when she transcribed the interviews. The transcribed audiotaped interviews were stored on a password-protected computer in the researcher's personal office.

After the researcher transcribed the audio recordings into a password-protected electronic file, the interpreter translated the transcribed interview into Karen. Translating the transcript made it accessible to the participants to review.

After the researcher conducted all the interviews, transcribed the interviews, and created a draft transcription with the support of the interpreter and analysis of the interview, the researcher conducted face-to-face exit interviews within the school setting with the researcher, participant, and interpreter present. With the participant's permission the interview was recorded by the researcher using a Sony ICD-BX140 Digital Voice Recorder. Prior to the exit interview, each participant was presented with a transcript of her responses from the first interview for review, and to ensure the information was what they felt to be correct.

After each participant had been allowed to modify and approve the transcript from the first interview, the researcher with the support of the interpreter administered the exit interviews lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. Subsequently, the researcher transcribed the interviews while wearing head phones to protect the identities of the participants. All information that the participants provided were kept confidential using pseudonyms. The audio recordings, transcripts, and notes were protected in a locked filing cabinet. The digitally transcribed documents were password-protected on a personal computer in a locked office.

After the interview, the researcher reviewed and analyzed the combined data from the interviews, exit interviews, and field notes. The researcher used the analyzed data to find common themes that address the research questions.

### **Data Collection**

**One-on-one interviews.** The one-on-one interviews were conducted within the school setting with the researcher, participant and interpreter present. With the participant's permission, the researcher using a Sony ICD-BX140 Digital Voice Recorder recorded the interviews. During the interviews, the researcher also took notes. After the interviews, the interpreter transcribed the audio recordings onto an electronic file. All information that the participants provided were kept confidential using pseudonyms.

**Face-to-face exit interview.** After the researcher conducted all the interviews, transcribed the interviews, and created draft transcription and analysis of the interview, the researcher conducted a face-to-face exit interview within the school setting with the researcher, participant, and interpreter present. With the participant's permission the interview was recorded by the researcher using a Sony ICD-BX140 Digital Voice

Recorder supplemented by notes. Each participant was presented with a transcript of their responses and asked to fact-check the transcript as well as be encouraged to take the opportunity to add any further thoughts.

**Data Storage.** After the exit interview, the audio recordings, transcripts and notes were protected in a locked filing cabinet. The consent forms and pseudonyms were kept locked separately. The digitally transcribed documents were password-protected to a personal computer in a locked office.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step in qualitative data analysis, described by Smith et al. (2009), is the immersion into original data. The researcher began this step by reading and rereading the transcripts of the interviews and field notes.

The next step was initial-noting (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher took notes on the transcripts. These comments were used for the next step of analysis. Some of the comments included in this step included the researcher's commentary notes, linguistic comments, conceptual comments, and deconstruction comments.

The third step of analysis was to develop emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher used the comments created in the initial-noting phase to create themes.

The researcher followed the first three steps with the data obtained from the face-to-face exit interviews. The researcher used initial-noting phases to create themes from the face-to-face exit interviews.

Finally the researcher searched for connections across emergent themes. After the researcher completed the previous steps for all one-on-one interviews, field notes, and face-to-face exit interviews, she looked for patterns across cases using group tables.

These patterns assisted the researcher to make conclusions in reference to the research questions.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of Burmese-Karen refugee parents within a U.S. public school located in a Northeastern urban city. This chapter provides the results of the qualitative data collection and analysis gathered through individual study interviews and exit interviews by four participants. Data from both the initial interviews (Appendix A) and the exit interviews (Appendix B) illustrate a picture of the Burmese-Karen refugee parents' experiences with a U.S. school in a Northeastern urban city phenomenon. This case study attempts to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 15). Data to support the findings from this research are subdivided into three research questions.

### **Result Rate**

An interpreter telephoned to invite four Burmese-Karen refugee female parents whose children attended at the chosen school to participate in the study, explaining the study purpose and procedures. A total of four individuals indicated to the interpreter that they were interested in participating in the study. The researcher then sent consent forms (translated from English to Karen) that outlined the importance of the study, contact information of the researcher, contact information of the interpreter, risks and benefits to the participants, participant anonymity, and the right to withdraw up to the point in which data analysis began. All four individuals returned the signed consent forms within a week of receiving the translated consent forms, participated in the initial interviews and in the exit interviews.

## Demographics

Demographic information from the participants (N=4) was collected in the initial interview. All of the participants were female. The number of years of formal schooling completed by the participants included 1 year (two) and 3 years (two). The average number of years of residing in the United States was 5.3 years. Table 1 shows a collection of demographic data of the study participants. The participants' names in Table 1 and subsequent tables are pseudonyms.

Table 1

### *Demographic Data of Participants*

Participant Number	Years of Formal Schooling	Years in the U.S.
P1	1 Year	7 Years
P2	3 Years	4 Years
P3	3 Years	5 Years
P4	1 Year	5 Years

*Note.* All participants were female.

All participants at the time of the study had a child or children attending the public school located in a Northeastern urban city of the United States. All the participants identified as Burmese-Karen refugees who were residing in the United States.

## Thematic Analysis

The transcriptions from the initial interview and exit interview created an illustration of the participants' lived experience as Burmese-Karen refugee parents within an urban U.S. public school. Dominant themes were determined after the study data had been reviewed numerous times. The dominant themes culled from the data are: family,

limited formal education, communication, and cultural representation (Appendices C, D, and E).

### **Identified Themes and Associated Research Questions**

The dominant themes have been associated with specific research questions. The four dominant themes and their associated research questions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

#### *The Four Dominant Themes and Their Associated Research Questions*

<i>Dominant themes</i>	<i>Associated research questions</i>
Family	1,2,3
Limited Formal Education	2,3
Communication	2,3
Cultural representation	1,2,3

An interpretative analysis of the dominant themes will be explained. Categories were identified within the four dominant themes. Table 3 shows a summary of the dominant themes and their descriptions.

Table 3

*Dominant Themes and Descriptions*

Theme	Description
Family	<p>Family life and traditions are vital in Karen-Burmese Culture.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mother's role.</li> <li>2. Children's role in Burma.</li> <li>3. Importance of family time.</li> <li>4. Loss of family time.</li> <li>5. Access to work to support family.</li> <li>6. Karen-Burmese celebrations.</li> </ol>
Limited Formal Education	<p>Karen-Burmese refugees with Limited Formal Education have difficulty navigating and supporting their children in an American school.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cost of education.</li> <li>2. Lack of support.</li> <li>3. Family responsibility.</li> <li>4. Inconsistent attendance in home country.</li> <li>5. Education in the United States.</li> <li>6. Lack of familiarity with systems of education.</li> <li>7. Challenges with translated communication.</li> <li>8. Associate limited education with challenges.</li> </ol>
Communication	<p>Communication between the school and Karen-Burmese parents is ineffective due to the language barrier and causes parents stress.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication in English only.</li> <li>2. Children act as interpreters.</li> <li>3. Anxiety over communication.</li> <li>4. Need for an interpreter.</li> </ol>
Cultural Representation	<p>There is a lack of Karen-Burmese cultural representation at an American school with Karen-Burmese families.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Traditions that celebrate family.</li> <li>2. Fear loss of culture.</li> <li>3. Desire inclusion of culture.</li> <li>4. Desire for teachers to attend celebrations.</li> <li>5. Desire for Karen language to be taught.</li> <li>6. Desire for children to lead the community.</li> </ol>

*Note.* Appendices C, D, and E.

**Theme 1: Family**



All four participants discussed the high value for family life within Karen-Burmese culture. As shown in Table 3 the description of this theme is precipitated by seven categories: mother's role, children's role in Burma, importance of family time, loss of family time, access to work to support family, Karen-Burmese celebrations, and children's role in the United States. A selection of participants' responses to the interview and exit interview can be found in Appendices C, D and E.

**Mother's role.** Three of the four participants agreed that in a Karen-Burmese family it is the mother's responsibility to make decisions around the welfare of the family. Some of the responsibilities of the mother are to teach cultural traditions to children, organize the family's schedules, organize the finances, and support their children's education. Participant 3 described her role as the decision-maker:

I have to take responsibility for everything. My husband only works and gives us money. He doesn't know how to use the money. Also, he doesn't know about my children's school. I have to check on that. I have to organize everything. I have to go to the teacher meetings, the parent conferences.

Participant 1 also stated that it is the mother who makes the decisions, and the rest of the family will follow. Participant 4 confirmed this when she stated that she made the decisions for her family as a consequence of her being the mother.

**Children's role in Burma (Union of Myanmar).** All participants were in agreement that children, having grown up in Burma (Union of Myanmar) or in the Thai-Burmese border refugee camps, are expected to help work and provide for the family. All four participants stated that it was their responsibility to help their parents by working for remuneration, and therefore they were unable to attend school. Participant 2 described her

role as a child in her family, “I was in school, but only for three years. I am the middle daughter at home, so it was my responsibility to help my parents.”

Participant 1 provided more insight into the value placed on supporting her family as opposed to getting an education when she was a child: “I didn’t think school was important. I thought only working and helping my parents were important.”

Participant 3 described in detail her role as the eldest daughter and her community’s perspective on valuing children working with their families rather than having them go to school:

When I was a kid, people said that if you have an education you can eat, and if you don’t have an education you can eat, so it doesn’t matter. It’s not important to go to school. So, I was in school for only three years. I am the oldest daughter; so it is my responsibility to help my parents.

**Importance of family time.** All of the participants emphasized the importance of doing activities as a family. All of the participants described a family as having a mother, father, children, and grandparents. Participant 2 described what it means to be a family: “Family means they all live together, the children, parents, and other relatives. They eat together, enjoy together, and teach together.”

Participant 3 pointed out that family life goes beyond eating and living together: “They all live together, they eat together, they share things together, and they teach and continue our culture.”

**Loss of family time.** While reflecting on the similarities and differences between living in their home country and the United States, the participants described how the

time they spend with their family has shrunk since they arrived in the United States.

Participant 2 described the loss of family time:

Family life in America is totally different. I have to organize the family so my kids get to school on time so we don't have time like we did before, because the schedules are different, so we don't have family time like we did before.

Participant 3 goes on to describe how the clashing schedules have affected their family time and how she perceived it has affected her children's appreciation for traditional food:

We cannot do things in the United States like we did in the camp. For example they want to eat different food than us, only American food, they don't want to eat Burmese food. The kids don't want to eat Burmese food and they have to eat all at different time.

Participant 4 described how family life in the camps was good in comparison to family life in the United States.

**Access to work to support family.** The participants described that to be successful as a parent, the parent needs to be able to work and provide food for their family. Participant one described how limited access to work in the Thailand-Burma refugee camps affected her ability to support her family:

In the camp, if you want to work and support your family you cannot. You cannot find a job. In the United States my husband goes to work and supports the family and I am home, I support my kids. In here we have more opportunities to support our family. In the past we didn't have enough food and we were not allowed to work.

Participant 2 also described the challenges she faced in the refugee camps around supporting her family: “If I stayed in the camp right now I couldn’t pay for my kids to go to school and there would not be enough food.”

**Karen-Burmese celebrations.** All four participants emphasized the importance of celebrating the Karen wrist-tying ceremony. The Karen wrist-tying ceremony is an annual celebration of the family. The participants stated how important it is that the family holds this day sacred as a time to get back together and celebrate with each other. The participants stated that on this day elder family members would tie a bracelet onto the younger family members’ wrists. Participant 4 described the value of this ceremony to her community and family:

We have a thread and the older family members tie it on the wrist of the younger people to show that the family is back together. It doesn’t matter where you are you come back together on that day to see everybody.

Participant 3 stated that the wrist-tying celebration is a special day for her and her family, and Participant 2 elaborated by explaining the value these celebrations have for their children and community:

We have a culture and we have a language, so it is important that my children go to the celebration. So my children will be absent on those days and I want my teachers to know that.

## **Theme 2: Limited Formal Education**

All four participants described their personal experience as students with limited formal schooling in their home country. As shown in Table 3 the description of this theme precipitated eight categories: cost of education, lack of support, family responsibility, inconsistent attendance in home country, education in the United States, lack of familiarity with systems of education, challenges with translated communication, and access to work. A selection of participants' responses to the interview and exit interview can be found in Appendices C, D and E.

**Cost of education.** Three of the participants identified economic status as a barrier between themselves and education in their home country. The participants emphasized that education in Burma (Union of Myanmar) was not free and thus the cost of education made it challenging for them to receive an education. Participant 3 elaborated on the economic challenge that education posed for her family:

In Burma, school is not free. My family needed to pay for school and my parents didn't have money for that. In Burma you need a lot of money. You have to pay money to get an education. Even if you do graduate you cannot go to college if you do not have money in Burma. So it is very painful for parents who do not have money.

Participant 2 expanded upon the economic barrier through postsecondary education:

In Burma, you need money to go to school and go to college. In my country, you have to pay first to attend college. In the United States, we don't have to worry about that because we can borrow money and we can apply for support.

Participant 4 experienced the pressure to work rather than attend school due to her family's economic status in Burma: "I couldn't go to school because I didn't have money, so instead I had to work at a young age."

**Lack of support.** Three of the participants attributed their limited education to a lack of support from their families and a lack of resources. Participant 1 stated her perceived cause of failure in school in Burma: "I didn't have any idea of what to do or how to work in school. No one supported me so; I failed every subject in school."

Participant 3 described the distress she felt while attempting school work alone: "I was so sad because my parents couldn't help me with my education. I would cry because I had to try and figure it out myself."

Participant 2 illustrated the frustration she felt around a lack of resources while she attended school in the refugee camps:

When I was young I didn't have resources. I only had one book, not a text book—a notebook—but I only had one. I also didn't have any practice books or exercise books so I had to write on a rock slab.

**Family responsibility.** All of the participants emphasized how their families prioritized work responsibility over education when they were children. Some of the participants stated that this responsibility stemmed from their birth order. Participant 3 stated her responsibility: "I was in school for only three years because I am the oldest daughter, so it was my responsibility to help my parents."

Participant 2 agreed with Participant 3 as she stated how her age affected her responsibilities: "Yes, I have been in school, but for only three years. I am the middle daughter at home. This means it was my responsibility to help my parents." In the same

vein Participant 4 added that her education was shortened due to her responsibility to help her parents: “I have been in school only till second grade, because I needed to help my mom and help my family.”

Participant 1 stated that she perceived helping the family to hold higher value than education when she said, “I didn’t think school was important. The only things I thought were important were work and helping my parents.”

**Inconsistent attendance in home country.** One of the participants described the challenges she faced with regular attendance due to the weather and distance between her village and the school. Participant 1 described this challenge:

We couldn’t go to school regularly every day, because when the rainy season came the water flows and you cannot get to school and the school as far, so very few people went to school.

**Education in the United States.** Three participants described the differences between education in Burma and the education their children have in the United States. Participants pointed out that because education is free in the United States they perceived that their children have a larger array of opportunities than they had.

Participant 3 illustrated her belief that education will provide her children with opportunities:

The United States has free programs. Here we don’t have to pay for education and school supplies are also free. Here my kids study, they are happy, and they have many supplies. They will have many opportunities.

Participant 2 compared the cost of schooling in Burma and the United States: “There are many opportunities for my kids to get an education here in the United States, but in my home country you need money to go to school, or to go to college.”

Participant 1 described how education influences a person’s access to opportunity: “When I came to the United States, I saw that the people who had an education had more opportunities.”

**Lack of familiarity with systems of education.** One participant described the impact her lack of experience with schooling has on her ability to navigate and support her children’s education in the United States. Participant 1 stated:

I don’t have experience with school, because I was in school for only one year. I don’t have any idea what to do; I don’t know how to work in school. But my children have to do it, so even though I don’t know I ask someone for help. Our lives are very different. For my own life, I have no education, no experience, but I have to help my children with their education.

**Challenges with translated communication.** One participant associated her struggle with reading translated school documents with a lack of formal language instruction. Participant 1 stated: “It is better if someone says it to me in person, because even if it is in Karen the letters are written in formal words and I don’t know them.”

**Associate limited education with challenges.** Three of the participants associated their lack of education as a contributing factor towards their challenges personally and for the Karen-Burmese community. Participant 3 described how her limited education affects the job opportunities she has: “Right now I don’t have an education and I am not an educated person, so I cannot find jobs.” Participant 1 echoed



the sentiment when describing the challenges she faces due to her limited education: “I don’t want my children to be like me and my husband. We don’t have an education so we have problems with everything. We have to depend on other people.”

Participant 4 and Participant 3 attributed a lack of leadership and education among Karen-Burmese people with their limited access to education. Participant 4 stated:

Education is important for my people, because they are so poor. They don’t have things, and they don’t have good leaders, so they have to spread out to many places and now Karen-Burmese people cannot be in the same place.

Participant 3 concurred with Participant 4 as she attributed a lack of leaders among Karen-Burmese refugees with a lack of skills: “We don’t have skills so we have to flee to many places and we cannot be in the same location. We spread out because we don’t have good leaders.”

### **Theme 3: Communication**

All four participants discussed the ineffectiveness of communication they receive from the American school where their children attend. As shown in Table 3 the description of this theme precipitated four categories: communication in English only, children act as interpreters, anxiety of communication, and need for an interpreter. A selection of participants’ responses to the interview and exit interview can be found in Appendices C, D and E.

**Communication in English only.** All four participants stated that they receive communication in English from the school where their children attend. The participants described letters, phone calls, and in-person interaction where the language barrier impeded their comprehension.

Participant 1 described receiving written communications from the school her child attends, as being in English and challenging to decipher: “When I get a letter about my son’s behavior at school, I didn’t know what it said. I had to go to my neighbor to read it to me, because it is in English.”

In the same vein, Participant 4 discussed her desire to communicate with her child’s teacher and stated that, “Sometimes I want to say something to my kid’s teacher, but I don’t know how to speak English.”

Participant 3 illustrated the challenge of communication through phone messaging, which is done in English. Participant 3 illuminated the challenge when she stated: “I get phone calls from the school with them speaking in English. I don’t understand, so I have to have one of my kids listen.” Participant 2 concurred with Participant 3 as she described the stress of receiving phone calls in English: “When I get phone calls from the school I worry about whether my son did something, or if my son is sick because I don’t understand the message.”

**Children act as interpreters.** Three of the participants rely on their children to interpret communication from the school. As a result they have encountered challenges that include their children’s ability to comprehend the vocabulary in communication for parents, misinterpreting information, and dishonesty to avoid consequences.

Participant 3 described an incident to illustrate the frustration tied to relying on her children to interpret school communication:

The school contacts me with the phone. When I get phone calls with them speaking English I don’t understand. One time I let my son listen, and he told me the message said no school uniform tomorrow. So my daughter didn’t wear her

uniform. But when I got to the school I saw that everybody was wearing their uniforms, so I had to run home. On my way home I got a phone call from the school that said I needed to bring my kid's uniform. So I feel like I cannot trust my kids to translate for me. I was really angry.

Participant 4 discussed a challenge she faces when she depends on her children to translate letters:

I want letters to come in my native language, because when the kids read to me, some of the words they don't understand. They can read it, but they don't know how to explain it exactly.

Participant 2 described how she cannot rely on her children to translate honestly when she stated, "I ask if it says homework or not, but they lie, so I don't know for sure."

**Anxiety over communication.** Three of the four participants attributed communication from the school as a source of emotional distress: anger, frustration, sadness, and worry. Participants 2 and 3 associated sadness when faced with a language barrier when talking with a teacher, interpreting letters, interpreting phone calls.

Participants 1 and 2 described the worry they have for their children's welfare and academic standing when they receive communication from the school. Participant 1 stated, "When I get letters with my son's name I get really worried, so I have to get someone to read it to me." Participant 2 echoed this statement when she explained, "If I cannot have an interpreter I am worried. I think to myself, 'what are they telling me about my son?' So I get really worried."

**Need for an interpreter.** All of the participants explained that having an interpreter to support communication between the families and the school was a necessity they would like to see implemented.

Participant 1 described the need for translated written communication to Karen-Burmese:

If the letter was in my native language I could read it right away. Right now my neighbor is busy and can't interpret, so I get worried a lot.

Participant 3 stated the need to have an interpreter orally translate school communication:

If letters were in my native language it would be good. If there was an interpreter for conferences it would make it good. Also it is better for someone to say it to me in person.

Participant 3 discussed the need for phone call messages to be sent to Karen-Burmese families in their native language with the support of an interpreter when she stated, "I think the phone messages in English are hard to understand, so in the future a Karen interpreter would be better for me."

#### **Theme 4: Cultural Representation**

All four of the participants reported that there is a lack of Karen-Burmese cultural representation at their children's school, which serves a population of Karen-Burmese refugee students. As shown in Table 3, the description of this theme precipitated eight categories: traditions that celebrate family, fear of loss of culture, desire inclusion of culture, traditional dress, traditional meals, desire for teachers to attend celebrations, desire for the Karen language to be taught, and desire for children to lead their

community. A selection of participants' responses to the interview and exit interview can be found in Appendices C, D and E.

**Traditions that celebrate family.** Three of the four participants agreed that cultural celebrations that honor family are paramount to Karen-Burmese culture. Participant 3, Participant 1, and Participant 4 explained the perceived value the Karen wrist-tying ceremony has for the Karen-Burmese community. Participant 1 provided an explanation of why the Karen wrist-tying ceremony holds worth to her community:

La Ki Su Day is a day where we have bracelets. It is the Karen wrist-tying ceremony. The bracelets are special because every family member comes back together. Some of them don't know each other, but on this day they come back. That day is important, no matter how far they come back to see each family member.

Participant 4 and Participant 3 explained that the wrist-tying celebration is one that she really cares about. This ceremony is significant because Karen-Burmese refugees have had to flee throughout the borders between Burma and Thailand, and have resettled in countries such as the United States and Australia, resulting in estranging many family members. The wrist-tying celebration is a day for Karen-Burmese to reconnect and come back together.

**Fear loss of culture.** Participant 2 spoke of a fear that her children will not retain their Karen-Burmese culture while residing in the United States. When asked to describe her children's schooling experience at the American school, she immediately expressed her concern that her children are assimilating into American culture at the expense of

their native Karen Culture, “I think that my kids learn American, they learn English. I am concerned because I don’t want them to lose our culture.”

Participant 2 elaborated by emphasizing that for this reason, cultural celebrations are essential for her children: “We have a culture and we have a language, so it is important that my children go, so my children will be absent from school on those days, and I want teachers to know about that.”

**Desire inclusion of culture.** Participant 3 stated that she would like her children’s school to include more Karen-Burmese culture. Participant 3 expressed a desire for the American school where their children attend to be inclusive of diverse cultural backgrounds and races:

At this school they do some things for our culture, but I want them to do more. In my mind they should make the school more equal for all people. People should be welcome no matter their race, whether they are rich or poor. They should increase the understanding of cultures.

Participant 3 described how her children’s school could begin to include Karen culture in the classroom:

I want the school to make a party where we can wear our Karen dress and make Karen food. Then we can share our culture with other families. Maybe we can have a picture day where we wear Karen dress, and the teacher also wears Karen dress, and we can take pictures with the teacher.

**Desire for teachers to attend celebrations.** Three of the four participants agreed that teachers attending Karen-Burmese cultural events would strengthen the teachers’ understanding of their culture. Participant 2 stated that she “[w]ished that teachers would

come to celebrations so they can see our culture, see what we do, and taste our food.” In the same vein, Participant 1 spoke of the understanding that would develop between the Karen-Burmese families and teachers:

I would like the teachers to know about our new year. We celebrate our culture and it is very important for us. We have to appreciate that day because it is special for us. I would like to invite teachers to come and see what our culture is like and what we do. Then the teachers will understand our culture and we can understand each other.

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment:

I would like to invite the teachers when we have Karen New Year and La Ki Su Day where we honor the leaders, and the wrist-tying ceremony where the family comes back together. It is a special day when we get back together and we would like to invite the teachers so that the teachers can come and see what it looks like.

**Desire for Karen language to be taught.** Participant 2 stated her fear that her children would lose their Karen culture and language in the American school. Participant 2 outlined a resolution that the school could establish to diminish her fear: “I am concerned; I don’t want them to lose our culture. I wish that there was one Karen teacher here. They can teach them the Karen language.”

**Desire for children to lead the community.** The participant’s agreed that it is essential that their children receive an education so that they can become leaders who support the Karen-Burmese community back in their home country. The participants described the leadership positions they desired their children to aspire to as police officers, doctors, teachers, and missionaries who work in Burma with Karen-Burmese

people. The participants emphasized the importance of community service as evident by their desire for their children to perform tasks of education, healthcare, and protection gratis for their community. Participant 4 asserted that her community lacked leadership and therefore she wanted her daughter's education to provide her with the skills to support the Karen-Burmese community:

Education is very important for my children. Whoever becomes an educated person can be a leader and have a better life, a better job, be famous, and organize things. This is especially important for my people because they are poor, they don't have things, they don't have good leaders, so they have to spread out to many places and they cannot live in the same place. We don't have a safe place. My daughter will be a police officer, so she will help that. In the United States we have opportunity for education, but in our country we don't have that. I wish my kids to become educated people and leaders.

Participant 1 illustrated the value she thought her son's education will have on her home country and Karen-Burmese community after receiving an education and attaining a position as a doctor:

I wish that my son becomes a doctor. A specialist doctor that can heal those who are sick, because our village is very far from the hospital. So there have been many times when people who have been sick died because it took them two to three days to get to the hospital. If my son becomes a doctor or professional he can build a hospital around there. I also want him to give them help for free, because doctors in my location charge a lot of money. I don't want my son to be like that; I want him to do it for free and help our people.



Participant 2 described her desire that her sons attain leadership positions in education and healthcare to support her cultural community back in Burma:

I hope that my sons will become leaders in schools and hospitals. I want them to work in my village with people who share my culture. You had to pay a lot of money to get support or help. When my sons work I want them to make it free, and equal for everybody. Right now the rich people get everything, but if you're poor they don't care. I don't want my sons to be like that.

Participant 3 offered a related desire as she stated her goals for her children:

When I go to the hospital I see the people who work there. One day I hope my children work there. It's going to be good if one of my children becomes a doctor, and one the principal of the school. I encourage them to be friends with people back from our country, and I tell them one day when you get an education don't forget to help your people.

### **Results From the Initial Interviews and Exit Interviews**

Three research questions guided the phenomenological case study. Each question was analyzed upon compilation of the study data transcriptions (interview and exit interview transcriptions). The questions that follow were used as a framework to report the research findings. During the initial and exit interviews the researcher asked the participants open-ended questions that allowed the participants to respond in detailed reflective narratives that described their experience as a Burmese-Karen refugee with a child or children attending the public school.

**Research Question 1.** Research Question 1 asked “What cultural values do Burmese-Karen refugees whose children attend an American elementary school reveal

about themselves?” Burmese-Karen family units consist of parents, children, and grandparents. Within the Burmese-Karen family unit, mothers hold the responsibility for making decisions that concern education, healthcare, fiscal planning, and navigating the U.S. social-care system for the family unit. The level of responsibility for the mother is compounded in the United States in comparison to that in their home country, which leads to an acute level of stress.

Burmese-Karen families cherish the time that the family spends together. In Burmese-Karen families it is customary that families live in the same home, eat together, and continue cultural traditions as a unit. Participants experienced grief over the loss of family time spent as a unit when they relocated from the refugee camps to the United States due to differing work schedules, incongruous school schedules, and children’s and parents’ conflicting desires.

The value of family time is imbedded within Burmese-Karen customary celebrations. A prevalent theme between these celebrations is the reunion of extended family and communion. These celebrations hold greatest weight among Karen-Burmese people as indicated by a ceasing of work and schooling during the duration of these celebrations.

The participants value their children’s contributions or potential contributions to the Burmese-Karen community. This is marked by the pride they hold for their children when they support community members with interpretation and their desire for their children to be leaders in the Karen community by acquiring positions in the field of medicine, education, religious priesthood, and civil service.

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 asked “What relationship trend appears between Karen refugee parents’ perception of education and their students’ English literacy proficiency development?” Table 4 shows the challenges that the participants faced with formal education in their native country and the effect it has on their perception of themselves as parents and providers. Participants had many obstacles that impeded their ability to receive formal education in their home country that include necessity to work and assist their family for survival, the immense cost of schooling, vast distance in relation to location of home villages, the effect weather played in traveling to the school site, and the community perception that education was not necessary for livelihood by community elders.

By contrast, in the United States situation, participants attributed their poor job prospects and the challenges they face in supporting their children’s schools with a lack of education. This perception left the participants feeling inept at supporting their children’s education in the complexity of the U.S. education system with the newfound perception that education is essential for their children’s ability to be leaders in the community.

Table 4

*Challenges of Karen-Burmese Refugees due to Lack of Formal Education*

Challenges around lack of formal education	
Challenge	Effect
In Burma, education doesn't affect access to work.	Attribute lack of education to being confined to poor jobs in the United States.
Limited schooling in home country because of responsibility to work and support their family.	
When education started, it was short-lived and inconsistent.	Belief that the United States requires education for good jobs, but participants feel as though they don't know how to support their children's education, because of their lack of experience with education.
Limited access to supplies and resources in their home country.	
Education was expensive when the participants lived in Burma and families did not have money.	
Lack of support for education.	

**Research Question 3.** Research Question 3 asked “What challenges do Karen refugee parents experience at an American Elementary School?” The participants named the language barrier between communication with families and the school as an immense obstacle. Communication with families is largely in English, which leaves the participants in the embarrassing and unreliable position of depending on their children to

interpret for them truthfully and accurately. The participants felt an intense level of anxiety, negative self-perception, and despair due to the language barrier.

In addition to the language barrier, the researcher inferred that the participants have experienced challenging interaction with the school due to ethnic and cultural bias. This interpretation is evident by the participants' expressed desire for diverse cultural tolerance and understanding at the school to alleviate the stress between participants and interactions at their children's school on a racial and cultural level.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the lived experiences of Karen-Burmese refugee parents with children that attend a school in the Northeastern region of the United States as described by four participants. The descriptive narratives gathered from the initial interviews and exit interviews provided data that detailed the phenomena of Karen-Burmese refugee parents experience within an American school.

All participants described their value of family and desire to help their families flourish while holding on to their cultural traditions. All participants discussed the challenges they faced with their understanding of educational systems, language barriers, and grief over loss of family time, and importance of cultural traditions.

In Chapter 5, the researcher drew conclusions and summaries regarding the findings while being supported by relevant research. In addition, limitations and recommendations for future research are presented.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

Hornberger and Link (2012) reported that “one in five students in the United States is the child of an immigrant, and between 1995 and 2005, the English Language Learner population grew 56%” (p. 262), resulting in an urgency for educational policy and strategies to support the literacy and language development of ELLs. With the swiftly expanding numbers of immigrant populations, it is essential for researchers to examine the intricacies of the diverse populations of ELLs that are served by the public education system in the United States. This study examined the experience that Burmese-Karen refugees have with a U.S. public school in the context of building insight around the lower English proficiency attainment as compared to other ELLs in the school site. This chapter provides an overview of the study, the conclusions, and summaries regarding the findings linked to relevant research, and implications of the findings. In conclusion, this chapter will provide recommendations for further research and the limitations of this study.

### **Overview of the Study**

The problem that was studied in this dissertation is the reasons for the English literacy proficiency gap of Burmese-Karen refugees and other English Language Learners at the researcher’s elementary school. The purpose of the study was to analyze the experience Burmese-Karen refugees have with the U.S. public school system in a northeastern urban city by answering the following questions: What cultural values do Burmese-Karen refugees whose children attend an American elementary school reveal about themselves, What trends appear between Burmese-Karen refugee parents

perception of education and their students' English literacy proficiency development, and what challenges do Burmese-Karen refugee parents experience at an American elementary school? To answer the questions, the researcher asked the participants guiding questions to reflect upon their own experiences with education in their home country and as a parent with an American elementary school.

Participants in this study met the following criteria: (a) Burmese-Karen refugees who have resettled in a city in the northeastern region of the United States and (b) having children who attend school at the researcher's school site. The researcher collected data through interviews that asked the participants open-ended questions to address the research questions. An exit interview asked the participants additional questions that further highlighted their experience with an American school.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the results related to all three research questions, the researcher has identified four persisting themes emerging related to this study: (a) family, (b) degree of formal education, (c) communication, and (d) cultural representation. The researcher has found a consistent set of perceptions among all participant responses in connection with their experience as Burmese-Karen refugee mothers within an American elementary school. As a whole the participants expressed the importance of the family unit, and the immense responsibilities they held for their families as mothers based on Burmese-Karen cultural systems. As Burmese-Karen refugees who have been resettled in a city in the Northeastern United States the participants shared the experience of perceived ineptitude due to a lack of education, owing to the hardship they experienced in their home country which persists and affects their ability to provide for their family and support their

children's educational needs. All the participants reported that communication between the school and Burmese-Karen families is ineffective because of the language barrier and the school's lack of translated or interpreted material. The effect of the dysfunctional communication leads to accumulation of anxiety and despair for the participants. Finally the participants perceived that their children had a deficit in their Burmese-Karen cultural development and ethnic identity due to a lack of Burmese-Karen representation at the American school that served as the research site.

This study, based on the data brought forth by the participants, identifies the challenges the participants experienced as their cultural norms are impeded due to assimilation into American work and school systems, lack of formal education experiences which create dissonance as parents supporting children in a formal education setting, inability to communicate effectively with their children's school site, and a loss of cultural representation and experience for their children. This research provides vivid evidence that Burmese-Karen refugee parents would benefit from support from an interpreter/translator that shares their cultural experience as they navigate through American systems of healthcare, work, social supports, and American formal education. This study also highlights the critical need for culturally responsive practices at all levels of the educational system which include home-school communication, school system structures, programming, and curriculum.

### **Findings Linked to Relevant Research**

Findings from this study also support the literature, which suggested that schools provide interpretation, include student cultural norms in instructional design and teaching



strategies to support student development, and provide supports for parents to develop their understanding and develop their skill set with navigating an American school.

The findings of this study are linked to relevant research of Gay (2013), Kozleski (2010), Rodriguez-Valls and Torres (2014) and Kugler and Price (2009). These studies have concluded that supporting the development of diverse population is most effective when culturally responsive teaching is used. Kugler and Price (2009) found that family support and engagement is essential in the development of refugee student success. The themes of this study were established by the experiences of the participants. In this section, the themes are compared to relevant prior studies as follows: family, degree of formal education, communication, and cultural representation.

**Family.** As reported by Kugler and Price (2009) “immigrant and refugee students often come from close protective families” (p. 2). Kugler and Price (2009) emphasized the invaluable resource that families play in developing a student’s academic development and growth. When comparing the structure of families from immigrant and refugee families to the structures of American families, Kugler and Price (2009) stated that, “while the American culture values individual privacy rights, many recent immigrants believe in communal responsibility” (p. 2). In the researcher’s study all the participants emphasized the importance of the family unit and the desire for their children to attain a role of leadership among the Burmese-Karen community. Based on participants’ responses and values, the researcher has asserted that the participants highly valued their collective Burmese-Karen community. This is important for teachers and administrators who work with this demographic because in a collective community, “the

entire community must understand and support the services a child receives” (Kugler & Price, 2009, p. 2).

**Degree of formal education.** Kugler and Price (2009) found that among the many challenges that refugees face, limited formal education is one of the contributing factors to their feelings of isolation and inability to navigate a new country. This study’s participants inarguably recognized their limited formal education as a main contributing factor to the difficulty with navigating and supporting their children in an American school.

**Communication.** Kugler and Price (2009) concluded that an isolating factor and cause of anxiety for refugee children is the language barrier and the responsibility “of taking on adult roles, serving as interpreter and negotiator for family business from finances to health” (p. 1). The participants as a unit described this interaction as both a moment of pride in their children and frustration over their own inability to function as the family leader, a situation which leads to internalized feelings of inadequacy.

Rodriguez-Valls and Torres (2014) discovered communication between multilingual communities and American schools is a key factor in the academic success of ELLs. Rodriguez-Valls and Torres (2014) found that an important component to building positive communication with families comes from partnership with community organizations that help to build, “communicative venues” (p. 34). The participants expressed a desire for an interpreter who is part of their community to bridge the communication and cultural divide between themselves and their children’s school.

**Cultural representation.** Kozleski (2010) found that when working with students in the nondominant culture, specifically the non-White middle class experience, students

experienced more success when teachers incorporated culturally responsive teaching. Three of the key features identified by Kozleski connected with the study included participants' reflections such as anchoring curriculum in the everyday lives of students, understanding the assets and capabilities that students' families bring to their parenting, and visiting students' families and communities. A prevalent theme among responses from participants of the study was a desire for teachers to attend cultural celebrations within the Burmese-Karen communities. This is echoed by Kozleski's (2010) finding that "[i]t is important that teachers get to know their students' families and communities by actually going into the students' home environments" (p. 5).

Gay (2013) illustrated the gaps between the main demographic of teachers and the diverse demographic of the students they serve when the author stated, "In the United States teachers are predominantly middle class, female, monolingual, and of European ancestry, while students are increasingly poor and linguistically, ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse" (p. 14). The participant responses in the study indicated that Burmese-Karen parents feel the dissonance between their culture and the mainstream culture that is perpetuated in an American school. The study found that Burmese-Karen parents desire cultural inclusion within the school programming, and instruction. Gay's (2013) findings support the participants' desires as evident in the example of "self-concepts, ethnic pride, and academic success of Appalachian students improved by studying their own local cultural communities, customs, traditions, and artifacts" (p. 14).

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study were previously presented in thematic analysis and results in relation to research questions to provide insight into the experience of Burmese-

Karen refugees within an American school. The literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrated the need for additional research that investigates the lived experience of Burmese-Karen refugee parents with children enrolled in an American school. The implications of the findings not only affect existing teachers and administrators who work with Burmese-Karen refugees but also future teachers working with the identified population.

A number of implications related to culturally responsive teaching emerged as a result of this research. The major implication constituted the need for inclusion of families' and students' cultural knowledge into school systems and curriculum. Diverse student populations continue to grow in the United States while the demographic of teachers continues to be predominately White middle class women, whose cultural knowledge differs from the backgrounds of the students they serve. Considering the cultural gap, it is important that teacher training programs and administrators prepare teachers with strategies for incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into their pedagogy.

This study also illustrated the need for providing adequate communication with multilingual refugee families. Implications of this study show that dissonance between a school and families can lead to barriers to integration of students toward success. Institutions working with refugee communities should make sure to provide communication in students' native language and provide interpreting services through a professional who is part of the families' community, as some families may find written correspondence inept based on their limited formal education and their requirement for oral correspondence.

Those who work with Burmese-Karen refugee communities must do so with culturally responsive practices (Rodriguez-Valls & Torres, 2014; Koleski, 2010; Gay, 2013) which have the potential to support the literacy and language proficiency of Burmese-Karen refugee students. It is the hope of the researcher that this study can build on the body of knowledge about the Burmese-Karen parent experience in an American school, and influence stakeholders to better support teachers who work with Burmese-Karen refugees.

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher in this study is a teacher and coordinator at the school site where the participants' children are students. As a teacher and coordinator at the school site for three years, the researcher has created a relationship with the Karen refugee community whose children attend the researcher's school. Over the course of the researcher's work with the Karen refugee community, she may have developed a sympathetic relationship, which may cause her to be less than objective in her data analysis. The researcher's possible bias was managed through the use of member-checking to strengthen the data's validity.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are challenges in a study that may affect the findings. In the study the researcher used interviews as the main tool of data collection. According to Creswell (2014), data collected by the researcher is bound by the following limitations: "indirect information filtered through the views of interviewee, provided in a designated place rather than in the natural field, the researcher's presence may bias the response, and not all people can equally articulate" (p. 191).

Murray and Wynne (2001) discussed the importance of using interpreters in qualitative data by stating “that when interviewees speak in a second language they perceive themselves as less confident, happy, and intelligent. Therefore, in order to allow people whose first language is not English to fully express themselves, consideration should be given to the use of an interpreter” (p. 157). Murray and Wynne (2001) described five limitations that researchers encounter when interviewing participants with an interpreter. These five limitations are the three-way production of data, selective translation, reliability of interpretation, impartiality of the interpreter, and confidentiality.

Three-way production refers to information being passed from researcher to interpreter to participant. When an interpreter is involved the interview goes from one-on-one to what may be perceived as two-on-one, according to Murray and Wynne (2001). This change makes it more difficult for the participant and the interviewer to build rapport. Murray and Wynne (2001) stated that, in their experience, “the rapport needed between researcher and participant to discuss sensitive topics in detail is more difficult to accomplish within a single interpreted interview, we would suggest serial interviewing” (p. 165). In this study the researcher used two interviews to build needed rapport.

Selective translation refers to the inability to translate all meanings across languages. Murray and Wynne (2001) stated that, “with the use of follow-up questions, and expanded responses the interviewer can enable the clarification of understanding” (p. 166). In this study, the researcher used follow-up questions to expand the responses of participants when the interpreter used selective translation.

Another limitation was the language barrier between the researcher and participants. This limitation was mitigated by the use of an interpreter with links to the

target community. Although an interpreter was used during the study, there is the potential for an element of subjectivity in the interpreter's interpretation.

Murray and Wynne (2001) described the "reliability of interpretation" (p. 168) when referencing whether the interviewer trusts that the interpreted interview is a "faithful representation of participants' sentiments" (p. 168). One of the ways Murray and Wynne advised to combat this limitation is to audio-record interpreted interviews and then have a second interpreter check the reliability. The researcher in the study audio-recorded all interviews and had a second interpreter listen and check for reliability.

Murray and Wynne (2001) stated that those interpreters who come from the same cultural group as the participants might interfere with the confidentiality of the interview. In this study, the researchers protected the privacy and confidentiality of the participants by having the interpreter sign a confidentiality agreement prior to the interview.

The final limitation in this study is that the data was not generalizable because of the nonrandom selection and small size of the sample. Since the study will investigate the experience of Karen refugee parents from one elementary school the findings will not represent the experience of other Karen refugee parents. Creswell (2013) stated that "the intent in qualitative research is not to generalize the information, but to elucidate the particular, the specific" (p. 157). In the study the researcher acquired detailed information from participants, which provided depth to the data.

The final limitation in the study was the sample size of the sample participant-demographics. Because of the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to other individuals or communities. However, because an intensive qualitative approach

based on extensive interviews and participants' opportunities for review was used, the findings do exhibit a strong element of authenticity.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was designed and undertaken to augment the paucity of knowledge on Karen- Burmese refugee parents' experiences with an American elementary school. The data from the study highlighted themes that warrant investigation into the relationship between Karen-Burmese refugees and American schools, and how schools can support Karen-Burmese refugee students which would lead to language proficiency and literacy growth.

1. The study conducted included four participants. There should be continued research on Karen-Burmese parents' experiences with American schools; however the researchers should increase the size of the sample group. Expanding the sample size will provide further data around the phenomenon and add to the body of knowledge.

2. The continued development of Karen-Burmese refugee students relies on their parents' ability to navigate the complexity of American schools and structures. Ongoing research to support programs for Karen-Burmese parents should be explored. This research may provide schools with the resources needed to support Karen-Burmese refugee parents as they successfully navigate American school systems.

3. As the demographic composition of the United States and the number of English Language Learners continue to expand, the need for more research that examines Culturally Responsive Teaching with diverse populations is crucial. Teachers who work with English Language Learners would benefit from action research. Sagar (2000) defines action research as a type of inquiry led by those who will be taking action. As



teachers engage in action research around Culturally Responsive Teaching with diverse groups of English Language Learners, these findings can add to the body of insightful knowledge.

4. The challenge that administrators and teacher preparation programs face is the ongoing changes in school demographics and limited professional development provided for teacher-practitioners and prospective teachers to support the diverse student body. Different models of teaching professional development around working with diverse student populations should be studied to determine the most effective means to support teachers and prospective teachers develop culturally responsive instruction practices.

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Appendix A  
Interview Questionnaire



**A Phenomenological Case Study:  
Karen- Burmese Refugees' Cultural Perception of Formal Education**

**-Interview Questionnaire-**

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**Greet the participants and thank them for their participation. Remind participants that they have the right to not answer a question or end the interview at any time.**

Script: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. This study will help teachers and researchers understand Karen Refugees experiences with American public schools. Before we begin, I want to remind you that I will be audio recording the interview and you have the right to not answer any question and/or to end the interview at any time.

Questions:

1. Tell me about your background. (Data related to Research Question 1 will be reported specifically from this question.)
2. Explain to me how you think about a family and how different family life is in the United States. (Data related to Research Question 1 will be reported specifically from this question.)
3. How would you define success in providing for your family? (Data related to Research Question 1 will be reported specifically from this question.)
4. Who makes the decisions for the family? Why? (Data related to Research Question 1 will be reported specifically from this question.)

5. Tell me about your personal experiences with schooling in Burma or the Union of Myanmar. (Data related to Research Question 2 will be reported specifically from this question.)
6. How have your views on education changed from when you were a child to now as adult? (Data related to Research Question 2 will be reported specifically from this question.)
7. Can you tell me about your family? (Data related to Research Question 1, 2, and 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)
8. Can you describe some moments when you have been proud of your child/children? (Data related to Research Question 1 and 2 will be reported specifically from this question.)
9. Tell me about some of the goals you have for your child/children. (Data related to Research Question 2 will be reported specifically from this question.)
10. Tell me about your child's/children's school. (Data related to Research Question 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)
11. How is your child's/children's experience with schooling different from your own? (Data related to Research Question 2 and 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)
12. Describe your experiences you have had at your child's/children's school as a parent. (Data related to Research Question 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)

13. Tell me about some challenges you have faced with your child's/children's school? (Data related to Research Question 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)
14. How much does your child's/children's school include Karen culture and you? (Data related to Research Question 1 and 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)
15. How does your child's/children's school communicate important information with you? (Data related to Research Question 3 will be reported specifically from this question.)

Script: Thank you so much for your time today. I will be transcribing the data and will have the transcript ready for you to review in one week. At the end of the study I will provide you with a copy of the findings.

Appendix B  
Exit Interview Questionnaire

**A Phenomenological Case Study:  
Karen- Burmese Refugees' Cultural Perception of Formal Education**

**- Exit Interview Questionnaire-**

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**Greet the participants and thank them for their participation. Remind participants that they have the right to not answer a question or end the interview at any time.**

Script: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me again. I want to remind you I will be audio recording the interview and you have the right to not answer any question and/or to end the interview at any time. Before we begin I have a copy of the transcripts from our last interview. I would like you to review the translated transcript and confirm that what has been transcribed is accurate.

At this time the interviewer will ask the participant questions about the translated transcript which will be provided at a previous date from the previous interview(s). The researcher will allow the participant an opportunity to fact-check the information. After the participant provides feedback on the transcript, the interviewer will continue with the exit interview questions.

Questions:

1. What are some things you would like your child's/children's teacher to know about Karen culture? (Data related to Research Question 1 specifically from this question.)
2. Describe in detail the value education has for your child/children. (Data related to Research Question 2 specifically from this question.)

3. What additional challenges have you been confronted with at you child's/children's school since our last interview? (Data related to Research Question 3 specifically from this question.)
4. If any, what supports could the school have to help with the challenges you described? (Data related to Research Question 3 specifically from this question.)

## Appendix C

### Participants' Responses in Relation to Research Question 1

*Participants' Descriptions of Family*

Participant	Descriptions of family
Participant 3	The family members are parents, children, grandpa, and grandma included. They all live together; they eat together, share things together, teach and continue our culture.
Participant 4	The family has parents, children, and include the grandpa and grandma.
Participant 2	Family means they all live together, the children, parents and other relatives. They eat together, enjoy together, and teach together. We have to teach them to learn something, like continuing culture
Participant 1	We spend time together, we cook together, and we eat together.
Participant 1	I have to make the decisions because my husband says you make good decisions and my mom says she's too old so whatever decision you make I am going to follow.
Participant 3	In my family I make the decisions. My husband says ok and my family says ok. The mother makes the decisions so they follow it.
Participant 4	Yes me, I make the decisions for the family.
Participant 3	I have to take responsibility of everything. My husband only works and gives us money. He doesn't know how to use the money. Also, my children's school he doesn't know, I have to check for that. I have to organize. I have to go to the teacher meeting, the parent conferences, everything, because my husband doesn't know about it



*Participants' Description of how Family Life has changed*

Participant	Description of how family life has changed
Participant 3	One thing that is hard for me is school. I have to pick up my kids on time. I have to work hard to get them. In the past we don't need to do that.
Participant 2	Family life in America is totally different. I have to organize my kids to get to school on time.
Participant 3	In the camp I didn't need to take my kids go to school. I didn't need to worry about that. But in here we have to work hard for our kids.
Participant 3	We cannot do things in the US like we did in the camp. For example they want to eat different things, only American food, they don't want to eat Burmese food. The kids don't want to eat it (Burmese food) and they have to eat different times.
Participant 2	So we don't have time like we did before, because the schedules are different so we don't have family time like before.
Participant 4	Family life in the camp was good but we didn't have opportunities for education
Participant 3	We cannot work together or spend time together.

*Participants' Description of Burmese-Karen Cultural Celebrations*

Participant	Participants description of Burmese-Karen cultural celebrations
Participant 1	La Ki Su day is a day we have bracelets. It is the Karen wrist ceremony. The bracelets are special because every family member comes back together. No matter how far they come back to see each family member.
Participant 4	Karen New Year and Ma Htoo Dar Day. Sometimes we combine Ma Htoo Dar Dar with the wrist tying ceremony. We really care about it; it is when the family comes back together.
Participant 2	I would like teachers to know that we celebrate and that sometimes we are going to be absent from school, because we celebrate Karen new year. We have a culture and we have a language, so it is important that my children go, so my children will be absent those days and I want teachers to know about that.
Participant 1	I would like teachers to know about our New Year. We celebrate our culture and it is very important for us.
Participant 1	I would like to invite teachers to come see what our culture is like and what we do. The teachers will understand our culture and can understand each other.
Participant 4	When I have a special day for my culture I want to invite the teachers to come and see what my community does.

## Participant 3

I would like to invite the teachers when we have Karen new year and La Ki Su day where we honor the leaders, and the writs tying ceremony where the family comes back together.

It is a special is a special day when we get back together and we would like to invite the teachers so they can come see what it is like.

## Participant 4

We have a thread and the older family members tie it on the wrist of the younger people to show that the family is back together. It doesn't matter where you are you come together

that day to see everybody.”

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*Times Participants Were Proud of Their Children*

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Participant	Times the participants were proud of their children
Participant 1	I'm so proud of them because right now when I go places they are little translators for me, so I'm proud that my kids can translate for me.
Participant 2	One time I went to the dentist and the interpreter was not there yet, so when the lady asked me, I didn't know, but my son translated for me.
Participant 3	Yea I am proud when my kids gets awards from school and right now my kids can speak English really well. My neighbor they ask for help and the kids already can help. So I am so proud of that.
Participant 2	When I heard my children's teacher say your son did a good job, and is very successful in school, So I was very happy when I heard that.

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*Participants' Goals for Their Children*

Participant	Participants' goals for their children.
Participant 1	For my first son I hope and I wish he becomes a missionary. In my village my family doesn't know about Jesus and they are not Christian. So I hope my son can do that
Participant 1	For my second son, I want him to help people, because in my country people are poor. They don't have a lot of money and they are very far from hospital. So some patients they go to the hospital and it takes two, to three days to get there, so they pass away on the way. So if my son becomes a doctor he can help save their lives. So I wish that all my kids go and work back in our country not in America.
Participant 2	I hope my children become a doctor or a teacher, and that they are very successful working for the community and help people and help our family. I hope they become good people and help poor people, not rich people.
Participant 4	My community didn't have education and didn't know anything. My community needs help that's why I hope my kids can work for them.
Participant 3	I hope one of my children will become a doctor and a principal of a school. I encourage them to help friends back from our country and one day when they get an education, to not forget your people.
Participant 3	It is very important especially for my people; My people are really poor and have no education.
Participant 4	I want to see my kids one day get the good job, become a good person, and help the community
Participant 1	I also want my son to give them help for free, because some doctors around my location

you need to pay a lot of money. I don't want my son to be like that I want him to do it for  
free to help people.

Participant 2

When my son works I want him to make it free and equal for everybody. Right now the  
rich people get everything, but if you're poor they don't care. That is why I don't want my  
son to be like that.”

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Appendix D

Participants' Responses in Relation to Research Question 2

*Participants' Perceptions of Children's Opportunities*


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Participant	Participant's perceptions of children's opportunities
Participant 3	Here my kids study, they are happy, and they have many supports. They have many school supplies and they have many opportunities.
Participant 3	They (United States) have free programs. We don't need to pay for it. And school supplies are also free.
Participant 3	My daughter needed special education and in here (United States) she got services right away.
Participant 3	I think that they need to get an education first to get a better life.
Participant 1	I wish that my children can have an education and graduate, so that they can get a good position and work anywhere.
Participant 2	When you get an education you become an educated person and people know you. You can get jobs and place with an education.
Participant 4	Education is very important, whoever becomes educated can be a leader and have a better life, a better job, be famous, and organize things.

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*Challenges with the U.S. Education System*

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Participant Challenges with the U.S. education system

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Participant I see that they have to do things even though I don't know how.

1

Participant I encourage my children to study hard, because when you get an education  
3 you can get better job, but I don' know how.

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Appendix E

Participants' Responses in Relation to Research Question 3

Participants' Experience with Communication with Children's School

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Participant	Participants' experience with communication at their children's school.
Participant 1	When I got the letter for my son's behavior at school, I didn't know what it said so I had to go to my neighbor to read it to me, because it is in English.
Participant 3	I get phone calls with them speaking in English, so I don't understand, so I let my kids listen.
Participant 2	When I get phone calls from the school I worry about whether my son did something or if my son is sick because I am not sure of the message.
Participant 4	I get phone calls and letters from my kid's school. I don't understand so my kids read to me.
Participant 4	When I need help I have my kids translate for me.

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*Participants' Feelings of Anxiety Caused by Language Barrier at Children's School*

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Participant	Participants' feelings of anxiety caused by the language barrier at their children's school
Participant 1	When I get letters with my sons name on it I get really worried, so I have to ask my neighbor to read it to me.
Participant 3	I was really angry, because I don't know English, so I let my children listen but they gave me the wrong message.
Participant 2	If I cannot have an interpreter I am worried. 'What are they telling me about my son?' so I get really worried.
Participant 3	When I met my children's teacher I went to ask about my children's school and about their education, but I cannot speak English so it makes me so sad.
Participant 2	I was sad because I don't know for sure. I asked for you have homework or not, but maybe they lie to me so I don't know.
Participant 4	Sometimes I want to say something to my kids' teacher, but I don't know how to say.
Participant 3	I want to be involved, but I can't because of the language barrier. I can't understand, so I am so sad.
Participant 1	I want to support my kid's school, but I don't know how. I am sad when I see some parents working for the school, selling things and working for the parent group. I want to do it also, but I don't know how to communicate with them. I'm worried that I am going to make a mistake.

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*Participants' Identified Solutions*

Participant	Participant identified solutions
Participant 1	If it was in my native language I could read it right away. Right now my neighbor is busy, so I get worried
Participant 3	I think the messages in English are difficult to understand, so I think that in the future the Karen interpreter would be good for me.
Participant 3	If the letters were in my native language it would be good and for conferences if there was an interpreter for Karen that would be good. Also it is better if someone says it to me in person because even if it is in Karen they are written in formal words and I don't know them.
Participant 4	I want the letter to come in my native language, because when the kids read to me some of the words they don't know. They can only read it, but they don't know how to explain it exactly.
Participant 2	My children learn American, they learn in English. I am concerned because I don't want them to lose our culture.
Participant 3	In my mind the school should be more equal for all people. It shouldn't matter your race. It shouldn't matter if you're rich or poor.