



In Pursuit of a New Perspective in the Education of Children of the Refugees: Advocacy for the “Family”*

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Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of Burmese refugee families with elementary schools in the U.S. and proposes a new perspective for serving the educational needs of refugee children. Data included in-depth interviews with 25 Burmese families in a midsize Midwestern city. Findings from the preliminary analysis demonstrated that due to their own limited school experiences, the parents did not know how they could advocate for their children’s schooling and use academic opportunities. While the parents appreciated and encouraged their children’s school learning, they lacked the resources to support their children in negotiating academic contexts. Moreover, the schools policies lacked innovation and resources to involve refugee parents. Finally, Burmese children’s diverse out of school learning contexts and unique needs went unnoticed in school contexts. These findings suggest that educators, community agencies and policy makers take a new perspective, advocacy for the whole family, so that the parents might provide a stronger leadership in children’s schooling. This could be accomplished in various ways: Advocacy for true bilingualism of refugee children, advocacy for family presence in school, support for community based academic learning and cultural responsiveness to the family goals for child growth.

Key Words

Education of Immigrants, Children of Refugees, Cultural Diversity, Early Childhood Education, Parent Involvement.

* This paper was revised after being presented at the International Conference on Global Issues of Early Childhood Education and Children’s Rights, Gaziantep, Turkey, 27-29 April 2012.

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The education of refugee children or children of refugees is a challenging process for researchers and practitioners. While the majority of immigrants make choices regarding their new lives and experience a planned move for further education, a new job, or family union (Zhou, 1997), refugees are defined as “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2012). Refugee experiences might be extremely varied. Refugees arriving in the host countries might be affected by regional political issues such as the trauma

related to violence they observed during the war. Other times, refugees experience socio-economic issues such as the recent Ethiopian and Somali refugees impacted by famine (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has a bigger umbrella defining the people stricken by those extreme circumstances as “refugees, asylum-seekers, returned refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) protected/assisted by UNHCR, returned IDPs, stateless persons, and others of concern to UNHCR” (UNHCR, 2012). Some of these refugees resettle in a different region in the same country, or in a different country. The United States, one of the few countries to respond to this global crisis, has been admitting resettled refugees in increasing numbers. In 2011, 56,419 refugees from 65 countries were resettled in the U.S., with the majority coming from Burma, Bhutan, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Russia (ORR, 2012).

The unique background experiences of each refugee community are important to consider understanding their specific needs beyond common immigrant characteristics. When their teaching experiences are limited to larger and more prominent immigrant communities, educators and researchers may not easily recognize these issues in the refugee children’s educational lives (McBrien, 2005). In order to notice how the lives of refugees and their schooling experiences interact, U.S. educators need to understand how refugees’ past geographic, social and educational experiences affect their current context. For instance, many of the Bosnian refugees came to U.S. after the persecution they faced during the civil war between 1992 and 1995. However, the majority of Bosnian refugees also come from middle socio-economic status along with further educational experiences in a European cultural and social context. The majority of Bosnian refugees arrived in the United States in the late 90s and beginning 2000s, making them a relatively established community (ORR, 2012). This background might moderate negative impacts of refugee experiences and support their engagement with and expectations for schooling in the U.S (Mosselson, 2009). On the other hand, many of the Burmese refugees, although defined in the same refugee category with the former, spent the last decades in the refugee camps in Thailand, while being forced to live a semi-nomadic life in these camp-villages without any permission to work, go outside, or earn citizenship rights or identity cards (Brees, 2010; Fuerte, 2010). After they were deprived of their own land by military

forces in the country, they were unable to hold any rights in Thailand system and were fearful for their safety in the refugee camps, which had no formal educational opportunities that is compatible with a European-American social and educational context (Linsenmayer, 2006). Children of these refugees might then be more vulnerable in academic settings than the children of Bosnian refugees are, due to the parents’ lack of schooling opportunities. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the sociocultural context of the families in order to find particular ways to support the education of the children of refugees.

This paper proposes a new perspective in serving the educational needs of refugee children. The experiences of Burmese refugees in U.S. Midwest, might provide insights for educators and policy makers since the community is geographically accessible and fairly new in its resettlement experience. Given the scarcity of research focusing on refugee children, especially their educational experiences (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; McBrien, 2005), this study fills a gap by describing a case of a particular refugee community in their local context and the experiences of families with early elementary education. I first describe some of the earlier theoretical frames that focus on the education of immigrant children and their adjustments, and then offer a new perspective that might fit with the particular social and educational context of Burmese refugees and others in similar vulnerable circumstances. While doing this, I give examples from a qualitative study that focuses on the experiences of Burmese refugee parents with schooling in the U.S. to provide evidence for this new perspective. I believe this will support the efforts of educators who might be challenged with the complexity and diversity of immigrant communities.

Literature Review

Life Experiences of Refugee Families after Resettlement: Perhaps the biggest challenge in the lives of resettled refugees is “being the other” in a new society due to language difficulties and the social, emotional, and academic challenges this brings. Researchers have found that traumatic experiences can impede the ability of resettled refugees to learn the new language; at the same time, the inefficiency in communicating might lead to a sense of alienation from the society (Beiser & Hou, 2006). When refugee families attempt to participate in the multicultural neighbourhoods and communities they are locally a part of, factors such as discrimination

and time constraints might impede their ability to do so (Goodkind & Foster-Fishman, 2002). Financial constraints of newly resettled families may evoke a sense of loss and hopelessness (Beiser & Hou). Children, while they experience financial hardship of adults to a lesser degree, share the same traumatic experiences such as separation from homeland and a feeling of loss (Staehr, 2001). Some researchers thus argued that these children might face psychological problems that might surface through their academic progress and behaviour (Anderson et al., 2004; Hodes, 2000).

Another dilemma families are facing is the clash between the cultural values of family and the popular culture in the mainstream society as this might lead to further alienation of the child from the home culture and family. Many of the refugee families reported that they want their children to integrate into the host country, but also carry their cultural identity (Attwell, Gifford, & McDonalds-Wilmsen, 2009; Shimoni, Este, & Clark, 2003). Accomplishing both might not always be possible (Attwell et al.; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). For example, the difference between parental views on culture and methods of discipline created clashes between Sudanese and Hmong refugees and their children in the context of school and societal expectations in Australia (Attwell et al.).

In general, refugee families tend to have very high aspirations for their children's academic lives and future careers (Banks & MacDonald, 2003), even though they have challenges in articulating the specific ways to achieve these aspirations (Banks & MacDonald; Shimoni et al., 2003). Research studies with older refugee students also support these claims; these students view education as a way to proactively build their future and replace their losses (Mosselson, 2006). In addition, appreciating the importance of efficient communication, refugee parents who are not able to learn the new language might strongly encourage their children's academic success and view them as experts in the family (Attwell et al., 2009). However, when they are put into key positions for their family such as the translator for school events and documents or the communicator during visits to offices and formal events, this might lead to a sense of superiority on the part of the children and challenges the leadership of the parents (Zhou & Bankston, 2000).

Experiences of Burmese Refugees: The Case of Indiana: As a result of the coup d'état in Burma in 1988, a rapid influx of refugees began to flow into India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, and other

countries (Hlaing, 2009). The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports that in 2011, 16,901 refugees arrived in the U. S. from Burma, with the majority settling in New York, Texas, and Indiana (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). These numbers situate Burmese refugees as the largest resettled refugee community for 2011. Today, the estimated number of Burmese immigrants in the U.S. is 100,200 (U.S. Census, 2010). Fort Wayne in Indiana is a major city of resettlement for Burmese refugees and attracts secondary refugee migration from other cities for the convenience of concentrated Burmese neighbourhoods despite a less appealing job market. Indeed, families struggle with financial circumstances and unemployment in the recession. Unlike many refugees who are separated from their families (Anderson et al., 2004), the majority of Burmese refugees are resettled as the whole family with mostly two biological parents. However, most of the jobs available to Burmese refugees are located out of state in meat factories, or locally in the sewing industry (Indiana's News Center, 2010). While few Burmese in Fort Wayne have immediate family members left in Burma, or in refugee camps in Thailand (Linsenmayer, 2006), many are separated in the U. S. because male family members can only find employment in other states. Prior refugee camp experiences with limited educational opportunities coupled with financial struggles place Burmese families and children who are P-12 students in a vulnerable state especially considering the scarcity of knowledge and skills among community and local educators serving culturally diverse children (Han, 2006). Refugee parents often feel very hesitant in getting involved with community meetings and in mainstream contexts since they feel they do not know how to do things or how to act (Goodkind & Foster-Fishman, 2002). These dynamics make this particular group a very important one to explore in order to understand the needs and experiences of young refugee children with their early education.

Burmese Refugees and Early Childhood Education: Even though the early childhood period has a broad impact on the cognitive development of children, future school achievement and social and emotional development (Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2003; Reynolds et al. 2007), many refugee families lack access to good quality early childhood education for children who arrived at a young age (0-5 years), or were born in the U.S. For many refugee parents, it is a challenge to afford early childhood education for their children (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). Young refugee child-

Table 1.*Interview Protocol for the Burmese Families*

1. Tell me about your stay in the United States? How did you begin living here? Tell me about life here compared to Burma or Thailand.
2. Tell me about your own education? If you had education, how long was that?
3. What did you think of United States and education here before coming here?
4. Tell me about education system here as you learn through your child's schooling. What is interesting or new to you in your child's education?
5. How did you feel the first year school experience was for your children (between K-3)?
6. Was your children's adjustment to school harder in kindergarten? What made it harder or easier?
7. What resources do you need to provide a good education for your children?
8. How much do you know about your child's education and what they learn in school?
9. Tell me about your communication with your child's teacher?
10. Tell me about your visits to your child's school? Do you go there? How do you feel when you go to their children's school? Do you attend field trips?
11. How do you think your child is viewed in school by peers? Does she have much contact with local peers? Does she feel like a part of school community?
12. How do you think your child is viewed in school by teachers?
13. What do you think the challenges your child face at school?
14. How does your child define their culture and identity? Do they have challenges with cultural differences between school and home? What are they?
15. Do you feel your celebration of your national and religious holidays are respected by schools?
16. Did you have any different opinions with your children's teachers about discipline, manners, behaviors or expectations?
17. What else would you like teachers to teach your child?
18. What is your vision of good teaching? Who is a good teacher to you?
19. How do you think school system supports your child? (Services, translation, extra courses, tutoring etc.)
20. How often do you work with your child on homework? How do you arrange the daily schedule at home?
21. What kind of education and future do you envision for your child?
22. Does your child attend to any religious/cultural education in your community?

ren attending kindergarten through 3rd grade are vulnerable to future academic and social challenges since they do not have prolonged experiences with schooling, or experiences with early English language learning in preschools. Having a prior refugee camp experience at a young age might also hinder young refugee children's early development (McBrien, 2005).

For refugee children, early childhood education not only positively influences future school achievement, but also may support their adjustment to the host country (Trawick-Smith, 2010). For instance, joining schooling contexts at an early age and understanding the cultural practices and expectations in these contexts might help children greatly in their successful negotiation of cultural incongruence later on in their formal schooling and beyond (McBrien, 2005). However, for many Burmese refugee parents, it is a challenge to afford early childhood education (Hernandez et al., 2008). Financial hardships make it practically impossible

to send children to preschools, and subsidized care such as "Head Start" centres can only accommodate a very limited number of children. The young children are, thus, often cared for by parents who are unemployed, or by other relatives.

Low childcare and preschool attendance rates for Burmese children are also attributable to the lack of awareness in the community regarding the importance of early childhood education and the scarcity of bilingual education opportunities. The Burmese lack previous experiences with these types of educational opportunities (Lugar, 2010). When Burmese children miss early education, the language barrier persists and remains one of the greatest factors affecting children's social belonging and academic achievement in school. This especially affects recently arrived Burmese children who begin American schooling in the kindergarten through 3rd grade range; they have missed early English language learning in at the preschool level (Lugar).

Theoretical Perspectives to Describe Refugee Experiences

Deficit Perspectives: In this partial and biased, but somehow still permeating perspective, educators and researchers associate underachievement of refugee students with social status and cultural attributes of families. They associate students' success with the degree to which students leave their tradition and languages. In this frame, difference is a key word and does not mean equality or partnership; it is a means for discrimination and marginalization (Shields, Mazawi, & Bishop, 2005). At times, deficit model might arise even with the best intentions such as wanting to highlight the needs of the refugees. For instance, Steimel (2010) highlighted how the stereotypical representation of refugees in visual and written media as people who are either helpless or trying hard to achieve American dream is intended to produce an emotional effect on the reader. Consequently, McKinnon (2009) discouraged educators and community agencies from the use of saviour rhetoric when talking about the issues surrounding refugees and their resettlement experiences.

Cultural-Ecological Theory: Ogbu and Simons' (1998) framework placed minority students in two main categories: voluntary and involuntary immigrants. Ogbu and Simons analysed refugees as a separate group that carries some characteristics of voluntary immigrants such as a positive outlook at the opportunities, and an eagerness to be a part of the new society. In order to analyze academic and social outcomes of refugee children, we need to look at four types of understandings: "Frames of reference, folk theories of "making it" (and role models), degree of trust of white people and their institutions, and beliefs about the effect of adopting white ways on minority identity" (Ogbu & Simons, p. 169). Refugees' frame of reference about U.S. tends to be more positive than that about their home country. While refugee parents might realize that, due to some factors like age and language difficulties, their chance of "making it" to a white collar job is unrealistic, their aspiration for their children's future lives might still be very high. Again, as refugee communities share some characteristics of voluntary immigrants, their trust of mainstream institutions such as schools might be high. Therefore, "...they are willing to accommodate because they do not imagine that learning mainstream white ways and language will harm their group identity" (Ogbu & Simons, p. 175).

Segmented Assimilation Theory: This perspective by Portes and Zhou (1993) might also help us to understand the different trajectories of refugees. Of the three outlets into the adjustment to U.S., the first one describes the possibility of direct upward mobility, often seen in the case of immigrants from Europe. Second one considers ethnic solidarity as a drive for mobility such as intact ethnic groups like some Vietnamese or Cuban as active communities with some impact on the policy. Assimilation into poverty, the third trajectory, happens if refugee families remain marginalized and poor. This situation might discourage refugee children from owning the cultural identity of their families. In this frame, educational and cultural resources of the family and economic stability are crucial for refugees' healthy integration and for fostering the growth of a strong bicultural identity.

While these frameworks provide useful information about immigrants' adjustment and educational success through different factors, they often situate children of immigrants in-between (Sarroub, 2002) the host society—in this context, educational institutions— and their parents, as the opposite sides of a dichotomy. They focus on the adaptation and integration process for each individual, rather than focusing on families as a unit. Moreover, they often fail short in describing the unique characteristics of contemporary refugee communities such as cultural and linguistic practices that enrich refugee children's educational lives. Without this knowledge, schools struggle to support their local refugee communities, and specifically, young refugee children. A new reciprocal approach might combine the strengths of the two important actors in refugee children's educational lives, the school and the family. This approach should consider the dynamics of social and educational context in which Burmese refugee children and others in similar circumstances are situated. For example, Anderson et al. (2004) argue that the experiences of the refugee children can only be understood considering the three phases of their changing contexts, pre-migration, transmigration, and post-migration. Therefore, by just looking at the pre-migration experiences, we might fall into stereotypical assumptions towards these children.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological model that recognizes the complexity of children's growth and education through the various structures and systems around them might serve as a foundation for this new framework. Therefore, by focusing on the family as the unit in exploring children's school

experiences, I look at the issue from the perspective of whole family in its ecology including cultural and social activities in and out of school, past and present experiences, parents' aspirations and beliefs, and current local contexts and educational policies for refugee families.

Method and Background of the Study

The objective of the qualitative research study was to learn about the educational experiences of newcomer refugee families with early elementary education. Exploring a particular refugee community in its local context is appropriate to the ecological model sought by this inquiry. The specific focus of my inquiry is the experiences of families with young children who arrived in the U.S. within the last four years and currently attend kindergarten through 3rd grade in elementary schools in Fort Wayne. Therefore, I ask the following research question: What are the unique experiences of Burmese families as a unit with elementary education and schools? How do the education policies and practices of districts, schools, and classrooms impact cognitive, social and emotional well-being of newcomer Burmese refugee children between grades Kindergarten and third grade. In order to answer these questions by capturing the beliefs, and perceptions of the parents, I conducted in-depth interviews with 28 Burmese parents from 25 families in Fort Wayne during Summer and Fall 2011. The parents were between the ages of 25 and 53. All of the families could be classified as working class, while many of the fathers are living in other states, mostly in meat factories. Therefore, most of the participants were refugee mothers, while three families included both parents as participants, and two of the families only included fathers as participants. The interviews lasted between 70 to 90 minutes with each parent. The interviews were conducted in Burmese, through a translator, who was a volunteer in his local community. Table 1 illustrates interview questions.

In the interviews, experiences and future aspirations were visited, as well as various geographic contexts the families lived. The nature of the relationship with school contexts were elicited throughout the parent answers. I was both an outsider and insider to refugee parents' experiences. As an immigrant researcher, woman, and mother, I was able to gather powerful narratives by elaborating issues with parent experiences with schooling. However, post-positivist research on indigenous communities requires the researcher to consider the benefits and possible

negative effects of the study for the communities (Smith, 1999), and cautions the researcher about traditional research approaches that served "the interests, concerns, and methods of the researcher" and not those of the communities (Bishop, 2005, p. 111). Since I never experienced the challenges the families faced, such as a refugee camp or civil war, I mainly relied on the pure descriptions of refugee families, but took a reciprocal approach in interpreting their experiences in a most respectful and empowering manner (Lather, 1991).

Even though most of the parents had other older and younger children, I centered my inquiry on the children between kindergarten and third grade. Parents still mentioned about their experiences with schooling for their older children; thus, I was able to capture the unique characteristics of first school experiences across different ages. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After the interviews, the summary of the findings were shared with the families through the translator, who, in addition to the families, checked the interpretations for the clarity, and representation of narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for credibility. Since qualitative inquiry is inductive in nature (Lincoln & Guba), instead of beginning with a hypothesis, I based the new perspective in exploring the educational experiences of Burmese families on the parents' narratives. All of the interviews went through first coding phase using *initial coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and *process coding* (Charmaz, 2002) techniques. Data were further analyzed in the second coding phase to develop a conceptual organization of the initial themes using NVivo software within a grounded theory method framework (Strauss & Corbin) to be able to capture the parents' experiences, perspectives, and beliefs towards the education system in the U.S. In the third phase, codes were examined across individual and common experiences in order to define characterizations and categories that would satisfactorily describe "how" and "what" of the case. Findings were interpreted through the Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1977, 1979). Utilizing the case of Burmese refugee families, I then conceptualize a new perspective that advocates for the whole family in order to foster social-emotional and academic growth of young refugee children.

Findings

Unquestioned Trust

The Burmese parents made it clear that they perceived public schools to be a safe haven for their child-

ren. They often compared the schools in the refugee camps with the elementary schools in the U.S. and trusted that their children will be safe during the day in the U.S. schools. The parents elaborated that they no longer have stress and concerns over their children's lives and safety. A mother reflected on her own schooling:

I went to school until the 5th grade in Burma. It is very different from U.S. education system. My fifth grade is like kindergarten here. There were so many things going on, we have to move around, there is war zone, the school is not safe, and how can I focus on my school work? (The father interjects): I did not go to school in Burma.

Another parent elaborated:

They treat students very well like their children. We don't worry about the children's safety when we send them to schools, but we were worried in Burma because if kids did not understand things, they might be hit by the teacher. Also, in the refugee camp, they only taught Burmese, and here all classes are in English. We are not worried about what is happening to them unlike in Burma or the refugee camp.

The findings also indicate that all parents made their decisions to move to the U.S. considering their children's education. Even though this might be surprising given the parents' history of the lack of education and dire circumstances that orient them towards survival goals, we need to be reminded that this characteristics align with the south Asian culture that highly values education and educated people, who are branded with wisdom and authority (Hickey, 2005). All of the parents expressed the assumption that the U.S. has the best education system around the world without question. Participants explained that they gained this perspective after being presented information by sponsoring agencies in the refugee camp, and through the relatives who came to the U.S. before they did. A mother explains:

When I came here, I realized that education system is the best here. In Thailand, the education system is useless. I don't have even a word to describe education here; it is the best in the world. In the refugee camp, we had all sorts of concerns; the schools were not good and safe for the kids.

Considering the lack of early educational experiences and thus, a comparison point, all parents clearly endorsed any and every decision that the school system and teachers make and never question those. A parent wanted to be sure that her child follo-

wed the school policies and worked hard to achieve the goals set by the teachers:

When we went to the parent teacher conferences, we learned that he obeys classroom rules, he does not cause any issues, and his teacher thinks he is a bright kid and is improving every day. I want him to be the smartest and the hardworking kid in his class.

It is certainly promising that the parents expressed an appreciation for the educational opportunities for their children as compared to the lack of safety and basic needs that they experienced in the rural areas in Burma or the refugee camps in Thailand. However, their lack of a comparison measure to another similar educational setting makes parents vulnerable in that they do not know how they could advocate for their children's schooling and use further academic opportunities. For instance, when a teacher uses teaching methods that are not sound or does not recognize the actual academic level of a Burmese child, the parents would not have any way of judging this. Even when the parents voice concerns, their credibility may not be as high in the eyes of the school personnel. For instance, because of a mistake that a U.N. staff member made at the refugee camp in Thailand, one of the children's age was recorded as 3 years older, and when he is resettled in Fort Wayne, he was placed in a higher grade. When the mother explained the situation, it was not received well by the school due to the lack of documentation, and the family had to wait two years and had several school failures until they convinced the administration.

For so many times, I tried to explain that his age is not correct; his grade should be in kindergarten. But they (the school) were just looking at the documents and they asked for more documents proving her point. However, he was born in Burma and it is extremely hard getting documents from another country. He spent that year in the third grade and next year he went to the fourth grade. But he began to fail in the classes. He was going to the 5th grade last year. It was mid-year, and finally we held a big meeting with the principal. I objected to the decision and explained the situation again. They finally decided to put him in the second grade last year instead of fifth grade. This is his fourth year in school and he is in third grade back again. He was very happy to be able to return to the second grade. The work is not hard and his social adjustment is good. He is still weak in reading and in other subjects, he is doing O.K. He does regularly read at home.

A Forced Disconnect from School

Despite the language challenges, most of the parents reported a heightened interest in their children's education and displayed a desire to be more connected to school culture and the teachers. The findings indicated that even though most of them wanted to be more closely connected to the schools by frequently visiting the school, communicating more often with the teachers, and supporting academic work at home such as helping with homework, Burmese refugee parents are virtually non-existent in schools and have vast difficulties being present or involved in the traditional sense and keeping track of their children's progress. There are several reasons for this situation.

Past experiences of Burmese parents challenge them to navigate the culture of schooling, which was conceptualized through the idea of *cultural capital* in early studies (Bourdieu, 1998; Weine, Ware, & Lezic 2004). The nature of refugee camp experiences in Thailand makes it even harder for children and families to negotiate cultural norms and relationships in educational and public settings in the U. S. (McBrien 2005; Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008). For instance, in refugee camps, Burmese refugees typically experience close personal relationships, de-institutionalized procedures for adult-children relationships, flexible scheduling, and informal schooling. In addition, before coming to the U. S., Burmese refugee children are typically excluded from any contact outside of refugee camps for educational purposes. They would not have had any contact with a formal educational system even though teachers and NGO staff in camps are often very dedicated to provide meaningful learning experiences (Oh & Van Der Stouwe). Therefore, upon resettlement, formal processes and hierarchy in educational institutions – such as making an appointment; complex schooling policies that can vary by classroom, building and district; and procedures that require written communication or parent involvement – intimidate Burmese parents in interacting with school personnel (Kyaw (Joe) Soe, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Findings demonstrated that a prominent reason for refugee parents' disconnect from the schools that is often disguised as the language difficulty is the scarcity of resources and strategies in school districts. For instance one parent explained: "I did not go for any visits (besides parent teacher conferences) by myself because of my language barrier. I would like to visit more often to track my child's school work." The parents mentioned that the scho-

ol could only provide translators for parent-teacher conferences, or other important occasions. The system as it stands in that particular district had its flaws due to the lack of resources since the parent-teacher conferences were usually held on the same day for multiple teachers. One parent commented: "Last month, we had our second parent teacher conferences. I went to the conference, but my 8 year old girl had to translate because there were not enough available translators."

The parents felt that a barrier between themselves and being actively involved in their children's academic work is their lack of knowledge and experience with curriculum, instructional methods, and the materials. They wished the curriculum and instructional system would be explained to them in the earlier weeks of the school.

One parent elaborated:

The first couple of weeks were rough. He did not know anything about the language, the homework, he cried a lot. He did not know a single word in English. It took him a few months to become capable of functioning in school. He was only watching some cartoons in English. He really did not want to go to the school; the school concept was foreign to him because he never went to the school in the refugee camp. He did not have any friends, either. When my son did not understand an instruction about a school task, the translator had to help. The translator or the teacher did not call me so I did not know how his days were or what happened. I know he cried a lot more at home than in school. Since I don't know how the school system works, I wanted to trust the teacher since the teacher knows the kids well. Even if I wanted to go in, the translator could not be arranged. I was also so busy going to the appointments, visiting the doctor, getting shots, doing food stamp application, so I could not go even if I wanted to.

Another issue that frequently emerged during the interviews is the parents' struggle to support their children's progress at home, mostly through homework. A parent explained:

When they get home, they do not know how to do it, we figure out the easy parts, but sometimes we don't know how to do them. I can help some, but things like with vocabulary words, the kids need to go to an older child of my neighbors, who they call brothers and ask them about it.

All of the parents reported that they arrange their children's after-school schedule tightly and make sure they allocate time to do their homework.

I get to see my children's academic work on their homework. I ask them daily about how their day went, the lunch, and they tell me. When we have homework, the kids usually have challenges, they ask us and we don't know a lot. Even helping with Math is very hard for us. So they either have to do it themselves, or ask someone else in the community. It is getting better though.

The parents reported that they paid special attention to the homework; yet, many of them had challenges understanding the expectations and guidelines. They had to utilize older brothers or sisters, and other relatives in the community if they cannot help their child with it. One parent voiced this concern: "I would like to have flyers or info in Burmese about homework so I can help, but we do not have this service in here." Another parent commented: "Once, the school mailed me an information letter, but did not include Burmese translation. I would have really liked that." Few parents reported that some community organizations such as Catholic Charities and Neighborhood Action Center have home-based tutoring/homework help programs for their children after school or on the weekends. In addition, some parents expected schools to create weekend or summer schools for their children and reported that a few public schools organized summer school for their children once.

All of the interviewed families reported that they attend all parent-teacher conferences, which last around 15 minutes and are stressful and formal encounters. However, that was the only occasion that they were able to see the teacher. Indeed, the type of family involvement the families preferred called for a stronger connection with the teacher. One parent reported: "When I go to school, they are so welcoming to me, they respect me. I only went to parent-teacher conferences. It is hard to get to know the teachers. I would love to get closer and get to know them." All but one of the parents wanted the teachers to do home visits and they commented on how this would help the teachers understand the child's family context very well. Given that hospitality is central to the traditions of Burmese, this is not surprising. However, the schools currently do not practice home visits for reasons such as safety, lack of reimbursement, and extra work hours.

Lack of Advocacy for Diversity

Even less recognized is the diversity among Burmese refugees, since this community includes many ethnic groups such as the Burmese, Karen, and Mon with their own languages and cultural

particularities. This is especially the case for recent refugees from Burma, who were ethnic and religious minorities in Burma and faced discrimination there (Burmese Advocacy Center, 2010). Burmese refugees also include Muslim and Christian minorities even though the majority are Buddhist. Moreover, cultural differences among different ethnic and religious groups add to the complexity of being refugees from Burma. For instance, some but not all Burmese youngsters are Muslim and fast during the month of Ramadan and attend classes (Sa Ge Dar, personal communication January 10, 2011). Yet, in Midwestern schooling settings, mainstream peers and teachers at times perceive all Burmese children as similar. Some Muslim parents interviewed mentioned about the lack of halal food in the school system and explained that due to their special diet, their children may not consume many of the items in the school menu and this is an important issue for them. However, none of these parents considered the possibility of requesting halal food as a community or using vegetarian menu option due to the lack of knowledge about their rights and the lack of communication with school. Therefore, the parents could not advocate for the recognition of their diverse needs and rights for school services.

Obstacles for Family Cohesion

Particular aspects of South-Asian cultures influence Burmese refugee children and their families by creating incongruences in their schooling experiences. Ultimate respect for authorities and elders comes up against the concept of earned respect in U. S. society; dependence on family and peers for success contrasts with the promotion of personal and individual achievements; and the prominence of self-control and conformity seems incongruent with the ease with which one communicates own needs in the context of the U.S. (Hickey, 2005). Burmese refugees found kinship and connections with relatives to be the only way to survive in the harsh live conditions and scarcity of resources during both their prior life experiences in Burma and their time in the refugee camps in Thailand (Brees, 2010). They often brought this notion of close-knit community with them, which is apparent in the way they were settled in large apartment communities just like a village based on their ethnicity or religion in Fort Wayne. However, many of the Burmese parents interviewed observed no differences between their values and the values established in school settings. Examples from a few parents demonstrate this observation:

(On behalf of her daughter) She sees herself as Burmese. Currently, we do not have difficulty with cultural differences between home and school.

I don't have any problems with cultural differences. My child feels Burmese. She likes the social environment of the classroom.

My children feel half Burmese, half American. We do not have any issues with cultural differences. We already mentioned to school about the meal. There are many Burmese kids in children's schools. The teachers already know about our culture.

My son's best friend is white, his name is Todd. My younger girl loves school, no difficulties. She feels more like American. The teacher knows about Burmese culture and our religion; we can get absences as excused days.

Yet, some parents had concerns about their religious values or cultural principles that they want their children to carry:

I am still worried about them, in American culture, when you are 18, you can do whatever, that is why I am concerned about them, I want them to stay in our culture. I am teaching my kids to respect the elder and to have the compassion for younger. I also teach them about religion, and anything the religion approves, they need to respect that.

Most parents also observed that their children do not usually share specifics of their school day, suggesting a possible disconnection between themselves and their children:

The first week, we did not have any difficulty, we were so happy to be able to send our children here, and they would have friends from every background, American, Burmese, Mexican and all. The kids seemed very happy, too. But when they come back from the school, I asked "how is the school?" Then they just said "it's O.K." we got homework, we were O.K."

A New Perspective: Advocacy for the Family

According to Bronfenbrenner, the most immediate and significant experiences a child has in his/her early years are composed of interacting microsystems of families, peers, school, and neighbourhood contexts, which impact children's physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive growth (1979). For instance, in the Midwest, close-knit family structures and positive interactions with other Burmese children and adults within their apartments or neighbourhoods often create enclaves. This supports

young Burmese children to become socio-emotionally resilient, indicating signs of a healthy microsystem around them, despite the fact that most of these neighbourhoods are located in low-income and high crime areas.

Even though Burmese refugee parents come from a very vulnerable background with no strong educational experiences, their appreciation and hard work for their children's education is inspiring. Moreover, Burmese parents view their children's overall schooling experiences very positively and appreciate the educators' efforts in public schools. Highlighting the strengths of the family in school settings will support families in staying intact and have positive reciprocal relations with children, who will continue to respect their parents and see them in a more capable, positive light, as experts with "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 2005).

While the parents have these strengths and potential, they may lack the resources and structures to support their children in negotiating multiple contexts and relationships in order to gain personal and academic success. Therefore, a new perspective for the education of refugee children could be articulated as "advocacy for the whole family" and increasing its weight and presence in their children's schooling and healthy development. The policy makers, schools and community agencies can accomplish this new form of advocacy in various ways: Advocacy for true bilingualism of refugee children, advocacy for family presence in school, community based early education and academic support and cultural responsiveness and supporting family goals for child development.

Advocacy for Bilingualism: Research indicates that only when children achieve true bilingualism—the capability to use both languages in a proficient way—as opposed to immigrant children who lose their first language, they often excel in particular aspects of cognitive growth such as higher mental control of cognitive tasks (Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008; Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008), higher ability in certain attention tasks (Bialystok & Martin, 2004), and academic success (Zhou, 1997). However, because of the circumstances surrounding Burmese refugee parents, most of them are not knowledgeable about research on language learning and bilingualism. Thus, while they enthusiastically support children's English language learning as a means of doing well in school and life, they may not be aware of the importance of fostering first language competencies. The interviews

also indicated that except in three of the families, children were not taught how to read and write in Burmese in their communities and not regularly exposed to literary texts in their culture. Even though many refugee families pay great attention to preserving values and oral language as a means of fostering a sense of belonging, these parents cannot provide a literacy-rich environment that supports Burmese language competency, as many of the resettled Burmese families lack access to literature in Burmese. Few parents were able to complete a higher grade level in their own schooling in Burma or in the camps to become literate at a level to be able to foster their children's language and to be able to pass on the historical and literary works of Burmese culture to their children. Therefore, teachers, as ironic as it seems, should support the use and the teaching of the first language in the refugee communities beyond daily language along with supporting literacy practices in English.

Advocacy for Family Presence in School and Beyond: Schools should foster the participation of refugee parents in school. However, this participation might not be the conventional ways of joining parent-teacher associations, attending all field trips, school events or volunteering as needed in the traditional sense. For instance, as the findings reveal, all, but one of the Burmese parents wished to be in closer contact with classroom teachers in a personal fashion such as through home visits. Therefore, schools should seek ways to be innovative to connect with parents.

In terms of school policies, arrangements should be made for parents who would like to stay in their child's classroom and informally act as classroom volunteers for a period of time and learn about the culture of the school, instructional methods, the use of curriculum, routines and rituals of school life, the procedures and the policies, and the style of communication used such as jargons. Some school policies limit the time that a parent can visit or stay in their child's classroom. While this procedure is understandable in some contexts such as in kindergarten where teachers attempt to foster a sense of routine in the classroom, in refugee parents' case, it might perpetuate their confusion and ambiguity about schooling. For instance, allowing a parent to use the school bus with her child and attend a few school days would offer enormous benefits to the parents, who already feel intimidated by the flux of information coming from their children about school since they cannot understand what kinds of contexts these are or what a typical school day lo-

oks like. As the findings demonstrate, many children chose not to communicate with their parents about their school day, knowing that the details will not make sense to their parents. This might disrupt family cohesion between the parents and children, and impede parents' ability to offer guidance in academic and social matters.

While refugee parents have true barriers such as transportation and language, these barriers can be overcome by school policies that are unconventional and out of the comfort zone, but beneficial to the school and children in the community. Creating classroom blogs with children's work samples and visuals might be extremely educative to Burmese refugee parents, since almost all of them had computers and internet connection in their houses. Brief explanations about how the displayed work is used as assessment or what other curriculum resources are used to teach a topic might help refugee parents understand the teaching-learning process better and, and might serve as a discussion starter with their children. Parents might also virtually participate in these platforms by adding some comments to the blog. Informing parents about how they can use educational technologies available on the internet for academic growth may support their efforts for their children's success and help them see the various ways technology could be used by children besides entertainment and gaming purposes.

Homes are open and social spaces for Burmese community, who brought this cultural practice from the crowded refugee camps. Indeed, it is hard to be able to find a Burmese household without guests, or relatives coming and going and sharing food during the day and in the evening. Therefore, another way to build reciprocity between families and school is home visits, which gives the parents the respected role of the host. All of the parents interviewed mentioned that they would be extremely happy to invite the teachers to their house so the teacher can get to know the child on a personal level, and it can create stronger connections between the parent and the teacher. This is also not happening in many of today's schools because of reasons including finances and time constraints, besides the conventional middle class perception of home as a more private setting. However, we need to notice that home visit is a culturally responsive practice since it is the preferred way of contact for Burmese parents who practice an open house policy during the day in the social context of Burmese community. This might be applicable in other refugee communities who are collectivist in their cultural practices.

Community Based Early Education and Academic Support: Community education in the first language is also needed for refugee parents to become aware of the importance of early education and future educational opportunities for their children. Early education experiences and bilingual educational contexts where both languages and cultural practices are valued will not only contribute greatly to the healthy development of children, but also facilitate the parents' understanding towards an awareness of the rights and the opportunities their young children have. This might also aid the adjustment process families go through as a unit. Policies supporting and providing financial assistance for such programs are needed and will strengthen the efforts of educators in formal education institutions. Financial and language barriers that the parents experience for early childhood education should justify the creation of broader early education opportunities including possible after-school and weekend programs that are facilitated in collaboration with refugee cultural community contexts. One example of such a program is the New Immigrant Literacy Program that Burmese community leaders organized in Fort Wayne. The director, Kyaw (Joe) Soe started this tutoring program unofficially in 2003 and in 2006 he began collaborating with the Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) School of Education. The program focuses on prolonged relationships with parents and children and is supplemented by community education talks for parents. With IPFW students as volunteers, the program has already served hundreds of students (IPFW news releases, 2010).

Cultural Responsiveness and Supporting Family Goals for Child Development: Rogoff (2003) has long been an advocate of understanding child development through the goals that communities set for children and the particular practices based on the values of the communities. Han (2010) found that many early childhood educators were unaware of the importance of understanding and supporting children's cultural identities in forming social competence skills. Policy makers and educators need to realize the importance of cultural and religious traditions for refugee children and the role of purposefully crafted educational programs within the communities in the construction of healthy bicultural identities. For instance, many Buddhist Burmese families visit and revere to their local monks on Saturday afternoons, and benefit from their wisdom and the experiences. Muslim Burmese families created informal after school and weekend programs called "madrasah" which are designed to teach children about the holy book, Qur'an

and other religious knowledge. Christian Burmese families often have their own congregation and worship times in assigned mainstream churches. Teachers can connect to the communities they are serving if they understand each community's goals for their children's education and the contribution the cultural and religious educational programs make to the children's social competence and emerging identities as bicultural. This way, schools and stakeholders might support refugee communities' through a reciprocal and respectful fashion.

Conclusion

This study will contribute to the knowledge of educators, community, and policy makers by offering a systematic inquiry into the experiences of the young refugee children with education. This research has also interdisciplinary significance for the fields of education, sociology, psychology, social work, and public policy since the literature on the development and school experiences of young immigrant children (0-8) is extremely limited (Keels & Raver, 2009) while there is a well-established literature on the educational experiences of older students, especially adolescents. By grounding its claims in the recent experiences of an understudied refugee community in a particular context to understand the issues in young refugee children's schooling, the study offers a different perspective based on providing advocacy for "the family". It also discusses the ways to advocate for families so they are able to take a stronger leadership of the family in the educational lives of children.

If policy makers, educators and researchers are able to understand the experiences and needs of young refugee children, we may then explore the ways schools and communities might support healthy cognitive and social-emotional development of these children (Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007). This process will positively contribute to school achievement of refugee children and help them successfully integrate into the greater society and become active citizens who would, then, contribute to the educational and economic growth of their region.

Refugee children and their families certainly face many challenges, but opportunities lie ahead of them as well. The biggest responsibility of the greater community and the educators is to create the contexts in which young children's developmental needs could be met. Those needs are not limited to academic achievement but include interrelated systems such as health policies, early childhood

education opportunities, after-school programs, and parent and community engagement efforts. This will contribute to an easier transition for the refugee children and their families to become productive community members and will allow the greater community to benefit from rich multicultural experiences.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like thank Indiana University Purdue University at Fort Wayne for the summer research grant that supported this research.

A portion of this manuscript, particularly the literature review includes pieces from a previously published article. The copyright rests with the author for the published article [Isik-Ercan, Z. (2011). Education of young Burmese refugees in Midwestern United States. *The Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration*, 1 (1), 26–30].