

ADAPTATION FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF BURMESE REFUGEES
IN A MIDWESTERN AMERICAN SCHOOL

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Abstract: Due to the political turmoil in Burma, many Burmese families have sought assistance from the United Nations as refugees. Many of these refugee families have found a new home in the United States. As these families settled into their new communities, the children faced the challenge of entering an American school for the first time. This study examines the stories of four Burmese refugees who navigated the American educational system in a Midwestern school district. These participants' stories highlighted the dangerous journey they endured by leaving Burma and the challenges they faced in their American school. The findings of this research suggest that Berry's (1992) theory of acculturation does not offer varying levels of integration based upon the level of value found within a migrant for their original culture and the new culture. The author proposes that migrants who adapt through integration undergo a process of blending these different cultures called syncretic integration. This process can be categorized as either idle integration, enthusiastic integration, or shifting integration. The individual reevaluates the value of both cultures through transformational syncretism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Please, get a job!” With those four words, my wife launched my career as an educator. A self-proclaimed career student, the last thing I had ever wanted was to leave behind my role as student and succumb to the reality of adult responsibilities. I had just entered my final year as a Master’s student in Education, and I knew that a doctoral program would be next. The quickest and easiest way to satisfy her request was to become a public school teacher. It wasn’t her intention, nor was it my desired life journey, but that conversation would have a significant impact on my life.

Being a first-year public school educator, I decided to get involved in extracurricular activities as soon as possible. Having played soccer nearly my entire life, I made contact with the soccer coach and offered my services as an unpaid assistant coach after school. The head coach readily agreed to accept my assistance. That year ended with a state championship, and the head coach officially offered me a position on staff for the following year. As I started my new role as assistant coach the following year, I noticed a very disheartening trend: I had the worst car in the parking lot. Although a petty realization, this awakened me to the socio-economic status of the school district in which I worked. My new Saturn Ion could not compete with the BMWs, Lexus, and Mercedes that cluttered the soccer parking lot. Similar to the lack of diversity in the parking lot,

the students who drove those cars lacked racial diversity—of the 58 players on the team, only nine were not white.

A few years later, without any special fanfare, a refugee student from Burma made the soccer team. No one—players or coaches—noticed anything special about this player. He was an above average player with good foot skills and a nice pass. For two years he put in time as a Freshman and Junior Varsity player. During his junior year, the head coach placed him on the varsity squad. This player, Zam Khai, had a surprisingly successful season. He worked his way into an important role for the team, and in a playoff game against our biggest rival he scored the game-winning goal. Although we did not win the state championship, Khai's efforts helped the team achieve more than the coaching staff had expected at the beginning of the year. When I talked with Khai about how he would help us the next season, he informed me that he would be skipping out on soccer his senior year; he felt the calling to place his energy in his church band. Honestly, Khai's absence would be felt, but it was just another day for the soccer team. Players come and go. Change is expected. However, we all missed the importance of Khai's time on the team.

During tryouts that year, there were more Burmese students than in previous years—meaning there was more than just Khai. Three or four of those Burmese players made the team. Again, the coaching staff failed to notice the change that was coming. The following year, during tryouts, the difference was noticeable. The number of students trying out—a rough average of 60 students each year—neared 100. An overwhelming number of students trying out for the team were Burmese. The coaching staff noticed. Yet, it wasn't just on the field where the change occurred. The change occurred in the classroom, as well. A small number of Burmese students began trickling into mainstream classrooms. What had been a

phenomenon tucked away in sheltered ELL classrooms spilled into mainstream classrooms throughout the high school. The influx of Burmese students had begun.

It was about this time that I started my doctoral program. Outside of class, members of my cohort started discussing possible dissertation topics. One can never start too early in preparing for a dissertation. As the others discussed school gardens and safe spaces, my thoughts continued to drift back into my classroom and onto the soccer field. My profession—both in the classroom and in the locker room—had changed. I faced new challenges with the changing demographics within my school. Throughout my doctoral program, I have explored the demographic changes that have occurred at my school and within my school district, and I have examined the way the district administration, faculty, and staff has adapted to these changes. Most importantly, I have noticed a difference in my Burmese students. I am fascinated with what are called push and pull factors—the causes for these Burmese families to leave their country and the reasons they have moved to the United States. As an educator, I feel the need to explore the changes the school district has made in response to the growing number of Burmese refugee students. This study is the synthesis of those two curiosities. I believe this study will challenge the administrators and teachers of schools with refugee students to reexamine their current curriculum.

Statement of the problem

The number of refugee students in American schools is growing. For many school districts across the country, current curricular practices are inadequate for integrating these refugee students into the educational environment (Husarska, 2008; Yeh, 2004; Roberts and Locke, 2001). Research studies show that refugee students receive insufficient emotional and academic support as they make the transition to American schools. This lack of support

surfaces as refugee students begin and continues throughout their entire educational journey (Allden, et al., 1996; Hickey, 2005; Yeh, 2004; McBrien, 2005; Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012; Stromquist, 2012; Tandon, 2016; McWilliams and Bonet, 2016). For many, the past traumas they have endured that drove them away from their home country go unrecognized and untreated. For others—especially Asian refugee students who are disadvantaged by the stereotype of Asians as the model minority (Yeh, 2004; Wessler, 2016)—there are little if any programs in place to assist them academically. Most refugee students experience both. There are research studies pertaining to policies and pedagogical practices related to refugee students (Roberts and Locke, 2001; Ngo, 2008; Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010), but there are a limited number of studies that provide the stories of refugee students as they work their way through the American education system—particularly the stories of Burmese refugee students in the United States.

My research focuses on Burmese refugee students in one school district that is confronting the issue of a rising refugee student population. The influx of refugee students has dramatically changed the demographics of the school district in my study. For example, one newcomer government teacher at the high school had students from Burma, Indonesia, India, Oman, Pakistan, Venezuela, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in one class. Most of these students were refugees, all of them had recently moved to the United States, and most of them did not speak English. The three students from the Democratic Republic of the Congo spoke a language that was not supported through Google Translate or other language aids used by the district to communicate with non-English speaking students. Additionally, these students were illiterate in their own language. What they all had in common is what Berry (1992) calls acculturative stress. These stresses are part of the

acculturation process and influence refugee students' adaptation to their new educational experience.

Burmese refugee students face a bevy of factors that impact their adaptation process. One of these factors is the political and religious turmoil occurring in Burma—an important part of their designation as refugees. Many of the Burmese refugee students in the school district in my study originated in the outer regions of Burma and faced persecution from the Buddhist military regime. This military regime persecutes ethnic and religious minorities throughout the country (Cockett, 2015; Charney, 2009; Omi, 2011). This traumatic past is often unaccounted for in school policies and pedagogical practices within American schools (Husarska, 2008; Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018; Roberts and Locke, 2001). Refugee students confront these challenges while defining and understanding their identity in a new culture (Ngo, 2008; Wessler, 2016; Roberts and Locke, 2001). These stresses are often met with a need for educational and emotional support—a need that is too often not met (Hickey, 2005; Allden, et al., 1996; Stromquist, 2012).

Refugee students require an equitable educational opportunity to learn and grow. As the number of refugee students increases, so does the number of educational approaches needed to provide that equitable educational opportunity. Unfortunately, due to the rapidity with which change is needed and implemented, adequate time feels fleeting to evaluate the experiences these students have had while adapting to an education in the United States. There is a lack of significant research devoted to the stories of refugee students' adaptation to education in the United States—in particular, Burmese refugee students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of Burmese student participants' stories of adaptation to the educational process in an American school district.

Research Questions

Clandinin (2013) believes "Each narrative inquiry is composed around a particular wonder, and, rather than thinking about framing a research question with a precise definition or expectation of an answer, narrative inquirers frame a research puzzle" (p. 42). The research puzzle driving this study centers on the storied experiences of Burmese students in a Midwestern American school district, and this puzzle can be best observed through the personal narratives of these students in social and cultural contexts. For this narrative inquiry study, I am interested in collecting stories. Some of these stories may compare American schools to Burmese schools, while others will focus on the individual's journey to the United States and how that impacted their adaptation. I am most interested in those stories of adaptation.

In order to construct the frame for this research puzzle, I am following the method found in Creswell (2013) in which the researcher develops an "overarching central question and several subquestions" (p. 138) that are used as "a means of subdividing the central question into several parts" (p. 140).

My central question is:

What are the stories of how Burmese students adapted to education in a Midwest American high school?

My subquestions are:

What are the stories of these students becoming refugees?

What are the stories of their obstacles and/or support in an American school and community?

How do their stories demonstrate their navigation between two cultures?

Theoretical Framework

J.W. Berry (1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008) developed a conceptual framework for acculturation that takes into account both an individual's willingness to become a member of the mainstream culture (larger society) and the individual's desire to maintain his/her cultural identity. He discussed individual, social, and cultural factors that impact the acculturation process and culminate in adaptation. In this section, I will begin by providing a definition for some of the important terms that will be used throughout this study, and then I will explain Berry's (1992) acculturation theory and briefly describe its relation to my study as a theoretical framework.

Definitions

There are some terms related to refugees that I will be using throughout my study. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is "a person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (Fouberg, Murphy, and de Blij, 2015, p. 79) and who often dislocates from their home country. The remaining definitions are related to the processes of refugees in their interaction with the mainstream culture of their new homes. Acculturation is the "dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). This dual process leads to acculturation strategies that include integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Berry and Sam (1997) pointed out that one

criticism is “the concept came to mean *assimilation*, even though in the original definition this outcome was identified as only one of the many possible varieties of acculturation” (p. 294). They recommended two ways to handle the criticism: “to discard the concept because of this confusion, or to emphasize clearly the original meaning” (p. 294). Like Berry and Sam, I am choosing the latter. Adaptation refers to “both the strategies used during acculturation, and its outcome” (Berry, 1992, p. 3). Adaptation occurs as a result of two processes: the learning due to exposure to and/or interactions with the new culture and shedding certain features of the original culture. Finally, acculturative stress is a “kind of stress, that in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation” (p. 7).

Theory

According to Berry (1992), migrants—including refugees—approach the process of acculturation through two distinct levels: a group level and an individual level. The group level includes all members of the same culture, while the individual level looks solely at one member of that culture. The group level of acculturation includes issues of physical, biological, economic, cultural, and social change (Berry, 1997). At the individual level, refugees confront behavioral shifts and acculturative stress. These behavioral shifts are impacted by “a variety of factors existing prior to the acculturation... and factors arising during acculturation” (p. 5). While encountering these behavioral shifts, the individual faces acculturative stress. Berry (1992) stated that acculturative stress “may underlie poor adaptation, including a reduction in the health status of individuals, identity confusion and problems in daily life with family, work and school” (p. 7). It is important to note that a certain form of acculturation may be of profound benefit to the individual, but other forms

can be destructive to one's ability to thrive. Berry and Sam (1997) specifically discussed the difficulties included with refugee acculturation. "This group of acculturating persons faces the greatest risks during the process of adaptation... In addition, they have likely experienced the most difficult pre-acculturation situations, including war, famine, deprivation, torture, and humiliation (at the individual level), and massive exclusion or domination (at the group level)" (p. 309). The strategies used for acculturation and their outcome results in adaptation. There are three varieties of adaptation: adjustment, reaction, and withdrawal. Adjustment occurs when the individual changes in a way that reduces conflict, reaction occurs when the individual changes in a way that confronts the cultural environment, and withdrawal occurs when the individual reduces pressures from the environment.

Berry (1992) believed that acculturation strategies are related to the individual's response to two questions. The first question asks if the individual believes that his/her cultural identity and values should be retained through adaptation. The second question asks if the individual desires a relationship with the larger or mainstream society. For visual simplicity, Berry (1992) limited the answers to the questions to a dichotomous "yes" or "no"; however, it is understood that the degree to which an individual supports or opposes the notions presented in the questions may differ greatly depending upon the individual. Based on this model, the four acculturation strategies that emerge based upon the answers to the two questions are assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization.

Figure 1: Four Acculturation Strategies as a Function of Two Issues

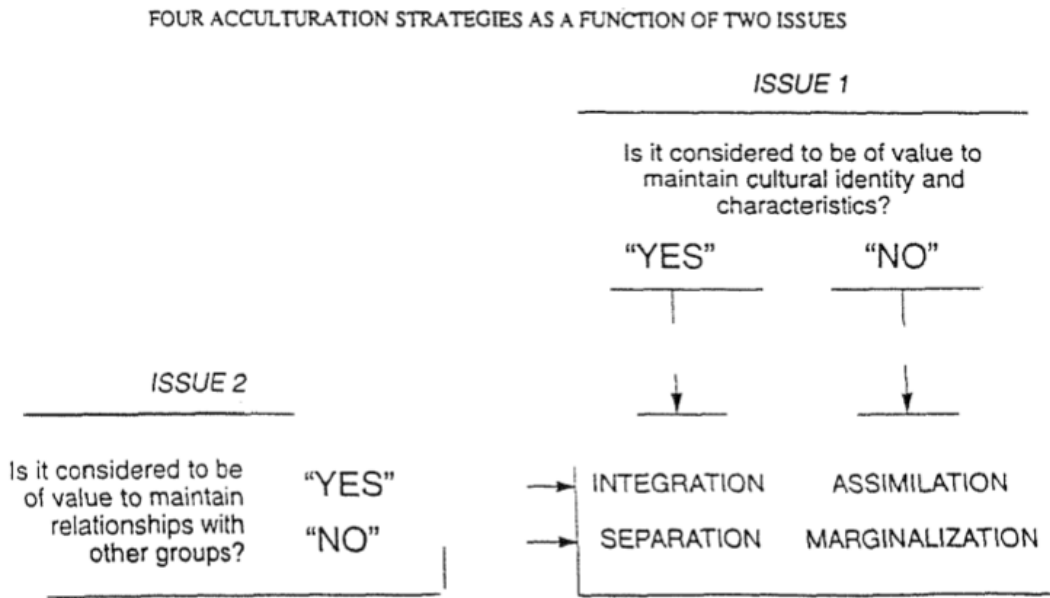
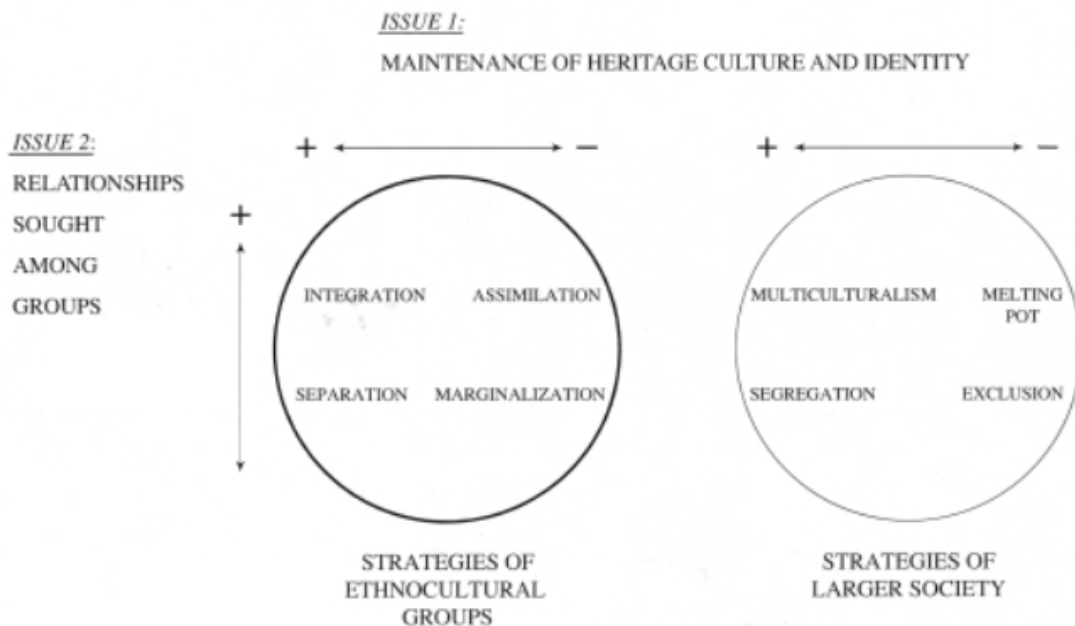


Figure 1 provides Berry's (1992) conceptual framework for acculturation strategies. According to the framework, an individual who seeks to shed his/her own cultural identity and values while moving into the larger society is undergoing the process of assimilation. The individual who seeks to shed cultural identity without desiring a relationship with the larger society is undergoing marginalization. Berry (1992) stated that through marginalization, the individual may "lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society" (p. 4). An individual seeking a relationship with the larger society while maintaining cultural identity undergoes integration. Finally, an individual who maintains cultural and/or ethnic identity and traditions while staying removed from the larger society participates in separation. With separation, Berry (1992) offered a caveat. The term separation depends upon who is dictating the separation from the larger society. In a later paper, Berry (2001) expanded this conceptual framework to include

another set of strategies with the larger society having the power of determination for the migrant's or migrants' answers to the two questions (Fig. 2). If it is the individual, then it is separation. If it is the larger society as a whole, then it is deemed segregation.

Figure 2: Acculturation Strategies Including Larger Society



Berry's (1992, 2001) acculturation strategies provided the framework for my research study. Berry and other acculturation theorists have received criticism for oversimplifying the process of acculturation (Sakamoto, 2007; Rogler, 1994). However, I believe that this conceptual framework can be used effectively for my research. My analysis is informed by stories of refugees, not a psychological evaluation. Although Berry (1992) discussed behavioral shifts—a psychological evaluation of what cultural traits one decides to incorporate from the mainstream culture and what cultural traits one sheds from the original culture—my study looks at more: the holistic stories of the participants. The four strategies

that Berry (1992, 2001) discussed are not presented with a value structure or which strategies are more beneficial and which are more detrimental; however, I believe there are distinctions that must be made about the value of each strategy. Integration/multiculturalism is the most beneficial strategy. Assimilation/melting pot and separation/segregation present an interesting dynamic. Assimilation and segregation are not as beneficial as melting pot and separation. The emphasis of who is directing the cultural interaction plays a significant part in the acculturation process. Finally, marginalization/exclusion offers the most detrimental acculturation strategy. My research participants have undergone this process of acculturation. My research question centered on how they adapted to education in the United States. This adaptation includes not only the outcome, but the strategies used during their acculturation.

For my study, I was not interested in the different categories offered by this theory. This was not a psychological study. My research focused on the process of adaptation. Although it may be an important part of my study to examine the ways my participants approached the two questions provided by Berry (1992), it was not for the purpose of determining his predetermined categorical strategy. I approached each of my participants' strategies as an autonomous unit. I did not confine myself to Berry's four categories. I sought stories that detailed Burmese individuals' processes of adapting to American schools.

Research Design

Burmese refugee students have stories about the adaptation to education in the United States. My study sought some of these stories using narrative inquiry as a methodology. I used purposeful sampling for this study. I selected 4 graduates of one midwestern American

school—all high school graduates and all from Burma—to participate in this study. Creswell (2013) stated that there are four basic types of information for qualitative data: observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (p. 157-159). For my research, I collected data through interviews, a focus group, writing prompts, and optional artifacts. Due to COVID-19, I believed that interviews—including the focus group—provided me with a better option than observations. Additionally, the writing prompts and optional artifacts offered participants an opportunity to provide documents and audiovisual materials. I submitted an IRB application to Oklahoma State University, and I received approval in August 2020.

Upon receiving approval for my research from the Oklahoma State University IRB office, I started recruiting participants for my study. My initial plan was to obtain a list of Burmese refugee students who had graduated from the school district from a representative of that district. Once I received this list, I was going to randomly select 8 individuals to contact and request their participation in my research study. However, throughout August 2020, I acquired conflicting stories about who I should contact to procure the list. At one point, I had two individuals telling me that I should contact the other about my request. It was at this time (late August) that a colleague who was aware of my research recommended that I contact one of her former students. This former student, Mark, agreed to participate on September 1, 2020 over the phone. I mailed him one informed consent form in English and one in Zomi along with a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the consent form. At this point, Mark suggested that I contact his friend's sister, Nina. I called Nina on September 9, 2020, received her acceptance to participate, and mailed her the same forms I mailed Mark. On the same day, a different colleague suggested that I contact two of her former

students. I called the first, Sammy, that night. He agreed to participate, and I mailed him the forms. I conducted my first interview (Mark's first interview) on September 16, 2020. During this interview, Mark suggested that I contact his friend about participating. His friend, Steven, was the second suggestion from my colleague, but I had yet to connect with him via telephone. Mark assisted me in contacting Steven, and he agreed to participate on October 1, 2020. Steven's second interview on October 28, 2020 was my last interview. I led the focus group with all four participants on November 3, 2020, and I emailed writing prompts to all participants that night. I asked four individuals to participate, and no one declined.

Participants were interviewed 2-3 times and participated in one focus group. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I collected data by audio recording each interview and video recording the focus group using Google Meet. Interviews and the focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour each. I personally transcribed all interviews and the focus group, and I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. I informed all participants that I would be using a pseudonym for them. I offered to use a pseudonym of their choice if they preferred. Steven was the only one to accept that arrangement. I selected the pseudonyms for the others. The pseudonyms I selected were English-language names due to my limitations of language. I conducted member-checking throughout the process of my study to ensure that all of my collected data accurately represented the beliefs and ideas of those I interviewed. All transcripts were locked by a password on my computer, and all transcripts will be destroyed at the conclusion of my research.

I used narrative inquiry as the methodology of this study. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that the "main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that

humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). As this was a narrative inquiry study, the design of the study hinged upon the stories provided by the research participants. Interviews and the focus group were conducted in a manner that welcomed open-ended discussion—an ideal way to collect stories. I also collected writing prompts from all participants and artifacts in the form of pictures from those who were willing and able to provide them. Writing prompts were distributed to each participant through email, and these prompts were a required component of my research. For the optional artifact submission, I asked each participant to share a picture, a drawing, or an item that represented a story of their adaptation process. Participants were allowed to share more than one artifact if they chose.

The collection of these stories during interviews, the focus group, and the writing prompts allowed for triangulation of data. Triangulation provides the researcher with what Cresswell (2013) called “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251). In order to triangulate, I needed to obtain their stories through multiple means. It was imperative that I, as the researcher, allowed those stories to be shared fully and completely. That being true, it was also necessary for me to drive the discussion with pertinent questions related to the focus of my study and relevant follow-up questions related to stories that require additional information for data analysis. In order to successfully accomplish this goal, it was vital for me to begin each interview and focus group with semi-structured questions that allowed me the freedom to stray off of the prepared course should avenues of relevant curiosities emerge.

During and after data collection, I began my data analysis. My research question was about the adaptation process of Burmese refugee students to education in America. For my theoretical framework, I used Berry's (1992) acculturation strategies. I used coding methods as defined in Saldaña (2016) for my data analysis. I began with In Vivo coding for my first cycle coding. Upon completing the first cycle, I began code mapping. Next, I began second cycle coding—consisting of pattern coding and focused coding. Finally, after second cycle coding, I began the post-coding process. Data analysis was a process that began with data collection and continued throughout the research process. Patton (2015) warned that qualitative findings are suspicious to some because “the analyst has shaped findings according to his or her predispositions and biases” (p. 653). However, he assured qualitative researchers that they can enhance credibility by “being able to report that you engaged in a systematic and conscientious search for alternative themes, divergent patterns, and rival explanations (p. 653). In the end, the researcher of narrative inquiries is an essential tool of data analysis—it was through my lens that connections were made, follow-up questions were asked, and relevancy was determined.

Mary Kay Kramp (2004) provided a pathway originally theorized by Polkinghorne (1995) for data analysis for narrative inquiry. Kramp (2004) delineated the differences between narrative analysis and analysis of narrative. In analysis of narrative, “your purpose in using stories is generally to understand a concept or abstraction” (p. 120). In this example of analysis, the researcher looks for common themes among the stories shared by participants. In narrative analysis, “you integrate the data rather than separate it as you would do in an analysis of narrative” (p. 120). During this type of analysis, the researcher “restories” the participants’ narratives. As a narrative researcher, I used both types of

analyses to “restory” my participants’ narratives and search for common themes among their narratives in an effort to understand their strategies of adaptation. I will explore the foundations of my lens as researcher in the next section.

Researcher Subjectivity

I am a model person of privilege. I am a white, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, educated, male American. However, I am from a poor, uneducated family. I was the middle grandchild in a family that failed to appreciate the value of education. My parents moved our small family unit of four away from my extended family’s hometown in order to escape the pressures of familial norms. My brother and I are the only members of our family to earn a college degree, and I am the first person in my family to attend graduate school. Thanks to my parents and their brave decision to move away from their families, I have a clear understanding of the power of education. As a public school teacher, I have continued to witness how education offers opportunity. At the same time, some minority students do not have this experience and resist education.

In many ways, this may strongly impact my role as researcher. My belief of the power of education—its ability to provide opportunities that might not be available otherwise—may not be shared by my research participants. In my work as an educator, it is my mission to open the doors of possibilities to as many students as possible through education. For my participants, however, the purpose of education could be vastly different. My research question centers on student experience and the process of adaptation. Our approaches to and beliefs of education may differ, but I must focus on experiencing their stories through their lenses. I believe Clandinin (2013) highlighted this relationship that I have to negotiate as an educator and a researcher in better words than I can find: “I...live in

institutional stories, stories of school. I live in other institutional stories, but the institutional stories of school” shape me (p. 22). As an educator, a graduate student, a father of two school-aged children, and an education leader at my institution of faith, I am bombarded daily with stories and experiences of the school experience. As a researcher, I must maintain an open mind while analyzing the stories shared with me—stories that are not my own.

Significance of the Study

It is a rare occurrence in which a researcher—especially one in graduate school—may claim that the significance of any study is significant based upon the interest of the researcher alone; however, Clandinin (2013) claimed “[n]arrative inquirers need to begin with personal justifications, that is, by justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions, and personal inquiry puzzles” (p. 36). This study was significant because it was important to me. I engaged in a moment of personal and professional challenge and growth due to the changing dynamics of my school demographics. My experiences, my challenges, my questions about these students justified the need for this research. It is not generalizable. It is not research that aims at a one-size-fits-all solution to a problem. It is research that has meaning for me, with an added benefit—it might have meaning for others, as well.

Educating refugee students is a challenge, but it is a necessary challenge to overcome for the sake of future generations. As the United States welcomes refugees into the country, the need for meaningful curriculum programs aimed at refugee students grows. This study will provide a look at a specific type of refugee student—students from Burma. A look at the stories of these Burmese refugee students’ educational experiences will offer researchers a greater understanding of how these students negotiated the educational system in a midwestern school district.

This study can inform educational institutions, policies, and practices. By shining a light upon the lived experiences of these students, the educational journey for Burmese refugee students may be more transparent. Curriculum and student programs could be created, policy decisions could be enacted, pedagogical practices could be adopted, and teachers' professional development could be delivered with the purpose of minimizing acculturative stress for refugee students. A more informed educational institution has the potential to become a stronger learning environment. The school district involved in my research study sent an email to all stakeholders in the summer of 2020 with the following message: "We are a community of diverse learners. Our diversity makes us strong. Students from all races, religions, and backgrounds enhance the learning environment by sharing their unique perspective and experiences. Every student and every employee is a valued member." As I stated earlier, this research study appealed to my interests, but I believe its impact could make a change for others.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I studied the ways Burmese students in a high school in the Midwest adjusted to American schools in order to help administrators and policy-writers better understand the situation of Burmese students in American schools so that teachers can better provide a positive learning environment for Burmese students. To share stories and construct their meanings situated in a larger context, I focused my research of literature on three topics: a brief introduction of Burma's historical context, the education of refugee students, and Burmese refugee students in the U.S. I included the literature about the historical background of post-World War II Burma and its relationship with the West because these students from Burma fled their country of origin for an important reason. Developing a better understanding of what was and is occurring in Burma was imperative for me as I underwent a process of meaning-making with my research participants. I started with this background and moved to a careful analysis of the existing literature related to refugee students in general, from which four major aspects emerged that are important for their success: policy, pedagogy, cultural identity, and educational and emotional support. This literature review will examine each of these aspects and locate one missing element of the literature: the stories of Burmese refugee high school students.

Historical Background of Burmese Refugee Students

Burma is a country whose identity is still in doubt for many people. “in the past 120 years, the idea of Myanmar (Burma) has come to be known, produced, and understood through a variety of perspectives that reveal particular and sometimes contested perceptions of the Burmese past, present, and future” (Aung-Thwin, 2008, p. 187). Although recognized globally as Myanmar, I use the term Burma for two reasons. First, Myanmar is seen by many to be the incorrect name for the country. According to Maung (1990), “The new name of ‘Myanmar’ given to Burma by the present illegitimate government is wrong both phonetically and politically” (p. 602). The crux of Maung’s complaint is situated in the political actions of the military government to rename the country based upon the Myanmah--the majority ethnic group. This re-naming of the country proclaimed “the political suzerainty [sic] of the Myanmah over minority ethnic groups such as the Shan, the Karen, the Chin, the Kachin, the Mon, the Arakan, and a host of others who have been waging war against the Myanmah governments for more than 40 years” (p. 602). (Suzerainty is defined as a relation that exists between states where the subservient state has a government but is not allowed to make international decisions without the approval of the superior state.) Second, my research participants’ population in general refer to their country of origin as Burma. Cockett (2015) quoted Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of Burma, about this issue:

No one should be allowed to change the name of the country without referring to the will of the people. They [the government] say that ‘Myanmar’ refers to all the Burmese ethnic groups, whereas ‘Burma’ only refers to the Burmese ethnic

group, but that is not true. ‘Myanmar’ is a literary word for ‘Burma’ and it refers only to the Burmese ethnic group. Of course I prefer the word Burma (p. 82).

Names have power, history, and importance associated with them. As Aung San Suu Kyi mentioned, the word Myanmar, for many, only relates to the Burmans--an ethnic group currently in power of most government functions and responsible for much of the oppressive actions leading to the increasing number of refugees coming to the United States. In this way, the name Myanmar fails to recognize those ethnic groups originating from the outer portion of the country. In support of all Burmese students, I use the name Burma.

One of the questions I constantly face when contemplating the lives of these Burmese refugee students is “Why the United States?” There are many countries closer to Burma that have the potential of offering aid to these refugees. Why is there such a strong link between Burma and the American Midwest? The literature related to the modern history of Burma and the connection to the West focused on two factors: Western intervention against the Japanese in Burma during World War II and the rise of a Buddhist military government that practices oppressive and deadly measures against the Christian and Muslim “hill tribes” (Cockett, 2015, p. 77).

Burma’s relationship with Britain—a strained relationship based on imperial pursuits with poor administrative control—suffered a tremendous setback when the Japanese invaded Burma during World War II. The strategy of using the Burma Road to reinforce China with supplies from the Western world against Japan came to an end in 1942 when the Japanese overran Burma. At the conclusion of World War II, Britain removed the Japanese insurgents; however, as the war ended, so did the British

Empire. As the Burmese tried to reinstitute a Burmese government, the power vacuum left by the retreating British opened the door for a despotic military regime (Cockett, 2015; Aung-Thwin, 2008; Thorner, 1945; Maung, 1990; Deutz, 1991; Weiner, 1993; Hendershot, 1944; Beatty, 2010). Michael Charney (2009) calls the period from 1937-1947—just before World War II until shortly after the war—“self-government without independence” (p. 46). This time period saw a Burmese government of “limited self-rule, but never complete independence” (p. 46). That would change once the British recognized their independence on January 4, 1948 (Cockett, 2015).

The military regime that claimed power in Burma in the early 1960s included the ethnic majority—Burmans—who nearly all practiced Buddhism. The military attempted a new strategy of self-governance. “Rather than devising a way to cope with the reality of the society that they inherited, they tried to dismantle it and create a homogenous, Burman, society” (Cockett, 2015, p. 45-46). This desired homogenous society differed from the Burma that John Sydenham Furnivall described in 1948: a plural society. Furnivall described Burma as a plural society due to the large variety of peoples living in Burma, including the different ethnic groups who make up the people known as “Burmese” based upon the political boundaries of the country (Cockett, 2015; Charney, 2009). On the outskirts of Burma resides a number of ethnic minority groups, many of whom are commonly referred to as the “hill tribes.” Most of these “hill tribes” practice Christianity, and they, along with the Muslim “hill tribes,” have faced persecution at the hands of the Buddhist military regime since that time (Cockett, 2015; Charney, 2009; Omi, 2011; Anand, 1978; Beatty, 2010; Weiner, 1993; Deutz, 1991; Maung, 1990). Omi (2011) wrote, “From the moment Burma won its independence from Britain in 1948, the

Rohingya—a Muslim minority community in this largely Buddhist nation of 55 million—have been targeted by a succession of repressive governments intent on controlling and marginalizing a host of non-Burmese ethnic groups in some of the most remote portions of the country” (p. 58). This type of repressive activity permeates the hill country and affects Christian and Muslim communities in Burma.

The refugee students who have left Burma and moved to the midwestern city in my study are mostly members of the “hill tribes,” and a vast majority of them are Christian. The literature detailed that the connections between the West and these Burmese refugees hinge upon the history of these two regions during and following World War II and the religious opportunities provided to a group of people who have only known religious persecution during their lifetimes. Cockett (2015) recounted an interview with “a resolute and opinionated schoolteacher” (p. 39):

Like the Kachin and other ethnic minority groups persecuted by the Burmans, he argued, ‘To be a genuine union we have to be a federal state...for five thousand years we [the Arakanese/Rakhine] had sovereignty, and after 1948 we agreed to be part of the union [of Burma], but that was our big mistake’ (p. 39).

This is the feeling for many of the ethnic minority groups and “hill tribes” in Burma. A large population of the Burmese refugee students in the midwestern high school in my study are Zomi. The Zomi are one of the “hill tribes” in the northwestern part of Burma, and almost all of them identify as Christian. They have faced an onslaught of governmental oppression which has led to the large number of refugees seeking asylum in the United States.

This brief review situates the political and cultural issues that have arisen in Burma that have a profound impact on the participants in my study. Many of the Burmese refugee students in the United States have fled the aggressive military regime of the government in search of religious freedom and a chance at earning an education. The current political situation of Burma is unique, and it has played a role in molding the refugee students in American schools. It is necessary to understand their history to understand where they are today.

Policy: Difficulties for Refugee Students

One of the struggles with researching Burmese students in American schools is the lack of current research. However, there are numerous studies devoted to refugee students. Research shows that many of the difficulties for refugee students relate to policy decisions (Auletta, 2000; Roberts and Locke, 2001; Husarska, 2008; Ngo, 2008). Ngo (2008) warned that policymakers must analyze the dominant discourse used to understand immigrant families because “different discourses make possible different ways of teaching individual students and organizing schools” (p. 10). Policies for refugee students that fail to account for the students’ reasons for leaving their home country provide inadequate support or harmful decision-making, such as failing to offer counseling to students dealing with past traumas, inadequately communicating with teachers students’ needs, and giving credence to stereotypes like “yellow peril” and “model minority” (p. 10). Research shows that policy decisions are often based upon stereotypes of the refugee families. It is through decisions of policy that the framework for refugee education is formulated.

Husarska (2008) highlighted one way that policy creates a barrier to refugee inclusion in the United States. Many refugees have a past that includes taking arms against those oppressive powers—including moves and hostilities sanctioned by the United States—that led to their eventual departure from their home country. Oppressive policy decisions that lead to armed resistance prevent those refugees from being able to coalesce with society. Criminal records and traumatic memories follow these refugees from their home country; for many, a chance for a fresh start under a government that will ignore past transgressions is a necessary step. Husarska (2008) quoted a refugee voicing his despair with the American government after denying his entry into the United States: “‘I expected that they might help me,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps that they would protect me. I watched a lot of American movies on television so I supposed...’ His words trailed off into incomprehension” (p. 91). Stories like these are exemplified to show the struggles some refugees face in coming to the United States.

In his research over the Colombo Plan, Alex Auletta (2000) discovered that the initial refugee relations between Western countries and the Asian-Pacific area—including Burma—arose from Cold War policy. In fact, many Western countries used “education aid, whenever possible, as a way of countering adverse reactions by the international community” (p. 50). Australia, in particular, issued a memorandum in 1950 identifying Chinese communism as a threat to the region and declared a need for “international efforts to stabilise [sic] government (in the region) and to create conditions of economic life and living standards under which the ideological attractions of communism exerts will lose their force” (Auletta, 2000, p. 49). Educational policy, for example, would be used as a weapon of ideology first and then as a tool for learning. The main goal of

refugee education was not for academic knowledge, rather it was a way of promoting capitalism and highlighting the evils and the corruption of communism. As a result of this mindset, the purpose for educational aid shifted over time to a “focus on trade rather than aid” (Auletta, 2000, p. 57). Again, the academic growth of the refugee students was secondary to the ideological fight of the Cold War. Educational aid would only assist the education centers working with the refugee students, while trade would open the door to a stronger host country with the ability to have a greater influence in fighting communist support in surrounding countries. The economic benefits of supplying aid—including providing safe havens for refugees and sharing educational strategies—trumped the humanitarian effort of supplying learning opportunities to those youth in need. The effects of this strategy and others have created long-term emotional issues, which I will discuss more in the next three sections.

Appropriate Pedagogy for Refugee Students

Another area of focus for the research related to refugee students is pedagogy. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) summed up the importance of pedagogy: “Refugee learners require additional support to help them successfully transition to a new country and the demands and expectations of a new education system” (p. 115). There is very little research that examines the pedagogical practices in education in the West for Burmese refugee students in high school; however, much of the available research on pedagogy of refugee students focuses on qualitative research with a look at academic and non-academic learning practices (Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Gay, 2000; Roberts and Locke, 2001; Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012). What almost all of these studies have in common is the emphasis placed upon

story-telling. Story-telling as a pedagogical practice allows refugee students to share their experiences with classmates and school personnel as a way of sharing who they are and participate in cultural sharing. Story-telling also provides the refugee students with a varied approach to learning academic and non-academic lessons. Roberts and Locke (2001) explained further how the process of asking refugee students to share their stories can facilitate a stronger understanding of the culture of American schools. Roberts and Locke (2001) stated that “the telling of students’ life history stories became an act of self-creation and served as an avenue to support refugee and immigrant student participation in the social and academic dimensions of school life in the United States system” (p. 376). The process of story-telling—telling their own life stories, in particular—allows refugee students to construct a sharper image of who they are and what their journey is about.

Most literature related to pedagogy focused on elementary education. Prior and Niesz (2013) and Nykiel-Herbert (2010) examined elementary school refugee students in American classrooms. Prior and Niesz’s study is a narrative inquiry involving “Karen refugees from Myanmar” (p. 1). The Karen, as I mentioned earlier, are an ethnic group belonging to the “hill tribes.” Prior and Niesz’s study was “inspired by an interest in the stories that young refugee children tell about their early experiences in an American school” (p. 13). They noticed that the coping strategies, such as “bridging home and school and in building friendships in the classroom” (p. 13) and the time needed for adapting to American schools differed. Their findings included the need for early educators of refugee students to listen to the stories of these refugee students in order to foster smoother transitions into American classrooms.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is an effective way to teach refugee students (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Gay, 2000; Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012). Nykiel-Herbert (2010) believed that, “culturally responsive pedagogy must be offered consistently to ELL newcomers, particularly those at-risk from the start: refugees from conflict zones, children displaced by natural disasters, and all those with interrupted education, or no previous school experience” (p. 3). Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as using “cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” which “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically” (p. 29). Focusing upon students from Iraq, Nykiel-Herbert argued for more research related to self-contained classroom opportunities for refugee students to make teaching culturally relevant for them. Self-contained classrooms are those classrooms in which only a certain demographic of student—in this case, refugee students—attend, and the teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects during the school day. Using self-contained classrooms for refugee students would offer more pathways for academic success and development through providing culturally appropriate materials and teaching.

Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) offered a more contemporary look at how the West are attempting to acculturate refugee students. Informed by culturally responsive pedagogy, their research focused on the development of a sense of school belonging. Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) argued that appropriate pedagogy for refugee students must focus on more than just academic content, and that, “Educators need to be equally concerned with students’ level of engagement and participation at school” in order to construct an appropriate learning environment for refugee students (p. 21). Effective programming that is inclusive of

refugee students “can be achieved by asking students questions about their experiences, listening to what they have to say, and creating partnerships with students to help change school practices and culture to meet their specific socioemotional needs” (p. 21).

Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) provided an example of this pedagogical practice of fostering school belonging. They discussed the Internationals Network for Public Schools focus on the “principle of heterogeneity and collaboration” (p. 111). In this system, students are not tracked based upon demographic information, academic ability, or level of language acquisition; rather, they are placed in content classes as 9th and 10th graders. The classes are small, and the “small-team environment” allows students to engage with others and learn from their experiences (p. 111-112). This type of pedagogical practice allows the refugee students to become an important member of the classroom dynamic; their stories and shared experiences are part of the curriculum.

Another effective mode of pedagogy found in the research moves beyond the confines of teacher-based pedagogical practice and uses informal school talks. Roberts and Locke (2001) promoted a type of student-led pedagogical practice that offers effective educational opportunities for refugee students as they attempt to adapt to American schools: informal school talk. In their study, Roberts and Locke (2001) wrote that the stories of two of their participants “affirm the importance of informal school talk as a strategy for gaining access to the social and academic dimensions of school” (p. 376). These informal school talks—mostly with classmates—assisted these refugee students in “getting comfortable with and learning about school” (p. 381). Refugee students depend upon their classmates. Roberts and Locke (2001) continued by saying,

Interactions between classmates are important for all school children, but especially for refugee and immigrant students because of the typical format of most teacher-student talk.... Informal school talk for refugee and immigrant students offers opportunities for them to gain access to interpretations of the social and academic expectations of school, to use English with an intellectual content, and to ask questions (p. 381-382).

Although informal interactions with peers can take place outside of school, these interactions do not directly provide refugee students with practice of school life. However, informal school talks allow refugee students to adapt to schools in their adopted country by providing a basic understanding of the expectations of a student in the classroom.

The need for informal school talk does not imply that the classroom teacher is a non-essential component of teaching and learning for refugee students. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) believed, “Teachers play a critical role in supporting refugee students’ language acquisition and in helping them transition to a new learning environment and the curricular, teaching and learning, and assessment practices used in the United States” (p. 111). Rather, it is imperative for the teacher to construct a welcoming environment for informal school talk while attending to the other roles mentioned above. This is not an easy task. Refugee students may carry emotional scars that can inhibit this process. Roxas (2011) asked,

what happens in a classroom when refugee students, who have been discriminated against by their local communities in their countries of origin in the past, are asked to suddenly build community and trust everyone around them?...

Sometimes refugee students, influenced by their past experience in their home countries or by the ambivalent context of their reception in the United States, feel disconnected to a sense of community within their own ethnic group, in the local communities to which they have been resettled, and within the local school communities in which they have enrolled (pp. 1-2).

The teacher plays an influential part of creating an environment that fosters a spirit of trust and acceptance that alleviates some of these feelings of disconnectedness within the classroom.

One proposed method by Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) for constructing such an environment involved using “the students’ life stories as part of the curriculum” (p. 112). Class projects, essays, and other activities promote a culture of sharing that fosters the necessary environment for informal school talk. Additionally, such pedagogical practices “allow the teacher to get to know each student’s background, educational experiences, and interests” in order to “help teachers tailor their instruction, build empathy for the student, and, when sustained over time, build stronger social capital among teachers and students, which leads to a greater sense of identification and belonging among students” (Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018, p. 112). Teachers of refugee learners must use pedagogical practices that allow those refugee students to become an active member of the learning environment by promoting positive interactions between the teacher and the student, as well as among all of the classroom students.

The Importance of Cultural Identity

Another major theme that emerged from the literature was that of cultural identity. Many researchers explored how one’s cultural identity affected educational

opportunities and learning environments (Ngo, 2008; Yeh, 2004; Roberts and Locke, 2001; Glicksman and Wohl, 1965). The cultural dominance of the native students overpowers, and in many cases overwhelms, the refugee student. This severely limits the educational growth and opportunities for the refugee student. However, some research indicated that this view of the relationship between cultures is overly simplistic and fails to account for the “double movement of discourse and representation” (Ngo, 2008, p. 4). This “double movement of discourse and representation” includes verbal and non-verbal communication between those of the mainstream culture and other cultures, as well as the way those members of both cultures present themselves as a member of that culture. Cultural exchange does not exist in a top-down arrangement with the mainstream culture on top. In cultural exchange, members of all cultures influence and impact the members of the other cultures.

Before the political turmoil leading to the creation of Myanmar occurred, Glicksman & Wohl (1965) compared the values of American and Burmese university students. By asking one open-ended question—“What do you want from life?”—Glicksman and Wohl uncovered different cultural themes. For American students, answers most frequently focused on “the categories of Economic Security, Marriage and Children, and Religion” (p. 25). Burmese students, on the other hand, highlighted Education and Social Concerns. Studies such as this have contributed to the current “stereotype of Asian American academic success” (Yeh, 2004, p. 93). Public schools in the United States report demographic data of their school districts including numbers of Asian-American students. The stereotype of Asian-American students in the United States promotes the image of educationally driven students who achieve academic

success, especially in the fields of math and science. Wessler (2016) quoted Rosa Chen, a college student, about the stereotype of a model minority: “It’s the idea of the model minority; that Asian Americans are successful, high income, studious, hard working, quiet” (p. 361). The answer “Education” by Burmese students in Glicksman and Wohl’s (1965) study failed to capture the reason why the answer is chosen. Their findings claimed that the students’ responses show the level of importance education holds in the Burmese community; however, it does not take into account the potential answers due to Burmese students feeling they have been deprived of an education for a number of reasons.

Much of the research conceptualized a cultural “battle” in the classroom between refugee students and the mainstream culture of the adopted country. Although dependent in some cases on whether the student was born in the United States or is a first-generation immigrant, research showed that students who do not identify with mainstream culture often struggle in school environments—both socially and academically (Roberts and Locke, 2001; Yeh, 2004). Ogbu and Simons (1998) believed that refugee students had an advantage over other migrants in attempting to identify with mainstream culture. “They knew before coming to the United States that to accomplish the goal of their emigration they would have to learn new, that is, white American, ways of behaving and talking” (p. 165). Other factors that heavily influence cultural adjustment for refugee students include the age of the student, the level of any previous education, their first language, and the size and type of facility they attend in the United States (McDonnell and Hill, 1993; McHugh, 1979; Nieto, 1992; Roberts and Locke, 2001). Roberts and Locke (2001) wrote that “(s)tudents who are not grounded in the mainstream culture struggle to get

along in school settings that are institutionalized according to the moral, social, and cultural dimensions of society” (p. 375). The school setting, itself, is a microcosm of the society within which it belongs. Social outsiders face similar obstacles to adapting to schools as they face adapting to society. Kuriowa and Verkuyten (2008) believed that “the development and maintenance of ‘groupness’ and a sense of collective ‘we’ are key tasks” (p. 408). A strong sense of “groupness” that recognizes and celebrates the belonging to a minority group is just as vital as developing a sense of “we” as a member of society—or to a lesser extent, the school population—as a whole.

Although this “groupness” creates a strong bond among those in one cultural group, this could lead to stereotypes, such as the stereotype of Asian American academic success (Yeh, 2004). In addition to the stereotype of academic success, Thrupkaew (2016) highlighted the long-held belief that Asian Americans are also financially secure and emotionally well-off due to their own community support; however, “the plight of refugees” from Asia arriving in the United States after 1975 “differ markedly from the professional-class Chinese and Indian immigrants who started coming 10 years earlier. The Southeast Asians were fleeing wartime persecution and had few resources. And those disadvantages have had devastating effects on their lives in the United States” (p. 231). These stereotypes contribute to the further marginalization of Asian refugee students.

Contrary to cultural stereotyping, Ngo (2008) visualized the cultural struggle as more of a constructed cultural blend. She believed that too many researchers and educators have affirmed the notion that Asian culture is static in nature and passed from generation to generation. Rather, Ngo (2008) believed the Asian cultural identity of

students change due to the surrounding influences of the mainstream culture. “Double-movement of identity opens up a space for change and negotiation” (p. 9). A student, whether a member of the mainstream culture or a different culture, shares his/her culture with others while experiencing the culture of others. The culture for each refugee student interacts with the mainstream culture and results in a new, hybrid culture. The dominant theory that there is a “culture clash” creates simplistic understandings that fail to account for dynamic development of culture (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman, 2008). This differing interpretation of the struggles of cultural identity is the first step towards redefining the influence of culture on the growth of the student. Cultural identity and school knowledge are related. Oh and van der Stouwe (2008) wrote that education systems have the responsibility “to promote the acquisition of knowledge, skills, social norms, and cultural values;” however, one of the problems in relation to these responsibilities is determining “which types of knowledge and skills should be taught, and whose social norms and cultural values related?” (p. 589). This issue highlights the crux of the cultural issues faced by refugee students in American schools.

Necessary Educational and Emotional Support

There is abundant research that concluded that refugee students face additional emotional and educational struggles with little support (Alden, et al., 1996; Hickey, 2005; Yeh, 2004; McBrien, 2009; Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012; Stromquist, 2012; Tandon, 2016; McWilliams and Bonet, 2016). Perhaps due to Asian Pacific refugees being identified as what Yeh (2004) calls a “model minority” (p. 82), there are few services or programs that specifically target this group of students. The lack of services and programs for these students creates an atmosphere that is restrictive in the

educational process and detrimental to the emotional security of the student. Thrupkaew (2016) highlighted the growth of this positive stereotype in the United States. Shortly after the Watts riots of 1965, *U.S. News and World Report* published an article in 1966 entitled “Success Story of One Minority in the U.S.” in which the author wrote, “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own, with no help from anyone else” (p. 231). In 1971, *Newsweek* claimed that Asian Americans were “outwhiting the whites,” and in 1986, *Fortune* proclaimed Asian Americans a “superminority” (p. 231). On the flip side, a Pacific Asian student could find themselves labeled part of the “yellow peril.” With this notion of yellow peril comes the belief that the influx of Asian migrants poses a threat to the culture and safety of America. These misplaced stereotypes have contributed to a lack of available educational and emotional support for Asian American students.

Emotional distress can have a profound impact on students, and many refugee students face emotional stress. In his study, Hickey (2005) concluded that in the current educational structure of American schools, the emotional needs of refugee students are not being met. The commonalities of the experiences for South East Asian refugees include the following: lack of accompaniment by family members, acculturation problems, and emotional distress (Hickey, 2005; Allden, et al., 1996). This emotional distress, according to Allden, et al. (1996), mirrors the difficulties of those suffering post-traumatic stress symptoms. In large part, these emotional struggles exist because the refugee student fails to adapt within the sociocultural context of the adopted country (Hickey, 2005). Allden, et al. (1996) contributed the poor rate of self-reporting

emotional distress by refugee students to the lack of available support services. Hickey (2005), however, proposed more extensive educator training in order to identify and act upon the emotional distress of refugee students.

Social tension for refugee students can heighten emotional distress. Tandon (2016) conducted a qualitative study about the struggles faced by high school refugee students in relation to resettlement. Tandon found that students faced “feelings of isolation and segregation from mainstream students, as well as a lack of information about available resources” (p. 1). In addition to the lack of inclusion and communication about resources, refugee students must contend with the trauma of their past experiences as they try to adapt to their new home (McBrien, 2005; Allden, et al., 1996). Many refugees have escaped a past of emotional and physical trauma which they carry with them to their new homes. These traumas are compounded by parental beliefs and social issues with the parent(s). McBrien (2005) argued, “social support is important for refugee parents as well as for youth” (p. 355). In all, these obstacles and limited support services—according to Stromquist (2012)—“produce an educational experience characterized by limited access to academic courses, labeling by peers and teachers, and reduced chances of access to higher education” (p. 195).

Unfortunately, refugee students’ emotional needs go unrecognized which impacts their future educational and social journeys. McWilliams and Bonet (2016) and Haffejee (2015) focused on refugee students in relation to postsecondary education. McWilliams and Bonet looked at how high school refugee students “shape their aspirations, needs and capabilities as they transition to postsecondary education and work” (p. 1). Both studies found that refugee students are largely dependent upon social services and support staff

during their time in public schools. Finally, Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) pointed out that, “administrators and teachers are largely underprepared to adequately address the various needs of refugee students” (p. 3). Educators must develop a greater understanding of the needs and viewpoints of diverse students and challenge the accepted school culture for greater educational success for refugee students.

Refugee Students’ Own Stories

Some research studies over refugee students included these students’ stories and perspectives. They revealed two important components of the life of a refugee student: communication and transformation (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012; Roberts and Locke, 2001; Florio-Ruane, 1997). One student in Montero’s (2012) study stated, “I know what the teacher is teaching because I already learned it in Ethiopia, but I cannot express myself in English, and it is hard for the teacher to understand me” (p. 11). Stories like these underscore the importance that communication—in both linguistic and cultural forms—holds for refugee students. Likewise, through these stories, researchers and participants alike recognize the transformational process undertaken by these refugee students. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) believed that the story of her research “is one about a powerful, multi-dimensional transformation brought about by a shift of cultural perspective—one that recognized the students’ individual identities as well as the identity of their group” (p. 4). The stories and perspectives of refugee students highlight the changes that have occurred with both the refugee student and his/her community.

As Prior and Niesz (2013) argued, “listening to children’s stories of their adaptation experience and the narratives of their families may help us to foster smooth

transitions into American early childhood classrooms for young refugee students” (p. 1). Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) agreed that listening to refugee students’ stories is vital—including at the secondary school level—for an effective educational program for those refugee students because such attending students’ stories and perspectives provide them “with a space to gain and share the social, cultural, and academic knowledge they need to become active and successful participants in local and global economic, cultural, and social landscapes” (p. 21). While there are limited studies about the stories of high school refugee students, I have not found substantial research focusing on Burmese refugee high school students and their stories. Their stories are important and unique, and it is important to seek them out and listen to what they have to say. My research aimed at filling this gap in the literature.

Conclusion

Students from Burma who enter the educational system in the United States encounter many difficulties, like other refugee students. They face pre-existing policies and pedagogical practices that were not established in their best interest. They battle against stereotypes of being a model minority or a part of the yellow peril. They experience isolation and segregation based upon the differences in their culture, and native students and teachers exacerbate this problem by failing to realize that they, too, play a part in the process of developing multicultural experiences. These Burmese students also struggle with emotional distress that in many cases goes unnoticed or untreated. But these students have also overcome many obstacles. They have shown strength of character and resolve. They have demonstrated resilience in the face of difficulties, and they have a wealth of success adapting to an American school. What

researchers have failed to study in great depth—something that I investigated in my research—are Burmese students' own perspective on their experiences as they attempt to adapt to life inside an American school. My research offers a glimpse of Burmese students' stories and experiences in American schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

I begin this chapter with a brief outline of my research methodology, including a brief discussion of how that methodology fits within my epistemological view. I then share more information about my theoretical framework. Finally, I introduce my participants, data collection and analysis techniques, and guides for rigorous and ethical qualitative research.

My methodology for this study is narrative inquiry. I discuss this more below. Kramp (2004) believed that, “(t)he object of narrative inquiry is understanding—the outcome of interpretation—rather than explanation” (p. 104). To achieve this goal of understanding, I conducted interviews, a focus group, writing prompts, and optional artifacts in which my participants detailed their stories with me in a shared experience of meaning-making. I believe that the underlying principle in how we know what we know is through our experiences. We construct reality through our senses, our memories, and our shared experiences with others. As a framework, I used J. W. Berry’s theory on acculturation and adaptation. I share more about my theoretical framework in the next section. This was the basis for my research.

The Choice of Methodology

For this study, I used narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method of research. But what is meant by the word narrative? Creswell (2013) believed that, “‘Narrative’ might be the *phenomenon* being studied,... or it might be the *method* used in a study” (p. 70). Narrative has been used in different ways by different researchers. As Creswell pointed out, narrative could be the story that is being told, or it could be the researchers’ analysis of someone else’s story. Czarniawska (as cited in Creswell, 2013) defined narrative inquiry as a “qualitative design in which ‘narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected’” (p. 70). This narrative offers greater depth and breadth of knowledge about a particular subject.

“Narrative inquiry is more than just telling or capturing stories” (Patton, 2015, p. 128). The stories that are told by participants are data for analysis. Narrative involves the researcher analyzing the story/stories of the participant(s) in order to make meaning of them. Connelly and Clandinin (1991) stated that, “Narrative is a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience” (p. 121). It is this human experience that offers the researcher answers, themes, or additional questions in relation to the topic of study. Creswell (2013) outlined a list of defining features for narrative studies: (1) researchers collect stories and collaborate on meaning-making with the participant, (2) participants tell about their experiences which illuminate their identities, (3) researchers gather stories through multiple forms of data, (4) researchers form stories into a chronology, (5) researchers analyze the stories, (6) researchers highlight turning points in the stories, and (7) researchers situate the stories within a place. All of these steps require the researcher

to collect data in the form of stories and analyze them to co-construct a narrative in response to the research question(s).

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1991), “Narrative inquiry may also be sociologically concerned with groups and the formation of community” (p. 122). Stories confer experiences of an individual within the context of the community and society as a whole. I studied Burmese refugee students in a midwestern American school. My collection of stories from more than one individual emphasized a shared experience within the community. These shared experiences allowed me, as the researcher, to analyze the stories through the construction of themes—one of three specific ways to analyze stories (the others being structural and performance) according to Creswell (2013). However, each individual story is an experience all its own. My analysis entailed narrative analysis and analysis of narrative. I discuss these in further detail in a later section.

Truth

Narrative inquiry is a particular mode of knowledge and inquiry that is informed by the researcher’s epistemology. Crotty (1998) defined epistemology as “the theory of knowledge” (p. 3). This theory of knowledge is what defines how we, as individuals, find truth. One of these epistemologies is objectivism. Crotty (1998) believed that, “Objectivism is the epistemological view that things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects (‘objective’ truth and meaning, therefore) and that careful (scientific?) research can attain that objective truth and meaning” (p. 5-6). More simply, objectivists believe that individual experience and/or sensory perception do not change

the truth that is within every object. “In the constructionist view... meaning is not discovered but constructed... but actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them (the object)” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42-43). Constructionists make meaning of objects or events through their senses and experiences *with* the object or event. Crotty (1998) also stated that, “In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject” (p. 9). Rather than the construction of meaning coming from nothing, Crotty believed that subjectivists import meaning from their unconscious—through dreams, archetypes, religious beliefs, etc.

Although it is irresponsible to claim that narrative inquiry *always* falls under one of these epistemologies, it is within reason to claim that narrative inquiry is generally informed by constructionism. Patton (2015) stated that, “Narrative inquiry examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 128). That lived experience helps the individual construct knowledge and truth through interaction with the event.

Reality

As narrative inquiry is usually situated under constructionism, reality for each individual is constructed through her experience. Constructionism informs the narrative inquirer’s ontological orientation in the ways people view reality and forms the basis for the questions people ask and the way they interpret the answers to those questions. Understanding and explaining human and social reality cannot be separate from “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p.66-67). For narrative researchers, reality exists in the meaning

constructed through experience, and they seek to understand participants' interpretations of their world. These interpretations offer researchers the answers to questions based upon their participants' experiences.

Patton (2015) discussed the double-nature of interpretation found within narrative studies. "How to interpret stories and, more specifically, the texts that tell the stories is at the heart of narrative analysis" (p. 130). In a narrative study, the researcher collects data from participants who have already interpreted their experience; yet, the researcher through analysis must also enter into a process of interpretation. To guard against overly conflicting interpretations about the participant's story, Riessman (as cited in Patton, 2015) recommended "detailed and lengthy accounts with many different crosscutting themes rather than short, succinct, and fragmented sections" (p. 130). Through more detailed and descriptive accounts, the researcher limits extreme differences of interpretation with the participant.

Possibilities

Different types of narratives allow researchers options in how they approach their studies. As is the case in all research, purpose is the guiding factor. Despite all of the types of narrative available for researchers, one characteristic is true of all narrative research. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1991), "The fact that a story is inherently temporal mean that history and the philosophy of history, which are essentially the study of time, have a specific role to play in shaping narrative studies in the social sciences" (p. 121). The experiences of the participants do not occur within a vacuum; rather, they are situated in time. Chronology plays a significant role in the story of the

individual, including the chronology of the world around them. This fact can assist the researcher in analyzing and retelling the participant's stories.

Limitations

Two of the biggest limitations in narrative inquiry are the number of participants a researcher can effectively include in the study and the time needed for the researcher to understand the story they are retelling. Creswell (2013) stated, "The researcher needs to collect extensive information about the participant, and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual's life" (p. 76). Time is needed to build this relationship and develop an understanding of the participant, her motives, and her experiences. Time is also needed for the researcher to reflect "about their own personal and political background, which shapes how they 'restory' the account" (p. 76). It is important to remember that the researcher is a co-creator of the narrative. Niander and Scott (as cited in Riessman, 2008) wrote, "the researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation" (p. 21). Finally, there is time needed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1991), "it is common in collaborative ventures to either work with participants throughout the writing, in which case records of the work itself constitute data, or to bring written documents back to participants for final discussions" (p. 144). Simply sitting down for an interview or two and then ceasing all communication with the participant does not constitute ethical narrative research.

Theoretical Framework

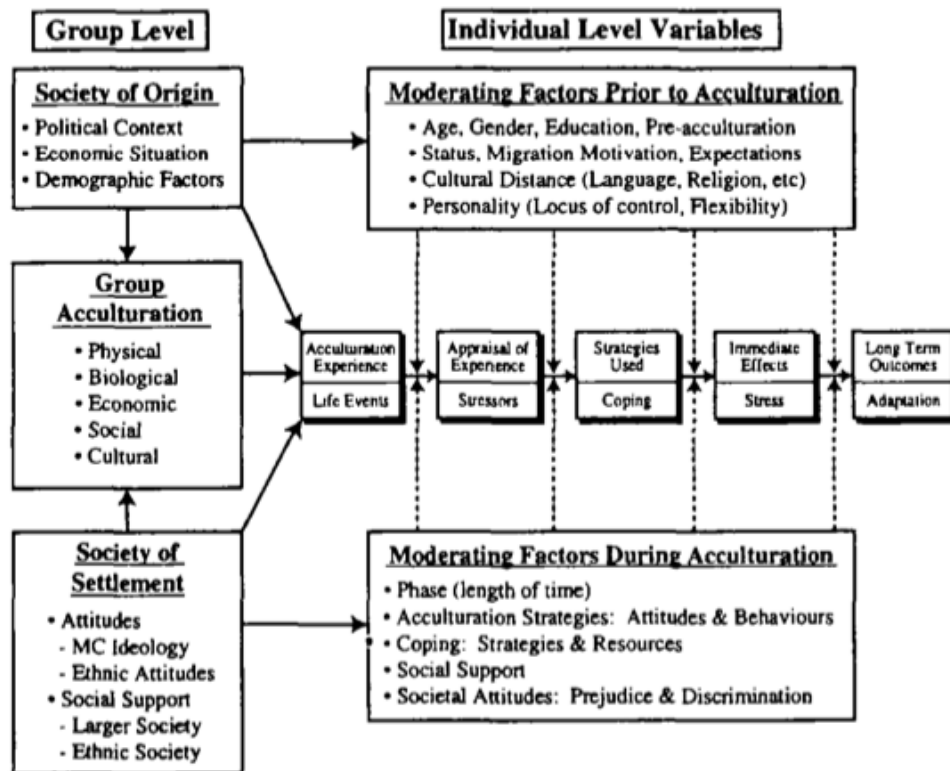
Berry (1992) structured a conceptual framework of acculturation and adaptation based upon two dichotomous positions: should the migrant seek a relationship with the

mainstream cultural group and should the migrant maintain elements of the native culture. Berry (2001) expanded upon this framework by recognizing that the choices for the two positions are not always commanded by the migrant. In some instances, the mainstream culture dictates whether a relationship is possible or if the migrant may keep native cultural beliefs and practices. As I conducted my research, I collected stories from Burmese refugees who encountered these two positions in an educational setting in a school district in the United States. My research focused on how some Burmese refugee students have navigated the process of adaptation while confronting social and individual relationships with multiple cultures. These shared experiences—as individual stories and as a collective narrative—provide a picture of the reality of adaptation for these Burmese refugees. These storied experiences provide understanding of their process of adaptation.

As I attempted to process these stories on a group and an individual level, I used Berry's (1997) framework for acculturation research (Fig. 3). In this framework, Berry broke down acculturation into group level and individual level variables. In looking at the group level, Berry discussed how factors of the society of origin and the society of settlement impact the acculturation process. On an individual level, Berry highlighted the moderating factors prior to and during acculturation and how they influence the individual's path of acculturation. As the migrant encounters life experiences, the individual appraises that experience. That appraisal is based upon the confrontations with stress felt by the migrant. These appraisals occur as a three-part process: culture shedding, culture learning, and culture conflict. Culture shedding and culture learning “involves the accidental or deliberate loss of behaviors, and their replacement by behaviors that allow the individual a better ‘fit’ with the society of settlement” (p. 18).

To cope with these stresses related to the appraisal of experience, strategies are constructed and enacted by the migrant. As the individual confronts the effects of these coping strategies, he/she is met with more stress. As a way of dealing with these stresses, a long-term strategy of adaptation is constructed by the migrant. Throughout this process, the individual's path is impacted by the moderating factors prior to and during acculturation. This framework provides guidance for my narrative analysis and analysis of narrative.

Figure 3: Group Level and Individual Level Variables



Sampling and Participant Selection

For this research, I used purposeful sampling. I selected 4 high school graduates from my school district who were born in Burma. A colleague suggested that I contact

one of her former students, and the other three participants emerged through another colleague suggestion and the snowball method from that initial participant. Participants were willing to meet with me for 2-3 interviews of roughly 45-60 minutes each and one focus group meeting of 45-60 minutes. Participants also were required to have a conversational understanding of English. I prepared an informed consent form in English and Zomi (the cultural dialect spoken by most of the Burmese students in my school district) to ensure that former students (and their family members, if relevant) understood what was being asked during my research. I did not have access to a full-time translator for my research. All participants were identified in the research with a pseudonym: Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven. I introduce my participants in detail in chapter 4.

Data Collection

The initial phase of data collection consisted of one-on-one interviews with the research participants through Google Meet. Interviews lasted on average 45-60 minutes, and I made an audio recording of each interview. At the conclusion of each interview, I constructed a transcript of the interview using the pseudonym for the participant. All audio recordings were stored on my home computer in a digital file that was locked by a password. I interviewed each participant two times.

The second phase of data collection involved a focus group consisting of all of the participants. The focus group consisted of one meeting, lasting roughly 60 minutes. I collected an audio recording and a video recording of the focus group by recording our Google Meet session. At the conclusion of the focus group, I created a transcript. The transcript, audio recordings, and the video recording of the focus group were stored on

my home computer in the same digital file protected by a password. At the conclusion of the research, I will destroy and/or delete those files.

The final phase of data collection involved participants submitting photos (optional) and writing prompts to the researcher. I emailed each participant writing prompts in an effort to triangulate the data. Participants, if they were willing, were able to provide a photo, a drawing, or an item that depicts a story with specific meaning to their process of adaptation. Two of the participants provided me with pictures. Mark shared photos of his church and friends in Burma, and Steven sent me pictures of his village. I used these photos to construct a better understanding of their lives in Burma. I do not specifically mention the photos or describe them in detail, but I used the images to complete my restorying of Mark and Steven’s stories in chapter 4. The digital photos and the writing prompts were stored on the same home computer as the files for the interviews, and they, too, were locked in a digital file with a password.

Table 1: Participant Data Collection

NAME	# OF INTERVIEWS	FOCUS GROUP	WRITING PROMPTS	OPTIONAL ARTIFACTS
Mark	3	Participated	Completed	Pictures
Nina	2	Participated	Completed	-
Sammy	2	Participated	Completed	-
Steven	2	Participated	Completed	Pictures

Data Analysis

I used two approaches for my data analysis. The first step of my data analysis—a step that was repeated continually through the analysis process—was coding. As a guide for coding, I used Johnny Saldaña’s *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. My coding included two coding methods: in vivo and versus. To begin the process of coding, I transcribed all interviews myself. While reviewing the transcripts, I cut the portion of the interview out that was related to the method of coding, glued it to a notecard, and wrote the code and description of the quote on the back of the notecard. These coding methods allowed me a different way of engaging with the transcripts of the interviews. My data analysis also included written prompts and artifacts as a part of my narrative analysis (described in Chapter 1). I used notecards in a similar way for the focus group transcripts and the written prompts. The process of narrative analysis began in this step, but it continued throughout the analysis portion of my research.

After completing my first cycle coding, I followed Kim’s (2016) process of constructing categories, patterns, and themes from these codes. This was an example of analysis of narrative (discussed in Chapter 1). Kim (2016) discussed the role of analysis and interpretation as they apply to narrative inquiry.

Some might think that analysis and interpretation are two different concepts, as analysis implies objectivity and interpretation implies subjectivity. However, although they are not identical concepts, they work in tandem because we analyze narrative data in order to develop an understanding of the meanings our participants give to themselves, to their surroundings, to their lives, and to their lived experiences through storytelling (p. 189-190).

My process of data analysis began during the interview. As I asked questions, as I listened to the stories of my participants, as I contemplated unscripted follow-up questions to delve deeper into their stories, I began the process of understanding and meaning-making.

The final step of my data analysis included member checking. I shared my findings and my “restorying” with my participants. It is possible that one or more participants may have found fault with my analysis, but no one mentioned any issues during our discussions. Through this process I reevaluated my findings, but I did not make any changes. The analysis was a result of the co-construction of these storied experiences. As I have discussed previously, and as I discuss in the section on ethical considerations, I was tasked with the responsibility as a researcher to ensure that this process of analysis and interpretation was accomplished in a way that was honest, dependable, credible, transferable, and confirmable—in other words, trustworthy.

Rigor of the Study

Agee (2009) offered a beautiful introduction to the process of qualitative inquiry. “Many qualitative researchers see a question as a beginning point for their research. Once a satisfactory question is in place, a study can begin” (p. 431). A question provides the spark that fuels the process of research. When I started my doctoral program in 2014, the only question I pondered related to my worthiness as a student. After gaining self-confidence and a sense of belonging, I had an opportunity for reflection. Through my reflection, I discovered a question that gnawed on me—an internal enigma that had lingered imperceptibly in the back of my mind: How have

Burmese students in my school district adapted to an American educational system. This question was the spark that fueled my research.

Unfortunately, the question itself did not provide a guideline for rigorous research. Sandelowski (1993) cautioned qualitative researchers about the dangers of focusing too much on rigor. “There is an inflexibility and an uncompromising harshness and rigidity implied in the term ‘rigor’ that threaten to take us too far from the artfulness, versatility, and sensitivity to meaning and context that mark qualitative works of distinction” (p. 1). This desire for rigor stems from the academic community’s previous belief that quantitative research offered the blueprint for rigorous study. In quantitative research, rigor can be evaluated by internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. This is not the case in qualitative research. Krefting (1991) stated, “Too frequently, qualitative research is evaluated against criteria appropriate to quantitative research and is found to be lacking. Qualitative researchers contend that because the nature and purpose of the quantitative and qualitative traditions are different, it is erroneous to apply the same criteria of worthiness or merit” (p. 214). Kramp (2004) believed that “verisimilitude—the appearance or likelihood that something is or could be true or real—is a more appropriate criterion for narrative knowing than verification or proof of truth” (p. 108). Morse (2015) highlighted what Guba and Lincoln (1989) proposed as the criteria for qualitative rigor: trustworthiness. Morse claimed that Guba and Lincoln “identified the overall goal of trustworthiness, consisting of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, to be respectively equivalent to quantitative criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 18). Likewise, I evaluated the rigor of my study by its trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln

(1989) called their criteria of trustworthiness the parallel criteria. The parallel criteria is meant to parallel the rigor criteria mentioned above: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the four parallels—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—have techniques that ensure their rigor.

The techniques for credibility include prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, and member checks. I was committed to these techniques. Prolonged engagement requires the researcher to invest “sufficient involvement at the site of inquiry” (p. 237). I have worked within the school district of my study for over 15 years, and I have considered this project for six years. During that time, I have made “unofficial” observations and built trust with the student body. Peer debriefing and progressive subjectivity require the researcher to document his/her a priori beliefs of the throughout the research process and to engage in discussions with a peer who has no connection or interest in the study. I kept a dated journal throughout the research study in which I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and emerging ideas, and I met regularly with a former classmate for peer debriefing. Finally, at the conclusion of my transcriptions, I shared transcripts of interviews and the focus group with each participant in the process of member checking.

The second parallel, transferability, requires thick description. Thick description provides rich details that include time, place, context and culture. By providing thick description for my research, I am offering others the opportunity to apply my study to their situations of interest. For Guba and Lincoln (1989), dependability requires the researcher to document “the process of logic and method decisions” (p. 242). These

documents allow the researcher to undergo a dependability audit. Through the use of my research journal, I hoped to track and evaluate the reasons and the extent of my processes of logic and method. Finally, confirmability asks for an additional step in the dependability audit—ensure that the “findings are rooted in the data themselves. This means that data (constructions, assertions, facts, and so on) can be tracked to their sources, and that the logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit in the narrative of a case study” (p. 243). I enhanced the trustworthiness of my study by focusing on these parallels and holding myself accountable to my audits.

Ethical Consideration

One of the greatest ethical restraints on narrative research is the need for detailed attention and cooperation with each participant. Riessman (2008) believed that, “The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23). Narrative research attempts to provide greater depth and understanding about an individual’s experiences. A researcher that fails to collect rich data violates ethical considerations of narrative research. The researcher is unable to help co-construct a narrative without a full understanding of the experience being described. A lack of complete understanding about the experience of the participant opens the door for other unethical pursuits. As Kramp (2004) stated, “Narrative privileges the storyteller.... You as researcher give authority to the storyteller, whom you acknowledge as the one who knows and tells” (p. 111). The researcher in a narrative study must recognize that the participant is the expert of the story.

Connelly and Clandinin (1991) offered another warning about narrative research. They believed that one attraction of narrative research, is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways. But this same capacity is a two-edged inquiry sword. Falsehood may be substituted for meaning and narrative truth by using the same criteria that give rise to significance, value, and intention. Not only may one “fake the data” and write a fiction but one may also use the data to tell a deception as easily as a truth. (p. 141).

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, researchers have a duty to approach their studies with the intention of upholding certain ethical standards. One of those standards is to collect enough descriptive data to gain an understanding of the participant’s experience. In a narrative study, a researcher must collect and analyze data with the intent of upholding the meaning of the participant’s story. The researcher is a co-creator of the narrative, not the only creator. To “fake the data” is to eliminate the participant as a member of the co-construction. It is very difficult to prove wrongdoing in this regard, which is why it is imperative for all narrative researchers to approach their research ethically.

Alderson and Morrow (2011) offered one additional consideration for researchers when conducting narrative research with children. Since narrative research is a two-way exchange of information, a researcher who conducts research with children should “validat(e) findings with young people, report back to them and draw what may have been quite close relationships to an end” (p. 97). Children may become emotionally attached to the researcher, and it would be unethical for the researcher to handle the

relationship as though it is just a means to gather information. When the research is over, the researcher should undergo a process of closure in order to avoid emotional trauma caused by the sudden disappearance of the researcher from the participant's life. This is good advice for researchers regardless of the age of the participant.

Spence (as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1991) warned about a process called "narrative smoothing" (p. 142). Narrative smoothing is similar to what others call "the Hollywood plot." This is the process in which everything works out in the end. Spence's theory of narrative smoothing involves the researcher smoothing out the plot of the participant's story during data collection and data analysis. Although there is a limited need for this type of smoothing for retelling the story in dissemination, it is unethical to smooth for the sake of constructing the co-constructed narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (1991) suggested operating through the lens of "I the critic" when analyzing and writing the narrative in order to avoid "narcissism and solipsism" (p. 141). Always being aware of your purpose as a researcher and staying true to your participant's meaning will help guide you through the process of co-constructing a narrative ethically.

I completed the Oklahoma State University IRB process, and I did not conduct any portion of my research until I obtained their approval. My most important ethical consideration in this study was my role as a narrative analyst. As I mentioned in the Researcher Subjectivity section of Chapter 1, it was imperative that I stayed aware of my perceptions of story as different from the intention of the story. I was not an "objective inquirer." I was a "relational inquirer, attentive to the intersubjective, relational, embedded spaces in which lives are lived out. [I] do not stand metaphorically outside the inquiry but [am] part of the phenomenon under study" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24). Kramp

(2004) believed that, “Biases need not be obstructive or intrusive for you, as researcher, if you interact with an awareness of them and are sensitive to their potential” (p. 115). As I performed my research—whether in the course of constructing interview questions, conducting interviews, processing answers from interviews, analyzing participants’ stories, or writing my final assessment of my research—I was responsible for reflecting upon the influences that I, the researcher, had on my study.

CHAPTER IV

LEAVING BURMA, ENTERING AMERICA

In this chapter, I present narrative analysis of each participant. My four participants were Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven (pseudonyms). One of my colleagues suggested that I contact Mark, and he readily agreed to participate. During our initial conversation, Mark suggested that I contact his friend's sister, Nina. Nina warned me that she had a busy college schedule, but she would be willing to participate if I could accommodate her. I gladly accepted her terms. Sammy and Steven agreed to participate after contact through a different colleague. All four students attended the same high school during a five-year window. Although the timeline of their attendance does not differ greatly, each participant's experiences were unique in many ways from the other participants. This chapter is intended to look at each participant as an individual. Each participant's story offers a glimpse at that individual journey from Burma to the United States and through the American education system.

Mark: A Story of Danger and Opportunity

Mark's desire to share his story was hypnotic. There were moments when I almost lost sight of my intended mission—an interview—and fell into a trance. He is passionate about retelling his experiences. I believe a big part of this passion resides in an

unconscious aspiration to make others recognize their blessings. His story is one of a have-not desperately maneuvering through the unknown in pursuit of a life among those who have. Mark's smile and bubbly personality put me at ease in this first step of my dissertation research. Our talk before the interview felt like having a conversation with a long lost friend. But, whenever I started the interview, his demeanor changed dramatically. His smile faded, his voice grew softer, and he slowed his speaking rhythm, as though he was attempting to relay the importance of each development to me. This is Mark's story.

Journey: The Perils of Crossing the Border

Mark grew up in a small village in Burma. This rural setting, one that Mark described as “probably two day driving from the city,” provided Mark a foundational understanding of the necessities of life. “What you have is all you need.” His family's goals did not revolve around material goods or worldly success; they centered on survival. An average day in his village consisted of “just living off the daily basics.” For Mark, food was an essential component of those daily basics. He continued,

The food you eat is fresh; everything is fresh, organic. It's like for dinner, it's always from what you harvest from what you farm during the day. So you might have a little yard in the back—in your backyard where you farm a little bit, like vegetable [sp] and stuff like that. But also, you have a big farm where you walk sometimes one mile, two miles, three mile, depending on how far you are assigned. So it's kind of like you are assigned to a land, and then that's where you farm. (All quotes used in this chapter are my participants' words. These stories are theirs, and it is their voices that must be heard.)

Farming is essential for life in Mark's village. Without farming, there is no food. However, food is not the only challenge to life in his rural village.

In Mark's eyes, money is the key to happiness in Burma. Money gives one opportunities, options, and privileges. Mark highlighted this theme when he described his experiences in Burmese schools. Those with money had an unfettered path to success, but those without money faced numerous struggles throughout the school day—and that excluded the process of learning. Mark complained that,

So you would pay a lot of money, but at the same time, it's like you already fail before you even go to school.... It's like that and school-wise is that you've always get bullied because you don't have anything. Even if you have like pencils or pens like binder and stuff like that. Like people can just bully you and just take it away from you. So I would say a life over there if you're living like a rich life, then it's very very fun. But if you're poor then it's kind of like you need a lot of opportunity like to--you might want to let go out of country or at the state to like make some money and trying to feed your family.

For Mark, the rich life is fun while the poor life is filled with bullying and struggle.

He does believe the struggles for most of the poor in schools in Burma is destined for failure. "It's like if you're rich, you can get away with anything, get your education, and things like that. If you are poor, it's like you basically—unless you are really smart, you're basically going to be—you're known for failing." There is no escape for the poor—unless "you are really smart." This is the key to understanding Mark's transition to the American educational system. Knowledge is power for Mark in more ways than

one. To him, knowledge gives you a chance, and it offers you hope for happiness. Mark strives for that opportunity, and he will not allow any opportunity to pass.

Eventually, the “lifestyle” in Burma necessitated a move for Mark and his family. “I say it’s the lifestyle because—is usually because of the government. Because the government didn’t provide us like opportunities, provide us—like they never provide us education where if you don’t have money you can get education... just very difficult if you’re just living day by day.” Mark’s family decided it was time to make a move. The challenges associated with the journey out of Burma are many. Unfortunately, the first step meant saying goodbye to his father. Mark’s dad left Burma and traveled to Malaysia. Malaysia provided his dad with two resources: a job in order to provide a home for his family when they escaped, and a link to an organization that would lead his family to their preferred destination: the United States. In Malaysia, Mark’s dad met with United Nations representatives and started the process of his family officially escaping Burma as refugees. For the uninformed, this process sounds like a long day of paperwork. In reality, for Mark and his family, that is far from the truth.

Mark’s family—Mark, his mother, and his sister—had to hire a car to drive them to the city—a profound undertaking considering Mark never saw cars in his village. Mark, aged 5 or 6, saw the city for the first time as he began his escape. His family stayed in a house they had rented for about a week. The next step of the journey was another car ride to a bigger city. In this city, the family stayed at an orphanage for 2-3 weeks while Mark’s parents planned the route to Malaysia. Finally, the family moved to the border of Thailand. Mark described the ordeal of travelling through Thailand as an adventure that required misinformation and stealth.

And from Thailand, when we got to the border, we have to lie about it because they wouldn't let anyone go out of the country for a long time. If they know you're going to live out somewhere else, they would not let you out of the country. So we would have to lie about it. And we would just tell them, 'Oh, we're just staying there for two weeks or something like that...'

This deception allowed them to sneak across the border, but it did not ensure their safety.

After two weeks of lying about their purpose for being near the border, agents arrived to transport Mark and his family through Thailand to Malaysia.

One night, they take us with a motorcycle, like there's a lot of motorcycles. It's not just us, there's a whole group that wanted to go into Malaysia. So it wasn't just us. And so we go into this one jungle where they have like a, a little camp that they have, where they put us. They leave us in there about probably a night or so... No one would notice that place. So it's out in the wild. And so we stayed there for about night. And then in the morning, we would walk. We would run to get into Malaysia. We would run or we would walk and things like that.

The picture Mark painted was one of constant fear and anxiety. The questions of doubt, the fear of detection and capture permeated their atmosphere. Every second seemed eternal as the border, safety, and a new opportunity remained just out of reach.

Fortunately, Mark and his family didn't have to walk and run the entire way through Thailand and into Malaysia.

So one night, they get us into this one taxi. It's a small taxi. It wasn't an SUV or anything like that. It's a taxi car and they shoved in about ten people in that taxi.

And then luckily, I was small, which is good. They fit me between the passenger's seat and the driver's seat. So they fit me into that thing and then I would be throwing up everywhere, things like that. And then from the passenger, there's a guy that's sitting there, trying to show me all these pictures of dog. He's trying to get me to focus so I don't throw up, which didn't work. When you get out of that taxi, it's like you can't even walk because they're shoving in everybody and there's no room for your leg to just relax so everybody's squeezed up. It's packed in there. Some people had to lay down in the trunk, which is not just one person. It's usually three or four shoved in so you can't even breathe there... And then we would walk to rivers, we would walk to dirt.

As Mark described this part of his journey, you could hear a bit of relief in his voice. He recognizes some of the benefits he received due to his youth. Avoiding the trunk and receiving extra attention during the ride prevented him from facing the fact that his family was racing against time to get across the border.

Speed meant life for those trekking through Thailand. Any delay could mean capture, arrest, and deportation. Because it was so important for every member of the party to be quick, it was necessary to leave possessions behind. “Everything you brought with you, there's nothing left because on the way, if you would carry a bag, it's just going to slow you down. And they don't want that. So they want to go quick, quick, quick, quick.” Even the prospect of stopping for a bathroom break was dangerous. “If you need to pee or something, you got to go. It's just got to be like that.” For Mark, though, his youth enabled him to avoid some of the physical challenges of the journey. “And luckily, I was small, so they would just carry me when I'm slowing them down, which is good. So

some people can get caught and thrown into jail but we were blessed enough to make it through the border in Malaysia.” Finally, the family arrived at their temporary destination: Malaysia. Psychologically, the sense of relief and success was uplifting, but the physical and mental exhaustion of the journey had taken its toll.

When we get to Malaysia, we got there, our shirts were ripped or over mud, no shoes. Everything you have on is just ripped and that's all you have. When we get there, we just looked like somebody who has never been taken care of... The agent that get us into Malaysia, that's the apartment that they got for us. So when we get there, we didn't even have time for anything... And so you don't even shower. Just get there and then you lay down and you just asleep.

Mark and his family braved death, arrest, deportation, and more for opportunity. It is this journey that drives Mark. He longs to find a biographer or researcher who is willing to go to Burma with him and retrace his steps. He wants others to know the dangers Burmese refugees face for the opportunity of a new life in the United States.

Mark's education about the United States started long before he departed for what is now his new home. The UN engaged in an education program for refugees to prepare them for the conclusion of their continuing escape. For many, the UN-sponsored education program can last as long as 3-4 years while arrangements are made to transport the family to their new home country, but for Mark the wait was relatively short—15 months. These education programs offered by the UN attempted to,

teach you like how to behave in America, like what--if you're in trouble, what do you call? The 911 if you need—if there's like a fire, you would say, 'Ambulance,' and stuff. They would make us practice in person that. It takes

about a week that they make us do this practicing. And they would teach us like if you—when you go to fill up bottles for, water bottles, like the big bottles. And you can't, like, sexually harass anybody who is online, stuff like that. They teach us things like that. And then after all those, they would tell us, like, they would call and tell us when to, when is our flight to go to America. That's how the process is.

Initial efforts for education conducted by the UN are intended to promote safety and orientation for refugees, not content-based, core-curriculum education conducted by public schools in America. Those types of education programs are placed on hold for these refugees until they arrive in the United States.

In the United States: Relishing the Opportunity for a New Start

Mark's journey within the United States started in New York with a night in a hotel. After making contact with a relative, Mark's family flew to Miami the next day to stay with that relative. After two weeks, the family finally flew to the Midwest. Mark's family knew a pastor in the Midwest who came from their village. "We would stay at their house. He's still our pastor. Still now." This pastor was one of the first Burmese refugees to leave for America. Now, Mark and his family lived with their pastor until they could get on their feet. "The process took about, I would say, a month for my dad to get a work permit, social, and then we had to apply for food stamp...When my dad received the work permit, he applied at [an] air conditioning company." His dad's job opened up a new life for Mark's family. "And then whenever he got a job, the first payment we move out and get apartment. And, yeah, from there we stay about, I would say, five years or so. We were able to get a house. Yeah, that's how we got into

America.” When Mark explains this process, you can hear the pride in his voice. A job and a place to live meant success.

Mark’s first impression of America was that it was “neat”—not a youthful slang term for likeable, but clean. “People say it’s the country of opportunity. I have no doubt it is, the opportunity, because it’s just the vibe or spirit they had. It’s like America is welcoming you, something like that.” America gave his family a chance at a better life—opportunity. But, that was not the end of their story. “The reason why my parents really want us here is not just because of the opportunity, but getting education.” His father had provided financial stability for the family. Mark was now responsible for upholding his part of the bargain in this opportunity: an education.

Education in Burma was quite different for Mark. “When I moved out of the village, I was about to go into 3rd grade, I think.” Mark calls the education system in Burma “very different” from the one he experienced in America. “If you are smart, you would, you would get to sit in the front... so they really want you to get education. Then, if you are dumb, they would put you in the back like that. Dumb—that’s kind of mean to call it by that.” These value statements of smart and dumb were built into seating arrangements and treatment of the students. Mark described an educational system built around educating the most advanced and neglecting those who needed more assistance. “The teacher would tell you what to study. And then, you got to memorize it. If you don’t memorize it, you’re going to fail.” Mark’s American educational experience showed him a different meaning for the word learning.

It’s the same structure. But then, it’s—the way they teach it—it’s not like a teaching. If you are good at memorizing, then you will definitely be a good

student over there... If you really, really want to learn something, the book they give you—you would read them. And you would study them every night—every day and every night. And then, that’s how you would learn them.

A self-directed learning program based on memorization was now replaced with an American education. Mark began his process of adaptation.

Mark entered an American school in fourth grade, and his pastor’s son led the efforts to enroll Mark and his sister. Mark’s first experiences in his new school triggered feelings of fear and confusion.

When I first got to the school, all I see is all Americans speaking English. And then we were just there. And we have no clue what’s going on, or what they’re talking about. Even going to the bus, it’s very difficult. They had to explain to us, ‘Oh, you have to do this. You have to wait for the bus to come,’ and stuff like that. And it was crazy... because there’s nothing like that growing up. There’s no buses that pick us up.

Language played a big part in Mark’s confusion, but it wasn’t the only obstacle for him. Daily routine was something entirely new for him. “The craziest thing for me is lunch because unless you have someone walking—unless I have someone walking with me, I’m lost. I don’t know where to go...I didn’t even know where the cafeteria is. I didn’t even know what time I was supposed to be done eating, start eating, recess, all those kind of things.” Mark was lost in a new environment with an unfamiliar language.

His gateway to understanding—his process of adaptation—started with a peer helper. “The teacher would give me a friend that’s supposed to be taking care of me, taking me to places where I’m supposed to be.” Mark’s use of the word friend in this

situation is telling. In reality, this individual was a classmate, someone who shared the distinction of being in Mark's English Language Learners (ELL) classroom. This "friend" and others in his ELL class "were able to help a lot. They helped me after school, finding my bus and stuff like that. But most of the time it's usually my classmate that has helped me go through the day." Mark leaned on his "friend" to adapt to his new American school. Mark wanted to learn, and he wanted to succeed. Education was a priority, and guidance from a peer was his path to enlightenment.

This method of adaptation was so critical to Mark's success that he took pride in performing a similar role for a new Burmese student later in the year. At the time, there were only three Zomi girls at Mark's school, "and then Steven comes in. Steven comes after a month or so and then that's my first buddy. That's when everything goes down." Steven is my fourth participant. I did not know about their connection when they both agreed to participate in my research, but Mark's friendship with Steven is fascinating; he calls him his "lifelong buddy." Mark described their meeting like this,

So Steven come in, I was feeling like I was the OG there. I was feeling like I know everything over there. Steven is new. I knew where I was going, classes, lunch, recess, and stuff...And he was the only Zomi guy out there of my age so we connect. We just connect and him coming kind of gave me confidence like, 'Oh, I got a friend now. I don't have to be—I don't have to be alone.' And since I can't speak English, I don't always have to be alone, sitting alone, walking alone. I mean, he was able to come in, and then we can be friends.

Mark needed guidance from one who had experience in order to adapt to his new environment, and it was apparent in the way he told about his relationship with Steven—

his smile and his laughter—that he took great pride in being able to perform that same role for another.

But for Mark, guidance didn't just come from a buddy system in school. Mark believes that the Burmese community in his American home city strives to keep students informed. "Usually, when something is very important, usually the community will say that—say it out or kind of like advertise it in the community." Unfortunately, there is an area where Mark felt a significant failure in the communication between his community and his school district. For Mark, high school was an important step, but it was one filled with questions and doubt.

I feel like high school for me in a way is—it's the most difficult time, I guess, because you don't really know what to do if—when you're done with high school. Like, there's nobody there to like, 'Oh, what are you going to do in high—after high school?' There's no one that just gives us advice or, 'What are you going to do,' kind of like question thrown at us. And so I had to find everything by myself like about college... I didn't know how important ACT was.

Despite the lack of assistance, Mark worked hard to learn about life after high school in any way he could. The boy who thrived under the buddy system discovered his own voice and sought answers on his own. By reaching out to others and engaging in meaningful conversations about his future, Mark was able to establish a sense of control over his life. "Now, as I live longer here, I'm able to have normal conversations. It's easier for me to start conversation. It's easy for me to keep a conversation now. I would say for me that's the biggest difference—is having that confidence." Mark graduated high school and attended college.

Mark's family left a small village in Burma that offered little opportunity for education, health, or safety in order to escape to the United States. Their journey was dangerous, and it highlighted just how necessary they felt it was to leave. Making it to the United States was not the goal for Mark; he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity at a new life and an education. His process of adaptation included a desire to understand the mainstream culture in his new community. He felt alone and lost without another's guidance. Adaptation meant learning the language, understanding his environment, and making the best of every opportunity he faced. Opportunity was his driving force for success, but guidance was his pathway to understanding.

Nina: A Story of Empathy and Confidence

Nina's interview can be summed up with one word: smile. She is the nicest and friendliest person I have ever interviewed. While Mark pushed past his smile during his interview—perhaps a subconscious desire to approach the interview in a serious manner—Nina's smile was present almost the entire time we talked. She laughed and joked throughout the interview, and she rarely lost her affable demeanor. Yet, it was the occasional change in demeanor that pointed to one key aspect of Nina's story. Nina's smile faded and her demeanor changed ever so slightly when she failed to understand a question or a phrase. Nina is intelligent and driven, but through our discussions I noticed that self-confidence is a major factor in Nina's story. Nina's faded smile indicated a diminished feeling of confidence. Her story is one of academic pursuit and educational success. She actively pursued opportunities to excel in the American school system, and these moments of misunderstanding during the interviews accented what she would consider her intellectual deficiencies. This is Nina's story.

Journey: The Long Wait for America

Nina grew up with her mother, brother, sister, and grandmother. Her father “knew business, and like he travels a lot so I didn’t really get to see him that much.” Her mom had to provide for the family. “Your dinner is, like, basically dependent on how much you get that day, so, and that’s a lot of women’s job because... it’s not like you’re guaranteed to get a payment. So, that’s how it is for us to basically, I mean, my mom, she used to be a teacher, but she stopped when like she married to my dad.” Nina’s mom worked with many other Burmese mothers in the market while Nina attended school.

Nina’s educational experiences in Burma were quite varied. As I mentioned earlier, there are religious conflicts that plague Burma; Nina’s family is Christian. Nina started her educational journey in Burma in her church’s Christian school. She was there for kindergarten, and then she moved to the public school. Nina faced some difficult situations with this change. The public school Nina attended was a Buddhist school, and there were activities and rituals that were new to her. “They make us do like, I don’t know what it’s called, but it’s a Buddhism thing, and like we meditate and that’s like every morning. When we went to Christian school, we didn’t have to do those so when we went to the public school I was like ‘What?’” This was a troubling experience for Nina. She didn’t have an understanding of the practice, and she felt like an outsider. “We were like kind of forced to do it. And, even though as a kid we were like this is not right, this is not what I’m supposed to do because I’m not Buddhist, but we have to... I couldn’t understand why we had to do it, and I guess I kind of a rebel because

at the time I didn't want to do it." Nina was unable to comprehend why she had no desire in complying with the rules, but she felt alone and lost.

What stands out to me about this experience for Nina is how similar it is to so many other problems she encountered in education in the United States. Nina confronted an uncomfortable situation as a solitary figure in an unfamiliar world, but she found solace through the guidance and direction of an understanding adult. If any of the students refused to participate in this meditative ritual in her school in Burma, "we'd get punished or something, but my teacher, she understood—even though she was a Burmese teacher—she understood. This one day like after a few days of school, she came to me and she told me, 'Hey, I understand this is not your religion, and so if you want to pray while we do this, you can.' And so from then I started praying." Nina recounted this story like she did many other stories about helpful educators that I will share in the next section. Her face grew brighter, and I could tell that she had a sense of thankfulness and appreciation for the act of kindness. "I think that was really, I don't know, um, touching."

Eventually, Nina's family started planning for their departure. "I didn't understand why we had to leave back then, but my parents did, and they wanted better lives." For Nina and her siblings, "Life in Burma was fun because as kids, we didn't understand my parents' struggle and what life really is. While education can't be the first priority when surviving is the main one, my parents never wanted that to be the reality for us." Looking back, Nina explained to me that there were many reasons for her family to leave: "freedom, religious freedom, and education." Although Mark's story of coming to the United States centers on the treacherous trek across Thailand and a brief stay in

Malaysia, Nina didn't discuss her trip to Malaysia. I do not know if her travel to Malaysia was as harrowing as Mark's, or if she encountered very few dangers. What I do know is that her stay in Malaysia far outlasted that of Mark. Her story of transition includes an overextended stay in a temporary location.

Malaysia was just a stepping stone on the way to the United States. "The United Nations help wasn't in Burma; it was in Malaysia." Unfortunately, being in Malaysia was not necessarily a pleasant experience. "Life in Malaysia is like, I think the hardest part of our lives because it's like moving from Burma to Malaysia, and then you're like waiting to go to the United States to have a better life, but then you have to, like, suffer here first." Suffering in Malaysia took many forms. Nina noted the treatment she and her family suffered due to their status as outsiders. "When we moved from Burma to Malaysia, it's like we weren't citizens there so, like, honestly if we think about it... if we didn't have the UN card then we were illegal to stay there. Since we were refugees, we had to apply for the help, and we got the help. So after that we were legal to stay in the country, but there is a lot of hate from the Malay people because they think we are not legal to stay there." Nina faced the social pressures of living as an outsider in a new community, but her status extended beyond just her community.

Education was a challenge for Nina as a refugee. "We didn't get to go to school, like public school... the basic knowledge we kind of lack because during those four years in Malaysia, we didn't get to go to school." Being a refugee prevented Nina and her siblings from attending public school, but there was an option for attending to their educational needs. "It was just, like, a refugee school, so basically it was like a daycare, honestly." Nina is very proud of the education she has earned, but she has no fond

memories of learning in the refugee school. “We wasted a lot of our development time during that age... If we wanted to go to the public school, we would have to pay a lot, and also if you were a refugee you weren’t really allowed to.” This refugee school used funding from non-profit organizations and churches to provide educational opportunities for the young Burmese refugees, but it fell far short of delivering on its intended purpose. “We go there, and we do lots of things—fun stuff. So, that made our childhood a little better, I guess... We went to a water park and a science center and like field trips, so those were fun, but as far as learning, educating, like actual learning, there wasn’t none of that. It was fun, but we didn’t learn as much.” My impression from our conversation is that these memories still bother Nina. I think her issues of confidence include a bit of anger about the lost moments of learning as a refugee. When Nina says “We wasted a lot of our development time during that age,” I don’t get the impression that she is talking about all of the children in that facility. Nina is talking about herself, and it stings. She has learned so much; she has accomplished so much as a student. I think she is haunted by the feeling that she could have done so much more had this time in her life not been “wasted.” Thankfully, Nina’s story is not one of missed opportunities. Her educational journey in the United States is a story of success.

In the United States: Teacher Support Makes a Difference

One can do everything possible to prepare for a new experience, but the new experience can still shock you. Nina broke into laughter as she described her first moments in the United States. “It’s funny because we were like so excited to go. We thought the U.S. was cold, like snow, like that’s all we could imagine.” The weather in Malaysia was completely different from what they were preparing to encounter. They

did not own jackets in Malaysia, and now they needed to be ready for snow. “My parents save up money to like actually go shopping for the trip... We went to like the mall, and I don’t know why but we only got jackets, in the form of a hoodie. It was really thin, and that’s all we got because we thought that would be enough.” Reality was far different from what Nina and her family had expected. “We were so cold. My mom, she’s like always creating. So, my mom, she like wrapped us in blankets. We looked very refugee-ing.” This exemplifies Nina’s early experiences in the United States--adapting to new situations and feeling very refugee-ing. Again, her comment about feeling “refugee-ing” seems to indicate Nina’s struggles with confidence. It isn’t to say that Nina is not proud of her origins; on the contrary, Nina is very proud. But, I think she does consider how others view her.

Trying to navigate within the airport in the United States reinforced Nina’s and her family’s feeling of being in a strange land. Although they were quite hungry, they found it very difficult to accomplish a much needed task: order food.

We were so hungry, and we had this bag that the United Nations gave us—it was like our files and documents and all that. And my dad has to wear this lanyard and the ID says something like ‘I have trouble speaking English,’ or something like ‘Can you help me?’ or something like that.

The family walked around the airport unable to order anything. Eventually, Nina and her family worked together and took “English words that we know, from all of us, and we like, we were able to get the burger. But, we showed the ID because they told us to do that.” The ID did more than assist them in their pursuit of a meal. “When we got lost in the airport, we could show the ID and people just help us along the way. So, it was

frustrating. We got lost a lot of the time, but still I can't believe my parents actually managed to do all those." Nina has so much pride in her success, but you can hear a bit of her frustration as she discusses the trials of being in a new place. Unfortunately, her journey was not quite at its end.

Nina and her family initially relocated to a different midwestern city. Nina describes her sponsors in her first American city as "so nice and so generous." Those sponsors took many pictures of Nina's family and shared a photo booklet with them. This was especially fortuitous due to Nina's brother's tragic error.

We wanted to capture pictures, you know, like the airplane cause that was our first time. So, we bought this Canon, this tiny camera, and my brother was responsible for taking pictures and all that. And when we got here, he accidentally deleted everything! So, we were so mad at him! We were like, 'Oh my gosh. We bought this to capture all these trips and all that and you deleted everything.' Now, like every time we talk about it, he is like, so pissed.

Nina's family lived in this city for roughly six months, and the kids attended school for that semester. On Nina's first day of school, she once again found herself leaning on understanding adults. "Even though I was so lost and didn't know what was going on, my ELD teachers were there for me. I am very emotional, and when I couldn't even explain my struggles in English, the only way I knew to express myself was to cry. Even then, they understood me and encouraged me. This really comforted me and gave me hope to keep fighting through my years of learning." Her ELD teachers helped her find a path to understanding.

But, Nina's dad was a pastor. There were very few Burmese families around, and the church was small. Nina's dad wanted to make a change. "Looking back, we didn't understand his intentions, and we were too comfortable staying there. And we had some friends, and so we didn't want to go. So, when my dad like told us about it, we were all crying and like, 'Why do you have to do this?' We didn't understand him." Nina's dad used a connection to make a move to her current city of residence. This move opened a new world for Nina, one that would have a profound impact on her life. Nina believes that her spiritual awareness was not strong at this point in her life. The young student who refused to participate in Buddhist customs at her school in Burma could not understand her father's true intentions in moving to a new city. But, it was in this new city where Nina made a spiritual connection. "Looking back, we weren't really like that spiritually strong, I guess... In Malaysia, my parents had to work on Sundays, so they didn't get to go to church with us." Yet, in his new position in a new city, Nina's dad was able to open up a new spiritual world for his children. "My dad like told us to be the worship team, join, so we could be more involved." Nina's faith is very important to her, and upon graduating high school, she attended a private Christian university.

Before graduating high school though, Nina had to navigate a new school in a new city in what was still a new country. Again, understanding and encouraging teachers—especially those in a devoted ELD program—helped Nina navigate these changes. Nina was in Middle School at the time of her move. Her ELD teachers focused on two main tasks: helping non-English proficient students to gain comfort and ability in English-speaking classes and preparing those students for the transition to the High

School. Nina truly found a calling in her teachers' motivation for learning with a purpose at the High School.

I remember how they prepared us mentally for high school because that was part of the

thing that I needed because before I went to high school, I was like, 'Oh, high school.' I was really intimidated. But I think Miss V, Miss C, they helped me prepare mentally. And they're like, 'You can do this. You guys got this. You guys are going to thrive. You guys are going to do well.' And from there, I had more confidence in myself. And they reminded me I'm going there for a purpose. I think I kind of wasted my middle school years in just trying to adapt to the culture, the school when I wasn't actually learning. And so when I went into high school, they prepared me mentally that, okay, I'm going to go to school to learn, actually learn stuff and for a purpose.

That purpose for the ELL program is high school graduation and the possibility of college. "And so I wanted to do good. It's like they're not forcing me to do well in school, but I wanted to do good." The ELD program at both schools and the teachers within those programs were instrumental in Nina's transition to American schools. But as she moved to the high school, two other programs provided a framework for her educational development.

Nina first found a path of adaptation through the AVID program. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. This program works to close the opportunity gap by helping schools develop a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that is more equitable. AVID offered Nina a pathway to better understanding

in education with greater mentorship from caring and compassionate teachers. “So, I took AVID in freshman, and I had Ms. W. She was the best.” For whatever reason, Nina did not participate in AVID her sophomore year, but she rejoined as a junior. Once again, Nina found direction in the form of a devoted teacher.

I had the same teacher junior and senior year. And Mrs. J, she’s my mentor all throughout my high school years. She was like my mom. I would go to her during lunch. She had to feed her baby and stuff, but then she would make time just to talk to you and sit down with you. And so I find it helpful that way.

AVID opened an avenue of adaptation for Nina.

Another program that aided in Nina’s educational development was the Advanced Placement (AP) program. The AP program offers students a chance at rigorous, college-level educational opportunities in high school that can count as college credit if students pass an exam at the end of the year. AVID requires students to take at least one AP class, and Nina enrolled in AP classes to satisfy this requirement. Nina struggled with the AP classes, but one AP class in particular offered her a chance to grow as a student.

The AP class that I took that was helpful was AP Seminar. It was just like we had to do a—what is it? Presentations. And you had to write actual essays that’s like—‘how many pages?’ It was so long. And that was my first time having to write an essay that’s so long. And my presentation was not good... But I think I learned a lot through that course.

Nina credits this course with helping her prepare for college in the United States.

Nina’s journey through the American educational system was maximized through her participation in educational programs. These programs provided Nina with a

framework of how education in the United States works and the tools with which to be successful. Yet, these programs would have been meaningless to Nina without the efforts of caring and devoted teachers who offered support, encouragement, and guidance to help Nina overcome her struggles. “As I would say, my teachers are the ones that impacted me to be the person I am today. Because I knew and understood how much they wanted for me, it made me want to do good and want to be the fruit of the seeds they have sown.” I have no doubts that Nina’s teachers would smile with pride knowing how much Nina has grown.

Sammy: A Story of Honor and Responsibility

Sammy is an introvert. One of my biggest concerns when I developed my research design was the potential for a participant to have little desire in sharing stories with me. Thankfully, I did not have that issue arise, but Sammy came the closest. Sammy, like Nina, smiled a lot before the interview began, but his smile faded when the interview began and he appeared more sullen. He appreciated the opportunity to discuss his experiences, and he was very honest about his life in the United States. Yet, Sammy approached the interview a bit guarded. He took a very pensive demeanor throughout, and he did not overshare in any capacity. Sammy was a very different interviewee from the others, and his story was quite different, as well. I am so thankful that Sammy agreed to participate in this study, and I appreciate his efforts to fight past his introverted nature to share what he did. This is Sammy’s story.

Journey: The Son Acts as a Man

Sammy is the oldest sibling—the protector—and he is the voice of the family. His reserved nature and thoughtful delays before answering questions epitomizes

the burden he carries for his family. Whenever I asked him a question about Burma, he continually prefaced his answers with an assurance that he remembered little because he was too young. “Life in Burma? I don’t remember much since I lived there for like nine years, so I moved when I was nine... There’s not that much that I can recall.” I get the impression that Sammy’s life in Burma was a sad one. He didn’t describe his village or his daily life in Burma, but he revealed one aspect of Burmese life that I think speaks to his experiences. “The things that I can recall would be it’s not an easy life, especially if you’re living in a small town with a small income. You have to work really hard... Food and shelter and everything’s expensive. Yeah, it’s difficult to buy a living expense because even if you work all day long—a laborer’s work—you barely can get by with scraps.” He talked briefly about some tangential items before returning to the subject. “Living in Burma, as far as I remember, was harsh and difficult... My mother has to work until she has blisters on her hands just so my three siblings and I can attend school. My father was working in Malaysia so he was able to send us some money. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles also helped us in any way they can, so we are able to manage to survive.” There was a hint of sadness in Sammy’s voice as he answered these questions. I think Sammy remembers more about Burma than he originally let on, but I refused to push too much because I believed it to be a painful memory. I am grateful he shared as much as he did.

Education for Sammy in Burma was drastically different from the United States. “Education. That’s a luxury for some because it’s expensive first off, then there’s the uniform textbooks, and everything. It’s really expensive. It’s not like education in the United States.” Sammy describes a system of memorization, recall, rank and honor. “I

don't know about other people, but the way how I attended school and how my school work is—you go to school, you sit down, you listen to your teacher's lecture, you try to memorize, and then after the exam you go home.” Memorization is key in Sammy's mind, and the stakes are very high indeed.

You try to memorize or try to study as much as you can. And then whenever it's test or exam, you have to try to get everything correct as much as possible because they rank you. And then the first, second, third, that brings—how should I say this—brings your parents and your family honor, I guess... There's only one test at the end of the year that decides your grade for the whole school year. And then that's how they rank you... And then there's a prize given at the end of the year, like a ceremony.

This form of high-stakes testing seems cruel enough, but the ranking system extended beyond just one test, a ceremony, and family honor/shame. Even trivial aspects such as handwriting were important. “Your handwriting also counts toward your grade. If your handwriting is terrible, you would get a bad grade.” The ranking system extended into the classroom—including which class you attended—and was displayed to the entire school.

So, we'd stand in line according to our grade and according to our classroom because depending on your intelligence, they're divided into Class A, Class B, sometimes, if there are a lot of people, Class C... And Class A would be more intelligent and Class B would be less intelligent than Class A, and so on. So you stand in according to your grade and classroom in front of the flag, and then you'd say the national anthem... Then, the principal or one of the teacher would make

an announcement, and they'll dismiss you and then you can go to your classroom and then continue with your study.

This system of teaching and learning instilled certain qualities in Sammy that he carried with him when he left Burma: a system of judgment and ranking that required your best at every moment to have a chance to succeed.

Humiliation and shaming were not the only punishments for imperfect work. "If you can't remember the assignments the teacher assigned you or the homework they assigned you, they will punish you. Either they will smack your hand or they will do sit-ups—holding your ears doing sit-ups." I would love to say that this was a punishment that Sammy avoided, but he shared one instance when he was unable to avoid his teacher's wrath.

I remember this one time where we have to remember vocabularies... For the current me, it was fairly simple. It's the common English words for us. But back in Burma, it was vocabs. So it was 50 words, and we had to memorize them—the English definition and the Burmese definition in one night. And if you can't memorize them, we have to do five sit-ups per word.

Needless to say, Sammy did not memorize all 50 words, and he faced the consequence of physical torture. Sammy believed that a student in that position should take the punishment, learn from your mistakes, and try to never make the same mistake again. The family honor is at stake. Again, Sammy is the oldest, and that weight on his back would grow heavy with his journey.

Sammy's family eventually found themselves making a decision many other Burmese families made: they needed to leave the country. "Many of us left Burma for

many different reasons—for the sake of better opportunities, conditions, education, and politics. I don't exactly know why we left, but these are what I can remember." Sammy's recollection of the events that transpired during his exodus far exceeded those of his memories of why his family left, but then again, it wasn't important for him to know the reason why. "I don't recall very much because I'm just following what my parents or my mom did or said... I just know that we need to go and we went." Like Mark and Nina, the journey out of Burma occurred without the presence of the father. "My dad's there [Malaysia], yeah. He was there before us, and then we came after him." Sammy would have to take a role of immense responsibility on this journey in the absence of his father.

Similar to Mark, Sammy remembers the trials and ordeals of illegally crossing the border into Thailand and rushing to get into Malaysia.

When we went from Burma border to the Thailand border, the very first thing that I remember was when we got off the truck where they kind of like stack us. So, trying to cross the border illegally, whenever we jump off, my mom twisted her ankle so she would have trouble--she had trouble walking, but she would still walk because it's just her, my three siblings, and me. So, it's five people. And I was the oldest of my siblings, and I was only nine. So, the others were fairly young.

Sammy glossed over any type of help he would have given in this situation, but it must have been overwhelming—assisting his mother with his three young siblings as they fled from their home, only to see his mother get injured. And the dangers didn't end there. "There are many points in our journey through Thailand where we would have to

travel during the night and then rest during the day. And then, we'll try to avoid any human presence because we don't know if they're friend or foe." Their agent rushed them through Thailand by cover of night to ensure their safety.

As the journey out of Burma commenced with injury for a family member that threatened their safe travel, the journey out of Thailand began in similar fashion.

On the night we were supposed to finally cross over to Malaysia, my sister got stung by an insect. I don't know what insect it was, and she cry a lot. So, they would separate the group from my sister and my mom... It was my mom, my two sisters, and two of the agents. They were trying to quiet down my sister who got stung by insect, and the rest of us would be far away from that noise.

After crossing into Malaysia, the fear of being caught by the people of Thailand diminished, but new fear entered Sammy's life—the police. "At Malaysia, you try to avoid any police presence because although they can't really arrest because we have a UN card, you have to bribe them still. So, we have to always keep on lookout for them, and that last till we arrived to United States." The oppressive Burmese government Sammy's family had escaped from was replaced with a corrupt police force "protecting" them in their temporary home. For three years, Sammy's family lived in Malaysia, waiting for a chance to complete their journey to the United States.

While in Malaysia, Sammy started experiencing responsibilities that would continue to be thrust upon him during the rest of his childhood. Sammy's mother became pregnant during their time in Malaysia. His family was continuing to grow, and, as the oldest, his responsibilities grew, as well. With his mother's pregnancy came some medical issues.

We had to walk a lot to a small clinic for my mom’s monthly check-up, and then we have to stay there because she diabetic when she was pregnant. So, we have to go there for her appointment and then at night for her blood draw. And then the walk pretty much is like 30-minute walk, so it’s a long walk for us—I don’t want to say harsh, but it was not an easy walk, especially at night because there are a lot of cars... there are streets that we have to cross which cars go by.

Sammy took on the role of caregiver, and it is a role he continues to bear to this day. His time in Malaysia set the stage for what his role would be in the United States.

In the United States: The Voice of the Family

The UN worked diligently to ensure that Sammy’s family could complete their escape from Burma, but it is not an easy ordeal. “It’s a long and arduous process... There are many steps and interviews that you have to go through in order to get that answer.” Eventually, Sammy’s family completed the process, and the UN finalized plans for their departure. “They bought us our plane ticket with the immigration organization—I don’t know what it’s called—but it’s an immigration organization... They flew us to United States.” Unlike Mark and Nina, Sammy did not have temporary locations within the United States before continuing on to the Midwestern city that would become his home. He and his family flew directly to their new home and city and started the process of creating their new lives.

When they arrived in the United States, Sammy and his family leaned upon organizations to assist them in their new home town. “There are some who helped us with our—how should I say this—maneuvering in this new area. The Catholic charity, they helped us a lot in finding our apartment and helping us find my dad a new

job.” Sammy also emphasized the aid they received from their local community, as well—including their pastor and other Burmese refugee families. Finding a place to live was the toughest transition for Sammy’s family. “We couldn’t find an appropriate apartment for us because we’re a big family... That’s seven in the family, and they couldn’t find appropriate apartment for us, so we have to stay in the homes provided by the Catholic church for almost a month, I think.” Catholic Charities is very supportive of Burmese refugees trying to start a new life in the United States.

The transition stage can be very hard for refugees in a new country, but Sammy initially dismissed the idea that the transition to the United States was difficult. “For me, since I didn’t directly went from Burma to United States... there’s not that many of surprises for me... In Malaysia, you’re part of the minority because you’re illegally living there without the government knowing and permitting you to leave... You have to try your best to avoid any complications with the law enforcers. You just try to behave.” But there is more to transitioning to a new country than just behaving. As Sammy continued to share his stories with me, many topics of transition emerged, including food, manners, respect, resources, and language.

Of all the topics discussed during my interviews related to adaptation, Sammy’s discussion of the horrors of American food was the most shocking to me. I had prepared myself for most of the topics we discussed, but surely no one would find issues with American food. Sammy, however, was not a fan. “The food there totally different—cereals and the bakery stuff and the chips. First, I can’t eat them because they’re salty, very salty. And now I like it, but when we first got here, oh man, I don’t know how someone could eat that.” Sammy’s greatest dislike is reserved for cheese. When I asked

him what his least favorite American food was, he responded “the chips and all those fast-food, like especially the pizza. I can’t eat it because it was salty, and it was cheese. I’ve never eaten cheese before until I got to the United States and ate pizza... I don’t like cheese. But now, I can—if it’s on pizza, sure. I can eat it, but cheese, no. I don’t like it.” Sammy found himself searching for familiar items from home that would suffice for nutritional sustenance. “I couldn’t eat it, except rice and some other veggies and meats.” Such a trivial matter, food, for one who can pick and choose what they eat daily, but for a student in a public school system, choice is not always there. Sammy explained how lucky he felt that there was an Asian food line at his school. Although it may appear trivial, food is a vital part of the education system.

Sammy also noticed a different emphasis and perception of manners and respect, especially in the classroom. “Back in Burma, or still in Malaysia, it is a good manner to practice to respect our elders, anyone who is older than us, no matter how large the age gap is. Even if it’s one year or like 30 years. It’s still you have to respect your seniors. But when we first arrived in the United States, that’s not what I see. That’s not what I encountered. People treat each other equally no matter the age.” From a social experience, Sammy felt the lack of additional respect for elders was difficult to adapt to. Sammy is the oldest sibling. But differences inside the classroom were just as challenging.

[In] Burma, we would fold our arms across our chest and bow our head downward slightly to show respect and admiration to our teacher. But in America, if you fold your arms in front of your teachers, that is a sign of disrespect. We cannot ask our teacher questions and interrupt her lectures. In the

United State, however, you can interrupt your teachers as long as the interruptions pertain to academic clarification. Also, where I came from, we do not call our teachers by their name. We just call them teachers. But in America, we called them by their last name after Mr. or Mrs.

Differences in manners did not just extend from the student to the teacher, but there were differences in the way teachers treated students. “Back in Burma, they would check your shoes, your cleanliness, your uniforms, your nails... your hairstyle, and everything. [In America] there’s no uniform. And you can wear any kind of shoes or flip-flop if you want... and you can dye your hair.” Sammy encountered many shocking differences in American classrooms, but he adapted to these changes and helped his family with a better understanding of American life. As the oldest, he was setting the example for his siblings and helping his parents to transition to their new country. As you will see in the next section, Sammy’s role as a transition specialist for his family was instrumental in their successful transition to the United States.

Adapting to cultural differences in manners and respect may have been difficult, but Sammy noticed the way his community supported his family in the United States. “There is more food here than back in Malaysia because you get food stamp, and then they help you with the welcome money and other resources at their disposal. It’s much better than Malaysia financial-wise, yeah, and living condition-wise, but sometimes it’s just a feeling that you can never compare.” He and his family felt welcomed and appreciated.

The seniors and adults were kind and generous in their way of treating us. In our community, not the Burmese community but the American community,

organizations such as the Salvation Army would hand out gifts, toys, and foods seasonally, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Such organizations would also give out clothes accordingly. The local government also provided public benefits such as food stamp and Sooner Care to those with low income, which helped my family. Such help and care from various organizations and agencies really helped my family, and I see why we seek to come to America, a foreign and unknown world, in search of a better life and opportunities in education, occupation, and politics.

Through shared community resources, Sammy's family found an easier transition to daily life in America, but the lack of certain emergency resources would place a greater burden on Sammy as the oldest sibling.

As in Malaysia, the occasional health issue would arise in Sammy's family. When these emergencies would emerge, help would usually arrive from the Burmese community. "When I have appointments, like doctors' appointments and other appointments... we don't know anything. So, either the pastors or if you have relatives who can speak English fairly, you can go with them or either the pastor if they have time, or a caseworker from the Catholic church charity. And if they're not available, you have to be on your own." In what could be someone's greatest need—a medical emergency—Sammy described a process in which he and his family members would be constricted by others' schedules or they would have to go through it alone. "Sometimes you'd get help, sometimes you won't... If the person who you're trying to go to appointments with are busy, you can ask them to reschedule it. And you have to rely on others until you can stand on your own." Alone and helpless in a time of need. Sammy was there for his

mother in Malaysia when she needed medical assistance with her pregnancy, and now Sammy felt the call again to help the family the best he could. “It’s one of those factors that pushed me to adapt real quick because we’re a big family... We have a lot of appointments. And so whenever we can’t rely on someone, my mom would bring me, and then I’d try my best to interact with the other person... [I’d] try my best to interpret and translate what they have to say.” Sammy’s greatest struggle in this role “would be filling out forms because we don’t do any of those back in Malaysia or Burma... So, it was difficult, but I think those are what pushed me to quickly adapt to it.” Sammy still holds this role for his family today. “If I’m not available, there’ll be my siblings, my brothers and sister. And if I’m available, my parents prefer me most because I’m used to it, and I know my way around it.” For the sake of the family, a quick learning of language was a necessary skill that would require his focus and attention while in American schools.

Language is perhaps the most apparent cultural challenge for those outside of the transition process. It is an external component of adaptation. For Sammy, this is a transitional element that found its greatest battles within the education system. Sammy entered American schools as a seventh grader—middle school. “It was really difficult trying to understand what’s happening in class, the teacher’s lectures, and the homework or assignments they assigned. But with the help of the school department... ELLs and other special class, they help a lot. I quickly adapted, I guess, and I got out of that program in two years.” Sammy credits his ELL teachers with helping him change his life by learning English. “Without that, I won’t be able to take the normal classes.” Sammy

believes he succeeded in adapting to his school environment and the English language through teachers' care and motivation.

The teachers were very thoughtful and helpful in pushing us outside our comfort area by making us speak English in the classroom. They would even condition us with marbles. They would put marbles in the jar if we do something good such as homework, answer questions, and sometimes vocabularies. They also take away marbles from the jar if they hear us speak languages other than English.

Sammy's ELL teachers used the marbles and the jar to motivate students to work hard and use English in the classroom. I asked Sammy if this system of motivation was harsh or demeaning. "That did not bother me because whenever we did that, whenever the teacher dumped marbles out of the jar, the culprit or the person who's caused the deduction would feel bad in the classroom. Give him or her, the person, the glare. You have to try your best not to lose marbles. It just doesn't affect you, it affects the whole class... It's a good thing because it pushed me and helped me learn first faster." Sammy was used to a system of education that included judgment and ranking. Practices like the marbles and jar were positive motivators for him.

However, there is a difference between casual English learning and academic English learning. Sammy credits an ELL program that emphasized both types of English learning with preparing him for high school. In particular, his middle school ELL teachers used assigned projects from "regular" classes to teach their students the skills that would be needed at the high school. "The teachers would also help us with our homeworks by breaking down the words in simpler terms so that we can understand them on our own... I remember how they helped us with our science project and social studies

by providing the necessary materials and the necessary guide such as how to act and dress so that we would fit together with our peers for the Ellis Island project.” These teachers taught content material, but they also taught them how to fit in and belong in an American classroom. Sammy remembered one experience in particular in which his ELL teachers helped him through a frustrating science project.

I remember this where we have to create a microbe, amoeba, I think it was called... But we couldn't finish it because we don't know how so we got help. We worked in six hours with the help of the teachers, and we just turn it in late and they understand. So, we would not get a full mark, but we didn't lose any points due to turning in the assignment late.

These teachers worked for over six hours to assist students with little educational background on content and even less understanding of the language to ensure they could be successful on a project. These kinds of actions inspired students like Sammy.

Personally, this encouraged me to improve in my speaking abilities and my academic grades... Their actions helped me fit in easily with the rest of my peers and classmates, especially when I went to high school. They helped me learn independence and ask questions when I am not clear what to do next.

Sammy's teachers instilled in Sammy a spirit of inquiry and independence to complement his growing sense of confidence. Their contributions aided Sammy in recognizing and exercising agency.

In addition to his teachers, Sammy benefitted from a class of students with similar experiences of trying to cope in a new educational environment.

When I was in seventh grade in middle school, I was a new student with little to no English-speaking skills and no friends. Everything was new for me—the school, the language, the social interactions and expectations, and the education system. Not for long though because I made new friends very quickly, and they helped me with navigating classes when I don't know what to do. Although the teachers explained where to go, I can't understand what they are saying due to the language barrier. So, I relied on my friends, and heavily at that. My friends also helped me with the social norms and expectations because it was such a foreign social standard for me.

Friends in ELL classes helped Sammy make the initial adaptation to the school environment, but once Sammy reached high school, he left the program and started taking “regular courses.” He believes that he completed his adaptation by extending his friend circle outside of the ELL students. “You just have to hang out with other people, try to understand them, to try to make friends with people from different backgrounds so that you could get used to it.” For Sammy, this journey outside of his comfort zone included using English outside of school as much as possible.

Sometimes, it would conflict because at school you don't speak English proficiently as they would want you to, but at home—and they want you to practice speaking at home even when you're at home with your parents—but at home, your parents want you to speak your native tongue. And there's that conflict.

Sammy addressed this conflict by speaking in his native tongue with his parents, but he would sprinkle in English when having conversations with his siblings. Using English as

often as possible helped Sammy gain confidence with the new language and feel a togetherness with his English-speaking classmates.

Sammy's reasons for adapting to American schools are selfless and easy to understand. As the oldest sibling, Sammy had experienced the pressures of responsibility from a young age. He helped his mother sneak younger siblings across the border and through Thailand, he supported his mother during her medical trials in Malaysia, and he learned English quickly to be the voice for his family in their new home country. Through ELL teachers, their specialized practices, and relationships with friends, Sammy feels he has adapted successfully, and he continues to exercise his role as his family's voice. Respect, honor, and responsibility have fueled his pathway, but he accomplishes his goals and leads his family modestly and reservedly. Sammy's story is one of sacrifice and humility.

Steven: A Story of Fun and Friendship

Steven was the most relaxed of my four interviewees. His voice is calm and soothing, and at no point during our talks did you get a hint of emotion—except humor. Steven likes to laugh. During the focus group in particular, Steven was the life of the party. But his humor doesn't come from wild behavior and obnoxious energy. It is genuine. He loves to laugh, and he enjoys sharing that love with others. What made Steven's interview so special was learning about his relationship with Mark. I didn't know that they knew each other, but when I learned that their stories of elementary school included each other, it was magical. Steven's story brought me back full circle to where it began. Unlike the others, Steven has recently returned to Burma to visit

family. His story isn't one of far-off memories, and it isn't one of escape at all costs. His is a story of change, a story of want over need. This is Steven's story.

Journey: The Benefit of Resources

Steven's remembrance of family in Burma was that of a divided home. "It was mostly me, my brother, and my mom that live together. My dad was always travelling, trying to make money. And then my oldest brother was with my grandparents. And so it was just us three." His village "is really small. From one point to the other, it would be like 20 minutes long to get from here to the end. And then there is no highway or anything. There's just one main street... It's pretty small, and it's pretty poor. There's no car... And it's not safe. There's no stop sign; there's no traffic light." Steven speaks of his family being poor throughout our interview, but there were times his story deviated from this reality. Asking a 5-10 year old kid about the financial situation of a family unit will often result in an inaccurate answer. He puts the issue to rest during the interview by saying, "Before what I remember, I guess we were really rich. But, from what I remember we weren't." You can hear the inner-conflict as he describes his living situation. One of the reasons for this inner-conflict centers on his educational situation in Burma. "We move around a lot because we didn't have much... but my parents still put me in a private school. I didn't go to public school. I was in a church school kind of thing." Steven's family was not too poor to send him to a private Christian school, but it sounded like the family sacrificed a lot to make that a possibility.

Steven's life at home in Burma was far different from his home in America.

There are no lights, no free electricity. So cooking is done in wood coal or wood. We would fire that up. And as for light, we use a candle, but my family

were blessed enough to get—my dad got us solar panels. So we put that up on our roof, and then at night we get electricity. But we don't have no rice cooker or nothing back then.

The inconsistent availability of electricity was a nuisance to daily life, but water is a necessity.

As for water, we don't even have a bathroom, so it's just out in the open. You shower with your underwear... You build your own well. And then for bathrooms... you sit here, right? But back there you have to squat down and do it. For that, you build a hole, and then you build the squat thing. And then when it's full, you cover that up and build another one.

Whether Steven's family had been rich at one point or not, he grew up in a very poor village. His home life was challenging, and his parents knew that his education was important.

Steven's school was a new school. He was part of the second class to attend the school. When he was in Kindergarten, the highest grade in the school was first grade. The next year—Steven's first grade year—the highest grade was second grade. Steven stayed in this school until he left Burma during his third grade year. To get to school, a student had two choices: walk or bike. "For transportation, it's either you walk or there's no bus or anything. But my parents, they got me a bike. So, every day I go to school with my bike." For Steven, the bicycle reinforced his idea of his family's financial situation. "Yeah, I was poor. So the transportation is mostly bicycle. It's like how right here everybody owns a car. Back there, everybody owned a bicycle. If you

own a motorcycle, you're considered rich." Rich or poor, Steven and his bicycle went together to school each day.

At school, Steven developed a close bond with his classmates. "A couple friends, my neighbor that goes to the same school with me, we would all get together in the morning and then go to school... We would get there around 7:00 and then play with our friends." School would start each day around 8:00 with some version of school-wide Bible study, and then the official school day would begin around 9:00. For Bible study, "we would get together in like a big hall, gathering place, and then they would teach us about the Bible, Bible stories. And then we pray together, everyone. And then we go to our own class... We would just use one room and then divide that with a big wall, just a random wall." Again, the school was small. "First grade, there's only one class. And then for kindergarten, there's only one class. So basically, you grow up with that class, so it's the same people next year, the same people the next. So, that's why we're more closer." Steven's Christian school required students to bring their own lunch each day, "and then we have uniforms. We had to wear that every day." Being in a Christian school, Steven didn't have some of the issues Nina encountered, but he does remember some religious protests that occurred outside of his school.

There are like a couple protests when I was young. All the monks would protest. Back then, I was so young, So I don't know what the problem is...but mostly religious-wise, there are a lot of Buddhism, but for us we just within our group... Church-wise, we were free to praise God and stuff. So I don't think it was banned or anything. Yeah, and there were many churches.

Steven's experience with school and church in Burma was one of relative peace, but like the others, his family would eventually make the decision to seek escape in favor of life in the United States.

Steven believes that his parents' biggest reason for escaping Burma and moving to the United States was education, but he also believes that lifestyle played a role in their decision. Like Mark, Nina, and Sammy, Steven's father was already out of the country and working in Malaysia; however, unlike the others, Steven's journey lacked some of the dangers associated with their journeys. "I had it easy, our family, because we paid agents... So the more money you pay them, the better they take care of you." His family's process for departure started with a one-and-a-half year-long period of paperwork and preparation. During this time, Steven's family traveled back and forth between Mandalay and Yangon. To get to Mandalay from his village, "We go with bus. The thing is, from Mandalay to [my village] is like 300 miles... But the roads are so bad. It takes a whole day. And sometimes if it rains, the bus can't go. So it stops, and then we have to be sheltered in the middle of the road. We have to find places to sleep." Mandalay was not new for Steven; he had family members who lived there, and he had visited the city almost every summer.

Once in Mandalay, Steven's family began traveling back and forth to Yangon. "We need a passport... We were there [Yangon] like a year, applying visa, passport, and stuff like that that I don't understand back then. But, we go to offices a lot, back and forth." Steven's description of the travel back and forth between Yangon and Mandalay seemed rather basic, but there was one trip stuck in his mind. "So from Mandalay to Yangon we took the train. There's nothing crazy, except someone died on

the way. The train hit someone, some drunk person... I guess he was trying suicide, I don't know. So they took him to the hospital at Yangon, because Yangon is the biggest city... Then ambulance came and then they took him." While a tragic event, it pales in comparison to the dangers associated with some of the others' stories of crossing Thailand; however, there were other dangers that had to be faced by those trying to escape Burma without needing to cross into Thailand. "During that time, I had no school, no education, nothing." For roughly two school years, Steven failed to receive an education. Their process of leaving the country prohibited Steven from being able to be enrolled in a school. Through conversations with other Burmese students at the school district in this study, there are some refugees who went over three or four years without attending school. The dangers associated with fleeing Burma were not just physical dangers. Steven's journey included dangers of its own.

Steven's dad was working hard in Malaysia to ensure UN support for the family's move. "When the UN people called back, say 'next week come in with your family,' that's when we decided to go." At that point, Steven's family flew from Yangon to Singapore. Singapore was just a stop on the way to Malaysia. "We had an aunt who lived there. She came and picked us up and took us to her house. And then we ate and went back to the airport... From there, I think, we took a bus to Malaysia. Not those comfy bus, just those hard chairs... I was very young back then, so I don't know how long it was. I slept most of the time. But it was a pretty long ride." Steven's departure from Burma included office visits, paperwork, buses, and trains. Most importantly, it included an elongated period of time that departed from normal life—including school. When he

and his family arrived in the United States, they would work hard to return to a new version of normal life and resume education.

In the United States: The Good Life

Steven and his family landed in Los Angeles, and they had a similar experience to Nina's family: "Snow. It was snowing that day. That was the first time I ever seen snow my entire life. So, it was pretty amazing." It was an awe-inspiring moment upon arriving in his new home country, but for Steven, this would be the beginning of a long chain of comparisons he would make between his old home and his new home. "At Burma, the coldest would be 60 degrees, and it's still cold for us back there. But here... it was snowing. It was cold as balls. That's all I remember the first day we arrived here." Despite the cold weather, there was hardly a cold reception for the new arrivals. Much like in Singapore, his family had someone present to provide them with guidance and comfort. "So, we got a relative that picked us up... They picked us up at the airport, and then we walked out." It must have been reassuring to have someone waiting for them in the United States. Their first night was in a hotel in Los Angeles. The next morning, they caught a plane that would take them to their current home city.

Upon their arrival in their new home city, Steven started his new life by living with another relative. "But it's the first time we ever met, but my parents and their parents know each other. They had three kids: two girls and one boy. And the youngest guy was, I would say, two or three years younger than me. With this younger relative, Steven developed his first bond with someone who was not from Burma. "He was born here so he didn't speak our language. But he was still a kid; I was still a kid. We'd both

want to play—they had GameCube. That’s my first time ever seeing GameCube. So we played, but all I could say was ‘good, no good.’” Playing games became a way for Steven to adapt. This first experience with a relative opened a path he would use in school, as well. “We communicate mostly through action, with hands mostly. And then the parents want me to talk to the kid in our language, and then my parents want the kid to talk to me in English—so we could both help each other. And I would say that helped a lot, too.” Games and fun had a special connection with Steven, and he enjoyed using them as tools for understanding his new environment.

Trying to establish yourself in a new country as a refugee takes time and patience. For Steven, that meant “a lot of offices. Like social security, work permit for my dad, and a whole bunch of stuff.” Those trips to the offices were vital for Steven’s parents, but for Steven and his brother, it was both fascinating and sickening. “We don’t know where we live. We don’t know the road, but every time me and my brother would just stare out the window and just be amazed because you would barely see that many car. We’d barely see a car in Burma.” Cars were scarce in Burma, but part of the preparation for the trip to the United States included descriptions of the use of cars. Steven loved the idea of being in a city full of cars, but the reality was far from what he expected. “My worst experience was the car. I hated riding the car... It was cool, like I wanted to ride when I got here. But, once I was on it, I get car sick a lot.” Cars are a part of daily life in Steven’s part of the United States, and it took time to adapt to this new lifestyle.

Through the fascination and the sickness, Steven’s family started to make themselves a home in the United States. After living with a relative on a temporary basis

in order to finalize paperwork and find employment, the time came for the family to settle into their own home. “We moved in January to another apartment—just our family. We got a car. So my dad started working. It was just my dad... And I started school. Fourth grade, second semester.” When Steven started school, he discovered something he had been aching for since leaving Burma, something that he tried to develop with his relative in the United States but was unable to accomplish due to the language barrier: friendship. “And the first friend I ever met was Mark. And we’ve been friends since. And school was tough. I don’t know if I cried or wanted to cry the first day they took me to school, my parents. And then it was these people talking, it’s just like you can’t understand anything they’re saying. So I was down then.” Steven found himself at the same school and in the same ELL class with Mark, and it was a partnership that Steven needed. “So, she [teacher] introduced me to Mark and three girls that are Burmese. And Mark was the only guy. So he was lonely, too. And we met there and became friends.” Similar language, similar background, and a similar longing for friendship provided Steven with purpose in his new home.

Steven’s purpose was fun, plain and simple. Rules and responsibilities were second to his desire for fun. Steven broke into laughter as he described one of his first experiences in dealing with friendship and responsibility. Steven regularly rode the bus home from school.

And the thing was, I knew my bus number. And then not even one week into school, right, he [Mark] said, ‘Come over.’ So, I rode his bus. We went over to his house, played, and then my parents got worried. I didn’t know their number. I didn’t call them... But the thing was, they [Mark’s family] asked me

my parents' number. I did not know. So they asked me who I lived with. I told them. They still don't know. But our pastor, they do know my pastor, but they didn't have the number. So they had to ask there. We go to a different church. So they asked their pastor to get our pastor number, then called our pastor. And we didn't have a car back then, so my parents can't pick me up. So, our pastor came and picked me up, took me home, and gave me a whole lecture that I shouldn't be doing this.

Steven's desire for fun and friendship allowed him to look beyond the fear and anxiety of being lost and in an unknown situation. Mark was a guide for Steven in his new home. When he told Steven to "come over," it was not a question of if he could. Steven viewed this as a normal event, the way one should act. Steven followed Mark and enjoyed being with him.

Mark's guidance was surely far from ideal in many ways. Although Mark had only been in the U.S. a few months longer than Steven, he leaned on Mark for understanding. "I remember this one time, our teacher was like, 'You can not say the S word.' I was like, 'What's the S word?' So I went to the bathroom; Mark was there... I was like, 'What's the S word?' I thought it was shut up or stupid, right? What's that mean? He told me it meant poop." In reality, the teacher meant the word stupid, but Mark had made the assumption through other conversations that "stupid"—the S word—actually meant poop. Unfortunately, Steven faced other examples of these misunderstood meanings that inhibited his progression in learning English. But in math, the language barrier did not prevent him from flexing his intellectual muscles. "I would say math was my strongest subject because it's similar to Burma... It's easier to understand. And I was

pretty good at it.” Steven’s comfort with math stabilized his process of adaptation. He found a place where he could achieve success, and this helped him progress more quickly out of ELL classes.

Fourth grade was the Mark and Steven show, but Steven’s quicker progression in academics meant a quicker departure from the ELL program. In fifth grade, Mark was no longer one of his classmates. Their friendship would continue to live outside of the classroom, but Steven longed for more friends. “So from then, I started hanging out with my classmates more. I was really talkative back then. So I started hanging out with more like Spanish, white, Black, other than my race. I started hanging out with them. I think that’s what helped me learn English faster.” Steven passed his ELL test in fifth grade, and by seventh grade he no longer participated in the program. “I didn’t struggle that much in school as other people, I would say. I was a pretty fast learner so I learned pretty quick.” He credits some of this academic success on an unlikely source. “I watch a lot of cartoons when I was young, a whole bunch. And I think like me without knowing, that helped a lot—like learning-wise, too.” Steven understandably bragged that he had never received a D or F as a final grade, and for the most part, he avoided Cs. “So I didn’t struggle much as long as I tried. But yeah, I got older, I got lazier.” His biggest struggles came with Language Arts classes. “Learning a whole new language. I mean it’s easy to just learn, but the grammars: nouns, verbs. To this day, if you ask me I wouldn’t know.” What I found so refreshing about Steven’s academic success is the fact that he never allowed his constant search for fun to get in the way. Steven used fun—playtime with an English-speaking relative and watching cartoons on tv—and friendships as adaptive devices to help him find his place in his new home. From bike rides to school in

Burma, to bus rides to a friend's house in the U.S., Steven found a way to make his new world fit him as much as he tried to find ways to fit his new world.

Once Steven started discussing his experiences in American schools, he digressed into a series of comparisons between life in the U.S. and life in Burma. Some of these comparisons directly related to the education systems, but the conversation quickly turned to other topics, as well. Again, Steven is light-hearted and loves a good laugh. Most of the comparisons upon which he elaborated were told with laughter and some one-liners. He feels truly blessed to be in the United States. But, unlike the others I interviewed, Steven has returned recently to Burma to visit his family. These comparisons are not like fish stories where the catch was never quite as big as the narrator describes. Rather, these comparisons ring true. They are the product of recent reflection. Steven's love for his life in the United States is a genuine reflective comparison of his life there and his life here.

I'll start with Steven's comparisons of schooling in Burma and the United States. Steven was in awe of the many benefits one could receive as a student in an American school. "I really like it here because you basically get a free lunch for us. You eat breakfast here, and then you have class. All the supplies are free. We don't have to buy textbook, nothing. All you have to buy are like your clothes and your bag and pencils. Even if you don't have pencils, the teachers provide." American schools offer opportunities for those in need that do not exist in Burma, and standard educational tools, like textbooks, are included in public school services. However, not all of Steven's comparisons were based on what you get in American school; some were based on what you do not get in American schools. "There's no hitting. That was the one thing that

surprised me most because Burma, it's always like hitting. If you don't know the stuff, they hit you. If they ask you a question, if you get it wrong, they hit you." When I asked Steven if the punishment was always the same, he told me, "it depends on the teacher. Some would twist your ears. Some would twist your stomach. Some would say put your hand out, hit it with a ruler. It's like the worse the trouble, the worse the punishment." It is easy to understand why Steven took a liking to education in the United States—he perceived it as an environment of love and care as opposed to a system of strict punishment.

In his free time, Steven found different ways to relax as compared to his life in Burma. "We play every day, mostly. And swimming pool was something else. It's the first time seeing swimming pool... Our apartments have swimming pool. So every day our schedule would be go to school, go home, eat, play whatever, and then swimming pool, and go home, shower, eat. That was the life." As I've mentioned, Steven is driven by fun and friendship. Life in the United States allowed for extra time and opportunities to partake of these loves. Part of what provided Steven with extra and more productive times for friends were some of the technological amenities available to his family in the U.S. "Washing machine—never seen those before... and the rice cooker. Everyday life is so much better here, so much easier... And Wi-Fi was nice. Or no Wi-Fi, just the phone in general... Back in Burma, we don't have internet. Our family especially, we don't have phone and no TV." Even if he had access to those amenities in Burma, the availability of their usage would have been profoundly limited. "The whole network would get electricity at 5:00, and then they'd turn it off at 9:00... So, when the light goes off, before light goes off, you're basically in bed. You're already asleep." On the other

hand, in the United States, “my friend and I would play games, sometime all night.” As he discussed his life in the United States, Steven smiled and laughed constantly. You can feel his appreciation for the life he has made in America.

Finally, Steven explained how the weather and water supply in the United States made life much more enjoyable. “Burma is—outside, inside—the same temperature. Same freaking temperature. You’re just sweating all the time.” If Steven or his family showered in the afternoon in Burma, it usually followed a day of outdoor activity and sweating. Cold showers were in need, and they were always in good supply. But, a morning shower was like a nightmare. “All our water is from a well, alright, so it’s always cold. Every morning my mom wakes up before us, and she would boil hot water. We have a big bowl where she would mix it, make it warm, and that’s how we would shower.” When Steven went back to Burma a few years ago to visit family, he took special note of the water and other amenities he enjoyed in the U.S. “They didn’t have hot water. Man, I miss hot water. You don’t know until it’s gone... When we first got out, we would appreciate everything, every little thing. But then as we live, we think it’s for granted... Then I came back, and then I appreciate it more. And the AC and heater because we got no AC or heater.” His family would hand fan him at night to help him fall asleep in the hot, one-bedroom house. Life in Burma was difficult, hot, and punitive for Steven. The United States gave him the opportunity to revel in his laughter. Steven adapted to his community and his school to accentuate these moments of fun, and he cultivated friendships to build confidence and comfort in his academics.

Stories in Summary

Each of the four participants in this study grew up in different parts of Burma, attended different types of schools in Burma, and faced different challenges as they and their families bravely undertook the journey to the United States. The stories of their journey to the United States are compelling, and these experiences also influence how they adjust to a new culture. Most importantly, each participant discovered different motivation as they struggled to adapt to education in the United States. All four participants took individualized paths toward adaptation.

Mark found opportunity by leaving Burma and traveling to the United States. His poor background in a desperate village coupled with his parents' drive for an education for the children led Mark to see his arrival in the United States as a chance for something better. Adaptation was something that Mark wanted. As one of the first Burmese refugees to arrive in this midwestern school district, Mark had little support from others in the beginning. He relied heavily on an assigned buddy through his ELL program. Finally, Steven arrived, and he found a chosen buddy to help him through school. Mark also found support and guidance from the community. He used these support structures of adaptation to maximize his opportunities in his new home.

Nina's journey included academic pursuit and educational success. In large part, Nina's success came from funneling her issues of self-confidence into purpose and desire. Nina more than the other participants found part of her identity through others' eyes. When she found herself lost in her new environment, she searched for her way and a strategy to adapt. In the school district, Nina found this strategy thanks to empathetic teachers and school programs. At each step along her way to adaptation, a teacher placed

Nina under her wings and guided her. In addition to these teachers, Nina found solace and direction in school programs. ELL, AVID, and AP classes pushed Nina to find her confidence through academic success.

Sammy's path to the United States shaped his process of adaptation perhaps more than the other participants. Sammy adapted to American education out of a need for personal responsibility. As the oldest sibling, he was responsible for assisting his mother, brothers, and sister during their exodus. The 9-year-old Sammy who helped his mother escape Burma with a twisted ankle became the 11-year-old Sammy who walked with his mother to the doctor in Malaysia. Now, Sammy is his family's—and to a certain extent part of his community's—voice during medical emergencies. Sammy adapted to his American school, learned English quickly, and developed comfort in his new home out of necessity. His process of adaptation included motivating teachers and the structure of an ELL program that pushed for integration into "regular" classes. Sammy used these resources to take a place as a lead voice in his family.

Steven had a less dangerous path to the United States than Mark, Nina, and Sammy. His path included financial resources for more assistance in leaving the country, proper paperwork in his departure, and frequent visits with family members along the way. Steven's individual needs in the United States centered on amusement and camaraderie. Steven found a way to pursue fun, laughter, and friendship by taking advantage of his time inside and outside of the classroom. He developed friendships with Mark—someone with a similar background, culture, and language—along with other students of all cultures and backgrounds. Steven's acceptance of diversity in friends allowed him a wider array of ways to adapt and an easier path towards language

acquisition. Also, Steven used his memories of and recent adventures back to Burma to drive his desire of the American lifestyle.

Adaptation is a process of taking on a new culture and shedding your original culture. This process is different for each individual because each person takes on varying amounts of the new culture and sheds varying amounts of their original culture. For these four participants, learning English and graduating high school were priorities. Education in the United States was a necessity. Because each participant saw an American education as a requirement, they opened themselves up to taking on parts of American culture; however, each of them leaned on their Burmese community within their new home town. They were unwilling to completely shed their Burmese culture. The stories in this chapter offer a look at adaptation for each individual. In the next chapter, I look at intersecting themes of these participants' stories—a story of Burmese refugees adapting to American schools.

CHAPTER V

THE INTERSECTION OF THEIR STORIES

In the previous chapter, I analyzed each individual's story of their journey to the United States and their process of adaptation to American schools. In this chapter, I analyze the intersection of common themes found within their stories. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven do not speak for the whole community of Burmese refugee students entering American schools, but their shared experiences can shed a light on the process. Through their stories, four themes emerged that offer a greater understanding of students' adaptation in American schools: a chance for a new beginning, losing the feeling of being lost, navigating support and obstacle in the Burmese refugee community, and negotiating different expectations between family and school.

A Chance for a New Beginning

When I sat down with Mark for my first interview with these participants, I wrote down the word "opportunity" multiple times and underlined it each time. Mark was adamant that opportunity was his biggest driving force for success in the United States. I noticed the intensity in his eyes as he talked about it. But, Nina, Sammy, and Steven made similar claims. All four of them faced hardships that persuaded their families to flee their home country. By choosing to leave, they faced many dangers, including the possibility of death. The journey to the United States represented a chance to start

again—opportunity. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven found a chance for a new beginning through their willingness to adapt and their church association.

Willingness to Adapt

Returning to Berry's (1992) theory of acculturation, there are two issues a refugee confronts during adaptation: is it considered of value to maintain cultural identity and is it considered of value to maintain relationships with other groups? With all four of my participants, it is evident that they have answered the first question with a resounding yes. They all discussed life situations and personal choices that included their inclusion in the Burmese community within their American city. They have not rejected their association with other Burmese refugees; rather, they have embraced their cultural identity. Likewise, to the second question they also answered yes; each one of these participants possessed a willingness to adapt. They all considered it of value to maintain a relationship with another group—American students.

Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven all expressed their willingness to adapt to American culture in different ways. For Mark, as I explained above, “opportunity” was key. For Nina, it was “understanding” enough about her new environment to gain confidence. Sammy discussed “honor” for his family and for himself, and Steven believed it was “communication” with others for stories, for laughter, and for fun. These words connect with their individual stories, but they also tell a more complete story together. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven contemplated these key components of adaptation when they considered educational pursuits in the United States. A high school diploma meant an opportunity for a job and a family for Mark, the chance for college for Nina, an honorable accomplishment for Sammy, and a life of friendships and possibility

for Steven. An American education meant something different to each one of them, but they were each a willing participant in the exchange of intercultural ideas. School was a pathway to accomplishing their goals in the United States, and it was something they each desired.

The willingness to adapt for these participants did not just emerge within a vacuum. An important element within all of their stories was parental support for adaptation. Nina summed up her parents' philosophy of adaptation as "taking good parts of American culture without taking the contradicting American cultural ideas." The others shared similar statements. Their parents wanted their children to learn about American culture. As parents, they decided to move their families across national borders and relocate to the United States. This is a factor that cannot be overlooked. These refugee students entered the public school system in the United States because their parents wanted them to be there. However, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that children are not required to share their parents' desire to live in their new home country. It was not a foregone conclusion that Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven would be willing to adapt, but their belief in the value of relationship with American culture gave them all a chance for a new beginning.

Resilience

According to Masten (2014), resilience can be defined as "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" (p. 6). In the case of migrant children, resiliency demonstrates their capacity to adapt successfully to changes—disturbances—that threaten their culture, identity, or happiness and integrate them into their existing boundary. These disturbances

come from interactions with the mainstream culture and their adaptive process within that culture. Examples of disturbances include abuse or violence based upon their racial and cultural differences. Racial discrimination and minority status are predictors of negative outcomes for younger students. Some of these negative outcomes include dropping out of school, violence, drug and alcohol use, and subpar academic achievement (Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012). Resilience occurs when a student faces circumstances that are predictive of negative outcomes but achieves positive outcomes. Zolkoski and Bullock (2012) believed “an essential requirement of resilience is the presence of risk and protective factors helping to promote positive outcomes or reduce negative outcomes” (p. 2296). Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven proved to be resilient by successfully earning a high school diploma despite confronting the dangers of leaving Burma and attending school in a new home country.

Refugee students experience specific disturbances. Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) referred to a study by Gunderson (2007) which showed that refugee students “have the highest dropout or disappearance rate” of any immigrant students. Their experiences can differ greatly from other immigrant students. Pieloch, McCullough, and Marks (2016) believed that “refugee children can experience numerous stressors and traumatic events because of their migration, resettlement, and acculturation experiences” (p. 330). As I discussed in chapter 4, each of my participants faced emotionally and physically traumatic experiences as they made their way out of Burma and into the United States; yet, each of them overcame those experiences and found different outcomes of success. “Children who succeed in spite of adversity have been identified as *resilient*; possessing certain strengths and benefiting from protective factors

that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive” (Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012, p. 2295). Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven all graduated high school and successfully entered what their school district calls “the 13th grade.” They flourished in a new culture and a new school with their inner strength and ability to overcome the obstacles.

Pieloch, McCullough, and Marks (2016) stated that, “When refugee children arrive in their host country, they are confronted with very different situations depending on the country’s political, social, and cultural climates” (p. 333). One of the arenas in which they experience these different situations is school. Interacting with peers and teachers, confronting language acquisition, and observing different cultural norms are but a few of the situations a refugee student could face that may result in negative outcomes. Mark’s interaction with his first school-assigned buddy was far from ideal. He mentioned his loneliness and how depressed he was during that part of his experience. Mark credited Steven’s arrival with helping him overcome that depression. Likewise, Nina’s inability to find her voice due to her lack of English-speaking skills led to similar feelings of depression. These examples highlight some of the ways that migrant students could experience negative outcomes, like dropping out of school or succumbing to depression. Yet, as Ogbu and Simons (1998) stated, refugees “come to the United States with already existing differences in languages and cultures” but know before arriving in the United States how to adapt “without fear of losing their cultural and language identity” (p. 165). Regardless of the situation, all four of my participants persevered. According to Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012), it is through positive educational experiences that refugee students achieve better opportunities (p. 4). These positive educational experiences are explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

The Power of the Church

Steven's story from chapter 4 about his pastor picking him up from Mark's house after riding the wrong school bus home left a lasting impression on me. When Steven's parents—recent arrivals in the United States—needed answers about the whereabouts of their son, they contacted their pastor. This moment offers a window into one structure of adaptation for Burmese refugees in this midwestern community. Despite the fact that Steven had been at school, not church, the pastor was the first point of contact during an emergency because he provided Steven's family with the best chance for understanding and resolution. Church was an important part of everyone's story, but it was important for many reasons. Faith aside, church was important for all four of my participants because it offered a guiding hand for those Burmese refugees who were new to the community. In many ways, their new beginnings started with the church.

As I discuss the power of the church in my participants' lives in the United States, it is important to note Nina's special circumstances: her father is a pastor. Nina's experiences vary from those of Mark, Sammy, and Steven. As I discussed in Nina's story, her first residence in the United States was not in her current city of residence. She moved to her current home due to her father's work and ambition as a pastor for Burmese communities. The church was a home for Nina because of her father's occupation, but it was her literal home at one point, as well. When Nina's family moved from their first American home city to their current home city, they moved in with Nina's father's church connection, and they lived there until they were able to find their own place. Nina's familial circumstances necessitated a reliance on church assistance, but

Mark, Sammy, and Steven also leaned on the church as they adapted to life in the United States.

Again, Steven's story shows how his family relied on their pastor to help them navigate moments of emergency during their early years in the United States. Mark's encounter with the church in the United States came in the form of his pastor's son. "When we first moved here, the pastor's son is the one that take care of us, sending us to places, getting enrolled for school." Mark's pastor's son took a lead role in helping Mark's family find their way and have a successful beginning to life in the United States. And let us not forget that it was Mark's pastor who had helped Steven's pastor locate him when he rode the wrong bus home. These pastors work beyond their congregational membership and help the entire Burmese community. Their work is to assist new community members adapt to their new home. Yet, for Sammy the relationship with the pastor had a lasting impact. His encounters with the pastor during his early months in the United States included trips to doctors and other appointments with the pastor acting as the translator. Now, Sammy performs a similar role for his family and other members of the community. Although Sammy did not state this explicitly, I believe his pastor opened doors of understanding and provided guidance in difficult circumstances. This was an example he willingly followed as he discovered his place and found his voice.

Although each participant experienced the power of the church in a different way, they all found a level of direction and guidance from church leaders. In their stories, they described the church as a body of the community working to build understanding and acceptance in their new community. In this way, the church acts as an agent of change.

The direction provided in these stories supports what Berry would term integration. Berry (1992) stated that integration “implies some maintenance of the cultural identity of the group as well as the movement to become an integral part of the larger societal framework” (p. 4). The churches represented in my participants’ stories are Burmese Christian churches. The church leaders are Burmese refugees, and their members are refugees. Gu (2021) noticed a similar phenomenon in research with Burmese refugees. The majority of Burmese refugees in Battle Creek, Michigan—the site for the study—were Christians from western Burma. The Baptist church sponsored “more than 200 Burmese seeking asylum to live in Battle Creek” (p. 6). Church organizations played a similar role for the participants in my study. The church is one area of consistency or normalcy for these refugees; they belonged to the church in Burma, and they are still members in the United States. They celebrate their Burmese culture, but as these stories indicate there is a mission to adapt to American culture with Christianity as the mainstream religion. I believe the church works in this manner and is successful in its guidance because of the willingness to adapt for some, if not all, of their members. In other words, these Burmese Christian churches foster an environment in which members may “retain cultural identity and move to join the dominant society” (Berry, 1992, p. 4). Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven capitalized on their desire to adapt to American culture—with support from their church—to seize opportunity and make a new beginning.

Losing the Feeling of Being Lost

In my sixteen years as a public school teacher, I have had the privilege of participating in ten international educational tours. With each new country I’ve visited, I

have faced new challenges: language barriers, culinary “treats”, sense of direction, and cultural norms. Thankfully, I have had the opportunity to travel with what I call training wheels. When I have had a miscommunication, a bad experience, or wander off the path, I have a tour guide to whom I reach out and find direction. My sense of being “lost” is merely a temporary inconvenience. As I interviewed my participants, I felt the overwhelming feeling of desperation in their stories. Being lost for my participants was not a temporary inconvenience; it was their new normal. Part of their process of adapting to American culture was developing ways to find their path—to lose that feeling of being lost.

Teacher-Assigned Buddies

When my participants entered their American public school, the school district provided them with a district-designed road map for adaptation. One aspect of this road map included the assignment of a “buddy” for every new student in the ELL program. In an effort to provide new students with a peer guide, new students were paired with a “veteran” student in the ELL program regardless of their country of origin or primary language. The program developers implemented the buddy-system to offer new students assistance from someone other than an adult. Steven’s example is quite unique—I will be discussing his experiences in more depth in the next section—but Mark, Nina, and Sammy found varying degrees of success with this program.

One positive aspect of the program dealt with modeling appropriate behavior. Sammy emphasized the differences between Burmese school behavior and American school behavior. “Kids would often interrupt the teacher and be rude, loud from my point of view—rude loud, and disrespectful—but the teacher doesn’t seem to

mind at all.” This type of behavior had negative consequences back in Burma. “If we do that, the teacher would either make us do time out—which would be sit-ups—or they would spank us.” The assigned buddies offered new students a model to observe and follow as they made adjustments to typical American school behavior. Without the help of these buddies, new students would struggle more to find the appropriate adjustments expected in their adaptation process. The buddy is really a model of acculturation and would not help a student who finds value in maintaining their cultural identity but does not find value in maintaining a relationship with a new group. As I have discussed before, my participants were willing to adapt, and this program was not detrimental to their adaptation process.

The buddy system also provided direction for migrant students as they navigated a new building in a new school with a new daily schedule. Nina described her first day with remembrances of being confused, sad, and lost. When she walked around in the hallway to find her class, she noticed all of the other students talking. She described the overwhelming sound of English—a language she could not understand—as similar to “the buzzing of bees.” She had no idea how to make sense of what was being said, and she felt totally alone. “I’m just trying my best to follow a schedule, but then I just wasn’t aware of the time and schedule. So I was pretty lost.” Instead, she found herself crying in the hallway until a teacher helped her find her way. Her buddy would provide her with an example of where to go (for example, the location of the lunch room) and when to arrive, avoiding the lost feeling that led her to tears on the first day. Mark’s buddy “helped me after school, finding my bus and stuff like that.” Steven faced a different situation with one of his classes. “I didn’t know I was supposed to show up. I just

skipped that day.” It was through Mark’s assistance that Steven found more clarity about his daily schedule. Having a buddy helped them find where they were supposed to be and avoid feeling lost.

Finally, this program attempted to ensure that each migrant student had a “friend” at school. I will look at true friendship in more depth in the next section, but this friendship is systemically contrived. This “friend” is not a friend in the traditional sense. An assigned friend is not the same as an emotional and social friend. Nina and Sammy did not discuss any negative aspects to the buddy system, but Mark had a different take. Being one of the earliest Burmese refugees to move to his current city of residence, Mark did not have many Burmese options as a buddy. Instead, he had a class with three Burmese girls and one boy from another country. Mark and the boy could not communicate because Mark did not speak English or the boy’s native language. Instead, the contrived friendship made Mark aware of just how lonely he really was. The buddy system assists migrant students in many ways, but it does not ensure friendship and happiness. There is no guarantee that these students will truly be friends. Mark’s happiness in the buddy system did not take off until he acted as the buddy for a new migrant student: Steven. This moment started a wonderful friendship that continues today.

Making Friends

I would be remiss to analyze the aspect of friendship as a part of my participants’ adaptation without spending time looking at the friendship between Mark and Steven. When Mark discussed the moment that Steven joined his class, it was like watching a small child as they prepare to blow out their birthday candles. His face

beamed. His voice grew a little higher pitched, and the pace of speech quickened. There is no denying how important Steven is to Mark. “In my class at the time, I think it was only three girls. And then Steven comes in. Steven comes after a month or so, and then that’s my first buddy.” Mark was Steven’s assigned buddy, but it was different. “He was the only Zomi guy out there my age, so we connect. Him coming kind of give me confidence like, ‘Oh, I got a friend now. I don’t have to be alone.’” According to Steven, on his first day of school, the teacher “introduced me to Mark and three girls that are all Burmese. And Mark was the only guy. So he was lonely, too. And we met there, and we became friends.” Both Mark and Steven highlighted the feeling of loneliness that existed until they met each other.

Part of the issue is a lack of connection with others who share a common culture. My participants were willing to adapt, but it is very clear that they still found value in their own culture. That value needed friendship with one who shared that culture. Mark explained how Steven’s arrival filled a friendship void that a school-assigned buddy could not fill.

Since I don’t speak English, it’s just like I’m just there, and they were just there. I didn’t feel like I’m homesick, but at the same time I kind of wish I have a friend. It’s not that my classmate can’t be a friend. It’s just there’s no way to communicate. That’s the problem with me feeling alone because I can’t really communicate with them.

Mark’s feeling of loneliness could not be solved by someone who was unable to effectively communicate with him. He needed a friend who shared a common language to no longer feel lost and alone. Similar situations happened with Nina. Nina’s

friendships blossomed as she struggled to find her voice. “I was just this quiet kid. I just did not talk at all. They [other students] would come up to me, and they would say, ‘Hi. What’s your name?’ And I would go not talking for a whole day in school, and so my voice was not there.” Nina noticed change within herself as she found friends within her culture. “I did not enjoy school. I was like, ‘Dang! I don’t like this.’ But then it was when I came to [my current city of residence] there was more Burmese people—Zomi people. And then I started connecting with people, and I enjoyed more.” Nina found connection and confidence with other Zomi people—classmates she still calls friends today.

Yet, my participants did not just make friends with other Burmese refugee students. As Sammy discussed ways he navigated the cultural differences he encountered during his first couple of years in American schools, he mentioned the importance of friends he made with different backgrounds. “It was a gradual process where you have to get used to the culture which you’re not used to at home—culture outside of your comfort zone. So, you just have to hang out with other people, try to understand them, try to make friends with people from different backgrounds so that you could get used to it.” Berry (1997) discussed this situation which occurs when “societies become *culturally plural*” (p. 8). According to Berry (1997), a culturally plural society exists when “people of many cultural backgrounds come to live together in a diverse society” (p. 8). In order for these culturally plural experiences of Sammy to exist, it requires a willingness on the part of both groups—the native and the migrant—to coexist. Sammy took efforts to step outside of his cultural group and make friends with members of the mainstream culture for integration purposes; however, this decision was only successful

for Sammy because members of the mainstream society were “open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity” (Berry, 1997, p. 10). Friends who were also Burmese refugee students allowed Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven the opportunity to maintain their Burmese culture and connect with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds, but friends with American students helped open the door to American culture. Sammy’s description of making friends “outside of your comfort zone” was a concept with which the others agreed. As they found their voice and gained comfort in their new home, friends with different cultural backgrounds became an entity of transition away from being lost.

“Someone to Watch Over Me”

In addition to support buddies and friends, another group of people entered the lives of these Burmese refugee students and helped them find their place in America—a group of people outside their peer group: teachers and mentors. I use the word mentor in this section because there is a different type of relationship that exists between some of the teachers who engage with these students. Many of the teachers discussed by my participants who work in the ELL program in the school district from which they all graduated attempt to address issues of social and emotional needs just as much as they address educational needs. I do not make this statement as a way of underscoring the attention and care almost all classroom teachers have for their students. But, there are additional needs that exist for students who are new to the country—especially when their first language is not English. Tandon (2016) believed that, “Institutional agents such as school counselors, advisors, teachers, and administrators are of significant importance in the lives of high school students, as they hold vital information related to

college access, scholarships, and grants” (p. 11). These teachers and mentors strove to help their students find their place in their new home.

After nearly seven hours of interviews and focus group discussions with Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven, I never heard them say anything negative about the ELL program in their school district. In the focus group, Nina stated the “ELL teachers were the best. And they literally help you grow every day. And they have such a great impact in my life because I know how I used to be and how I am now. And it’s just because of all those teachers who impacted me in so many ways.” Sammy responded, “Yeah. I can testify to that. Being in the ELL program in the middle school was awesome. I dare say I wouldn’t be here if not for them.” Nina and Sammy heaped mountains of praise on the ELL program, but their experiences within the program differed drastically from Mark and Steven. Since Nina and Sammy arrived in the United States and entered the ELL program in a middle school, they had different teachers and different expectations from their first day. So much of what they discussed about the program centered on preparing the ELL students for high school. However, as Mark explained, the ELL program was quite different in elementary school. While the middle school ELL program concentrated on content—helping students with projects, presentations, vocabulary, and state testing—the elementary school ELL program focused on fun and games to introduce basic educational concepts and American school orientation. Mark explained,

It’s kind of easier for us. They teach us everything basic. We start everything from basic: teachers teaching us animals, easy math. The ELL teacher would help us in class. She would give us computers and stuff where we can play games and learn at the same time.

Despite the difference in the program goals for the different sites, the common denominator for my participants' experiences was help. The teachers provided help in many ways: curriculum, English language acquisition, reading and writing, learning addresses and phone numbers, understanding cultural differences, etc. For a new student, the teachers and mentors in the ELL program established a foundation upon which their students could construct their understanding of American culture.

Fortunately, the ELL program did not just stop with developing a foundation. The ELL program works in tandem with other school programs to prepare students for the next stage after public school—something their school district calls the 13th grade. Sammy truly appreciated how the teachers in the ELL program readied him for typical classes in high school. “It was really difficult trying to understand what’s happening in class: the teacher’s lectures and the homework or assignments they assigned. But, with the help of the school department for ELLs and other special classes, they help a lot... Without that, I won’t be able to take the normal classes.” One of the other programs Steven implicitly mentioned was the AVID program. I explained the AVID program in more detail in chapter 4, but it is a program that also left its mark on Nina. The AVID program uses purposeful lessons to prepare students for applying to, entering, and being successful in college. One of the beneficial aspects of this program is the teacher/mentor. As students progress each year through the program, they stay with their core group of AVID teachers. The students and teachers build a relationship through their extended time together. AVID is a class that students may select to take as one of their electives. They do not have to remain in the program. Steven chose to leave the program after one year because he wanted to explore other options for his electives,

but Nina found a home within the program. Her relationships with the teachers and mentors in that program is the biggest reason for the growth of her confidence. Having peers assist in adapting to a new culture was important to all four of my participants, but they all saw teachers and mentors as a valuable resource in navigating the school system.

Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster (2012) supported the idea that “schools are the primary setting for young people to learn about life in the host country” (p. 5); however, there is more than just learning about the host country for these students. McBrien (2005) believed that, “If not for the sake of the individual refugee child, then for the stability of society as a whole, helping refugee children to succeed in school should be of importance to educators, administrators, and policymakers” (p. 358). The ELL program and the AVID program are two wonderful examples of teachers and mentors helping refugee children succeed in school. Their guidance and direction, in addition to the buddies and friends, allowed my participants to find their place and not feel alone.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers and mentors act as the first line of emotional support for these refugee students. Whether it is promoting a sense of school belonging (Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster, 2012) or engaging in learning activities that provide the refugee students with opportunities to share their experiences (Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; McWilliams and Bonet, 2016), teachers and mentors have the potential to provide meaningful and necessary emotional support for refugee students who are navigating a trying experience. As I described in the previous chapter, my participants lived through traumatic experiences during their journey to the

United States. They carried those memories with them as they entered the school system in their new home. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) wrote that, “Refugee learners require additional support to help them successfully transition to a new country and the demands and expectations of a new education system” (p. 115). Teachers and mentors provided that support for my participants.

Nina’s story provided a perfect illustration of the type of support teachers and mentors can provide refugee students. As Nina walked the halls with no sense of direction, no understanding of where she was supposed to be, and no way to communicate her frustrations, it was the gentle and nurturing arm of a teacher that provided her with a sense of calm. The dangerous trek from Burma to the United States provided few opportunities for emotional peace. Nina found peace and guidance from her teacher. This type of emotional support is just as valuable for refugee students as the content of teachers’ lessons, and it is the type of support that helped Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven be resilient.

Navigating through Support and Obstacle in the Burmese Refugee Community

Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven encountered the unknown when they first arrived in the United States. As they struggled to find their place and formulate understanding of their new home, they leaned upon their Burmese refugee community. In many ways, this community consisted of members with either more life experiences in the United States or greater life experience overall. The community presented advice, modeled appropriate behaviors and attitudes, provided resources, and offered emotional and academic support and motivation. In many ways, the community helped them formulate their initial

strategy for adapting to the United States, and these strategies worked their way into their adaptation process in the schools. However, the community also placed pressure and burdens on these participants, and participants learned to overcome obstacles by navigating through these pressures. As they adapted to life in the United States, other Burmese refugees leaned upon them for assistance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their English language acquisition, their community involvement, and their reliance on community guidance.

English Language Acquisition

The stories of Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven are riddled with examples of loneliness, sadness, self-doubt, and occasionally humor in relation to their comfort with English. As I have discussed earlier, the inability to speak English led each participant down a path where they felt lost and afraid. The “buzzing of bees” as Nina described it prevented them from feeling successful, from effective learning, from finding their voice. In order to learn English, my participants stated that they needed support from their families. Their parents preached academic success and required them to put their best effort into their education. All four participants were adamant that education was imperative for their existence in the United States. Their families supported their efforts to learn English, but this support came with certain restrictions.

I have already restoried many of my participants’ examples of learning, including English language acquisition, throughout the last two chapters. But, Sammy highlighted a conflict that occurred in his family. The ELL program within their school district pushed students to use English at school, at home, and at play. The more you use it, the

less likely you are to lose it. Unfortunately, despite the supportive atmosphere of adaptation at home, there were moments when that support waned. Sammy explained,

At home, you just do what you normally do. But sometimes, it would conflict because at school, you don't speak English proficiently as they would want you to. But at home—and they want you to practice speaking at home even when you're at home with your parents—but at home, your parents want you to speak your native tongue. And there's that conflict. So you just have to figure it out. For me personally, if I'm talking to my parents, I will use my native tongue. But if I'm talking to my siblings, I try to mix English with it so that I could improve my English.

Sammy found a way to abide by his teachers' wishes while not ignoring the rules imposed by his parents. His parents' desire that their native tongue be used in the home conflicted with the school's model of English language learning, but by using time with his siblings, Sammy formulated a plan to engage in English language acquisition at home in a way that was beneficial to him and his siblings while respecting his parents' wishes. This innovative conflict resolution encapsulates a valuable part of the adaptation process. Mark, Nina, and Steven shared similar stories. At home, there was a need to use their native tongue. For them, the reason is that their parents had a limited knowledge or no knowledge of the English language. Those feelings of loneliness that haunted my participants would be visited upon their parents if they only spoke English at home. This is not a phenomenon that is only associated with these participants. Hickey (2005) found that "several refugees referred to their parents' desire that they remain fluent in their native language" (p. 30). A Filipino female participant in Hickey's study stated that,

Even though [our children] are here, we raise them up with our customs and traditions. I do speak Tagalog. That's our language. But [my children] can talk, they can talk the [English] language. I guess it's easier to [learn English] when you play with other kids (p. 30).

As Sammy mentioned, siblings were an available outlet for using English at home because they, too, were learning English at school. The younger generation continued to develop a working competency with the English language while many of the older generation chose to protect their Burmese culture and their native language. This language enrichment had a profound impact on the younger generation as described in the next section.

Responsibilities Within the Community

In Netflix's *Explained*: "The Racial Wealth Gap," Thomas Shapiro—David R. Pokross Professor of Law and Social Policy at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University—stated,

The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis did a study that came up with a finding that white college graduates, over a couple of decades, their wealth increased dramatically, as one might expect. Black college graduates, over the same period of time, their wealth actually decreased.

The narrator continues, "The reason isn't that graduates made very different amounts of money. It was how they spent it." Shapiro concludes, "It's much more likely to be the case that an African-American college graduate is the most successful in their family network and therefore relatives ask them for help, and they give it." Although Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven are not yet college graduates, they have experienced a similar

phenomenon. The Burmese refugee community willingly supported the progress and educational pursuits of my participants, but their progress and education—success—generated demand from the community. These demands have created obstacles for Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven.

When Steven first arrived in the United States, he felt completely helpless. “If you want to go grocery shopping, you’ve got to call someone. If you want to go to appointment, you’ve got to call someone. Stuff like that—I hate it!” Now, he no longer has that feeling. He owns a car. He speaks English. He has experienced shopping and doctors’ appointments on his own. He no longer relies on others. Yet, there is a growing community of Burmese refugees who are experiencing those same feelings Steven had when he had just arrived in America. As they neared graduation from high school in the United States, Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven undertook a new role within the Burmese refugee community--they became support-givers. They became responsible for helping other community members with navigating transportation issues and attending doctors’ appointments.

For Sammy, this transition was not really a surprise. “You have to rely on others until you can stand on your own... It’s one of those factors that pushed me to adapt real quick because we’re a big family... so we have a lot of appointments.” Sammy knew that adaptation meant additional responsibilities, but it was a step he wanted to take for his family. He knew that there were other options than himself. “If I’m not available, there’ll be my siblings—my brothers and sister. And if I’m available, my parents prefer me because I’m used to it, and I know the way around it.” These additional responsibilities were part of being in the family, but others called for help, as well. “If

[Burmese refugee community members] call, then I can help. And if I'm available time-wise, sure, I will help." Sammy is not the only one who has accepted this new role in the community. Steven stated, "I was able to communicate really well. And whenever there was a new student, they would come take it to me for translation. So I was helping with that. Whenever my parents—everyone--have an appointment, I would always take them for translation. So I think that's how I grew." Steven's comment underscores how community members—in his case members within the school as well as members within the community—seek assistance from other Burmese refugees who have greater knowledge of American culture, but it highlights the possible dual nature of this kind of adaptation. Not only is there a process of adaptation on a personal level that exists within the school system, but the community's reliance upon those who have adapted more than others strengthens and quickens that adaptation process. The community requires assistance from Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven, and this assistance eats up their time, energy, and resources; however, the community's support and the act of assisting itself allows them to reap the benefits.

Guidance from Without

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, teachers and mentors provided guidance and direction as Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven navigated the school system, but that was not the only place they received advice. Family and members of the Burmese refugee community offered their own advice. This direction from outside the school district added a layer of support for students struggling to understand requirements for graduation and college applications, but it also added confusion. The Burmese families' lack of generations of experience in dealing with the mainstream culture—something Yosso

(2005) termed navigational capital—is the root cause for this confusion. Tandon (2016) wrote that the lack of formal schooling in American schools for Burmese parents has “direct consequences for the participants in terms of accessing educational services and opportunities in the U.S.” (p. 11). The desire to support the students ended up in a lack of clarity and misunderstanding.

One of the aspects of Burmese culture that my participants share is the influence of their parents in their life decisions. According to Mark,

Our parents do everything for us. Our parents tell us what to do. Our parents would tell us like, ‘Once you go to school’—basically, they plan out everything for us. And parents would tell us how to behave in public or you need to behave this way when you go to these kind of people...

This control extends into the realm of academics and higher education. As Mark continued his discussion, he explained his problem with allowing his parents to participate in the decision-making process in adapting to high school graduation and college. “There’s no plan because you don’t really know people who is going to teach you—I would say counsel you—towards what you want to do. It’s so difficult because parents don’t know. Sisters, they don’t really know.” All four participants complained about the need to follow advice from those who had yet to experience the situation themselves. Hickey (2005) referred to this phenomenon as filial piety—“utter respect for and deference to elders within the family on matters of decision-making” (p. 29).

According to Hickey (2005), filial piety is a common cultural trait for Southeast Asian refugees. It is through this cultural practice that my participants, as students, deferred

their own judgment about college preparation and application to their parents and community members in the absence of guidance from other authority figures.

When I asked if there were programs in place to assist them in making decisions about graduating high school and college admissions, Mark admitted that, “They do have that, but it’s just like there’s no people that are in front of us. There’s no one in our community that inform us like, ‘Oh, you need to get a good high score on the ACT if you want to get into a higher colleges or good colleges or a good scholarship.’ Things like that.” Mark is attending college, but you could hear some of the frustration in his voice. “Usually, when something is very important, usually the community will say it out or kind of like advertise it in the community.” Unfortunately, the Burmese refugee community lacked experience with the American school system to provide adequate advice. “There’s no one that just gives us advice or ‘What are you going to do?’ kind of like question thrown at us. And so I had to find everything by myself like about college, ACT... I didn’t know how important ACT was. And so I graduated.” The adaptation process of Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven relied on community support, but the miscommunications and lack of understanding hindered this process. The guidance from outside the school district compounded an already confusing step for high school students, and these four graduates continue to live with the consequences of some of those decisions.

Expectations: Within and Between School and the Burmese Refugee Community

One additional aspect to consider when exploring the process my participants took to navigate through support and obstacle within the Burmese refugee community is

expectation. There were expectations that existed within the Burmese refugee community that challenged the autonomy of my participants as they attended public school. Likewise, there were expectations from the school district that added more challenges to their autonomy. Many times, these expectations from both entities were similar, but there were times when the expectations added an additional layer of what Berry (1992) called acculturative stress. Berry (1992) defined acculturative stress as “psychological phenomena that involve conflict and often result in new forms of behaviour that interfere with smooth day-to-day functioning” (p. 6). These challenges to autonomy—especially when those challenges were contradictory in nature—created conflict that necessitated a changed behavior.

One area in which both the school community and the Burmese refugee community share a common expectation is in the celebration of multiculturalism. In this sense, multiculturalism is the presence of at least two cultures that coexist without the pressure of a required blending or eventual dominance of one culture over the other(s). As I have discussed many times, my participants felt support from their families and the Burmese refugee community to engage with and learn from the mainstream culture. This kind of support celebrates a spirit of multiculturalism only if there is also a desire to maintain elements of their Burmese culture, which Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven have all confirmed was present in their situations. This multicultural spirit at home allowed these students to explore avenues of multiculturalism in the school. Within the school community, there existed a similar support for a multicultural existence. The ELL program practices an approach to learning that celebrates this multiculturalism. There also exist at the different school sites within the school district a

number of clubs and activities (e.g. the multicultural club and Zomi Day) that recognize the different cultures that exist among the students.

Both the school community and the Burmese refugee community also shared an expectation of educational success in the classroom that would culminate with college enrollment. As I have noted, all of my participants believed that their parents faced the challenges and dangers of becoming refugees in part to provide their children with educational opportunities in the United States. Similarly, the school district promoted educational success and a focus on how students could be successful in the 13th grade—their post-high school plan.

However, there were different expectations between those communities that posed conflict. The school community, following state law, enforced an attendance policy that required students to be present a certain number of days in order to pass that grade, and individual teachers within the school community assigned homework assignments and scheduled tests and quizzes with rigid due dates. Unfortunately, expected needs within the Burmese refugee community would trump the possibility of school attendance or preparation for school assignments. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven had expectations that they assist their families and other Burmese refugee community members with appointments regardless of what was scheduled at school that day. Fortunately, this conflict of expectation did not result in a failing grade due to too many missed school days, but it is an added stress that required a creative response. Each of my participants have siblings with whom they shared responsibilities for appointments, but as Sammy discussed, he was the preferred attendee at appointments for his family.

One final expectation I highlight is one in which the two communities disagreed with the implementation of an English language acquisition program. Although both communities agreed that Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven should learn English as a part of their education, there was a disagreement about the need for using English within the home. I have already discussed this disagreement, but it is worth revisiting in the context of community expectations. Sammy's stories about learning English highlighted the efforts within the school community to structure some of the learning for ELL students around English language acquisition; however, that learning process does not exist just within the confines of the four walls of the classroom. The school community expects students to practice English at home to reinforce learned skills and vocabulary at school. However, some in the Burmese refugee community expect the use of the native language at home. Sammy recounted his strategy for overcoming the conflict in the two expectations. To conform to school expectations, he practiced English at home, but he only did so in front of his siblings. By taking this step, he still respected the expectation of his parents. He used his native language in front of them. His solution offered his younger siblings an easy path to navigate the difficult conflict of expectations that they would have been experiencing while attending a school within the same district. By his creative responses, he met the expectations of the school and Burmese refugee communities, which contributed to the adaptation process in which he was able to navigate between two languages without abandoning his home language.

Sammy's solution not only provided him and his siblings with a practical way of satisfying the requests of family and school, but he unwittingly created an environment that research shows increases the possibility of positive outcomes (Bartlett, Mendenhall,

and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; Eisenclas and Schalley, 2017; Daly and Limbrick, 2020). Although previous best practices included the discouragement of ‘Home Language’ as a part of instruction, this is outdated and inhibits academic success. Daly and Limbrick (2020) defined Home Language as “the language used by the refugee family at home among family and community members” (p. 2). In the case of my participants, instruction was provided in English, along with the request for at-home English usage. However, this type of educational practice is detrimental to the student. According to Daly and Limbrick (2020), the absence or restriction of resources in their Home Language “conveys to the refugee child that they, their language, and their culture are not valued by the educational contexts and community in the country in which they now live” (p. 3). This type of educational practice creates a stressful environment that increases the chances for negative outcomes. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven’s success within this system once again highlights their resiliency.

Conclusion

Adaptation is not just a process that exists within one facet of daily life. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven faced adaptation in their school, in their home, in their friend circles, and in the Burmese refugee community. In many ways, adaptation was desired. Adaptation brought clarity, understanding, knowledge, friendships, and opportunities, but it also required time, work, and attention to responsibilities within their community. In the end, their willingness to adapt and the rewards it brings outweighed the added responsibilities. They are part of the first members of their community to adapt within an American school system, and that designation is important for them. Mark believes,

You just kind of find your way. It's not going to be given to you; you have to search for it. You got to want it. You got to have the drive to thrive. And that you have to push it, push it on your own when even if nobody helping you because you got to be the first one in your family to push it. Because if you push farther, you know the beauty of being in America.

Mark's comment was shared by all of my participants. They pushed through the struggles of adaptation for themselves. They pushed for their family. They pushed for their community. Despite their traumas, their trials, and their risks, these four participants were resilient—overcoming the possible negative outcomes and achieving success. Despite the obstacles they faced, Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven proved to be resilient and found ways to achieve positive outcomes.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I revisit my research questions and share my findings based upon my participants' stories. Then, I discuss the implications of my research. Next, I explain the limitations of my study. It is important for researchers to identify and acknowledge their study's limitations in order to accurately address its trustworthiness. I then explore potential future research opportunities based upon my research. Finally, I reflect upon my entire research process. This section will offer me a chance to review my work and my impact on my research. Although the work of exploring Burmese refugee students' methods of adaptation should not end here, I must close the door on this part of that journey. This chapter is the end of my current research, but hopefully it is the beginning for others.

Findings

Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven dedicated a number of hours in interviews, focus groups, and individual follow-up sessions in order to share their stories and experiences of leaving their home in Burma, traveling to the United States as refugees, and adapting to the education system in an American school district. As I discuss my findings, I want to reemphasize the fact that this section is the constructed meaning of the researcher. My

findings do not speak for my participants. They are my thoughts and analysis based upon the stories of my participants. I use this section to answer my research subquestions and then my central research question

Refugee Stories

One of my research subquestions centered on the stories of my participants becoming refugees. In chapter four, I restoried each of my participants' recollections of family life in Burma, preparing to leave their home country, escaping to Malaysia, and journeying to the United States. Although each story was different, there were common elements that illustrated the magnitude of the decision to leave Burma. Mark's story of a young child battling fear and danger while entering the unknown for a chance at a better life is rivaled by Sammy's story of a young child overcoming the possibility of fear in spite of the unknown due to his obligations as the oldest sibling caring not only for his younger siblings but his mother in need. Stories of Nina's unending days in Malaysia were countered by Steven's quicker movements from Burma to Malaysia to the United States. The stories were different, but the journey was similar.

That last comment appears controversial, but I hope my explanation will ease those with troubled minds. As I analyzed my participants' experiences of becoming refugees and fleeing their home country, I discovered that all four of them found a defining piece of their individual identity through their individual experiences. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Mark was overwhelmed with appreciation for his opportunities in the United States. As Mark shared stories of life in his village in Burma, he described a dead end—a place in which there was no chance at existence. During this part of my interview with Mark, he used words like “failing,” “difficult,” “basic,” and

“poor” to describe daily life. Mark envisioned the process of leaving Burma as an opportunity to not fail, a chance to have something worth owning, a chance to live. In the beginning, Nina failed to truly grasp the understanding for their departure. As she came to understand the reasons why, she dealt with an elongated period of transition—or suffering as Nina describes it—in Malaysia. This extended period of transition, coupled with a brief settling in her first American city, led Nina to constantly question where she belonged. Her experience as a wandering refugee—refugee-ing in her words—diminished her confidence. Sammy as he took a position of responsibility within his family. As the elder sibling, he saw it as his duty to help his mother and siblings as they left Burma. Sammy’s desire to live a life of honor for his family coupled with this role of familial responsibility forged the man that Sammy is today. And Steven, extremely young when he started his journey to the United States, faced fewer physical dangers than the others did as they escaped Burma. As Steven described his journey, it felt like someone describing an adventure. Steven’s love of fun and excitement was captured within his experience of leaving Burma. The stories of why they left and how they left were very different, but as refugees, they experienced a similar journey in which they discovered a part of themselves in the process.

Obstacles and Support

Another subquestion focused on the stories of obstacle and support within the Burmese refugee community and the American school district. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven shared many stories that focused on the support they received from teachers, the Burmese refugee community, and their church; however, with each of these supporters there was an element of obstacle experienced by my participants. These obstacles and

support systems—exemplified by their teachers, the Burmese refugee community, and their church—played a part in their adaptation process.

My participants struggled to find negative stories about their teachers. Whether discussing ELL teachers, typical classroom teachers, or club and program sponsors, their stories about teachers always highlighted the moments of support that provided guidance and confidence for the students. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven recalled teachers' names and beamed as they described their experiences with those teachers. These teachers helped them learn English, assisted with assignments and homework that was confusing, offered a shoulder to cry on in times of need, provided guidance with understanding cultural norms in the United States, and aided their construction of identity in their new home country. All teachers, regardless of what grade they teach or what segment of the school population they work with, are expected to help students with content. For ELL teachers, it is expected that teachers assist students with learning English and understanding cultural differences between their home country and the United States. However, the stories of my participants about their teachers included the use of emotional support structures. Their teachers attended to their emotional needs. This additional layer of support allowed an additional sense of comfort and belonging as they coped with adaptation.

Where my participants struggled was in finding their place once they entered the American school. Mark discussed the lack of friendship that could give him a sense of belonging. Nina struggled to find her way around the school and faced the emotional trauma of being lost within a new school with no way to communicate with those around her. Steven allowed a new friend to persuade him to ride the wrong bus home, leaving

his family in a panic as they frantically searched for him. Through early encounters such as these, my participants discovered some of the difficulties associated with adapting to a different culture. That feeling of being lost existed within the school, but the feeling continued into the larger community. Finding their place in the school opened the door for a sense of belonging in their new home city. Their struggles for awareness and understanding of the mainstream culture extended into a feeling of acceptance and belonging as a part of their aspiration for integration.

Outside of their school community, the other largely influential community in their lives was the Burmese refugee community. As this community grew larger in number, its members grew more comfortable maintaining the cultural norms of their native culture. My participants talked of their families and their community of being supporters of education. Nina, Sammy, and Steven supported Mark's description of opportunity as it pertained to educational opportunity. Part of their decision as a family in leaving Burma as refugees was the possibility of gaining an education in the United States. The Burmese refugee community—individual families and the community at large—provided my participants with the support they needed to be successful as students. Their churches, as a part of this community, played a significant role in this support structure. Whether assisting with housing accommodations, enrollment, or shepherding lost children back into the fold, Burmese refugee churches added a layer of support for my participants. Yet, with this support comes additional responsibility. As my participants became more familiar with the mainstream culture, their services were required by members of the Burmese refugee community. These additional

responsibilities placed obstacles of time and attendance on my participants, but they were obstacles that they successfully managed.

Navigating Two Cultures: Conflict Resolution

My final subquestion dealt with my participants' navigation between their Burmese culture and American culture. In many ways, this was not a choice of one or the other. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven faced the challenge of finding resolution to the conflicts that emerged. Their willingness to integrate (Berry, 1992) meant that they wanted to keep their Burmese culture largely intact while adjusting to the mainstream American culture. They performed this task with varying levels of success. Through their stories, three areas emerged as guiding examples of their cultural conflict resolution: English language acquisition, respectful behavior, and preparation for college.

As I have mentioned previously, the process of English language acquisition as constructed by the school district for my participants conflicted with the Burmese families' desires. In integration (Berry, 1992) the migrant finds value in the mainstream culture while maintaining their own culture. The process of English language acquisition that requires only the use of English at home threatens the maintenance of the native language. This is one aspect of school policy that created conflict for participants and their families. As Sammy's story indicated, there was a need to find balance in navigating these two cultures. By speaking his native tongue at home with his parents and family, he managed a system of maintenance that kept his Burmese culture alive; however, by speaking English at home only with his siblings, he found a way for him and his siblings to work on language acquisition outside the four walls of the classroom. His solution offered all involved a way to participate in the mainstream culture and

strengthen their learning process without shedding their native culture. Rather than allowing conflict to exist, Sammy found a way to balance the conflict and allow the two cultures to coexist.

When Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven entered the school system in the United States, they faced different cultural norms than what they experienced in Burma. In particular, they struggled to understand what behaviors were deemed appropriate in the presence of their teacher(s). They mentioned the following examples: “For example, when you’re talking to someone who is older, much older, then you would fold your arms like this, and listen. But in the United States, that’s a sign of rudeness and disrespectful.” Especially for a migrant student who does not speak English, body language was of great importance. Also, “Whenever we were walking in front of an elder or a teacher, we have to walk like this with our head bowed.” Add to these comments the story Sammy shared in which students interrupted the teacher during a lesson. For him, this was “rude, loud, and disrespectful,” but for the teacher it was part of engaging students. In order to fit in and not offend, they shed (Berry, 1992) some of their cultural norms. They found ways to interact in the classroom that mirrored the examples provided by the other students. Nina found her voice and began voicing her opinions during class discussions. All four of my participants joined clubs and participated in extracurricular activities. They constructed a place of syncretic culture that allowed them to navigate between American and Burmese cultural norms. Although these norms only pertained to their relationship with teachers and other elders in the classroom, it required them to willingly shed a part of their native culture and adopt a part of new culture during the adaptation process.

As Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven completed their education in an American school, they faced the potential of entering college. As I previously discussed, these students found themselves contemplating the unknown without the feeling of adequate support or guidance from the school district or the Burmese refugee community. Mark described a situation in which family members attempted to dictate the best course of action for applying to and preparing for college without experiencing or understanding the process themselves; meanwhile, the school failed to provide adequate guidance and direction in the years leading up to high school graduation. They believed that they should have had a firm grasp in how to proceed, but the mixed messages led to confusion and miscommunication. They responded with resignation. They believed their best guesses with how to proceed were just as probable to result in positive outcomes as following the disjointed advice coming from the school and the community. In their cases, the spirit of resignation did not amount to failure, but it is an indication of a failure to communicate between the school and the Burmese refugee community. These Burmese refugee students navigated two different cultures by balancing the competing cultures, shedding some of the native culture, and resigning themselves to fate when they felt adrift without consistent guidance.

Adaptation to an American School

My central research question focused on the stories of how Burmese refugee students adapted to education in an American school. Through my subquestions, I heard stories about their journeys to the United States as refugees, the support and obstacles they experienced from their American school and the Burmese refugee community, and the ways they navigated two competing cultures. These stories offered a glimpse at some

of the external pressures and additional areas of adaptation they faced while attending an American school. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven adapted to an American school by building friendships, seeking and accepting help from school programs, and fostering a spirit of togetherness between the school and the Burmese refugee community.

I started my research with the expectation that I would discover that learning English was the key to adaptation. English is a necessary tool for education in this school district. I believed English would offer my participants a connection to the mainstream culture that would ease their adaptation. Unsurprisingly, for each of my participants, their first moment of successful adaptation was through communication; however, it did not center on communication through the English language, but through non-verbal and emotional connections. As young students, my participants entered school without direction—lost and alone amid the “buzzing of the bees.” Assigned buddies assisted some of them by providing nonverbal cues and direction, but it was not a connection that substantially established authentic relationships. Building friendships opened that connection within the school community. Communication, regardless of language, provided my participants with direction, a sense of belonging, and a reason to return. Friendship gave them a reason to smile and enjoy their new home; it gave them an emotional escape from the scars and traumas of “refugee-ing.” Friendship played a role in their resilience.

Another way that my participants adapted to an American school was by seeking and accepting help from school programs. Although the ELL program was not an optional program for Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven, it was a program in which they were willing participants. In this program, they made friends, they learned English, they

received emotional support, and they found direction as they sought connections with the mainstream culture. In addition to accepting help from the ELL program, they sought assistance from other programs: AVID, tutoring and mentoring sessions, and school clubs. These additional programs provided them with extra opportunities for academic growth, making friends, understanding cultural differences, and celebrating their cultural identity. These programs provided my participants with the great opportunity to navigate two desired cultures without selecting one culture at the expense of the other.

Finally, my participants fostered a spirit of togetherness as they navigated between their American school and the Burmese refugee community. Berry's (1992) theory stated that integration requires maintenance and movement—maintenance of cultural identity and movement towards becoming a part of the mainstream culture. The challenge for integration is refusing to shed more of one's cultural identity than desired while being open to differences found within the mainstream culture. By approaching these differing cultures through a spirit of togetherness, my participants have constructed a new cultural identity—a blended identity. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven shared no stories of regret in relation to adaptation. Through all of our communications, they expressed happiness and contentedness with their decision to integrate. Although there were moments of failure—college prep, for example—it never deterred them from working hard to impress both the school community and the Burmese refugee community.

Blended Identities

In his theory, Berry (1992) admitted that his four categories of adaptation for individuals—integration, assimilation, marginalization, and separation—are constructed

through the dichotomous answers of “yes” and “no” to the two questions he believed all migrants faced when confronting acculturation. Berry believed that there were differing levels of assent and dissent that exist within the answers to those questions. His acculturation theory provides researchers with a foundation upon which to contemplate adaptation, but it does not go far enough. The varying levels of assent and dissent can drastically inform the adaptation process.

Syncretic Integration

As migrants confront the two questions posed by Berry (1992), they answer with a varied level of “yes” and “no.” Those differing levels impact the type of integration undertaken by the individual. It is understood that a part of integration is an acceptance at some level of both the original and the new culture. This necessitates the individual to undergo a process in which there is a blending of cultures. I call this process Syncretic Integration (figure 4). Syncretic Integration is a transformational process that is not static. An individual continues to examine and reexamine the questions proposed by Berry (1992), but the answer may change for the individual at any point during adaptation. I call this process of reevaluating one’s answers to these questions Transformational Syncretism. During the process of Transformational Syncretism, an individual evaluates and adjusts what Berry (1992) termed maintenance and movement. Maintenance refers to the individual’s retention of their original culture; movement refers to the individual’s adoption of the new culture. I have constructed my model based upon the different levels of maintenance and movement individuals process within integration.

Those migrants who feel strongly about finding value in their original culture but are hesitant or reluctant to find value in the new culture undergo a process of adaptation I

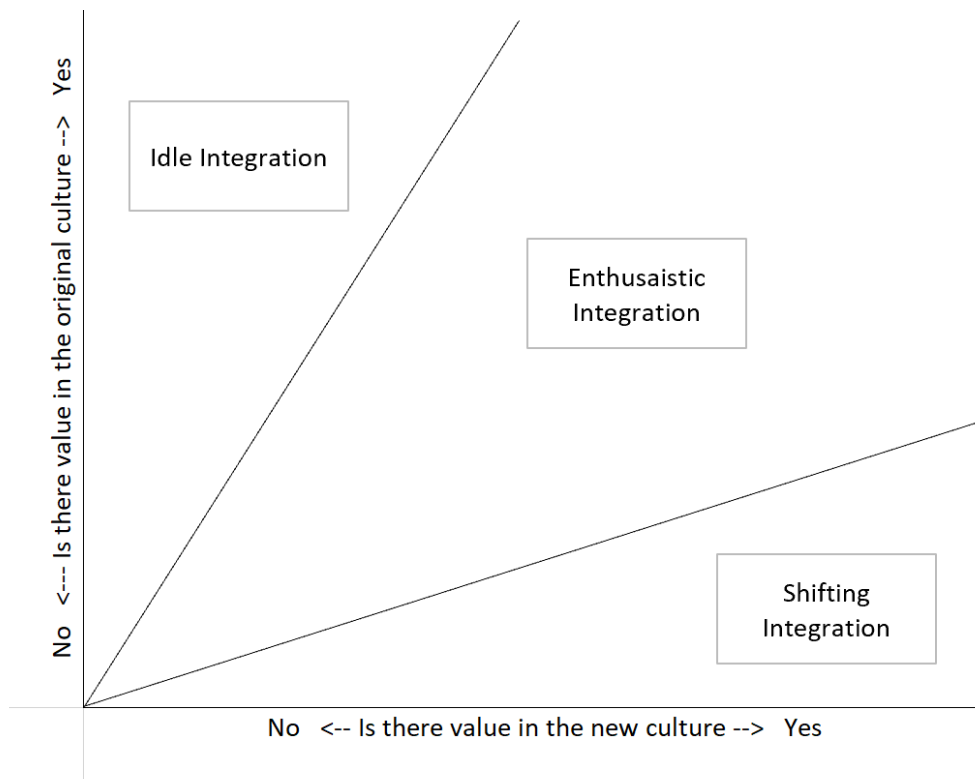
call Idle Integration. The process of integration still exists, but the acceptance of the new culture is not as meaningful to the migrant as the retention of the original culture. These individuals confront adaptation with a strong focus on maintaining as much of their original culture as possible while allowing room for some aspects of cultural blending (high level of maintenance, low level of movement). This category borders on what Berry (1992) termed separation—the desire to maintain the original culture while dismissing any value from the new culture. In Idle Integration, migrants make minor adjustments to adapt to the new culture while protecting their original culture.

Migrants who find value in the original culture and the new culture undergo a process of adaptation I call Enthusiastic Integration. For these individuals, the transformational syncretism requires a more even blend of both cultures than for those in Idle Integration (mid-level maintenance, mid-level movement). They most accurately fit within the category of Integration as proposed by Berry (1992). Individuals who fit in Enthusiastic Integration are more willing to accept value in the new culture than idle integrationists, and they are more willing to find value in the original culture than the third type of integration: Shifting Integration.

Shifting Integration is what I call the adaptation process in which an individual finds tremendous value in the new culture, but they find just enough value in the original culture to keep from undergoing what Berry (1992) termed assimilation. In assimilation, the migrant finds no value in the original culture but finds value in the new culture. Shifting integrationists maintain just enough of the original culture to prevent a complete movement to the new culture (low maintenance, high movement). The most important thing to remember about these different levels of integration is that individuals move

within these levels throughout their adaptation process. Through the process of transformational syncretism, individuals redefine their adaptation process. Acculturative stressors inform behavioral shifts (Berry, 1992) and the result can be an adjusted level of maintenance and movement which may result in a change from one form of integration to another.

Figure 4: Syncretic Integration



My Participants' Integration

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, my intention with this study is not to diagnose my participants psychologically, but I think it is important to highlight the differences in integration among these four individuals that informed my proposed theory on Syncretic Integration. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven—at the time of our

discussions—were undergoing integration. I have detailed how they had each found value in their original culture and the new culture; however, the ways in which they integrated had noticeable differences. In this section, I describe how I interpreted those differences and how I believe they fit within my model of syncretic integration.

Mark's integration centered on taking advantage of opportunity in his new home country. He sought academic success, and to do so, he followed a process of high movement and low maintenance. Mark built a strong friendship with Steven, but I felt through our conversations that Steven was one of the only real connections Mark maintained about his original culture. His desire to return to Burma does not include a want to reconnect with Burmese culture; rather, he wants to detail his experiences to inform members of American culture about what refugees endure. Mark epitomizes shifting integration.

On the other hand, Sammy maintains strong ties to Burmese culture. During both interviews, Sammy emphasized the difficulties he faced in adapting to differing aspects of respect and honor in the new culture. The correct way to act and behave, and the proper way to treat others was important to him, and he struggled with the thought of shedding those cultural norms from his original culture. He and I even diverged from our original discussions and explored the topic of food. Sammy hated some of the food options from American culture, and he still prefers Burmese food to salty and cheesy American food. Sammy's integration included little movement and a high level of maintenance. I identify Sammy's process of integration as idle integration.

Finally, Nina and Steven blended both Burmese and American culture during their process of integration. Nina became a student body leader during her time in high

school, and she earned a major honor with which students and faculty played a significant role in the selection process. She has thrived as a student and peer within her American school, and this is in no small part due to her desire for movement towards the new culture. Yet, she maintains a leadership role in the Burmese refugee community, as well. She is a leader in the school's Multicultural Club, and she acts as a bridge for the student body between the Burmese refugee students and the other students. As for Steven, he has made many strides of movement towards American culture. He rivals Mark in his use of American slang and connection with American-born friends, but Steven is not as disconnected from Burmese culture as Mark. Steven has returned to Burma since graduating high school. He visits family, and he maintains strong connections with his Burmese culture. Nina and Steven have undergone a process of integration in which they have allowed maintenance and movement at similar levels. Nina and Steven are enthusiastic integrationists.

Again, I have categorized these four participants based upon my judgment of our conversations at a given time. I believe that they will continue to undergo Transformational Syncretism, and perhaps that process will lead them into a different type of adaptation. I believe these categories to be important because they affect the individual's adaptation. Mark's greater willingness for movement opens different opportunities for adaptation than for Sammy with a greater desire for maintenance. What is important for my participants as a whole in this study is that they all found value in both their Burmese culture and the mainstream culture in their new home. This characteristic required each of them to construct a new identity—a blended identity—with features from both cultures.

Implications

This study has implications for schools, refugee communities, and refugee education that help migrant and refugee students to adapt to their new culture. First, it is important to establish a network of communication between host schools and refugee communities. As demonstrated, my participants' stories were filled with what I call "missed opportunities" due to a lack of communication or miscommunication between the school and the community. When it comes to educational needs, requirements, scheduling, testing, and college preparation, the school system is supposed to be the authority. It is necessary for the school system to take the lead in communicating students' needs; however, it is imperative for the schools to understand the needs and culture of the community to ensure a cooperative spirit for the student's benefit.

School districts must reach out to refugee communities and find a connection that fosters a spirit of growth between the two entities. It is up to the school district to offer community opportunities to learn about things like class scheduling, ACTs and SATs, study habits, and college applications. The school district should make meetings, classes, or conferences available to members of the refugee community about these topics in their native language. One possible arena in which the school district could begin this process is within religious institutions. As each of my participants shared their connections with their church and its influence in the adaptation process, it makes sense to use religious organizations' connection with the refugee community to build a strong relationship with the school. Religious leaders can ease the adaptation process for new refugees and introduce school officials to the families. By opening a spirit of cooperation between the

school district and community leaders for refugee communities, they can foster a feeling of trust for those new to the United States. Providing translated materials and translators once or twice a semester does not provide community members with a feeling of unity in doing what is best for the student.

Second, the ELL program holds an important role in the adaptation process and should adopt strategies that work for refugee students. Refugee students with little or no English language skills use this program to learn English and receive assistance in transitioning to a typical American classroom. However, the ELL program must also navigate its educational role within the context of preexisting cultural identities for their students. It is in this area that the ELL program needs to evaluate its teaching practices. English language acquisition is an important step in ensuring refugee students a chance for success in American schools, but it should not come at the expense of the student's cultural identity. Language is an essential component of cultural identity, and students should not be forced to unlearn—what Berry (1992) called shedding—their native language. Instead, best practices for refugee students should be employed that give the students voice and power in the construction of their learning process.

Storytelling allows refugee students to use their voice and share their experiences and can become an effective strategy in teaching English. It is also vital for the ELL program to examine different ways to teach subjects by finding culturally relevant examples, topics, and tools. One possible way to adequately employ storytelling—especially in the native language—and find culturally relevant ways of teaching is to promote teacher training opportunities for members of the refugee community so that they can become teachers. By opening the doors of potential employment in teacher positions to this community, the

school district can “bridge home and school and... build friendships in the classroom” (Prior and Niesz, 2013).

Finally, there should be greater consideration for offering emotional support structures for the refugee students. As exemplified by my participants’ stories, these refugee families may have experienced emotional trauma during their transition from Burma to the United States. For many families, the transition consists of dangers and a feeling of uncertainty that begins with departure from their home country and continues post-resettlement—a “continuum of precarity” according to McWilliams and Bonet (2016). As I discussed in chapter two, McBrien (2005) recommended that support services should be extended to the entire family, not just the student. Unfortunately, most school systems do not have the resources or the necessary training for staff and faculty to provide adequate support for those in need. School systems, teacher training programs, and local governments need to make changes to the systems that currently exist. Programs for emotional support for students and their families must exist within the school and the community, and teacher training programs at the university level should reevaluate minimum requirements for teacher certification. Refugee students should have every opportunity to feel safe, welcome, and accepted in their new home country, and the school system should lead the way in providing the emotional support needed to make that a reality.

Limitations of My Study

In no way is this research a complete look at the topic in question. As with every researcher, I made decisions along the way that allowed me access to and understanding of the answers to my questions; however, with each decision I also closed off another

avenue that might have offered a different view or perspective of the answers I have constructed. Every decision I made conformed to my research design, but the limitations still exist. In this section, I discuss some of the limitations that exist within this study due to those decisions I made about how to conduct my research. I do not intend for this section to be a self-indictment of my work; rather, I highlight these limitations to give my readers a clearer glimpse of how my participants were selected, why my participants were selected, and possible ways of approaching future research on this topic in a different way.

One of my first decisions when considering my research design was to only interview high school graduates. My reasoning was simple: I wanted to discuss adaptation in an American school with those who had completed their time in the school. I purposefully selected a specific type of student to include in my study. One of the consequences of focusing on that type of students was the absence of the voice of an important segment of the population that could have offered a different lens with which to confront my research question: dropouts. By focusing only upon graduates, I limited the list of potential participants to those who had shown at least an adequate ability to adapt. Those Burmese refugee students who could not adapt, did not want to adapt, or faced too many behavioral shifts and/or acculturative stressors to navigate the American school system are possible missing voices in my study. Likewise, my research design did not include conversations with current students regarding the processes they were currently using for adaptation.

Another decision I made early in my research design was to include only students who had an adequate grasp of English to engage in meaningful and deep conversation

about their stories. I did not feel that I had the necessary resources available to me when I started my research to conduct interviews and focus groups with participants who spoke a native Burmese language. The inclusion of only those who speak English with comfort failed to consider the stories of Burmese refugees who have voluntarily chosen to not learn English—perhaps opening a door of understanding into what Berry (1992) termed separation—or Burmese refugees who have struggled with the language portion of adaptation. My study focuses on Burmese refugee graduates with English-speaking ability and high school diplomas.

One final limitation of this study is not based upon a specific decision I made, but it is related to my selection and acceptance of the participants for my study. Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven attended school in a relatively small window of time. During this small window of time, there is the likelihood of little institutional change related to available programs and resources or their implementation. By expanding the timeline of participants' attendance in the school district, a researcher could analyze different methods employed by this American school to enable adaptation. Similarly, my participants entered their American schools in 4th-7th grades. There is no evidence in my study for a Burmese refugee student adapting to an American school in their early elementary years or their late secondary years. Each of these missing populations offer potential reasons for different findings—the possibility of less time in the home country before becoming a refugee or less time in the American school system with which to adapt. The limitations I have mentioned do not discredit the findings for my research. The stories of Mark, Nina, Sammy, and Steven are their stories, and my restorying and analysis pertain only to them.

Future Research

As I envision future research emanating from my study, I imagine a study that addresses some of the limitations I addressed above. I think it would be valuable to conduct a study with a similar research design that includes the stories of Burmese refugee students who were high school dropouts, who do not speak conversational English, or who attended school in the same district over an elongated period of time. I would like to continue my work by conducting similar research with Burmese refugees who have little or no conversational English. By selecting individuals without conversational English, this new study could produce results that differ greatly from my current study. Each individual's story offers additional insight of the positive and negative aspects of life before and after leaving Burma and the moments of confrontation they encounter as they navigate adaptation to an American school.

I also imagine conducting research over migrant integration. The purpose of this research would be to strengthen or refute my proposed theory of Syncretic Integration. For this study, I would use a mixed-methods approach in which the quantitative results would inform qualitative follow-up interviews. I would use a survey to assess acculturation style (integration, assimilation, marginalization, or separation). Included in the survey for those who qualify as integrationists would be a second section that would assess the level of maintenance and movement. After completing the quantitative evaluation, I would randomly select 2-3 individuals from each type of integration (idle, enthusiastic, and shifting) to participate in 2 interviews and a focus group.

Finally, as a historian at heart, I would like to conduct research with a different focus—the migrant teacher, not the student. I envision an historical research study that

evaluates the progress of the ELL program within the school district in this study. This research would focus on changes made within the program to adapt to Burmese refugee students, why those changes were made, and how that affected the program and the teachers involved. The purpose of this research would be to highlight the success (or possible lack of success) in balancing theory and practice in an ever-evolving educational system.

Reflection

As I reflect upon my journey through this process, I am overwhelmed with how much I have learned. I entered into this process with apprehension and visions of failure. My biggest fear was that I would be unable to find Burmese refugees who were willing to sit with me and discuss their experiences, especially during the lockdown period that accompanied Covid-19. Yet, I found four amazing individuals who agreed to participate, and I was shocked at how forthcoming they were with me. As I prepared for my first interview, I started to think back on every lesson I had learned about interviewing others and engaging in conversation with individuals who speak English as a second language. These lessons informed how I approached each step of my research.

Before I left for China as a school representative on an educational exchange, I engaged in conversation with one of my colleagues, who had previously served in that position, about his experience. One of his comments had significant meaning for me as I contemplated my interviews. He advised me to be aware of all conversations that were taking place among those with whom I was in their company. As one who doesn't speak Mandarin Chinese, my colleague cautioned me to not assume that others were not in a conversation just because I couldn't understand what was being said. It would be rude to

interrupt others' discussion. The key was to ensure that everyone had finished talking before beginning a new thought. In many ways, his advice corresponded with a family situation I encounter at home. My youngest daughter has apraxia of speech. She struggles putting sentences together, and it is much more difficult if she is trying to construct a new sentence. I have noticed others speaking over her at times, but it is because they can't tell that she is in the middle of conversing with them at the time. As I contemplated these ideas, I formulated a strategy for conducting interviews—and especially the focus group—with a greater attention to listening to any and all conversations without interrupting.

While my focus on listening was a success, I recognize the unreconcilable issue of a white, middle-aged American restorying the experiences of Burmese refugee students. I struggled throughout my data analysis confronting the fact that, to a certain extent, I would be speaking for my participants. To the best of my ability, I have allowed my participants' words to carry the story, but in the end, it is my lens through which the analysis is completed. During the data collection and data analysis stages, I frequently logged my thoughts in my personal dissertation journal. My entries mainly focused on my assumptions and their influence on my interpretation of my participants' stories. Through member-checking, journaling, and constant conversation with a former classmate and my wife, I believe I have produced a trustworthy research study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following questions are semi-structured questions for the first interview and will be adapted according to the interview process. Additional interview questions will emerge after the first interview.

1. Tell me about your life in Burma.
2. What happened that made you and your family decide to leave Burma?
3. Describe your journey to the United States. Anything particularly interesting happen? Can you share a story or two?
4. What were your experiences of attending schools in Burma?
5. Tell me about one of your first experiences in the United States.
6. Tell me about your first experiences in the American school or school district.
7. Describe a typical day for you when you were a student.
8. How would you describe your process of coping with cultural change?

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

1. Share stories about the stresses you faced in Burma?
2. Share stories about some of the stresses you faced after arriving in the United States?
3. Describe the ways you tried to handle those stresses?
4. Tell me about a moment when you felt the United States was a welcoming place or a moment in which you felt the United States was an unwelcoming place.
5. Were there times when you hated being in the United States?
6. Were there times when you felt like the United States was now home?
7. Tell me about a time the school district attempted to assist you in your first year in the American school district.
8. Share a story when the American school district offered support that you felt was of great benefit/not of great benefit.

Appendix C: Writing Prompts

1. What was your most memorable occasion when you felt cared for and supported by others in the American school? Please describe it. How did the support meet your needs at the time? Did it have any long-term impact? In what ways?
2. What was your most memorable experience in extracurricular activities at the American school? Please describe it. Why was it so memorable? Did it have any long-term impact? In what ways?
3. What was your most memorable experience as a student in activities outside of the American school? Please describe it. Why was it so memorable? Did it have any long-term impact? In what ways?
4. Tell me about living in Burma. Describe a moment that represents your life in Burma.

Appendix D: IRB Approval



Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 08/27/2020
Application Number: IRB-20-374
Proposal Title: Adaptation for Refugee Students: A Narrative Inquiry of Burmese Refugees in a Midwestern American School

Principal Investigator: Justin McCrackin
Co-Investigator(s):
Faculty Adviser: Hongyu Wang
Project Coordinator:
Research Assistant(s):

Processed as: Exempt
Exempt Category:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,
Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Justin Matthew McCrackin

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: ADAPTATION FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF
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