Summer 8-13-2016

We the People: We Survive, We Work, We Live, We Belong An Autobiographical Study of One Refugee’s Victory Over Poverty and Racism to Lead an English Learner Program

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WE THE PEOPLE: WE SURVIVED, WE WORK, WE LIVE, WE BELONG

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF ONE REFUGEE’S VICTORY OVER POVERTY AND RACISM TO LEAD AN ENGLISH LEARNER PROGRAM

By

Sambath Ouk

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 12, 2016

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Jill Watson, Judy Auger and Dr. Dianna Seng. Dr. Watson, thank you so much for taking a risk to work with me on this life story research. You always knew how to motivate me and keep me going through the many times when I wanted to quit. Judy, thank you so much for supporting me through the years. Your work as EL Coordinator has helped so many students like me. You are my role model and my inspiration. Dr. Seng, thank you for your continued support and patience. Both of us know that I had many failed attempts at completing this project. Yet you continued to believe in me.

I would also like to thank my grandpa and mother along with my three friends who were willing to share their stories and experiences with me. Life as a refugee is tough. Yet remembering the stories and sharing them out loud is even tougher sometimes because of the many bad memories that we don’t want to relive. Yet the five of you were willing to fight through the pain of bad memories to help enlighten educators of your plight in hopes of making the lives of many refugees better.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A Refugee’s Experience

The things I see, the things I hear
The things that came that brought me tears

The bomb that dropped, the lives it took
The baby who was overlooked

The camp has grown to bring in fear
The bloody people everywhere

America, my dreams still end, my nightmares last
All because the killing past

The killing fields where bodies lay
Please come to an end may this I pray

Nature is quiet, the temples gone
Walking through the red glazed lawn

Changing people rich and poor
Never to dream again wishing never more

Love is filled still in my heart
But this experience won’t ever part

Written by Sambath Ouk – 1997

I want to walk backwards into my life and relive the events that created me in hopes of learning about what matters to a person when overcoming the odds. I want to
relook at all the major events that passed through the lives of myself and my family and also all the little encounters that seemed meaningless at the time but now overshadow many important things in retrospect. Despite this being a personal reflection, it will not be an individual journey and is intended to benefit all who work with at-risk students, especially students in the category of the refugee and immigrant experience.

My life was blessed by many who have walked through it. And my story would not need to be told if it was only a story of individual struggle before obtaining enlightenment and achieving one’s dreams. No, it’s not this. It’s a refugee story and a reflection on collective struggles, collective risks and collective investments. My story is not unique. Any refugee and immigrant story is filled with struggle and a will to overcome. However, my hope in telling it is that it will help develop a path for others who were born into a life filled with obstacles, a way to tell their stories and the events that happened that led them to make the right choices, bringing them out of the circle of death, poverty, and despair. Furthermore, as refugees and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) range in the hundreds of thousands across the U.S., examining my own story and others’ in this research may provide us with some themes as to what needs to occur in order to help our students achieve the success they strive for and meet the high expectations that teachers push them to meet.

My particular interest in the topic arose from personal reflections of my life. I was a refugee student unable to speak because I didn’t know the English words. Without these words, I was destined to have no voice. Without a voice, I believed that I would never understand what it means to be free in this country of freedom. And without freedom, I
have to question in my own tongue, whether or not I am truly living in America or just existing in it.

If I were to never learn the words and find my own voice, America would have just felt like another refugee camp. Fortunately for me, classes in English as a Second Language (ESL) taught me the words. Being an ESL student, I was able to find my voice. And since then, I have been speaking loudly with this voice to help further the field of ESL teaching, first as an ESL student, then an ESL teacher and now an ESL program coordinator in charge of directing the practices of ESL in a Minnesota school district.

Throughout this journey from refugee camp to leading an ESL program, I have learned to admire greatly the work done in this field and understand that there still exist many gaps in understanding and many barriers to finding the best ways to support refugee ESL students. For example, if we look at the differences between our non-refugee and refugee Asian groups, you find a drastic difference in performance. Non-refugee Asian groups do extremely well as shown on state standardized test scores. However, refugee Asian groups struggle to perform. The Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (CAPM, 2014) states that only 40% of Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian students are proficient in reading and math. Karen students, who are one of the newest refugee groups in Minnesota, are only 17% proficient in math, the lowest out of any racial or ethnic group in the entire state as measured by the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (CAPM, 2014).

Throughout my career in education, I have not come across much research that was written and conducted by the refugees firsthand. I fear that this leads to a gap in understanding the full struggle of refugee students and their families. Therefore, since
I’ve lived the refugee experience firsthand and grew up as an ESL student within the Minnesota school system, I want urgently to connect the dots of my experiences, bringing to light the practices that worked and didn’t work for me and kids like me so that educators working with refugee students can acquire a more complete understanding of the refugee students: who are the refugee kids, what troubles do they have adjusting to life in America, and how can they be helped through these troubles.

I anticipate that my work will impact best practices in the following areas: district programming, classroom instruction, and relationship building with refugee families. As educators read through this research, it is my hopes that the stories from this study will guide changes in programming to better meet the needs of refugee students. And as readers develop a deeper understanding of the struggles of refugees and what it takes for them to succeed, classroom instruction is improved and educators find more successes in their efforts to establish positive relationships with the students and their families.

Refugees - Children Without A Nation

The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Stein, 1986, p. 5). Many refugees come to America to escape war and persecution in their native countries. However, the path to America is not a direct one. And at every twist and turn, new surprises are encountered with only one thing constant: the refugees themselves have little control over what happens to them. A
refugee travels the world, and with every settlement, the traveler encounters a new language, a new culture, and a new experience.

However, unlike the common tourist, refugees tend not to be met with a friendly smile and don’t automatically travel by plane or take a cruise on a fancy boat. Refugees flee by any means possible to stay alive and even more so to give an opportunity for their children to live. Neil R.M. Buist, a physician in Khao-I-Dang, a Cambodian refugee camp in the 1980’s, talks about the difficulties of the Cambodian refugee journey. Buist describes the scenes of death, carnage, and destruction due to warfare fought by multiple factions. On a daily basis he saw refugees cross over the Cambodian border into Thailand wounded from torture, gun shots and landmines. Buist wrote,

The unpalatable truth is that the Khmer refugees are not only fleeing from the horror of atrocities perpetuated during the Pol Pot regime, from the fear of continuing struggles between the Khmer Serai and the Khmer Rouge, from their deep-rooted fear of their life-long enemies, the Vietnamese, and also from starvation, but at the same time they are escaping to a country which is not particularly well disposed toward them. (Buist, 1980, p. 36)

Rivalries between countries are not uncommon. In geopolitics, one neighboring country often feels superior to the other, especially if one country is developed and the other is at war or going through conflict. We see this in the situation between Somalia and Kenya and Somalia and Ethiopia. We see this in the situation between North African migrants and the Mediterranean coastal European countries. These types of relationships existed in Asia during the Indo-China wars and continue today between Thailand and its neighboring countries. The situation is also a dilemma for the island/country/continent of
Australia and refugees from the Pacific islands. The recent British vote to leave the European Union was sparked partly by resettlement of immigrants and refugees in Britain from the Middle East and North Africa. New British Prime Minister candidates vow to make it harder for immigrants and refugees to enter Britain (Costas, July 8th, 2016). Even the relationship between the United States and Mexico is an example of this situation in that some in the United States are hesitant towards supporting immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The point is, the individuals and their families who flee conflict are not always accepted and wanted in the countries they hope will give them a safe haven.

Furthermore, children who were born in a refugee camp and spent most of their lives there struggle to find the proper identity to describe themselves. Since I was a young child, I have struggled to know who I am. The struggle has not been related to finding out what I like or don’t like or what I want to do in the future like other kids. The struggle is knowing if I belong anywhere. Where is my country? What nationality am I? Do I have a particular culture to relate to? Which history should I be proud of? Am I a child without a nation? Is that what a refugee is? I tried to ask and seek answers. However, no one was able to tell me definitively because they all told me something different.

Am I Thai? I was born in Thailand in the refugee camps of Khao-I-Dang. No, I don’t speak Thai. I didn’t know any Thais until I met someone from Thailand during my college years and to that person and all other Thais, I am not Thai. Do I want to be Thai? No, not after hearing stories about how the Thais would turn away my uncle and other Cambodian refugees by having them run down the steep slopes of the Dangrek Mountains while firing guns at their backs. Even if I were accepted as a Thai national, I would not want to be Thai.
Am I American? For the longest time, I did not feel American. My first recollection of life was when I was four years old. I woke up from a nap. I went outside with a little toy motorcycle. I played on the sidewalk and I saw other Americans walk by making obscene noises that they pretended to be an Asian language. They left garbage in my yard and spat in my face. I did not know English. I didn’t know what to say back to them. I just stared at them as this was a form of insult in my culture to challenge an older person by looking at them straight in the eye. I did not want to forget who they were or what that moment meant. I learned very early on from others in my community that in order to gain respect from Americans, I have to be able to beat them at everything I do. No, I’m not American. Americans were my competitors.

Am I Chinese? My dad was a Chinese refugee into Cambodia during the Chinese Civil War. However, I wasn’t able to know who my dad was until four years ago. Complexity from the Cambodian War separated my mother and my father. Maybe in the future I can be proud of my Chinese heritage. However, for the moment, I don’t know enough about half of me to be Chinese.

If I’m not any of the above then surely I must be Cambodian. For a long time, it was what I wanted to be. However, the suffering and the sorrow my family experienced during the Killing Fields are things they will never believe I can understand. The Killing Fields was a period in Cambodian history that took place from April 17, 1975, to December 1978 under the reign of the Khmer Rouge, a communist Cambodian regime responsible for killing nearly a quarter of Cambodia’s population (Nakanishi & Matias-Padua, 2008). For the past 35 years, my family has talked about these events like they just happened yesterday. As much as I and people of my generation wanted to
understand, it almost seemed soothing to them to be able to tell us that we didn’t. Furthermore, our struggles in the United States with school, racism, and all other problems seemed small in their eyes and silent to their ears no matter how loud we tried to speak up. Their answer to our explanation always was, “You don’t know what struggle is. Have you experienced starvation? No, you can eat even when you’re not hungry. Have you had to trade a life of someone you love to save a life of someone you love more? (My mother stole rations from her little sister to feed her parents which she believes led to the death of her little sister due to starvation).” No, those are not the kind of tough choices I have had to make. So am I Cambodian? No, I fear that I may not be good enough to be. Who am I then? For a long time I had to ask myself this question.

The only definition I knew to characterize me properly was that I was a refugee. I was a child growing up without a nation. And this struggle to belong just somewhere played a big part in the lives of myself, my uncle and aunt, and our friends growing up together in a refugee community in Minnesota. The state of Minnesota has resettled many refugees from Southeast Asia such as the Hmong, Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, and more recently the Karen from Burma. Minnesota has also resettled many east African refugees, with the largest East African group being from Somalia.

Resettlement - Trying to Live Again

My Family

My family and I were brought to America in May of 1982. We resettled in Rochester, Minnesota, a town famous for the Mayo Clinic. Cambodians were the first large wave of immigrants to resettle in Rochester, Minnesota, in a long time. There were other groups that were being resettled in Rochester, too, from Eastern Europe and
Southeast Asia, such as the Romanians, Vietnamese and Laotians. However, they didn’t arrive in such large numbers as the Cambodians. The St. Paul Foundation’s estimate of Southeast Asians in Rochester in 1987 identified 1,860 Cambodians, 340 Vietnamese, 230 Laotian and 40 Hmong (Dougherty & McCormick, 1993).

During my years as a teenager, Rochester was rated as the “Best Place to Live” by Money Magazine (Money Magazine, 1993). However, these were the headlines I remembered, “Rochester wrestling with racial tension” (McAuliffle, 1984), “Refugees encounter some bias” (Andrist, 1983), “Asian gang has violent reputation” (Gregorson, 1992), and “Students take fight against racism beyond one day, one rally” (Dougherty, 1997). These were headlines from a local newspaper in Rochester. I remember Rochester, the best place to live in the United States, to be a very violent place for me and other refugees.

However, the thing that stuck most in my memory growing up were the meals that I had every day. Prior to elementary school, our early years in America didn’t seem so bad. There were 10 people living in our house: My grandpa and grandma, my mom and me, my three aunts and one uncle, my adopted aunt and my grandpa’s nephew who came along in place of my oldest uncle who we thought was dead. We all lived together and pooled our money. I remember sleeping on the kitchen floor, then the living room floor as my adopted aunt moved out, then eventually having a room to myself. My favorite meal back then was rice and dried radishes. I had that twice a day. What went along with that was a can of beer given to me, his four-year-old grandson, by my grandfather. It was one of the few material things that he was able to share with me.
My grandfather loved his beers. He always drank cans of Schlitz Malt Liquor. He would wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, go for a walk outside and then come back and drink and drink until he passed out. He would wake up the next morning and do the same thing. I never wondered why he drank so much. I just wondered why he couldn’t stay awake long enough to see me learn new things. As I got older, I realized that he was drinking to cope with life.

A conversation that I remembered having so clearly with my grandfather at the age of eight was when we were riding in a car to Boston to meet up with his younger brother. We talked about what dreams he had when he went to sleep.

Me – Grandpa, what do you like to dream about?

Grandpa – Fighting in the war with my friends. I think it’s the last time I’ll have friends.

Me – You can find friends here. I find my friends at school. You can go to school and find friends.

Grandpa – My friends are in Cambodia and that’s why all my dreams take place in Cambodia.

Me – You never dream about America?

Grandpa – No.

Me – Are you not happy in America?

Grandpa – No. At least not how I remember happiness to be.

Me – If you are so unhappy in America, why don’t we go back to Cambodia?

Grandpa – I knew my life was done the day I crossed the border into Thailand. I crossed the border to help my children survive. I would have been happier dying
with my friends in Cambodia. And I continued on to the United States so that my children and you would have a chance to live again. Make me proud and live your life well.

I heard him, but as an 8 year old kid, once he started talking for more than a sentence at a time, my attention already focused elsewhere – to the scenery on our drive to Boston. At that moment I felt so free taking in the scenery. I was conquering the world one mile at a time. However, I didn’t realize that as my grandpa watched the scenery, he felt further and further away from home trapped in this foreign country.

It wasn’t until I got older that I understood what my grandfather was referring to. In elementary school, I ran around and played with everyone. Kindergarten and the first two months of 1st grade were very hard. I went through a silent period where I could not understand anything that was going on. I just played when I was supposed to play and played when I wasn’t supposed to play, often getting into big trouble with the teachers. The school that I attended had no English Learner (EL) support. However, I transferred to a school with EL support and my language abilities grew quickly. Elementary school wasn’t a problem. When I got to middle school though, things changed drastically. Suddenly I felt like I was only allowed to hang around other Cambodian kids. My American friends formed a white gang that inflicted violence towards minority groups called the “All American Boyz.” The American flag was their symbol. My Cambodian friends and I matched their hatred with our own gang, “The Royal Cambodian Bloods.” This sudden change made me understand why life was so hard for my grandpa. If it was hard for me to fit in and adjust to life here when I knew the language and culture, how
hard must it be for him? He doesn’t speak English, and doesn’t have a set time to adjust to the culture. Therefore, he wakes up every day hoping to close his eyes again.

The ironic thing was that if he fell to sleep after drinking, it was good for my family--it gave us peace and a chance to move on. There were times when he didn’t sleep. During these times, his axe was drawn every time he got drunk. As a child, I stood there watching my mom and her sisters and brothers take beatings from the father who loved them so much. I watched my grandmother fear for her life as her flesh got cut, her skin bruised and her bones cracked. I stood by and watched. I wanted so much to cry but never did because I did not want to draw his anger my way. He never touched me, however. For some reason or another, he took care of me like a precious monument to himself.

My grandfather was a leader in the resistance against the French. He was brought back into the army to train the new soldiers who were fighting in the Communist -Capitalist conflict. He was respected by everyone. Now that he’s in America, he cleans toilets for a living. He couldn’t bear the shame. He felt he disgraced our long blood line of warriors and noblemen. The Ouk family never submitted to French rule and led the revolt for Cambodia’s independence. In America, my grandfather gets yelled at for not being able to clean toilets well. Therefore, as much as I know my grandfather had no right to act the way he did towards my family, it made me feel a little bit better blaming life’s circumstances than blaming him.

My mother had a harder time seeing what was going on and feeling helpless to the situation. She wanted so much for life to be better for her son and herself so she moved away from her family. My mother had strong faith in education and believed that was the
only path that can lead our lives to a better tomorrow. Sadly, she came here at an older age already and did not have enough time to pick up her English to perform well in school. From the day she started high school to the day she was forced to quit, every day was tough for her. She was given a bus to school but she stopped riding it because American kids would stick gum in her hair and sexually harassed her. The bus driver, the teachers and the school turned a blind eye, saying that she misinterpreted the action of kids trying to be her friends. She didn’t have the vocabulary to go into details and every time she would try to make a gesture to describe what was going on, she felt like a clown acting out comedic scenes for people to laugh at her and at the pain she was feeling.

Minnesota statute states that, “A pupil who becomes age 21 after enrollment is eligible for continued free public school enrollment until at least one of the following occurs: (1) the first September 1 after the pupil's 21st birthday; (2) the pupil's completion of the graduation requirements; (3) the pupil's withdrawal with no subsequent enrollment within 21 calendar days; or (4) the end of the school year (120A.20: Admission to Public School, 2014). Under state statute, my mother would age out of public high school at age 21. After aging out, my mother tried to go after her GED. However, failure after failure led her to lose hope in school. She tried to apply for work but struggled with the question of what was her highest degree completed. Who was going to offer a job to someone who couldn’t complete high school? With no job and no more opportunities to go to school, my mother tried to make it by gambling at the casinos.

The meals that I remember most from my teenage years were eggs, cereal and packaged noodles like a cheaper version of ramen. Actually, eggs were my favorite, because when I came home and smelled scrambled eggs in the frying pan, I knew that my
mom was home and that someone was there to ask me how my day went. When she was home, I had eggs and rice twice a day. Those meals along with school lunch meant I was able to complete my three meals a day that the school always said we should have.

Sadly, most of the time, she wasn’t home. During the school year, food was covered at lunch time. Water was free at home. I could walk four miles to my grandma’s house, but I didn’t want to be a burden to them and now that I was older, I was scared about what I may be asked to do if I once again saw my grandfather hurting my grandmother. So I stayed home and talked to my belly, asking it to be quiet.

When there was food at home, it usually consisted of a box of cereal and a box of packaged noodles on top of the fridge, eggs, and a carafe of water inside the fridge. We always had a bag of rice in the cupboards. Rice, we were never short. Every time I had a sleep over at one of my American friends’ house, I was always amazed at how much food they had in their fridge. They had so much food that they even had two fridges, one inside the house and the other a freezer in the garage for their meats. I was also surprised that he didn’t have more strength with all that food.

As a teenager, I never viewed food as a problem even though we were short. I knew that when my mom came back from the casino, she would take me grocery shopping. I just hated that sometimes I had to wait so long for her to come back. Her average was three days from home. However, sometimes she would be gone up to eight days, leaving me alone at home. There were times when she was gone longer, and I had to ask my uncles or aunt to take me to the casino to bring her home. Every time became more and more difficult and every time, I felt like I was losing the only thing meaningful to me, that sense of family.
Resettlement - Trying to Live Again

My Friends

As my sense of family deteriorated, my friends became more and more important to me. The difficult thing about this scenario was none of us could help pull each other out of this cycle of poverty and struggle. We could only support each other as we went through it together. I had nine friends who were going through the exact same things I did. Out of the nine, there were six Cambodians, two Hmong, and one Laotian. Counting me, there were ten of us total who were very close from elementary school through high school. They went through everything I went through. We understood things about each other that our teachers and even our parents struggled to understand. We all came from violent, broken homes where our parents struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We were poor. Our parents couldn’t speak English well, so there were many times we had to be the adults in conversations with Americans. To sum it up, we were refugee children in need of family.

The ten of us grew to be just that. We were brothers who shared everything. A special memory that I had in middle school was about baggy pants. That was the style back then, but none of us could afford to be in style. The only clothes we got were hand-me-downs from older family members or purchased at the Salvation Army. However, we did have one pair of baggy pants between the 10 of us which we shared just to be in style once a week.

Sharing the pants was a story about friendship. However, coming up with the pants in the first place describes criminal behavior. What we couldn’t afford we stole. The pair of pants that we shared was stolen from the GAP. We were lucky that baggy
pants were the latest fashion trend because the sharing couldn’t have happened if we had to steal different sizes. We stole to share and we also stole to feed ourselves. Besides the clothes from the GAP, we were even better at stealing pops and chips from the gas stations. And since there were ten of us, we could keep rotating so that we wouldn’t get caught.

We never stole for fun and we never wanted to cause anyone trouble. We stole just to experience the sensations that other average kids were experiencing, the sensation of being clothed and the sensation of being full. Also, we were stealing for each other so that despite the little capacity we had to be generous, we still were able to achieve that sense of helping out a friend. However, every time we would go pull off another heist, my mind was never at ease. My mother always told me that a poor beggar still has his dignity even though he’s begging because his actions don’t hurt anyone else. No matter how hard life is, there is never justification for stealing something that doesn’t belong to you. Each time we stole, I blocked this life lesson out by asking myself, “Does she truly care for me as she left home for weeks to gamble at the casino?”

Stealing was the least of my worries as we were good at it and we never got caught. It was the fights in school that I couldn’t avoid that were the real problem. From the end of 7th grade to the end of high school, big fights happened about once or twice a year and each fight that we got involved in was always labeled “gang activity.”

Truthfully, the fights were not caused by gang activities. The fights were caused by race and the unwillingness by the majority race to accept us. Even though America does not have a caste system by law, evidence of racial segregation can be seen throughout the country in cities and neighborhoods divided by race and color (Alba & Chamlin, 1983).
Students in schools segregated themselves by race. Asian kids only hung out with other Asian kids and white kids hung out with other white kids. Different immigrant groups were friendly with each other. However, close relationships were created more within students’ particular racial or ethnic groups. There were always exceptions to this practice but in general, this was how it was.

Growing up, I felt that many things in Rochester were separated by race and color. From middle school on, there were two main opposing gangs and a few smaller ones. White students formed a gang called the “All American Boyz” or “AABz” using the American flag as their symbol. Southeast Asian immigrants being majority Cambodian formed the “Royal Cambodian Bloods” or “RCB’s” using a three point crown as their symbol. Despite the rivalry, these two gangs did share a few similarities. Race, culture and color were the predominant requirement of membership in these two gangs. Furthermore, members in each gang felt like they were the targets of violence and bullying from the other group. However, a big difference was that the Cambodian gang, even though being predominantly Cambodian, was multicultural and included a small branch of disenfranchised white youth called “507 White Cambodian Bloods.” The “AABz” were identified at times by the local newspaper as a white supremacist gang. Their members were all white. Along with the American flag symbol on their clothes and backpacks, the confederate flags were painted on the windows of their truck. They inflicted violence on the refugees and immigrants as a statement that they didn’t want us around. The “RCB’s” inflicted violence on them to send a message that they weren’t afraid to stay. The response was an effort to fight back against racism and discrimination. Sadly, back and forth fights between the two groups happened so frequently that it
became very hard to identify which group was causing the problem and determine who was really attacking whom.

Fights were common at all three middle schools. The school on the north end of town had more Cambodian kids than kids in the white supremacist gang. That school was relatively peaceful. The middle school in the center of town had an even number of white supremacist kids and Cambodian kids. Knife fights were common at this school culminating with a Cambodian student slitting the chin of a student in the white supremacist gang.

The school on the south side had more white supremacist gang members than Cambodian kids. This was the school that I went to. Fights happened less frequently at this school but taunting and threats to fight occurred on an almost daily basis. Nonetheless, I was very comfortable in this environment of confrontation.

When I stole things, I felt guilty. I felt like a scum. But when I got in a fight, I felt invigorated. I was even better at fighting than stealing. With stealing, I often asked myself why I was doing this. With fighting there was no hesitation. It was a game to me and I wanted to keep fighting more and more people and bigger and bigger people. I never worried about getting hurt. I just thought a fight at school would always get broken up. School to me was a safe place to fight. However, things were different for my Hmong friend.

There was a morning close to the end of our 8th grade year. He decided to go study instead of walk around with us before school. Four of my friends and I were walking around the school when we saw ambulance workers run into the school. A student was put on the stretcher and we just laughed, not realizing that it was one of our
friends who got beaten up to the point where he was having seizures. At that moment, I realized it wasn’t just a game.

Going into high school the fights got even more violent. We went to a round shaped school. Six doors were placed throughout the school. This was the south side high school which brought even more white supremacist gang members as their people combined from the two middle schools. My Cambodian friends and I were even more outnumbered as the majority of the Cambodian community lived on the north side of town. Suddenly going to school did not feel safe anymore. More groups were formed at the high school by a growing but still small number of Mexicans, Somalis, and African Americans. Fights at the school now were not just between Cambodians and the white supremacist gang members. Smaller fights took place between Somalis and African Americans. Why Somalis and African Americans were fighting was never really clear to me. However the result of this led to the Cambodians convincing the other immigrant groups to join together. This led to it being clearer that the underlying issues for these conflicts were not because of gangs. It seemed to not even be about race. The fights were between immigrant and non-immigrant students. The sad part about this time was that with so many fights, it was very difficult to focus on learning. Immigrant students and non-immigrant students began to park in different parking lots and entered school on the opposite sides of the building. There was even a conscious effort by me and some of my friends to walk around the long way to class to avoid passing a certain door. I know the other side felt the same way and did the same thing. This conscious practice kept me away from fights almost my entire high school years.
At home, we struggled to pay rent and debt was accruing on our car loan. The cable was shut off. Electricity was cut. I worked at three fast food restaurants and as a janitor at IBM from 4:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. I did this along with going to school for a while to help pay off my mom’s bills. Fear was also setting into my mind for the first time. I wasn’t scared of getting hurt at school. I was scared of what would happen to my mother and my little sister if I were to get hurt. Waking up for school became tougher and tougher. But for some reason or another I chose to stay. And out of our group of 10, two of us made it to college after high school, me and another person. Eight of my friends didn’t make it to college. Out of those eight, four dropped out of high school, one died, and one went to prison and is still awaiting deportation calls.

Guiding Questions - What Helped Me Persevere?

When I made it to college, giving up never crossed my mind. However, prior to that, every waking moment was a struggle. In elementary, I didn’t want to go to school because I was afraid of what would happen to my family at home. In middle school I was tired on a regular basis and couldn’t wait for lunch because I hadn’t eaten the night before. I was embarrassed about my clothes as they no longer fit and still resembled the fashion of 10 years prior. During high school, my mother had lots of debts that I needed to pay off. I was also tired from working until 2:00 in the morning. I walked into school smelling like cleaning chemicals. I was not embarrassed of it. I was not ashamed of what clothes I wore or anything else anymore. I was worried because, financially, I felt college was out of reach. However, something kept me going. What was it? There must have been events, interventions, or influences after each moment of hardship that pushed me to
tell myself that I should try school out for just another day. Believe in yourself for just another day. And maybe the next day is the day when things become alright.

The purpose of this study is to find out what those recurring events were in my life that kept me going. Was it teacher encouragement? Was it the belief that education was the only path to a better life, the lessons taught to me by my mother’s personal journey? Was it competition against a group of people who did not believe in me and people like me? I seek to find answers to these questions as it is my belief that if I can define particular moments that pulled me up when I was down, including what programs and who was responsible for them, then others can learn from these patterns and provide more effective support to refugee and immigrant students with whom they work. It is my hope that the themes from these events may help teachers successfully reach the many students who have the same obstacles that were in my life.

Summary

In this first chapter, I wanted to expose you to some of the major themes and issues that occurred throughout my life. I explained my struggle with identity being born as a refugee and not being able to fully attach myself to a nation. I also talked about the struggles of my family and friends as they tried to adjust to life in America. The description of the struggles correlates to the hardship of living through poverty, racial barriers, and coping with cultural differences and PTSD. This chapter also asks the question of what important and recurring events served to lift me up when life pushed me down. The recurring events and answers to these questions will be described in later chapters.
Looking Ahead To Chapter Two - Factors For Success

In Chapter One, I demonstrated how difficult it was to be a refugee, especially a refugee child born in a refugee camp, therefore not allowing you to fully connect with your parents’ cultural heritage and also not fully being able to define a home nationality. I also discussed the difficulties of resettling in America for the older and younger generation of Cambodian refugees. Problems with language barriers, culture, and racism played a major role in hindering successful resettlement.

In the next chapter, we will look at personal narratives, documentaries and autobiographies of people’s lives and the struggles they had to overcome. The investigation of these personal narratives is to explore similar themes and find out what events need to take place to give people with great obstacles set against them the ability to succeed. Common themes will emerge and it will be those common themes that will set the stage for the remaining three chapters.

Chapter Three will focus on the methodology of the study as I explain the manner in which I will conduct my narrative analysis with the inclusion of life stories, recorded dialogues, and personal interviews. I will go in depth to explain my techniques in implementing the research on my own story and the stories of others. In Chapter Four, I will explore my own personal journey. We will take a look at historical events in Cambodia and draw parallels as to how those events influence the resettlement experience in America and the outlook Cambodian people have for survival. Furthermore, I’ll bring in the stories of my friends and relatives through recorded interviews and conversations to complete my personal life story. Chapter Five will
examine implications of the study and will provide suggestions on what educators need to do to have positive effects on students surviving the refugee experience. This chapter will draw on examples from the previous four chapters leading to a conclusion for better understanding of the personal life and struggle of a refugee student and what programs are required to be established in order to meet the needs of these students.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

THE NEW COLOSSUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

(Lazarus, 1883)

Refugees come to America from all over the world. They may not know of this poem or the meaning of the Statue of Liberty as it stands for freedom and acceptance of people from all over the world. However, the majority of refugees who come to the United States are made aware of America’s spirit of freedom. They believe that coming to America is the opportunity for them to live again, for them to rebuild their future, for their kids to have the opportunities they never had and for their kids to never again go hungry. And as refugees experience the darkest night of war, many yearn for the lights of America.
However, for many refugees, this journey from war, to the camps, and to America was not greeted by the smile of Lady Liberty but by the open gates of struggle through poverty, identity, cultural dissonance and the hardships of recreating a home for themselves and their families. This gate of struggle is a maze controlled by an unwritten system that tends to keep people down rather than pull them up. And for the people who have to navigate it, they are begging once more to not be played as a pawn in life’s game with no written rules for some and too many for others, wondering when, if ever, they will have control of their life again.

Format of Literature Review

In presenting this review of literature, I am following the narrative analysis autobiographical methodology which is described in detail in Chapter Three. In this methodology, both scholarly research and other, narrative sources—novels, short stories, journals, movies, documentaries— are drawn upon to provide insight into the experience of refugees and the events or influences that lifted them up and gave them the boost they needed to persevere. It is especially appropriate to hear accounts from different types of sources in this kind of study, since many refugee stories are not told in research studies, but in accounts the refugees tell or write themselves.

Introduction of Interpretive Themes

The literature review will explore seven total themes, four major themes of struggles and three major themes of support that are necessary to the refugees’ journey to successful resettlement. In this whole study, successful resettlement means that the refugees themselves are able to overcome the four major themes of struggle to create a happy and healthy life-style in the United States and be able to achieve their goals in life.
The first theme of struggle examines the price of survival and being able to recreate a new home for yourself after the peaceful home you once knew (if you ever knew one) is gone. This theme explores the primary phases of the refugee journey. The two stories used to describe this theme will highlight the danger of the refugee journey from a war torn village or city into the refugee camps and from the refugee camps to the disappointing resettlement process in the United States. To help engage readers in this theme, I will provide readers with my working definition of ‘home’ prior to summarizing the refugee story.

The second theme of struggle will discuss the complex identity of being a refugee. This theme relates to and extends the first theme of home and survival as both will deal with the sense of belonging. However, this theme involves more personally the inner thoughts of the refugees as they relate to the people around them. This theme will also discuss not only the identity that refugees discover for themselves but will also take a close look at the people around the refugees and what they perceive the refugees to be. The personal journal of Choua Vang (Rempel, 2004), a fictional character who is the daughter of Hmong refugees in St. Paul, Minnesota, will be used to help highlight the importance and complexity of this theme.

Just as the first and second themes apply to each other, the second and third themes are also related. The third theme explores cultural dissonance and the issues that refugees face as they arrive in their new world, which is vastly different from their native home countries or their parents’ home countries. How strong the refugees’ identities are tied to one culture or the other often determines how much struggle they will have with cultural dissonance. Even though all five of the narratives being analyzed in Chapter two
have faced the issue of cultural dissonance, we will explore more closely the stories of two younger Cambodian refugees and discuss the conflict they have trying to balance their new and old culture.

The last of the four themes deals with the refugees’ struggles through poverty. This theme does not have as close a connection to the other three. However, it speaks loudly through all of the three other themes as refugees are people who have lost all possessions, including external materials and internal familiarities with their personal culture and idea of home, the refugee journey is a journey not only through war, but through poverty as well. Poverty highlights the minimal resources available for the refugees to help themselves. This theme also draws attention to the idea that when refugees arrive into the United States, it does not mark the end of their refugee journey. It is actually only the beginning of a new stage in their journey. Studies on poverty and a discussion of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) will be presented to explain the difficulties that refugees have with poverty. Parts from a variety of refugee narratives will be used to highlight the poverty state of refugees.

The themes of recreation of home after survival, identity struggles, and cultural dissonance are very closely related because they all are connected with the idea of belonging, which is a major struggle for many refugees. However, these themes are also by themselves unique from each other. If we allow for a deep discussion of each theme, educators will understand that each theme by itself plays a vital role in the lives of our refugee students and their families. If we looked at them only as one theme, we are in danger of misunderstanding the true struggles of refugees.
After addressing the themes of struggle, I will explore the three themes of support that are needed for a refugee to have a successful resettlement experience. The three themes that I identify as playing a critical role in the success or lack of success in refugee subjects are: 1) What programs they had to support their personal needs and to empower them in their personal pursuit of their goals; 2) What individuals they had to help support and guide them as they navigated through the four themes of struggle; and 3) How strong their internal will is to succeed. After the refugee narratives are summarized, these themes will be drawn out from the refugees’ stories and discussed collectively.

In this chapter, I will review five autobiographical stories: the accounts of Darina Siv (2000), a Cambodian refugee who settled in St. Paul, Minnesota; the fictional character of Choua Vang (Rempel, 2004) the daughter of a Hmong refugee in St. Paul, Minnesota; Many Uch and Loeun Lun (2006) Cambodian refugees who immigrated to the Seattle, Washington, area; and Valentino Achak Deng (Eggers, 2006), a Sudanese refugee who settled in Atlanta. Two of the stories are of older adult refugees who spent the majority of their lives in their native country and three of the stories are of young adult refugees who grew up in the United States. While not warranting the accuracy of these reports, I take their value in understanding the topics of this study to be incontestable.

Understanding the stories and the themes that the stories tell will help educators realize and comprehend all the emotional stress their students bring with them into the classroom. As the experience of refugee adults and refugee youth differ, studying different generations and age groups of refugees will allow teachers to understand not only the struggles of the students but also the adults that may be important in the
students’ lives. This understanding will help teachers promote better or more respectful family-school partnerships, which have been shown to be important for improving academic outcomes for students (Keo, 2010).

Prior to addressing each theme, I will give you a quick overview of who the refugees are, what struggles they faced, and what they were able to accomplish after overcoming those struggles. Then I will go in depth with the parts of their stories that address the seven themes.

Theme 1 - Finding a Place to Belong

The Refugees’ Journey of Survival and Their Struggle to Rediscover Home

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997) has six definitions for home. Four of these definitions are pertinent to this study: 1) place of residence, 2) social unit formed by family, 3) familiar or usual setting, and 4) place of origin. Furthermore, being at home means one is relaxed and comfortable, in harmony with the surroundings, and on familiar ground (Merriam-Webster, 2015). For this study, the working definition of home is a summary of ideas embedded in these conversations: ‘Home’ is a relaxed, familiar place enjoyed by the individual and his or her family. It is their place of residence and maybe their place of origin. Regardless of whether or not they originated there, being at home should be a comfortable place for the individuals. In this section, we will explore whether or not refugees are able to have this idea of home as they struggle through their refugee journey from their village to the refugee camps to resettlement in America. The two stories used to discuss this theme of home are the autobiographies of Darina Siv and Valentino Achak Deng.
Darina Siv – Never Come Back

Darina was a Cambodian refugee born in 1957. She enjoyed a peaceful life in Cambodia through high school until war broke out between communist and capitalist factions resulting in the victory of the Communist Khmer Rouge. After the Communist victory, life would never be the same again for Darina. She chose to flee Cambodia with her younger brother against the disapproval of her parents. The tough decision to leave Cambodia and her parents turned out to be the right decision as she learned that her mother and father lost their lives when war between the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge entered their village. Darina eventually made it to America where she had to overcome more struggles before earning her Master’s Degree in Social Work (MSW) at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota (Siv, 2000).

The part of her story summarized here to articulate Theme 1 - Exploring the price of survival and the refugees’ ability to recreate a new home for themselves after the home they knew is destroyed - comes from her autobiography, *Never come back* (Siv, 2000). We commence from the point where she made her decision to leave her village with her younger brother and focus on the struggles of her journey through the refugee camps. Background information is also provided to help readers understand what the atmosphere was like in the Thai refugee camps during the 1980s.

Refugee Camps – Not a Desired Home

During the Vietnam War, 21 refugee relocation camps were established in Thailand along the borders of Laos and Cambodia for fleeing refugees of Hmong, Lowland Lao, Cambodian and Vietnamese origin (Faderman, 1998). Floods of refugees
came at different times throughout the era of the Indochina wars. However, many of these camps were unsafe for refugees. In his book entitled *Brutality of the Thai refugee camp*, a former colonel in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam describes the situations where camp guards and officials often beat the refugees and skimmed off rations that were intended for the refugees (Freeman, 1989). Khou Her, a Hmong refugee, describes her experiences in the Thai refugee camps as being a prisoner:

> We left behind our rice farms, our house, our pigs, chickens, everything, and we came to Thailand, and then they put us in a camp. The camp where we were kept was surrounded by barbed wires. No one was allowed to go out without permission….If you tried to go out without permission; the Thai soldiers would kick at you or kill you. (Faderman, 1998, p. 71)

If we consider this quote and our definition of home, we can conclude that a refugee camp may not encompass the idea of home, for according to this account, refugees are not living in harmony. They are neither safe nor comfortable. There are numerous accounts of Thai soldiers physically abusing or taking advantage of refugees (Faderman, 1998). Darina’s narrative below supports this point as well and raises other points to discuss. Her journey takes her multiple times into the Thai refugee camps and to multiple resettlement locations in different parts of the United States. Darina’s resettlement process speaks volumes to the struggle of refugees and their abilities to make a new home for themselves.

**Darinas Siv’s Journey to the Refugee Camps**
Darina Siv’s first attempt to escape the wars in Cambodia occurred in 1979. Darina set out with her baby brother Ra to march to Thailand with other refugees, risking her life. She did this against her parents’ wishes. Her dad believed that she was going to end up prostituting herself in Thailand to survive. There were also many stories of people who died trying to cross the border. Buist (1980) describes the constant risk of death that the Cambodian refugees faced from different factions who were fighting during that time:

35 wounded were brought in today from a skirmish out on the border camp of Makmun. We do not know whose shells and bullets have wreaked this havoc…It was the Viets shelling the camp; There was a battle between the Khmer Serai and the Khmer Rouge; There was an internecine power struggle between rival factions over lucrative gold or smuggling trade; or it was the Thai military that attacked. When faced with this unnecessary carnage, who of us cares what the reasons for the attack are? (Buist, 1980, p. 36)

The journey for refugees is never a safe journey. Often people forget the risks refugee take in order to pursue safety. Despite knowing all the dangers, Darina remained brave and was willing to take the risk. Her grandma, who may have understood her best, told her to go but with the stern advice to “never come back.”

Refugees enter the refugee camps hoping it to be a safe haven from war. However, when they reach the camps, they often learn that they are unwanted. Sometimes they are even denied entrance into the camps. We often hear the discussion and debate of whether a country should or should not accept refugees. Darina herself was denied entrance into the Thai refugee camps in the cruelest of ways.
On June 10, 1979, Darina and her brother made it to Nong Chan refugee camp. That first night they fell asleep on the mud during the pouring rain only to be awakened by a strike from the stick of a Thai soldier beating them repeatedly and telling them, “Pey, Pey, Pey,” which means “to go” in Thai. Darina and her brother stayed for a short time in Nong Chan with other refugee families in a makeshift plastic tent. Darina describes the brutality of the soldiers: “Thai soldiers were very mean. They hit, kicked, and beat refugees for no reason. I was more scared of the Thai soldiers than I was of the Khmer Rouge” (Siv, 2000, p. 118). From this quote by Darina, it can be inferred that refugee camps are not necessarily a safe enough place to be considered a home.

Twelve days later, the Thai soldiers took action to firmly express their intention of not wanting the Cambodian refugees on their land. They loaded the refugees on one bus after another while United Nations and Red Cross workers stood watch from across the street. They drove the refugees up the Dengrek Mountain Range. The Dengrek Mountains separate Thailand from Cambodia. After they got to the top of the mountain, they told Cambodian refugees to crawl down the steep mountains. They were also told that they were going into the protection of the Khmer Serai army. Families and young children weren’t given any special consideration. Some refugees lost their children while getting on the bus. If they didn’t lose them there, they lost them on the way down the mountain (Siv, 2000).

If we consider the first definition of ‘home’ as being a place of residence, Darina and her brother were not there long enough to develop residence. If the twelve days in the camps suffice for them to be residents of that camp, then they have just been evicted in the cruelest of ways. The environment of Nong Chan camp does not fit the definition of
‘home’ described above. However, regardless of whether or not it was home, whatever they had in Nong Chan was now lost.

Darina and her brother were able to stay together. They crawled down the mountains like the other refugees. When all the refugees were on the steep slopes of the mountains, gunshot rang out from the top of the mountain. The refugees didn’t look back. They didn’t need to as they saw bodies catapulting in front of them hitting the ground on a land mine, their bodies exploding into pieces after they were shot in the back. When they got to the bottom, they learned that there were no Khmer Serai guerrillas to help them. The truth was the refugees were abandoned there, leaving them to fend for themselves (Siv, 2000).

Being at home means being comfortable and relaxed, a place enjoyed by you and your family, therefore the experiences that Darina had with the Thai soldiers definitely did not make her feel at home. Furthermore, with so many refugees losing their lives to buried landmines, one can conclude that they had limited familiarity with their jungle surroundings. The place where the Thai soldiers sent the refugees cannot be considered home even though they were sending them back to their place of origin. They were not sending them home.

Darina would not give up hope on escaping the war and eventually she would make a second trek into Thailand, into the country that did not want her there. Her second attempt landed her in Khao-I-Dang Refugee camp, run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). This second attempt gave her the opportunity to live again as she continued her refugee journey, eventually ending up in St. Paul, Minnesota.
When countries go to war and the home you know becomes unsafe, the millions of refugees around the world with experiences similar to Darina’s are left to wonder: Where do I belong? After meeting so many cruel people, is there anyone out there I can trust? As a refugee, will I ever have certainty in my life again? For Darina, she began to realize that coming to America was not the end of her journey, it was actually just the beginning (Siv, 2000).

Valentino Achak Deng – What is the What

Valentino Achak Deng was a Sudanese refugee who fled his town at the age of seven due to the civil war in Sudan. According to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation (2015), the Sudanese Civil War killed nearly two and a half million people and displaced six million more. During this time between 1983 and 2005, the Sudanese refugees were called the “Lost Boys” because many young children would make the trek to the refugee camps on their own, walking through deserts and jungles, and would often disappear. They would either get eaten alive by lions or taken by rebels to fight as child soldiers. Valentino himself would witness five of his “Lost Boys” taken away by lions. He, himself, would make it out of Sudan and then into Kenya, eventually making his way to Atlanta, Georgia. Valentino had great struggles in his early years of resettlement in the United States. However, he would overcome those struggles and make it to college to pursue a degree in international studies and diplomacy. Valentino is the founder of the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, an organization that provides education opportunities to people in his home town of Marial Bai, South Sudan (Eggers, 2006).

The journey Valentino took to the refugee camp to escape war is an amazing story of a person overcoming tremendous obstacles. However, I would like to concentrate on
his efforts to rebuild a sense of home here in the United States half a world away from Sudan. Valentino’s stories are taken from his autobiographical novel, *What is the what* (Eggers, 2006), written by David Eggers in collaboration with Valentino Achak Deng to explore the difficulties refugees have with resettlement in the United States and the obstacles they must face before they can recreate a home here in their new country. The two parts of Valentino’s story that I will use takes place in the United States and highlight the difference between his expectations of the United States prior to coming here and the reality he now understands during his early years of residence in the United States.

Before going into Valentino’s story, I want to remind us of our definition of ‘home.’ ‘Home’ is a relaxed, familiar place enjoyed by the individuals and their family. It is their place of residence and maybe their place of origin. Regardless of whether or not they originated there, being at home should be a comfortable place for the individuals. We will refer back to this definition as we explore Valentino’s experiences.

**America - Not Home Yet**

**Valentino Achak Deng**

Valentino was resettled in Atlanta, Georgia after spending time in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. At the beginning of this story, Valentino had been living in Atlanta for three years. *What is the what* (Eggers, 2006) starts out with Valentino getting robbed by a man and a woman in his own home. Valentino answered a knock on his door. A lady asked if she could use Valentino’s phone to call the police because her car broke down. Being concerned for the lady and wanting to be helpful, he let the lady in not knowing he was being robbed. The lady rushed into his room and locked the door. Soon, her accomplice entered Valentino’s home and pointed a gun at Valentino. While
the woman continued to collect his stuff, the man belittled him by making fun of him for being from Africa and by saying he’s from Nigeria instead of learning where he’s truly from. The man, holding a gun in his hand, kicked and beat Valentino (Egger, 2006). As he laid there helplessly, Valentino thought to himself, “I came here, four thousand of us came here, contemplating and expecting quiet, peace, college and safety. We expected a land without war and I suppose a land without misery” (Egger, 2006, p. 7-8).

Valentino had goals and aspirations. It was often discussed in the book that he feared disappointing people as he thought that they, the Sudanese refugees who made it to America, were the hope for the future of Sudan (Eggers, 2006). Home is both a conceptual and a tangible idea. According to our definition of ‘home,’ it’s a physical place of residence. Therefore, there are physical things people bring in to add to their homes. Refugees come to this country with very little and often have to work very hard to acquire their materials. That night, many of Valentino’s valuables were taken: his TV, his laptop, his VCR, his cordless phone, his microwave, and his cell phone along with his backpack containing his homework. His homework was one of his biggest concerns as he was afraid that he won’t be able to reproduce the work that had already been done.

The robbers would eventually leave and Valentino’s friend and roommate Achor would return to find the home they were trying to build in a complete mess. Achor and Valentino called the police to report the crime. However, that too did not meet their expectations. Their hopes for having the cops catch the robbers and return their stuff were quickly dashed when they realized the police were not able to do much.
Achor proceeded to take Valentino to the hospital where they would encounter another disappointment. Despite waiting at a hospital for fourteen hours, Valentino was not able to get treated. The events of the day left Valentino very confused:

We did not know much about America, but we knew it was peaceful and that there we would be safe. We would each have a home and a telephone. We could finish our educations without worrying about food or any other threat. We conjured an America that was an amalgam of what we had seen in movies: tall buildings, bright colors, so much glass, fantastic car crashes, and guns used only by criminals and police officers. Beaches, oceans, motorboats. (Egger, 2006, p. 483)

America was not what Valentino expected. Prior to coming to the United States, Valentino had high expectations for America like many other refugees. He believed that coming to America would allow him to rebuild his life. After many years of running from refugee camp to refugee camp, he would be able to settle down and call America home. Valentino was completely unprepared for all the problems he would face in America. It’s obvious through his statements that Valentino was disappointed with what he was experiencing. However, what non-refugees may find very difficult to understand is that this disappointment rested side by side with his continued hope for America to fill his expectations. Valentino describes his thoughts:

Each time I find myself giving up on this country, I have the persistent habit of realizing all that I have here and did not have in Africa. It is annoying, this habit, when I want to count and measure the difficulties of life here. This is a miserable
place, of course, a miserable and glorious place that I love dearly and of which I have seen far more than I could have expected. (Eggers, 2006, p. 351)

Valentino’s thought process resembles that of many refugees yearning to come to America. He had high expectations for his life here, especially when he had traveled so far to escape death and starvation. He had hoped that when he got to America, he would not have to struggle anymore. Through television and in cultural orientations by refugee camp staff, many of the wonderful things about America are made evident. These events, along with the recent experiences of escaping war, death, and starvation, make people yearn for an America without problems, leaving them completely unprepared for all the hardships they will face in the first few years of resettlement. The fictional character, Choua Vang, daughter of a Hmong refugee, described how her father thought they would be better taken care of and treated as heroes in America since he helped Americans in the Vietnam War and how he was disappointed, even became resentful of America, when that didn’t turn out to be the case (Rempel, 2004).

Despite their disappointment, refugees carry on with the belief that America can be ‘home’ for them one day. They hope to get more familiar with the good and the bad that America has to offer and maybe the opportunities to find a stable place of residence to start a family and provide for them a better life. That tangible idea of ‘home’ along with the conceptual idea of home, of a place where you can be comfortable, relaxed, and have enough sense of peace to finally start working towards your dreams, are very important for refugees. However, for many refugees, the first few years of disappointment in America is a continuation of hardships experienced from the loss of war and the abuse of the camps. In the end, if the refugees find a way to overcome their
unexpected disappointments, they can focus on their goal of rebuilding a home in America. For Valentino at this moment in the story, America is not yet home.

Theme 2 – Identity

Who are the Refugees?

Adult refugees have a strong understanding of their home culture and home life as they’ve spent a large amount of their lives there before immigrating to the United States. They were able to establish that sense of home with their native country and land. They were familiar with their place of birth. They originated there. And they are relaxed and comfortable navigating through their native culture. After immigrating to the United States, we see in Valentino’s story that there is a difficulty adjusting to life in the United States and that his expectation of the United States changed when he arrived. The changes taking place for Valentino can be explained in part by a process called acculturation. Acculturation is a process that occurs when groups of individuals from different cultures come in contact with each other, resulting in a change in behavior, language, values, and identity (Dinh, Weinstein, Kim, & Ho, 2008). For younger refugees the process of acculturation differs in rate and outlook from older refugees. Refugee youth experience many explicit and subtle pressures from the U.S. society, including from teachers and peers, to adopt an American identity. Parents who do not participate in these environments are not aware of the same pressures. Furthermore, the push for their child to keep up their own traditional values often leads to internal conflicts within the families (Dinh et al., 2008). Dinh, Weinstein, Kim and Ho (2008) focus their study on Cambodian refugees. In their section on intergenerational conflict, they stressed that the acculturative experiences differ for Cambodian children and their parents.
This difference stated by Dinh et al. (2008) about Cambodians is also true for other refugee groups. In this next section, I will use the story of Choua Vang, a fictional character from the book, *Hey hmong girl, whassup?* (Rempel, 2004) to identify her struggles with identity as she tries to balance her parents’ expectations and the expectations of her peers. In her story, the relationships between her siblings and parents will also be looked at as we discuss this theme of identity related to intergenerational struggles.

Bosher (1997) summarizes the struggle that young refugees have with balancing the cultural expectation of family and peers by stating that children of first-generation immigrants to the U.S. face the formidable task of determining who they are from a cultural and social perspective. Often their native culture is very different from and even at odds with American culture. These differences are exacerbated during adolescence and young adulthood, when the influence of the peer group, often oriented toward American youth culture, supersedes that of the family. (Bosher, 1997, p. 593)

Choua Vang and her siblings, like many other refugee kids, have to balance two worlds. One world is made up of her parents’ traditional culture, Hmong, and the other, a mainstream culture characterized by the American system of education and American social values.

Hirano (2008) explains that identity is how a person understands his or her relationship with the world and possibilities for the future (Hirano, 2008). This definition of identity often leaves refugee students with three possibilities. They can assimilate, segregate, or integrate. In her thesis *Straddling Two Worlds*, Nguyen (2006) used Harry
Kitano’s four adaptive patterns (1995) to explain her Vietnamese community’s struggle with intergenerational identity. The four adaptive patterns are: high assimilation-low ethnic identity, high assimilation-high ethnic identity, low assimilation-low ethnic identity, and low assimilation-high ethnic identity (Nguyen, 2006).

In high assimilation-low ethnic identity, individuals feel more American rather than identifying with their ethnic culture. They’ve assimilated to life in the United States. They prefer to identify with things American such as language, life-style, friends and even marriage. If an ethnic identity is present, it’s only in a symbolic sense from reaction of the outside world. This individual may participate occasionally in ethnic celebrations, partaking in ethnic foods and movies (Nguyen, 2006).

In high assimilation-high ethnic identity the individual is fully integrated, holding on to a strong sense and understanding of their native culture, but yet can navigate with ease through American expectations and lifestyle. These individuals can make friends in both cultural groups because of their strong bicultural perspective. However, despite their relative ease in navigating both cultures, maintaining an even balance between the two can be quite stressing (Nguyen, 2006).

Low assimilation-low ethnic identity describes individuals who have a hard time fitting into both cultures. These individuals are alienated. They struggle to fit in with their American peers while at the same time having very little understanding of their native culture. These individuals also struggle to be comfortable with their own ethnic identity (Nguyen, 2006). Many of the second generation refugee kids who join gangs may portray characteristics of low assimilation-low ethnic identity. With these adaptive patterns, kids tend to segregate themselves from mainstream culture as well as from their families.
Low assimilation-high ethnic identity often refers to the parents of refugee students and first generation refugees with a strong sense of home and familiarity with their native culture and country. In low assimilation-high ethnic identity, the people in this category are more comfortable with their own ethnic culture and community than they are in the mainstream American community. They may be able to have a functional understanding of how to navigate life in America but they are clearly more comfortable within their own ethnic enclaves (Nguyen, 2006). Individuals with these characteristics would often prefer living in ethnic neighborhoods and segregating themselves from the mainstream community.

Out of the four adaptive patterns, refugees who fall into high assimilation, high ethnic identity has the easiest time in balancing the expectations of the two cultures in which they live allowing them to more easily navigate between the expectation of their parents’ native cultures and mainstream expectations to avoid intergenerational conflicts. We will consider these four adaptive patterns as we analyze the journal of Choua Vang to understand the pressure of refugee kids to identify with a certain culture. What is lost or confusing for people struggling with this balance of two worlds is their own ability to determine their own identity. These pressures are both external and internal. They are external because both their parents and peers prefer them acting in a certain way. They are internal because even though they may understand how they need to act in society in order to be successful, they don’t want to disappoint their parents or their friends by not portraying a particular personality.

Choua Vang—Hey, Hmong Girl, Whassup
Hey Hmong girl, whassup? (Rempel, 2004), is a well-researched book situated on the margins of fiction and creative non-fiction by author Leah Rempel, chronicling the life of a fictional character named Choua Vang. Even though these stories do not constitute direct reporting of historical events, Rempel conducted many interviews and verified the accounts with many Hmong students to make sure those events that took place in these stories were authentic to a Hmong teenager’s experience. Rempel was an ESL teacher in St. Paul where many of her students were children of Hmong refugees.

Choua Vang is the daughter of a Hmong refugee family. In the book, the main character Choua wrote a collection of journal entries from November through March of her tenth grade year of high school to tell the story of her struggles with life as a daughter of Hmong refugee parents. Her father was very strict and tried very hard to hold on to their Hmong customs. Her mother had a better understanding of their kids’ struggle in America, but as a Hmong woman, she had very little authority to question her husband’s decisions. Her oldest sister was married young, in line with Hmong traditions. Her older brother and her other older sister rebelled against their father and joined gangs, getting themselves into problems with the law. She is the fourth child and she has a younger sister in 8th grade and another brother in 3rd grade (Rempel, 2004).

Being the middle child, Choua often witnessed the power struggles between her older siblings and her parents. Her father tried to discourage her from behaving like her two older siblings and remain true to their Hmong culture. It is this part of Choua Vang’s journal that I will share in support of this theme relating to the identity of refugee youth.

Good Kids Keep Their Old Ways
A prevailing theme in Choua’s journal was the struggle between Choua’s dad trying to keep with the Hmong traditions where he decides what’s best for his daughters, such as when they should get married, and her siblings’ fight with their father to control their own lives. The journal entry that I will examine first supports this theme as Choua summarizes a power struggle between her father and her sister Mai. As Choua listens, she tries to balance the expectations of her father and be supportive of her siblings.

The journal entry starts with a conversation between Choua and Mai. Choua asked Mai if she would get married if her dad asked her to. Mai quickly got upset and said that she would not follow her dad’s demands. Choua’s understanding of being a Hmong kid was that it was really important to respect your parents. A way to respect your parents is to listen and obey everything they tell you to do. Mai, on the other hand, feels that it was very stupid to follow this Hmong tradition. Her father comes home and overhears the discussion between Choua and her sister Mai (Rempel, 2004). Below is the exchange of their conversation.

Mai shouted at her father – *You can’t make me! I’ll kill myself before I get married to some stupid relative of ours!*

Mai’s father replied – *It’s our custom, you must respect our traditions.*

Mai yelled – *It’s a stupid custom and stupid culture! You’re in America now. Stop being so old fashioned!*

Mai continued while running out the door – *I hate both of you! If you really loved me, you wouldn’t make me do this.* (Rempel, 2004, p. 10)

Dinh et al. (2008) explain that Cambodian youth experience both explicit and subtle pressure from U.S. society to identify with and adopt the identity of being
“American.” Their parents offer them conflicting pressure to maintain their Cambodian cultural traditions. The two opposing expectations often lead to direct confrontation between the child and the older family members (Dinh et. al, 2008). Even though Mai and her family are not ethnically Cambodian, their experience as Hmong refugees in relation to this situation is similar. Mai is rebelling against her father because, in America, kids don’t get married at a young age (Mai is seventeen). In America, people are able to pick who they want to marry. This is different in Hmong culture where kids get married young and marriages are arranged by their parents. Mai’s father wants his children to keep with Hmong traditions. As Mai ran out of the house, Mai’s father turned to Choua and said, “Choua, you’re a good girl. I hope you don’t do this to me when it’s your turn to get married” (Rempel, 2004, p. 11).

Choua’s father falls into the adaptive patterns of low assimilation-high ethnic identity. He speaks some English. He knows enough about American culture to get by. However, he desires to keep with the traditions of the Hmong culture and strongly feels that keeping with traditions is best for him and his family. In contrast, he thinks America is hurting him and his family (Rempel, 2004). Choua’s father stated, “America is a bad place for us. There are many bad people. It makes our children disrespectful. People treat us like we are nothing and nobody understands our culture. Even our children don’t care” (Rempel, 2004, p. 10). Choua went on to explain that her father fought for the Americans during the Communist-Capitalist conflict back in Laos as part of the Vietnam War. He thought people would treat him as a hero when he came to America. Instead, they were treated like garbage on the street. This is why her father wants even more to keep with Hmong traditions. He’s angry at America (Rempel, 2004). Choua’s father is struggling
with the first theme in this study. He’s struggling with the idea of ‘home’ and figuring out how to build a happy ‘home’ in America.

Another one of Choua’s journal entries that speaks to the difficulty of refugee kids and their battle with developing their own identity involves a conversation between her and her older brother, Ger. Ger doesn’t spend a lot of time at home and is involved in a gang made up of the local neighborhood Hmong kids. The conversation starts out with Choua asking Ger about what life was like in gangs. Ger agrees to tell Choua about it only after she promised him not to join a gang. He tells her that gangs can get her into a lot of trouble. Choua agrees but this only makes her wonder even more why Ger would join if he knows that it could get him into a lot of trouble (Rempel, 2004).

Ger went on to explain why he joined a gang. “You know Choua, it’s like this. You go to school, your teachers yell at you. You come home, your parents yell at you. So you just end up with your homeboys on the streets” (Rempel, 2004, p. 51). Later on in the journal entry, Ger describes his gang as being his family (Rempel, 2004).

The conversation went on about Ger not going to school and how he steals to get by. This exchange between Ger and Choua allows us to understand what adaptive pattern Ger is forced into in his understanding of his own identity and how it helps Choua understand a little bit better the complex struggles in her family identity and resettlement experience in America.

Choua - Don’t you ever go to school?

Ger – Just enough so I don’t get kicked out.

Choua – But you’re so smart. Don’t you want to go to college?
Ger – Get real. Poor people don’t get to go to college and Hmong kids never go. I’ll just get a job on an assembly line or something.

Choua – I don’t get it. Don’t you want more than that?

Ger – Nah

Choua – So do you steal stuff?

Ger – Yeah, sure, but we don’t hurt nobody. Rich people don’t need all that shit anyway. They should share some with us. (Rempel, 2004, p. 52-53)

Choua reflected on how much Ger sounds like Mai (Rempel, 2004). Ger and Mai are displaying the character of low assimilation-low ethnic identity. In this adaptive pattern, individuals are alienated, finding it to be very hard for themselves to fit in with both their native culture and mainstream American culture (Nguyen, 2006).

By witnessing the struggles between her siblings and her parents and experiencing the pressures from her parents, school, and her peers, Choua starts to construct her own identity and what she desires for herself. Choua writes,

The more I think about it all, the more I know I just want to live my own life and do my own thing. So what if everyone thinks I’m just a quiet little Hmong girl! Maybe my parents think I’m just going to get married and have babies. Maybe my teachers think I’ll just do ok in school, and then I’ll get a job and get married or something. But I know the truth! I Choua Vang, am going to be SOMEBODY! I am going to graduate and go to college and write books and get famous. (Rempel, 2004, p. 63)

As discussed earlier, acculturation happens when groups or individuals from different cultures come in contact with one another, creating personal change in the
individual’s behavior, language, values, and identity (Dinh et al., 2008). Choua’s experiences with her family, her teachers, and her peers at school are helping her find her own identity. Choua desires to be a successful writer, defying the expectations of her parents to marry young as well as the expectation set by her peers and some teachers who believe that she won’t be able to do something amazing. As the stories only take place between November and March of her 10th grade year at high school, we don’t know if Choua is successful in her goals. However, it is clear from these accounts that she is trying to discover an identity for herself that displays the characteristics in the adaptive pattern high assimilation-high ethnic identity. This is the pattern where the individual can freely and comfortably navigate both cultures (Nguyen, 2006).

The story of the fictional character Choua Vang helps us understand the struggle of refugee kids as they try to develop their own identity. Even though some kids may understand what they need to do to be successful, the pressure and expectation from parents to keep the traditional ways and the pressure to fit in with friends at school often force students to make tough decisions in order to please both their parents and peers. How successful refugee kids are at navigating these pressures could have a tremendous effect on how successful they are in school and in society. Bosher (1997) explains that the ability immigrant youth have to maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to the majority culture can play a critical part in the development of their self-esteem and adjustment to society. Therefore, having an understanding of the identity struggles in refugee youth could help educators find strategies to help refugee youth navigate the pressure and expectations put on them in relations to identity.
Theme 3 - Cultural Dissonance

The Struggle for Understanding between People, Generations, and Equality under the Law

As large groups of refugees from the same ethnic background settle into specific areas, possibilities of tension and conflict due to cultural misunderstanding as well as other issues occur between the new refugee group and older residents of a particular community. Diversity in society, besides raising the possibility of conflict between groups, can also promote other social problems, such as those of status, power, and patterns of domination and subordination (Gumperz, 1982). Initial U.S. policy tried to disperse refugees throughout the country with the intent of avoiding large enclaves, making it difficult to assimilate the refugees (Smith-Hefner, 1990). However, refugees would often try to relocate to areas where larger numbers of their population already exist after being settled in a different state. This process is known as secondary migration. The refugees coming from a different state into an area inhabited by a large number of their own ethnic group are called secondary refugees (Nelson, 2014). Secondary migration helps refugees to develop better familiarity with their surroundings, utilizing their community to help access support from mainstream culture. Later policies of resettlement agencies recognized the social and psychological importance of this which allowed certain ethnic refugee communities to flourish (Smith-Hefner, 1990). The next two stories used to discuss the theme of cultural dissonance are of Cambodian youth. Their stories take place in and around Seattle, Washington. The Seattle area has one of the highest Cambodian populations in the country.
Keo (2010) described in his study on Cambodian families and school partnerships that, because many Cambodian Americans have settled in urban areas already inhabited by disadvantaged members of other minority groups, trouble often occurs due to cultural misunderstanding and other social problems. Keo went on to state,

Perhaps the most egregious outcome of cultural misunderstanding and under-resourced communities, particularly among Cambodian youth, is arguably the growing popularity of ethnic Cambodian gangs in the United States. This, one might argue, is a factor of self-protection from other ethnic and racial gang members within poor blighted communities. (Keo, 2010, p. 6)

The next two stories about Loeun Lun and Many Uch will describe the struggle of refugee youth, particularly Cambodian refugee youth, as they struggle through gangs in response to some of the cultural issues they have with other ethnic communities in their neighborhoods. These stories are pulled out of the documentary Sentenced home (Grabias & Newnham, 2006). I will summarize parts of their stories that demonstrate the theme of cultural dissonance. I will transcribe quotes and dialogues to help give readers a better sense of the struggle refugee youth face when trying to fit into their surrounding environment and new community. In order to clarify the quotes from the documentary from other quotes in this study, the transcribed quotes will be rendered in italics, and any unintentional errors will be mine.

Sentenced home (2006) is an independent documentary directed by David Grabias and Nicole Newnham. The documentary follows three Cambodian refugees who were at first welcomed into the country. Then, due to a change in immigration law in 2002, they were deported for a crime for which they had already been punished. In a sense, they
were handed double jeopardy which is not supposed to happen in the American legal system.

The double jeopardy clause means that a party shall not be tried a second time for the same offense (Amer, 1997). The three Cambodian men discussed in this section went through the legal process twice for the same crime, a process which resulted in both of them receiving a sentence of deportation. Double jeopardy protection was not accorded them. Two of the three Cambodian refugees discussed in this study had no opportunity to debate their sentence. This type of punishment and treatment are not inflicted on native born citizens of the United States, only Cambodian refugees and certain other immigrant groups (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

**Many Uch and Loeun Lun—Sentenced Home**

Many Uch and Loeun Lun were Cambodian refugees who immigrated to the Seattle, Washington, area as children. They grew up in tough, poor neighborhoods and had to make tough choices to fit in. Many Uch was a member of the Loco Asian Boyz, a Cambodian gang. According to Many, the group was just a bunch of friends hanging out. Since Cambodians were one of the smaller minority groups in their community, they tried very hard to get recognized as the toughest kids in the neighborhood. This effort led to violent acts that would ultimately get him into trouble with the newly revised Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIIRA, 104 Cong., Sept. 30, 1996). This law designed to crack down on terrorism and illegal immigrants also allowed the deportation of legal permanent residents for minor crimes and non-violent offenses. For refugees sentenced to a year or more for aggravated felonies, deportation was now mandatory (Leitner, 2010). This law applies no matter how long ago the person
committed the crime or whether they had already served their time in prison (IIIRA, 104 Cong., Sept. 30, 1996) Unlike Many Uch, Loeun Lun was not a gangster. However, growing up in a similar environment to Many led Loeun to the same result of violence, as I will explain below.

Many Uch and Loeun Lun are Cambodian refugees. Their story showcases the Cambodian struggle with resettlement as refugees in relation to cultural conflicts between them and other ethnic groups as well as between them and parents. As with other stories in this study, information from scholarly articles will be used to highlight the themes being discussed. For this particular theme, we are focused on cultural dissonance. Even though this particular section describes in detail how our two subjects struggle as Cambodian refugees, readers need to keep in mind that in terms of cultural struggles, the particular parts of Many Uch and Loeun Lun’s experience are shared by many other refugee youth of all different backgrounds.

**No Voice in a Tough System**

Loeun Lun is the first story that I will summarize to highlight part of the theme where refugees struggle to find voice in set systems and policies. Loeun got deported for a crime he committed in self-defense when he was a teenager. His story highlights one of the tragedies of the 1996 immigration law.

Loeun was small in stature. In school, he got into lots of fights with other ethnic groups, particularly African Americans. His sister described that they would gang up on him. One time, he was beaten up so badly, his face was brutally disfigured. They then shoved him into a locker and locked him in it. Loeun’s sister said that he was not involved in a gang. However, the documentary described him as fighting against a rival
gang (Grabias & Newnham, 2006). Chhoun, (2013) discusses how teachers often believe Cambodian youth to either be in a gang or aspire to be in a gang because of the way they are dressed (Chhoun, 2013). This is often times an unfair judgement placed on Cambodian youth. Chhoun (2013) went on to explain that Cambodian youth often mimic the styles of urban African-American youth as an alternative way to express their masculinity since the mainstream idea of manhood of being white, tall and involved in school sports was not generally available to them (Chhoun, 2013).

When Loeun was a teenager, he fired a gun at a group of gang members who were chasing him in a mall parking lot, a crime of self-defense for which he served eleven months in a county jail. Seven years later he went to try to get his citizenship and was arrested and detained at the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for about nine months. Since serving his time in jail seven years previous to seeking citizenship, Loeun hadn’t done anything else wrong. He had gotten married and had had two daughters. He was loved by both sides of his family. Yet, because of a crime seven years prior, committed in self-defense, for which he had already served his sentence, Loeun’s family was torn apart by the system.

Throughout this crisis, Loeun felt helpless with the situation. There was one point in the documentary where Loeun’s mother asked if he could ask if there was a way for him to get out of his deportation sentence. Loeun’s response in Khmer was “What can I do, if they decide to send me?” Loeun felt that there was nobody who would listen or would even care that he had done nothing wrong since that time. Loeun’s sister said that maybe if he wouldn’t have tried to get his citizenship, he probably wouldn’t have been
deported. If only he wouldn’t have tried to belong to this nation, maybe he could have still been together with his wife and daughters (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

Loeun’s story not only examines this theme of cultural dissonance but also the theme of home and identity. The documentary is entitled *Sentenced home* (2006) which refers to Cambodian refugees being sent back to Cambodia. However, if we look back to our definition of ‘home’ as a familiar place where you reside with family, a place where you’re comfortable and relaxed, America would fit this definition of ‘home’ for Loeun more so than Cambodia would. America was where his family was. He clearly saw America as his home, as he actively sought to become a bona fide member of the society through citizenship. In a true case of tragic irony, it was precisely the action of trying to become an American citizen that brought attention to Loeun’s past, resulting in this eventual deportation.

Chief Counsel Patricia Vroom of Immigration and Customs Enforcements explains in the documentary that

> *Congress has looked at the rules that people who live in this country must follow in order to get to stay here. And it’s something of a quid pro quo. We’re giving you something of tremendous value. In exchange for that, we expect nothing more than for you to live like all the other people who got this for free. That’s all, that’s all we’re asking of you. And if you can’t do that then we’re going to have to take it away from you.* (Cited in Grabias & Newnham, 2006)

Vroom compares refugees to native born Americans, appearing to believe that they can be held to the same expectations without considering the disparities between the two groups. Despite her believing that this is a fair expectation, her quote identifies that if
a native born American commits the same kind of crime as an immigrant, they will not get deported away from their families. They “got this for free” while refugees have to earn the right to stay. Therefore, even though the behavior expectations of refugees and Americans who were born in the country are equal, the punishment for failure to comply is drastically unequal.

Many Uch – Making a Name for Ourselves

At 18, Many Uch was a member of the Loco Asian Boyz, which police described as a violent street gang. He was arrested for assisting in a robbery. He served his time, and when he got out, he thought it was an opportunity for him to change his ways and make his life better. But prior to his release, instead of being given his freedom, he was given a paper saying that he was facing deportation (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

The documentary did not go into why the robbery took place. However, Many Uch’s demeanor in the documentary and his future pardon lead one to believe that there were many reasons that led to Many’s poor decisions in the robbery. Many Uch stated,

_We were the minorities within the minorities. Our English was bad. We just didn’t fit in. We wanted to make a name for ourselves. We wanted to be the toughest ones of all in Seattle. The cops call it gangs, but when we grew up, we just think that we had this bond._ (Cited in Grabias & Newnham, 2006)

Social theorist Donna Beegle (2007) explains that membership in a social class is determined by an individual’s ability to identify with and respond to a complex set of expectations shaped by the values, beliefs, and habits of its members. Often individuals from a certain social class interact exclusively with each other (Beegle, 2007). The vast majority of refugees weren’t brought into a middle class lifestyle where they would have
enough resources to meet their needs. They were brought into existing ghettos where they had to fight back against harassment and other forms of bullying. Chhoun (2013) states, “Given the lack of what Connell (1996) termed ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (i.e. not being white middle class and male) combined with a racist school context, marginalized Asian American boys are pushed to negotiate alternative ways of expressing themselves as tough urban males” (Chhoun, 2013). Similar behaviors are expressed in other groups of refugee youths as well, for example, the behaviors of Choua Vang’s brother, a Hmong refugee (Rempel, 2004)

Like other refugee kids who’ve experienced the horror of war, the Cambodian refugee children lived through the atrocities of the Killing Fields, watching their close friends and relatives murdered before their eyes. They were accustomed to violence. They were not going to roll over to bullying and harassment from other ethnic groups who struggled in the ghettos. Lavinia Limon (2003), the executive director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, stated in a New York Times article:

The Cambodians are manifestly the greatest failure of the refugee program in this country. Mistake No. 1 was that we didn’t treat the Cambodians different. The scope and breadth and depth of what they endured – the only thing you can compare it to, was the Jewish Holocaust. (Sontag, 2003, p. 5)

Furthermore, without the language to express themselves and not having familiarity with the system and knowledge to navigate networks of support, Cambodian refugee kids felt that the only way they could fight back was to engage in violence. Their past experience coupled with the unfamiliarity of their surroundings easily makes refugees feel like
they’re being pushed into a corner. All these aspects combined to make the perfect ingredient for the violent reactions from Cambodian youth.

One part of the documentary that highlights the violent experiences of Cambodian refugees is shown in a meeting with Many and his former elementary school teacher. His teacher sat with Many and looked at pictures and drawings from his former elementary class when Many was in it. In one of the drawings a student wrote about an experience he had back in Cambodia where he witnessed a boy being murdered by a bad man because the murdered boy was crying about his father dying. The teacher went on to comment tearfully about his Cambodian students:

>You know, you guys that were from Cambodia experienced terror like very few people ever experience. People like Kunthea, whose father got his head cut off and she had to see it and people who starved and saw their houses get burned down and saw relatives shot and people yanked away from them. It all happened to these kids and it was amazing to me that they could smile. We did not have any kind of good services for kids like you. As you started to hit puberty, there were all these gangs that were started. Well we tried what we could to help kids out but I don’t think we had a really good understanding of why all this was happening. I just think it was neat that how you can take a horrible experience and make it better. [Tears started to roll down even stronger] I don’t know if I could do the same thing. It’s really amazing. It’s amazing to watch. I mean you’ve made it out. It’s because of you. Not because what we were able to offer to you. You know. And I wish we could have offered more as people. (Cited in Grabias & Newnham, 2006)
The teacher’s quote summarized the unbelievable horror Cambodian refugee kids faced during that time. He also explained an important point that not many people knew and understood what the Cambodian refugee youths were going through, which made it very difficult for people to help the children no matter how hard they tried.

The lack of understanding that was described by the teacher did not exist only with people who were trying to help the refugee kids. This lack of understanding spread to the parents of the kids as well. In fact, it may have started there. The parents, too, were refugees. They, too, had a lack of understanding about the environment around them. They also lacked the ability to access the established support networks that were not culturally sensitive to them. However, that’s where the similarities between the parent refugees and their children end. The older adults have a stronger connection to their home country. In Many’s case as a Cambodian refugee, his parents had established their identity as Cambodians. Therefore, even though this identity didn’t really help them navigate life in the U.S., it did give them an explanation as to why they were struggling. This reason the parents have is often times taken away from the kids by their parents because Cambodian parents have a hard time talking about their past.

The interesting disconnects between Cambodian parents and their children exist because of the atrocities of what has come to be known as the Killing Fields. The Killing Fields was a time in Cambodia that took place between 1975 and 1979. This was a time of great violence in Cambodia. Between 1.7 and 2.5 million Cambodians died during the Killing Fields due to starvation, sickness and execution (Hardy, 1988). During this time, older children were indoctrinated to become shock-troops of the Khmer Rouge. They were the ones who conducted tortures and executions of their elders (Ung, 1991).
Religious persons such as monks were executed or defrocked, left to die by outright starvation. Holy places, even such places as the sacred Angkor temples, were destroyed with sledgehammers by religious followers forced at gunpoint (Ung, 1991).

Throughout the Cambodian people’s 40-year adjustment in the United States, many have been living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One study found that nearly 55% of Cambodian mothers and 30% of Cambodian fathers suffer from PTSD (Kiang, Lin & Suyemoto, 2009). PTSD causes a range of intergenerational problems within the Cambodian family. One is the negative psychological effects of survivor silence. The mothers, brothers, aunts or grandfathers who survived betrayal and deprivation inherent in the Cambodian genocide tend not to want to talk about the experience, which puts them at risk for negatively affecting their own mental health or self-image and negatively affecting their relationship with children and other family members. They are resistant to breaking the silence, because talking may reopen severe psychological wounds that remain unhealed (Kiang et al., 2009). Therefore, Cambodian parents remain silent and choose not to communicate with their kids. Parents who do open up to their children often get frustrated quickly with their kids when questions get asked of them. The parents try to open up about their experiences, but they don’t want to get to deep into it. Kiang et al. (2009) states,

Family members, particularly an elder who is detached and presents emotional numbing, younger family members may misinterpret the meaning of these dynamics that, combined with silence related to avoidance of memories, can easily lead the younger generation to believe that the experiences endured by the older generation are unimportant and not worth mentioning. This not only
interferes with significant sharing between generations but may also cause hurtful assumptions and inaccurate conclusions about each other that reinforce avoidance, distance, and continually frustrating non-communication. (Kiang et al., 2009, p. 200)

This quote describes the difficult environment for conversations between Cambodian kids and their parents about the past.

In another study, Keo (2010) talks about the struggle with identity between the two generations of Cambodians, one generation who was born in Cambodia and the other generation of Cambodians who were born during the refugee transition and have little memory of Cambodia. Bankston (2009) states,

One of the difficulties has been the problem between older people who see themselves as Cambodians and sometimes speak little, if any, English, and younger people who have either been born in the United States or have no memory of Cambodia and consider themselves entirely American. (Keo, 2010, p. 5)

Many’s mother, who struggled with adjusting to American culture and customs, described in the documentary that she didn’t know what to do. In Cambodia, she never saw kids hang out and drink before. She was worried all the time. This concern coupled with the PTSD that she was already experiencing alarmed her doctors. Their advice to her was to stop worrying. The difficulty in life experiences between Many who grew up in America and his mother who strongly identifies with her experiences in Cambodia hindered communications between them. Many describes his feelings about what he put his mother through:
You know, my mother tried so hard trying to get us to America and I didn’t live up to that as a teenager. I failed because she expected a lot from me. For me going to prison, it put shame on her. It made her think she failed in certain ways.

*Somehow, she raised this bad kid.* (Cited in Grabias & Newnham, 2006)

This feeling of not living up to your parents’ expectations is a common feeling among the children of refugee parents.

This feeling is often aggravated by misunderstanding because the parents do not fully understand the pressure their kids go through in terms of the expectation of school and a society that is influenced by the kids’ peers. Smith-Hefner (1990) mentions the parents’ own limitation in education and resources when discussing their role in the education of their children. Many of the Cambodian youth and their parents fall into a special category of refugee students known as Students with Limited Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). Minnesota statute defines a SLIFE as an English Learner who:

1. Comes from a home where the language usually spoken is other than English, or who usually speaks a language other than English.

2. Enters school in the United States after grade 6.

3. Has at least two years less schooling than the English learner’s peers.

4. Functions at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics.

5. May be preliterate in the English learner’s native language.

(Minn. Stat. § 124D.59, Subd. 2a)

While directed toward students in school, the conceptual parameters of this definition can describe both the students and their parents. In the case of Cambodia, many
generations lacked the opportunity to be formally educated because of what the Cambodian people suffered through under French colonialism, the almost decade-long war in Cambodia, four years of the Killing Fields, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Keo (2010) suggests that Cambodian parents’ inability to maneuver through the school system may be a result of their own personal experiences with lack of education. Therefore, even though they want their kids to succeed, they have a hard time pushing their kids towards success (Keo, 2010).

The result is that lots of Cambodian kids struggle to be successful and embrace negative behaviors that give them a feeling of power and control. Rios (2012) wrote, “Feelings of exclusion from a network of positive credentials, education and employment opportunities led to resistance identities” (Rios, 2012, p. 50). Resistance identities are behaviors created by subordinate populations in response to being oppressed. These behaviors may include the embrace of criminality (Rios, 2012).

As the guilt in disappointing one’s parents grows stronger and stronger, Cambodian refugee kids, like other refugee youth, often turn to their peers for support. Peer groups are a means for children to expand their experiences and test their social competencies. For many at-risk youth, parents and peers seem to be at opposite ends of a seesaw. The influence of peers increases as the influence of parents declines (Dryfoos, 1996). Certain peer groups turn into gangs or the group gets labeled by outsiders as gangs. Theses gangs turn into the troubled child’s surrogate family (Aung & Yu, 2007). Many describes the gang situation with him and his friends in the documentary:

\[
\textit{Most of my friends were in the same gang. We know each other from since we got to America. You know, it’s been ten to fifteen years and my friends are still the}\]

same. I mean, they’re not getting anywhere with their lives you know. And most of us land ourselves in prison and some just passed away. I mean what is bad you know. You know, what is a bad kid? I mean, I grew up thinking I’m not a bad kid at all. Even though you run from the police. You get in trouble. You go to school, you get kicked out of school. You know. I still. You know. You don’t consider yourself bad because everybody in the neighborhood is doing the same way.

(Cited in Grabias and Newnham, 2006)

A prevailing negative outcome of gangs or gang-like groups is the pull away from academic success such as obtaining a high school degree or entering college, which are outcomes that have been associated with upward socioeconomic mobility (Keo, 2010). Therefore, kids who are involved in gangs hinder their own upward mobility.

Loeun and Many’s stories show us that there are not many easy choices for refugee kids to make when they are placed into tough, struggling environments. Dinh et al. (2008) express that economic stressors common in the Cambodian American community, such as living in poverty, inhabiting dangerous neighborhoods, and parents who are forced to work long hours all have a negative impact on Cambodian American children. When young people grow up in this type of environment, they will often develop creative responses to help them with the necessary tools to survive in an environment where they are constantly criminalized (Rios, 2012). As Portes and Rumbaut (2006) put it, “Unfortunately, many groups tend to settle into impoverished ethnic neighborhoods that function more as traps than as platforms for upward mobility.” (cited in Chhoun, 2014, p. 234).
Furthermore, intergenerational differences in life experiences between Cambodian refugee youths and their parents make it difficult for Cambodian kids to turn to their parents for support. Parents themselves struggling with PTSD, socio-economic barriers, and understanding of the educational and social systems in the new country may not know how to help their children through their problems. Despite these narratives focusing on the Cambodian situation, the problem of cultural dissonance in relation to having a say in unfair policies, navigating through cultural differences, and overcoming intergenerational barriers are common experiences shared throughout all refugee groups.

Theme 4 – Poverty

An Underlying Source of Struggle

The theme of poverty is not so closely related to the other themes as this analysis has shown them to be to each other. Readers can often confuse issues around survival and adapting to a new home, the journey to find one’s own identity, and fighting through cultural problems as being the same problem. They are closely related, and tied to the refugee’s fight to belong. However, poverty is a category on its own in the refugee struggle. Despite it being its own category, poverty is one underlying source that leads to problems experienced in the other three themes. People living in poverty struggle to obtain satisfaction in Maslow’s still relevant hierarchy of needs, which are given here in ascending order: physiological (food, shelter, clothing), safety (feeling secure and being out of danger), love-belonging (being accepted by others), esteem (achievement, gaining approval or recognition) and self-actualization (finding fulfillment and realizing one’s potential) (Maslow, 1943). In Beegle’s (2007) discussion of Maslow’s hierarchy, individuals in poverty often have to fight to maintain their physiological and safety needs.
and need to belong, which can lead to the creation of gangs. Focusing so hard on obtaining basic needs makes it difficult for individuals living in poverty to reach the higher level of needs, which are esteem and self-actualization.

Poverty makes it difficult for refugees to find a home to provide them with that sense of safety and stability. A Somali refugee in Minneapolis describes his struggles with finding a suitable home for his family:

I was paying 60 percent of my income towards rent and I was hiding my youngest child. If I didn’t do that, they would have required me to rent a three-bedroom apartment which I cannot afford. I was hiding my youngest for two years. (Garret, 2006)

In order for refugees to sustain a home for their family, they often have to come up with uncommon strategies to make ends meet, such as this Somali refugee hiding his daughter from his landlord.

Poverty also affects the second theme of identity. Beegle (2007) explains that people from certain social classes often associate more closely with each other as social class tends to determine one’s complex set of expectations, beliefs, habits and core values. What is described by Beegle (2007) explains why Choua Vang’s brother Ger feels like Hmong kids aren’t meant to go to college. He doesn’t know any Hmong students in and around his social group making it to college. Furthermore, in his conversation with his sister Choua, he defines himself as poor and his identity as a poor kid helps him justify stealing from richer people (Rempel, 2004).

Maslow’s third need in the hierarchy is love-belonging. Beegle (2007) suggests that this is why many young people join gangs. Many Uch’s story also describes this need
as he talks about him and his friends wanting to make a name for themselves. Many discussed that he and his friends had shared a strong bond. They were all struggling refugee kids who would hang out together and do the same things regardless of whether it was right or wrong. They didn’t know what it meant to be a bad kid because everyone did the same things (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

**Poverty – The Prison of Financial Hardship**

War is a prison. Your life is no longer completely under your own control and you stay alive largely on luck. The refugee camps were a haven from war. However, surrounded by barbed wires and unfriendly soldiers with assault rifles, they, too, were military prisons. Now entering America’s capitalist society, refugees find that money is the means for so much in life. Without it you are trapped. Life in poverty is another form of being imprisoned. All five people discussed in this chapter had stories depicting struggle with financial stability which guided their decision making when either approached with opportunity to better themselves or providing for basic needs.

People who struggle with the refugee experience often face many symptoms of generational poverty. One of the characteristics of generational poverty is not having enough income to meet basic human needs, so people in generational poverty have to work in many different jobs at a time that are unstable along with reliance on federal and state aid or charity (Beegle, 2007). Darina Siv (2002) relied on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC is a program administered and funded by federal and state governments to provide financial assistance to needy families (AFDC, 2011). She also worked on the side along with her little brother and her husband. They then
would pool their money together. This was the only way for them to make the bill payments at the end of every month.

Valentino Achak Deng and his friend Achor Achor also pooled their money together and received donations of used furniture from his local church (Eggers, 2006). Their income was gained through working at jobs where they always had to fear that they could easily be replaced. Both he and Achor Achor tried to cope with their place getting robbed while worrying about being fired from work if they didn’t make it on time. After spending fourteen hours at the hospital and not getting treated for his wounds, Valentino walked home from the hospital at 3:00 a.m. and had to get to work by 6:00 a.m. the next morning. He did not get much sleep but chose to go to work because he feared getting fired and not being able to find another job (Eggers, 2006).

Along with not being able to have a stable job, the chance of moving up in your job is also slim for refugees due to limitations in of language ability and experience. A number of entry level jobs now require a considerable amount of English proficiency. Many refugees who come with advanced degrees and professional backgrounds spend years driving cabs and work in other jobs that Americans don’t want. When refugees try to seek better jobs, they are often hindered by their language skills and low amount of work experience in America (Garrett, 2006)

Not having enough money hinders your ability for upward mobility and at the same time causes great amounts of stress and fear. Long work hours, both parents working, children being left alone after school, cramped living quarters often in unsafe neighborhoods, financial worries (including helping families back home), long commutes
to and from work, daily language barriers, and other challenges cause refugees to be 
exhausted with life (Garret, 2006).

In one scene in the book *What is the what* (Egger, 2006), Valentino and Achor 
Achor were scared to call the police after their home got robbed. They knew they needed 
to report what happened. However, they were afraid that the police would ask them about 
their unpaid parking tickets, so they had to make sure that they had enough money 
between the two of them first to pay the tickets before calling the police. Later in the 
story, Valentino was afraid that the reason the hospital took too long to see him was 
because they feared he didn’t have enough money (Eggers, 2006). Both accounts in 
Valentino’s autobiography show us how difficult it is to take care of the things you need 
to when you know you have such little money. Later in his autobiography, Valentino 
would again describe the tough financial situation that they were in as he explains why he 
could not buy health insurance. “I am making $1,245 a month, and school fees are $450, 
rent $425, and then food, heat, so many things, Insurance was not an expense that I could 
work into the equation” (Eggers, 2006, p. 241).

Darina had to put her dreams on hold because of fear that her AFDC aid would be 
cut and that she could no longer afford her apartment. Darina and her husband passed 
their exam to enter St. Paul Technical College. However, because her aid was going to be 
cut if both of them went to school, Darina chose to let her husband go while she took a 
minimum wage paying job (Siv, 2000).

Choua Vang’s family also struggled with money. Not having enough money to 
sustain his already impoverished lifestyle away from home, Choua’s older brother Ger 
was forced to steal to meet his needs. Her father, despite not liking the lifestyle that his
son was choosing for himself, was forced to be hypocritical and seek financial help from his son from time to time even knowing that his son is getting money through stealing (Rempel, 2004).

Refugees are people who have lost everything or have left everything behind in order to escape war and persecution. When they arrive in the United States, they are truly glad for their opportunities to rebuild. However, when you have nothing to build upon and have to start from scratch with very little money, in a place with an unfamiliar language and culture, failures often times outnumber successes in their attempts to rebuild. Depression often sinks in, leaving people feeling lost and trapped. The pressure of trying to make it in America brings tremendous stress. Refugees often cannot find time to relax, socialize with other immigrants, or find neighbors to help each other. These pressures often lead to fractured relationships within families and serious health issues (Garret, 2006). Valentino describes this feeling as he talks about the situation of marginalized Sudanese male refugees in the United States:

Now the enthusiasm has dampened. We have exhausted many of our hosts. We are young men and young men who are prone to vice. Among the four thousand are those who have entertained prostitutes, who have lost weeks and months to drugs, many more who have lost their fire to drink, dozens who have become inexpert fighters….Every time, I wonder where we’re going and who we are. (Eggers, 2006, p. 476-477)

The four themes of struggle: The loss of home, identity, cultural dissonance, and poverty were all present in the refugee cases we analyzed. These themes of struggle created tremendous barriers for the refugees to find success in their life after being
resettled in America. In the next section, we will look at the themes of support. These themes are: guidance and support from caring individuals, available programming for the refugees, and the refugees’ own internal drive to succeed. We will analyze how these themes of support help the refugees overcome the themes of struggle.

Themes of Support - How to Overcome the Refugee Struggle

Analyzing the five narrative stories of Darina Siv, Valentino Achak Deng, Choua Vang, Loeun Lun, and Many Uch, three themes of support emerged to help four out of the five individuals succeed in surviving the refugee journey and be able to recreate a home for themselves and their families. These same three themes of support also helped the refugees in the stories I am analyzing overcome the issue of identity and cultural dissonance along with giving them support in coping with the elements of poverty. The three themes that I’m referring to are support from other individuals, programmatic support such as welfare, and the refugees’ own internal drive to overcome their barriers and achieve their goals. I will explore the three themes of support for each individual using examples from their lives to show how these supports made a difference in their resettlement experience in the United States.

Darina Siv
Darina Siv was a refugee from Cambodia who survived the Killing Fields, made two journeys into Thailand while being shot at by multiple factions fighting in Cambodia, and navigated the resettlement process in the United States while being plagued by poverty and other difficulties. She survived being a refugee and went on to get her
Master’s degree in social work and became executive director of the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota from 1999 to the time of her death in 2002 (Siv, 2000).

Individuals Helping Darina

Darina was able to count closely on the love and support of her husband and brother. They were able to work together and pool their money allowing them to survive poverty. All three of them were able to achieve their goals. Darina went on to publish two books. Her husband became a high school teacher in St. Paul, MN, and her brother attended a Minnesota state university (Siv, 2000).

Darina also had support from staff members at the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota (UCAM). Staff at UCAM helped provide Darina with a sense of community. They helped her find a job and obtain support from the AFDC program so that she could rent an apartment for her and her family (Siv, 2000).

Programs to help Darina

Prior to receiving AFDC support, Darina and her family struggled to make ends meet. They lived in a small apartment with twelve other people. This type of environment did not give Darina a sense of peace and home. She would often struggle to make ends meet and, with not enough stability at home, she struggled to pursue a job or further herself in education. AFDC allowed her to pay for housing support so she could find a small apartment, allowing her and her family to take care of each other (Siv, 2000).

Darina’s internal will to succeed

Being able to have proper shelter and money for some food, Darina was able to start thinking again about her life. She thought about what she wanted to be and what she wanted to do now that she was living in America. She and her husband decided to enroll
at St. Paul Technical College so that they could gain skills in pursuit of better-paying jobs in the United States. However, she would encounter another barrier in her effort to reaching her goal. According to Darina, the welfare system only allowed one of them to go to college. If they both enrolled, they would end up losing their benefits. So she decided to let her husband enroll while she found a minimum wage job. Darina did not let this set back discourage her. She decided to pursue her GED. After she obtained her GED, she continued on to college (Siv, 2000). Darina knew that she had support to get where she got to in life. So she decided to give back by helping others with struggles similar to hers. She became a foster mom to Cambodian orphans and worked as Executive Director of the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota (Siv, 2000).

Unfortunately, Darina Siv passed away in 2002 from cancer. However, her courage and spirit to fight and overcome make her a role model for all.

Valentino Achak Deng

Valentino Achak Deng was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. Valentino survived a long, treacherous journey through deserts, jungles, and wetlands to escape the civil war in Sudan. He evaded lions and rebels hiking through the sweltering heat and slept on the cold ground at night. He came to the United States expecting to no longer experience the pain and hardships of violence. Instead, his experiences in his new country included being robbed and beaten. This event along with numerous other negative experiences he had in America made him want to give up. He yearned for home in Sudan. However, the individuals who counted on him and the support he was given, coupled with his internal will to succeed, allowed him to go to college and earn a degree in international studies and diplomacy. He too, like Darina, wanted to help people similar to him, so he returned
to his hometown of Marial Bai to establish the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. The foundation gives educational opportunities to those affected by the conflict in Sudan (Eggers, 2006).

**Individuals helping Valentino**

Valentino had his close friend and roommate Achor Achor to help him through his struggles. Valentino recounted many times that he wouldn’t know what to do without Achor Achor there with him. Both Valentino and Achor Achor were able to keep in touch with other Lost Boys who immigrated to the United States. Their close group, even though spread out across the United States, gave them a sense of home and community.

Another person who was important to Valentino was his girlfriend Tabitha who lived in Seattle, Washington. The book *What is the what* (Eggers, 2008) described many times through letters and Valentino’s recollection of his time with Tabitha that she was his inspiration to continue his studies and fight on even though things were very difficult.

Another very important person in Valentino’s life was Phil Mays, his sponsor. Phil supported Valentino graciously by helping him set up a bank account and agreeing to co-sign for a car for Valentino. He also helped Valentino get into Georgia Perimeter College. The weekly conversation with Phil helped Valentino learn many basic things that would help him adjust to life in the United States. The resources that Phil was able to provide Valentino allowed him to start working himself out of poverty.

**Programs that helped Valentino**

There were a few programs that helped Valentino and his roommate. Valentino had some support from the local church. He mentioned in his autobiography that he was
thankful to the Peachtree United Methodist Church for donating things to him such as a VCR, a microwave, an alarm clock, and other conveniences. In his studies, Valentino was able to receive some financial support from Phil Mays and the Lost Boys foundation. These foundations, he suggested, allowed him to quit his job and study full time at the community college, taking classes that would help him apply to a four year college (Eggers, 2006).

Valentino’s internal will to succeed

Valentino stared into the eyes of a lion. He faced Arab militiamen. He walked thousands of miles to the refugee camp in Ethiopia. And when he faced rejection after rejection from colleges, Valentino never gave up. He knew how important it was to succeed and he knew that people in Sudan, who had much less, were counting on them, the few here who were lucky enough to come to America. Valentino described throughout his autobiography that even though he didn’t make much money here in the United States, people in Sudan struggling through war made much less than he did, and his family members often counted on him to send money home. Eventually, Valentino’s “never give up” attitude got him into a four-year college which paved the way for him to go back to Sudan and help provide educational opportunities to others through his Valentino Achok Deng Foundation.

Choua Vang

Choua Vang, a fictional character, was the daughter of Hmong refugees. In the book *Hey Hmong girl, whassup?* (Rempel, 2004) the author had the character summarize the many struggles she faced growing up as a Hmong teenager in America through a series of journal entries. Choua, the main character, described the issues she had in her
home between her siblings and her parents. She also discussed events that shaped her identity and went into her family’s struggle with poverty and cultural differences in the United States. The book climaxed at the point when she decided she knew what she wanted to be. She wanted to beat everyone’s expectation and become a famous writer (Rempel, 2004). Throughout her journal entries, key people and programs emerged to help her along the way. These themes paired with her strong will to succeed allowed Choua to be happy despite all the crazy things that went on in her life.

**Key people in Choua’s life**

A key person in the life of the fictional character, Choua Vang, was her creative writing teacher, Ms. Martinez. Ms. Martinez was the person who encouraged Choua to write her journals and tell her stories. When Choua felt worried that she wouldn’t be a good writer, Ms. Martinez was there to encourage her. A key conversation that took place between Ms. Martinez and Choua was a discussion on race. Choua had been having trouble with an African American girl in school which gave her a bad view of African American people in general. Ms. Martinez was able to help guide Choua to understand racial differences, opening Choua’s world to more friends (Rempel, 2004). Ms. Martinez was Choua’s mentor guiding her with encouragement and advice.

Choua’s mother was another key person in her life. Choua’s journal entries in the book explain numerous times that women in the Hmong culture were subordinate to their husbands and other men. However, at certain times, Choua’s mother would stand up to her husband in hopes of helping her children. A great example of this was when they were meeting with a family counselor at a non-profit organization designed to help
Choua’s dad – *Who cares what you think, woman? I’m the boss. I decide what happens with our children. I’m tired of you trying to turn us into an American family. We’re Hmong, and don’t ever forget it.*

Brian asks Choua’s mother if she had something to say to her husband.

Choua’s mother talks – *Yes, I do. You are destroying our family. Our children hate you. Is it more important that you are a strong Hmong man in charge of his family or is it more important to be a good loving father that your children can look up to and respect?* (Rempel, 2004, p. 121)

Choua’s father was angry but conceded that Choua’s mother was right. Choua understands that it’s tough for a woman to stand up to her husband in Hmong culture. However, her mother’s bravery allowed Choua to be strong and made her a very good role model for Choua.

**Programs that Helped Choua**

Two programs that were mentioned in the book, that made a big difference in Choua’s life were the family counseling program that was offered by the non-profit center and the International Club at school.

Family counseling helped Choua safely return home after running away with Mai. The counselor, Brian, a Hmong man who was able to bridge the Hmong and American cultures, helped to safely bring the thoughts and opinions of Choua and Choua’s mom out
to help Choua’s father understand that what he was doing was pushing his kids away (Rempel, 2004).

The school club helped Choua learn to understand different cultures and make friends outside her own ethnic group. Prior to the International Club meeting, Choua disliked African Americans because of her experience with one African American girl named Leticia who bullied her in class. A fight broke out between the two. However, they were able to solve their differences through the conflict resolution program at school and then went on to participate in activities together at the International Club (Rempel, 2004).

Choua’s internal will to succeed

Despite living with her older brother and sister who struggled to make good choices and having her father control what’s right and wrong in their family, Choua was able to block all of this out and learn about who she wanted to be. She found her identity and set her own dreams. Choua wrote and signed a contract for herself that is reproduced from the book in exactly this form.

On January 16, 2001, I, Choua Vang, make a solemn promise that I will make my dreams come true, and I will do what I want to do and not what others think I should do. I will always follow my heart.

[Choua Vang]

Signed, Choua Vang (Rempel, 2004, p. 64)
Unlike her older siblings, Choua knew how important it was to set goals. Setting goals is the first step in developing the drive to succeed.

Loeun Lun

Loeun Lun was the only person out of the five that was not able to find support from individuals or resources within the system where he lived. The lack of support contributed to his not being able to avoid deportation for a crime committed in self-defense. This crime had been committed during his teenage years, seven year prior to his deportation. He had already served time for his crime as well. Loeun did what he was supposed to do. He spent eleven months behind bars for his crime and then an additional nine months in INS detention awaiting the deportation orders. He served his time without fuss or fight. However, in the end, he felt helpless about the situation, stating to his mother that he couldn’t do anything if they tried to send him away. In the end, he was deported to a small farm in Cambodia. He lives off income that his wife sends him (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

Individuals who tried to help Loeun

The only support Loeun had was from his wife who was also struggling through the same environment. The heart-breaking irony in Loeun’s story that the documentary highlighted was that he was arrested and sentenced to deportation only after seeking to become part of America as a US citizen. “If he didn’t try to be an American, maybe he would still be in America,” mentioned his sister (Cited in Gabbrias & Newnham, 2006). Lacking programs for support
If, at the time prior to the documentary, Louen had been able to find a program to help struggling Cambodian refugees who were in danger of deportation or even just finding somebody in a position of influence who was willing to listen to his story without judgement, he would have probably been able to stay with his family and watch his two young daughters grow up. Instead, the documentary shows him now halfway around the world living in a small farm shack with nothing but a hammock. His daily living is supported by his wife in America.

The documentary explains well that Louen’s lack of support not only hurts him, it also hurts his family, in particular, his wife, whose day starts at 4:00 a.m. and doesn’t end until 10:00 p.m. Much of the money she makes will go to Cambodia to support her husband. She’s not able to buy a house or buy very much of anything else (Gabbrias & Newnham, 2006). Loeun’s family will be stuck in generational poverty for a while to come.

Where was the Will to Fight? It Came at the Wrong Time and Never Came Back.

In a New York Times’s article about Cambodian deportation, Deborah Sontag (2013) revisited the story of Louen Lun and Many Uch. In the article, she describes Loeun Lun’s personality:

With his wide eyes and steady gaze, he is a gentle, somewhat passive guy who doesn’t bother with facts and figures, even if they are the data that define him. Is he 27 or 28 years old? Lun gets it mixed up. His life, from the time he was a baby, a bag of bones in his mother's rucksack on a forced march through rural Cambodia, has been profoundly disorienting. Most of the time, Lun just tries to go with the flow. (Sontag, 2013, p. 2)
The article confirmed that Louen never involved himself with a gang like other Cambodian kids. He decided to purchase a gun because he worried for his mother’s safety. After purchasing the gun he went to the mall to buy new shoes when he was harassed by a group of African American kids. In countering their attacks, Loeun fired a shot from his gun, scaring them away. This single act sent him to jail for eleven months. When he got out, he didn’t commit another crime. However, desiring to get a passport so he could take his wife to Cambodia, Loeun tried to become a US citizen. He went in for his citizenship interview and was arrested on the spot (Sontag, 2003). Loeun did not fight the original charge and chose to plead guilty. Both Sentenced home (Grabias & Newnham, 2006) and the New York Times article (Sontag, 2003) did not mention anything of Loeun fighting the deportation charges. He just did what he was told. This lack of fight led him to be easily deported.

The Difference between Many and Loeun

Many was the same as Loeun in many aspects such as not having many programs to assist him. At the beginning, he had a few people that he could talk to about his problems. However, these people weren’t able to do much in terms of taking action to fight for his cause. The one major theme that differs between Many and Loeun is Many’s fighting spirit which we will discuss in the section, “Many’s Will to Fight.”

Many Uch

Many Uch served 40 months in prison for being an accomplice in a home invasion. At the time of his sentence Cambodia had not yet agreed to accept deportees. That changed when he got out. So after serving out his term he was freed only to be told that he was going to be deported back to Cambodia for a crime for which he had already
served time (Murakami, 2009). During the time of the film, Many checks in with the immigration office once a month knowing that each time he checks in, he could be put on a plane back to Cambodia. There was a scene in the documentary where he gave the director his phone and asked him to call his employer just in case he’s not let back out of the immigration office. With his future uncertain, Many decides to become a community activist helping at-risk youth in his neighborhood through the game of baseball (Grabias & Newnham, 2006). His community service was noticed and because of it, he was granted a pardon by the governor of Washington (Arandes, 2011).

Individuals who helped Many

Many benefited a lot from the support of people around him. His elementary school teacher that was shown in the documentary loved and cared deeply for Many and kids like him. Even though he admitted that he didn’t have much understanding of what kids like Many were going through, he was there and he took the time to notice reasons for the struggle. In the documentary, Many described his elementary teacher as an overall great guy and, when times were tough, Many went to seek out his teacher just to have someone to talk to about his problems.

Many’s friends, gang members of the Loco Asian Boyz, along with the tough environment he grew up in, helped shape Many’s personality and get him through tough situations. They were his surrogate family, a group of young kids that shared a special bond with Many. They gave him a sense of belonging. Many and his gang wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be the toughest group of kids in Seattle. Even though the gang activities were what landed him in prison, it’s worth noting that being a part of the gang gave him a fighting spirit.
Many Uch didn’t really have programs that helped him. He was a refugee like Darina and Valentino, but he was of a different generation. He belonged to that generation that had little memory of what it was like in his native country. One of the things highlighted in the documentary was the fact that Many had very little guidance through his problems. He didn’t understand what his immigrant status meant until he faced deportation. In the documentary, Many stated,

\begin{quote}
At the time, there weren’t many programs that encouraged these refugee families to get citizenship. We just didn’t understand much about citizenship at all. We were just kids. Even our parents didn’t think much about it. There are 100 questions on the citizenship test and there wasn’t anybody to help us prepare for that. Most families just put it off. (Cited in Grabias & Newnham, 2006)
\end{quote}

Many’s elementary school teacher also mentioned in the documentary that people just didn’t have much understanding of what the Cambodian kids were going through and that there were not any good services available for kids like Many (Grabias & Newnham, 2006).

Many’s Internal Will to Succeed

While Many lived his life not knowing when he would be sent back to Cambodia, he decided to make the most of the uncertain time he had in America. He became a community activist and spoke out for immigrant rights all across the nation. He also worked closely with at-risk youth in his neighborhood (Murakami, 2009). When Many was little he always wanted to play baseball. However, he didn’t know how to get onto a team. And even if he did, his parents couldn’t afford to pay for him to participate
(Grabias & Newnham, 2006). So now as an adult, Many is trying to create a baseball program for Cambodian kids so that they can have the opportunities that he never had.

The directors Nicole Newnham and David Grabias, said that in making the documentary, they were struck by Many’s gentle soul and his extraordinarily thoughtful perspective on his situation, living in limbo between building a life in the U.S. and being deported (ITVS, 2010). They urged him to apply for a pardon from the governor of Washington, even though they knew that there was a slim chance that a pardon would go through. An article published on June 11, 2009, in the Seattle Post Globe by Kery Murakami (2009) talked about how dozens of activists came to his support when he was summoned to a hearing to discuss his pardon at the State Clemency and Pardon Board. Sonya Jung, the former head of the immigration rights group said “Many is not just extraordinary. He’s important. We need him” (Murakami, 2009, p. 1). The chairwoman of the board, Margaret Smith, agreed, saying to Many that his public service record is one of the most impressive she’s seen in the past 10 years (Murakami, 2009). Komo 4 News, a Seattle news station, reported on May 8, 2014 that Many Uch had been granted a pardon by the Governor of Washington four years prior (Drew, 2014). However, his case hasn’t been reopened yet and he still could face deportation despite the pardon (Drew, 2014). Nonetheless, life still goes on for Many and he is continuing to fight unfair immigration laws for himself and for others. Many now has a family. He owns a house and he says he’s doing ok for himself (Drew, 2014). Many had very few people he could turn to for help in his struggle. However, as people started to know him and his story, they gravitated towards him and helped him succeed in getting the pardon from the governor.
Because Many had the desire to make the most of his uncertain time people took notice and Many succeeded with his efforts to stay home in America. Many now works two jobs and is married to an American citizen. He is an integral part of the Cambodian community in Seattle (Arandes, 2011). Many is now also helping others fight against harsh deportation sentences. In 2014, he tried to help Touch Hak beat his deportation case so that he could stay and donate a kidney to his brother who’s suffering from kidney failure (Wissel, 2014). Many’s internal will to succeed allowed him to help himself and many others.

Conclusion

Four people out of the five people mentioned in this chapter were able to overcome their barriers. The barriers were defined into four themes. The themes were: survival and the struggle to create a new home, identity, cultural dissonance including intergenerational conflict, and poverty in relationship to being able to meet the basic needs of life.

Through closely examining the autobiography of Darina Siv and Valentino Achak Deng along with the journal entries of the fictional character of Choua Vang and the documentary narrative of Loeun Lun and Many Uch, I discovered three themes of support that were critical to allowing refugees to overcome their struggles. Those themes are: help from individuals, help from programs and the refugee’s own internal will to succeed.

The sole person who was not able to succeed in achieving his goal and overcoming the four themes of struggle was Loeun Lun. Loeun, struggled with inner city youth, an example of his inability to overcome cultural dissonance, and was deported to
Cambodia, taking him away from his home and his family. His wife struggles to make ends meet for their two kids as she needs to ration off money to support Loeun in Cambodia (Grabias & Newnham, 2006). He will continue to struggle with identity as a Cambodian refugee who grew up in the United States and was now forced back to a home he doesn’t know.

The other four people were able to overcome struggle and achieved their goals because they were able to access the three themes of support. Both Darina and Valentino went to college and found jobs to help other refugees through the struggle. Many received a pardon from the Governor of Washington and is now helping other Cambodian refugees fight through their deportation sentences. And Choua was able to discover for herself, what she wanted to be.

The Gap

The four themes of struggle: recreating a home after survival, identity, cultural dissonance, and poverty, along with the three themes of support: individual support, programming support, and the refugees’ internal will to succeed will be used to analyze my own personal narrative. As I create my own autobiographical research, I will analyze my life story according to these themes to see how the themes of struggle impacted my life and what types of support were there to help me overcome my own struggles.

As refugees increase in numbers in the state of Minnesota, educators will see an increase in refugee students in their classrooms (King, Ouk, Watson, 2016). In order for educators to meet the needs of refugee kids, they will need to research and study the themes of struggle for refugees and learn about how to support refugees in overcoming their struggles. However, most teachers in the state are not themselves refugees and much
research that is available for investigation has been done by non-refugees. An example of this is the book *Hey Hmong girl, whassup?*, an account of a fictional Hmong refugee student that was created, written and told by a non-refugee person. Leah Rempel was a teacher in a district where many of her students are of Hmong descent. Her research was conducted through conversations with her students and then she created a fictional character, Choua Vang, to tell a fictional story of a Hmong family. Despite her close connections to Hmong families, it will be very hard for her to understand all the nuances of Hmong culture and history to properly explain the feelings of Hmong parents and the decisions made in the Hmong families. A lot of external and internal pressures are placed on refugees and their families that unless you are yourself a refugee, will be very difficult to fully understand and explain in research. Even if the research retells true personal refugee stories, the individuals conducting the research and writing the story are often non-refugees interpreting the refugee’s experience second hand, as in the case of Valentino Achak Deng.

In conducting my own personal research and analyzing my own refugee story, I will be able to help educators understand what problems refugees have in succeeding and what can help refugee students find success in their life, not from a second-hand perspective but from someone who has lived, struggled and overcome the difficult refugee experience. I will provide educators with a perspective of someone who went from the familial experience of genocide, refugee camp, racial conflict, poverty and disrupted family in the U.S. to success in high school and college, to a position of English Learner Paraprofessional, Teacher, and EL Coordinator for a district in which I am responsible for all educational experiences of all refugee and immigrant English learners.
This unique perspective and study will help contribute to the understanding of the refugee experience and transformation both from the inside out (as a refugee) and from the outside in (as an English Learner Coordinator). My study will fill the gap in research that is conducted autobiographically, from this unique position, on what gives refugees the best chances for success and also what hinders them.

Research Questions

In this chapter, I introduced the theme of refugee survival struggles and the difficulties refugees have in recreating a home. I also introduced the themes of identity struggle, cultural dissonance between the home and adopted culture including intergenerational struggles, and the effects of poverty as themes that commonly mark refugee experience. I also identified the potentially palliative effects of programming, individuals, and intrinsic motivation in facilitating positive transformation for refugees. Having reviewed refugee experience in personal accounts, I will, in this study, apply the self-study research method to my own experience, interrogating my own history to discern how having to recreate a home after experiencing loss, identity struggle, cultural dissonance, and poverty influenced me, and to explore if and how programs, individuals, personal drive, and other factors allowed me to overcome extremely challenging circumstances, while many of my immediate peers did not. My specific research questions will be:

1) How do Cambodian history and my own family history explain and influence the experiences that I have had as a refugee who found eventual success?
I will explore the research done on Cambodian history, and of my own family, to discern the major events and changes that led up to the life that is my own, a life which is a testament to that history.

2) What kinds of programmatic support influenced me in my journey as a resettled refugee, and how?

I want to examine the elements that make a program successful, as depicted in my life story. Does the program need to support the person’s basic human needs of food, shelter, and clothing? Does the program need to educate people to take risks and develop skills to be successful? Does the program need to be culturally sensitive?

3) What kinds of support did I receive from individuals, and how was that support imparted?

I want to ask of my own life story: What type of people need to walk into your life to be able to pull you up and provide you hope? What do they need to do to be effective in supporting you? Do these people need to be from your same background to have an understanding of what you’re going through?

4) What was the role of intrinsic motivation in my own transformation story, and how was this personally awakened in me?

I will interrogate my own experience to gain a better understanding of how a person can develop intrinsic motivation to pull himself out of a current difficult state. Does that person need to be unhappy with his life to make him pursue change? Is the pursuit of change sparked by an external element? Is this external element the care and love for someone else or is it the idea of not wanting to be
judged as lesser than another individual? Are some people just born with more internal drive, or do they acquire it along the way, from their experiences or mentors?

5) What other factors presented either an advantage or a disadvantage to me in terms of the formation of my identity and success as a refugee?

6) How do these analyzed aspects help create effective programming and instructional practices for educators and administrators?

I will seek to answer these questions and more as I take the steps to reflect back on my life to explore the influences that converged to allow me to write the story of my life as a refugee who “made it.” In Chapter Three, I will describe what method I will use to research my own life. In Chapters Four and Five, I will make the journey into researching my personal story.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF-STUDY RESEARCH

Overview

In this chapter, I will describe the methods that I will use to research and seek answers to the six research questions identified in chapter two which are:

1) How do Cambodian history and my own family history explain and influence the experiences that I have had as a refugee who found eventual success?

2) What kinds of programmatic support influenced me in my journey as a resettled refugee, and how?

3) What kinds of support did I receive from individuals, and how was that support imparted?

4) What was the role of intrinsic motivation in my own transformation story, and how was this personally awakened in me?

5) What other factors presented either an advantage or a disadvantage to me in terms of the formation of my identity and success as a refugee?

6) How do these analyzed aspects help create effective programming and instructional practices for educators and administrators?

To help educators understand the difficulties and the many barriers which hinder refugees from achieving successful resettlement, the life story approach in personal
narrative analysis will be used as the main theoretical framework for my self-study. In the life story perspective, individuals make sense of their lives through self-defining life stories (Chhuon, Kyratzis & Hudley, 2010). This study will explore my own personal narrative to discover themes of struggle and support to help educators understand how they can best help refugee students achieve success.

An example of life story research that is similar to the one I will be conducting is the thesis authored by Narin Phaingdy Antoniades (2009), *An Ethnic Lao Cambodian Refugee’s Journey to Educational Opportunity*. In this thesis, Phaingdy, the author, was an ethnic Lao refugee living in Cambodia. She wanted to learn how difficult it was for ethnic minorities from other countries to adjust to life in the United States. In her study, she reviewed the personal narratives of four people and then compared them to her own autobiographical narrative in which she describes her struggles during the Khmer Rouge period, the refugee camps, and resettlement in the United States (Phaingdy, 2009). In her study, she uses the narratives of others to draw attention to some themes of struggle in her life as a refugee. She used her research as an educational resource to further the field of social work.

According to Rappaport (1995), narrative stories can influence identity, behavior, and personal and social change. Phaingdy (2009) uses the life story approach to analyze the narratives of others to help her understand her own personal journey from refugee to obtaining a Master’s degree in the field of social work. Her studies were intended to help social workers understand the struggles of ethnic minorities in refugee resettlement through their personal stories. In my life story research, I will attempt to use my
autobiography as well as the personal narratives of others to create a better understanding of refugee struggle and support for educators.

Currently I am working in the field of education. My present position is that of English Learner (EL) Coordinator in a district containing one of the larger EL populations in the state. I have a leadership role in the district where I supervise twenty EL teachers, seven cultural liaisons, and eight classroom paraprofessionals. I have been successful in my work and influential in guiding the district’s directions. Personally, I have established myself comfortably in the middle class lifestyle, making enough money to support myself and my family. I’m also fluent in print culture, having made the transition from the oral culture that was common in my upbringing as a refugee living through poverty.

To be honest, I never thought that my life could be this good. However, I am reminded when I go visit my mother in my hometown that I was one of the very few who were able to make this transition. And because so many of my friends and family continue to struggle through poverty and their transition from being a Cambodian refugee to a naturalized American so they can obtain the opportunities that the ‘American Dream’ holds out, I constantly live with survivor’s guilt and hope to seek further understanding in how I can help others rise out of poverty. Also, through the analysis of my own personal experiences through conducting self-study research, I hope to be able to describe common themes and attributes of successful programs that give access to people growing up with similar experiences an opportunity to succeed. I also want to closely analyze the relationships I had with the people around me: my family, my peers, my teachers, and other mentors. What characteristics and personalities did certain people have to allow me
to connect with them and be inspired by them to help me grow? Also, to look at the opposite of this, what types of support did not work, and why not? In addition, I will look at relationships: how did I relate and navigate through the people that came into my life to either intentionally or unintentionally hinder my growth? The types of questions that I want to explore in my study lend support to the use of life story research since discourses in life story research represent an important way we convey ourselves to ourselves and to others (Chhuon et. al., 2010).

By analyzing my own life story, I wish to better inform educators on how to help students who are struggling through the refugee experience. These students may have problems transitioning and bridging cultural differences. These students struggle to define their own identity. And certainly a large number of these students will struggle through poverty. These struggles make it very difficult to create a happy, healthy home. Besides helping educators in the field, I hope to expand my own knowledge in the understanding of how to help at-risk students and people who are struggling through situations that caused past struggles in my life. To be able to have knowledge of opportunities and ideas about how to help people through these common barriers will bring great satisfaction to my personal life and put my own survivor’s guilt to rest.

**Research Paradigm**

I will conduct an in-depth narrative analysis of my own life story in order to discover meaning in the critical events that happened in my life. Chhuon et al. (2010) have confirmed that “[n]arrative analysis can be used in educational settings to reveal the concerns that participants experience about their social lives in relation to those settings, as well as to discern how the participants go about constructing their social lives in those settings.”
settings” (Chhuon et al., 2010, p. 350). I want to learn how these events helped me overcome a life of poverty and many struggles with race and cultural conflicts to create a peaceful lifestyle for myself and discover my purpose in an influential line of work.

Merriam (2009) states the oldest and most natural forms of sense-making are stories or narratives. Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and the means through which we understand the world around us (Merriam, 2009). In Chapter Two, I analyzed the personal narratives of others to introduce themes that I can use to guide my own autobiographical research. I believe common themes will emerge to help explain events that led me to overcome my obstacles and ultimately find success in my life.

The narrative analysis of my story, however, is only part of my life story paradigm. In order for me to do a more complete self-study research project, I will also be including interviews and conversational transcripts. Patton (2002) explains that narrative analysis extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs and creative non-fiction. The dialogue in these recordings will be influenced by events in Cambodian history. Cambodian history will be discussed thoroughly in order to help us understand how Cambodian refugees viewed themselves and their abilities to adapt to America during the refugee resettlement process. The methods that I will use to conduct my self-study research will be guided by my investigation into how to conduct quality auto-biographical research. According to Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), good self-study research follows nine basic guidelines, an additional five guidelines if the researcher uses correspondence and email or recorded conversations in his or her autobiography. I will also be utilizing recorded conversations
in my self-study research. Therefore, I will be following all of the 14 guidelines in this study. The first nine guidelines are listed below:

Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research

1) *Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connections.*

2) *Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation.*

3) *Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.*

4) *Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator.*

5) *Authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the scholarly standing of a biographical self-study.*

6) *The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the other.*

7) *Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story.*

8) *Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context or setting.*

9) *Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths.* (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 16-18)

The next five guidelines will serve to help me properly include and analyze the information from the interviews I will conduct and the important information that I will obtain from the recorded dialogues that I will have with my mother and grandfather.

Guidelines 10 through 14 are listed below.
10) Self-studies that rely on correspondence should provide the reader with an inside look at participants’ thinking and feelings.

11) To be scholarship, edited conversations or correspondence must not only have coherence and structure, but that coherence and structure should provide argumentation and convincing evidence.

12) Self-studies that rely on correspondence bring with them the necessity to select, frame, arrange, and footnote the correspondence in ways that demonstrate wholeness.

13) Interpretations made of self-study data should not only reveal but also interrogate the relationships, contradictions, and limits of the views presented.

14) Effective correspondence self-studies contain complication or tension.

(Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 19-20)

Because the text and story are themselves the data in autobiographical research, I will need to follow these guidelines as I conduct my autobiographical research to help me present my story with reliability and validity. These guidelines will help me construct my story, allowing me to create illumination in the meanings of my personal experience to help me create a theoretical structure for my research as well as provide readers a theoretical framework to understand the refugees’ plight.

My Specific Method

Research Technique #1

In alignment with these guidelines, I conducted my self-study research using three different strategies. First, I summarized the history of Cambodia dating back to
Cambodia’s golden age, The Angkor Empire, all the way to the results of the wars in Indochina that led to the massive wave of Cambodian refugees into the United States. The particular focus of this research was to analyze certain events that may have had an effect on the Cambodian views of resettlement in America and particularly the acceptance of American education by Cambodian families. I used these historical data to help summarize how my family and I, along with many in the Cambodian community, adapted to living in poverty in the U.S. after escaping the tortures of war and the hardships of the refugee camps.

This method aligned to Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) guidelines 2, 3, 7, and 8: promoting insight and interpretation (guideline 2), engaging history (guideline 3), portraying character development and dramatic action (guideline 7), and attending to the person in context or setting (guideline 8). I also recorded conversations with my grandfather and mother, which will give me valuable access to our family’s personal experience of the themes of Cambodian refugee life. Guidelines 10 through 14 provided structure and coherence to my interviews and recorded conversations.

The findings in the first part of my analysis helped explain how Cambodians defined their own identity and understood their own culture. Also, this led readers to see how Cambodians and refugee groups similar to the Cambodians used their experiences and the life lessons in their own history to interpret their social belonging in the United States and within the diverse environment of the local communities in which they settled.

My family’s immigration and resettlement struggle were told by intertwining events in Cambodian history to explain why certain decisions were made during their journey out of Cambodia in their effort to rebuild their life here in the United States. It
was my belief that my grandparents’ experience of being wealthy land owners and noblemen in Cambodia, to my mother’s experience of being of an age during the time of the Khmer Rouge to be in a position of power to carry out torture and participate in warfare as a child soldier, greatly affected their ability to adjust in this society. Furthermore, the relationship with my father who was a refugee from China into Cambodia greatly conflicted with my mother’s theory of how a refugee should behave. This difference ultimately led to their separation. I’ve heard these stories many times before. However, for the sake of this study, I recorded a conversation that I had with them about the stated topic.

Research Technique #2

The second part of my research actually was part of the conclusion of the first. I continued to map the history of the Cambodian refugee journey to America. However, instead of diving into historical research of Cambodia, I analyzed and summarized newspaper articles about the Cambodian refugee resettlement story from the local newspaper in the city in which I was resettled. The articles explained in detail the difficulty the city had adjusting to Cambodian refugees and other refugees who arrived later. I was literally in many of these articles as they described some of my struggles and the choices I made in approaching the many cultural barriers, language barriers, and racial disagreements between the refugees and the city’s long-time residents.

Utilizing newspaper articles from past events that identify some of the subject’s involvement in critical issues of his environment, then, going deeper, providing personal insights and reasoning for the actions taken, are techniques that accord with guidelines 1 and 9 (Bullough & Pinnegar 2001): enabling connection (guideline 1) and offering fresh
perspectives on established truths (guideline 9). In the case of this self-study research, the subject and personal insights are my own.

The second part of my self-study research helped me dive into my own personal stories, some of which were the focus of local newspaper reports. Readers will also learn about my reaction to some of the negative sentiments that local residents had towards the refugees. These sentiments led to not only verbal attacks but also to physical violence. In this part of the research, I sought to understand whether or not a type of stance taken during these situations made a difference in the individual’s will to fight. Furthermore, I wanted to explore what thoughts or experiences individuals needed to have in order to respond appropriately to these challenges. Educators and people who work with at-risk refugee students often ask: What can we do to help students respond correctly to overt racism and class prejudice? What events should take place to promote a better understanding of culture and the refugee situation? I want to look for answers to these and similar questions.

Research Technique #3

In the third part of my research, I conducted interviews with key people who helped illuminate my story. I interviewed three friends who grew up with me utilizing the question bank in Appendix A. The interviews were recorded and excerpts of the interviews were transcribed and shared in Chapter Four. The experience of my friends who grew up in the same community I did added a more intimate understanding to what was happening in this small Minnesota community. I sought to draw parallels from the events in their lives, including the choices they made and the support or lack of support they had to get through tough times. I discovered whether or not those supports were
consistent with the supports I had. Also, I wanted to ask, what lack of support existed for my friends that caused them to fail as Loeun Lun failed to beat his deportation sentence?

The third part of the research will help educators understand that the refugee struggle is a collective struggle. These struggles are widely experienced by many Cambodian refugees as well as other refugee groups. Understanding these struggles and having knowledge of how to support people through these struggles can greatly benefit the field of teaching and others working with refugee youths.

This part of my research was an analysis of my own autobiography against the narratives of others. This process engaged guideline five and part of guideline six (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Guideline five calls for more than the author’s authentic voice. By relating my story to the story of others, a more complete analysis was conducted and allowed the readers to discover and to connect themes in the lives of refugees who had to survive war, fight through a difficult resettlement process, and/or struggled through generational poverty.

To conclude the three parts of my research, in Chapter Four I analyzed and summarized the factors that were crucial to my success and discovered whether or not they aligned with the other narratives discussed in Chapter Two. My findings will be explained in Chapter Five, drawing connections for educators in identifying strategies and programs that work for refugee students. In doing so, I more fully addressed guideline six as I explain how this research improved the learning situation for me and others. It also addressed Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) remaining guideline, guideline 4, which talks about the problems and issues that make someone an educator. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the structure of this research study.
After concluding the three parts of my research, I began the analysis process. Narratives are stories of lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, interviews and conversations with the people in my life along with newspaper articles summarizing important events of the time period and the community I lived in was used as part of my research to analyze the historical and cultural context of my life.

After reviewing other refugee narratives in Chapter Two, certain themes began to emerge. One major theme was that it is very difficult for a person going through these particular obstacles in life to overcome them all on their own. This lesson can be learned through the story of Loeun Lun, as well as many of my close friends’ stories that I addressed in Chapter Four as part of my own personal narrative.
The other two themes of support that persist in Chapter Two made evident that if there are programs that can cover the basic needs of the struggling individual, then he or she can pursue other support and activities to achieve a better life for the individual and his or her family. However, this alone is not enough as this only covers the basic necessity for survival. The goal of each of the subjects in this narrative and our goal as educators is to help our students and adult refugees to be able to live a happy and healthy life and not just cover the basic needs for survival. In order to achieve this, the people discussed in Chapter Two seemed to benefit from the support of individuals who cared about their struggles and could act as their mentors and guides. On the other hand, when people who struggle encounter individuals who express negative judgement, setbacks often occur causing more struggle and hardship for the people.

The last theme that was very recognizable in the refugees’ stories was the refugees’ will to fight through their personal barriers and challenges along with the challenges set by the current systems. It’s maybe this intrinsic will, enflamed by the encouragement of having something to live for, that drives the individual to achieve success in terms of the other themes. Evidence of this was what I looked for in my self-study research.

In Chapter Four, I will revisit Nguyen’s (2006) research on identity and adaptive patterns of assimilation to discuss how hard it was for Cambodian youth to fit into this community. As cultural dissonance is one of my themes of struggle, the four adaptive patterns of assimilation will help me understand how and why I and my Cambodian friends and families define ourselves at different stages of our resettlement.
The analysis of these particular themes in comparison to my personal narrative will provide suggestions and ideas to educators so that they will be able to gain a deeper understanding of what works and doesn’t work in the lives of refugee students. It will also help those working with refugees learn ways to set up refugees for success upon arrival. I was also able to take the messages and ideas learned from analyzing my own personal story in this particular way, so that it no longer isolated my experiences but collectively engaged my experience in a greater circle of courage, bravery, and meaning amongst others who’ve experienced the same or even greater hardships than I did.

In the process of carrying out my personal self-study research and creating the autobiography of my personal experiences of resettlement struggles, identity, cultural dissonance and poverty, I had to overcome a couple of structural difficulties in presenting an autobiography as a research study. Clements (1999) outlines these difficulties in his article entitled, “Autobiographical research and the emergence of the fictive voice.”

In this article Clements describes a major issue with autobiographical research. The issue he thoroughly talks about is the problem with memory: “Memory fades with time. The academic research to support this assertion is varied and much depends on the types of information to be recalled, but generally studies agree on this phenomenon” (Clements, 1999, p. 24). Clements then went on to cite studies done on memory retention. The study that he showed to be most favorable to memory retention found that 99% memory retention exists after 18 months but drops to 68% after six years (Conway, 1990).

Clements went on to offer certain ways to address memory problems in autobiographical research, by drawing on records of the past and recreating feeling by
aligning events to historical agents (Clements, 1999). Clements is not convinced that even this method can portray accurate events of the author’s past memory. However, I incorporated Clements’ suggestions in my chosen research methodology to afford the highest possible degree of accuracy in my recollections. It is my job to explain accurately the events of my life through the support of the self-study research guidelines outlined by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001). Although Clements (1999) believes that an autobiography may be difficult to present as research, it is a challenge that I am able to address with the research paradigm that I had set up following recognized guidelines for this research methodology.

The techniques that I used to create my self-study research were divided into three parts. The first part outlined the difficulty of Cambodian resettlement through the exploration of their history. The second part brought in documented current events of the Cambodian struggle in a local Minnesota community along with personal stories of residents from that community. The third part drew parallels between my experiences to others who had struggled through similar situations. The use of outside sources - interviews, newspaper articles, historical accounts was an important supplement to mitigate any effects of fading memory. This methodology should be sufficient to draw conclusions and pull out answers of what programs and activities are needed to be effective with our refugee population struggling through resettlement, cultural dissonance, creating identity, and overcoming poverty.

Ethics

In this autobiographical research, I have taken seriously my primary ethical responsibility of taking careful measures to interrogate my story accurately and with
respect for the historical record, consulting documents when available. I have studied and followed guidelines (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Clements, 1999) for appropriate conduct of autobiographical research in completing this study. Further, prior to starting my research, I obtained human subjects approval from Hamline University to conduct my interviews and recorded dialogues with respondents to the interview portion of the research. I also obtained signed informed consent forms (Appendix B) from the five people I interviewed, all of whom participated voluntarily, were aware that they could discontinue their participation at any time, and agreed to be recorded and have their comments transcribed and analyzed for the purpose of this paper. There are no known negative effects of participating in their research, other than possible discomfort in recalling negative memories. In cases where the respondents communicate more comfortably in Khmer, the conversation was conducted in Khmer then translated by me into English. Confidentiality is maintained by refraining from using actual names but rather pseudonyms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve described the methods I used in conducting my self-study research. The methods were guided by Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) approach to autobiographical self-study, as well as the theoretical framework section in the work of Chhoun et. al (2010), and Clements (1999). An example of how life story research could be used in education was also discussed and supported by the work of Antoniades (2009).

I’ve also discussed the difficulties in conducting autobiographical research and discussed the ways that I addressed these challenges. In the next chapter, I will share my personal story which starts from my family’s refugee journey to America to escape the
horrors of the Killing Fields. Their stories were discussed against the backdrop of Cambodian history. This history created my people’s culture, which not only influenced the Cambodian people’s outlook on life and resettlement in America, but also influenced the internal struggles and the counter ideas behind the Khmer Rouge form of government. My family’s stories were also the start of my story that took place during the time of great struggle between the local residents of a Minnesota city and Cambodians who resettled there in large numbers as struggling refugees. Through the light of these stories, themes were discovered to describe how someone who grew up with so many obstacles and barriers could overcome and accede to being a leader in an American school system. Educators will also be able to see through the recollection of these memories, the supports and strategies needed to help students who experienced similar hardships succeed in their efforts to overcome barriers and hardships to achieve their hopes and dreams to truly live.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS
LESSONS FROM MY OWN LIFE STORY

Looking Out the Window

Dear White Snow, will you have time for me to call?
I want to tell my grandson
that I’ve given it my all.

And even though his world falls short of heaven’s accord
Please help make him understand
that it was all I can afford.

Dear White Snow, can your flakes retain my story?
So that when you fall every year,
I will be taken home to glory.

Or have I requested something in vain
Since you will melt away
leaving me only memories of pain?

Sambath Ouk, 2016

Whether a picture is worth a thousand words or one word paints a thousand pictures, my family’s home country of Cambodia embodies both. And like all refugee families, the stories of sadness and loss are easy to identify. But our decision on how to move forward and the price paid for survival are less known and harder to understand. Even with perfect English it’s so hard for some refugees to describe from where they
truly came. It’s so difficult for them to describe the happiness they remembered. And it’s especially hard for them to talk about the sacrifices they had to make in hopes of a brighter future for themselves and their families. Because being now a refugee leaves them with even fewer resources and more unknowns in life than when they were just a child trying to figure out the world.

This chapter will discuss the life of refugees and the tough decisions refugee families had to make in order to care for their loved ones. I will walk you through my family’s experiences by revealing what my grandfather and mother had to go through to get to America and what they needed to do to adjust to life in their new home. When I share a direct quote from conversations, it will be placed in italics. I will use newspaper articles from the 1980’s and 1990’s to highlight some of the racial tensions in the community where I grew up to help educators understand how tough it is for refugees to assimilate. The events from articles and interviews will help readers understand why refugees are forced to make hard decisions that are not always politically correct in order to survive.

In the first part of this chapter, I will summarize ‘Theme one - Refugee survival and the struggle to rediscover home,’ using Cambodia’s history and how events in Cambodia’s history caused my family to be refugees. The life of my grandfather and my mother were shaped by four important eras in Cambodian history: The Angkor period, French Occupation, Independence, and The Killing Fields. These eras made them who they are and shaped how they prepared for life as a refugee in America. Life lessons during the Killing Fields taught them how to have hope when things were bleak.
Horrors during the Khmer Rouge period eventually brought my family over to the United States. For my grandfather and my mother, death of a family member, destruction of their home and the world they knew were an exchange for opportunities for their kids and over 30 years of depression for themselves. This was the price they paid to survive and to have an opportunity of rebuilding a new home for themselves and their family.

Before I get into the details of their lives and how they were affected by historical events in Cambodia, I will describe both my grandfather and mother first individually in their particular sections, giving the reader a profile of who they are and a glimpse of the hardships they went through. Since quotes from their interviews are shared in various places throughout Chapter Four, it may be hard to get a complete picture of who they were without this quick summary. I will do the same with the three friends I interviewed as well for the second part of Chapter Four.

How History Defined the Cambodian Refugees

The Beginning of the Refugee Story - My Grandfather’s Pride

Ankgor, the Great Khmer Empire

One narrative that rivals the Killing Fields in terms of printed materials about Cambodia is the research about the Angkor Wat which was built during Cambodia’s golden age, known as the Angkor Period. This was Cambodia’s time of greatness. Spanning from 802AD to 1431AD, the Angkor period was the time when Cambodia ruled much of Southeast Asia (Ross, 1990). At its zenith in 1191, its borders spanned all of Thailand and Laos. It also controlled most of Vietnam and some parts of Malaysia and Burma (Kim, Kim, Kim, Lee & Lee, 2011).
To understand how advanced and dominant the Khmers were one can just glance at the traces of Angkor’s glory by studying the temples they left behind, many of which still exist to leave visitors to Cambodia breathless beneath their presence. The Angkor Wat, built between 1113 and 1150 AD under King Suryavarman II is still the largest religious monument in the world. The temple is the symbol of Cambodia and its people. Surrounding Angkor Wat, the city of Angkor itself was the largest preindustrial metropolis in the world, with a population near 1 million and an urban sprawl that stretched over an area similar to modern-day Los Angeles (Maugh II, 2007).

The glory of Angkor was a central focus of my grandfather’s education. His whole life was lived during Cambodia’s struggles through colonialization and war. However, despite this reality, the only books he read and lessons he was taught showed only Cambodia greatness as his temple education was highlighted by stories of Angkor. My grandpa was born on March 4th, 1928, long after the Angkor period was over. But like many other Cambodians, he believes that the greatness of Angkor is the definition of what Cambodia is in terms of glory and accomplishment and what Cambodian people are in terms of strength and bravery.

His birth year was identified as 1928 when he arrived in America. Birthdates are confusing for many refugees. However, he stressed that I should not describe the complication in my study. Many refugees do not know the month and year of when they came into this world. This was not the case for the Cambodians. Many knew their birthdates which under natural cultural practices would be a year off from their Western birthdates as we are one year old when we are born and not zero. However, for Cambodians who arrived as refugees during the Killing Fields, more things came into the
picture to complicate the simple fact that people are born on a specific time, day, and year. These things had to do with the Khmer Rouge forcing many people to hide from their true identity.

My grandpa was born on March 4\textsuperscript{th} and then, figuratively speaking, reborn to the year 1928. More importantly than when he was born, however, was how he lived his life and what he had to live through. He lived through French colonialization, the Japanese occupation brought by World War II, the Cambodian Civil War, The Killing Fields, and the Cambodian refugee flight to America.

Half of my grandfather’s life was spent living in a state of war. However, despite the volatile situations around him, he was able to understand some form of peace and happiness when he married my grandmother. Unlike many other Cambodians at the time, his marriage with my grandmother was not arranged. My grandfather fell in love with her and asked her to get married which she then deferred to her parents for approval. Their marriage was only approved after my grandfather was able to build a house for his bride. They went on to have nine kids together.

My grandfather was a child when the French returned from World War I. He grew up in a remote village on the Southern coast of Cambodia along the gulf of Thailand pretty far removed from French authorities in Cambodia. Similar to the times of Angkor, only the royal family and the wealthy aristocrats were educated. At the time, the Ouk family was not of the wealthy class. Out of his siblings and cousins, he was the only one to be educated. The family couldn’t afford to lose more than one person to school. All of the other children were needed to work the farm. My grandfather’s education was a religious education provided by the local temple.
He spent much of his childhood working on the rice paddies through the time of harvest. When the harvest was over and the Cambodian Harvest New Year was celebrated, my grandfather would go out with the other villagers young and old to the beach to spend a few weeks shrimp and crab fishing in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Thailand. One of his favorite hobbies was to climb coconut trees and pick the coconut fruit from the top of the trees. The peace my grandfather knew in his village was short lived and always uneasy. The French tax system kept almost all of the Cambodians poor and under constant pressure to pay more taxes they couldn’t afford.

Despite my grandfather and his friends being born outside the Angkor period, they were heavily influenced by its glory in a way that was different from the Cambodians living in the cities. Many villagers did not get to go visit the temple as tourists (unlike people in the city) but the stories and symbolism of Angkor were frequently visited in their conversations.

Much of my grandfather’s childhood was spent at the temple. This was where he learned how to read and write in Khmer. Part of his education was also to listen to stories from Cambodia’s past, which was a local interpretation of the life and legends from the walls of the Angkor complex. The stories are filled with glories of Cambodian victories over its neighbors and even its glorious struggle to withstand Mongol pressure when the rest of the world succumbed to Kublai Khan’s hordes. These stories shaped Cambodian identity for my grandfather and many boys who were educated at the village temples. To him, it was the Khmers who were strong while French were savage guests that overstayed their welcome.
The following generation who founded the Khmer Rouge carried on similar views. According to my grandfather, these views may have been passed down from his generation and this is also proof of how dangerous the world can become when hate is passed down from one generation to the next instead of following what Buddhism teaches us, which is to let go.

**Grandpa** – *People in my village carried on the hate for the French and its influences despite knowing that the French had already been defeated. Many of them have never met a French person and were not directly involved in the fight against the French. I worry that fighting had become part of the Cambodian culture.*

Many Cambodian villagers had only religious schooling at the temples as carried on by traditional practices. The people who lived in the capital under French rule either went to ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese schools or the French schools for wealthy Cambodians. The different systems of education began to divide Cambodia into true Cambodians and Western-influenced Cambodians, a classification which the Khmer Rouge exploited and used to rule over the Khmer people.

In order to properly understand this distinction we need to take a closer look at the events that happened during the French Colonial period.

**Under French Colonial Occupation**

**Cambodia Labeled The Village of Bastards and Beasts**

In 1863, the French came in and made Cambodia their protectorate. Ironically, falling under French rule was probably what saved Cambodia from being completely usurped by Thailand and Vietnam. France’s plans for Cambodia, however, were not of a
type that would have restored Cambodia’s glory. In 1887, Cambodia was formally annexed into the French colony of Indochina.

France did little to transform Cambodia’s village-based lifestyle and economy. What the French did for Cambodia during the early colonial years was to establish a better way of collecting taxes for the French empire (Ross, 1990). Under the French, the common Cambodian folks continued to suffer. Many did not produce enough on their small plot of land to pay their taxes to the French authorities. The interest on unpaid taxes would then increase 100 to 200 percent. The Cambodian people of the colonial period paid the highest tax per capita in Indochina (Ross, 1990). When taxes couldn’t be paid, the French authorities would seize the villagers’ land. According to my grandfather,

*The French taxed to keep the villagers poor and the Cambodians weak. However, many villagers who had no connection to news or information from outside the village did not blame the French. Many did not know anything about the French because the French people that were in Cambodia were living in the cities of Phnom Penh and Battambang. The French brought in Vietnamese and Chinese civilians to be the colony’s civil servants. Farmlands that belonged to villagers and were worked on as a community were taken by force and given to Chinese and Vietnamese people who worked for the colony. In the city, it was Vietnamese civil servants that carried out orders for the French. In the village, it was rich Chinese businessmen. So a lot of the villagers’ hatred was targeted at the Chinese. They were the tax collectors for the French.*

Low literacy rates also kept the Cambodians from revolting against French colonial laws. The French themselves were very reluctant to improve the literacy of
Cambodians, fearing that Cambodia would be persuaded by nationalist sentiments that existed in the rest of Southeast Asia at the time (Ross, 1990). When the Cambodians did revolt, the French would force the Cambodian King at the time, King Sisowath Youtevong, to rename any village that rebel “The Village of Bastards and Beasts.” The village that had these names had to carry on the names for 10 years (Duk, 1964).

However, the French did promote secular education. This was a move away from the Buddhist temple-run system of the medieval ages of Cambodia. However, secular education was limited to the very small numbers of aristocratic Cambodian children and a larger number of Chinese and Vietnamese students who were the children of businessmen and civil servants of the colony (Corfield & Summers, 2003).

Again, this type of favoritism for Chinese and Vietnamese students in the colonial area of Cambodia created hatred between Cambodians and people they viewed as foreign to their land. This hatred of foreigners was the driving force for the Khmer Rouge in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. Even apart from the policies of the Khmer Rouge, common Cambodians throughout Cambodia were starting to develop a defiant spirit against foreigners.

This defiant spirit was carried forward by many Cambodians coming into Minnesota during the refugee resettlement period. For my grandfather, this spirit, which is a combination of anger, dissatisfaction, hatred, and learned pride, was what kept him alive during the Killing Fields.

Prior to French control, in accordance with Angkor culture, the Ouk family held pretty good status in the simplified Angkor caste system. My great grandfather and great-great grandfather were military servants to the royal court and owned large plots of land.
Grandpa – *Our family had a long history of serving the Kings of Cambodia. I don’t know when it started, but I grew up hearing tales of how we were the last family to surrender to the French. And our defeat was humiliating because it happened due to the betrayal of one of our own family members. This betrayal led to our defeat and banishment from the royal city. Family leaders who refused to accept French supremacy were put to hard work rebuilding Phnom Penh to satisfy their new French masters. After they finished, your great-great grandfather and many of his sons were buried alive. This was how the French let us know who was in charge. The God-chosen Khmer Kings are now chosen to serve the French. Ironically, the Khmer Rouge who hated the French utilized similar tactics to create fear amongst their own people.* 

The days where he could play in the ocean and climb coconut trees ended when he was 18. In fact, his only happiness from the age of 18 on was when he married my grandmother. At the age of 18, he joined a guerrilla movement to fight for independence. This was the Issarak Movement. However, the Japanese invaded Cambodia during World War II and repelled the French for a short period of time from Cambodia. When that happened my grandfather was taken to the capital to help build landing strips for the Japanese army.

After World War II, my grandfather returned to the Issarak army. The army didn’t have much support. However, they were skilled at deception. They combined real guns with fake ones to confuse the French into thinking that they were well armed. The Isarrak movement created uprisings all throughout Cambodia which eventually led to Cambodian independence in 1953.
Grandpa – The success of the Issarack movement taught me that one can accomplish much with very little. That’s why it’s important to never give up in life. Cambodians were not just refugees due to the Killing Fields. Many

Cambodians were refugees under the French as well. The most important thing to survival is having the will to fight. The reason why Cambodians were under French rule for so long was that they didn’t know how and weren’t given the opportunity to fight back. I was. And because of this opportunity, my spirit became very strong. This spirit carried me through the Killing Fields as well.

I asked my grandfather if this was what he was thinking about when he was buried up to his neck by the Khmer Rouge and his head was going to be used to boil their tea. His reply back to me was that you don’t think much about anything during times like that. “However,” he added, “something inside me did tell me that I was going to live.”

Independence - A New Sunrise Over an Old Land

Cambodia was under official French rule as part of the French Indochina Colony for 66 years from 1887 to 1953. Independence for Cambodia was granted by the French on November 9th, 1953. Norodom Sihanouk, Crown Prince of Cambodia, became the country’s head of state. His struggle for independence and victory over the French was known as the era of “Sangkum Reastr Niyum,” which translates to the “People’s Socialist Community” and was summarized in a popular Cambodian novel as the new sunrise over an old land (Soun, 1961). The spirit of nationalism and the hope for a brighter Cambodian future was sparked under Sihanouk.

For many ordinary Cambodians, Sihanouk’s time from 1953 to 1970 was the only short-lived peace they had known. Success in that era was stamped by three important
events for Cambodia and the Cambodian people. The first was independence and the belief that Cambodia could once again shape its own future. The second was the judgment by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that ruled on the temple of Preah Vihear. This victory marked the first time since the 12th century that Cambodia was able to win back lands occupied by its neighbors and protect one of their ancient temples that are so valuable to the Cambodian people. The third and most relevant point to this study was compulsory education for all of the Cambodian children through high school. Because of free compulsory education in Cambodia, my mother and her older siblings were able to attend primary school.

Sihanouk’s time was marvelous but it ended very quickly. On March 18th of 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown. The Capitalist Lon Nol Government took power. The 1970 coup d’état dragged Cambodia into the vortex of a wider war (Ross, 1970). This war was known to the west as the Vietnam War. However, the Vietnam War was just one episode in a series of Indochina wars. Any progress made during Sihanouk’s Sangkum Reastr Niyum era was dead. Cambodia once again was thrust into the nightmares of war, culminating in the horrors of its next period, the Killing Fields.

Prior to the war, my grandfather was a freedom fighter against French colonial rule. He and his relatives in the royal court organized guerrilla revolts against the paid Cambodians in the French army. He had actually retired from the army after Cambodian independence. However, he was invited back to train new recruits in the Lon Nol’s Capitalist army after the overthrow of King Sihanouk. He came out of retirement not truly understanding why except for the fact that he was asked to serve his country again.
This decision propelled him and the rest of my family to be one of the primary targets for torture under the Khmer Rouge.

The next sections of this chapter will contain quotes from my mother’s interview. Before continuing on with the historical events of Cambodia and how it affected my family, I will give you a short summary of who my mother was and what she went through during the Cambodian Civil War and the Khmer Rouge concentration camps.

My Mother’s life in Cambodia

My mother was one of nine kids. She was born right before the Cambodian Civil War which started in 1968. Her life was peaceful for a short while as she got to go to elementary school and work in the market with her mother. She did not have much opportunity to spend time with her father as he spent most of his time at the military base.

Peace quickly unraveled for my mother after the war ended. Her father came home and burned away everything they had. Her house, her toys, her books, her extra pairs of clothes, everything was gone. They spent money and had enough to eat for a while, however, the family was sleeping on the street crowded into the rickshaw.

Shortly after the Khmer Rouge entered their city, she was taken away from her parents. Kids her age had their own separate camps. She had a couple of different jobs under the Khmer Rouge. She was first put in charge of taking care of the infants and toddlers. She was responsible for providing food rations to them. After a few years, she was enlisted into their military unit as a young soldier. She was not going to war yet. Her duties with the gun were to watch over the older adults and make sure they were working hard enough on the fields. If they weren’t it was my mother’s job to beat them until they worked hard enough.
Cambodian culture and life under the Khmer Rouge were flipped upside down. Parents and elders who had the utmost respect under traditional Cambodian culture were slaves to their own kids. The kids were given the authority to reeducate the generation that were corrupted by foreign influence, their parents. My mother was forced to do horrible things. She has been able over the years to put her actions into historical context and forgive herself for what she had to do. However, one thing that she still has not been able to forgive herself for was the death of her youngest sister, for which she believed she bore responsibility.

The Killing Fields - The Reeducation of Cambodians

The Continuation of our Refugee Story and the Reason Why My Mother Cries

Under Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime, the idea of Cambodian greatness and true Cambodians shaping their own destiny was widely touted under the so-called philosophies of Angkar, the word for organization in the Cambodian language that was used to mean the ‘Will of the People’ (Locard, 2004). The Khmer Rouge would say Angkar wanted you to do this or didn’t want you to do that (Locard, 2004). However, progress in all areas of Cambodian lifestyle was lost. The Khmer Rouges were so paranoid about Western influence that they forgot that the only people they had to torture on a daily basis were ordinary Cambodians. Not only was education systematically obliterated (Ross, 1990), the whole of Cambodia itself was lost.

My grandfather, being a part of the capitalist army under Lon Nol and being semi-educated in a religious setting, had to completely erase his whole identity. He buried all his valuables far away from his home and burned down his house. He took a new name and age and gave different ages to all his children. An army sergeant prior to the Khmer
Rouge victory, he reduced himself to being a homeless rickshaw driver. Two of his sons died during the war. One died of illness. The other, he accidently beat to death with his own hands as he didn’t know how to cope with the traumatic stress of the battlefield. His remaining children were taken out of school. Everyone struggled to understand why everything their family had worked so hard for their own father was so willing to destroy overnight.

I put the question to my grandfather whether he had any remorse or second thoughts. His reply was no. He went on to explain that Cambodian culture had been greatly affected during this struggle. The effort of the French to keep the Cambodians illiterate had turned them into savages. My grandfather understood the cause of the war well. He understood the differences in thinking between the villagers, his fellow villagers, who mostly aligned with the Khmer Rouge and the elites who were brought up by the French and Western capitalistic thinking. He lived in both worlds. He understood the anger of the Khmer Rouge and 20th century society and the hope that the city people developed. After the victory of the villagers (the Khmer Rouge) my grandfather, with his knowledge of both sides, became the reason for my family’s survival. Every step of the way he was able to act as a bridge for my family to cross into a realm of relative safety.

He himself, however, faced many near death experiences. His younger sister admitted to a young Khmer Rouge officer of no more than fifteen years old that my grandfather was a former capitalist soldier in exchange for a bag of rice for her and her family. The Khmer Rouge tied my grandfather up and beat him until he fell ill. My grandfather refused to admit he was a soldier so they let him go. They thought he was going to die anyways because he was so ill. They didn’t bother killing him.
The Khmer Rouge had a very cruel mindset when it came to governing its people. Some of the core Khmer Rouge philosophies were:

- You can arrest someone by mistake; never release them by mistake.
- He who protests is an enemy; he who opposes is a corpse!
- Absolutely everything belongs to the Angkar
- The sick do not need to eat, for hunger cuts the appetite. A good diet will cure you. (Locard, 2004, p. iii)

Pol Pot wanted to create an agrarian utopia in Cambodia. He believed that the glory of the Angkor Period could only be restored on the backs of Cambodian peasant farmers working on Cambodia’s rice fields. Under the Khmer Rouge rule, a major goal was to eradicate the educated upper and middle classes. Any evidence of education doomed a person to death. Cambodians who were school-aged during this time were taught only allegiance to the Angkar (Ung, 1991).

Khmer Rouge reeducation affected the whole of Cambodia. Reforms were brutally carried out by the Khmer Rouge. Families were split apart. The family structure no longer existed. Expressions of love or grief were forbidden. Schools and hospitals were closed. Your only job during this time was to work on the fields (Munroe, 1979).

“We shall force them to work with their hands in order to become new men (Mao Zedong, 23 June 1950, cited in Locard, 2004, p. iii).” This Mao quote was used as Cambodians young and old marched from the cities into the fields. Very young children were left to the care of a few remaining elders who could not participate in physical labor. Older children were indoctrinated to become shock-troops of the Khmer Rouge.
They were the ones who conducted tortures and executions of their elders (Ung, 1991). Religious persons such as monks were executed or defrocked, left to die by outright starvation. Holy places, even such places as the sacred Angkor temples, were destroyed with sledgehammers by religious followers forced at gunpoint (Ung, 1991). There was a new Cambodia, and the old traditions were systematically being erased.

In order to reeducate the young, families were separated. Children were taken away from their parents and husbands and wives were split and forced to form new unions that were more pleasing to the Angkar (the mysterious “Will of the People”). My mother was a child of no more than fifteen years old during the Killing Fields. However, she was given a gun and the heavy responsibility to guard the country, especially the children of the country.

Everyone under the Khmer Rouge control was given unpaid jobs in the country depending on their age. If you were younger than 11, your job was to learn and perform the communist doctrine. You start out by torturing animals. If you perform that well, you are moved up to torture other humans, especially your own relatives. From the age of 12 years old to 21, you were given a gun and your job is to watch over the workers and fight foreign invaders, which at that time was an excuse to kill Cambodians from the city who had lighter skin. Later, my mother and other children went out to fight the well-equipped Vietnamese army who were well-trained and experienced in fighting wars against the U.S. and China. From the age of 21 to 60, you worked the fields. Anyone older than that was systematically removed to prove that religion didn’t exist and that if there was such a thing as “God’s Will,” it was the “Will of the People,” – The Angkar.
Mom – The most difficult job I had was rationing out food for infants and small children, knowing that no one had enough to eat. One day I heard that my father was sick from being beaten by Khmer Rouge soldiers. For a week, I would take food away from my youngest sister’s mouth and other kids and carried it over at night to the fields where my father worked. It didn’t take long before my youngest sister became ill due to lack of food. Her last words to me was that she wanted to eat fish. I told her to wait until night came so I could sneak out and find her some. She smiled and fell asleep. In the night, I snuck out to find fish for her. When I came back, I tried to wake her up. But she wouldn’t wake up. Until this day, I blame myself for killing my own sister.

Children were greatly affected during the era of the Killing Fields, both physically and emotionally. Prior to the Killing Fields, there were 990,000 primary school children in Cambodia. Out of that number 670,000 children went missing. Surviving children of the Killing Fields became refugees. Many were orphans and some made it to the United States and to Minnesota. Children who were trained by the Khmer Rouge to torture and kill had a hard time adjusting to life in America.

When the sun came out the next morning after her sister died, my mother had to report the incident to the top without showing any emotions. Because Angkar decided who your family members were her sister was just another comrade in their system. If they would have caught her crying, she would have been strategically removed from their system, meaning she would be killed. My mother could not show any emotions or recognition of her own sister’s death. In fact, for four years under Khmer Rouge control, my mother never let herself smile or cry. The only time she heard her own voice was
when other Khmer Rouge soldiers asked her questions. Songs, music, laughing, playing, crying, normal emotions often felt by a child, were only experienced in her head.

I asked my mother how this made her feel and what carried her through. Below is her reply.

Mom – How did it make me feel? It made me really confused about what was reality and what was a dream. You know that in America, I suffered from nightmares about everything that happened in Cambodia. Surprisingly, when I was there, I didn’t have nightmares. Maybe I didn’t let myself have nightmares, because when I was awake, everything was a nightmare. Therefore, I had great dreams at night. In my dreams our family was together. Our house stood. I was back at school. Everything was perfect. I yearned so much for that to be the reality that when I was awake, I told myself that this was just a dream. One day I’ll wake up not from my dreams but from reality, the reality that was a nightmare and I’ll be happy.

My mother used sleep to block the difficulties around her. When we got to America, it was my grandfather who used sleep to help him forget his troubles. I went on to ask my mother, “What kept you alive through all this?”

Mom – I had a goal in life and I needed to stay alive to achieve that goal. I wanted to explain to everyone that I didn’t kill my sister on purpose. I wanted people to know that I tried my best to do my part for our family. I wanted to be able to embrace our family again, our true family, not the ones the Khmer Rouge gave to us. I wanted to be able to apologize out loud to my sister. I wanted to feel
people forgiving me. Ironically, it was this guilt that kept me alive and made me fight on.

The Killing Fields left a horrific legacy on Cambodia. Besides the numbers of missing children, other staggering numbers were the number of professionals who died under the Khmer Rouge regime. Before the Khmer Rouge, there were 550 doctors of which only 48 survived the Killing Fields. Only one single lawyer was known to have survived the Killing Fields. The targets for Khmer Rouge execution were ones whom they called sub people. Sub people included people who lived in towns or had encounters with foreigners (Munro, 1979). Since education in Cambodia was guided by the French system at that time, anyone who was educated was a target for murder. The hatred for foreigners may have derived from the mistreatment of Cambodians from foreigners during Cambodia’s dark ages, colonial period and the Vietnam War. However, by the end of the Killing Fields, nearly 2 million Cambodians died due to starvation and torture (Twiss, 2002). One in three Cambodians perished under Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime. And since so many of the educated Cambodians perished, the few that were able to come to the United States had very little education or none at all. This made it even more difficult for them to be successful at school and adjust to America’s literate society.

The Killing Fields was not the Angkor Period, Cambodia’s golden age. The will of Angkar killed about two million Cambodians and forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to leave their homes, many of whom were never able to return. 200,000 refugees found their way to the United States where they were given the tools of hope to fight yet again, for another new beginning (Nakanishi & Matia-Padua, 2008).
The Killing Fields ended when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, starting the Third Indochina War. My mother was sent into battle against the Vietnamese. However, quick defeats at the hands of well-trained Vietnamese soldiers allowed my mother to free herself from the Khmer Rouge and find her parents. Gradually she found most of her remaining family members. The war had now taken two brothers and one sister from her. One person that was still missing was her oldest brother. He was sent off and people assumed he was dead. The family did not reunite with my oldest uncle until twelve years later in America. The family joined the refugee caravan and marched towards the Thai border. My grandpa gave the family one last piece of advice before their long march:

Grandpa – *No matter what happens, no matter who dies by your side, look ahead and keep moving forward. Do not worry too much about the what if’s in life.*

*Buddha says, the past should not be forgotten and the future depends on your present decisions. Always look toward the future and don’t regret your past.*

This Buddhist saying teaches people to focus mostly on what decisions they make in the present reminding people not to focus so much on what can’t be changed in the past. This Buddhist saying became the motto for the rest of our refugee struggle. My mother and her family made it into Thailand where she would eventually be arranged to marry my father. Because of differences in their ideas of what a refugee should be like, they ended up being separated and my father came to the United States while my mother was seven months pregnant with me.

My father was a Chinese refugee into Cambodia. Being a refugee once before, he felt like he needed to jump on any opportunities given to him, even if it meant that the family would be apart for a while. So when he had the opportunity to come to America,
he took it, leaving my mother behind. I did not know my father was alive until I was five. I did not talk to my father until I was seventeen and I did not meet him until I was 31.

When I talked to him on the phone at age seventeen, I wanted to say so much to him. There were so many questions I had but like my mother during the Khmer Rouge, the conversations were only carried out in my head. And the emotion I felt for him was anger. It was because of him that I grew up in a broken home. I did not understand the complexity and the difficult decisions that refugees had to make. I wasn’t mature enough back then.

It wasn’t until I solidified my career in ESL at the age of 31 that I was able to take my wife and go meet him. Again, I wanted to say so much but words couldn’t come out. The trip was not a failure, however, for it gave me an even deeper understanding of how tough things were back in the refugee camps. My father told me that he never intended to leave me. He thought he was doing the right thing. He had the opportunity to come to the United States and he took it. He thought he was going to be able to make a nice living for himself here and then bring us over at a later time. However, life never got better for him. He was a taxi driver in New York. And every time he got ahead, he got robbed and had to start back from the bottom again. When he heard that my mother had come to the United States too, he grew ashamed of himself and became too afraid and to come find us.

My mother, on the other hand, always believed that my father had forgotten us once he made it to the United States. She was also afraid. She was afraid that if I met him, I would blame all our lives’ miseries on her. After her sister’s death, she could not handle any more blame. I wanted to tell my mother so much that I had met my dad and that I didn’t blame her for anything. She gave me the best life she could. I know for a fact
that my life would not have been better with my dad in the picture. The bravery, the fight, the compassion, all these were traits that I learned from her.

I’m at peace now with what happened between my mother and father. All this was part of being a refugee. Our lives are like a broken puzzle. We strive to put pieces back together one piece at a time. However, some pieces go missing and we need to try to admire what we can of an incomplete picture. Sometimes the empty spaces carry the most meaning. The poem below, written when I was 27, were the most words until now that I’ve expressed about my father.

A Father

Twenty seven years of life has gone by.
I've never seen you once to hear good-byes

A complete stranger in my eyes,
You are an image - left in a dream soon to die.

I remember one tear drop wasted in time
listening to you explain your heartless crime.

Believe me, your stories weren't sublime.
But you may complete your duties to this rhyme.

Do you remember the person you left behind?
Well don't worry because she's doing fine.

I've been taking care of her since I was nine -
holding on through the fears in a life less divine.

Everyday we pray for heaven to appear -
to make life a little bit better over here.

And as you sit enjoying the peace over there,
don't forget about the pieces of life you left broken...
in the air.

By Sambath Ouk, 2007
Theme One - The Refugee Journey to Rediscover Home

The price of survival and rediscovering home

The first theme of struggle in this study talks about the price of survival and the refugee’s journey to rediscover the feeling of being at home. My mother felt that home was with her family and a refugee family should stick together. She lost so much in surviving this far. The only thing she felt that she had left was her family.

In 1982, we were sponsored by Lutheran Social Services to come to the United States. Many would assume that, once we were in America, all our troubles would disappear. However, the other themes of this research—Identity, Cultural Dissonance, and Poverty—laid heavy barriers to us experiencing the promised American dream. Also, because of the trauma that my grandfather and my mother experienced during colonialism and the Killing Fields and the lack of education, adjustment to life in America became extremely difficult. I will go into these difficulties in the analysis portion of this chapter after discussing the other themes.

Newspaper Articles and the Voices of People Who Survived

I often get questions from my colleagues about the culture that EL students bring with them. The questions, comments and negative remarks come to me in a wide spectrum. Some say they are so happy to live and work in a place that’s multicultural…They wish our students would share more of their cultures with them. This comment is more positive. More negative comments sound like this: EL kids should be placed in a separate school until they can learn to be more like us. One comment is
positive and one is quite negative. However, both comments share a directive, asking EL students to perform a task for us.

For my colleagues, what’s lacking is the understanding of how hard this task is for some of our kids, especially if our kids are refugees and their families have been refugees for a while, having experienced limited or interrupted education over many years or even generations. Many of our refugee EL students not only struggle with learning to fit in to our culture, but they also struggle to live up to their own culture if they are lucky enough to know what that is.

When I get those comments from my colleagues, I often reflect back to the experiences of my grandfather and mother and my own experiences growing up in a small home crowded with people but emptied of emotions due to war, conflict, and torture. It was hard. It was so hard. I do not wish my experience on anyone. However, it’s my duty to bridge the gap and share my knowledge, gained through first hand experiences, with my colleagues. So I create a learning moment for them by explaining a little bit about our refugee kids and their struggles, especially, their struggles with identity. What these kids are going through now is similar to what I experienced 20 years ago as a teenager. In the eyes of my parent, I was too American. In the eyes of Americans, I was not American enough. When teachers told me to be myself, I didn’t even know who that was.

In this section of Chapter Four, newspaper articles are used to bring out the voices and experience of early Cambodian and Southeast Asian refugees. These articles summarized the difficulty that some of the refugees had fitting into their new environment.
The local newspaper in the town that I grew up in was the Post Bulletin. This newspaper ran an article entitled, “Students try to cross sea of language” (Dougherty, 1993) which mentions how Boua Somvang, a Lao Tinh student, goes home to a traditional Tinh culture. When he enters class, he quickly tries to switch gears and assemble American phrases in his head so he can be successful in school.

Another article appeared in the same newspaper, entitled “Young Cambodian feels pull of two cultures” (McCormick, 1993). Ren Nhean, a local Cambodian refugee student and the subject of the article, talks about the religion and life of his parents being from a different generation and how he wishes to go back to Cambodia one day to better understand his native culture. His only life at home is sheltered to his small room where he has a small stereo and pictures of his soccer team. The newspaper states, “Nhean doesn’t remember much about Cambodia and knows more about cartoons, cars and rock ‘n’ roll” (McCormick, 1993). Nhean at the time of the article felt that additional racism was targeted towards him as Asian gangs got extra attention from the media. People assumed he was a gang member just because he was Cambodian. Nhean also described that people used to spit on him back in middle school because he was Asian (McCormick, 1993).

Nhean felt pretty successful at balancing his two worlds. He really wanted to be successful in America. He had aspirations to go into law enforcement, but he felt his lack of English might be too great a barrier to overcome. Nhean felt great responsibility to care for his parents. Because of that, he felt that he was often asked to do more than other kids. He worked 20 hours a week, went to school, and took care of his parents (McCormick, 1993)
Much like Nhean and Samvong, many refugee kids are asked to balance two worlds, making it very confusing for them to define who they are and set their own expectations. Often, the responsibilities that come with balancing two cultures, two languages, and two lifestyles are overwhelming for refugee students, causing high levels of stress and anxiety.

Theme 2 - Identity

Who was I? Why was I that? How did I become me?

This section will discuss my struggles with identity. I will describe events that took place in the community that made it difficult for me to accept being American. I will also talk about the barriers that were in place to make it difficult for me to define myself also as Cambodian. Throughout this section, I will insert comments that were made by my interview subjects.

The subjects of my interviews were the friends I with whom I grew up. These two men, whom I will give the pseudonyms Monorom and Seyha, were people that went to school with me from middle school onward. The woman I interviewed, whose pseudonym is Davy, was a first generation Cambodian teenager. She was the former girlfriend/fiancé of one of the founding gang members of the Royal Cambodian Bloods. In the next three paragraphs, I will describe the three interviewees in more detail. Quotes from their interviews are inserted throughout Chapter Four.

Davy

Davy was a first generation Cambodian refugee youth. She came to America at the age of 13. Davy had many struggles in her life. She lived in a home with an abusive
father who struggled with alcohol and violence. Her mother and siblings struggled with depression and fitting in to a new life here in the United States. Some of these difficulties may have been due to PTSD that her family would live through in the Killing Fields of Cambodia.

In school, Davy would often get picked on due to her lack of English and previous education. At the time that Davy was in school, support for language learners was still minimal. American students would harass her and put gum in her hair. She did not feel like there was anyone she could go to for support at school.

At home, Davy also struggled to find someone she could turn to share her struggles. Her siblings were older and were either working or on welfare. Her parents were not educated and could not support her with her schoolwork. Therefore, when she explained to them that she was struggling to make the grades, they thought this was due to her not trying hard enough in school.

Davy dated one of the founding members of the Royal Cambodian Bloods. They were engaged for a brief time before the young man went to jail for assault. Despite being around gangs and negative activities, Davy was able to stay out of trouble, and she believed that gang life and activity of the time was justifiable because of the bullying that gang members received from their American peers.

I asked Davy to be my interview subject because she went through the very beginning of the racial tension between Cambodian and American youth. Her story along with the other two interviewees helped me focus on the themes of identity and cultural dissonance.

Seyha
Seyha was a close childhood friend of mine. I’ve known him for as long as I can remember. He was one of the nine friends I introduced in the first chapter of my study. Seyha is two years older than me. However, he was only one grade level ahead of me. Seyha’s brothers were close friends with my uncles and aunts. Together, Seyha’s brother and my uncle made up some of the original members of the Royal Cambodian Bloods. This was the gang that both Seyha and I joined when we became teenagers ourselves.

Seyha was a child of amazing talent. He was athletic and musical. However, he had a hard time showing how talented he was at school. We ended up living in the same block when I was thirteen years old. However, prior to that, I was still living in apartment complexes with large numbers of Cambodian refugees. Seyha’s family moved out of the Cambodian neighborhood. His older brothers and sisters dropped out of school and worked, allowing them to pool money together to buy a house for their mother who was a single parent. Seyha’s father had died during the Cambodian war.

Because of supporting their single mother, Seyha and his brothers and sisters saw getting a job and going to work as their primary goal. Seyha found very little support in school and ended up quitting as soon as he had the opportunity to drop out.

Seyha’s struggle to access the three themes of support--people who cared, programs that met his needs, and his will to fight--was channeled towards getting a job to support his family rather than obtaining a degree for himself. If Seyha had been able to access support, he may have been able to receive money while at the same time pursuing his degree. Seyha may have had the opportunity to build a better life for himself.

Monorum
Monorum is also a Cambodian refugee. He is two years younger than me and was two grade levels below me when I was in middle school and high school. Monorum tried very hard to fit in. He had a small group of Cambodian friends that he hung around most of his time in school. He and the few Cambodian friends he had were not accepted by many of the Cambodian youth at the time. People viewed Monorum and his friends as ‘Sell Outs.’ This was a term that some Cambodians used to label other Cambodian students who they did not feel kept close enough to their culture.

Monorum and his friends always worked hard in school. Their grades were good. They also got involved in school. However, despite his efforts to succeed in American society, Monorum struggled to gain acceptance from his American peers. Now, as a professional in the local school district, Monorum has found a balance where most of his friends are Cambodian and his free time is also spent with Cambodian people. However, he continues to succeed in his studies and has moved up in his profession through the school district.

Monorum’s story helps us understand one of the themes of struggle, identity. His narrative highlights how long this struggle with identity can last and how different people choose to resolve it. In his case, he found a personal life that is now immersed in the Cambodian community while his work life is immersed in the mainstream community.

The three people I interviewed were all my childhood friends. They went through similar challenges that I went through. All three of them struggled with cultural dissonance and identity and they all grew up in poverty because of the Cambodian refugee experience. Through the rest of the chapter their quotes contribute to the themes of struggle and support. However, I chose to start my interview with all of them by
asking them how they defined themselves. This question allowed me to reflect on theme
two, the struggle with identity. Two of the three of them until this day still identify
themselves as just Cambodians, not Cambodian Americans nor Americans. When I asked
them why, both of their replies reflected a belief that Americans won’t allow us to be
American or view us as equal to them. Monorum, the only person to state something
different said he now tries to be more American. Following are excerpts of our
conversation about identity.

*Interview of Davy (older friend, 1st generation Cambodian teenager)*

*Me – How do you identify yourself?*

*Davy – Cambodian*

*Me – As a Cambodian, how were you being treated in school?*

*Davy – It’s so hard for me*

*Me – Do you think the Cambodians at that time were looked at as inferior to the
Americans, meaning worth less?*

*Davy – Yes*

*Me – Did the relationship between the Cambodians and the Americans at that
time affect how you define yourself?*

*Davy – Yes*

*Interview Of Seyha (fellow RCB)*

*Me – How do you identify yourself?*

*Seyha – I identify myself as Cambodian.*

*Me – Just Cambodian?*

*Seyha – Yes*
Me – Did the relationship between the American and Cambodian community affect how you identify yourself?

Seyha – It was not because how I was treated. However, no matter how hard I tried to be American, the color of my hair and my skin color, I’ll always be Cambodian.

Interview with Monorum (Sell Out)

Me – How do you identify yourself?

Monorum – Now, Cambodian American. I’m trying to be more American. Before, just Cambodian. All my friends were Cambodians. I’m trying to integrate more now.

A lot has changed in the attitude that American people hold towards Southeast Asian refugees. However, the negative experiences that the three interviewees had with local Americans in their Minnesota city engraved in their minds that they will never be accepted as true Americans. So their only choice is to identify as Cambodian and cling to as much Cambodian culture as they can. This highlights one of the struggles with identity for young refugees. All three people interviewed actually spent more of their life in America and are probably more familiar with American culture than Cambodian culture. However, their identity was so tied to the cultural issues in the city that they find it hard to call themselves American. Early on, I, too, identified myself as just Cambodian.

My family reluctantly left our home country and our way of life behind. Our way of life was taken from us by our own people, forcing us to flee for our lives. And even though America opened its doors to us, there were many days when we felt like they
didn’t want us around. In fact, it seemed like for many years, we couldn’t go a day without someone shouting at us to go back home.

The Post Bulletin captured quotes highlighting some of the white American reactions at the time to the influx of Cambodians into their city. The quote from Josephine Castle, a Minnesota resident from 1983, states. “I don’t think anybody likes them around here.” (Andrist, 1983, p. 5B) This particular newspaper article captured the experiences of the Danh family who in the newspaper is identified as a Vietnamese refugee family. However, this is an error. The family is a close friend of ours. They were Cambodian refugees from Vietnam. Aun Danh, who is mentioned in the article, states, “Almost every week they come by and they want to fight my son.” (Andrist, 1983) Aun continues, “They don’t like us. We didn’t do anything to them. We don’t like to fight but we have to sometimes.” (Andrist, 1983, p. 5B) Another article from two days before this article mentioned a question from Southeast Asian refugees to the reporter, asking him when people were going to stop calling them “Chinks” and telling them to go back home (Andrist, 1983).

In Chapter Two’s literature review, I discussed how poverty and cultural dissonance have tremendous effects on the acculturation of refugees. Dinh et. al (2008) define acculturation as an effect that happens on an individual when two cultures come in contact with each other. The negative experiences that refugees face when encountering the majority cultural group make it very difficult for them to want to or know how to be a part of American life and culture. This pushes them to cling even more to other refugees in their cultural group for support.
As a little kid, I saw many unfriendly white faces. It seemed like people tried their best to put on their meanest face possible when looking at us. This happened everywhere, from the check-out lanes at the stores to people walking in front of our house. I found those faces funny and at times couldn’t help but laugh. It didn’t bother my family either. They’ve been through so much that a little stare down won’t intimidate them.

As a child, I didn’t understand what racism was. However, I certainly felt and understood very well the tension that was present. In Chapter One I described being spat on by older American kids in my own yard. At that time, all I did was stare back at them. I didn’t know what else to do. However, I wanted to show them that I wasn’t afraid and that I was tough enough to take their insults. I couldn’t remember who those kids were but for a period of time after that moment, I always played outside with rocks nearby.

One day at the park near our house, a white American boy was trying to talk to me. I couldn’t understand him but I thought he was yelling at me. I didn’t understand English yet, but I learned from past experiences that American kids weren’t nice to me. So I grabbed a handful of sand that was in the play area and threw it in his eyes. He cried and his mother came to yell at my mom and me. My mother wanted to apologize but she didn’t know how to speak English so she just grabbed my hand and walked away. I asked her why Americans were so mean to us. To this day, I still remember that moment. I know now as an adult and fluent English speaker that I didn’t handle that situation well. However, to this day, I’m not so sure that I was at fault.

Fights between refugee kids and white American kids continued back and forth, each side blaming the other for starting them (Andrist, 1983, p. 5B). Looking back on that time, many of the fights were because of the kids’ inability to communicate with
each other. The issue that had a greater effect on me was that my mother and other Asian parents were always being yelled at afterwards by the white parents. Our parents couldn’t talk back to them. They just pulled us away. That made me very angry.

The language barrier and the difference in culture led to many misunderstandings that added to the rising tension between the two groups. Growing up in this type of environment caused me to form a belief that I will never be accepted as an American, much like Seyha and Davy in my interviews.

From the day I knew I was alive until the 2nd grade, I never wanted to be American. I thought they were rude and hated: me, my family, and my people. Why would I want to be a part of a group that didn’t even think I was human?

I was an angry kid. Part of that anger was because I could not communicate with American kids. Without the ability to communicate, I always felt like I couldn’t understand what was expected of me at school, on the playground, and at the neighborhood gas station. I just kept feeling that everyone was always yelling at me.

I see this same reaction in our newcomer students today. Last year, in my role as EL Coordinator, I kept getting called into a certain school because an EL student was hitting other students in the classroom. The teacher and the principal tried to figure out what was going on with the child. The student won’t talk to anyone except for the interpreter and he kept saying that when other kids do something to him, they never get yelled at. But he would always get in trouble for fighting back. The teacher kept saying that the other students never did anything to him.

This child was feeling the same way I felt when I was his age and didn’t know English. Because we didn’t know the language and had a different cultural background,
we couldn’t understand the cultural norms of the classroom and what was expected behavior. We interpreted certain gestures by other kids as being hostile to us and we didn’t have the ability to respond back through language. So we often responded through physical means that got us in trouble.

Don’t Turn Your Back On Your People

My struggles with English continued through 2nd grade. I remembered the very first day of school in kindergarten. The teacher asked what I wanted to be. I responded, “cereal.” Everybody laughed at me. I meant to say soldier but back then I didn’t know the difference. I also remembered having an accident on the floor because I didn’t know when it was appropriate to ask to go to the bathroom. In 1st grade, I remembered a fellow student asking me if I was a new student a month and a half into the school year. I was being pulled out so much for support classes that he didn’t know I was in his class. My needs, much like the needs of other EL students at that time, perplexed teachers. Many wanted to put us in special education because we couldn’t grasp what was going on in class.

Dougherty’s (1993) article in the local newspaper stated that many of the first wave of EL students were placed in special education classes. In the same article entitled “Students try to cross sea of language,” Judy Auger, director of Rochester’s Limited English Proficiency program, stated, “No one was really ready for what it would take educationally” (Dougherty, 1993, p. 4B)

In Chapter Two, one theme of support was finding the right programs to meet the needs of refugee students. Many communities often find it difficult to deal with large refugee waves coming into town, if they’ve never resettled refugees before. For my
hometown, Cambodian refugees were the first large wave of refugees that the city experienced. The city struggled to find adequate resources and create the right programming to help meet the needs of the refugees. For the refugees, themselves, navigating how to obtain the resources can sometime be an unsolvable puzzle. For the school district in this town, programming did manage to improve through time as the district began to figure out how to support refugee students who had had little education in the past.

Midway through 1st grade, my mother and the rest of my family made a decision to move into a neighborhood where I would be able to get more English support--EL education was only at certain schools at the time. I was enrolled into a school that had a Newcomer English Center for elementary age students. Because of my year in country, I was not placed into the Newcomer program. However, I was able to get two hours a day of support from the ESL program there. This helped me a lot. For the first time since I could remember, I liked going to school. There was a gifted and talented art class in the district and I was enrolled in that. I excelled at music and playing musical instruments. I was faster than all the other American kids and every Cambodian kid too except for one. I had lots of Cambodian classmates and we all seemed to excel. The school did a great job of helping us promote our culture by doing concerts in our language. Every year we would sing two songs in Cambodian to the rest of the student body. The good feeling that I felt at school allowed me to go back home and talk about school to my family. It made them happy too to see the successes that I was experiencing. From 2nd grade to 6th grade, I loved going to school. I had American friends who came to visit me every day. I could communicate with them. My ESL teacher, music teacher, and some classroom teachers
visited my house. I started to feel like I belonged here in America and maybe that I, too, was finally an American.

However, this positive feeling didn’t last long. When I entered junior high school, a lot of things changed. The American friends that were close to me in elementary distanced themselves, making me second guess myself again as to whether or not I was American.

The junior high school I went to had pre-existing racial tensions between Cambodian refugees and white Americans. There was a white supremacist gang called the All American Boyz and a Cambodian gang called the Royal Cambodian Bloods. These two were the largest local gangs in the city. My grandpa’s nephew and many of my cousins became founding members of this newly formed gang. However, I was not an official member until later on.

I struggled with the purpose of the gang and did not see any advantages for me to be a part of it. Since a lot of my family members and older age friends were already in it, I was never excluded from any hang outs or gatherings. I also still believed in the great experience I had at elementary school where I felt American.

Because of that experience, whenever I heard negative things being stated about white people, I would always come to their defense. This was back in seventh grade. I thought of all the white friends I had and the white teachers who helped my family and me so much. They weren’t bad people. On the other hand, I saw lots of negatives with the Cambodian kids in the gang.

Whenever my friends complained about white people, I would always say we brought the problems on ourselves. We were the ones with the gangs and creating the
violence. I haven’t seen white people start trouble with us for years. There was a white supremacist gang in town as well at the time, but I had yet to encounter them. Whenever I defended white people, my friends would always tell me that I should never turn my back on my own people because once white people turn their backs on me, I would have no one to turn to.

This comment came to me often and it made me very uncomfortable. They were making me choose sides. I, however, did not feel like a decision needed to be made. There were other Cambodian kids in the school that I saw who did well in school and had American friends, too. However, to most of my other Cambodian friends, these kids were called “Sell-Outs.” My Cambodian friends in the gangs felt like they weren’t Cambodian enough. Even though at the time I did not choose sides, it was hard for me to disagree with my gangster friends. The “Sell Outs” couldn’t speak Cambodian. I never saw them at any Cambodian gatherings. And most importantly, I felt they insulted their parents and their people for not spending time with us. I didn’t realize at the time that what those particular people were going through is what I’m describing in this study now. They were struggling with finding their own identity.

Monorum – I wanted to hang out with more Cambodian people. However, I didn’t want to get involved in the gangs. I didn’t see any reason for it. A lot of American people bullied me too. However, my dad always told me that the way to make them respect me was to make it through school. I didn’t know very many Cambodian people. However, the things you hear from other people and the newspaper made you not want to be around your own people.
As described earlier, Monorum was one of the kids that my friends and I would label a ‘Sell Out,’ just because he had a hard time embracing the other Cambodian students, and appeared to get along with white Americans. Until this interview, I did not know how difficult it was for him to balance both worlds and the pressure he received from his parents and other Cambodian students. I also didn’t realize until interviewing him that he also struggled to fit in with the majority culture.

As for me, I was given a choice early in middle school that I didn’t want to make. I thought my older gangster friends were right about the “Sell Outs” but I didn’t think they were right about Americans turning their backs on me. Sadly, midway through seventh grade something happened to me that proved them right. I should not turn my back on my people. Because during those racist times, they were all I had.

There was a day in 7th grade when I was by myself at my locker. Everybody else was in class since it was during a class hour. Three white kids decided to approach me and asked me to fight. I cursed at them and proceeded to open my locker. One of them came up and hit me in the back of my head. I pushed one of them away and they chased me, throwing punches at me. I ran to the office and reported it. The principal talked to all of us and in the end I was suspended. They didn’t tell me what happened to the other kids. At the time, I thought they got out free. I didn’t know how to ask the right questions. I didn’t know how to ask why I was in trouble. It wasn’t a language barrier, but a cultural barrier stopping me from challenging authority. Now as an employee of the school district I know it’s not a common practice to share with students how you punish other students. But I didn’t know that at the time.
I felt very hurt and embarrassed by this incident. They tried to call my mother but she wasn’t home as she was already out gambling at the casinos. So they had an interpreter call my grandmother and explained to her that I was in a fight. I felt so powerless at the time. I wanted to grab the phone from the interpreter and tell my grandmother that it wasn’t true. I was running away from a fight and yet I got in trouble for not fighting back.

No one listened to my side of the story. My grandparents listened to the interpreter who I know was only doing his job. My mom didn’t come back from the casinos for five days. By the time she came back I was already back at school. So I didn’t feel it would help to bring it back up. I remembered very clearly how I felt. I was very embarrassed and angry. I remember my friends’ words. They told me I would have no one to turn to when white people turned their backs on me. I felt stuck. White people had just turned their backs on me. This one event persuaded me to officially call myself a member of the Royal Cambodian Bloods.

Red, White and Blue

Red like the bloods that flooded the “Killing Fields”
Blue like the three seas we crossed over
White like the stars that were out of reach

Red, white and blue I stand in front of all three
Yet the “Bloods” of the “Killing Fields”
Was the only color to embrace me

By: Sambath Ouk, 1999

When I was a little kid, I asked myself why would I want to consider myself American? Now I knew why I didn’t want to. I was Cambodian. And my Cambodian
blood is filled with the greatness of the Cambodian kings. This was my identity. I was a Royal Cambodian Blood (RCB).

I was proud to be an RCB. Actually until this day, I don’t regret being part of this gang. Yet, the kids in the RCB’s had a very bad reputation.

Theme 3 - Cultural Dissonance

Our Own War

In a 1992 Post Bulletin article entitled “Asian gang has violent reputation” (Gregorson, 1992), the author described a twelve year old member of the Royal Cambodian Bloods arrested for attempted murder, assault, and burglary charges.

Each year the reputation of the gang got worse, making the Cambodian parents in our community very confused. These kids were the hopes of their families. They were very respectful to their parents and during a time when many Cambodian kids started to lose their native language, these were the kids that spoke Cambodian fluently. The good kids that the Cambodian parents thought they had were being reported by teachers, principals and later the police as being bad kids.

A local newspaper article written about this situation was entitled “Gangs a part of everyday life in junior high school (Burcum, 1993).” In this article, the author interviewed three junior high school students who were not identified in the article. However, from knowing the students personally, I was aware that two out of the three people interviewed were Cambodians and the other person was a non-immigrant. One of the Cambodian persons interviewed was a fellow member of the Royal Cambodian Bloods. The other two people were not gang members and their perception of the gang was quite different from the gang member interviewed.
As outsiders to the gang, the two teens saw the gang activities in a very negative light and stress that there were no good reasons to join the gang. The two teens felt that kids join gangs only to be cool, to act tough and to get attention from girls. The lone gang member, named Kim in the article, told a different story of why kids join gangs and why gangs existed.

Kim, an eighth grader at the time, came to school every day wearing bright red colors. Red is the color of the Royal Cambodian Bloods. Kim described the city’s residents as being prejudiced towards Southeast Asian immigrants. He described how people put him down because of his culture and his bad English. This is the reason why Kim joined the gang. He knew that many other kids that shared his Cambodian background experienced the same thing. He stated that his fellow gang members understood his own cultural values and perspectives, allowing them to stick together to fight against the hatred and deal with the prejudice (Burcum, 1993). Kim stated, “The problem with prejudice was much worse than the city’s gang. Gang members only fought when they were provoked.” (Burcum, 1993, p. 3)

Having grown up with Kim and having experienced the violent prejudice of the city, I support Kim’s descriptions of why Cambodian kids in the town joined gangs. One of the people I interviewed also articulated Kim’s point. Seyha was a Cambodian student who often got bullied at school by American kids because he was one of the few kids of color at his school.

Seyha – *I was under a lot of stress in school. I was being bullied by American students. I would always get jumped and beaten up every day by six kids. I never*
wanted to go to school. I didn’t want to learn because I felt like I was being treated differently from the other kids.

As described earlier, there was no desire for these Cambodian kids to gain popularity. Opposite of what the newspaper described, these kids were known as the good kids in the community. They were able to keep their native culture in this foreign land. Many of the gang members were very talented. They played on the community soccer teams. The older members even played in the local Cambodian bands. They were athletic and musical. And their fluency in both languages allowed them to help their parents acquire support from the city.

The gang and I, we had no reason to be bad. The main driving force that persuaded us down this path was the opportunity to fight back against the prejudice. The other image of gang life that is popularized in American culture involving drugs and money through drugs as described by rap songs did not exist in the original Royal Cambodian Bloods. This may be due to us immigrating to a small middle class city. I guess this was another misunderstanding of America. We didn’t know how a gang should act. No, for us, the Royal Cambodian Bloods were a group of people, kids and young adults, who came together to push back against the bullying we received from the American community.

The same newspaper article that talked about the 12 year-old-member of the Royal Cambodian Bloods being charged for attempted murder also went on to describe other gangs in town. However, one group they described only as a “gang-like group” that hung out on Broadway, a street in town. This was a reference to the white supremacist group, the All American Boyz (AAB). In the newspaper articles I found, none referred to
this group as a gang. In fact, there was an article from the Post Bulletin that was entitled, “Members say AAB not racist, not gang” (Bayer, 1995). This article mentioned that this group of kids was responsible for harassing and vandalizing cars and homes of minorities. However, they went on to mention that this group was only formed because of harassment from black and Asian kids. This was the same reason mentioned by Kim in an earlier article. As explained I explained in Chapter One, the fights went back and forth so much that it was hard to determine which side was instigating the problem and which side was retaliating. This article also mentioned other white groups that called themselves the “Gook Killers” (Bayer, 1995).

Regardless of whether or not this group was recognized by the negative label of gang, like the Cambodian kids were, the All American Boyz who used the American flag as their symbol was the group that we were fighting against. Bayer’s (1995) article did not call the group a gang. However, the article recognized the racial tension between whites and minorities.

The struggles between the Royal Cambodian Bloods and the All American Boyz is an example of how individuals get acculturated when two cultures come in contact with each other. In Chapter Two, I cited Chhoun’s (2013) point that Cambodian youth weren’t able to obtain the mainstream definition of masculinity which was described as being white, tall and involved in school sports. Therefore, Cambodian youth embraced a different form of masculinity.

The Royal Cambodian Bloods were formed in reaction to discrimination and intimidation from the white youth in the community. This intimidation caused many Cambodian kids to cling close to the local Cambodian gangs. Cambodian youth were
forced to define themselves as either ‘Sell Outs’ or gang members. Both images had a
destructive effect on the Cambodian community.

I was one of those youth who chose to embrace the gang life because I feared
being labeled a ‘Sell Out,’ regardless of whether or not I belonged to the Royal
Cambodian Bloods. I was still a target of attacks from the All American Boyz. Therefore,
for me, the wisest choice back then was to become a Royal Cambodian Blood. Its
description fits how I best wanted to define myself at that time. For me, theme three:
cultural dissonance had a direct effect on theme two: Identity.

Early History of the RCB: Embracing the Counter Culture—Why We had to Fight Back

First generation Cambodian teenage students struggled greatly. English was a
difficult language to learn. However, they knew enough English to know that words from
American students shouting at them were not always kind. They felt that their parents
were being put down and they wanted to fight back. Their parents, however, wanted to
avoid confrontation as much as possible. They felt that they were temporary visitors in
this country and just wanted to live in peace as guests in this country.

Because of their parent’s influence, Cambodian teens tried hard to avoid fighting.
However, the more English they knew, the less they could tolerate the insults. I was eight
years old when I remembered a large fight that took place. I believed this fight started the
Cambodian gang culture. I was with my aunt and uncle and their friends, teenage
Cambodian kids, at the city’s only roller skating rink. We went there to roller skate.
None of us were good skaters, however, and didn’t know all the rules and different games
they played at the skating rink. We didn’t know that there were times when everyone
needed to skate backwards. We didn’t know that there were times when you had to skate
in pairs and that there were times when skating rinks do different types of competitions. We just went to skate and tried to have a good time.

However, again, the yells came. People called us names and told us to go home. If our parents were there, they would have walked away and pulled us away. But our parents weren’t there and those teenagers were tired of walking away. All the guys in our group took off their skates and they used them as weapons, swinging at every American that was nearby. I, too, took off my skates and tried to join in but my aunt pulled me away. The Cambodian guys ran at people swinging at them and then charged out the door.

This was the first time that young Cambodians started fighting back. And this was the first time when we as a group fought together. I watched as those Cambodian guys swung their way out of the skating rink and drove off with us without trouble. The whole night’s event empowered us. For the first time, we felt that we as a Cambodian community can fight back against the insults. We felt like we had a way to never be put down again.

Our parents didn’t know what we did and we didn’t tell them because they wouldn’t have approved. Fighting at the skating rink may not have been the right thing to do. Put in a sentence here stating what you would now advise newcomers to do in that situation. However, at that moment, those Cambodian teens felt like it was something they had to do.

From then on, large groups of Cambodians began to hang out with each other at the parks. There were so many of us at one of the local parks every night that they nicknamed the park Cambodian Park. We didn’t cause trouble. We just got together to play
soccer, volleyball, and just talk. This happened for years and I was becoming a teen myself. When I was a kid, I didn’t have my own group of friends yet. Many of my friends were older kids who were my uncle and aunt’s friends. I had an admiration for them. I felt they were strong and they were the people who fought to retain our pride.

In one of my interviews I spoke with Davy, one of the first generation Cambodian students, and back then she was a girlfriend of one of the founding gang members. She talked in depth about her struggles at school and how the negative relationships between Cambodians and Americans at the time made her feel.

Davy – *In school, they would call us names every day. They tell us to go home and throw things at us in class. Every time they walk by us in the hallways, they asked us to fight. We tried to ignore it. We went to the teachers and that was all they said. They told us to ignore it. However, ignoring it just made it worst. They felt we weren’t human and that we were inferior to them.*

I went on to ask her how that made her feel. She described that it made her want to quit everything in life. They couldn’t go to their teachers and they couldn’t go to their parents. Their parents told them they needed to work hard and succeed in school. However, they didn’t know how hard school was for their children.

Many of the Cambodian parents never went to school themselves so they couldn’t support their kids. Like Davy, Seyha and Monorum also described their parents’ inabilities to help them in school:

Monorum – *My dad was very influential in my education when I was young. He wasn’t a big scholar. He had about a 4th or 5th grade education. Back in the refugee camp he used to hit me if I didn’t study. However, when we came to*
America, there wasn’t much he could do to support us in school. The only thing they could do was to lecture us to study hard so we didn’t have to work as hard as them.

Seyha – My mom didn’t know how to drive. She didn’t understand the language. So it was really hard for her to get involved with anything I did. My mom understood how important school was. However, she didn’t know how to help me so she relied solely on the school to help me learn. But school was a place where I always got bullied.

The lack of understanding from teachers and the lack of support that these students received from their parents speak to the first theme of support: having caring individuals to help you overcome your barriers. All three of these individuals struggled to find support from their parents. Their parents did not have an understanding of the school system. Even back in their native country they did not have much opportunity to go to school. Therefore despite wanting their kids to succeed, they struggled to support them towards success.

Davy went on to discuss how difficulties at school with cultural tension forced her and her friends to react.

Davy – I don’t know how I finished high school. I couldn’t read well and my English was bad. On top of that, American kids picked on us almost daily. I had friends, guy friends who fought back. When they did, they went to jail. No one was on our side. The gangs were justifiable. When you’re already outnumbered and no one is on your side, you need to come together to make a statement.
In the article, “Stealing a bag of potato chips and other crimes of resistance,” Rios (2012) describes this need to fight back as “resistance identity.” (p. 50) Rios explains that when people feel excluded from positive networks, they will tend to embrace an identity of resistance. According to sociologist Manuel Castells, resistance identities are created by subordinate people of the populations in response to oppression (Castells, cited in Rios, 2012, p. 50). They create their own system that excludes the excluders. In resistance identity, the subordinate populations often take self-defeating paths that lead them into trouble yet also give them feel a sense of agency and dignity (Rios, 2012).

The Cambodians of the late 1980’s in Minnesota began embracing a resistance identity in defense against all the bullying. However, the Cambodian gangs did not solidify into the Royal Cambodian Bloods until the early 1990’s. The reason for this is because we didn’t know what gangs were yet. It wasn’t until gangster rap emerged in the early 90’s that we became an organized group. Rap inspired a counter culture to the America that did not accept us. This was the culture we embraced.

Theme 4 – Poverty

The Struggle to Have Enough

On top of fighting to fit in, a harder battle was just fighting to survive. My family was very poor. We came to America in debt. Contrary to popular belief, refugees do not get a free ride to America. We had to pay for our plane tickets to get here. And when we arrived, we struggled to pay bills and put food on the table like every family living below the poverty line. And we had to do this without being able to speak the language, being familiar with the employment system, and understanding appropriate cultural norms.
As a child, I often heard my family argue about money. Only one of my aunts had a job. My mother and grandparents were on public assistance and my other aunt and uncle were still in school. We were forced to move out many times because we couldn’t afford to pay the rent. Sometimes, even when we paid rent on time, we were forced to leave. The landlords wouldn’t renew their leases with us, stating that they were going to sell the house. There was one year where we had to move three times. My family did not feel free in this free country because of the stress they felt every day from not having enough money.

Being poor had tremendous effects on my mother and grandfather. My grandfather always felt that he was able to take care of the family. He kept his wife and largely kept most of his kids safe under colonialism, World War II, the Cambodian Civil War, and the Killing Fields. He brought them to the refugee camps and eventually to America. He hung onto his motto of never looking back and believing in a brighter future. However, in America, so far away from home, he was starting to doubt his own message. He had fight in him as long as he knew how to fight. Back in Cambodia, in his own country, with his own language, he knew how to fight.

He did not know how to fight in America. And with every failure, he grew weaker and weaker. My grandfather tried to hold a job. He was highly skilled, having been in the army. He held high status in Cambodia. However, in America, he chopped meat and cleaned toilets for a living. No one talked to him. The only time his supervisor would say anything to him was when they complained about how poorly he was doing his job. He was fired after a couple of weeks for fighting because he thought someone disrespected his daughter who worked with him. He also tried to get his driver’s license but he
couldn’t pass the permit test. At that time, they didn’t have the test in his native language. He tried to learn English but he couldn’t get past cordial salutations. With every failure, his will to fight diminished. He felt demoralized and relied on alcohol to comfort him.

Matt Stolle, a reporter for the Post Bulletin, interviewed me when I first became the English Learner Coordinator for the school district I had attended as a student. The article was entitled, “Student becomes the teacher” (Stolle, 2011 p. A1) and it outlined some of the struggles my grandfather and mother had experienced.

The article described how my grandfather felt the loss of respect due to his inability to pick up English. His courage and ability to survive during the Cambodian Killing Fields didn’t count for much in America (Stolle, 2010). My grandfather felt inadequate as a Cambodian man in America. He couldn’t provide for his family and had to depend on his second daughter to support them financially. He tried to get a driver’s license so he could drive his daughter to work, but he couldn’t pass the driving test. He tried to get a job with his daughter but got fired for fighting at work.

My grandpa tried hard to find another job. However, it became an impossible task with his lack of English. Another article from the Post Bulletin entitled “Work options few” (McCormick, 1993) discusses how difficult it was for Southeast Asian families to find a job. The newspaper described how the language barrier kept them from obtaining good paying jobs despite their skill and ability. The article mentioned that half of the Southeast Asian household only earned $12,960 per year compared to the median income of the city which was $43,200 (McCormick, 1993).

Over time, in order to cope with his depression, he turned to drinking. Drinking used to put him to sleep so he could forget about his problems. However, pretty soon, the
alcohol couldn’t help anymore. Alcohol changed his sadness to anger and violence filled in the void while he couldn’t sleep. Stolle’s (2010) article described how my grandfather used an axe to attack my grandmother. My grandfather’s intent was to kill at that time. Luckily, my youngest uncle and aunt, who were only teenagers at the time, stepped in to wrestle the axe away from my grandfather. I ran upstairs and called the police (Stolle, 2010). At the age of 10, I put my own grandfather in jail.

As for my mother, she turned to gambling to help her fix the problem of poverty. She got tired of not being able to provide things for me. She wasn’t able to get a job, because of her lack of English and transportation to make it to work on time. Also, at the time she was on public assistance and she believed that if she were to work, she would lose medical assistance coverage for the family since my aunt, who worked, didn’t have health insurance.

Gambling became the answer to her problem of poverty. Stolle (2010) writes about my mother, “She turned to gambling, lured by the prospect of quick riches and a backdoor fulfillment of the American dream” (p. A1). Gambling took my mother away from the family. Over time it made the family’s money situation even worse. My mother and I moved out of my grandparents’ place. We moved into the heart of the Cambodian gang neighborhood. However, none of us felt endangered at the time because the Cambodian families were all really close to each other. All of us kids got along, too. The neighborhood was one large apartment complex. We all lived on the same floor and we lived on top of or below one another. So, to us, it was like one big house where the stairways and the hallways just connected our apartment suites to each other. A quick description of the apartment would make it seem like it was a very healthy community.
However, the truth was this was a community of many families struggling through poverty and PTSD from the horrors they had experienced during the Killing Fields.

On top of her gambling issues, my mother also struggled with PTSD. The National Institute of Mental Health defines PTSD as a disorder that develops in some people who have seen or lived through a shocking, scary, or dangerous event (PTSD, 2016). In The Khmer Adolescent Project, Sack and her colleagues assessed Cambodians who had just arrived in the United States and found rates of diagnosable levels of PTSD as high as 55% among Cambodian mothers and 30% among Cambodian fathers (Belesto, Clarke, Him, Kinney, Sack & Seeley, 1995). PTSD was common amongst Cambodians. Therefore, the comradery of living in a neighborhood where people who understood each other because of shared culture and shared experiences was not necessarily a good thing. Large groups of struggling people coming together with no answers to their problems made the problem that much harder to overcome, causing PTSD to stay permanent in many families.

The National Center for PTSD explained that common reactions to PTSD include fear and anxiety along with sadness and depression. People with PTSD may have crying spells and loss of interest in things around them (National Center for PTSD, 2013). My mother would cry often. And she would have nightmares where she would scream for the whole night. I shared a room with her up until 5th grade. I would often have trouble falling asleep because of my mother’s nightmares. She was even admitted to the hospital for her nightmares. However, nothing helped.

Somehow the casinos were able to give my mother and other Cambodians some peace. They were able to overcome their fears because they were together. It was also an
activity that they could engage in and at the same time feel like they were earning a living for their children and family. When they won, they came back and filled our empty refrigerators. However, when they lost, they become even more disengaged with life. The Cambodian parents would carpool with each other to the casinos and gamble for eight nights in a row, leaving their children to raise themselves. This was another reason why many Cambodian kids turned to gangs for comfort.

As my mother’s gambling problems got worse, life became harder and harder. As soon as I was old enough to work, I would work over the legal amount of hours to pay off the debts she owed and to keep the water and electricity working at home.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Maslow’s (1943) study on the Hierarchy of Needs tells us that physiological needs such as food, shelter, clothing, safety such as feeling secure and being out of danger and the need to belong has to be obtained before the individual can achieve the higher level needs of esteem and self-actualization. For my grandfather and my mother, poverty made it hard for them to provide the basic needs for themselves and more importantly for their family. This caused them to develop a lower self-esteem for themselves. Furthermore, even though they were far away from the war in Cambodia, their fight with PTSD did not allow them to feel a sense of safety and security. They were also very far away from the home they had known back in Cambodia. They struggled to adapt to the culture and language of the United States, causing them to give up on trying to belong here.

My grandfather and mother along with many other Cambodian refugees found it very difficult to be successful in reaching the lower tier of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943). This made it hard for them and their children to move forward out of poverty. I
understood well that my family and other Cambodians had less than others. My grandpa and mother had a hard time coping with poverty. It may have been easier for me as a kid. I had friends to help me cope, which helped me achieve that sense of belonging. I had food at school to cover for not having food at home, which helped meet my physiological needs. My grandpa and my mother, in their efforts to cope with poverty, developed very bad habits to handle their problems. My grandpa became an alcoholic and my mother became a gambling addict. Poverty seemed to have taken away their will to fight. Even though I had a life at school that sheltered me from the full effects of poverty and gave me a future to look forward to, it still wasn’t an ideal situation. I had to depend on other channels to meet my basic needs since they weren’t met at home. Fortunately, school provided just enough to help me improve my self-esteem and allowed me to focus on my achievements in school. However, a life of poverty, where my family had to move frequently, coupled with violence resulting from PTSD, made me realize that peace and comfort can be lost very quickly when you’re poor.

Themes 1, 2, 3 and 4 - They All Connect

Coping With the Madness

For us refugee children, it was not just one problem or one of these themes that made life difficult. It was all of them working together that set an almost impossible barrier to overcome. Living in a foreign land and not fitting in, constantly questioning your own identity and fighting through cultural dissonance, being poor and feeling inadequate, all these things make learning, succeeding, and living difficult. It was always difficult to make the right choices.
In the first chapter, I introduced my group of 9 friends. There were ten of us including me. We helped each other through a life filled with poverty and violence. We were an outlet for each other. However, we couldn’t be together all the time. When we were alone, each of us had a different outlet. All of us had both healthy and unhealthy hobbies. Two of my friends however had very tragic stories due to the hardships of life.

One of my friends found his escape through work and drugs. One of these activities killed him. Still, to this day it’s hard for me to pinpoint which activity caused him to die. The drugs may have gotten him sick but I don’t know if it killed him. He, his father, and his mother worked at minimum wage jobs with no health insurance. During my fourth year of college, he got sick. The summer prior to my fourth year, we hung out almost daily. Everything seemed normal. However, I remembered him telling me that he didn’t know how many more normal days he would have left. At that time, I didn’t know what was going on. When I came back during winter break and January-term of that same year, we hung out. Everything seemed fine. However, he told me he was very sick. He said he couldn’t go to the doctor because he owed them too much money and he and his parents couldn’t afford to pay the medical bills. He didn’t want to go into details about how sick he was because he said he wanted to have a good Christmas.

I graduated later that year, and went straight to work in another town. Work didn’t allow me to come back to my home as often. It wasn’t until a year after college graduation that I came to work back in my home town. One day I ran into one of our mentors from middle school. She told me that my friend had passed away from stomach cancer. I went and drank by his grave and I wrote him a poem. I often wonder: What if he could have qualified for medical assistance like my mother and I did? What if there
was some other sort of program to help him handle his medical bills or learn what to do?

Or, maybe if he was just a little bit richer, we could still be celebrating Christmas together.
A Refugee Christmas

Pen to Paper, Paper to Pen
How I remember us and our lives back then.

A can of pop between two friends
As pain besieges the smile we lend.

With dreams to bare, we ease the soul
and paths unwritten, the stories told.

Along the times, the truth unfolds
of broken wishes to fill the roll.

A masterpiece lies within the heart
while the paintbrush strokes a work of art.

A still life image falls apart
as life lay barren from the start.

I remember our smiles but I savor the tears
in the palm of our hands, we held our fears.

Cajoling poverty through the years
grieving the losses with gifts of prayer

Now time has brought numerous changes
but one thing lies certain through the ages.

Life’s joy of luck has encaged us
to kind voices of those we trust.

Continue to work and to see the worth
to live in the heavens and I this earth.

For us to cherish those we care
with those who are there and no longer here.

Merry Christmas to all, and to all
Another New year.

By: Sambath Ouk, 2005
My friend didn’t have any programs to help him. In fact, he didn’t know of anyone that could help him so he tried to cope with this problem alone. He was missing two out of the three themes of support. He didn’t have help from individuals nor knew of any programs to help him with medical cost. His will to fight carried for as long as he could through the illness he had. However, in the end, it wasn’t enough to keep him alive.

Another friend of mine who deserves time in this study is one I visited monthly at the prison during my first year of grad school. His relief from poverty and cultural dissonance was work and parties. As teenagers, he and I had held the same jobs at Burger King and Hardees at the same time. Because of our age, employers would not allow us to work more than fifteen hours a week. So what we did was worked at multiple fast food places to rack up the hours. He easily worked more than forty hours a week.

His parents were just like my mother. They had a gambling addiction. He had to work to pay off the debts his parents owed other people. When things got too much for him at home, he would run to stay with me. And I would do the same. A lot of times it was when our parents returned home from the casinos. Usually they came back home in a very negative mood because they lost all the rent money. They would take out their anger on us. My mother would just yell and scream. He would get hit by his dad with belts and any other things that would be lying around.

During our last year of high school, he started to throw big parties when his parents weren’t home. His life started spiraling out of control. From his parties, he discovered another outlet, sex. Sex gave him immediate relief and made him forget all the negative things in his life. His grades began to slip.
My friend’s last name fell right after mine alphabetically so we would often be seated next to each other. We had been friends since elementary school. On the day of graduation, he was not seated next to me. I walked up alone to receive my diploma. Because of how much he had to work, he couldn’t keep up with his schooling and wasn’t able to graduate. Our life grew even farther apart as I went off to college and he went to jail.

At one of his parties, he got involved sexually with a minor. He was sent to jail for two years. Then on the day when he was supposed to be freed, they sent him away to a deportation detention center. His story was similar to Many Uch’s as described in Chapter Two. Many served his time for a home invasion but then got sentenced to be deported once he got out. Also, similar to Loeun Lun’s story in Chapter Two, my friend found little support through his deportation proceedings.

My friend’s mother and father tried to tell the judge that it was their fault. They felt a lot of guilt for what they had done to their son. However, nothing changed the judge’s mind. I and two other of our childhood friends went to the hearing with his family. No matter how much his mother and father yelled, screamed, and begged, my friend was helpless under the law that made him serve his time and then punished him even more after he paid his dues. The lawyer he had assigned to him did not have very many supportive things to say. The strongest phrase she kept saying over and over to us was that if we were Mexican, we wouldn’t even be given a hearing. I didn’t know why she thought this comment was relevant. It only made us feel worse. We felt she was saying that my friend didn’t deserve a fair trial.
The hardest part for my friend was hearing his father cry louder than his mother. Even in the courtroom, my friend could only sit on the witness stand, with two guards behind him. He couldn’t come down to embrace his parents. As I watched this, I was filled with anger. Yet I felt so weak and inadequate, knowing there was nothing I could do. After the hearing, they sent him back to jail to await deportation.

My only other friend to make it to college from our group would visit him with me for the first few months. After that, it ended up only being me for about a year. Our visits lasted for about five to fifteen minutes. We really didn’t know what to say to each other. Our lives had taken us down two different paths. So again, the only thing we had to talk about were the years we shared with each other. We would talk about our childhood playing Cambodian refugee games like “Kick the Can” or “Throwing Flip Flops.” However, the joyfulness of our conversation quickly switched focus to the beatings, to not having enough to eat, to us smelling bad at school because we had no money for the laundry or the water bill. We were stuck on grief. The visits got harder and harder until he got out. The poem below was the best way for me to describe the whole situation.

POVERTY AND A LIFE OF CRIME—A REFUGEE STORY

I remember the day I said good-bye
I hung up the phone with tears inside
The screen turned off, your face subside
I see your pain, though your eyes were dry

Your mother screamed asking me why
Why does her hope have to die
What can she do now, to stay alive
How is her heart to survive

Your father’s angered at the words
English turned him into a crippled bird
A buffalo lost without his herd
Your father’s smile is now but blurred

However, you my friend I commend
Raising your head above all men
I am proud to be your friend
You fought this fight until the end

You chose to smile instead of cry
Behind bars you fought the lies
And though we’re nothing but normal guys
The heart we have the dollar can’t buy

If justice chooses to be on our side
Then heaven please hear my cry
A life of poverty has taken our pride
Leaving us in a state where love has died

They locked him up without a plea
This insane world took my friend from me
They threw him in hell and said he was free
All this, is a fate of a refugee

By: Sambath Ouk, 2004

He now has two kids and checks in to the deportation calls regularly. He has a job and is trying to pick himself back up. He is doing a great job providing a good life for his wife and kids. However, he doesn’t know if the peace he has now will last. The government could deport him at any time. He is now looking for programs and people to support him. Ever since he had his wife and kids, his will to fight was rekindled. He wants to succeed and do well for his family. This will was lost during his struggles in high school to keep up his grades and working to pay off his parents’ bills.

Themes of Support - How I Made It
Amongst my friends, I do consider myself the lucky one. I made it to college. I graduated and now have a great career and family. But the life that I know now could have been very different if I didn’t have the support from caring individuals who got me involved in programs that gave me the opportunities I needed to get where I am today.

As I look back at my life from 8th grade to 11th grade, I realize that I should have ended up like both of my friends. However, I was fortunate to have people who supported me, programs that helped me and enough fight to keep me on the right track. These were the themes of support discussed in Chapter Two that helped Choua Vang, Darina Siv, Valentino Achak Deng and Many Uch overcame their barriers. These three themes also helped me. Without them, I could have also been faced with deportation or, worse, death. I am fortunate that these themes of support helped lead me down a different path.

**Evidence of the Four Themes of Struggle**

Midway through 8th grade, our family got larger when my sister was born. However, a bigger family did not always mean a happier family. My mother’s gambling problems continued. Her boyfriend at the time was an American who ironically did not relate well to Asians and immigrants. There were lots of arguments at home which my mother used as an excuse to go gambling. Both of them were gone from home on a regular basis to the casinos, so my sister was left alone in my care. I was the first person to hear my sister talk and watch her walk. Because our parents were rarely home, I had to miss a lot of school to take care of my sister. My sister also spent lots of time at my grandparents’ house. However, we were all living in poverty and they had issues of their own to deal with so I tried my best to not burden them.
My grades fell. As we got poorer and poorer, I also started to question my purpose in school. There was no way that I would have enough money to go to college. At age 15, I started working at fast food restaurants. My mother accrued many gambling debts. Our electricity was cut off many times. We even had to cancel our cable services. Garbage service was also a luxury that we couldn’t afford. Once a week, I would sneak out to the park at night to throw away our garbage in the dumpster.

The money I got from working went to help keep up with the bills. Sadly, working 30 hours at a few different fast food places was still not enough. Therefore, I would also wake up in the morning and went to take aluminum cans out of people’s recycling bins so we could sell them for money. A few of our neighbors called it stealing. They would really get mad at me and yelled at me to go away. They wouldn’t listen to my explanation and how the bag of aluminum cans would help my family. Some neighbors understood and they would leave a bag of cans out for me with my name on it. On the weekends, my friends and I would also scavenge for cans in park dumpsters. We got many awkward looks from people. But we kept doing it because of the life we had.

Fights were frequent at school and it got even more frequent when I got to high school. In the first chapter, I explained that I went to a high school with fewer Cambodians and minorities. My high school had a higher population of the white supremacist gang members. However, the city’s two high schools at the time had space problems. So for half the day, ninth graders at both schools would come together at a different building to take classes. This evened up the odds a bit, leading to many aggressive taunts and actions from both sides.
Fights at school were quick and usually got stopped before anyone got hurt. However, students would run into each other at the local mall or go harass each other at the different parks where they each hung out. Ironically, the Royal Cambodian Bloods, even though more predominant on the north side of town, would hang out at a park on the south side of town. The All American Boyz, who were more predominant on the south side of town, would hang out on the north side. Numerous times people would drive to each other’s hang out spots to shout insults and intimidate each other. I felt like the Cambodians survived the war in Cambodia only to get themselves into a race war here in America.

There was a night I remembered very clearly because of how scared I felt. This particular night I had a gun in my hand exposed to everybody. I got this gun from my sister’s dad. It was easy because all his guns were stored under my bed. I went to the park to meet up with my friends. They all had their guns as well. We were waiting for a group of All American Boyz to show up because we had jumped one of their members earlier in the day at school.

Fights at school were so frequent that it was more like a game to me. I never thought at the time that it could get this serious that someone could actually be killed by one of us and that if that person was me, I could be going to jail forever. It seemed like all of my friends were caught up in the moment. The guns they had in their hands made them crazy. They were arguing about who was going to take the first shot and it seemed like it was a competition as to who could fire out the most rounds.

Even as I write this today, I remember feeling the sweat roll down my cheeks. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to be there but I didn’t want my friends to think
that I was weak. I believed that if things went down, I would have had to take part and would have fired just as many shots as the next person. Luckily, no members of the All American Boyz showed up or drove by that night. I lived only a block away from that park. I walked home and put the gun away. I knew I got lucky. I would have for sure gone to jail and no one would have been home to take care of my mother and sister.

First Theme of Support: Support From Caring Individuals

When I entered tenth grade things started getting better thanks to one very important person, my 10th grade social studies teacher. She was one of the caring individuals who helped turned my life around. Teachers have always been a big support to me. They made me believe that education could take me to a better place. This was a young teacher in her first or second year of teaching. She was very well aware of what was going on in the lives of the students she taught. She was aware of the fights that my friends and I were involved in. She was very knowledgeable of the other students we were fighting against.

I remember a conversation that she and I had after class one day. She pulled me aside and she told me that no matter how many little battles I won against the All American Boyz, I would be the loser in the end, because the AAB members were predominantly middle class kids and were doing well in school. They were participating in school sports and by far had a better reputation than we did. No one knew our names until we got in trouble. We weren’t involved in many school activities. This teacher made me realize that no matter how strong I felt when I beat up one of them, I was still actually losing. And each day that I would continue to fight in this manner, my losses would get bigger and bigger, because as I got older, there would be a heavier price to pay for each
fight in which I was involved. She told me that the only way for me to win was to prove people wrong. She asked me to show everyone that I could make it in life and be somebody.

Second Theme of Support: Supportive Programs

After this conversation she convinced me to be a part of the Affirmative Human Action (AHA) club at school. This club became one of the programs that taught me a healthier way to overcome my problems relating to cultural dissonance and poverty. AHA worked on putting together programs to help people embrace the growing diversity of the city. An article in the local newspaper covered our activities when we won the Martin Luther King Dream Keeper Award.

The Post Bulletin covered the achievements of this group in an article entitled, “Rochester teens keep dream alive” (Bayer, 1996). In the article, Bayer described how the teens came together through happenstance, with facilitation by adult leaders in the community including a high school teacher. The group of five teens for which I was the leader received the Martin Luther King Dream Keeper Award for organizing youth peace nights that drew over 100 students each time. According to the article, the events were effective at reaching teens of color. Further, in a reference to the All American Boyz, the article reported that the AHA intended to call out the perpetrators of racial discord (Bayer, 1996).

The article went on to document the goal that I wanted to achieve as the group president to reduce the amount of fights resulting from misunderstandings between the cultural groups. Just as participation in the gangs allowed me to feel a sense of belonging
and comradery with my peers, and just as the Royal Cambodian Bloods brought youth with the same goals together, this group did the same.

Success in this group led me to get more involved with civic engagement in my city. The AHA club gave me an opportunity to lead in a positive way. The club gave me an opportunity to make friends outside my ethnic circle. It also provided me a chance to be with kids that saw a positive future in themselves. Participants in the group saw themselves going to college and they felt in control of their own lives. They were knowledgeable about resources that could support them and they were relentless at pursuing their goals. The best part about all this is that they were kind enough to share their knowledge with me.

The group met one of my needs by helping me address one of my frustrations, the injustice that I felt was done to refugees and immigrants due to racism. My teacher, however, knew that participation in the club was not enough to turn my life around, because she understood that I had a lot of pride for my Cambodian community and cultural background. She also knew that I feared being called a “Sell Out” by my Cambodian peers. So she introduced me to the EL teacher at the high school who worked very closely with newcomer refugee students from Southeast Asia. I hadn’t been part of the EL community since sixth grade so I didn’t spend much time with the new Asian arrivals in school.

The high school EL teacher and my social studies teacher worked together to get me involved in field trips taken by the EL students. Those field trips included trips to the Amish community so we could learn about a minority white culture. That trip made me understand that there were many cultural differences and misunderstandings amongst the
white community in America as well. We also went to small towns around our city to share and talk about our ethnic culture. These trips forced me to look deeper into Cambodian culture and history. I had to read about the Cambodian wars and customs before the war so I could educate people about the Cambodian community in town. Prior to these trips, I never knew that I didn’t know so much about my own culture. These trips forced me to study more about my people. And I learned that I discovered new differences between Cambodians and Americans. However, I also realized so many more similarities between our culture, our history, and the goals of common everyday people. I also began to accept that maybe I had been Americanized somewhat myself. Maybe I am not just Cambodian, but actually, Cambodian American.

AHA and my involvement with the EL program was the start of my being engaged in my school and my city. It was positive engagement that led me, a Cambodian person, to achieving positive attention. Prior to this, I didn’t feel like the newspapers were capable of writing nice things about Asian people.

The positive experiences in AHA led me to work with other students in the city. We joined with the AHA group from the other school and formed the UNITY club. UNITY stood for Understanding Nationalities in Today’s Youth. This took the goals and activities of AHA to the next level.

By 1995, new refugee groups began to arrive in the city. One new group was the Bosnian refugees. The Bosnians were white, but they had a different religion that guided different cultural practices. They also struggled with English like the Cambodian and Southeast Asians did. Laotian and Thai hill tribes also started resettling in the city. They had a unique Southeast Asian culture, but they were Christians. Prior to the arrival of
these groups, I thought all Southeast Asians were Buddhist. We also had East Africans from Somalia and Ethiopia coming into town. They were different from each other as well in language, culture, and religion. The diversity in the town and the schools grew rapidly. However, what kept us the same in the eyes of the local community was that we were all refugees. And not everyone in town welcomed us. The new refugees began to experience similar discrimination and violence as the Cambodian refugees had experienced in the 1980’s.

The article, “2 accused of beating Somali boy are arrested” (Gregorson, 1996), described an event where 18 white supremacist, bat-carrying members of the All American Boyz gang attacked and viciously beat up a 12 year old Somali boy. At the time, two were charged with the crime while others were being investigated.

UNITY’s first task as a student-led civic engagement team was to respond to this incident. Student leaders from both high schools orchestrated a march and rally downtown. The UNITY Rally for Peace was the name of the event. The idea for the march was something I brought up and the movement started with me, my other refugee friend from Vietnam, and a white American girl who was dating a Cambodian boy. We weren’t stellar students. However, we gave each other courage that persuaded us to march into the superintendent’s office and told him this needed to be done. After talking through the logistics, he agreed that it would be a great example for the community.

In the process of planning the event, I realized my deficiencies. As a refugee student and as a gang member, I was really good at expressing my anger. From personal life experience, I had great ideas and great stories to share. However, except for my short time in AHA, I never really had experience working with others in such an organized
fashion. I realized there was a lot I had to learn. Compared to middle class students who were in honors classes and student government, there were a lot of things I didn’t know how to do. I didn’t know how to interject my thoughts into the conversations. I didn’t know how to add on to other people’s ideas. I didn’t know how to ask questions. By this time, I didn’t have a language barrier that impeded me from communicating with these kids. I had an opportunity and experience barrier. I’d never done these things before or anything remotely close to them. To tell you the truth, at that time, I didn’t even know how to sit in a meeting. My mind would wander. I didn’t have the stamina to listen to seven different ideas and reduce it down back to the one idea given originally. I didn’t even know how to control my passion and frustration when I saw people who never experienced some of the things I did speaking about what needed to be done.

Through this process, I realized that I was not the right person to lead this particular event. However, being part of the movement and the goal of embracing diversity and reducing racial violence was still something I was keen on. This experience taught me patience, how to work with a group, and most importantly, how to follow. As a refugee, I didn’t have many opportunities in the past to work in a positive group. Fear of the unknown, fear of not being accepted, and negative experiences with white Americans kept me from wanting to get involved in school clubs or sports. However, I was determined to not let this fear hold me down anymore.

The event was such a big success. The articles “Stand up and say no to racism” and “Voices cry peace at city rally” both written by Mike Dougherty (1997) described the event. 1,500 students came out predominantly from the two high schools and one middle school in town. Students holding signs saying “Erase the Hate,” “Silence the Violence,”
and “Everybody Chill Out” decorated the march. Students from all races voiced their concerns. Ouem Iem, a 15-year-old Cambodian student, stated, “This crowd is a message but it can’t just stop after today” (Dougherty, 1997, p. 1A).

The Somali boy who had been beaten up by the 18 kids spoke. The mayor was there. The superintendent was there and we even got a professional football player, Darryl Thomson, to come out and help voice an end to racism. Students of all different ethnic backgrounds came out to support the effort (Dougherty, 1996). This one event changed the tide. Embracing diversity became cool in our town and racial acts of violence were being pushed out.

My experiences with these clubs and their advisors at the time empowered me to fight against the barriers and problems that plagued my life: poverty, racism, and the lack of opportunity for upward mobility that comes with the two issues. Through these clubs, I was able to write editorials, go on the news, and speak out against racism. I learned to use my voice as a weapon and change the negative mindset that people had towards me and refugees like me. Working with students that saw themselves able to make a difference also made me believe that a bright future for myself was a possibility.

AHA and UNITY helped me fight back against the social problems in the community and empowered me to dream. I used to be scared to dream big. However, the involvement in these clubs taught me that I should not be afraid to have big dreams. It also made me believe that I should not be scared or ashamed to reach out for help because there are caring individuals out there who understand what I’m going through that will reach out their hand halfway to provide guidance. I learned to trust people that
didn’t look like me. And for the first time I believed that a bright future was possible for me.

Involvement in AHA and UNITY continued to open doors for me. The advisor of a college bound academic program called Upward Bound saw me give a speech for a UNITY event and made exceptions to allow me into the group as a junior in high school. This group normally would only accept applicants at the 8th grade level. The students would grow with the program, learning about colleges and get tutored in school so they could obtain good grades for college. However, they made an exception for me because they understood my family’s financial struggle and the limited path that I had for college. I think they also saw potential in me, which was something I began to feel more regularly since my participation in UNITY and AHA.

This is similar to Many Uch’s experience from Chapter Two. Once he began being involved in a lot of community service work, The Governor of Washington granted him a pardon and removed his deportation case. This pardon was not given to Loeun Lun and many other Cambodian deportees. This was a special exception was granted to Many because of his positive work in the community.

In the Upward Bound program, I began to see a possible path to a better life. The Upward Bound program paid students for attending homework help sessions and ran programs that helped at-risk students become college bound. Upward Bound and their program advisors took great care to help their students succeed. They took us on college visits and provided us with the experience of living in college dorms. With Upward Bound, I experienced how great life can be after high school. The other two clubs showed me a more effective way to fight through my barriers, gaining positive attention and
leadership skills, while Upward Bound made me see a path out of poverty through education. My involvement in the Royal Cambodian Bloods didn’t do any of that for me. For the first time, college seemed like a possibility.

Two of the friends I interviewed also express the importance of being involved in clubs and having supportive programs at school.

Seyha – *Back then I was a very good athlete. I was really fast so I got invited to play sports. I played soccer and football with the school. I was lucky. My parents couldn’t afford it. However, I had an American friend in high school that helped pay for me to participate in sports. Getting involved helped me get to know other kids in school a little bit better.*

Monorum – *When I hit high school, I wasn’t very involved in many things. I didn’t think there was anything at all that was created to meet our needs. I wished the school would have programs that can help low income kids join sports or activities in the summer. We couldn’t get involved in anything because our parents didn’t have any money. Therefore, we didn’t get to learn teamwork or integrate ourselves with the predominant culture. And I feel that was very important.*

The three programs that I was involved in greatly helped me. The programs were structured in a way that allowed their students, me included, to develop strength and see a path forward. More important than the programs were the people behind the programs. My 10th grade social studies teacher, the high school EL teacher, and the directors of UNITY and Upward Bound took the time to notice me and my potential. My UNITY director sacrificed her time to counsel me when I struggled with my mother and her
gambling problems. She even paid for karate lessons for me so that I could have a positive outlet to release my energy and anger, because she knew how much I loved to fight. My Upward Bound director continued the work of my UNITY director but focused on my academic needs. She drove me to college visits and sat down with me to apply for college scholarships. Because she generously gave up her time to guide me, I was able to win enough scholarship money to afford to go to college.

Another very important person in my life was my elementary EL teacher. She was the first person that provided a positive school experience for me. At the end of every school year during middle and high school, my friends and I would go visit her. She was the person that inspired me to pursue a career in ESL education. After shadowing her during my 11th grade community awareness program, I realized that the younger EL students were still going through the same things that I was going through as a kid. They were struggling with language, poverty, and being able to positively identify where they belong. Seeing this I realized that if I was able to make it out of my problems, it would be very selfish of me not to come back and help other EL and refugee kids succeed.

Monorum also stressed his thankfulness for one of his EL teachers.

Monorum - I have one ESL teacher who pretty much changed my life. She cared. She pushed you. I had other friends in my ESL class and I think sometimes teachers can see which students wanted to excel...I felt like she saw that I wanted to progress and she helped us to succeed. I will never forget her. She was a difference maker.

Third Theme of Support: The Will to Fight
Everything seemed to be going well and my life seemed to be heading smoothly in the right direction. But then there was a moment when everything could have really ended badly for me. In 11th grade I was reminded that my troubles wouldn’t just easily disappear. There was a dark moment when I thought I was going to die.

My troubles that day started when I was walking home from school. I walked across a park that I knew had many people that weren’t friendly to people who looked like me. I knew there was a risk walking through the park. However, it was the shortest way to my grandmother’s house where my little sister was staying. I was also tired from working until two in the morning the night before cleaning toilets at IBM. I walked through the park and stared back at the mean looks glaring at me. They started yelling racial slurs at me and insulting my family so I yelled back. They started coming towards me and I was walking as fast as I could backwards not taking my eyes off of them. They started running at me and I prepared myself to fight. I can’t remember exactly how many came at me at once. However, one of them had a knife and swung it at me. I blocked it with my hands and then he came back around and got me in my waist. I turned and ran away as fast as I could. Surprisingly, they weren’t running after me. I didn’t look back to slow myself down. I thought that if I did, I would for sure have been caught and killed. So I just ran.

When I got out of the park, I realized that my attackers ran back to get their cars. Their main goal was to weaken and intimidate me. I was running home with blood pouring out of my waist and my hands. I ran as fast as I could. I was on the streets in a very public area, but I didn’t notice anything around me. I ran past people on the streets who scurried as far away from me as possible. One car drove across me on the main road
and yelled insults at me, making me feel weaker than I already was feeling. This car was filled with my attackers. After seeing them, I felt my feet glued to the cement on the sidewalk. I couldn’t move. The only thing going through my mind was how fast I would have to swing my arms and legs to fight them off. Luckily, they just drove past me, yelling and sticking up their middle finger at me. I guess they felt like they achieved enough of their goal to leave me alone. They drove in front of me on the busy street and called me a “Scared Gook” and drove off. I didn’t stop running until I got home. I didn’t go to my grandmother’s house and pick up my sister until the next day. I didn’t want them to know what happened to me.

When I got home, I was not surprised to find myself alone. My mother was at the casinos again and didn’t come back home for a week. By this time, my sister’s father no longer lived with us. So I was alone to take care of my wounds. My aunt brought my sister to me later that night. She didn’t see the wound on my waist, but questioned the deep cut on my hand. I told her I cut it fixing my car. I didn’t go back to school for eight days and I contemplated dropping out. I no longer felt safe at school and I was still uncertain that school was the answer to the poverty and hate that I’ve been experiencing in my life.

But, by this point, I had experienced the benefit of so many people supporting me and programs that showed me a path forward. They had ignited my will to fight in a constructive way because they showed me how to fight and how to succeed. I also remembered my 10th grade social studies teacher’s words that I would have to prove people wrong. My attackers thought I was scared of them. They wanted me to fail. I had to show them that I was going to succeed. And through the help of the people and
programs that came into my life, I knew how to do it. I was going to graduate from high school. I was going to go to college and I was going to get my degree in ESL. I was going to be an ESL teacher. And was going to come back to town to help EL and refugee students succeed. And if I ran into these people in the future, I wouldn’t have to tell them they were wrong. I would have already proven it.

Things continued to go well for me, partly because I knew I was now in control of my own future. However, the problems I had during my youth didn’t all disappear right away. My family was still living in poverty. My mother still had gambling problems. I never officially got out of the gang. No one ever officially gets out. And though racial violence slowed, prejudice and discrimination still existed.

My last year of high school went smoothly. I took part in a program that allows high school students to take postsecondary classes, and Upward Bound helped me get accepted to Hamline University. I walked up to receive my high school diploma with one other childhood friend. The others didn’t make it. My family was poor and I worried about them not having enough but I believed a college education was going to allow me to better support them in the future. There were few Cambodians in my college city and the Asians in this city were Hmong, not Cambodians. I didn’t fit in and the label that I tried so hard to avoid, being called a “Sell Out,” finally was placed upon me. However, from the experience I had in my latter years of high school, I knew how to relate and make friends outside my own ethnic circle. I didn’t need to rely on the safe haven of the Asian community.

During the time when I was completing my student teaching for Hamline, I was homeless and had to sleep in my car and crash at a friend’s house. It is very difficult to
plan lessons in your car. Luckily, I was able to finish my studies and get a job back home as an EL teacher. I was able to help other EL students break through barriers and learn even more about themselves. I taught Cambodian dancing and basic French also at the elementary school I worked at utilizing these two programs to help kids integrate with one another.

Becoming a teacher and having a salary that I knew was enough to support myself and my family made me, for the first time, feel fully American. After my second year of teaching, I went to get my U.S. citizenship. I eventually took my grandpa back to Cambodia because he wanted to show me his life and childhood. We visited where he grew up, where he went to school, and where he fought in the war. It was a spiritual journey for my grandfather, allowing him to say goodbye to the many friends and family members he had lost. For me, after so long, I was finally able to call Cambodia home. I identified myself as Cambodian. However, when I got there, I realized how American I was. I travelled across the world just to realize that my home was this town where I grew up, fought, and had so many problems in the past.

When I came back home from Cambodia, I finished the year teaching my EL students. At the end of that year, I became the EL Coordinator for the district, which allowed me to expand the programming of dance and language out into the community to not only integrate and bring students together, but to bring parents together as well. Along the way I developed a mild cancer. However, things were moving forward so well, I was not going to let cancer slow me down. I remember my grandfather’s words. “No matter what happens, keep moving forward towards a brighter future.”
Comparing my life experience to the experience of my grandpa, my mother, and the two friends I described in Chapter Four, clear differences in support are evident. My grandpa and mother had a much more difficult time meeting their needs for security and belonging. Their struggles to provide for themselves and their family often led to depression and made it very hard for them to cope with their PTSD. Despite growing up in the same environment, I had the support of school to help me meet my physiological and security needs, and the need to belong, as described by Maslow (1943). This allowed me to pursue higher level needs for myself through high school and higher education, which ended up pulling me out of poverty.

As for my two friends, I had the support of many individuals and programs that strengthened my will to fight and ultimately helped me overcome all the themes of struggle for refugees: theme 1: discovering that sense of home; theme 2: identity; theme three: cultural dissonance; and theme 4: poverty. Overcoming these barriers took me from being a refugee from Cambodia to becoming an EL Coordinator in a Minnesota school district.

Analysis

In this section of the chapter I will analyze the reported story and events to answer some of the guiding questions and interpret the stories in terms of the Themes of Struggle. I will review the stories of my mother and grandfather and what they went through in their native country of Cambodia to see if it at all had an impact on how they adapted to life in the United States. Keo (2010) explains that the socialization experience of Cambodian families may be influenced by their history and culture.
The newspaper articles used in this chapter painted a very descriptive image of what was happening in this Minnesota town and the local residents’ reactions to the incoming refugees. Dinh et. al. (2008) defines acculturation as a mutual change process that occurs when groups and individuals from different cultures come in contact with one another. When this happens, the individuals involved reflect a variety of personal changes (Dinh et. al., 2008). Research has also documented that immigrant children of color from lower class backgrounds, including Cambodians, are vulnerable to assimilating into underclass U.S. strata and show opposition towards schooling. (Zhou, 1997)

To help us analyze the acculturation experience of the Cambodian refugees mentioned in this story, I will utilize Nguyen’s (2006) four adaptive patterns of assimilation categories: high assimilation-low ethnic identity, high assimilation/high ethnic identity, low assimilation/low ethnic identity, and low assimilation/high ethnic identity. Using this method will allow us to see if one can change categories and what would cause this to happen.

Finally, in this chapter, I will discuss the importance of the three themes of support and how vital it is to have these supports in order to overcome the themes of struggle. The analysis of all the themes will be applied in Chapter Five as I discuss the implications of this study.

**Did Cambodia Matter?**

Both my mother and grandfather survived the Killing Fields with a lot of courage and fight. However, when they got to America, they struggled to adapt. They experienced what many refugees experience, living through poverty and cultural dissonance.
For my mother the horrific events that she went through and her undying guilt about what happened to her sister caused her to developed severe PTSD. She struggled to overcome this illness and developed gambling as a bad habit to cope with her troubles.

As for my grandfather, his success in battle against the French and his knowledge gained as a high ranking military officer did not help him in America. The foreign environment and his struggles with the language did not allow him to succeed in finding and keeping a job. He wasn’t even able to get his driver’s license and had to depend on his second daughter to be the sole wage earner for the family of ten. His pride was hurt and he turned to alcohol to make himself feel better. However, alcohol only brought more hardship to him and his family.

French colonialism and the Khmer Rouge destroyed the education system in Cambodia. Therefore, the Cambodians refugees to America had very little education or experience in a proper school system. The result of this was that Cambodian children fell into the category of SLIFE; not only did they have to learn English and other academic content, they needed to learn how to go to school and engage in formal academic learning.

Cambodian parents understood the importance of school. Monorum described how his parents wanted him to succeed in school so he wouldn’t have a hard life like they had had. All three of the people I interviewed shared that their parents weren’t able to help them with their school work. Davy mentioned how her parents kept telling her to go to school but they didn’t know how hard school was.

Not only did Cambodia’s broken school system make it very hard for Cambodian kids to succeed academically in the United States, the events of the Khmer Rouge also
made it hard for Cambodian adolescents to adjust to life here. The Khmer Rouge taught kids to torture and neglect any familial bonds. The experience of young adults during the time of the Khmer Rouge may have helped spur the violent reaction to cultural tensions in the United States.

**How are identity and cultural dissonance related?**

Numerous newspaper articles in the 1980’s and 1990’s outlined racial tensions between the current local white residents and the incoming Cambodian and Southeast Asian refugees. Different generations of Cambodians responded differently to insults and attacks by the town’s white community. The older Cambodians who came over walked away from this tension because they didn’t understand the language nor the culture as well as the younger Cambodians who had the opportunity for schooling in America. The teens of that 1st generation of refugees had some English and understanding of the system. They were the first to start to fight back against the insults and racial attacks. My generation was the younger generation who grew up in America. We were heavily influenced by what we saw as bravery by our older brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles. We carried on the fight, but we had less connection to our ethnic identities. Not all Cambodian kids of my generation preferred to associate predominantly with Cambodians. Table 1 uses Kitano’s adaptive pattern criteria from Julia Nguyen’s research, Straddling two worlds (2006), to define the assimilation characteristics of the general group of Cambodian refugees of that time.
Table 1. Four Adaptive Patterns of Assimilation

Four Adaptive Patterns of Assimilation (Nguyen, 2006)

As I analyze the four adaptive patterns above, I understand that many Cambodian refugees fall into different adaptive patterns based on their acculturation desires and experience. The kids in the original Royal Cambodian Bloods still had strong ties to

<table>
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<tr>
<th>High Assimilation-Low Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>High Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Individual feels more American rather than identifying with their ethnic culture. They prefer to identify with things American such as language, lifestyle and friends.</em></td>
<td><em>The individual is fully integrated, holding on to a strong sense and understanding of their native culture but can navigate with ease through American expectation and life-style.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the younger Cambodian refugees fell into this category (In this study the term “Sell Out” was used to describe these kids) – Monorum could fall into this category.</td>
<td>I ultimately ended up in this category. – After finishing college and starting my career in EL until today, I would classify myself into this category.</td>
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<table>
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<th>Low Assimilation-Low Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Low Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>The individuals have a hard time fitting into both cultures. These individuals struggle to fit in with their American peers while at the same time have very little understanding of their native cultures.</em></td>
<td><em>The individual in this category are very comfortable with their own ethnic community and not comfortable in the mainstream American community.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seyha and many of the kids in the Cambodian Bloods can be classified into this category.</td>
<td>Both the older Cambodians and the first generation Cambodian teens fell into this category. They were more comfortable within their own community and often struggled to interact with the mainstream. – Davy, my mother and grandfather would be classified in this category. I felt that throughout middle school and high school, I would also be classified in this category.</td>
</tr>
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Cambodia and understanding of their ethnic culture. However, as I explained above, I learned more about the Cambodian culture when I interacted with the Newcomers in high school. Therefore, like me, many members of the Royal Cambodian Bloods may believe that they were more aligned with Cambodian culture than they actually were. When I went back to Cambodia, I realized that I was more Americanized than I had originally thought. Therefore, during my youth, my group of friends and I fell in between Low Assimilation-Low Ethnic Identity and Low Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity. However, if it hadn’t been for the racial tension occurring in the city at the time, we may have fallen more into the High Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity category.

Cultural dissonance forced us to choose sides. We were not allowed to assimilate very easily into American culture. And as we combatted the harassment violently, the consequences we received eventually forced many of us to be incarcerated or shunned by our own community. Newspaper articles and the media gave Cambodian youth a very bad reputation at that time. In my research, I could not find as many articles on the All American Boyz gang that we were constantly at odds with. I only found two articles, and one of the articles reported that they were not a gang. It seemed that the Cambodian youth got more of the negative reputation for the fighting.

My own acculturation was greatly affected by cultural dissonance. Looking back at my life I landed on different categories of Kitano’s adaptive patterns at different stages of my life. Prior to elementary school, I was Low Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity. I could not communicate with non-Cambodians at that time. During most of my elementary school, I was High Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity. This was because my teachers provided me a great experience in elementary school. From middle school to
tenth grade, the racial tension in my school forced me to pick sides. During this time, I would have landed on Low Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity. My latter half of high school to this day would have me in High Assimilation-High Ethnic Identity. Supportive programs and individuals helped me overcome my barriers and achieve my goals. In this chapter, I exclaimed that after my second year of teaching, I got my U.S. citizenship. I was ready to call myself an American while at the same time embracing the uniqueness of my Cambodian heritage.

**Are the Supports Necessary?**

Looking back at the personal narratives described in Chapter Two and my own personal narratives supported by the interviews of my friends, we can see that having caring individuals to guide refugee students, effective programs that can open doors for them, and the refugee student’s own will to succeed are vital to helping the refugee overcome the common barriers of identity, cultural dissonance, and poverty, and help the refugee successfully create a home that is integrated into his or her environment.

For Loeun Lun in Chapter Two and two of my friends described in Chapter Four, lack of support from effective programs and caring individuals diminished their will to fight and eventually led them to succumb to their obstacles.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I reflected on my life and the experience that my family and I had as we tried to readjust to life as refugees in America. The four themes of struggle: the refugee’s journey to reestablish a home in a new country, identity, cultural dissonance, and poverty, were illuminated through my personal experiences, newspaper articles, and the interviews of my friends and family. The three themes of support were addressed
together in the discussion of how I overcame my barriers. Programmatic support, caring people, and the internal will to succeed were all embedded in my story and the story of my friends and family, explaining how we were either successful or failed to overcome poverty and discrimination along with the other themes of struggle.

Based on the guidelines of Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) the narratives in this chapter enabled connection, promoted insight, improved the learning situation, developed character, and attended to the context of established truths. An analysis of the findings was summarized at the end of the chapter, describing the effects of each of the themes on the refugees’ ability to overcome their dilemmas.

Looking Ahead

In the next chapter, I will address implications and applications of my findings from Chapter Four. The information compiled and the analysis of that information will allow me to offer guidance to educators to help them succeed in their work with refugee students.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In Chapter One, I used The 1951 Refugee Convention’s definition that describes a refugee as someone who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Stein, 1986, p. 5). Refugees are a group that arrived in America after suffering through tremendous losses. In the case of my grandfather, he lost three children. For my mother, she lost one sister and two brothers. For my three interview subjects, they lost their opportunity to fully understand their own home and culture, forcing them to struggle to navigate through the cultural differences of their two worlds.

In the previous four chapters, I described many tough choices that refugees had to make. Darina Siv had to leave her parents behind in order to take her brother to safety. My mother stole food from children in order to help her parents live. The decisions they had to make were not always decisions that they could be proud of. And for people who have never been through war and the refugee crisis, it’s hard to understand. My mother often blames herself for the death of her sister. One may question how my grandfather could beat his own son to death. One may question why my mother turned to gambling and my grandfather turned to alcohol to cope with their pain. There are no easy answers
to these questions. The deep rooted emotions of fear, anger, and sadness of refugees are hard to replicate to help others understand.

These tough decisions were also passed on to refugee children as they tried to define their identity and navigate their cultural differences with the native born American kids. My friends and I by no means supported the culture of gangs and gang activities in America. As our parents escaped from the Killing Fields, our natural reaction to being in America was to embrace its opportunities. However, racial tensions and cultural misunderstandings forced refugee kids to take action in a way that may not be right, but seemed to be the only option at the time. The tougher the choices, the harder it is to make the right decisions. Sadly, for many refugees, the lack of understanding of their environment and the lack of available support at times make it easy to make wrong decisions. However, what is important is to understand the reasons why these tough decisions had to be made.

I believe the power of this study resides in my efforts to tell the whole story or at least as much as I can about refugees and their experiences in America. By explaining my refugee experience along with that of my friends and family, I tried to include both the successes and failures, both the good and the bad choices we made due to the circumstances we were given. Also, in this study, I attempted to discover what it takes to help refugee students through their struggles with poverty, identity, cultural dissonance, and their families’ complex journeys from a war torn country to a refugee camp to starting life over in America. These were the four themes of struggle first identified in Chapter Two, the literature review, then discussed in Chapter Four through my own personal narratives and the interviews conducted with my friends and families. In the
process, I also looked at three themes of support that were prevalent in the stories of successful refugees. These themes were appropriate programmatic support, caring individuals who made a connection with the refugees, and the refugees’ own internal will to succeed. Not all refugees in the study were able to overcome their barriers and a few in the stories suffered tragic endings as they succumbed to the problems of their life.

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two summarized the life of other refugees and their struggles through the four themes. In Chapter Four, I looked at my own personal story and the stories of people around me who struggled through the common problems of poverty and discrimination. Chapter Four also explained why refugees from a single Midwestern town struggled with their own identity and why a particular refugee community had such a hard time reestablishing life after losing so much in their native country. All of these memories and points of information have been evoked in an attempt to respond to the research questions in this study:

1) How do Cambodian history and my own family history explain and influence the experiences that I have had as a refugee who found eventual success?

2) What kinds of programmatic support influenced me in my journey as a resettled refugee, and how?

3) What kinds of support did I receive from individuals, and how was that support imparted?

4) What was the role of intrinsic motivation in my own transformation story, and how was this personally awakened in me?

5) What other factors presented either an advantage or disadvantage to me in terms of the formation of my identity and success as a refugee?
6) How do these analyzed aspects help create effective programming and instructional practices for educators and administrators?

In this chapter, I will explore the major findings in my study, noting how they respond to my research questions, and provide suggested themes for educators to reflect on and relate to the students with whom they currently work. I will also highlight applicable practices and programmatic guidance for educators to implement in their classroom, school, and district to support refugee students who have gone through similar struggles.

At the end of this chapter, I will look at the limitations of this research and explain the need for further research in this manner by other refugees. I will discuss the importance of first-hand stories from refugees in the form of autobiographical research that can help educators meet the needs of their refugee students.

Major Findings

An analysis of my personal narratives along with the interviews of my grandfather, mother, and friends make clear that the experiences of refugees in their native country has an effect on the refugees’ resettlement experience. Also the right support and guidance from people who understand the plight of refugees and are knowledgeable about the types of programs required to address their needs are crucial to the success of refugees. Furthermore, the newspaper articles I used in this study highlighted how poverty and cultural dissonance also played a role in impacting the acculturation of refugee students. My findings indicate that these four themes of struggle: --The price of survival and the struggle to recreate a new home for yourself in a new country, Identity, Cultural Dissonance, and Poverty--made it very difficult to adjust to
life in the United States and created tremendous obstacles for refugee students to believe that they could be successful.

The examination of the results from this study will be analyzed under the six research questions. Information from Chapter Four and the previous chapters will be utilized to answer the questions and discuss the implication of this study.

**Research Question # 1: How do Cambodian history and my own family history explain and influence the experiences that I have had as a refugee who found eventual success?**

This question can be answered using the stories of my grandfather and mother as they lived through French Colonization and the Killing Fields era of Cambodia. In Chapter Four, I described how the French were reluctant to improve Cambodia’s education system fearing that if Cambodians had a high literacy rate, their nationalistic sentiments would increase, leading to revolt against French rule. In his interview, my grandpa shared his understanding that the effort to keep Cambodians illiterate had turned them into savages.

The Khmer Rouge would later adopt the same philosophy as their despised colonial lords, the French. They would kill off over 500 doctors and other professionals. They would shut down schools and target educated people to be tortured. 670,000 primary school children went missing out of 990,000. My mother’s primary schooling abruptly ended and was replaced with the education of Communist doctrines.

The result of the French and the Khmer Rouge practices created many generations of uneducated Cambodians and many Cambodian individuals with interrupted education. Because of this, the parents of Cambodian refugees were not able to help their kids succeed in the Minnesota school system. All three of the people I interviewed stated that
their parents cared about education. However, none of their parents knew how hard school was or were able to help them through their school work. I had the same difficulties as the three people interviewed. My parents were not able to help me with my school work either.

Furthermore, both my mother and my grandfather suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. The PTSD that they suffered from made it really difficult for my family to progress and obtain their goals of making a better life for themselves in the United States. Both my mother and grandfather suffered from depression which made it difficult for them to obtain a job. My mother also suffered from frequent nightmares of what happened back in Cambodia. In Chapter Four, I described how my mother developed a gambling addiction to cope with her PTSD and my grandfather turned to alcohol to make his life more meaningful. PTSD made it hard for them to overcome the Four Themes of struggle and added to the already many problems they were experiencing in the United States.

PTSD also affected me as the negative behaviors that my mother and grandfather developed created more difficulties in the family. My mother was often gone when I needed her. The school would often have a hard time getting a hold of her because she was at the casino. Therefore, I was left to raise myself and my sister at a very young age. Her absence created an environment where I had little deterrence from being involved with gangs and other activities that would identify me as an at-risk youth.

The answer to this research question is, yes, what happened to the refugees in Cambodia did have a direct impact on me. What they experienced during the war continued to haunt them in the form of post-traumatic stress. Also the loss of education
during the Khmer Rouge and the inaccessible education during the French colonial occupation made it very difficult for my family to know how to support me in school.

Research Question #2: What kinds of programmatic support influenced me in my journey as a resettled refugee, and how?

Having the right programs and organizations to assist refugees is vital to helping them overcome their barriers. Darina, Valentino, and Choua’s family in Chapter Two had local churches and nonprofits along with federal programs such as AFDC to help support them through their battle with the four themes of struggle. Choua’s family was able to receive counseling from the Lao Family organization to help her family work through the generational and cultural struggles between her siblings and her parents. She was able to work with the conflict management group that helped her overcome the issues she had at school.

Programs that helped me succeed were able to do three main things. The programs empowered me. They taught me a positive method to fight back against the problems that were important to me and they showed me a path forward, guiding me away from my problems. These three characteristics are very important to have in programming if you are to make a difference in a refugee student’s life who struggles with identity, cultural dissonance, and poverty.

The program goals and initiatives need to relate to student needs and in a way directly address their struggles. For instance, a teacher asking me to be involved in chess club or student government would not have been successful because I had no interest in them and also I didn’t feel that they would have addressed my needs and feelings at that time, which were geared towards wanting to see an end to the fighting and wanting my
group of friends who were refugees and immigrants to be accepted. The school clubs at the time were either all or predominantly white, working on issues that were not familiar to the Asian refugees.

Affirmative Human Action (AHA) was a school club that my social studies teacher used to bridge my interest in being involved with other things in school and the community. The club had a clear focus and it was relevant to my needs. The goal of the club was to fight against discrimination. The club was made up of all white students. And I felt very intimidated to participate. However, I had my teacher there as the advisor of the club and she made me trust that this club was good for me.

AHA, Understanding Nationalities in Today’s Youth (UNITY) and Upward Bound were three clubs that exactly met my needs. The clubs had me continue my fight against racism. They helped gain positive publicity for my Cambodian community and showed me a path to college. The other important thing about these clubs is that they were very active, so even though I had very little experience working and operating in organized clubs, the many events that they had going on allowed me to easily participate as first an observer then an active member. Also, for all the time I spent in these two clubs, I never once felt it was useless for me.

Therefore, what we can learn from this is that refugee students need structured experiences that will allow them to work with others in clubs. Furthermore, they will be more interested in participating if they can clearly see how such involvement addresses their needs and what future benefits they can get out of it. Having someone they can trust in these programs will also help them be more successful in the program.
The programs need to empower and teach students how to address their problems. However, they also need to be able to address the academic and social needs of students. In Choua’s case, The International Club helped her address some of her social and cultural disagreements with African American students. UNITY and AHA helped me address the discrimination of refugees and immigrants. And Upward Bound helped me address my academic needs. These three programs and programs that share a similar vision of empowerment, positive fight, and a path forward are very beneficial towards helping refugee students achieve success and integrate positively into their local communities by drawing positive reactions to their civic work. In Chapter Two, I described how Many Uch created a baseball program for youth in his neighborhood so that Cambodian kids would have opportunities to integrate with other neighborhood kids and be involved positively in their neighborhoods.

Refugee students do not want to continue to be victims of being born into poverty and loss. Many students want to find a way out but struggle to know how to do so. Rios (2012) showed us that when students feel disenfranchised they often embrace a counter culture to allow them how to express their frustration and anger. Programs that can help guide refugee students to express themselves positively and fight in a positive manner against the things that make them so angry will achieve the most success with refugee students.

One very important issue that needs to be also addressed is that the student’s family have their basic needs covered. Darina Siv had federal aid in the form of AFDC cash assistance for her to pursue her own upward mobility. My mother was also on cash assistance. However, she struggled with gambling addiction which forced me to work
many hours outside of school to cover our family’s basic need of food and shelter. Furthermore, support for refugee families needs to include addressing the trauma they’ve experienced. If my mother and grandfather had help in learning how to cope positively with their PTSD, maybe they would not have develop the bad habits of drinking and gambling to cope with their struggles. If support for the refugee family is available, it makes it much easier for the refugee students to achieve in school.

Research Question # 3: What kinds of support did I receive from individuals, and how was that support imparted?

The autobiographies and personal narratives studied in Chapter Two along with my personal narrative summarized in Chapter Four all point at the importance of having caring individuals that can support and guide you through your troubles, with understanding and without negative judgment, especially when you are foreign to the system and are unaware of available resources. Many Uch had his elementary teacher whom he could talk to and later on, the camera crew that chronicled his journey and the tough decision he had to make. They stepped in to support him in his fight against deportation.

Like Many Uch, I had my elementary EL teacher who understood the struggles of Cambodian refugees. I could always confide in her about my problems. This is the reason as explained in Chapter Four, my friends and I would visit her at the end of every school year. She knew us when we were young and before we got involved in gangs. And she didn’t judge us as bad people despite the many poor decisions we made.

My tenth grade social studies teacher watched what was going on in the high school environment. She became very familiar with the problem and the fights that were
occurring in school. She approached me for the initial conversation and was able to identify my frustration. What made her different from other teachers was that she didn’t just tell me that I shouldn’t do those things or that the fights I got into was going to ruin me. She understood that I needed to fight and showed me a way to fight that would allow me to win. She understood that I wanted to win. My tenth grade teacher got me involved with the civic engagement club, Affirmative Human Action, which allowed me to channel my anger and frustration into positive action.

She also understood that you can’t just say to a teenage student, “Don’t worry about what your peers think.” She knew that I cared about what other Cambodian students felt when they saw me involved in school clubs with white students. So she reached out to the EL teacher to allow me to continue hanging around with other Cambodian kids but not be pressured into doing things that could hurt me.

My UNITY advisor guided me to be involved in activities where I could gain positive recognition for myself and more importantly for the image of my Cambodian community. My Upward Bound Director knew that the price tag of college discouraged many refugee students from taking control of their own future and realizing the opportunities that can be created by higher education. She utilized her knowledge of pathways to higher education to help us create our own path towards success. She made it ok for us to dream of a future.

Similar to how my Upward Bound Director was able to show me the possibilities of higher education, Valentino Achak Deng as discussed in Chapter Two had the support of Phil Mays, his sponsor. Phil co-signed car loans for him which allowed him to have a resource to get to jobs and school. In the end, Phil Mays helped Valentino enter Georgia
Perimeter College. This was the start that Valentino needed to allow him to eventually pursue a degree in international studies and diplomacy as part of his journey to eventually create the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation (Eggers, 2006).

Caring individuals are very important to the success of the refugee students. However, it’s not just the fact that these individuals cared for me that made me successful. In order for the caring individuals to be successful in helping the refugee students beat the odds by overcoming identity issues, self-confidence, cultural dissonance or any other obstacles, that individual needs to know what the student values and why the struggle persists. For example, if you don’t understand why the refugee student is fighting, you can’t tell them to stop fighting. That approach will only alienate the student even more. If he wants to fight, show him how to fight in a positive manner.

The caring individual will also need to be aware of resources available to help the student and personally approach the student with the opportunity. Once the student accepts the support, the individual needs to continue to help guide the student to make sure the student stays on the right path. As there are multiple problems plaguing the student at one time, it’s very easy for the student to turn away from the support because he or she feels that it’s not making a difference fast enough. Once this happens, the student needs someone to turn to in order to help redirect him or her. It’s also most successful for both the student and the teacher if there’s a team of caring individuals for the student to turn to. For example, Choua Vang had Ms. Martinez at school and Brian from Lao Family to support her and her family. The connection that her family eventually had with Brian was fostered by Ms. Martinez. She knew that with the things going on in Choua’s life, her help alone would not be enough to pull Choua through.
For me personally, I had my elementary EL teacher, my tenth grade social studies teacher, the EL teacher at the high school, The UNITY advisor and the Upward Bound director there to guide me and encourage me every time I wanted to give up. Most importantly, like the caring individuals I had, the individuals supporting the refugee student needs to not be judgmental of the student’s incorrect decisions but rather understanding of how these poor decisions can be made. The supportive individual does not need to be of the same ethnic background of the student. However, he or she needs to be familiar enough with the student what the student is going through to be able to connect with the student and guide the student in a positive direction.

Another important discovery that I learned as I went back through life was that it was not just one individual alone that was able to help me overcome the barriers of cultural dissonance, poverty, identity, and the refugee struggle to feel at home in their new environment. It was a team of individuals with different resources working collaboratively together that made a difference. Many times throughout this study, I compared a refugee’s life to a broken puzzle. Using that metaphor once again, I would say that many hands would hold different pieces of the puzzle. And the owners of these hands have to be communicating and working together in order to put as many pieces of the puzzle back together. One individual will not be able to hold enough pieces. It will be very hard for one person working alone to have all the necessary resources to help the refugee student. A team of people need to be working together in order to be successful at helping the refugee student overcome their problems. I was fortunate enough to have my 10th grade social studies teacher, my elementary EL teacher, the EL teacher at the high school, my UNITY director and my Upward Bound director.
Research Question # 4: How was the role of intrinsic motivation in my own transformation story, and how was this personally awakened in me?

The story of the Cambodian refugee story highlights the idea that people are affected by their past. As Cambodian history through French colonization and the Killing Fields created generations of people with interrupted education, the strength that the Cambodian people used to endure the struggle has created generations of survivors. I personally was affected by the story of my family’s struggles.

Even though my family, like Many’s mother and the subjects I interviewed were not able to support me in school, their stories of survival under torture of the French and Khmer Rouge, gave me strength to fight for a better life and not to just live with discrimination and settle for a life of poverty. As a child when I was hungry, my mother and other Cambodian Killing Field survivors would remind me of what they went through and what it took for them to survive. My grandpa’s heroic story inspired me: how he fought against the French and helped bring independence to Cambodia and later on how he was able to guide most of his children to safety when danger was all around such as Thai and Vietnamese rocket fire from the sky, armies of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese in front and behind them, and landmines in the ground. My grandpa did not only bring most of his family to safety in Thailand, he was able to bring his surviving wife, children and brothers and sisters to America.

Hearing about their undying spirit to live and survive made me believe early on that I can make it and prosper. The story of their survival highlighted how difficult life was for them. A large part of my drive to succeed was because I wanted them to not only just survive but to be able to live again. I wanted to achieve peace and happiness for
them. I wanted to succeed so that they could have something to be proud of. I wanted to push their sad memories out and refill them with happy ones. This desire to improve my family’s life was the start of my internal will to fight.

Sadly, despite the successes that my grandpa and mother had in surviving French colonization and the Killing Fields, they struggled in America to survive and failed at living a happy life. This is due to the fact that it’s very hard to find the will to persevere when you are in an unfamiliar environment and don’t know what you can do to be successful. This was the case for both my grandfather and mother. In Cambodia, despite the difficulties, they were at home, in a familiar place with a familiar language and culture. This familiarity was lost upon their arrival in the refugee camp and even more so in America. As described in Chapter Four, the difficulty they had in America led them to feel inadequate and pushed the two of them towards bad habits such as alcoholism and gambling.

Like my grandpa and mother, many refugees become resigned to just waiting to see what will happen to them when faced with challenges, such as in the case of my friend who felt he couldn’t go to the hospital because of the medical bills he owed, and the case of Loeun Lun in Chapter Two who did nothing to fight his deportation. In order for the refugees to maintain a will to fight for a better life, this will must be accompanied by a system of support guided by caring individuals and programs that make a difference.

I had many teachers who stepped in during my time of need and they guided me through programs that helped channel my frustration and anger toward positive activities. The supportive people and programs strengthened my internal will to succeed by making me believe in myself and helping me develop skills so I could overcome my barriers.
After seeing that I was able to accomplish my goals and that I was capable of improving my life, I began to fight even harder to succeed. The will to fight grows stronger when you can experience success. For example, being recognized for my achievements in AHA confirmed my belief that a nonviolent fight against discrimination was the right thing to do. Also, having guidance to apply for colleges and being successful at obtaining funding for college was what made me continue to succeed in school.

The will to fight alone helps the refugee survive. However, it’s not enough to help them live again. If we look back at Chapter Two, Darina Siv, Valentino Achak Deng, Choua Vang and Many Uch all had strong internal will to fight against the current struggles of their life. Many joined gangs and tried to make a name for himself through his gang inspired by the challenges of his tough neighborhood. Choua ran away from home to escape the problems of home. Valentino tried hard to do the right things as he went to school and work part-time. However, life in America presented numerous challenges for him such being robbed and losing his girlfriend to violence. Darina struggled through poverty which almost took the opportunity away from her to go to school. All these refugees had a strong will to fight to improve their life. However, their will to fight would have diminished without support from caring individuals and effective programs to help them. Therefore, the will to fight is a very important factor in refugee success. However, the will to fight and the refugees’ abilities to push themselves need to be supported by good programming and caring individuals.

Research Question # 5: What other factors presented either an advantage or disadvantage to me in terms of the formation of my identity and success as a refugee?
As discussed in Chapter Four, my acculturation was greatly affected by how my Cambodian refugee group was perceived in the community. The negative experience that my family and other Cambodians had with the mainstream community made it very difficult for me to want to be part of America and American cultural values. Furthermore, members of my peer group also forced me to pick one side over the other. In Chapter Four, I explained how one of my friends told me not to turn my back on my own people because I would have no one to turn to once white people turned their backs on me.

As a child, I identified solely as Cambodian because of how my family was treated. According to Nguyen’s (2006) four adaptive patterns of assimilation, I would be in between the category of low assimilation-low ethnic identity and low assimilation-high ethnic identity. I would stay in this category moving more towards high assimilation-high ethnic identity all the way through high school. It wasn’t until I established my career in EL teaching that I chose to test for my citizenship and ultimately called myself an American. The successes that I had in my career and in life were what ultimately made me feel a part of this country. It wasn’t until I was 27 that I was able to balance my two worlds, drawing from the best of both cultures. Nguyen’s (2006) study using Kitano’s four adaptive patterns would describe me at this point as being firmly in the high assimilation-high ethnic identity. Therefore, both my struggles and successes helped me define my identity and my eventual success as a refugee.

Implications

Research Question # 6: How do these analyzed aspects help create effective programming and instructional practices for educators and administrators?
One question that I often ask myself, and that drives my work in the field of English learner education, is this: Why was I the lucky one? Why did I succeed when many of my friends and others in the refugee community did not? This question developed in me a feeling of internal guilt that pushed me to continue my work with refugee and immigrant students in English learner programs. I wanted to give back and help others succeed.

As this study forced me to take a closer look at my life, I was comforted by understanding the factors that guided me towards success. I had caring individuals who understood me. They didn’t judge me. Instead they saw talent in me and guided me to pull away from my negative activities and replace them with positive ways of addressing my issues. I had programs that opened doors for me and rekindled my internal will to succeed.

This study also made me realize that a lot of decisions that I made as an EL teacher and EL coordinator were grounded in my personal life experience. It is this life experience as a refugee student growing up in poverty and cultural dissonance that I would like to share with educators. Through this personal reflection, I realized that there is no silver bullet that can help a refugee student overcome all of his or her problems. There is not just one curriculum, nor just one program, nor just one individual that can be used in isolation to help the refugee student.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, a refugee student’s life is like a broken puzzle. Many different pieces have to be put back together, and the final result may still have holes in it. Refugee students do not just experience intergenerational disagreement between them and their parents. They do not just struggle with poverty or with gang
activities. Refugee students come into a life of poverty and dissonance in the U.S. after having experienced war and genocide in their homelands. Poverty alone brings in numerous problems where the students struggle to see a way forward towards college or a stable career. Cultural differences between the student’s home culture and school culture often cause the refugee student to struggle with identity. The students are often considered too American in the eyes of their parents and not American enough in the eyes of their peers, leaving them to struggle with the question of where their own identity is rooted and where they would best belong. Cultural differences also bring cultural clashes if positive experiences are not built for both sides.

Because refugee students experience many of these issues all at once, a team of support needs to be provided to the students so the students can learn how to address these matters and be empowered with positive, effective ways to build toward a successful future.

We can see examples of multiple sources of support in all the narratives that we studied. Darina Siv had the United Cambodian Association, public assistance, and many individuals in her life to guide her through her resettlement journey in America. She also had a strong internal will to succeed that allowed her to move unafraid from New York to Florida and eventually to Minnesota in search of a better life while in America. Valentino Achak Deng also had many caring individuals who guided him toward numerous resources and programs to help him finish school and achieve his dream of starting a charitable foundation to help people in his village. The fictional character Choua Vang had her teacher who guided her to participate in her school’s international student club and conflict management program to help guide her through her problems.
I encourage educators to analyze available resources in the school and community that would be available for refugee students. When only one or two of the student’s barriers are addressed, we may be able to solve that one particular issue, but the student may still fail because there are still many unaddressed problems. For example, if we address the issue of cultural dissonance and pull the students away from gangs, but not be able to show him or her a path out of poverty, the student may still drop out of school so that he or she can work and support the family. If this happens, we make the life of poverty a more permanent state for the student and his or her family instead of helping the student understand that poverty does not need to be a permanent sentence and helping him or her develop skills and behaviors that will lead to a future beyond the grip of poverty. An example of this from Chapter Four was the fact that both the UNITY club and AHA club helped me satisfy my urge to fight against the discrimination in town. However, I was also guided to be involved in Upward Bound so that I could continue to find a way to work towards going to college. Without Upward Bound, there was no guarantee that the leadership skills I learned in UNITY and AHA would benefit my future.

By only addressing one issue at a time, we may also disengage the student from the positive activity we try to provide. For example, if we only provide academic support to the student, the student may become successful academically, but he or she still has to struggle with the issue of social identity, finding a place to belong. In Chapter Four, I described how I was pulled into the Royal Cambodian Bloods even after experiencing success in elementary school because I did not feel that white people accepted me and people like me. When this happened, my focus pulled away from school.
This is why a team of support and a structured support plan needs to be built for refugee students. A team of support will allow you to address as many challenges as possible in the refugee student’s life. I had many teachers in school and program advisors who worked together to help me through my problems. The different programs that I was involved in opened new opportunities for me. Since there are so many different moving pieces to the refugee puzzle, a team of support will help you put many of the pieces in the student’s life back together.

**Effective Programs of Support**

We need to involve students in a variety of programming that will teach them how to overcome all of their barriers. If such a system of support doesn’t exist in a particular school, district, or community, educators should strive to create one. In what follows, I will outline steps that can be taken to develop programming that addresses students’ diverse needs at different levels. In each case, I will refer to findings from my study that indicates the importance and efficacy of that step.

1) EL classes and programs should not only address academic needs of students but should also strive to understand students’ social issues and work to help students integrate and involve students in existing school activities.

   - *My tenth grade social studies teachers got me involved in the school club Affirmative Human Action. This club allowed me to channel my fight against discrimination that was previously channeled through gang activities into something positive.*
The EL teacher at my high school took us on field trips to see the Amish communities around town and developed platforms for us to share our culture so that others can understand our struggles.

The above examples are similar to what Choua Vang’s teacher did in the book *Hey Hmong Girl, Whassup?* (Rempel, 2004). The teacher of the fictional character Choua Vang encouraged her to get involved in clubs at school and utilize the resources available for her such as the International Club and the Conflict Manager program to handle her problems. Successful programmatic support is very important. In this study, Loeun Lun and two of my friends who were not able to find programs to support their needs eventually failed to overcome their struggles. Loeun got deported. One of my friends went to prison and is awaiting deportation and my other friend lost his life because he didn’t know of programming that could help him pay his medical bills.

2) Incorporate home visits into your educational structure so that you can understand more about the students’ home life. Learn about their community struggle as a whole and develop relationships with community elders and community leaders. Guide these community leaders to become bridge builders for their communities.

- One reason why my elementary experience was so positive was because my EL teacher and band teacher frequently engaged my family through home visits. These home visits helped my family understand the school system and it helped my teachers understand my personal struggles and the lack of resources my family had.
The city that I grew up in often worked with community leaders in the Cambodian community to address the problem of youth gangs and adult gambling. There were mixed results but the efforts that were being made showed students that the district cared about what they were going through.

Again an example from the fictional character Choua Vang supports this point. Ms. Martinez did not visit Choua frequently. However, when Choua struggled with balancing life at home and school, Ms. Martinez did not hesitate to visit Choua’s home to try to help both Choua and her family understand what Choua was going through. Many Uch can also be an example to this point. Not many people understood what Many was going through, nor did they understand the struggle of Cambodian refugees facing deportation. However, through filming the documentary *Sentenced home* (Grabias & Newnham, 2006), the directors began to understand who Many was and why he had to make such difficult decisions in his youth. They understood that Many was not the same gangster that he used to be and that he was trying his best to do good things for his community. Through many visits with Many they understood how important it was to keep him in the United States with his family, so they decided to do what they could to keep him from being deported.

3) Utilize established programs and create new programs to help students channel their anger and frustration in a positive manner. Give the students a voice and show them a way to college and out of poverty. For example: AHA, UNITY and Upward Bound

i. *AHA helped me channel my frustration and anger into positive actions.*
ii. **UNITY did the same and helped me be a part of bigger team.**

*UNITY gave me the experience to organize events that helped the city embraced diversity.*

iii. **Upward Bound made college a possibility for me by showing me how to get to college and also by helping me apply and obtain scholarships to college.**

4) Continue to support and guide students until they reach their goal. When there is already an existing cultural and language barrier, it’s hard for the refugee students to find someone that they can trust. They will keep coming back to you for guidance and support. Often the support needed is just a quick conversation to encourage them to keep working towards their goals.

- *My friends and I visited our elementary EL teacher at the end of every school year from elementary school on. We knew she was one person who didn’t judge us. Being able to give her updates on how we were doing and being able ask her questions as to what we can look forward to in the next grade level helped us stay focused on school.*

These are four steps that educators can take to help develop programs that address the needs of refugee students holistically. Furthermore, if we go back to the comparison that a refugee student’s life is like a broken puzzle, these four annotated steps will help educators put the pieces of the puzzle back together for their students. These steps address both parent involvement through the encouragement of structured home visits and student empowerment by involving students in the schools through clubs that allow them to showcase their talent and channel their frustration in a positive manner. When we
are able to empower students to break down their barriers, they have a much better
chance to develop an internal will to succeed. These four annotated steps will help make
school programming successful in working with their refugee students.

Limitations

This study helped me journey into my own life as a refugee student. I was able to
illuminate through my experiences and the experiences of others the issue of the refugee
struggle to reestablish a home, discover one’s own personal identity, overcome cultural
dissonance, and succeed through poverty. This study looked at how these themes existed
in the life of a refugee student and how they can be overcome with the correct support.
By looking closely at my own life, I was able to analyze the programs and individuals
that helped me overcome these barriers.

However, even though all refugees share a refugee culture of loss, each individual
refugee journey is different. Thus, even if I used personal narratives of individuals from
the refugee population of Sudanese and Hmong culture along with other Cambodian
refugees in Chapter Two, this is still only a small representation of all the refugees we
have in the United States and in Minnesota. There are many refugee groups in the United
States, all with their own unique journeys and experiences. For example, a Somali student
from a family who has spent three generations in a refugee camp may adapt to support
differently from a Cambodian student who spent a shorter amount of time in a refugee
camp. Nonetheless, this study does summarize themes of struggle common to refugee
groups in general, and highlights the needed support that could guide a refugee towards a
successful life in the United States.
Another limitation to this study is the difficulty to find interview subjects that were willing to tell their stories. As many of the Cambodian refugees who came at that time had to make choices that they weren’t always proud of, they were uncomfortable with sharing their story for this research. When I was able to find three friends to tell their story, I realized that their lack of experiences in sharing their stories made it difficult for them to share their thoughts deeply. Therefore, even as I satisfied the paradigm of this study, deep, profound responses from my interview subjects were lacking.

Further Research

I was inspired to do this autobiographical study because I always felt that the whole story was not told when I read research about refugee students and how to address their needs. I understood that there was a difficulty for refugees and refugee communities to articulate their experience, especially if their experience involved them being forced to make terrible decisions in their life. The lack of the refugees’ full story creates gaps in the research.

Much of the research on refugee students has been done second hand. Researchers and other educators strive to know how they could help refugee students, so research is done on the refugee groups by non-refugees. Many of the groups are in the first generation of the refugee struggle so they have difficulties telling their story, especially in a scholarly format, due to the lack of language and the understanding of cultural appropriateness when telling their story. Furthermore, the refugee stories themselves are hard to tell as they evoke pain and suffering. Also, certain life experiences are hard to fully grasp unless you’ve been through it yourself. A good example of this is my mother’s story about how she would sneak rations away from her sister to help her father,
possibly resulting in her sister’s death. One can only imagine what must have gone through my mother’s head. Therefore, it’s very hard for researchers to collect the whole story and explain it in writing.

I hope this autobiographical research will encourage other refugees to tell their stories first hand, articulating the good and the bad about their experiences. Having refugees tell their story first hand in the format of autobiographical research will help educators understand the tough decisions refugees have to make and will explain why some decisions that don’t sound right were right at that moment.

This autobiographical research told my story. This is the story of a refugee boy growing up in two worlds that didn’t fit well with each other. This is the story of a street gangster who was tired of his family being viewed as inferior. This is the story of a boy who learned how to fight effectively against discrimination. And this is a story of a boy who overcame the odds to achieve his dreams and now is helping others to achieve theirs by working as the head of an English Learner Program. I wonder how many other refugees are out there who are doing the same. And I wonder how they did it. More autobiographical research from the refugee community needs to be written.

Conclusion

This study was an effort to deeply understand the life and struggle of refugees who tried to successfully resettle in the United States. In Chapters One and Two, I reflected on my own life and analyzed narratives from other refugees to identify four themes of struggle and three themes of support. The themes of struggles were: The Refugee’s Journey to Rediscover Home in the United States, Identity, Cultural Dissonance, and Poverty. The three themes of support were: Caring Individuals, Supportive Programs, and
the Refugees Internal Will to Succeed. In Chapter Two, I also identified my six research questions:

1) How do Cambodian history and my own family history explain and influence the experiences that I have had as a refugee who found eventual success?

2) What kinds of programmatic support influenced me in my journey as a resettled refugee, and how?

3) What kinds of support did I receive from individuals, and how was that support imparted?

4) How was the role of intrinsic motivation in my own transformation story, and how was this personally awakened in me?

5) What other factors presented either an advantage or disadvantage to me in terms of the formation of my identity and success as a refugee?

6) How do these analyzed aspects help create effective programming and instructional practices for educators and administrators?

In Chapter Three, I outlined my research methodology which involved analyzing newspaper clippings from my youth, highlighting the cultural tensions between refugees and the local community and interviews of my grandpa, mother, and three friends. The newspaper clippings and interviews helped me answer my research questions that ultimately looked at what was needed to help refugee students succeed.

In life story research, the results are the stories. In Chapter Four, my story along with the interviews of my friends and family were analyzed under each theme of struggle and each theme of support. The stories found that support from caring individuals and programs that provided empowerment were necessary to help refugee students succeed.
Support from individuals and programs help strengthen an internal will to fight and succeed for refugee students.

Implications of these findings were discussed in Chapter Five where the themes of support were highlighted in four annotated steps. Chapter Five also discussed the limitations of this study, pointing out that the many different refugee groups in this country come with their own unique experiences. Therefore, in describing the limitations of this research I affirm that each refugee group, even each individual refugee, will have their own specific story to tell which cannot all be covered in the scope of a single study.

Nonetheless, this complete study will help educators experience a personal refugee story. My own personal story along with support from interviews and other personal narratives of refugees will allow educators working with refugee students to understand the tough decisions that refugees have to make in order to overcome their barriers. Through this study, educators were shown themes that created obstacles in a refugee’s ability to succeed. Most importantly, educators were shown what elements are needed in programming in order to help refugee students overcome their obstacles.

As I performed this research for educators in hopes of helping them discover answers and solutions to help their work with refugees and improve their abilities to educate refugee students, I was surprised at the increased understanding I’ve obtained about my own refugee journey. I started this research process filled with survivor’s guilt asking myself, why was it me that succeeded and not the other people around me such as my family members and friends that because of their tremendous life experiences through war and trauma may have deserved it more? This research study helps me find peace with my feelings of survivor’s guilt. In the end, I am ok.
In Chapter One I told the story of my road trip to Boston with my grandfather. If I could be 8-years-old again and ride in that car to Boston with my grandfather, I would tell him at the end of our conversation not to worry. I will live my life well and I will help him live his life again with happiness and peace. I would thank him with unrelenting sincerity for struggling and surviving so that I would have a chance to live my life. I realized even more through this research that the refugee struggle is a collective struggle as survivors and achievers play their part. My family struggled with the hopes that I would achieve. And that I did with the help of a collective team of individuals and programs accompanying my will to fight for a better life. In the end, I turned out ok. The life lessons of poverty taught me to value all I have. The violence of cultural dissonance has turned into healthy dialogues for solutions as race relations continue to challenge in America. Most importantly, I am happy with who I’ve become. This refugee child without a nation can now call Minnesota home. In the end, I am ok.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTION BANK

WE THE PEOPLE: WE SURVIVED, WE WORK, WE LIVE, WE BELONG

An Autobiographical Study of One Refugee’s Victory over Poverty and Racism to Lead an English Learner Program

Interview Questions Corresponding to the Seven Focus Themes

(This is a question bank. Only certain questions were asked depending on the flow of the conversation. These questions will be posed in Khmer or English based on the preference of the subjects.)

Finding a Place to Belong – Refugee Ressettlement:

➢ How old were you when you came to the United States?
➢ Talk a bit about your family’s ressettlement experience in the United States.
➢ Were people accepting of you and your family?
➢ Were there jobs available?
➢ What was the hardest thing for you and your family to adjust to in the United States?
➢ How was your family’s interaction with your neighbors?

Identity:

➢ How do you identify yourself?
➢ Do you have opportunities to be involved with the community? If so, in what ways?
➢ In what ways do you keep your traditions?
➢ How would you describe your relationship and involvements outside your ethnic community?
➢ Describe your relationship between you and your parents?
➢ Tell me about your friends. Were they predominantly from your same ethnic group?
➢ What influenced you in how you picked your friends?
➢ How would you describe your parents’ involvement in your life and educational career?
➢ What factors limited or encouraged their involvement?
➢ Do you feel that your parents understood the school system and US culture? Why or why not?

Cultural Dissonance:

➢ How would you describe the relationship of the Cambodian community to the rest of the Americans in your city? In your opinion, is your community accepted by the broader American society in your city?
➢ Describe any altercation you had with other races or ethnic groups?
Did the relationship between the Cambodian community and Americans in your city affect how you defined yourself? If so, in what ways? Did it affect your attitude toward schooling?

Did race and racism affect your community and how they adjusted to life in your city? If so, in what ways?

Did race and racism affect your success in school? If so, in what ways?

Poverty:
- Describe your family’s past and current economic status.
- How did your family’s economic status make it hard for you to succeed in school?
- How did your family’s economic status influence the decisions you made as a child?
- Did you do anything you regret because of your family’s lack of money?
- Did you feel other teachers and students judged you because you were poorer than them?
- How did you respond to judgement from your peers?
- Did you feel inferior because of your economic status?
- Did your economic status kept you from wanting to further your education in college and beyond?

Support from Individuals:
- In what ways were your friends supportive of you?
- Did your friends play a role in how well you did in school? If so, in what ways?
- Who was the most influential person in your life?
- Were teachers able to have an impact on you? If so how?
- What other adults were influential in your life?
- Besides your friends, who else was there to give you support? How did they support you?
- Did your teachers understand your home life? Were they aware of any barriers or resources you had that played a role in your educational experience?
- Were teachers sensitive to the needs of Cambodian students and other students similar to us?
- Were there any teachers in your classes that didn’t know your name?
- What else could the schools or your teachers have done better to provide you with a more positive and successful experience in school?

Support from Programs:
- Was your family on welfare?
- What financial programs did you remember helping you and your family?
- Were there school programs that helped you with your academics and were you able to take part in these programs?
- Were their social programs that you were involved in? Explain.
- Did these programs meet your needs? Explain?
- Did you have opportunities in school to participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities? If so, in what ways? In what ways did these activities influence how you look at yourself and your cultural identity?
- Were you encouraged by your friends, family and teachers to participate in school sports?
- What programs were created in school and the community to help address the needs of Cambodian youth?
What programs would you have liked to see created to help you or students like you succeed?

Internal Drive:
- What was the saddest moment you experienced and how did you work through it?
- What was your greatest success story?
- What was your biggest failure?
- Who were you most afraid to disappoint?
- Were you ever physically hurt by people?
- Were you ever disappointed in your teachers?
- Tell me about your experience with violence?
- What was the final straw that broke which caused you to stop believing in school and achieving your dreams?
- Was school difficult? If so, what aspect of school was most difficult?
- Did you feel safe in school? If not, why didn’t you?
- What kept you going to school despite the difficulties?
- Why didn’t you go to college?
- If you could do it over, what would you have done differently in school?
APPENDIX B: HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH CONSENT LETTER (ENGLISH)

Dear Participants:

This letter is written to explain the process and purpose of my research and to request your participation.

I am currently completing my masters in ESL, English as a Second Language, at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. This is the last assignment that I have to complete in order to obtain my Masters in ESL. The title of my capstone is: We The People: We Survived, We Work, We Live, We Belong: An Autobiographical Study of One Refugee’s Victory Over Poverty and Racism to Lead An English Learner Program.

The purpose of my autobiographical self study research is to understand the struggles and barriers that I, as a refugee, have faced, and to understand my experience in relation to the experience of what other refugees face in the United States and what support they had to overcome their barriers. As a part of my research, I will conduct informal interviews with select participants. The conversations will be held in English and/or Khmer, whichever is more comfortable for the participants. The interviews will be conducted at a reasonably quiet, private place of the participant’s choosing that is conducive to a recorded interview, and I will offer my home as an option. Your story will help me better explore my own history, and the themes of struggle and support for refugees in general.

The capstone research project that I write will be published online on Hamline University’s webpage. It is a piece of public scholarship. The abstract and final product will be catalogued in Hamline’s Bush Library Digital Common. This is a searchable electronic repository for the public to read and view as needed for scholarly activities; all of Hamline’s capstones are available online. I will audiorecord the interviews for my purposes only, so that I can be sure to capture all of the information shared in the interview. I will transcribe the audiorecording for my purposes, to facilitate analyzing the content and patterns shared in the interviews. I will transcribe the conversation in either English or Khmer, preserving the language of the original, and will translate Khmer portions into English. The audio recording will be kept in a password-protected computer and transcription of interviews will be destroyed within one year after the study is completed.

By signing this form, you are stating that you understand the purpose and the process of this research study. You agree to participate and to allow me to audio record your answers for transcription. By signing this form you allow me to use your responses for the purposes of my research and for completing my capstone, no later than May of 2016.

There is no cost to participate, and no stipend is offered for participation. Possible risk factors resulting from participation in this study include discomfort due to recall of unpleasant memories. Further, since this is autobiographical research and my name will be published with the study, confidentiality of participants cannot be guaranteed. The stories of people close to me during my childhood and adolescence may be identified by people who knew me. It may be possible to discover the identity of family members, since
they will be identified by their familial relationship to me in the interview and written narrative. However, the names of participants and people mentioned in the interview will be kept confidential: pseudonyms will be used for friends, and only the familial title (eg. “mother”) will be used during the interview and referred to in the written study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your participation in this study at any time without negative consequences. By participating in this study, you may experience the benefits of telling your story and creating opportunities for dialogue that could benefit educators who work with refugee students.

I have included my contact information and the phone number and email address to Ann Mabbott of Hamline’s Graduate School of Education. In cases where you would have further questions, please feel free to contact me directly or the staff at the Graduate School of Education.

Ann Mabbott
845 Snelling Ave. N.
St. Paul, MN 55104
Phone #: (651)523-2446
Email: amabbott@hamline.edu
Sincerely,

Sambath Ouk
Phone #: (507)271-0404
Email: souk01@hamline.edu
I agree to participate in this research on about refugees’ struggles and what helps refugees overcome their barriers. I understand that by signing this consent form, I voluntarily participate in the interview about my experience as a refugee. I understand and agree to have the interview audio recorded for transcription. It is clear to me that my responses will be used for this scholarly paper and that my name will be kept confidential. I understand that, since this is an autobiographical study, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Participants Signature: ____________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX C: HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH CONSENT FORM (KHMER)

ប្រការការវាយតំលៃគន្តប្រការ

នៅថ្ងៃប្រការទី២ ខែកញ្ចក់ ឆ្នាំ ២០២៣

ការប្រការដែលបានមានការព្យាយាមប្រការងារសិក្សាខ្ពែនេះប្រការជាងប្រការមួយទាំងអស់ដល់រូបភាន់សូមមួយកន្លែងការសិក្សារឿងររស់អ្នកនិងការរស់ការរត់ការសិក្សារឿងររស់អ្នកនិងការរកើតការឆ្លាស់ប្តូរការវាយតំលៃគន្តប្រការ។

កំណត់ស្រតារប្រការដែលបានមានមើលប្រការការប្រការងារប្រការការសិក្សារឿងររស់អ្នកនិងការរស់ការរត់ការសិក្សារឿងររស់អ្នកនិងការរកើតការឆ្លាស់ប្តូរការវាយតំលៃគន្តប្រការ។

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