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IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES FOR KAREN NEWCOMERS BY  
UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES OF  
KAREN REFUGEE STUDENTS

By

Alice Vang

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

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

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To God, thank you for being the Author of my life.

To my parents, thank you for your unwavering love and for the sacrifices you made along the way so that I could have the opportunity to live and dream.

To Matthew, I am grateful for your love, prayers and support.

To Chrissy, I treasure our friendship. Thank you for not letting me quit.

To my friends and family, *ua tsaug* for shaping me and encouraging me.

Finally, a sincere *ta blute doh ma* to my wonderful students.

I dedicate this Capstone to you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Her name was Paw Eh. She enrolled in the middle of October and it was her first day in school. Paw Eh appeared timid as she stood by the door of the classroom, but her eyes were full of curiosity and anticipation. She was the first Karen refugee student I taught as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in a program designed for newcomers. A newcomer was an English learner (EL) student, a recent arrival to the U.S. who possessed very limited or no English skills (Short & Boyson, 2000). As my co-teacher gestured for Paw Eh to come in, I led her to a small desk and gave her a pack of color crayons and a notebook. Paw Eh's face instantly lit up, and I was optimistic that she would fit in well within our global classroom. It was already a diverse community of English, Hmong, Somali, and Spanish-speaking students, reflecting the city that we lived in.

As I got to know Paw Eh, I wondered how I could best meet her academic and social needs, especially since there was no Karen native language assistance in the classroom. I wondered if Paw Eh had any formal schooling in her home country? Could she read in her native language? What kind of struggles might Paw Eh and her family have experienced from the ongoing civil war in Burma?

As my rapport with Paw Eh and the Karen refugee students that followed her grew, I began to develop a better understanding of Karen culture. For instance, I learned that Karen people only receive given names and not surnames. This unique cultural custom alone changed the way my school gathered our students' personal information

and family history. Teachers, staff, and administration were often not quick to recognize siblings, because they did not share a common surname. Furthermore, my Karen students would come to school wearing a yellow cakey substance on their face called *thanaka*. I initially thought it was face paint or medicine, but I later learned that *thanaka* could be compared to skin moisturizers. The purpose of *thanaka* is to keep one's skin cool or to absorb the oil in one's face (Dinner, Goldsberry & Hanke, 2014; Elias & Yin, 2012). Seeing Karen students wear *thanaka* was significant because it showed that students were comfortable enough to display their own cultural practices in a new place.

These initial encounters led me to want to learn more about my Karen refugee students. I began to read research about the Karen people, but not much reading material was available on them. It was then that I decided to conduct this research on Karen refugee students. I find it necessary to learn more about my students so that I could become a more effective teacher. Therefore, I aim to gather vital information that could help educators build a stronger understanding of Karen refugee students in schools, and better prepare educators to respond to the academic, cultural, and social needs of Karen students. Furthermore, in this study, I would like to hear the voices of Karen students because they would illuminate the picture of their educational experiences and needs. Other questions I would like to examine are: what should educators know in order to foster a better learning environment for Karen refugee students? What kind of schooling did Karen students have before coming to the U.S.? What values, beliefs, and attitudes do Karen families have about education?

### **Role of the Researcher**

Currently, I work as a ninth to twelfth grade ELL reading teacher at a nontraditional high school located in a large, urban district in the Midwest. The high school was created to serve newcomers and other ELs who desire to become proficient in English. It offers students opportunities to get their high school diploma, transition into a traditional high school or postsecondary education, and assists students in obtaining career opportunities, such as certified nursing assistants. A majority of students are bused from throughout the city. There are a handful of students who choose to come from neighboring cities and suburbs. The high school also offers an extended day afterschool program two times a week for two hours and houses a summer school program for ELs who are level one and two. Level one ELs are at the beginning stages of learning English and level two ELs are at an intermediate level (<https://www.wida.us>).

Students are allowed to continue their education until they are 21 years old in order to get as much education and English language learning as possible. It is not uncommon for a teacher to hear that a student has transferred from another state or high school because they learned that the high school accepts students 18 years old and over. Researchers suggest it should take seven to ten years to become proficient in academic English (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Cummins, 1981), but students at this site have shown that they could reach proficiency within five years on average. This is quite an achievement at the school considering there are approximately 60% of students who come to school with no formal education or very limited education.

### **Background of the Researcher**

As the Karen student enrollment in our school district continues to climb, I found it yet another exciting time in Minnesota history. I saw that many of my Karen students' lives mirrored the Hmong people's journey. While the Hmong came into Thailand from the east, the Karen similarly found refuge in Thailand on the western side of the country.

My parents were Hmong refugees who lived through the Vietnam War. In 1975, when Laos fell into the hands of the communists, the U.S. left Southeast Asia and the Hmong had to flee from their homeland because they supported American allies in the war (Burton, Cowan & Manteufel, 2001). My parents lived in a refugee camp for a year until they were sponsored to come to the U.S. in 1976. They settled in a small rural town called Belvidere, Illinois. There were no other Hmong people in sight.

Growing up, I heard stories of how my father and mother first adjusted to life in America. Their stories were both entertaining and disheartening at the same time. As refugees in a new country, my parents shared how lonesome it was to be away from their families in a strange land. It was not until they met another Asian person, a Chinese woman, that they learned where to buy jasmine rice. In fact, they shared how when they first met her, they embraced the woman. Despite the language barrier between my parents and this Chinese woman, it appeared she empathized with my parents. She knew how difficult it must have been for them, having newly arrived to a small Midwestern town and not knowing any English, because she, too, experienced the same thing.

A few years after my parents arrived in Illinois, I was born. My parents decided to move to St. Paul, Minnesota in order to be closer to my uncle, who was the eldest brother in America. The social structure in Hmong culture is a clanship and it is central part of

Hmong society. Clans can provide support, security, and comfort for families (Pfaff, 1995). In fact, when the Hmong came to America they were sponsored all over the United States, but eventually, due to the strength and necessity of the clan, Hmong families picked up and moved to where other Hmong clans lived. Hence, my family arrived in Minnesota in the early 1980's and resettled in the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul, where many Hmong and Karen refugees reside today.

In this way, I can see why the Karen people share a story familiar to the Hmong people. Both parties became refugees because of war. The Karen people lived in Thai refugee camps similar to the Hmong. Having the support of the community also plays a huge role in the social structure of both cultures. For instance, one can often find many Karen families living in the same apartment building due to the social support offered by the others.

As a former EL and a child of refugees, it has been quite a pleasure to come full circle as I teach newcomers. I see my parents in my ELs and I can envision a hopeful future in America for my students. I realize that one advantage of my being Hmong-American is that I can empathize with what Karen students might be experiencing as they acculturate to their new life in America.

I am reminded of a quote that has been attributed to Mark Twain: History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme. Teaching Karen newcomers has felt like experiencing another adventure similar to my family and my own people's experience. I am excited to take part in seeing where my Karen students will go from here. Hopefully this study will develop valuable information that will assist new Karen in America.

### **Guiding Questions**

The significance of this capstone is to understand the educational experience of Karen refugee high school students from the refugee camps of Thailand and describe how their educational experience affects their learning and adjustment in America. This study will bring attention to the academic, cultural, and social situation of Karen newcomers in high school. As teachers receive new students into their classroom from across the world, educators must prepare their classroom and curriculum for Karen learners with limited or no schooling. What should educators know in order to foster a better learning environment for Karen students? In order to address this, I am using three guiding questions that are central to this study:

1. What was the educational system like in the Karen refugee camps in Thailand?
2. What values, beliefs, and attitudes do Karen families have about education?
3. What are the academic, social and cultural challenges that Karen refugee students experience in the context of an American school?

Educators must create an optimal learning environment to help students learn English to achieve their goals and thrive in their new communities. What can educators do to support this process? This study hopes to provide educators, schools, community leaders, and anyone who works with the Karen community, with a better understanding of the issues Karen students are facing.

## **Summary**

The Karen people are a fairly new ethnic group to the Twin Cities with their own distinct characteristics. Many educators are just beginning to learn about Karen people and their culture. Have Karen students had formal or informal schooling? What kind of attitudes or beliefs do Karen students bring to school? What are the barriers to the educational success of Karen high school students? From former refugee groups, in particular the Hmong, who have traveled a journey similar to the Karens, it is possible that such a population can adjust and become successful in America. Therefore, I am studying the prior educational experiences of Karen students and their current outlook on school in America so that I can identify ways to meet their academic, cultural, and social needs in the classroom. Such findings can inform educators about how to effectively address these academic and social issues in the high schools, as well as develop stronger newcomer programs.

## **Chapter Overviews**

In Chapter One, I shared my first encounter with a Karen student, my current experience teaching Karen students, and my journey as a child born to refugee parents. In Chapter Two, I provide literature that further illuminates the refugee experience and how it relates to education. In Chapter Three of this study, I describe the research paradigm I used to collect the data for this study. A qualitative method was employed to gain students' perspective on their journey and life experiences in America. Then in Chapter Four, I present the results of the study. In Chapter Five, I analyze the data and share the implications of the results. In addition, I discuss the limitations of the study, further research, and recommendations for working with Karen students new to the country.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

The Karen people are a fascinating new group of ethnic minorities from Burma and Thailand. This inquiry explores research on the past educational experiences of Karen refugee students and their current educational experience in the United States. Presently, within my school district, there are 2,483 Karen refugee students. This number is growing every year and many of the Karen students come with a limited or interrupted formal education. It is imperative to learn more about the Karen and find ways to meet their academic and social needs.

The following questions are central to this research study:

1. What was the educational system like in the Karen refugee camps in Thailand?
2. What values, beliefs, and attitudes do Karen families have about education?
3. What are the academic, social and cultural challenges that Karen refugee students experience in the context of an American school?

The following literature review investigates the questions related to this study.

First, a history of the Karen people will be provided to understand why the Karen have become a displaced ethnic group. A brief summary of education in Burma and Thailand will be shared as well. It should be noted there was minimal resources and literature on the Karen, which is all the more reason to conduct research on this population. As I share about the background and history of the Karen people, I would like

to note this is not a review because some sources that have been drawn from are not necessarily unbiased sources. Then, I share literature review on students with limited or formal education (SLIFE) and the implications of SLIFE in the American classroom (DeCapua et al., 2007). An exploration of a newcomer's program (Short & Boyson, 2000) and teaching practices will be examined as well, such as the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) (DeCapua et al., 2007) that address the strengths and assets of SLIFE and helps to transition them into an American classroom. Lastly, I examine literature review about the ethic of caring and how teachers play a key role in the success of a student's academic education. This literature review will guide my inquiry about Karen refugee students.

### **The Karen People and Their History**

It has been speculated the Karen originally migrated into the region of Burma some 4,000 years ago. There are old Karen stories telling about a "river with running" (Marshall, 2008). Some scholars have asserted this referred to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. Other scholars have suggested it is the Yellow River in northern China because the river is full of sand and silt. Nevertheless, the Karen made their way into Burma and have lived in the eastern hill country of Burma ever since. It was only in recent decades that the Karen were forced to flee their homes and find refuge in Thailand. From there, many made their exodus to the U.S., Australia, Canada, England, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, New Zealand, Belgium, and Japan (Karen News, 2013).

Burma is situated in Southeast Asia and borders India. The population of Burma is 55 million and out of that number, 7% are Karen (The CIA World Factbook 2011, 2010). Burma has 100 ethno-linguistic groups with the Karen as the third largest ethnic

minority (South, 2011). Fewer than half of the Karen people live in the Karen State, one of Burma's 12 states located on the eastern hillside of Burma near Thailand. The rest of the Karen people live around Irrawaddy Delta, the lowlands of Yangon and the Bago regions (South, 2011). The population of the Karen in Burma is estimated at seven million. Some proponents of the Karen people claim the Karen population is an impressive 20 million (Karen Buddhist Ghamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010). The Burmese government, however, asserts it is a trivial one million. Realistically, according to South (2011), the Karen are believed to be around three to seven million. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the exact number of Karen people because Burma is a closed country and the figures are pure estimates (South, 2011).

**The Burmese civil war.** The Karen people came to the U.S. as political refugees from Burma. Burma has long been ruled by a military regime since 1962 (South, 2016). Its ongoing civil war is the longest lasting war known to mankind. In 1948, when Burma gained its independence from Britain, the Burmese militia struggled with Karen autonomy. The Karen had aligned themselves with the British and sought for their own independence as a free state (The Karen Human Rights Group, 2000). The Burmese government would not allow any ethnic minorities to seek autonomy (Tanaka, 2013) and called for genocide against ethnic groups who rallied against the military.

Over the course of the civil war, the Burmese have violated the human rights of the Karen people and many other ethnic minorities (Tanaka, 2013). They have accused, beaten, killed, and raped thousands of Karen people. In addition, many Karen have been kidnapped and used as porters for the military (The Karen Human Rights, 2000). Their houses and villages have been burned down. Free Burma Rangers (2007), a humanitarian

service organization aiding Burma, reported that villagers were shot in their homes and houses were raided and destroyed. The attacks by the Burmese army were intended to make life difficult for villagers to subsist, thus, forcing villagers to relocate and find refuge in Thailand. Moreover, according to Moonianda (2010), the Burmese Army General Shwe Maung walked on a Karen flag in 1997 and stated, “in twenty years you will only be able to find Karen people in a museum” (p. 6).

Although the circumstances in Burma seem dire, with the newly elected Aung San Suu Kyi, the socio-political situation in Burma is hopeful. For the first time, there are talks about lifting trade sanctions off of Burma. For many human rights organizations, this is digression, but for others, the anticipation is that Burma will comply with human rights laws (Whiteman, 2016).

**Education in Burma.** Schooling in Burma during the civil war was insubstantial. The Burmese government sanctioned the construction of elementary schools and middle schools for some Karen villages. However, the costs for school building and the salary of the state-supplied teacher came from villagers (The Karen Human Rights, 2000). Many families could not afford to send their children to school so they did not receive an education. According to the Karen Human Rights (2000), even when schools were available, children were pulled out of school as soon as they were old enough to work because families needed extra help on the farm due to the high taxed imposed on them from the Burmese government.

**Thailand Karen refugee camps.** Over 150,000 Karen have fled their home country since 1984 and resettled into nine refugee camps along the Burma-Thai border (Tanaka, 2013; World Relief, 2014). The average number of years spent in refugee camps

is fourteen years for Karen refugees. Some have lived in the refugee camps for up to twenty-five years (Fuertas, 2010).

Fuertas (2010) conducted research in the Karen refugee camps in Thailand. He noted there were post-secondary vocational schools that were the equivalent of a college education after completing high school, but they were not accredited and considered inferior to colleges in Thailand. Out of a population of about 49,000 in the camps, the number of Karen young adults getting a higher education was about 0.0008% of the population. As a result, not being afforded the opportunity to get an education led to limited options for teenagers and young adults in Karen refugee camps. It caused some to find illegal work in Thailand. There are an estimated 800,000 to one million Karen refugees that have migrated to Thailand and work in the illegal labor market (The Karen Human Rights Group). Some others chose to marry young and start families. Others decided to return to Burma illegally to work with internally displaced people as teachers, community workers, NGOs or missionaries.

**The Karen in America.** The largest migration of Karen people came to the U.S. with over 30,000 refugees settling in 41 states (Eh Taw Dwe & Cook, 2011). It has been about a decade since the Karen first moved to the Twin Cities of Minnesota. As of 2012, there are 6,000 Karen refugees that have made an exodus to Minnesota from Thailand (Asian American Press, 2012). St. Paul is the home to the largest population of Karen outside of Southeast Asia. Other states with significant Karen populations are California, Texas, New York, Michigan, Arizona, Indiana, Georgia, and South Carolina (Culture Care Connection, 2013). Specifically, within Minnesota, many of the Karen are living in St. Paul and the Roseville area. Some have also made a way to Worthington, Willmar,

Austin, Albert Lea and Faribault to work in meat-processing companies or other factories (Karen Organization of Minnesota and Life Tracks Resources, 2010).

The sixty-year civil war is the context in which many students and their families have come of age. Karen refugee students have lost family members, homes, and their communities. They have also lost their sense of freedom, safety, and dignity. Yet, with a resilient attitude, they keep on going, leading Karen refugee students with limited or no formal education to come to the U.S.

The Burmese government has renamed its country and it is now recognized as Myanmar. For the Karen to identify with the new order and any tyrannical socio-political agendas the country has, such as calling Burma Myanmar, is considered self-inflicting (The Karen Human Rights Group, 2000). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I will refer to Myanmar as Burma out of respect for my students.

### **Students with Limited and Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)**

From the 1990 to 2000, ELs were the fastest-growing group in the public schools in the U.S. (National Education Association, 2005). Their enrollment had increased by more than 105 percent. In 2000, there were one million students who were identified as newcomers in the U.S. (National Education Association, 2005). The state of New York identified 18,900 students as SLIFE (DeCapua et al., 2007). Newcomers are also known as SLIFE, students with limited or interrupted formal education. SLIFE are a subpopulation of ELL students who have educational experiences that have been interrupted by migration, lack of educational facilities or access to schools in their native country, and war or persecution (DeCapua et al., 2009). Such students may not even read and or write in their home language, yet they are expected to develop higher order

thinking skills, take mandated state tests, and master the basics of reading, writing, and math. Parents of SLIFE students are often poorly uneducated and lack in English proficiency themselves (DeCapua et al. 2007). SLIFE are often pressured to drop out of school and find work to support families.

What are the implications for students who are identified as SLIFE? DeCapua (2009) asserts that students are expected to learn basic English skills while having to master grade level content materials in order to obtain a diploma. This can be a major obstacle for SLIFE students not being literate and having to perform at the same grade as their peers. Under the circumstances, SLIFE students are known to have a higher dropout rate due to these challenges, even compared to their ELL counterparts (DeCapua, 2009). How should one teach students who are identified as SLIFE? According to DeCapua et al. (2007),

Teachers can effectively introduce academic content to the SIFE [students with Interrupted formal education] population by using visuals, such as charts, graphs, timelines, and Venn diagrams. Collaborative learning activities, such as task-oriented projects and small-group activities, replace traditional note taking and individual worksheet assignments. Demonstrations often replace lectures. When teachers must lecture, they repeat main points, speak slowly, and pause for frequent comprehension checks (p.43).

There are other program models that DeCapua et al. (2007) assert that are known to work effectively for SLIFE students as well. Sheltered instruction, where basic English skills are taught and the teacher modifies the language and skills to make it comprehensible for students. Content ESL where the primary goal is learning English and students are often pulled out once, if not twice, in small groups to focus on important

basic academic concepts. Bilingual instruction where student's home language and English is both emphasized and fostered in the classroom. By encouraging bilingualism, the teacher is able to "reinforce, expand, and accelerate" learning for SLIFE students (p.44). It is known as the best method for SLIFE if students speak the native language of qualified bilingual instructors. Lastly, collaborative learning is also a well-known method of effectively teaching SLIFE.

It should be noted that another observation made by DeCapua (2009) is that SLIFE students can be known to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). DeCapua et al. (2007) reiterates that students bring "not only lost education time, but also a host of social and psychological problems that are usually the result of having been abruptly uprooted from familiar surroundings and transplanted into an alien environment" (p.45). For Karen SLIFE students, the primary reason for their immigration to the United States is a direct result of the civil war in Burma. Loss of loved ones, family separation, and suffering human rights abuse can cause major trauma. Trauma needs to be addressed by professional counselors and the process is usually long-term; however, teachers and school staff are the ones who are in direct contact with students and should be trained to see the symptoms and refer students with PTSD. This study seeks to discover how this tremendous transition has affected and continues to affect young Karen students as they work to acquire English and acculturate to life in the Midwest.

### **Newcomer Program Research**

According to Short and Boyson (2000), newcomers programs are created to address the unique needs of these students. The goal is to "help students acquire beginning English language skills, along with core academic skills and knowledge, and to

acculturate these students to the U.S. school system” (p.34). One of the studies conducted by Short and Boyson (2012) was a three-year study on newcomers called *Helping Newcomers Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond*. In this study, Short and Boyson, surveyed over 63 programs serving newcomers in 24 states across America and chose a handful of schools in which to conduct case studies. The research was fourfold: to find newcomer programs that lead to academic success; to discover any exemplary transitional strategies from middle school to high school and high school to a post secondary option; to find how social service agencies partnered with schools; and to identify barriers that students experienced accessing any social service agencies or post secondary options. An examination of this study will help this research to understand successful programs and strategies that could work with Karen newcomers.

Shorts and Boyson discovered common key issues that newcomers faced in their study. It should be known that these issues were not always academic but social issues that could also affect students. They were concerns over: family reunification, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, No Child Left Behind accountability measures, staffing and English language development in bilingual programs, special education services, high school graduation credits, and postsecondary options were also concerns. Through a survey that was given, almost all of the newcomer programs replied that there were three very important aspects to developing a successful and effective newcomers program: “instruction, small community environments, and staffing” (p.76). School districts and principals that are able to find funding and create instruction tailored to newcomers have a higher success rate. Classrooms that are small in nature provided a safe place for newcomers to practice their English and build confidence. Lastly, students and their

families need to have teachers and school staffs that are sympathetic and can guide them to resources and services to meet their needs (Short & Boyson, 2012).

### **Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP)**

DeCapua and Marshall (2014) developed a framework for working with SLIFE called the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP), “an instructional model that addresses the cultural dissonance of L2 learners” (p.25). Many SLIFE students may not enter school with academic knowledge, but they have a wealth of life experiences beyond their age (DeCapua et al., 2007). According to DeCapua and Marshall (2011), SLIFE students are “accustomed to group interdependence and with fostering and maintaining group relations. In addition, because their lives have been shaped by pragmatic learning, the wealth of information SLIFE bring to the school setting is generally not the knowledge valued in formal education” (p. 37). Providing small group work as an instructional practice would be a valuable mode of teaching for a classroom with SLIFE students. As noted by Triandis (as cited in DeCapua and Marshall, 2011), about 70% of the world’s culture is collective. This includes many countries from Latin America and Asia. Most SLIFE students were brought up in a collectivist society and function better as a whole group, and learning would most effectively occur in the same manner.

The significance of MALP is that it transitions SLIFE from “oral transmission and informal learning” to a “western-style formal schooling and literacy” (p. 25) and not just one or the other. Western instruction is largely driven by critical thinking and written text. According to DeCapua and Marshall (2011), western-style of formal schooling can be “characterized by formal problem solving and scientific reasoning and centered on formally trained teachers and print” (p.35). Individualism and competition are regarded

as valuable traits in the U.S. and are embedded in western teaching (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). For example, the study identifies “scaffolding” as an instructional teaching method that promotes independence in America. Scaffolding is not necessarily an instructional practice used in collective cultures.

In a MALP learning environment, teachers would look at the assets that students bring into the classroom, meet students where they were, and help to transition students from an interdependent learning module to a more independent one. One might see a class calendar where teachers and students would write their birthdays, important cultural holidays, and special events. The calendar would also include assignment due dates and upcoming school events. Hence, mixing both personal and academic aspects. Concept posters, murals, posters drawing on academic and students’ cultural background would be presented on the classroom walls. Word walls and sentence starters would be found in a MALP learning environment as well to support learning for language learners. The physical space of a classroom would be flexible in that it would not be a traditional space but would change depending on the classroom activity and lesson for that period of time.

Overall, MALP is a framework that combines both paradigms. Other factors that would support the learning environment of SLIFE are caring teachers, the development of relevant lessons, building schemata, teaching vocabulary, providing visuals, and meeting with students frequently about their progress (DeCapua et al., 2007).

### **The Ethic of Caring**

Hersi and Watkinson (2012) define the ethic of caring as “the level of concern and commitment teachers have for their students as persons and learners” (p.100). They conducted a qualitative case study on six newcomers from Ethiopia to find out how a

teacher's pedagogy and attitude affected students' academic success. Hersi and Watkinson discovered that as teachers show care and concern for students' well-being and academics, students perceive their teacher's commitment to their academic success and were able to use that motivation to excel. Students describe such a classroom environment as inclusive and welcoming. Teachers are often described as being like a parent and the classroom was like a family. Moreover, the ethic of caring also recognizes student's cultural heritage. According the Hersi and Watkinson (2012),

Teachers with a 'critical ethic of caring' possess an understanding of how race and culture impact academic success and the access to enriching opportunities.

Teachers view their students within the cultural context of their communities and create counter narratives that refute deficit-laden assumptions that inaccurately describe the lives of students of color. (p.100)

Overall, teachers who exhibit the ethic of caring foster relationships with students that are supportive, respectful, set high expectations, acknowledge cultural diversity, and believe students will succeed.

### **The Gap**

There is very little research that has been conducted on the Karen, let alone their educational experiences. There has been similar research conducted on other immigrants, but not Karen refugees. Research and books on the Karen are scarce because they are one of the newest refugee groups in America. There are some websites on the Karen, but not all of the websites are trustworthy. Because the upper Midwest is home to the largest population of Karen refugees in the US, it is crucial to study the Karen. In addition, educational researchers have referenced how studies about newcomers are lacking

(DeCapua et al., 2007). It has been said that the dropout rates for SLIFE are higher than mainstream and ELs (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012). To respond to this situation, educators have to learn what the causes are behind the dropout rates. Research has to be conducted to identify the needs of SLIFE in order to create innovative newcomers programs that will close the gap in the research and provide information that will help build successful programs for Karen SLIFE students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions surrounding this study are: what was the educational system like in the Karen refugee camps in Thailand? What values, beliefs, and attitudes do Karen families have about education? What are the academic, social and cultural challenges that Karen refugee students experience in the context of an American school?

### **Summary**

The literature review that was investigated in this chapter provides the foundation for this study. As this chapter indicates, Karen refugees have been affected by conflict in many aspects- politically, socially, economically, and emotionally. The repercussions of Burma's civil war has carried calamitous consequences on the Karen people, as well as having to live in a refugee camp for decades and depending on U.N. assistance. As many refugees arrive in America, adapting to western culture is a challenging task. The literature review indicates that student success in the classroom can depend on a variety of things for newcomers. I examined students who are newcomers or identified as SLIFE and shared ways to support SLIFE in the classroom. I explored a study on newcomer's program and three key features that made the program a success: instruction tailored to ELs, small communities, and knowledgeable and empathetic staff. Next, I talked about

MALP and the benefits of using the framework to meet SLIFE students where they are and how to transition them into an American classroom. I also shared how teachers with the ethic of caring could promote student success in the schools by developing an encouraging, respectful, and deeply committed relationship with students, especially by valuing students' heritages.

In the next chapter, I explain the methodology I used to discover these components that impact Karen refugee students learning English. A qualitative approach was used. A pilot study was conducted prior to conducting my interviews. I describe my participants, setting, and data collection method in the next chapter. In the end, I talk about data analysis, verification of data, and ethics of my research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Methods**

This chapter presents the methodologies used to study the experiences of Karen high school students in Thai refugee camps and the United States. I will describe my research paradigm, participants, the setting, the data collection, data analysis, verification of data, and ethical considerations made in this study. The methodology used to study this research addressed these research questions:

1. What was the educational system like in the Karen refugee camps in Thailand?
2. What values, beliefs, and attitudes do Karen families have about education?
3. What are the academic, social and cultural challenges that Karen refugee students experience in the context of an American school?

### **Paradigm and Methods**

The research paradigm I chose is a qualitative approach because qualitative research aims to “involve the provision of careful and detailed descriptions as opposed to the quantification of data through measurements, frequencies, scores, and ratings” (Mackey & Gass, 2008). Specifically, I chose a case study approach that involves seven students and two Karen bilingual school workers. According to Brown and Rodgers (2006), a case study is “an intensive study of the background, current status, and environmental interactions of a given social unit: an individual, a group, an institution, or a community” (pg. 21). For this case study, I was able to conduct interviews and make

observations in the school in which I was teaching to gather sufficient data for this research. I chose interviews and observations because to establish a solid qualitative research when it comes to data analysis, there should be more than one method of data collection to strengthen triangulation (Mackey & Gass, 2012).

As I interviewed nine participants, my desire was to gain an emic perspective about their prior and current learning habits and beliefs and attitudes about education (Mackey & Gass, 2005). An emic perspective will provide viewpoints obtained from the participants versus outside sources. From these questions, my hope was to see if any patterns or themes developed. The interview questions that were asked were general and open-ended. Furthermore, the interviews conducted were semi-structured interviews where I used a set list of questions as a guide, but allowed participants to have the freedom to digress if needed from the interview and I was able to probe for more information (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The observations were conducted in the classrooms, hallway, and during school events. I appreciated having completed observations where I could observe participants learning and socializing in natural and holistic environments.

## **Data Collection**

### **Participants**

The participants interviewed were students, a bilingual Karen educational assistant (EA), and a Karen social worker from the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM), who also worked part-time at the high school. I also played a role as a participant. I was a classroom teacher and observed students in the classroom and in the community. As an ESL teacher in the high school, I asked Karen students who were over

18 years old to participate in the research by word of mouth. It was not difficult to gather participants, as students were willing to share their perspectives and educational experiences. Some students preferred to do the interview alone and others requested that they conduct the interview with a friend. These were all current or former students that I had previously taught. These students either began in my classroom as a newcomer or a level two student, but over the years have progressed to a level four student in terms of WIDA standards, where their English was now considered “expanding” (<https://www.wida.us>). All in all, there were seven students who were interviewed. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identity. More information can be found about the student participants in the table 1 below.

Table 1

*Student Participants*

| Name<br>(Pseudonyms are given) | Gender | Age | Grade  | Time in the<br>refugee<br>camp | Refugee<br>Camp<br>Location | Time in the<br>United<br>States |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----|--------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Eh Soe                         | male   | 21  | Senior | 6 years                        | Mae Ra Moe                  | 4 years                         |
| Law Eh                         | male   | 21  | Senior | 18 years                       | Mae La Oo                   | 3 years                         |
| Mu Khee Lah                    | female | 21  | Senior | 16 years                       | Mae La Oo,<br>Mae La        | 4 years                         |
| Dah Mu                         | female | 18  | Senior | 14 years                       | Mae Ra Moe                  | 4 years                         |
| Paw Say                        | female | 20  | Senior | 16 years                       | Mae La                      | 4 years                         |
| Moo Moo                        | female | 21  | Senior | 4 years                        | Mae La                      | 7 years                         |

Five students were female and two students were male. Of the seven students, five students were twenty-one years old while the remaining two students were twenty years

old and eighteen years old. All the students were seniors in high school and five students were graduating that spring.

An interview with a Karen bilingual E.A. and social worker from the Karen Organization of Minnesota was also conducted to discuss the current issues that Karen youth and their families face. They were both interviewed separately. Both Moo Paw and Htee Moo Shee (pseudonyms) are in their mid-twenties. Moo Paw and Htee Moo Shee has spent approximately ten years in U.S. and obtained their high school diploma at an American high school. I used similar questions in the interview that I used with students but allowed the interviewees to digress as needed.

### **Setting**

This study was carried out in a large metropolitan city in a Midwest state that has a large Karen population. The participants attend an alternative urban high school that serves approximately 300 students from 24 different countries, representing 19 different languages. The student population is 74% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 12% African; less than 1% are American Indian or white. Of the 74% Asian, Karen students make up the majority of that population. Furthermore, the makeup of teachers and other staff members at the school are 59% White, 28% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 4% Blacks (African and African American). At the school, 98% students receive free or reduced lunch; 2% are students with identified special education needs. There are three bilingual Karen EAs, one Spanish-speaking EA, one Nepali EA, one Karenni EA, one Hmong EA, and one Somali, Arabic, and Oromo-speaking EA.

### **Data Collection 1: Interviews**

I developed 50 questions for the real interview that can be categorized into three sections: Personal Information/ Family Life and Upbringing; Native School Experience; and American School Experience. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The process began with my approaching level 4 students to be a part of this research. As some students became involved, they asked their peers to be a part of the study. Permission slips in English and Karen were given to students who wanted to participate. I found time during my prep and lunch to sit down and discuss with students the purpose of the research. I answered any concerns and questions they might have had about the research. I went over the letter of consent and asked if any interpretation was needed; but because many students had a solid grasp of English, they said an interpreter was not needed, although one was available. After the initial meeting, participants had several days to a week to consider being a part of the study. Once students consented and or signed the forms, a meeting place was established and interviews were conducted after school.

The interviews were all conducted outside of the high school at a coffee shop or restaurant. Since the interview would last more than an hour, meeting outside of the school day was needed to allow for more time for the interview. I used the recorder app on my iPhone to record the interviews. Students were given a copy of the questions. Once again, I reiterated that if they wanted to stop the interview or skip a question, they could do that. The interviews were often administered over a meal or coffee and allowed for students to be relaxed and comfortable.

## **Data Collection 2: Observations**

Part of my data collection was based on observations made mostly in the classroom and school environment. A few of observations were made in the Karen community that included the Karen Organization of Minnesota, Karen New Year, and a Karen high school soccer tournament consisting of a handful of students from this research. As asserted by Mackey & Gass (2005), the goal of including observations in my study is to “provide careful descriptions of learners’ activities without unduly influencing the events in which the learners are engaged” (p.175). These observations were kept in my field notes and include my impressions about the community.

In my observations, I gathered field notes by conducting an observation as a participant and observer. I recorded the information in a notebook. I took Cornell notes as a format of collecting notes. I wrote the dates for each observation. Afterwards, I reflected on the observations and wrote that down as a summary. I was able to see how my students interacted with their peers, family, and as a teacher. I was able to obtain rich data on participant’s behavior and gained a deeper understanding of my students and the context they are living in.

## **Procedure**

### **Pilot Study**

Prior to conducting the interviews, I piloted my questions with a focus group of 15 Karen students in one of my Reading classes to get a feel for the kind of questions I should ask in the real interviews. I gave my level two reading class a questionnaire with six open-ended questions (Appendix B). I chose this method because the group was large and the timing was suitable during school hours to conduct it during class time. The

questions were about similarities and differences between schooling in students' home country and America, and it also covered what students liked and disliked about American schools. From this initial focus group of 15 students, I was able to get a feel of what I should and should not ask. I received some very insightful responses, but for the most part, due to open-ended questions, some answers were too general. This can be the negative drawback to interviews where some of the answers can be vague. According to Dornyei (2003), questionnaires with a qualitative nature are "superficial and relatively brief engagement with the topic of the respondent. Therefore, no matter how creatively the items are formulated, they are unlikely to yield the kind of rich and sensitive description of events and participant perspectives that qualitative interpretations are grounded in" (p. 14). I concluded that I should ask more questions and more specific open-ended questions if I wanted to gather enough data for the research. I also realized that level two students did not possess enough English vocabulary to express all of their ideas. If I wanted to get more thoughtful and richer responses, I would have to interview upper level ELL students in level 4 classes. Overall, I am glad I piloted a focus group because it refined my questions for the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze my findings from the interviews, I had to think of a way to organize the information in an effective way. I chose to organize the interviews by creating a matrix on Google sheets. This matrix would organize all the transcriptions from the interviews and prepare the data for analysis. At first I wrote the questions going across the top of a row and the answers of one of the participants going across as well, but as you can see, having approximately 50 questions, searching for answers would be

difficult. So I reworked the matrix and had the questions going down in one column and then the next columns consisted of participant responses (Appendix C). In this way, along with my observations, I would be able to find any patterns and developing themes based off of a question much easier. I also highlighted the three categories with different colors to differentiate the answers. I describe the themes and examine the relationships between them in chapter four.

### **Verification of Data**

To ensure verification of data, the strategy I am using is a triangulation of data collection methods, namely interviews and observations. Mackey and Gass (2012) recommend that the researcher “could supplement teacher interviews with classroom observations and interviews with students that would bring together an etic perspective with multiple emic perspectives” (p. 186). I also chose a bilingual Karen E.A. and a Karen social worker to interview to see if the information they relayed also supported or aligned with the ideas and notions that student participants shared. To add more verification of data, I used a recorder on my iPhone to record the interviews so that when I go back to transcribe the interview, the data from the transcription would have validity. As for recording my observations, I wrote my notes down in a notebook after each observation so that I would not forget the impressions that I had right away. Overall, the triangulation from this data collection will provide the internal validity to support this research.

### **Ethics**

This research employed several of the following safeguards to protect the participants’ rights. First and foremost, two human subjects review committees approved

this research, the school district where participants attended school and my own graduate school. Secondly, in order to ensure that students understood the objectives of the research, the letter of consent was written in the native language of the students. Interpreters were readily available as well if needed. I also sat down with students one on one prior to the interviews to talk about the purpose of the study. Students were given time to think about being a part of this research. It was emphasized that if they wanted to drop out of the research they could or if they wanted to skip any questions, they could as well. Thirdly, participants were made aware that pseudonyms would be used. This study would not be traced to or affect students' identities. Lastly, the information collected would be transferred from the recorder to Google docs and then erased from the phone. The data collection would be stored on a personal password-protected computer. My observations were kept in a notebook locked in a file cabinet initially. Then I transferred the notes onto the computer on a Word document, also on a personal password-protected computer. I destroyed the notebook afterwards to protect my students' privacy. I will keep the computer files for a year and then delete them.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared the qualitative methods I employed to collect the data for this case study. Through interviews and observations, I was able to gather valuable information about Karen educational experiences in Thai refugee camps and current learning environments in America. I described the participants, the setting, the pilot study, data collection and procedures, verification of data, and ethics in hopes of answering these questions: What are the experiences of Karen high school students as refugees and newcomers in an American high school? What are some of the cultural

barriers and challenges, as well as the assets, that Karen refugee students experience in the context of one American school? The next chapter presents the results of this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Results**

This study took place in an alternative newcomers high school in an urban metropolitan city in the upper Midwest. The data collection consisted of interviews that included seven student participants, a bilingual Karen EA, and a Karen social worker. Observations were also recorded from the classroom and community events where Karen students and families gathered. Through the collection of this data, I aim to answer the following questions: What are the experiences of Karen high school students as refugees and newcomers in an American high school? What are some of the cultural barriers and challenges, as well as the assets, that Karen refugee students experience in the context of an American school?

### **Student Participants**

Here is a short introduction of the seven student participants. I believe understanding each participant's history will provide a richer understanding of their educational experience. The Karen school staff members, Moo Paw and Htee Moo Shee's responses were not always included because not all the interview questions were the same. If they did answer some of the same questions, I included them in the interview results along with the student participants.

Eh Soe was born in Burma and belongs to a family of eight people. His family escaped Burma to Mae Ra Moe refugee camp when he was twelve years old. He studied Burmese in Burma from the time he was three years old until the third grade and continued his education in the refugee camp, but in Karen. His family initially settled in a

small town, but then they moved to where there were more social services for Karen families.

Law Eh came to the U.S. by himself when he was nineteen years old. He was born in Mae La Oo refugee camp and applied for refugee status by himself when he was 18 years old. Law Eh's parents have Thai citizenship and have obtained it for ten years. His parents lived outside of the refugee camp, but Law Eh lived in a dormitory inside the refugee camp and went to a more affluent private school ran by Seventh Day Adventists.

Mu Khee Lah also attended the same school as Law Eh. Mu Khee Lah originally lived in Mae La refugee camp but her parents sent her to Mae La Oo refugee camp so that she could acquire a better education at the mission school. From the fifth grade to the tenth grade, Mu Khee Lah lived in the dormitory. She came to the U.S. before her family and just this past year, her whole family was able to immigrate to the U.S.

Dah Mu was born in Mae Ra Moe camp. She came to the U.S. with her whole family and has seven brothers and sisters. Dah Mu shared that her father was a dormitory leader where he oversaw the dorms of one of the refugee camp schools. Although her family had their own house, she chose to follow her father and lived among students in the camp.

Paw Say was born in Mae La Camp. She came to the U.S. with her mother and four siblings. They initially arrived in the Midwest, but sought other opportunities in Texas. She eventually dropped out of school in Texas because she was encouraged to and applied to job corp. After some time, Paw Say realized she needed to learn more English and returned to the Midwest for more education.

Moo Moo came to the U.S. seven years ago and settled in New York. She eventually got married and followed her husband to the Midwest. Moo Moo shared how she escaped to Mae La refugee camp with her grandmother and then her family followed them afterwards. Moo Moo and her family came to the U.S., but her grandmother was left behind and passed on. Moo Moo has one daughter.

Day Chi lived in a refugee camp for 11 years before coming to America. She came with her parents and left her siblings back in Thailand. Day Chi's father has a heart condition and her mother is the only one able to work for her family. Day Chi is recently married.

### **Interview Responses**

Although there were 50 questions in the interview, I categorized them into three themes: Personal Information and Family Life and Upbringing; Native School Experience; and American School Experience. Within each theme, I shared the most pertinent questions and responses that are related to the topic. Under the section Personal Information and Family Life and Upbringing, I asked: What age did you go to school? What kind of educational experiences did your family members have? What did your parents say about getting an education? What do Karen people believe about education? I asked these questions because I wanted to gauge the former schooling experience of students prior to living in America. Additionally, I wanted to find out if students' parents and siblings had an education. Next, under the Native School Experience, I wanted to know what students' educational experience was like in Thailand compared to Burma or the U.S. I asked questions about schools in the Karen refugee camps and what their teacher and student relationships were like. Lastly, the third theme addressed Karen

students in America. I asked these questions to understand how Karen ELs perceive their new schooling experience: What is your relationship with American teachers like? What helped you to adjust to the American school system? How is your native school in Thailand different from school in America? What do you like and dislike? How is reading different? Do you have libraries in the refugee camps? How do you believe Americans view reading? What are some teaching strategies that you like? How should teachers teach Karen students?

### **Personal Information and Family Life and Upbringing**

To begin to understand what kind of experiences student participants had in Burma or Thailand, I asked when students went to school. Nursery school experiences and pre-k opportunities existed in the refugee camps, as well as primary, middle, high school, private Christian school opportunities, Thai schools, and postsecondary vocational schools. Most of the students began school at a young age. Only one started at the age of 10. Here are the responses in Table 2.

Table 2

*What Age Did You Go To School?*

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Eh Soe      | I do...like up to 3rd grade in Burma. Then I moved to the refugee camp. I studied Burmese only [in Burma]. I went to school at 3 years old.   |
| Mu Khee Lah | I went to school at 5 years old.  |
| Dah Mu      | It was 2 years, kinda like Head Start.  |
| Paw Say     | I went to school at 2 years old. There's a school like pre-k in the refugee camp. We have school and we start very young. You can choose the school but you have to pay for it and sign up your name and pay like 100 [baht] dollars.   |
| Moo Moo     | I went to school at 10 years old. I didn't have a chance to go to school. It depends when your parents want you to go to school. If your parents are noble, you can go to the Thai school.  |
| Law Eh      | I was born in Thailand, inside the refugee camp. My parents left the camp when they got citizenship. When I was 6 or 7 month, my mom told me the other teacher come to my mom and she came to take care of me like I was her son. I lived with her for 1 to 2 years [in the refugee camp] then she died. My mom took me back and I came to live with my mom. She was a teacher. |
| Day Chi     | Kindergarten  |

Students also shared that it did not matter what age one was, anyone can start at any grade level in the refugee camps depending on their language level. Eh Soe mentioned when he arrived to the refugee camp, although he had already finished the third grade in Burma, he had to start primary school in first grade. Moo Paw, the bilingual E.A. said,

I had to repeat my grade 'cause like at my mom's village, I went to school but I didn't get to learn Karen 'cause they didn't teach us Karen at my mom's village so when I went to my dad's village, I repeated. When I came to camp, they still

kept me back for one grade. Most of my friends my age were going to 1st grade. Paw Say shared similar sentiments. “My cousin is 23 years old and he is in 9th grade. We don’t compare students. If you're old and you want to study with us, it’s fine. It's not problem.” As students shared about their educational experiences, they described themselves as possessing characteristics often seen in Students with Limited and Interrupted Formal Education. DeCapua et al. (2009) describes a SLIFE student as someone who has had an interrupted education, among other characteristics. Moo Moo and Eh Soe had an interrupted education as a result of the civil war in Burma.

To get a feel for the educational background of parents and siblings, I asked students how much education their parents had. I also asked if other siblings went to school.

Table 3

*Educational Experiences of Family Members*

| Student Participants | Did your parents have an education?  | Did other family members go to school too? |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Eh Soe               | Yes, both my parents did at elementary but not higher.   | Yes  |
| Mu Khee Lah          | NA   | NA   |
| Dah Mu               | Yes, my dad. He did in Burma. He did not graduate. He went through grade 4. My mom did not go to school. She had to work.          | All siblings went to school.               |
| Paw Say              | No, they were farmers.   | Yes  |
| Moo Moo              | My parents are farmers and my mom's dad said she [mother] can't go to school because like she's the only daughter in the household | Yes, my siblings including me.             |
| Law Eh               | No, they don't have education.   | Yes  |

|         |                      |     |
|---------|----------------------|-----|
| Day Chi | My ma she used to go | Yes |
|---------|----------------------|-----|

These results show that parents either did not have any education or did not get past a primary level education. Siblings, along with participants, had the opportunity to get an education in the refugee camps. If parents did have an education, it was in Burma and not Thailand. In the literature review, it was stated by DeCapua et al. (2007) that parents of SLIFE would most likely be poorly educated. This is true in the case of all the students in this study. Although this cannot be conclusive of all Karen parents, this phenomenon might ring true for most Karen SLIFE students who come to the U.S. The follow up question would be to ask why parents did not get an education. Was it due to the civil war or was it because it was an agrarian society?

The purpose of asking this next question was to gage how parents viewed education. I was hoping it would reveal Karen attitudes, beliefs, and ideas about education. Here are the responses.

Table 4

*What Did Your Parents Say About Getting An Education?*

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Eh Soe      | For me they say go to school and study and you will become someone important. Work hard.   |
| Mu Khee Lah | They say go to school. They give you education... They say here [America] is hard so if I go to college to go back and live in Thailand and go teach and help Karen people.  |
| Dah Mu      | My dad always told me that education is the most important. Education can make your future easier. They always say like education comes first.   |
| Paw Say     | If you go to school, it depends on your mom and parents. My dad doesn't want us to go to school. He likes farm. He wants us to go to the farm to work and get money, but my mom wants us to get an education so she support us. My dad is the one who has to work so he wants us to work.  |
| Moo Moo     | [After getting married] My mom found me a job in New York. I dropped high school. But I made up my mind that I would finish high school. She was like 'do it!' She always support me. She's the one who cheers me up and she's always proud of me.   |
| Law Eh      | The first time I came to America, I thought I would get a job and get money and send it to Thailand. But I came and I saw everyone speak English so I called my mom and said I want to go to school and then I can find a job. My sister called me and she encourage me to go to school. Sometimes I struggle with my family. My dad is getting older and life is difficult in Thailand. |
| Day Chi     | They want me to go to school.  |

The statements here show a general support for education from Karen parents and family members. Here are other remarks that show the involvement of parents in their student's education.

They do a big exam, during that time, everyone stays home to study. You don't go to school for that whole week...At that time it's so fun. You sleep over with your friends to study. Your parents really encourage you. They will cook for you and give you a lot of food.

Moo Paw talked about how supportive parents are during testing time in the camps. Eh Soe said,

They [parents] have to find money to send the kids to go to school. Usually they go to other village around the camp and they go find something to do, any kind of job like pick the chili pepper, corn and then sometimes they have to carry the wood.

Schools in Thai refugee camps cost money. In order to put their kids through school, parents usually have to find some source of income to pay for their children's education. Day Chi shared her experience about how she missed out on some schooling but her parents were always able to find money later on to put her back in school, "I go to school every year, but not the beginning of the year until they [parents] can pay."

Mu Khee Lah and Law Eh were fortunate enough to attend a private school sponsored by the Seventh Day Adventist church. Parents of both students sent their children to live in the dormitories to get an education. Mu Khee Lah was sent from another Karen refugee camp to attend this well-known school from the fifth grade until the tenth grade. Law Eh's parents, who lived outside of the camp and had obtained Thai citizenship, sent him back to the refugee camp to get an education as opposed to having him attend a Thai school. Law Eh shared this information, his school cost "1000 baht per year. It is a famous school in the camp. A lot of people go to -- school and then they only teach English, Thai and Karen." Only those who had more financial means could attend this private school; otherwise, most students attended the public schools in the refugee camps. Depending on the grade level, the cost for each school would vary. "We have to pay the tuition, like 150 baht. It depends on your grade too. The higher your grade is the

more expensive, and it's different from school to school, even if they're all public. I go to refugee camp school,” says Moo Paw.

In the above statements, it is clear that education is valued in the Karen community, however, there were a couple of instances that showed how financial burdens can cause families to choose work over schooling. In the literature review, DeCapua et al. (2007) mentions that it is not unusual for SLIFE students to drop out and find work to support families. This was the case for Paw Say and Moo Moo. Paw Say’s father requested that she work versus go to school. Moo Moo’s mother assumed that once she got married, she would work to support her new family and discontinue school.

To understand what Karen students thought about when it came to the purpose of education, I chose to directly ask students: Why do people in the camp go to school? What is the end goal? What do Karen people believe about education? The responses given revealed that if one did not go to school, the other option was to work in the camp.

Table 5

*What Do Karen People Believe About Education?*

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Mu Khee Lah | If you have education than you can get a better life, but to get an education you have to work really hard.   |
| Dah Mu      | They believe that education is important. If they have education, they can get a job easily and a good paying job. They can travel and whenever they go, they can talk to people who speak English.             |
| Paw Say     | NA  |
| Moo Moo     | NA  |
| Law Eh      | I think children should get their education. Here is the opportunity to go to school so you can help your family. You might be the helpful child. Your parents want to be proud of you... so just go to school. |
| Day Chi     | NA  |

Additionally, Moo Paw shared this pertinent piece of information about Karen people and how she, herself, viewed education, particularly in an American context:

I think they will say if you're educated than you can get a better job and you're in a higher position. Sometimes they will say higher educated will look down at poorer people, but if you live here, you have to do that [go to school]. Some kids they say, I'm not going to school and I work and be at the meat factory because I think parents and student want to do it [go to school], but sometimes it's just so hard from the start, like they get to camp and they have two years of school and then they come here they are in grade nine and they're lost. They look at education as important but sometimes they just want to live their daily life... At least in my family, my dad would push me harder in my education because I'm small. I try to push the line more than my brothers and sisters, so they believe in me. Especially my dad, I have to get it. They say, 'yes, you can do it!'...He doesn't want us to work hard like him. He has high expectations...my dad's education is only fourth grade and my mom never went to school. Sometimes when I think about it, at least if I get a Bachelors, it's ok.

In this incident, Moo Paw shared what DeCapua and Marshall (2011) talked about in the literature review about SLIFE being at risk. Coming to America and not knowing any basic English skills and then having to be placed in and expected to pass the 9<sup>th</sup> grade can be a major obstacle for SLIFE. Under these circumstances, SLIFE would rather drop out of high school than deal with these challenges.

In Thailand, Dah Mu further explained that people went to school

...to make their lives easier. If you didn't go to school, you have to work...in Thailand, you have those people who speak Karen but they were not refugee [Karen Thais]. They have their own home and you work for them. They have farms.

Paw Say shared similar sentiments. "My dad cut the bamboo for a job. You have to work at night. If the police catch you, you'll be in trouble. You drag it into the village and sell it." Paw Say elaborated that Karen people were not allowed to work in the camp or in Thailand because of their refugee status. Her father had to secretly work at night so the authorities would not catch him. Due to the influx of refugees coming from Burma, many new Karen arrivals to the camp needed bamboo to make a house and this is how Paw Say's father found a means to make money for the family. If Karen Thai farmers, however, needed work on their farm, they could come to the camp and pick up anybody willing to work for the day.

We used to work in the cornfield. We get 80 baht a day. I was 14 years old. You have to pick the corn in the field. It's hot but you know we want money so you have to work hard.

Paw Say then chimed in as to why it is better to get an education. "After school, [getting] a little bit of education, people will see you. She know how to read and write. Education is important."

According to Moo Moo, "when I was 12 or 13 years old, I went to garden. My neighbors plant food and they pay me to water their plants and vegetables. They give me some vegetables and they pay me." She then went on to say,

If you don't go to school, people talk about you and look down on you. They will

say, 'This girl is so dumb. Even in their own language, they don't know how to read.' It depends on your family. If your family is too poor, they not talk about you, but when your family have money and they can support you, and they don't send you to school, people will talk about you and you feel so embarrassed.

Similarly, Law Eh expressed why Karen people went to school.

They go to school because they want education. Some of these are really poor they don't have money to pay for school, so they start to find a job when they are young. I saw when I go back to my village and I help my parents work on the farms. Some children come too, like 13 to 14 [years old].

Eh Soe shared comparable experiences with school that reveals how poverty interrupts education in the refugee camp.

"Yes, I left school one year because I need the money. I went to work, but I never find work. After a year I came back to school. This was 6th grade. I was 13 or 14. I would rather go to school.

Overall, mostly everyone in the community valued education in the refugee camps. Students were expected to attend school, however financial burdens hindered some families. Some parents were unable to afford school fees and their children would have to wait until there were monetary funds available or they would not go to school. Other parents, due to financial strains, preferred their children to work to contribute income for the family. It was clear that poverty was an issue for families in the camps. It caused interrupted learning for some Karen students and this relates to what DeCapua et al. (2007) shared about SLIFE students in the literature review, that one major

characteristic of SLIFE was that they did not have access to schools in their native country.

### **Native School Experience**

This next section will cover interview questions 17 thru 34, relating to schools in the Karen refugee camps. The data collected covers schools situated in three different Karen refugee camp locations throughout Thailand. Most of the answers were similar and vary slightly in detail. The questions address topics such as: grade levels, school buildings, classrooms, materials, technology, schedules, meals, uniforms, homework, school breaks, and how students pass a grade level.

Schools in the refugee camps are comprised of multiple levels: pre-k, primary, middle and high school. The highest grade goes up to the tenth grade. A few students mentioned attending school as a toddler, so it appears there was a nursery school or daycare available. It was also not clear if all camps had a middle school or if the middle school was part of the primary or high school, or possibly both because some refugee camps were bigger than others. If students wanted to continue to post-secondary education, they could attend vocational schools. One popular post-secondary school was geared towards teacher training. According to Moo Paw, “we have a post-secondary school for teachers. After you finish high school, you go there. It's like a college. In that college you get a degree but you can't use that degree anywhere except in the camp.” Other vocational schools were also mentioned that taught computers, healthcare, or engineering.

After you finish high school you can go to bible school, a lot of programs:

computer, engineering, teaching. But --- is like a bible school. You can transfer some of your classes, like the school that I went to. I think I could use it towards my major like in Australia if I went to college. I could get credit, but I didn't finish it.

Eh Soe mentioned that the population of each high school ranged from a thousand to two thousand students. "They have No. 1 high school, No. 2, No 3. No. 1 [high school] is over 2000 and the other is 1000." When asked how many students were in a classroom, the responses averaged 50 students per class. Moo paw shared, "160 [students] and split into two or three classrooms. I have 129 [students] in 7 grade and 66 in my class." The classrooms were called A, B, and C corresponding to the grade level. Paw Say said, "it starts with KG-C, KG-B, and KG-A and it takes 1 year to move to grade 1." Furthermore, Moo Moo claimed, "when I was 10 years old I was KG-A. Some of them are 13 years. The littlest was 4 or 5 years." Again, one's age does not correspond with a grade, like the system in the United States.

Whereas the public schools in the refugee camps boasted larger numbers of pupil per classroom, Law Eh and Mu Khee Law mentioned their private school classrooms comprised a smaller number of peers averaging 20-30 people per classroom. Law Eh shared,

I think more than 20 [students]. But you know I feel like when I was in 4th grade, I felt amazing. The first day of school we had 40 students but maybe almost the end of the year, the student have only 15 students because the other students moved to other countries. Some students moved to the U.S. or Australia.

Short and Boyson would suggest that for a newcomer's classroom, class sizes should be small.

School buildings in the refugee camps were described in similar terms. Students say that buildings were made out of bamboo. The roofs were either metal or made out of leaves. The school building was also one level with dirt floors. There were no concrete walls separating each classroom, only a piece of fabric or a wall made out of bamboo and grass to separate classrooms. The classrooms, according to Paw Say, are open. "You can see each other. You can see the next class. The wall is short and you can stand up and talk to people. It is very very loud."

As for classroom materials, teachers used a textbook and a chalkboard to teach. Students were given textbooks and notebooks twice a year. Some students had to buy the textbook and some students had to return their textbook at the end of the year, depending on the school and grade level. One participant noted that most students preferred to use a pen to write in the classroom. Students sat on long benches with tables. Day Chi described the seats as

bamboo wood. It is on the ground. You can touch your feet with the dirt. One bench has 5 to 6 people. You can choose where to sit. Some boys and girls can sit together or some separate. I mostly sat in the front.

Moo Moo mentioned,

...we have a desk table like this. One person sit and next person and next person. Some people say, 'this is my space! Don't cross it!' You sit wherever you want. If you talk too much, you can't pay attention to your teacher.

Mu Khee Lah said she was shy so she sat in the middle of the room. Eh Soe made it a point to say that he sometimes sat with males and sometimes he sat with his female classmates.

There was no electronic technology used in the refugee camp classrooms. However, students at the Seventh-Day Adventist school asserted they used typewriters to learn keyboarding. When they mastered that, they moved onto computers. In addition, when students took science courses, there were no hand-on experiments conducted. Moo Moo asserted,

you know, I have the same Biology class [as she does now in America] but we don't have pitchers or books like in Science class here. We have nothing. We just draw a picture and learn it. We don't have tools and scales.

According to DeCapua et al. (2009), one major characteristic of SLIFE was that they lack of educational facilities. Although refugee schools were established, the buildings, materials, technology, and set up of the school system in the refugee camps were inadequate and lacking in resources. There was overcrowding in the classrooms. Books and materials were also scarce. These conditions in the camps described can be attributed to students with limited or formal education and can impede learning.

The typical school day started around eight to nine a.m. and ended around three or four p.m. with an hour for lunch. Students would have breakfast at home and then walk to school. This walk could take anywhere from five minutes to thirty minutes. Mu Khee Lah said her school was over a mountain. Moo Paw said her school was thirty minutes away. When her older sister got married and moved away, she had to change to a closer school so that she could help her family with household chores. Paw Say mentioned that it

would take three hours to walk from the top of the refugee camp to the bottom of the refugee camp. This insight gives us an understanding of how big a Karen refugee camp could be. Students were also given an hour to go home and eat lunch. Many mentioned that they typically went home for lunch and were able to come back to classes for the remainder of the day. Although for Law Eh, his experience was the opposite, “sometimes I am also late back to school because my house is far from school. Sometimes the weather is bad during the rainy time, so I get wet.” One other option is to do what Moo Moo does,

...it depends if you wake up early. You cook, also you can make lunch to bring to school. They don't have breakfast and lunch at school. Around school they sell like food and noodle salad. We eat in the classroom if we brought the food. I will stay with friends who do not go home.

Students noted that they took seven classes. Although not all were able to specifically list what those classes entailed, here are some of the classes that were mentioned: Math, Science, History, Geography, Karen, English, Burmese, Thai. At different grade levels, either Burmese, Thai, and or English was introduced and taught. Dah Mu indicated,

They did teach Karen and English, but in English, the teachers explained it to us in Karen. Yes, when I was in grade 5, I learned Thai. I just knew how to write the alphabet, that's all. I didn't know how to speak. I learned more Karen.

At the Seventh-Day Adventist school, however, English was the main language of instruction. Students also said they did not have elective classes like Gym, Art, and Music. Nevertheless, once a week, classrooms would go out and compete with each other

by playing soccer games or having other competitions. There was one point that students wanted to express and that was that students remained in the same classroom all day. When a subject was done, it was teachers, not students, who changed classrooms.

All schools required students to wear uniforms. In fact, in the Karen refugee camps, including the private Seventh-Day Adventist school, all students were required to wear Karen clothes at least once or twice a week. Usually, students claim they wear Karen clothes primarily on Sundays if they attend church, and during Karen New Year once a year. Eh Soe said, “Tuesday and Thursday, we wear Karen shirt. Wednesday we wear anything you like. We wear white and blue [as the uniform]. It's good to wear Karen clothes.” Different schools sported different uniform colors from blue, green, red, to brown. Law Eh commented,

Yes, we wear uniform. If you do not wear uniforms, the teacher don't give you points. If you came to school without a uniform, they send you back home. I only have one uniform- white shirt and brown long pants. They don't care about shoes. The other schools use white shirt and black. When you look at them they look nice, but our school uses uniforms different, so our pants are brown and it looks old.

When it comes to homework, the responses I gathered varied. Some say they never had homework and others claim they had homework all the time. In Eh Soe's case, he said, “I never do homework. Here, too, I never do homework. Sometimes I get hit [by the teacher in Thailand]. Sometimes we have to run around the school. Sometimes we have to jump like a frog.” Mu Khee Lah reported that in her dormitory, the hours of seven to nine were devoted to homework. She studiously reviewed her schoolwork and

did homework every evening. Homework from teachers could consist of reading that students had to be ready to recite the next day. Students also mentioned that a lot of the materials covered in class were lecture notes and their homework was to memorize the notes. Math teachers were described as notorious for giving homework. Law Eh claims,

Math and Science is different. In my own country, they teach Math but they give us a lot of math homework. We have to do more than ten problems. But here they give you a sheet of paper and they teach you slowly. In Thailand if you don't understand, you have to research on your own.

Overall, unlike American classrooms, some students indicated homework in Thailand was taken more seriously. It was due the next day and one was punished for not turning it in. A typical homework assignment did not require problem solving unless it was math. Usually, homework meant memorizing the day's lecture notes. It can also be noted here that this approach to homework and learning is counter to the MALP method of learning. Although there is a time and place for memorization as an instructional practice, MALP suggests educational tasks that are relevant to students and interconnected (DeCapua and Mashall, 2014).

Students were given school breaks and vacations throughout the year similar to those in America. There was a break during December and two to three months off in the summer. Dah Mu said, "Yes, we did. It's about 3 months like America, but you don't get to do anything. They just let you be free and do whatever you want." No summer school options were available.

When it came time to take the annual comprehensive tests, students were given a week to study. These tests were given two or three times a year, but the final one was the

one that counted. It was a very stressful time because if students did not pass a core class (Reading, Math, and Science), they would have to repeat the entire grade level again.

According to Moo Paw,

...the test is a lot of writing. Usually one essay or poem for Karen subject. They teach you one lesson and you have to memorize that lesson and from that lesson comes the test. It's very different form here. They will review. Some teachers will give you 100 questions and from that, some of the questions will be on the test.

Paw Say claimed she never studied in school but waited until the final exams to study.

All one had to do was memorize the answers to the test to pass. Again, DeCapua and Marshall (2014) would suggest assessments that are meaningful and interconnected through the MALP framework.

This research is aimed at studying the educational experiences of Karen students in the refugee camps and currently in America. Educators have a huge impact on student learning. This next section examines the role of teachers and their relationships with students, families, and the community.

Teachers in the refugee camps were highly respected. The teachers were known as *Thara* or *Tharamu*. Students indicated that their teachers were young and old, male and female. Some had just graduated from the teacher vocational school and would sometimes be in students' age-range. At the Seventh-Day Adventist school, some teachers were recent graduates of the school. Teachers were mostly Karen, but some were Burmese, Thai, and of other foreign-born backgrounds, particularly at the mission school.

Some of them are young. Some of them are from India. And then the others,

sometimes they are exchange students, or foreign teachers. Mostly if you are the high school student, you have to speak English. They teach the English.

Some teachers were liked. Some were disliked. Some were fun and friendly.

Some were despised. Those that were despised were described as not being good teachers and not teaching properly. One teacher that a couple of students mentioned was a popular male teacher who was known for yelling loudly and disciplining his students. "He's not old. He's 30 years old and strict. He's like thunder when he yells. Everyone has to be quiet. The whole class hears him. He doesn't need a microphone. Every school hears him. He's still in Thailand." Furthermore, Dah Mu shared,

We have teachers like the U.S. There are teachers who are high level. Some of the teachers have 4-year college degree. Some just finished high school. All of them are Karen. But my math teacher is Burmese. I like my teachers. When we are in class, we respect them and listen to them. When we see them outside, we make each other like friends. Some of the teacher lives in the refugee camp and some live outside.

Dah Mu's statements resonated with Hersi and Watkinson's (2012) ethic of caring theory where teachers make students feel like a part of the community. In fact, teachers belong to the community in Thailand and live among students. Some students were recent graduates of the refugee camp schools. Participants also noted that it was not uncommon for teachers to be related or closely associated to students. This type of community is similar to what Hersi and Watkinson suggested teachers in America should strive for, a community where students and teachers both belong to and play a fundamental role. Another student perspective shared comparable insights,

Most of the time the teacher does all the talking. I really like my English teacher because I love English. I love them all. They can teach bible and then they would teach a different class like English. So not one specific teacher to a specific class. Usually our Thai teachers are young. They are students from our school and they know Thai.

In Karen culture, teachers are given the authority to discipline students. Students were punished for misbehavior, not turning in homework, skipping out on school, fighting, not passing tests, and much more. In fact, it is a common expectation that teachers are responsible for disciplining students for their learning, and not so much parents when it comes to a student's education. When I asked the question, did parents discipline you? Dah Mu responded, "No, because that's the teacher's job and also most teachers do it." Parents entrust teachers to watch over and monitor their student's education. Paw Say added,

They [teachers] don't call home. It's like they don't care. They're not going to call your mom. Mom isn't responsible for your education. If you do something wrong, you get punished at school. They slap you with things like this, a bamboo small stick. They yell at you in a serious way when you did something wrong or talk in the classroom. Even if they hurt you, your mom cannot do anything.

Discipline came in a few forms. Moo Moo shared,

Like they give you homework and if you didn't do it, they hit you with a stick or hit you with a rubber band. I used to have a teacher in 4th grade, she used the rubber [band] on us like if we didn't do all the work. Yeah, cause we're scared of her so we try.

But not all punishments came in the form of physical consequences. According to Mu Khee Lah, “In my school, if you don’t pass the test, we have to give them [teachers] money like 5 dollar [baht] and then it was put [towards] the vacation. Then sometimes we have to clean the school or dorm.” Law Eh said his punishments weren’t physical at all at the Seventh-Day Adventist School. His punishments consisted of reading for 30 minutes in detention.

Did students misbehave at school? For the most part, students were acknowledged as being good students, but there were a handful of students who acted out. The common response to that was that the teachers or principal would expel the student. Moo Moo shares,

Some boys are in gang. Most of teen boys like they are in gang. They usually don’t go to school. They just in the street all day long with other friends. Even if their parents send them to school. They go with their friends and walk around and their parents don’t know. If the teacher don’t say anything, the parents don’t know. Not girls, but mostly boys. They don’t care. They don’t work. Not all boys but just those that don’t care about their education.

This information was insightful. It reveals that there was gang activity. More could also be said about why these boys did not find education useful. According to DeCapua and Marshall (2014), they would attribute this to the educational system in the refugee camps as not providing a meaningful, interconnected, and valuable education for young males. Would more Karen boys and youth have been interested in school had it been more applicable?

A few questions that I asked related to parent and teacher relationships. Did your families know your teachers? Did teachers meet up with your parents? Students shared that most of the time, teachers and parents did not reach out to each other. There was an annual community meeting where parents would come out and listen to the school leaders share about school issues and future updates about the school. Parents were able to voice their opinions, ideas, and concerns at this meeting; however, expressions were geared towards the school community as a whole and not about an individual learning progress. Law Eh shares,

My mom she used to go, but not really because she's busy. That's why the adults don't have a chance to go to school, they work. If they don't work for their child everyone is going to die. It's like kinda good like New Year ceremony or memorial day. It's good that all people come together and enjoy that and in the end celebration.

Law Eh shares that there are moments where the school invites the whole community to gather at the school and celebrate momentous holidays like Karen New Year, a tradition that the Karen community continues today.

### **American School Experience**

The last part of the interview focused on students' experience in the American school system. Was this experience going to be similar or different to their home country? What are some insights that we can learn from the data collection. The first question I asked was, what was your first day like at an American school?

Table 6

*What Was Your First Day of School Like?*

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Eh Soe      | The first day I was frozen. I didn't know anything. I was in -. It was 3 stories. The basement was lunch cafeteria. The first day I was confused. Totally confused but something that I learned fast was the locker. The first try. The other was the schedule. I had to learn how to go to class. Sometimes the teacher had to help me. I was nervous too. I do go with some Karen people but when they see you they run away. Some people you can ask them but some people don't care about you. |
| Mu Khee Lah | It was kinda hard. I was so shy. The first day like, I go my class. You ask me the question and I don't know. It's kinda hard. I got confused too because we have to change the class. We just sit the whole day and the whole year in the same spot [in Thailand].  |
| Dah Mu      | It was not so good. Like the first day of school, before I came to school, one of my helper, he's white American. He took me to school and showed me all my classes and then on the first day of school, my schedule was changed and I didn't know anything. I was standing in the office and I was almost crying. And then Mr. --- saw me and he got me my schedule and then I was walking with you. I was scared because I didn't know any English.  |
| Paw Say     | I was scared and nervous. My first day in school was pretty fun. --- high has a lot of Karen students. You feel confident even though you don't know English, you can talk to them. I love it! When I was in Texas we don't have Karen people. All Spanish people born there. I don't speak much when I was there. I was not comfortable.  |
| Moo Moo     | I was scared. When I was in elementary school. I don't know nothing. I don't even know how to speak English. When the people talk to me I was about to cry. I don't know how to reply to them but only the words I know are no and yes. No other words beside no and yes. When the teacher ask me a question, if I could answer the question. I looked at that and my tears fall. My classmates just look at me and they mumbled. I was in 8th grade.  |
| Law Eh      | My first day of school, I was quiet. I didn't speak in class. I looked at other people speak. And I just stayed by myself. I feel lonely quiet. Along the way I start to talk with other friends.  |
| Day Chi     | Very hard. I could not even find the class. Like in Thailand we don't need to find the class. We don't even have the first floor, second floor, third floor. Here when I come, it took me one week to find my class and be on time. I don't know how to check my classes.  |

Most of the students shared that they were scared or nervous on their first day of school. Things that made them nervous were things that differed from what they knew of school, such as changing classrooms and not being able to speak English. As the level 1 Reading teacher at my school, I have taught most of these students as new arrivals. I have observed that students need usually a week to get acclimated to their schedules. On the first day, students wander the hallways and look lost. Teachers and other students often approach to help newcomers. When it comes to lunch, students are hesitant to eat at first but I encourage them to. Usually, I'll have students write their pin number on their hand so they understand that this number was important to remember. It typically takes a month before students understand school rituals and routine. I find that when students are able to greet me and smile, it is an indication that they are comfortable and ready to learn.

According to the literature review, DeCapua et al. (2007) recommends scheduling orientation programs because SLIFE come in at different times of the year. Schools could offer a peer buddy and provide a school tour to orient new students. It is critical for students to feel welcomed right away and not feel like an outsider or else SLIFE could be turned off to school and feel isolated. Likewise, Hersi and Watkinson (2012) would remind educators that teacher empathy is key to helping SLIFE acclimate well to school. Not all students understand the rituals and routines of school.

Naturally, the next question I asked was about how they acclimated to being in a new school in the United States?

Table 7

*What Helped You to Adjust to the American School System?*

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Eh Soe      | My first day at --- I feel comfortable. Like a year and then I feel very comfortable. At --- we have a lot of friend like Karen. We don't know something and then we follow [our Karen friends]. I do like that and it helps me.                                |
| Mu Khee Lah | We have a lot of friends at --- and we have the same class. If we don't understand something, I can copy and they can explain to me. I have confidence a little...  |
| Dah Mu      | I get to meet different friends that came from different countries. Each year I get to meet different teachers. I think my first friend was Spanish[-speaking].   |
| Paw Say     | You never get hungry. Karen students and the teachers are pretty nice. They cannot hurt you even if you do something bad. You don't have to be scared of them.  |
| Moo Moo     | I am more comfortable with people talk to me and be nice to me and be helpful to me. My teacher and classmates help me. Even if students talk to me in loud voice, if my teacher come to me than it's good.   |
| Law Eh      | The first time I don't understand the teacher and how the teacher was teaching. I didn't know how to do anything. I asked my friend to teach me. I saw -- yang. I thought he was Karen. He said "What?" I remember. Making friends helped me to be comfortable. |
| Day Chi     | NA  |

Many responses noted that having friends helped them to adjust to school life in America. Some specifically stated that having Karen speakers as friends helped them to understand routines in American school, while others stated that making friends of other racial and ethnic backgrounds helped them to feel more comfortable. Rather than having newcomers enroll in a mainstream high school where they may not encounter someone who speaks the same language or understand their status as a recent arrival, Short and Boyson (2000) recommended newcomer's programs to be developed to meet the specific

needs of SLIFE students. Being among other newcomers and among students who speak the same language, can help SLIFE students feel more at ease (DeCapua et al., 2007).

Teachers were also referenced as being a source of relief, although peers were seen as the prime source of comfort. Moo Paw also shared her first day experience. This is what she said,

It was really different. Like the first thing is you have to move from class to class. When I first came I was not that shy, I was open. Do you know ---? She was very nice to me. I had fun. Ms. --- like she called somebody up to volunteer and I went up and she said I was very brave and in our culture 'brave' means 'shameless.' I was like, 'Why did she say that?' But later I realized that it was positive and not negative.

Table 8

*How is Your Native School in Thailand Different From School in America?*

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Eh Soe      | The most different is we have to change class when the bell rings. The subjects are different, like here you have Algebra 1 and 2 but in Thailand we have the whole year to finish the textbook. I like everything here, like the system they teach and how they teach. I like Ms. ---. Sometimes they joke but they explain things really well. I don't like Ms. --- because whatever they teach I don't get it. It's like they throw it out and if I catch it but if I don't, I don't get it. When they go step by step I get it, but they jump into another thing and we confused. They ask do you have any questions, and we say no. Sometimes the teacher is so nice and they do for us and homework too. |
| Mu Khee Lah | In here, we have the right [freedom]. The high school has a right [freedom]. We have to walk and we have a uniform [in Thailand] but here we don't have to walk and have uniform. Here we don't have to memorize. If you teach, we understand the lesson. I like everything. There's nothing I don't like.   |
| Dah Mu      | I like teachers in here. If you like don't do your work, the students are responsible. But in Thailand, if you don't do your work, the students get hit. In Thailand, we didn't get to eat breakfast or lunch but in here we get to eat. Also in Thailand, we have to pay to go to school but in here- free. Like in America and you are under 18 or 21, you can go to school but in Thailand you can't if you get married. You have to leave school.  |
| Paw Say     | In the U.S.A., they teach very clear. You understand everything. You don't have to memorize things in Thailand at all. I don't really like it. In Thailand they teach you like when I compare it to here it's totally different. You don't learn nothing. You learn nothing at all. They just talk and they lecture and you just write down. I never ask a question, I know the way it is and I'm so quiet. I already know [the answers].  |
| Moo Moo     | Some people like to memorize and some people don't like to memorize.   |
| Law Eh      | They are different. In Thailand, we have to go to school by walking. The school bus takes you to school. The teachers are really really different. The teachers in Thailand, if you are not doing your homework, they punish you and hit you. Here, is you don't do homework, They are not hit you. The other things is they give you homework and a due date. If they give you today, you have to finish tomorrow. America is better.   |
| Day Chi     | Very different, like they have the electricity [in America] and the building is different and the teacher, everything.   |

For the most part, students indicated that schooling is different between Thailand and the United States. They noticed differences in transportation, meals, homework, teaching strategies and discipline.

As an ELL Reading teacher, I wanted to know what their perceptions were on reading. How are reading classes different or similar to reading classes in America? Did students have or use libraries? How do they think Americans view reading?

Table 9

*How Is Reading Different? Do You Have Libraries in the Refugee Camps? How Do Americans View Reading?*

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Eh Soe      | In Thailand, you have to read by yourself. The teacher read for you too. In here, you have a 30-minute reading. I never borrow the library book in Thailand.  |
| Mu Khee Lah | We do have a school library. We go and borrow some but not really. I'm lazy to read. I think they [Americans] believe reading is good. If you read, you can understand more about life. Karen people don't read much.   |
| Dah Mu      | The students didn't get to read as much in Thailand. Only the teacher reads to us. In Thailand, they do have a library and you can go there and borrow some books and read for fun. We have to go by ourselves. It's really big. I don't know about the books but they have like more than 20 shelves. [The books are] in Karen, Burmese and English dictionary too.  |
| Paw Say     | We do have textbook but only when the teacher tells you to read, you read. If you don't, you don't. The teachers read the textbook. In here, they care that you understand what you learn. In Thailand Reading is important to America. Is it true that reading can improve your writing and English? I don't think it could improve your English. I just think as long as you're brave than you can speak. What if you know how to write but you don't know how to read? |
| Moo Moo     | Americans think reading is important. Every word and every writing is making you improve your speaking and understanding so you can get a job. Even if you didn't graduate high school you can understand the question in an interview. I never knew that Reading improves your English. If you don't read, you don't know what could happen to your life. Even the scientists don't know nothing but they keep reading until they find the answer.                       |
| Law Eh      | Reading in my old country, after you read, you have to put it back [in the library] and you can get a new book. Here, you can choose and read and after you return you can get a new book.  |
| Day Chi     | We don't have Reading class over there in Thailand. Here we do. They give 30-minutes for reading class. If you want to read a book [in Thailand], you have to go to the library, but it's not a school library... a community library. You need to get the book and take home to read. Our school and library are very close so you could go anytime but Sunday and Monday it's not open. Sunday and money they are closed.   |

Students shared that reading is viewed differently in Thailand compared to the U.S. Teachers were the ones mainly reading to a class in Thailand. Reading was also seen as an assignment or homework and not for fun. DeCapua and Marshall (2014) would suggest that literacy should to be taught through a new lens. SLIFE usually see reading as a practical skill that is an academic task. However, in America, DeCapua and Marshall (2014) suggest that reading also holds “aesthetic purposes” (p.63). Reading can be meaningful and connected to the learner. Reading can be fun and enjoyable.

Next, I wanted to find out how teachers taught differently between the two countries. Are there strategies that we, as American educators, could learn from teachers in Thailand? Are there teaching methods that we should emphasize and continue to use in the American classroom? Were there any strategies that Karen students as a whole particularly found effective?

Table 10

*What Are Some Teaching Strategies That You Like? How Should Teachers Teach Karen Students?*

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Eh Soe         | They [Karen students] like sharing information and like share with the teacher and the group, like presentations. For me, I like to work with people because when you work with people, you can share ideas, many many ideas.  |
| Mu Khee<br>Lah | I think the small group. They [students] don't have the basic English so the small group helps. For me, most Karen people can easily memorize. I like to work by myself though.  |
| Dah Mu         | I like debating. We don't have to memorize anything. For learning, we have to read the whole page and memorize and then the next year we forgot all of them. Don't memorize. I learn more in America. They teach students to understand things, not to memorize. I like when they explain things very clear and when I take a test, I don't have to study. I remember all of them so I don't have to read and study hard.  |
| Paw Say        | Memorization. Push them to memorize something because English is not our first language. When I was growing up, my teacher use to push me or I get punished. You have to be serious teacher. You have to do that, if you don't do and pass the test, I have to pay money. So I was growing up with my teacher push me. Fear makes you work more. When I was a child we used to do that way so it's going to be like that forever. I just want them [American teachers] to be more meaner. The more you scare, the more they work hard. The teachers, I love them because when I have a question, they love me and help me and I'm not scared to ask them. In Thailand, I don't ask the teacher because I'm scared.   |
| Moo Moo        | For me, I like it when the teacher punishes me. When teachers punish students, like stand up or use bamboo stick, they can learn soon. For Karen people, students get hit by a bamboo stick. If they don't get hit, they don't learn nothing. If you fear something you can do that. America teachers too nice and too sweet. Some people they don't care. For me, I feel like why the teacher keep teaching and the students doesn't listen. Maybe the teacher is too nice or the students don't care about their education. Why is the teacher more patient? And I like them to be more specific so we can focus on education, I like when the teacher said no cell phone and the students should listen to them and they might feel better when the student is listening. They allow you to ask a question even if you don't understand it. The teacher is good even if you don't understand a question. They try to make you understand so you can get the question. |

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Law Eh  | I like to learn in a small group. You know, sometimes if I learn by myself and I don't understand how to do it so I have to depend on the group. We share the problem and solve the problem with the group. I like American teachers because they give homework but not much and then they also return out homework...I saw the teacher teach good for Karen students but sometimes I feel upset. They [students] don't want to listen to the teacher and they talk too much in class. I saw and I feel upset sometimes I talk to the Karen students younger than me and I say to them, we are in this country, we have to grow up and live a good life, but sometimes they don't want to follow it. They say we are here, we are free. We can do whatever we want. Sometimes they leave [skip] class. They talk bad things to the teacher or to the other students who don't speak Karen. I feel so upset. |
| Day Chi | Sometimes we have the group. The teacher divides us in a group. If we don't understand something, maybe our friend, other students understand and can help. The teacher also helps us to explain.   |

In the literature review, Short and Boyson (2012) and DeCapua and Marshall (2014) both acknowledged that small group instruction or collaborative learning is an effective method of teaching and learning. Several students pointed out that learning in small groups and memorization were an effective form of instruction. I have observed when Karen students work in small groups, learning occurs through social interaction. Students are asking their classmates for help to understand class materials and those who are higher do not have a problem sharing their knowledge. DeCapua and Marshall (2014) would require that each individual learner should play an independent role in a small group and make contributions to the whole group as well. In that way, they not only are interdependent but learn to be independent.

Another question that was asked during the interview addressed social issues that students experience in American life. The question that was asked was: What is hard about American life? Students responded that learning English was difficult to achieve and this hinders other aspects of life. For instance, Mu Khee Lah said, "If you have no

English you can't apply for the job and you are not what they want.” Dah Mu also added, “Like if you don't know how to speak English, you have to work hard- harder than the person who has education.” Other issues that students brought up had to do with transportation and getting around. In the camps, students could walk, but in America, transportation is an almost a necessity. Furthermore, finances are something students worry about. Paw Say observed that “money is a problem. You build your own house [in Thailand]. Style and design it. No bills. But here you have to pay for water, electricity. In Thailand, clothes you make by yourself, food you make for yourself, just make a fire and cook.” For Law Eh and Moo Paw, because they came as single people, housing and jobs were a dilemma. “Housing is a little bit hard for me and then also job too. In my old country you apply for a job, but you don't have to interview. But here they interview you and also check your background.” Moo Paw's sentiments were the same. “That year I had to worry about where I was going to live because the family I was living with was going to move. I was 21. It affected my school a lot.” In my own classroom observations, I have been lenient on student homework because some of them have said that they work and go to school. Occasionally, I will have students sleep in my class, not because the lesson is boring but because some of them worked through the night and did not get any sleep.

In the literature review, Short and Boyson (2012) shared that some common key issues that newcomers faced were not always academic but social issues. These obstacles would affect the learning of students. They were concerns over: family reunification, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, No Child Left Behind accountability measures, staffing and English language development in bilingual programs, special education services, high school graduation credits, and postsecondary options were also concerns.

To this list, I would also add housing and employment problems according to the student participants.

One of the final questions that I asked was whom do you go to for help? I wanted to know if students used any school resources or outside resources. Students shared that they went to their county worker or the school social worker for paperwork help. In our own school, I have come to talk to the school social worker about new students and she would already know their history. The social work aide has taken students to appointments, helped students secure housing, and held groups to help students with their social issues. Students also mentioned going to see the counselor to talk about their credits and graduation. The counselor often helped students figure out how they could graduate on time and helped students to think about post-secondary options. The nurse was another resource if they needed assistance with their health care. Friends were another source of help in the classroom. In fact, students preferred to go to classmates before they asked the teacher for classwork help. Karen students often depended on classmates for notes or to clarify something that I said during a class lesson. Teachers, however, were mentioned by almost all of the students as the main resource in a school. I truly believe that teachers can play a crucial role for students. I know of some teachers at the school that are housing former students in their homes. Teachers have helped students practice their driving in order to get their license. In fact, according to Moo Paw,

One day, Mr. --- called everyone to go over a credit check and he told me that he was not sure I could graduate. That was the worst day ever in my life. That day, oh my god! It was really hard... but I find Ms. ---, she's the best. It is very encouraging when you know one teacher who knows your story and encourages

you and tries to push you. Yes, after that I graduate. Right now, when I feel so down, sometimes you have that feeling. I know that I can get through those days.

It's very encouraging.

Short & Boyson (2000) described an effective newcomer's program as having qualified teachers, staff, and administration that are resourceful, supportive and understanding.

DeCapua et al. (2007) also reiterated that this population requires teachers who care deeply about SLIFE. From this one example, one can see that teachers can help students overcome obstacles in their learning. Hersi and Watkinson (2012) ethic of caring coincides with this study because it can be seen that input from a teacher made a huge difference in the life of a SLIFE student. Without the support and "push" from this teacher, Moo Paw might have not graduated.

The last piece of data that I want to share is how students responded to this question: What can the school do to help you be successful in your education? Eh Soe commented, "I think to be successful you have to try by yourself. School cannot do anything. They show the way and you have to follow or to realize by yourself." Law Eh reiterated similar sentiments, "What do I need help with? We need to be a good student. You need to pass the class. You need to help yourself, too, not only the teacher." Their responses revealed how Karen students viewed self-sufficiency and hard work. Dah Mu wanted to emphasize the freedom of choice that students had and said, "Do not force students or they might be scared. Let students choose." Finally, Moo Moo gave some good advice for teachers, "Some teachers, they don't like to teach, so I just want them to see that some people from Thailand refugee camp, they really love to learn. They really want to learn but they don't have any opportunity or chance, so I want everyone to see

that I want to support them. In the future, I want to build a better school. If we have somebody to support them, it's going to be good.”

### **Results from Observations**

Another form of data collection that I gathered was observational notes I made in the classroom, school, school events, and in the Karen community. I would like to share some of my observations and impressions from these events. DeCapua and Marshall (2014) recommended using graphic organizers as effective instructional practice in a MALP classroom. On March 8, 2016 in my level 2 reading class, we worked on using the graphic organizer for Cornell notes.

Most of my students are able to take Cornell notes after I modeled it and gave them examples...but students are struggling with summarizing, even after I modeled an example. A few Karen students walked over to get help from other Karen students. I think they're trying to understand what they're supposed to do or write. I think I will have to spend more time teaching summarizing.

This shows that with modeling and using examples, students were able to take notes. However, summarizing was a difficult task. It is a writing activity where students cannot copy from the text. Students have to be able to analyze information and determine what is a main idea and what is a detail. Students are supposed to independently know how generate their own words to write a summary. It led me to realize that DeCapua and Marshall would suggest sentence frames to aid students in writing a summary. Also, I should encourage collaborative work and oral transmission to written word in the next activity.

With the same class on March 23, 2016, I decided to have students work in small groups. I separated the classroom into five small groups with three to four people each. I made sure the groups were small enough that everyone had a role to play. Then each group was given a comprehension question from the text that they had to answer. It was a critical thinking question that was difficult for students at this level to answer independently, but as a group, the response would have been achievable. A poster-sized piece of paper and marker was given to students to use. Students had to work together to answer a comprehension question and then present their answers. Students worked together to find the answer. It then required oral transmission to written word for students, which is a MALP lesson recommendation. One student was the recorder and wrote the question and answer on the paper. Then two students had to present their question and answer to the class. Afterwards, their answers were posted around the room. Students could copy the answers in their notebooks later. I found this MALP activity successful because it required everyone to play a role and students depended on one another to complete the task. Here is an observation reflection from this activity.

I was impressed that students were able to work together so well. As a teacher, it was a bit difficult managing and checking in on every group because students wanted affirmation that their answer was correct or needed guidance to find the answer, but the end results were worth it. I enjoyed watching students who were usually quieter presenting for their group. But it wasn't a difficult thing to do because they just had to read the words off the paper. Those who were artistic also drew visuals on the posters as well for fun.

At a Karen soccer tournament that was put on by the school district that I worked in, I was able to see how the community gathered to celebrate this sport. The event was held in a middle school. There were about five high schools involved. I thought I would buy pizza for the teams. Here are my observational notes on December 10, 2015.

Our students were nervous and excited. This was the girls first time playing soccer. Paw Say and Moo Moo were playing. Paw Say refused pizza because she had a game and didn't want to get sick. During the game she almost kicked the ball into the opponent's net. It was the funniest thing. Law Eh was very considerate and thankful that I came. They shared that Ms. --- came by with water and a few other teachers were out here too.

There must have been 200 people there, mostly young people. The person in charge was a district cultural liaison. I was amazed at their leadership, commitment and involvement in building morale among Karen students. I realized that this was similar to the events held in the schools in the Karen refugee camps when students shared that they did not have gym class, but they would often compete with other classes in sports and competitions. Hersi and Watkinson (2012) would adhere that teacher presence and support would have meant a lot to students. I heard a student from another school say, "Wow! Look at all those people [students and teachers] here for --- school." Unfortunately, our students lost their game, but from that event, they formed a soccer club after school and now compete in a soccer league.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared the results of my data collection from the student participant interviews and observational notes. I covered when Karen students began their educational careers, their personal and family history with education, how parents viewed education, the purpose of schooling, schools in the refugee camps, teacher and student relationships in Thailand and in America, social issues that students face, and how schools could help support Karen students in America. I shared observations made in my classroom, school, and the Karen community. The results support the literature review of characteristics of SLIFE students, MALP strategies, and the ethic of caring. In Chapter Five I will discuss my major findings, their implications, and suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusion**

When I began this study, I was on a journey to understand my students better and to learn how to improve myself as an ELL educator. By conducting this research, I was able to gain profound insights into the history, culture, and educational experiences of Karen refugee students. The findings I am presenting will address these critical questions: What are the experiences of Karen high school students as refugees and newcomers in an American high school? What are some of the cultural barriers and challenges, as well as the assets, that Karen refugee students experience in the context of one American school? In this chapter, I share my major findings, limitations, and implications for teachers, administrators, school staff, and suggestions for further research.

### **Major Findings**

The data collected from the interviews revealed important information. I will share the findings based on the data presented in chapter four. The findings will be talked about in reference to the themes that were developed: Personal Information and Family Life and Upbringing; Native School Experience; and American School Experience. Specifically, I address the age of SLIFE students, education of parents, parental support, value of education, various topics about the schools in Thailand, as well as the schools in America.

#### **Age Schooling Begins**

The first section addressed the age when students first began school, which ranged from beginning in pre-school as toddlers to beginning at age 10. Teachers should

be aware that students coming from the Karen refugee camps might come with limited education. As the literature review stated about newcomers, students come to school with gaps that need to be filled. SLIFE are a subpopulation of ELL students who have educational experiences that have been interrupted by migration, lack of educational facilities or access to schools in their native country, and war or persecution (DeCapua et al., 2009). Participants in the interview possessed these characteristics. Therefore, teachers should address SLIFE issues differently from ELs. For example, in my classroom, I have students from Mexico who are considered level 1 beginners in ESL but have graduated from high school in Mexico. These students will usually excel and move faster because of their educational experience and understanding of school rituals and routines. Whereas SLIFE students may just be learning how to sound out words and how to take a test.

### **Education of Parents**

The next section addressed the educational experience of Karen parents. All of the students reported that their parents either did not have an education or if they did, it did not exceed more than a primary education. I am not sure if this is attributed to Burma being an agrarian society or parents having to run from civil war and not being able to attend school, but this lack of education can have major impact on their child's education. For instance, will parents know how to work the school system or understand how to advocate for their child? Specifically, would parents play a less active role in their child's education because they are unfamiliar with the educational system? Plus, in the schools in Thailand, unlike American schools, there were no parent/teacher conferences. Parents gave teachers the role of disciplining and monitoring student's learning.

### **Parental Support**

It was clear in the next section that despite limited experience with education, parents were highly supportive of their students getting an education, according to their children. Already, I can see that one way parents can become involved is through cultural celebrations and sharing who they are and their culture at schools, similar to Karen New Year celebrations in Thailand. Education was seen to raise someone's status. Parents worked hard to pay their children's tuition. During exams in Thailand, parents supported students by cooking for and encouraging them. This leads to the question: what does parent involvement look like for Karen Parents? Does involvement mean joining the P.T.A. and volunteering at school? Or should ensuring that your child is fully fed and clothed, and has their needs met in order for them to attend school, be considered part of parental involvement as well?

### **Value of Education**

Another finding is why Karen people receive an education and what the value of education meant. Obtaining an education for Karen people meant a couple of things. Namely, it gave merit or status to individuals. If one had an education, the community would not look down on an individual but offer respect. Secondly, getting an education offered a possibility that greater opportunities or jobs would be available, although this was not always the case. In addition, there is a stark difference between living in America and the Thai refugee camps. In the refugee camps, obtaining an education does not hold the same merit as it does in America. Paw Say commented,

Even if you graduate high school [in the camp]. You just work in school. You get little money. The job [one can get] is work in school and teach people. Or we

have two hospital. You have to work very hard to get into hospital. You clean the hospital.

Furthermore, Moo Paw had mentioned that one could attend a post-secondary vocational school and get a “college degree,” but that degree was not useful outside of the camp.

What does this finding imply? It means that as we receive Karen refugee students, they may not understand the value of an education and the opportunities that come with it. As Law Eh said when he first came to the U.S.,

I thought I would get a job and get money and send it to Thailand. But I came and I saw everyone speak English so I called my mom and said I want to go to school and then I can find a job.

It is our job to show students the importance of learning English and the value of getting an education. Knowledge is power in the United States. It does not matter if one was born with wealth, class status, or fame--education is the great equalizer.

### **Refugee Camp Schools in Thailand**

The next section talks about schools in the refugee camp and addresses these topics: grade levels, school buildings, classrooms, materials, technology, schedules, meals, uniforms, homework, school breaks, and how students pass a grade level. There are many findings that I could draw from this, but I will share the main ones.

**Assignment of students.** Students in Thai refugee camps are not necessarily placed in their grades by age. One of the first thoughts that I had was that in America we assign students according to their age. It was expressed how difficult it can be to be placed in the tenth grade and be held to tenth grade standards of Reading, Writing, Math, and Science when students have not mastered the alphabet. This is one of the many

challenges for SLIFE students (DeCapua et al., 2009). Fortunately, the newcomer's school that I work at assigns students to a classroom by language level. A classroom would be made up of students anywhere in the age range of 14-21 with the same language needs. I thought this was fitting because the environment would be familiar to Karen students. It would make sense why younger or older students in the classroom do not faze students. According to the literature review, Short and Boyson (2000) recommend that as a result of these circumstances, newcomer programs should be created to meet the needs of SLIFE students. Without newcomer programs, SLIFE students are more highly probable to dropout.

**Physical environment.** The school building and classroom is completely different from how students normally experience a school building. Our school building is three stories high and has a gym and library. On the first day students normally get lost trying to find their classrooms because their classrooms are scattered throughout the school. To address this issue, this year at our school, we developed student ambassadors, comprised of level four students, to give new students a tour of the school. This helps students to become familiar with their new school environment. Moreover, there are so many minute details that students have to learn from stapling paper, opening lock combinations, to logging on a computer that it may seem trivial, but it can be overwhelming for new arrivals (DeCapua et al. 2007). Educators cannot deduce the kinds of educational experiences that Karen refugee students bring into the classroom. About once a month, I teach students how to sharpen their pencils with an electric pencil sharpener because I continually receive new arrivals into my classroom. As Short and Boyson revealed in their study (2012), finding staff that is understanding and empathetic

is key to developing an effective newcomer's program. It takes patience, fun, and light-hearted attitude when one teaches SLIFE students (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012).

**Classes and homework.** This may be with all students, mainstream or ELs, but in my classroom, it can be difficult for students to complete classwork and homework independently. After gathering the data, I can see why it was difficult for students to complete this task. This is not an excuse because I have collected good independent work from many Karen refugee students, but the phenomenon of wanting to copy what I write, is more predominant among Karen students. Of course, it all makes sense now because in the refugee camps, students were expected to copy what teachers wrote. Copying has its place in learning, but students will have to be taught how to think and write independently and that it is an expectation in American education (DeCapua et al., 2007). This is where DeCapua and Marshall's work on MALP (2014) becomes a vital instrument of instruction for SLIFE students. Critical thinking will have to be taught as a highly valued skill that newcomers must try to achieve in America (DeCapua et al., 2007). The same could be said about homework, too, because the struggle is real. Again, if one comes from a learning environment that does not give homework, it makes sense why students struggle to complete it. This is not an excuse but it's a realization as to how and why most students don't complete homework. Of course, not completing homework could be contributed to students working a job and not having time. Or students having to finish chores, cook dinner, and babysit their siblings. Or if one is a SLIFE student, planning and organizing one's priorities has to be taught. I would also like to add that after some thought, if I taught in the refugee camp and had a class of 50 students and taught at least six courses, that would give me 300 homework assignments to correct.

**Technology.** In Thailand, students did not have a lot of technology usage in the classroom. The closest technology tool would have to be computers, of which, only a few set of students were allowed to use them. When it comes to using technology for Karen refugee students, it can conjure mixed feelings and mixed results. For example, students seem to have great command of the iPad in the classroom considering they had very little exposure beforehand. I have newcomers who pick up how to use an iPad right away. They are able to practice their alphabet letters, sounds and begin reading on the iPad. After a little while, students are savvy enough to operate the iPad independently, take selfies, and hack into the system to watch K-drama. Students coming from the refugee camps do not have a lot of material wealth and freedom. Now that they live in America, they may need to be taught how to manage their material possessions and freedom with facebook, iPhones, and technology. What are the implications? Educators will have to teach students how to monitor their technology usage and to prioritize their needs.

**Differences from Thai refugee camp schools.** The next findings address what students thought the major differences were between schools in the refugee camp and American schools and what they like and dislike about American schools. Students have shared that one of the biggest changes is discipline. Students feel American teachers should be more strict and punitive. In Thailand, fear was driven into students to learn. Most students supported this form of teaching and believe it would help students to be motivated about their learning. Yet, when participants were asked about the education in America compared to the education in Thailand, students said they learned more in the U.S. Therefore, it would make sense that using fear to drive learning would not be effective in America. If anything, what the findings show is that students want a

respectable learning environment and they have high regards for teachers. Hersi & Watkinson (2012) showed that if teachers believe, care, and support students in their learning, students will achieve educational success. I believe this is what is truly aspiring in the classrooms and why learning is occurring at a deeper level and higher rate when students share that they have learned more in America than in Thailand.

**Teaching strategies.** Students also shared the kinds of teaching strategies that they liked in class. Memorization and working in small groups or with friends were all mentioned as effective ways to learn for Karen students. It may be that as a collective culture, working with others is a productive way for students to learn. These are methods I will continue to employ in my classroom to improve learning. Furthermore, although students are comfortable with memorization, I would incorporate a MALP framework into the lessons (DeCapua & Marshall, 2012). By using MALP, I would be incorporating my students' assets and meeting them where they are at. Then teaching students to become independent thinkers.

**Social Issues.** One major finding that I would like to pinpoint are the social issues that students face from housing, transportation, health, jobs, drugs and alcohol, to being split from their families. Not to mention post-traumatic stress and mental health issues that students and their families have from the war in Burma. I would like to share an excerpt from the interview from the standpoint of the Karen bilingual E.A. who interacts daily with Karen students.

I think like sometimes the house, there's problem at home. We try to be secretive a lot. There's a lot of home life problems 'cause like what I see from my school and the kids that I work with, they have a lot of family problems. And then some

of them come by themselves and it's hard when they don't speak English. I think if there is one teacher to stand for them then they can go. At least if they have someone, they will feel safe, they will do better. Sometimes it's really hard to know them [students] personally because they don't want to open up. Sometimes they're ashamed or scared, like some kids they will go to the office. We don't really know them and we just see them, and they're kinda paranoid. They say 'everyone just sees me like a I'm a troubled kid in the office.'

It is important not to write off any of our students but to dig deeper and try to understand what are the motives behind the actions (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012).

**Community involvement.** Cultural community partners are essential at the school that I work at (Short & Boyson, 2000). Htee Moo Shee is a social worker from a community organization that teaches youth about leadership, community, and cultural adjustment. This year she taught approximately 75 Karen refugee students after school. This is what she says about her job:

I teach cultural adjustment. There are four stages: the first stage is what we call the honeymoon stage. You think when you come here [America] you will have fun. We see the movie. They have a nice house. They go to work. They have fun. When we first come here, we don't have to do anything. Our parents receive benefits from the county. The resettlement agency pays for the house for 3 months. They take care of us so we go shopping and we don't know how to save. We spend money and later on we hit the second stage. We get depressed. We got bills. We don't know where to go. We call our worker for help. Then we get to the third stage. We are more familiar with the culture and language, like for example,

we learn to like American food. We understand cultural things, like we don't use a spoon, only a fork and we get used to it. The fourth stage, you are doing fine. As a teacher, I can teach academics and English, but students need to learn more than English. Students have to learn how to survive and thrive in their new home country. Community partners are imperative when working with refugee populations. They are a rich resource we can tap into. Overall, it is vital for schools to have compassionate social workers, nurses, counselors, teachers, administration, and community partners to serve Karen refugee students.

### **Implications**

Through this study, I thought of five implications for teachers, schools, the school district, and community organizations to implement. First, schools or school districts should find ways to identify SLIFE students. Currently, the only system we have is WIDA and the ACCESS test to identify ELs, but more needs to be done to identify this unique group of students in order to better prepare educators for their learning. Second, schools need to be flexible and develop ways to orient new SLIFE into the school system. SLIFE come at any given time and it is alarming to be dropped into a huge school where one could easily get lost. Third, a key to helping SLIFE feel accepted and supported is how a teacher interacts with SLIFE. Teacher empathy, encouragement, and guidance can help students feel welcomed and help students overcome life's challenges and obstacles. Fourth, building an inclusive community will help students feel like a part of the greater community. Celebrating students' heritage and recognizing special holidays in the schools mean that students are becoming a part of a unique community where they are

valued. Lastly, the final implication deals with social welfare issues that schools have to help neutralize in order for SLIFE to be academically successful.

### **Identification of SLIFE**

One thing school districts could do at their student placement office is helping schools identify SLIFE students (DeCapua et al., 2009). This can be completed when students initially register with the school or school district. It could be a quick questionnaire for parents or students to fill out. Interpreters would have to be present to help. Having this piece of information will help teachers and schools place students into the proper classroom and it will help acclimate new students who have limited formal education into their new home schools.

### **New Student Orientation**

Then what schools can do when they receive this information is offer Karen refugee students a new student orientation. According to the literature review, DeCapua et al (2007) recommends a newcomer program that accommodates new arrivals to a school by creating translated school videos, buddying up new students, or give tours for new Karen refugee students. Many high schools across the nation have open house at the start of the school year where students get their schedules, make an id, and learn where their lockers are. Imagine being a newcomer and not even knowing that one is supposed to have all of that. This creates a warm and inviting environment. It prepares Karen refugee students for an American classroom since all of the participants claimed that the first day of school was one of the most nerve-wrecking and traumatic days for them.

### **Teacher Empathy**

As for teachers and instruction in the classroom, there are a couple of implications from this study that I know I will take away. First, I was reminded that new arrivals have a lot going on in their life. It is vital that teachers come with an empathetic heart, listening ears, and the patience to teach (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012). Teachers should not assume or jump to conclusions or reprimand students for their behavior until we know our student's situation. One does not know what goes on at home, what students carry from their past experiences, and how much students are constantly on their toes trying to adjust to a new country while trying to maintain their own cultural identities. Next, teachers could incorporate learning styles that Karen refugee students like, such as cooperative learning groups (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012). DeCapua et al. (2007) recommended small group work where it was collective in nature, but individuals were still responsible for their own share of work. I would also like to study other teaching strategies that students are unfamiliar with to see if they respond positively to it. I know just this year, students requested that I give out study guides before a test. Study guides are similar to what they are used to having before the big exam.

### **Building an Inclusive Community**

Another implication for all parties involved would be a way to build an inclusive community among Karen students and families. There are some positive initiatives that have already been put in place and I believe we need to expand or continue them, such as the Karen soccer tournament for high school students. This sort of activity is reminiscent of the classroom competitions in the Thailand refugee camps. It builds morale, camaraderie and community. What other ways can the district, our schools, and

classrooms utilize parents as an asset? These can be done through classroom projects and lessons that incorporate family history, Karen artwork, Karen music, and sewing Karen clothes. Another way is to celebrate the major holidays at school, such as Karen New Year and Karen Independence Day.

### **Social Welfare Needs**

Lastly, the final implications have to do with meeting the social welfare needs of Karen students. Students struggle with housing, jobs, mental health, healthcare, and many other issues. One of the biggest barriers to students learning is finding housing. For those students who come alone, I recommend building a dormitory similar to schools in Thailand. It may sound like a far-fetched idea, but this is common in Thailand and other countries where families who live in rural areas would often send their children to school in the cities. The United States has boarding schools for students who could afford a private school education, but what about public schools? Another option is to find people who are willing to house students like they do exchange students.

To address the issue of jobs, schools should offer high school courses or programs to help students get jobs. As the Karen social worker shared in the interview, after a few months, students have to pay for their own rent. At my school, we were able to partner up with another community organization that came in twice a week to teach students how to write a resume, fill out applications, and offer mock job interviews. According to Short & Boyson (2000), programs that offer career awareness classes, vocational education, or internships can help students develop practical skills and knowledge about job opportunities. Especially since not all students will be inclined to postsecondary options, nor are all students able to graduate before 21 years old. Partnering with outside

organizations is also a solution if one's school is unable to provide the courses. Helping students find real jobs so that they could become financially established is a necessity.

Finally, the implications of finding an outlet for students with mental health issues are critical. Our social worker runs small groups and has an open door policy for students to walk in, but some of our students need more help than what schools can offer. Schools need to partner with the county and outside resources that work with refugee populations who have experienced a great deal of trauma. Lastly, having a health office or clinic in a school helps to meet the needs of students. It would be ideal to get a family doctor, dentist, and optometrist through the schools because many of our students need their health shots, teeth filled, and glasses so they can see the white board (Short & Boyson, 2000).

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to this research. First, I wanted to conduct ten interviews with students and I was hoping to get five males and five females but more females volunteered for the study. Secondly, my participants were students who had been in the U.S. for some time. I would have liked to interview more recent newcomers. Tapping into this group would have not been a problem, but the interviews would have taken twice as long and it would have been costly to find translators to transcribe the interviews, being that each interview already averaged an hour and it took me three hours to transcribe each one. Plus, I am not sure how much students would have understood certain questions, being that they are new to the country. That would not negate, however, the fact that their responses would have been invaluable and their recall of camp life would have been fresher. Thirdly, I would have liked to interview teachers, the

nurse, and administration to get their perspective on working with Karen refugee students. If I did that, this study would have needed more time or it might begin to be too broad. Lastly, one final limitation that this study had was the perspective of parents and their voice. I would have liked to interview and observe a Karen household. It would be nice to see how students lived after school and how parents supported their education.

### **Further Research**

Conducting this study on Karen refugees and their educational experiences has led me to realize that more research should be conducted about the Karen community. As one of the newest refugee groups, there has been little research on the Karen people. I would like to see research on parent involvement and ways to reach out to families. Families play a huge role in their children's education. What are some ways schools can be more inclusive of families? Another aspect of research that should be studied is the trauma and mental health issues of Karen students. The Karen people have faced civil war, family separation, loss of a loved one, and growing up impoverished in a refugee camp. What are the effects of those factors on the mental health of Karen students? Lastly, it would be interesting to replicate the same interview with participants who dropped out of school. I wonder if their perspective on education and their circumstances would be similar or different from those who are still obtaining their education.

### **Conclusion**

When I set out to do this research, I was hoping to learn how I could learn better practices and strategies to teach Karen refugee students. As I interviewed my students and observed their behavior, it led me to wonder about their learning behavior. It was then that I realized before I could address the present, I had to address the past. I have a

greater appreciation and understanding of who Karen refugee students are and I hope to be a better teacher for them. It has been such an enjoyable experience getting to know these student participants again and listening to them share their stories, hopes, and dreams. It is sad and heart-warming to see their nostalgia for Thailand. Yet, when I asked them if they would ever go back to live there, they all said “no.” The door is wide open here, they say, even if they face difficult challenges ahead. I will conclude with the words of one of the participants, Law Eh, because it shows the Karen spirit for living and learning. It is this kind of spirit that motivates me to go farther and dig deeper as an educator. “Sometimes I meet with new student. I tell them, ‘try hard, do not give up. Try your best. This country is good for us, so try your best for as long as you can.’”

**APPENDIX A:****Focus Group Questionnaire**

PLEASE ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS AS BEST AS YOU CAN. WRITE IN COMPLETE SENTENCES.

1. How long have you been in America?
2. How long have you been going to school? In your home country and in America?
3. How different is the American schooling system compared to your native country? Can you describe the teachers? Classrooms? Schools?
4. What do you like about school that helps you to learn? What do you not like?
5. What can the school do to help you be successful in your education?
6. Who do you go to for help in school? (social worker, teacher, nurse, bilingual EA)?

**APPENDIX B:****Interview Questions for Participants***Interview Questions*Personal Information/ Family Life and Upbringing

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What grade are you in?
4. Tell me about your family. Who do you live with?
5. Who did you come to the U.S. with in your family?
6. How long did you live in the refugee camp?
7. How long have you been living in the United States?
8. Where have you lived in the United States? Or other countries?
9. What languages do you speak? Can you read and write in those languages?
10. What do you speak at home with your family? What do you speak with your friends?

Native School Experience

11. At what age did you go to school?
12. Did other family members go to school too?
13. Did your parents have an education? How high?
14. What did your parents say about school?

15. Do you have to pay money to go to school? What are the costs if you want to go to school?
16. How many years did you go to school in your native country?
17. How are you assigned a grade level? By age or education?
18. Did they teach you in Karen? Thai? English?
19. Was school far from your house? How did you get there?
20. Did you eat breakfast and lunch or dinner at school? Did you bring food from home? Or pay for food at school?
21. How many classes did you have? Examples? How long was school? What is a regular school schedule?
22. Did you have school breaks and vacations?
23. How many people were in a classroom?
24. Did you have uniforms?
25. Did you have textbooks? What kind of materials or tools did the teacher use? What kinds of materials did you bring to school? (ex: Notebooks? Pencils?) Describe any technology that you used.
26. Why did people go to school? What was the end goal?
27. What level of schools did you have? Elementary? Middle? High? College? Vocational?
28. Did you get homework? How long did it take you to do homework?
29. Describe a classroom. Describe a school building.
30. What kinds of teachers did you have? What were their ethnic backgrounds? Educational level?

31. What was your relationship like with your teachers?
32. How did your teachers teach? Teacher centered? Student centered? Small groups?
33. How about behaviors? Were students disciplined? How were they disciplined?
34. How did teachers know if students were ready to move on to the next grade or level?
35. Did your families know your teachers or meet with them?
36. If you didn't understand something or needed school work help, could you ask your teacher?

### American School Experience

37. What was your first day of school like?
38. What helped you to adjust to the American school system?
39. What do you like about school? What do you not like?
40. How different is the American schooling system compared to your native country?
41. How is Reading different in your country compared to America? Math? Science?  
How do people view reading in your native country?
42. How do people view reading here in America?
43. What would you like teachers to know about you or the Karen culture that they don't know?
44. Do you feel American teachers understand you?
45. How should American teachers teach Karen students? What are some teaching strategies that work for Karen students? Debate? Small groups? Memorization? What are some teaching strategies that you like since you've been to America?
46. What can the school do to help you be successful in your education?
47. What is hard about American life? Housing? Health? Jobs?

48. What do you want to be in America? Would you go back to your native country?

49. Who do you go to for help in school? (social worker, teacher, nurse, bilingual EA)?

50. What advice would you give to new Karen students who come to school?



|   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| How many classes did you have?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How long was school? What is a regular school schedule?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Did you have school breaks and vacations  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How many people were in a classroom?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Did you wear uniforms?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Did you have textbooks? What kinds of materials/ tools did the teacher use? What did you bring to school? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Why did people go to school? What was the end goal?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What level of schooling did you have? Elem./mid/high?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Did you get homework? How long did it take to finish?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Describe a classroom.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Describe a school building.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Describe any technology that you used.  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What kind of teachers did you have?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What were their ethnic backgrounds? Education level?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What was your relationship like with your teachers?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How did your teachers teach? Was it teacher/ student centered?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How about behaviors? Were students disciplined? How?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How do students move on to the next grade?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Did your family know your teachers or meet with them?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| If you need help, could you ask your teacher for help?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What was your first day of school like in the U.S.?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What helped you to adjust to the American school system?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What do you like about school? What do you not like?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

|   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| How different is American school from your native school?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How is reading different?<br>Math? Science?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How do you think people view reading Thailand and here in America?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What would you like teachers to know about Karen culture?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Do you feel the teachers understand you in America?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| How should teachers teach Karen students?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What are some teaching strategies that work for Karen students? What are some teacher strategies that you like? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What can the school do to help you be successful in your education?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What is hard about American life? Housing? Jobs? Health?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What do you want to be in America (career)?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Would you go back to your native country?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Who do you go to for help in school?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What advice can you give new Karen students?  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| What do Karen people believe about education?   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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