

# Refugee Students Arrive at a School: What Happens Next?

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## Abstract

As refugee children join classrooms across the world, schools have the opportunity to expand the global education of all students. Students, teachers, administrators, and families may partner together to form supportive environments. This article examines two and a half years in the life of a Maryland elementary school as 62 Burmese refugee students joined the population. Data is presented from both observations and student dialogue journals. The goal of the study was to consider how the interactions between refugee students, refugee families, teachers, and a principal define a community. These findings may support the development of pedagogy.

## Keywords

Refugee children, refugee families, global education, school community

## Introduction

Ngun Nee, a Burmese refugee, had her first opportunity to learn in a school building when she attended the second grade in the United States. While she was a lifelong learner, she had never had a formal school experience before arriving in the United States. During an interview that took place when she was a fourth grader, Ngun Nee reflected back on her first day of school. She explained, “When I first move here my teacher Ms. ...My teacher give me a little card. It’s writing my school name.” Ngun Nee described how her joy at receiving a name tag on her desk motivated her to learn to recognize her name. Ngun Nee had many experiences learning to read and write in Burmese with other families in the refugee camps, but she had not experienced using a drinking fountain, or using a school restroom. While there was much for Ngun Nee to learn about going to school in the United States, she had already begun to develop

as a reader, writer, and speaker in Burmese before arriving in the United States. When it is stated that public schools in the United States welcome students like Ngun Nee, this description masks an imbalance of power. The school system is positioned to grant or deny entry of members into a community. It is important to examine if the newly arrived members of a community feel ownership in redefining new norms for a community. As refugee students arrive at new schools, their membership within the community may be defined by a series of negotiations. This process of negotiation may differ among communities across the world.

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This article presents a depiction of Ngun Nee and the community that evolved as she and her Burmese refugee classmates attended a school in Maryland. The article seeks to highlight certain patterns that were observed and to allow the reader to draw conclusions regarding supportive pedagogy. Over the course of the two and a half years of the study, the refugee population at the school continued to increase. This article examines what it meant to be a school community during this time. Since the school continues to develop and grow, this article presents a snapshot in time.

### **Gathering Information**

This article presents an ethnographic study. As Wolcott (1997) indicates, “The word ‘ethnography’ means a picture of the ‘way of life’ of some identifiable group.” (p. 329) The goal of the study was to consider how the interactions between teachers, parents, and the principal influenced the ways that the school system granted or denied entry of refugee students into a community. The ‘identifiable group’ in this study was defined as the school community; yet membership in this community, and the ways and practices of the community, often differed depending on participants’ perspectives and actions. Research has long supported the value of studying an educational environment over time using ethnographic methods (Toohey, 2000; Heath, 1983; Whitmore & Cromwell, 1994; Moll, Estrada, Lopez, Lopez, 1988). Heath (1983) suggests that researchers are often both participant and observer within ethnographic studies. This was the case in the study described in this article. I was not observing the participants in isolation because they were influenced by my presence at the school. My role as both observer and participant allowed me to examine how the participants negotiated culture

and language as they created learning environments.

In order to create a picture of the development of the school community, multiple voices were studied. Data collection and analysis focused on nine teachers, 62 refugee students, the principal, and refugee parents. The findings presented in this article are based on multiple data sources. These sources included observations in classrooms, observations during grade level teacher meetings, observations during principal meetings with teachers, and dialogue journals.

### **Observations**

Over the two and a half year study, observational notes were taken within a variety of scenarios. These included classroom instruction in six different classrooms three days a week (1440 hours); grade level meetings with teachers for a total of 12 meetings (12 hours); and grade level teacher meetings with the principal for a total of 12 meetings (12 hours). Observational notes were assigned initial codes each week. Codes were compared across weeks and modified to accommodate newly discovered patterns.

### **Dialogue Journals**

Dialogue journals were exchanged with refugee students in an effort to document perceptions. The use of dialogue journals has been proposed as a methodology for understanding how students view the world (Denne-Bolton, 2013; Dionisio, 1991; Peyton, 2000). Dialogue journals were exchanged between the researcher and eight refugee students in grades four and five. The entries in these journals were shared with classroom teachers in all grade levels. In addition, two classroom teachers and students exchanged dialogue journals for a semester. In order to start the process of using a dialogue journal with each refugee student, a teacher or

researcher would write an entry in the journal. Often this entry would be read to the student or acted out. The students were given a chance to independently respond to the journal throughout the day. When I used dialogue journals with students, I initially met independently with each student. I would write in the dialogue journal while in front of the student and pass the notebook back to the student. When I presented the dialogue journal to the student, I would act out my question and point to the journal. The student would be encouraged to write back to me in the journal. At the end of the day, the dialogue journal would be left for the student to write back to me. Each week I would return to the classroom to read the students' responses and write back to them. Each response from me included a question in order to encourage the continuation of the conversation. Students could respond with drawings and use actions to provide context for their writings and drawings in the dialogue journals. Teachers and students shared their responses with me. The dialogue journal entries were coded. Codes were compared over time and modified to include newly developing patterns.

This study draws on sociocultural and critical theories in order to examine the social community. A sociocultural theory of learning suggests that interactions among groups inform the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory situates actions and voices in cultural, historical, and institutional settings (Wertsch, 1991). By applying Vygotsky's ideas through research in different cultures, sociocultural theory has implications for pedagogy (Oguz, 2007). Critical theory examines how changes in society are influenced by culture. When referencing first generation critical theorists, Antonio (1983) indicates, "Critical theory is concerned with contradictions between ideology and reality." (p. 331). Critical theory uses social

criticism to mark the gap between the ideal and the real. As critical theory has evolved, it has not proposed a specific methodology, but still embraces an approach to the social world. Within this article both sociocultural theory and critical theory will be used to place the interactions among participants within larger themes. The reliability of the study is supported by the collection of multiple sources of data and the longevity of the study. What follows is a discussion of the findings.

## Findings

### Redefining School Culture

As the actions and verbalizations of the participants were analyzed, it became apparent that the refugee students often did not all experience the same set of circumstances. Discussions with students revealed that some students had traveled to the United States with their entire family. In other cases, some students did not arrive in the United States with all of their family members. Some family members were left behind in Burma<sup>1</sup> and others had been killed. Some students relocated to the United States and reunited with individuals that they had known in their home countries, while other students did not know anyone in the new country. Students drew from both interconnecting and divergent funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzales, 1992). Within dialogue journals, students described the journey that they took to arrive in the United States and their conflicting feelings about being in the United States. For example, within his dialogue journal Muan discussed how his family moved from Burma to India to the United States. He stated, "We were in India because we wanted to come to America. From Burma, we can't come to America." Later he wrote about his feelings at the moment and indicated, "I really don't want to go back." Other students were observed

simultaneously expressing a love of the life they lived in Burma while also describing what they liked about their new lives in the United States. This can be seen when Sui Thai wrote, “ I like Maryland because a lot of my friend of Chin people and Burma people in her” (I like Maryland because a lot of my friends are Chin and Burmese people are here). Other times Sui Thai did not abandon her desire to return to Burma. For example, she excitedly read aloud what she wrote in her journal, “ I think we visit. I don’t yet! X mas time I visit. My father say we will visit.” This implies that a desire to return to a life in Burma may have left students with parallel perceptions. As Lerner (2012) states, “Yet, as experience demonstrates, assimilation is not the most appropriate acculturation process for refugee children.” (p. 10). This would suggest that many students processed their lives in different ways.

During this time, some teachers began to evolve in their understandings of the different contexts of students’ lives. This can be seen when a fourth grade teacher expressed surprise that some students wished to return to Burma. Grade level meetings began to host discussions that supported teachers’ evolving understandings of their students. During one meeting, a third grade teacher shared her puzzlement in learning that one of her students did not arrive in the United States accompanied by all of the members of his family. The fourth and fifth grade teachers’ comments often demonstrated how they continuously revisited their understandings. Spradley (1997) notes, “Culture, the knowledge that people have learned as members of a group, cannot be observed directly.” (p. 7) This articulates how difficult it is to state how the teachers’ understandings of students’ backgrounds directly informed the learning environments; yet, it is worth noting that teachers’

verbalizations appeared to represent a paradigm shift.

The principal also expressed the understanding that she had undergone a shift in her perceptions. When the principal wanted to receive input from the refugee families, she decided that the best place to do this was in a setting where the families would feel comfortable. As students were observed discussing probability in a math lesson, they were asked to detail something that they did frequently. They described praying and going to church. The principal determined that the neighborhood church played a role in students’ lives. She met with religious leaders in order to seek permission to meet with parents at the church. She went to Sunday services that were attended by the refugee families. The principal decided to hold a “pancake breakfast” for families at the church but did not realize that the parents did not eat pancakes and instead preferred rice. Through the use of a translator at the church during the breakfast, the principal began to ask parents if they felt comfortable with communications sent home. Family members expressed confusion as to the purposes of many communications sent home and the actions required of the parents by the school. The ways that knowledge is represented in a community inform the culture (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). The principal and families negotiated to have other church members and bilingual students attempt to provide to families context for school communications and provide the principal with feedback. After working with families outside of the school grounds during the breakfast, the principal that she felt that she was just starting to understand how families spent their time and how they communicated. She also revealed that she would need to engage in a series of social negotiations.

As time passed, the principal and teachers were continuously discussing their perceptions of the tensions that arose as time passed. They saw that these tensions would require both reflection and readjustment. For example, some teachers struggled with the amount of responsibility given to some refugee students at home. While parents worked, some students were responsible for taking care of younger siblings. One teacher, Teacher X, expressed her disagreement with this decision. As Lerner (2012) notes, refugee families sometimes do not engage in the same patterns of child rearing as families born in America. During the course of the study, Teacher X reflected on the presence of this new social pattern. The juxtaposition of differing ideas sometimes led to the examination of the relationship between children, parents, teachers, and school administrators.

While paradigm shifts were occurring for the principal and some teachers, simultaneously many refugee families were interacting with each other. Knowledge sharing occurred on a micro-level. Refugee family members who had been in the United States for a year accompanied newer families to parent/teacher conferences and school events. Burmese families began interacting with each other while picking up or dropping off children at the school, while working at the local nail salons and plants, and while living in the same neighborhood apartment complexes. For example, one parent was observed explaining her understandings of the meaning of a report card to another parent during the school pickup time.

While refugee families found ways to informally connect, their presence at the formally organized parent organization was non-existent. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) served as the main formally organized parent leadership group at the school. The PTA contained no refugee family members during the

time of the study. Invitations to attend PTA events at the school were issued through paper flyers distributed to students. Existing members of the PTA created both the language and methods of distribution for the flyers. This raises many questions. While the lack of interaction between non-refugee families and refugee families within the PTA could have been due to the timing of the meetings, it may also have been due to other elements. The existing members of the PTA issued the invitation to refugee families new to the school. Were the new refugee family members familiar with the habits, customs, or artifacts associated with this group? Did the new families use artifacts such as flyers with the same purpose and intentions? Did they embrace the use of flyers as a method of communication? Was the structure of the organization itself linked to the goals and objectives of the families? Were refugee families concerned that the organization embraced their strengths and ways of being? In addition, did all family members, including aunts and grandparents, feel welcome to join the organization? This may be an important question to ask since not all students arrived in the United States with all of their family members. Family dynamics were often restructured as refugee family members were separated across countries. While I asked refugee students and families what encouraged or discouraged involvement in parent organizations, I never received responses to these types of questions. It is possible that the meaning of these actions was unknown to even the participants themselves. The value of the study described in this article is that it may encourage readers to consider issues of conflicting methods of communication, different purposes for literacy artifacts, and divergent goals for families.

### **Drawing on Students' Resources**

At the start of the study, all of the teachers experienced confusion as to where to begin when instructing students. A few teachers verbalized a deficit perspective by indicating, "They are coming here with no education." As the study progressed, the data collected through the use of the dialogue journals appeared to contradict this perspective. The dialogue journals provided information as to the strengths that Burmese students possessed as both writers and thinkers. In addition, the dialogue journals provided evidence as to how the refugee students were processing their life experiences. What follows is a description as to how dialogue journals helped determine the intellectual and emotional resources of refugee students.

While many teachers had questions about the experiences that students had before arriving at the school, I learned that students' stories would only be revealed over the course of years. Over time, students occasionally provided glimpses as to how they perceived their lives in Burma. Teachers started to discuss the idea that asking a student to describe his or her life is a complicated and complex process. They debated what they should ask a student to share in a dialogue journal. Violence was a reason that many students fled to the refugee camps and were then granted entry to the United States. Some teachers communicated that they did not want to upset a student by asking questions about their lives in Burma. Other teachers verbalized the perspective that all of a student's life experiences deserve reflection. They felt that it was not a teacher's job to evaluate which life experiences to discuss. Refugee students were found to make these decisions for themselves as they choose what experiences to share in the dialogue journals. For example, when writing back and forth to Ngn Nee, I drew a picture of the mountains near my previous home in

Arizona. She responded to my observation by asking if the mountains were scary or fun. In response, I wrote back to Ngun Nee in her dialogue journal:

Dear Ngun Nee,  
The mountains in Arizona were not scary. They were pretty and red. Were the mountains scary near your grandfather's house? Did you go to your grandfather's house a lot?  
Sincerely,  
Mrs. Croce

After I read my response aloud to Ngun Nee, she took a couple of days to respond. Her reply is included below. I have transcribed her journal entry exactly as it was written. Following the journal entry I have written a translation in parenthesis.

Dear Mrs. Croce  
My grandfather come to the Burma and some time I come to My grandfather house want I go to My grandfather I stay 3 day and lot of thing to eat and it was very good My grandmother is die I miss my grandmother.  
Sincerely,  
Ngun nee  
(My grandfather came to Burma and sometimes I came to my grandfather's house. I want to go to my grandfather. At my grandfather's I stayed 3 days and ate a lot of things, and it was very good. My grandmother is dead. I miss my grandmother).

Within this exchange Ngun Nee decided what she would like to share. She could easily have addressed my questions about her grandfather with a one-word response but she chose not to. This interaction occurred after she and I had written to each other for two months. Ngun Nee was able to use the dialogue journal in order to process her life experiences. This

demonstrates that dialogue journals provided key insights into a student's emotional needs as well as his or her development as a writer.

Many teachers openly questioned how to assess students based on established curriculum goals for the state and county. Often times within a common curriculum the same goals are established for all children in one grade level (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018); yet, many teachers began to examine how the refugee students arriving in their classrooms had strengths and needs that differed from other students in the class. For example, even though refugee students had not been regularly reading picture books in the refugee camps, they had a variety of literacy experiences which teachers could draw on such as reading airline tickets, fast food signs, and passports. A few teachers found ways to develop curriculum that built on students' strengths. For example, in a third grade classroom, refugee students were asked to read a series of fast food signs and design a story. Yet, the teacher worried about her choices since reading environmental print was not a goal listed in the third grade state curriculum. This instance demonstrates how teachers continued to question how to differentiate instruction while also meeting requirements within state curriculum.

At the start of the study, all of the teachers verbalized that they were not prepared to help students process the complex emotions associated with being a refugee. Part of this may be attributed to the reality that no teacher at the school had been a refugee. Initially, teachers often discussed amongst themselves how to respond to a student's actions or words. Over time interactions during read alouds, guided reading groups, and writing centers allowed teachers access to students' words and actions. For example, when reacting to a read aloud one student spoke of missing family members left

behind in Burma. The classroom teacher answered by indicating, "Thank you for sharing. Who else wants to share?" Later she reflected on how she might have responded differently. As the study progressed, some teachers were seen discussing their observations of refugee students, attempting to understand the context for situations, and determining how to respond.

Another pattern that was noted among many teachers was a desire to better understand whether some refugee students would benefit from receiving gifted and talented or special education services. During the course of the study, it was documented that often teachers were not sure if students' actions could be attributed to experiencing new language and culture. For example, teachers debated as to whether certain actions reflected culture shock (Igoa, 1995) or a need for special education services. Some teachers were also uncertain as to the unique ways that refugee student would demonstrate characteristics of giftedness. Nguyen (2012) implies that parents and teachers of gifted students must understand that culture can inform the complex human experiences in a student's life. Within the study, one teacher had many students within the classroom that had been labeled gifted and talented. The teacher had also been placed in a gifted and talented program as a child. She noted that one refugee student in her classroom had been assigned to receive gifted and talented services. The student had also been described by the school as autistic. The teacher in this classroom verbalized her uncertainty as to how the student's autism, giftedness, and identity as a refugee student intersected. Throughout the study, the teacher continued to collect data through classroom observations, reading events, and writing samples in order to learn about intersectionality.

In addition to observing students' actions and words, a few teachers began to seek out

resources outside of their classrooms in order to establish contexts for the refugee students' experiences. For example, the principal encouraged teachers to start professional reading literature circles with texts written by Burmese authors such as Phan and Damien (2010). Every teacher in the school was given time to observe in another classroom at the school in order to examine the dialogue and action of other teachers and refugee students. A Burmese community liaison was also hired to answer teacher questions about observed actions or dialogue. For example, one teacher had a conversation with a refugee student whose observed behavior appeared to violate class rules. During this conversation, the student responded by smiling. The teacher perceived this to be a negative reaction. The community liaison clarified the actions of the students by providing context. He indicated that many Burmese individuals would respond to such an interaction by smiling so as not to create discomfort or aggravate a situation. The teacher then indicated that in the future she would not view smiling as a sign of disrespect when engaging in conversations about behavior with a student. This demonstrates how some teachers began to use evolving insights in order to reflect on their actions and words.

## Conclusions

This article discussed the ways that refugee students, refugee families, teachers, and a principal interacted to form a school community over two and a half years. Both observational notes and dialogue journals were used to assess these interactions. Readers might consider relating these findings to other school contexts. Some of the teachers and the principal in this study verbalized their experiences with shifting paradigms. These shifts included fluid

understandings about students' strengths and the values held by refugee families.

In addition to documenting teacher and principal paradigm shifts, this study provided a discussion as to the varying actions and dialogue that surrounded a formal parent organization (the PTA). Refugee family members were not observed participating in the PTA. This suggests that formal parent organizations also require a series of negotiations. Other school communities might consider that literacy artifacts may embody different purposes in different contexts (Perry, 2009). Members of a group construct different social languages that are dependent on their membership in the group (Gee, 2001). Duran (2016) also indicates that refugees have multiple identities that inform how they navigate language. The school in this study might consider how refugee families' informal interactions contribute to ideas about cultural artifacts both inside and outside of school. This might help renegotiate interactions within the PTA or allow the school to consider new ways to structure other parent organizations.

This article presents findings that suggest that schools are unique systems that require negotiation of actions and words. As this article demonstrates, refugee students each possessed distinctive sets of literacy and life experiences. Burmese students revealed their strengths as the study progressed. This led some teachers to question how to establish individual goals for refugee students in relation to state curriculum goals. As this study suggests, this is a question that needs to be revisited. Schools that are undergoing a shift in demographics might consider using observations and dialogue journals to begin to analyze the contexts of the actions and dialogue of refugee students and families.

## Notes

1. Students in the study referenced their home country as *Burma* instead of the also used *Myanmar*.

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