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Abstract

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Keywords

Karen Refugees, Early Childhood Education, Narrative Inquiry

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Refugee Children's Adaptation to American Early Childhood Classrooms: A Narrative Inquiry

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Researchers have suggested that a paucity of research exists on refugee youth in early childhood education settings. Arguing that children's stories provide educators a valuable resource for understanding the meaning children make of initial cross-cultural experiences, this article presents a narrative inquiry into the stories and artwork of three early childhood students, along with the narratives of their families, all Karen refugees from Myanmar. Examining what these stories reveal about the children's initial experiences in an American early childhood setting, we share their stories of adaptation, their experiences of cultural dissonance, and their illustrations of change over time. In addition to developing these themes, we also promote the use of multi-modal storytelling and the collection of family stories in narrative inquiries into young children's experience. As educators strive to provide high-quality educational experiences for all children, listening to children's stories of their adaptation experience and the narratives of their families may help us to foster smooth transitions into American early childhood classrooms for young refugee students. Keywords: Karen Refugees, Early Childhood Education, Narrative Inquiry

Over 300,000 men, women, and children are currently seeking asylum or have been granted refugee status in the United States. Of course, that number more than triples when we look at refugee migration globally. Over 10 million refugees have looked to other countries to provide a safe haven during times of conflict or persecution in their native countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2011). The large population of refugees in the U.S., as well as around the globe, creates challenges for educators as they determine the best ways to embrace refugee youth and adapt their classroom practices to provide an education that meets the needs of all students. As schools across the U.S. continue to become more diverse, the schooling of refugees is becoming a prominent topic in the field of education.

Educational research on refugee youth and schooling has been critiqued for conflating the adaptation experiences of refugees with those of immigrants (McBrien, 2005).¹ Although both refugees and immigrants are permanently living in a new country, immigrants choose to leave their homeland, whereas refugees often leave due to persecution, war, or violence. Current research also tends to focus on adult or adolescent refugees and is often removed from educational settings (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; McBrien, 2005). Comparatively less research examines young refugee children's experiences from their perspectives as they adapt to new settings and situations, especially in the specific context of schools. As Hamilton and

¹ It is important to recognize the difference between a refugee and an immigrant. Refugees have fled their native country due to persecution, war, or other violence. They have sought and received asylum in the country in which they are currently living. Immigrants are those who have left their native country voluntarily. Those who are granted refugee status further differ from asylum seekers who are in some stage of seeking a sanctuary in a country other than their native land. Asylum seekers have not yet been granted the legal rights in their host country as those who have attained the refugee status. The study described in this paper focuses on those who have been granted refugee status.

Moore (2004) suggest, “there is a paucity of material specifically concerned with refugee children, and only a small proportion of this is about school-based interventions and programmes” (p. xi).

In response to this gap, we designed a study to examine the experiences of refugee children and their families, as shared through their narratives. Our goal was to understand Karen refugees’ views on American schooling. More specifically, we were interested in learning how young refugee children and their families narrate their early experiences of American schooling. Megan Prior, the first author, conducted a narrative inquiry into the stories of adaptation to early childhood classrooms told by three young Karen students from Myanmar who were attending Preschool and Kindergarten in the United States. The purpose of our study was to generate understandings of the children’s views of the early schooling experiences and how these were expressed in narratives. As the teacher of these children, Megan collected children’s stories and artwork, which were complemented by family interviews, to investigate what the narratives revealed about the children’s adaptation to new communities and new schooling as they entered their first years of formal education.

During the course of this study, Megan conducted initial interviews with the families to provide an oral history of the families’ experiences prior to becoming refugees, during the transition, and after arrival in the United States with refugee status. Then, the students created drawings and told stories to share their experiences at school. A second round of family interviews later in the study produced narratives of the families’ perceived understanding of their child’s adaptation to the school and provided an opportunity for families to discuss the children’s stories and artwork. At its conclusion, this study provides an analysis of Karen refugee students’ narratives in order to promote a greater understanding of the adaptation experiences that these young children share in their stories.

Within the field of early childhood education, research commonly focuses on observation of children within a familiar environment, such as in play, at home, or in school. In the case of young refugee students who are unfamiliar with American culture and its formal educational setting, early childhood educators must look toward other methods of research to understand refugee experiences. The use of narratives may provide early childhood educators with an alternative resource for understanding and considering the experiences of young refugee students.

In what follows, we first present a brief overview of the historic struggles of the Karen in Burma. We then provide a discussion of extant research on refugee youth and adaptation to schooling, concluding with an explanation of why we focused on the stories and artwork of young refugee children. Next we present the methodology of the study. Finally, the remainder of the article is devoted to sharing the study’s findings, which are organized by themes in the shared and “storied” adaptation experiences of three young Karen girls and their families.

A Background Note on the Karen State and Burma

The Karen people settled in the hill country of Burma, now known as Myanmar, after migrating from China hundreds of years ago. They have since endured periods of great conflict with the Burmese. During the Konbaung Dynasty from 1752–1885, the Karen people were persecuted, heavily taxed, and enslaved by the Burmese people. In the Burmese war with the British beginning in 1824, many of the Karen people, still exploited by the Burmese, saw the British as allies. It was during the colonial era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the Karen people began petitioning the British Empire for separation from Burma. During World War II, open fighting between Burmese nationalists and the Karen began, resulting in the destruction of many Karen villages and massacres of the Karen people.

Following the war, Burma was granted independence from Britain in 1948, and the Karen remained subjects to the new Burmese government. Initially, the Karen sought to live peacefully with the Burmese, but this period of calm quickly ended with tensions building on both sides. Burmese militias began invading Karen villages Christmas Eve of 1948. This began a civil war in Burma, and the Karen people have continued to fight and petition for independence (Keenan, 2005). This conflict continued into the 21st century, forcing many Karen people to flee their villages seeking asylum across the Thai border in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2009). As many as 200,000 Karen refugees are reported to have been driven from their homes (Keenan, 2005).

After several decades of living in Thai refugee camps, officials recognized that the Karen people would not be able to go back to their homeland. Beginning in 2006, several countries, including the U.S., opened their borders to Karen refugees. Over the first several years, the majority (at approximately 73%) of Burmese refugees who left Thai camps resettled in the U.S., with most of the remainder moving to Australia, Canada, Finland, and Norway. Yet, most Karen refugees remain in Thailand (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).

Refugee Youth and Schooling

Researchers have noted that schools present refugee youth both an important means of integration into their new communities (Bačáková, 2011; Hamilton, 2004; Mosselson, 2007; Rah, Shangmin, & Thu Suong Thi, 2009) and an immediate challenge. On one hand, as Bačáková (2011) explains, “Much has been written on the importance of education and the school environment in the process of successful integration of refugees” (p. 163). Based on the research literature exploring the role of schooling for refugees, she notes that schools in host countries have been found to “facilitate contact with members of local communities; reintroduce a sense of normality and routine; provide a safe environment; increase self-reliance and empowerment; and foster social, psychological and intellectual development” (p. 163). On the other hand, adaptation to an unfamiliar school environment presents difficulties for refugee youth (Hamilton, 2004; Hoot, 2011).

Much research on refugees and schooling tends to be embedded within the more-developed literature related to immigration and schooling. Gibson’s (1997) research, for example, indicates that immigrant youth success in adapting to new cultural norms and practices reflects a variety of factors, which include the society of origin, the society of settlement, and reasons for migrating (see also Ogbu, 1987). Moreover, factors such as age, gender, previous schooling, economic standing, and support in the host country all influence this transition. Additionally, parents and community members can inhibit or encourage the adaptation of refugee and immigrant children (Ascher, 1985; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In some cases, parental involvement in schooling provides encouragement for children, helping them bridge the cultural gap between home and school. In other cases, cultural conflicts between family and school create an environment in which borders are created rather than bridges (Erickson, 2001; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993). Ultimately, as Gibson (1988, 1995) suggests, newcomers who view knowledge of the new cultural practices as an addition to their existing life, as opposed to those who seek to assimilate, are often more successful at adapting to the educational settings of the new country.

Although the research on immigration and schooling provides valuable insights on newcomer youth’s experiences in schools, many researchers have pointed to differences between immigrants and refugees, arguing that we need more research that focuses on the specific experiences of refugee youth (McBrien, 2005; Mosselson, 2006). For example, refugees tend to perform better in school than immigrants (Mosselson, 2007). Yet, as Mosselson (2007) notes, they “are more likely than other demographic groups to suffer high

rates of depression” (p. 99). Partly due to the conflation of immigrants and refugees in much educational research, the specific educational experiences of refugee groups and individuals have not been sufficiently explored.

Pinson and Arnot (2007) suggest that the research literature on refugees and schooling is rather limited generally, with most research focusing on issues of policy or on "practitioner discourses" relating to the perceived needs of refugee youth in schooling and school-based interventions, "best practice," or practical advice for teachers (e.g., Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Hoot, 2011; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006). Some more recent research also focuses on how schools can work with refugee parents (McBrien, 2011; Rah et al., 2009). A strength of this existing research, much of which is based upon interviews with educators and families, is that it views adaptation as a "two-way street;" instead of putting all of the onus on refugee youth and families to adapt to host country schools, schools themselves are urged to adapt to the needs of their new students and communities.

Despite the development of research on refugee schooling over the past decade, authors of reviews of this research have noted a number of gaps. Pinson and Arnot (2007), for example, argue that the research on refugee youth and schooling needs to be more sociological. McBrien (2005) suggests that in the U.S. we need to pay more attention to specific refugee communities. She writes that "the few noted differences [in refugee populations] indicate the need to research specific refugee groups to discover their particular needs, especially refugee groups arriving in the United States since 1990" (p. 357). Two additional areas in which our understandings of refugee school experiences are limited are early childhood education (Hoot, 2011) and the experiences of young refugee youth in their own words (Mosselson, 2007). Mosselson explains, "Research has delineated perceptions of refugees in schools, and discussions have taken place in the literature on how they adapt; "they," however, are rarely asked themselves" (p. 102). Her work (2006, 2007) and that of others (e.g., Bačáková, 2011; Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006) begins to explore the experiences of adolescents in their own words, but we have not found the voices of very young refugee children represented in the research literature.

Our study was designed to respond to this gap by focusing on the stories that young refugee children tell of their adaptation to American early childhood classrooms. We were inspired by the work of several authors who look to personal stories to document the emotions, sacrifices, and daily life experienced by refugees and immigrants moving to a new country. Florio-Ruane (1997), for example, discusses how stories help us understand self and others in the immigration experience because they highlight the societal and personal implications of cross-cultural experience. This idea is manifested in Igoa's (1995) longitudinal research, which focused on stories told by immigrant youth (aged 10–12). Igoa used what she called a "dual-dialogic approach," reflecting with former students, now young adults, on stories told through filmstrips created while they were students in her class. She analyzed these student and teacher reflections on the making of filmstrips to understand the experiences that children used as inspiration for their work. Analyzing these narratives, Igoa developed a greater understanding of the experiences of immigrant children entering school. Her approach served as inspiration for our study of the reflective artwork and oral stories of the Karen refugee children and their families.

In addition, we were inspired by Fuertes' (2010) work with Karen refugees, in which the refugees' narratives led to a metaphor that extended conversations about their lives and experiences. Through the metaphor, "birds inside a cage," the participants related the difficulties of their lives inside a refugee camp. Some, for example, told of forgetting how to be independent and self-reliant because of the length of their stay inside the camp. We rarely

hear the kinds of insights on the refugee experience that Fuertes' work provides. This is especially true in regard to the insights of very young children and their families.

In response to these problems and possibilities, the goal of this study was to explore the stories of a specific group of young refugee children to better understand their views of their adaptation to an early childhood setting in the Mid-West United States. Focusing on the oral stories of young Karen refugee children, their related artwork, and children's and parents' reflection on these, we share lessons learned from the narratives of early school experience.

The Study

Narrative research, Creswell (2007) writes, "begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (p. 54). Interest in narrative inquiry as an approach to qualitative research has surged in recent years, stoked, perhaps, by claims that stories both shape and communicate our understanding of personal experience and the meaning we ascribe to it (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This description of the value of stories is reflected in the design of this study. We viewed narratives as a way to learn about how several young Karen refugee children in Megan's school experienced—and "storied"—their first year(s) in American early childhood classrooms. The research question that guided this study was, *What do the stories of Karen refugee children and their families reveal about the children's adaptation to an American early childhood classroom?*

Several distinctly different types of qualitative inquiry are captured under the "narrative inquiry" label. Often these approaches appear to share little other than the interest in "narrative" or "story." Three broad categories in particular shape our understanding of the field of narrative inquiry. Donald Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between two of these, contrasting the "analysis of narratives" with "narrative analysis." In his conception, the analysis-of-narratives type of narrative inquiry includes those studies in which "researchers collect stories as data and analyze them with paradigmatic processes" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). In contrast, the narrative-analysis type of narrative inquiry refers to investigations in which "researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories (for example, a history, case study, or biographic episode)" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). In addition to these two kinds of narrative inquiry described by Polkinghorne, we would add a third approach. Some narrative inquiry focuses on *how* people tell their stories of experience. This approach is exemplified by Leslie Rebecca Bloom's (1996) study of the shifting narratives told by one woman.

Given the nature of our research question, we designed this study as an *analysis-of-narratives* type of narrative inquiry. We were interested to learn what stories children would tell about their experience in an American early childhood setting and what these stories might teach us about their adaptation. Yet, young children's stories present challenges to narrative researchers, given the children's age and the developmental process of storytelling. As such, the standard interview-based approach to the generation of stories in this kind of narrative inquiry would not suffice for this project.

During the early childhood years, children express their knowledge and understanding through a variety of mediums, including artwork, three-dimensional constructions, language, or other representative means. Moreover, for refugee children with limited exposure to the host country's language, expressing ideas, feelings, and understanding may rely heavily on other forms of communication. For these reasons, Megan not only documented children's oral and written stories, but also collected the drawings that were created to illustrate them. We viewed the artwork not as a supplement to the oral and written stories, but instead as another mode of story-telling. In addition, Megan collected the stories of the children's families to provide a multi-perspective narrative of the children's experience. Finally, she also

drew on her observations and experiences with the children as their teacher. Ultimately, for each participating child, we developed narrative cases from their written and oral stories, artwork, teacher observations, and family interviews.

Role of the Researchers

At the time of the study, Megan, the primary researcher, was a teacher in a diverse, suburban early childhood classroom. She wanted to understand the adaptation process of young refugee children in order to raise the quality of education for her students, to ensure the effectiveness of her teaching, and to share these experiences and findings with other educators. Tricia Niesz, the second author, was Megan's graduate school advisor at this time. She helped Megan design a study that was methodologically sound and would respond to her questions and interests. Tricia continued to provide methodological guidance throughout the conduct of the study. In addition, over the course of the data collection, she engaged in peer debriefing with Megan as related to the analysis and interpretation of the narratives. This peer debriefing allowed Tricia to mentor sound research practices, promote Megan's reflexivity, and contribute to the trustworthiness of the study. Once the study was completed, we developed and wrote this article together, building from Megan's master's degree capstone paper.

Ethics

IRB approval was obtained prior to asking permission from families, children, and the school in which this study took place. Since Megan was also the children's teacher, several steps were taken to maintain voluntary participation and limit undue influence. First, she met with each individual family and a family advocate to discuss the possibility of participating in the study. The families were asked to discuss the study at home with their children in their preferred language so the children had time to understand the study before being approached by Megan. If the families were still interested in participating following these discussions, Megan approached the children, explaining the study by relating it to activities they were familiar with completing during a normal day of school. Their involvement in the study beyond the normal activities of their day was limited to ensure the confidentiality and comfort of the students.

Participants

Megan developed narrative case studies of three Karen children, all girls aged 4–6 and all from her own school, over the course of approximately four months. The children were chosen based on their age, their time spent in a refugee camp before moving to the United States, and the obtainment of refugee status. At the time of the study, all refugees present at the participating school were Karen and only three had been born in a refugee camp and migrated with their families. Megan was a teacher of two of the three children at this time. The three children who met the criteria for participation in the study were Allison,² Aurora, and Cindy. Allison, the eldest, was the first from the Karen community to enter the early childhood education setting. Aurora, the next eldest, and Cindy, the youngest, entered school a year and a half after Allison.

All of the participants and their families had several shared experiences before arriving in the United States. The children spoke the same language, were from Burmese Karen

² All names are pseudonyms selected by the children themselves.

families, and were born in the same refugee camp, Tham Hin, in Thailand. Tham Hin is characterized by homes made of bamboo and plastic tarps, rationed food of rice and beans, little to no furniture, and no electricity. The children's parents had little work during this time, as there was no authorized movement in and out of the camp. Additionally, none of the children had received any education prior to their arrival in the U.S. At the time of the study, all had been settled in their current U.S. community for approximately three years. Each family had support from local organizations and a family advocate who assisted them in understanding American culture and living in the U.S. All of the families indicated that they would like to return to their homeland if it becomes possible to be safe and free.

The family advocate was included in all interviews as the primary language used throughout the study was English. The advocate worked closely within the Karen community and was aware of cultural differences, language barriers, and each family's experiences. During the study, the advocate helped ensure understanding between all parties during the interviews to promote accuracy of the narratives shared.

Data Collection

After obtaining IRB approval, selecting the three Karen refugee families with children enrolled in the school, and obtaining the children's assent and parents' permission to conduct the study with the assistance of their family advocate, Megan commenced developing prompts to guide the children's story-telling and art-making sessions. Throughout the course of the study, data were collected through these sessions and included the children's stories with accompanying drawings. All sessions were video and audio recorded. These were complemented by observations of the children in the classroom. To monitor her subjectivity and document her reflexivity, Megan engaged in journal writing and debriefing conversations with Tricia throughout the study.

In addition, we sought to link the children's artwork and stories with the narratives of their families, collected through digitally recorded in-depth English interviews with the assistance of the family advocate. Each family was comprised of the mother and father of the participant, with the exception of one whose father was unavailable throughout the duration of this study. Additionally, during the first family interview for two of the three primary participants, grandparents were involved in telling the families' stories of becoming refugees, living in the Thai refugee camp, and resettling in the United States.

Specifically, during the first phase of the study, Megan conducted and digitally recorded in-depth interviews with the children's families to develop an oral history of each family's experience prior to their arriving in the United States. We used Rubin and Rubin's (2005) "responsive interview model" to guide family interviews, as we found their advice on follow-up questions and prompts, as well as their conversational approach, helpful in generating the kinds of extended stories valued in narrative inquiry. The family interviews were conducted in English with the assistance of the family advocate, who was present to help with any translation or explanation needed by the families. Ultimately, these interviews were successful in providing valuable information regarding the children's histories and experiences as perceived and interpreted by their families.

In the second phase of the study, the students developed four oral stories with artwork guided by prompts, which were based on information from the family interviews. The prompts included starters such as: "Tell me about when you first started school" and "Tell me about a time you were happy at school." Megan also kept observation notes during each of the storytelling sessions with the children. During each session, she developed analytical insights as recommended by Hatch (2002) to guide future interview discussions and storytelling sessions. After the first two storytelling sessions, Megan assessed the data

collected through interviews and children's stories to identify missing information and to revise prompts and questions for the second two sessions.

In the third phase of the study, Megan conducted additional interviews with each of the families; these were focused on their perceived understanding of their child's adaptation both at the beginning and end of the study. In these interviews, the families discussed their current understandings of their child's adaptation to the school. They also provided 'member checking' feedback on their child's narratives as Megan shared the children's dialogue and artwork with each family. The families also discussed Megan's initial analyses and interpretations based on her sessions with the children and offered their feedback by adding detail or sharing additional stories.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data throughout the study by recording and developing analytic insights in memos. The formal data analysis that took place later in the study consisted of two stages. In the first stage we analyzed the data to produce a narrative account of each child's experiences over time. We used the stories of each child and her parents to construct a narrative of experiences of adaptation as told from their points of view. To ensure accuracy of the narrative, we transcribed digitally recorded data from all sessions. We then reviewed and transcribed the written data from the family and child sessions for each child in order to develop a narrative case study for each child based on both parent and child narratives. These combined narratives were used as part of the data analysis completed in the second stage.

In the second stage of the data analysis process, we focused on analyzing each of the combined parent and child narratives compiled in the first stage to identify themes present across all the children's experiences. We categorized the data into emerging themes by using codes to compare across all of the parent and child narratives (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Examples of categories that emerged from the inductive analytical process included "not understanding," "friendship," and "frustration." Throughout the analysis, we studied the material in these categories to develop themes associated with the processes of adaptation that were reflected in child and family's perceptions of these processes. Several of these themes are discussed in the sections that follow.

Findings

A number of themes developed from the analysis of the children's stories, drawings, reflections, and family interviews. The stories of the children's experiences were diverse in nature, of course, but we can see several commonalities across what the children and their families shared. First, all of the children presented a narrative of change over time. Depictions of sadness or anger at the beginning of the school year were transformed over time, with all of the children describing happiness in school by the time of the study. Second, sharing their strategies of adaptation to the classroom, each of the children focused their stories on experiences that bridged home and classroom or on similarities with other children. Finally, in sharing specific experiences that were particularly difficult for the children early on, the children's families contributed narratives that the children themselves did not express through their artwork and stories. In the sections that follow, we develop each of these themes with reflections, stories, and artwork of the children and their families.

Reflections of Change Over Time

The stories and artwork of the children, along with the interviews with parents, presented narratives of experiences that changed over time. Drawing themselves on the first day of school, each child (independent of the others) drew a picture of herself with a frowning face. Although each of the children depicted emotions of sadness, anger, and loneliness as they were beginning school, their representations of their school experience later in the year were marked by smiles and stories of friends. Writing and drawing about the first day of school, for example, Allison appeared to be expressing sadness at being alone. Struggling to identify the term for this emotion, Megan offered the term, “lonely,” and defined it for her. After being given the definition of “lonely,” Allison used this term to label how she felt: “I was alonely in school.” Indeed, Allison often played alone at that time, both in school and, as family reported, at home as well. Her mother noted, “When she started school, she just did [played] alone. She don’t want no one with her.”

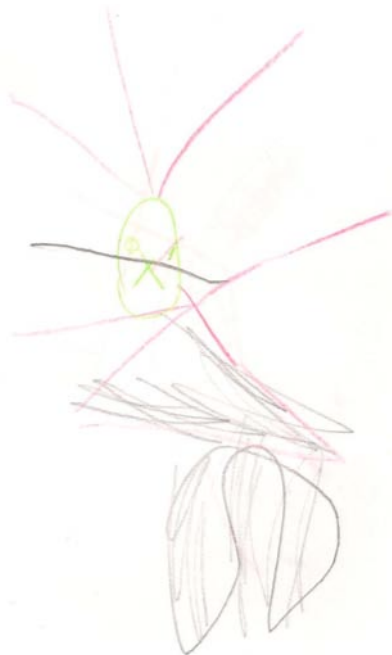


Figure 1. Cindy’s depiction of her first day of school. As she drew it, she explained, “My face said, ‘don’t.’”

The other two children’s stories shared some similarities to Allison’s. Aurora, whose stories were generally marked by a strong resiliency and much less conflict than those of Allison or Cindy, represented her initial days in school as somewhat mixed. She described feeling sad, but then drew her family happy that she was going to school and her teacher and peers happy as she got to school. She then continued to draw and tell how she was happy and playing at school. What Aurora described seemed to be her hesitancy about coming to a new place, but also how quickly she began playing. Her story suggested that she was comforted by the apparent happiness of her family and peers at school.

Cindy, however, expressed somewhat more difficulty. Like Allison, she initially had difficulty finding a word that expressed her feelings. Telling the story of her introduction to her new school, she drew what she could not explain about how she felt (Figure 1):

Megan: Can you tell me, how did you feel here at the beginning of the story?

Cindy: [*purses up face and squints eyes*] Ummmm mmmmm

Megan: Do you know the word for that?

Cindy: A happy sad.

Megan: A happy sad?

Cindy: Ok, my face said, "don't" . . . my face . . . [*points to picture*] (see Figure 1)

Cindy's illustration showed her with an "X" for her mouth; her body was in red. She described a strong feeling that she referred to as "don't," an emotion that might best be described as anger.

Despite representing their early days in the new school as sad or angry, each of the children presented stories indicating a change in experience and orientation towards school over time. In marked contrast to the frowning faces drawn early on, all of the stories the children shared and drew in the later sessions showed them interacting with their peers and enjoying school. Each of the children's families also remarked upon how much their child enjoyed going to school, even if they were afraid or did not want to go at the beginning. Allison reflected on the change over time, commenting, "That was when I was sad at school. I don't want to go to school when I was four. That was when I was four. So the next morning, I was five now. It was my birthday and I went to kindergarten like this." As she reflected on this, she viewed the pictures of a story she wrote (Figure 2). On the first page was a picture of a sad girl, and on the second one, a picture of a happy one.



Figure 2. Allison as sad and as happy.

What happened in between the difficult first days and the smiles later in the year? In the next section, we describe the adaptation strategies depicted by the children's stories and artwork.

Building Bridges Between Home and School

Each child seemed to use a different strategy to manage early difficulties and begin to adapt to the classroom. Yet, all had to do with building connections through friendship with peers and bridging home and school. Indeed, a commonality across all three of the children's stories was the importance of having something from their home environment represented in their classroom.

When Allison first started school she told about how she played almost exclusively with the dollhouse, pretending the dolls were bears like hers at home. She appeared to use the comfort of toys similar to the ones she had at home to help her transition into the classroom. Allison also told stories of experiences with friendship in the classroom. In two cases, she described a friend who had something that was the same as her: first, a child who was also in preschool with her and who then turned 5 and was in her Kindergarten class; second, she described someone who loved playing the same magic game as she did, making flowers appear and then disappear. Ultimately, her stories suggested that her adaptation to the classroom was promoted by identifying similarities in her peers, and building friendship and connection with others.

Similarly, the stories Cindy chose to tell about positive experiences at school all depicted her interacting with another child in play through some common interest. In stories in which she was enjoying play with friends, she drew them playing with worms, re-enacting a favorite story, and playing outside on the playground—all areas of common interest between herself and her friends (Figure 3). Figure 3 shows how Cindy represented herself and her friends (a) digging for worms and (b) playing on the playground. These common interests provided opportunities for Cindy to develop friendships with her peers and adapt to the school. Similar to Allison's stories, Cindy's stories also revealed her adaptation in the classroom as being facilitated through similarities with others and building connections.



Figure 3. Cindy's playing with friends through engaging in (a) digging for worms and (b) playing on the playground.

Aurora's stories indicate that, of the three children, she had the easiest time adapting to the school experience. Even her parents reflected that transitioning between home and school was not difficult for Aurora: "[It's] been easy, she's been in America. It's been easy because she little." Interestingly, her family's presence at school was common among several of her stories. In one of her stories, Aurora drew her mom coming to school to watch her sing. She said, "He [we] singing and family come. Family come and is so happy to see to sing their special song. My mommy is happy to see teacher." Additional examples were present in other stories of school, suggesting the importance of these experiences for Aurora. For example, she drew her family being present at school during family events and the picture of her family that hung in the classroom throughout the year. The presence of her family at school and her family's attitude toward school shaped Aurora's stories. They suggested a strong link between home and school that appeared to provide comfort as Aurora adapted to the American school context.

Indeed, the stories suggest that each child built bridges from home to school through familiar items, family, or developing connections with peers in the class through their similar interests or similar experiences. Although the time frame and process was different for each child, this was a thread that was woven through all of their experiences. Slowly, through bridges and connections of these kinds, the children appeared to feel at home in their American school. Friendships with other children were often highlighted in stories, artwork, and reflections. The representations the children drew changed over the course of the study from showing them playing by themselves or playing with other Karen children to playing with their peers in the classroom. Allison's stories shifted from depicting her playing by herself with the doll house to sharing the games she played with all her friends in Kindergarten. Reflecting on when she was older and in Kindergarten she said, "I have a lot of good friends and they play with me at every day." Additionally, Cindy and Aurora originally drew pictures of play alongside their peers in the initial stories about school, but showed themselves interacting with peers in their later stories. Their stories began to show integration with their American peers in play as bridges were built between home and school.

Dialogues on Dissonance

We do not want to suggest that the children's and their families' stories of adaptation to the classroom represented a simple linear transition. Families in particular noted difficult experiences, experiences that we have come to think of as "culturally dissonant," with which the children struggled at particular times during the year. Although the children's stories did not tend to highlight these events, listening to their families' stories created a more complete picture of the children's adaptation to the American classroom. In dialogue with Allison's family, discussions concerning a period of time when Allison would speak only English provided evidence of a culturally dissonant experience. Her family told of how Allison refused to speak Karen in preschool and into the beginning of her Kindergarten year. Her mother reflected, "She just speak English. [Her father and I] just tell [her], we are the same people and we love you." Allison's family advocate added that her father encouraged her family to let it be: "His words were, 'She's in America; she needs to speak English.'" She added that she did encourage Allison to use her native language at home. "I told her how beautiful I thought it was when I heard her speak Karen to her mother and father, because I want her to love both cultures."

Although the time frame when she would not speak Karen was included in Allison's narratives and drawings, she did not share this experience herself. Instead she focused her drawings on how she felt alone during preschool. When Allison entered preschool, she was immersed, for the first time, in the American culture. Discussing her drawing, Allison

reflected, “That was, I was sad at school. I don’t want to go to school when I was four. I had no friends, no friends played with me.” Interestingly, looking at Allison’s and her family’s stories, we can see that the period when Allison talked about making friends in Kindergarten aligns with the time that her family noted she began to speak Karen again.

A culturally dissonant experience Cindy related in her drawings was her struggle when she did not understand the actions or words of the other children in her class. While drawing about an experience putting on a Rapunzel puppet show with her peers, Cindy quoted herself asking her peers, “Why did you do that? It hit me.” In the retelling of Rapunzel, her peers had knocked over the old lady, Cindy’s puppet, as Rapunzel made her escape from the tower. Her peers, talking in English, verbalized the action with Rapunzel’s escape, but this eluded Cindy. She did not understand their play and struggled to understand their words. When discussing Cindy’s experiences beginning school, her mother noted that school was “scary and then her [*shakes head for no*] understand, so hard for her.” Reflecting on Cindy’s drawings, the dialogue with her family, and observations in the classroom, it becomes evident that Cindy struggled when she could not understand her peers. Cindy’s response to this was to confront the children to find out more. She initiated conversations because she wanted to understand her peers.

During these culturally dissonant experiences, looking at the children’s artwork in combination with the family dialogue created a fuller understanding of what was happening during this time in the children’s lives. Through the pictures, the children related the circumstances or their feelings; however, the families provided the broader context around each of these events. Cindy’s family reported seeing her difficulty communicating at school leading up to the story she shared about re-enacting Rapunzel with her peers. Allison focused on how she felt and expressed those feelings in her artwork, but her family reflected on her behavior at home during this time, providing insights into why she expressed feeling alone in preschool. Throughout the interviews, combining both the family’s narratives with the children’s artwork and stories provided additional insight into children’s experiences as they entered the early childhood setting. Listening to both the children and their families formed a more comprehensive representation of the children’s adaptation to the American classroom.

Discussion: Listening to Children’s Experiences in Context

This study was inspired by an interest in the stories that young refugee children tell about their early experiences in an American school. The stories, accompanied by artwork and reflection, as well as their families’ reflections on their experiences, highlighted a change in orientation to the school over time. They also revealed strategies that the children used in bridging home and school and in building friendships in their classroom. Not surprisingly, the children sought familiarity, identifying objects similar to objects they knew from home, focusing on family in the classroom, or relating to children with similar interests or experiences. Importantly, viewing the children’s narratives through the stories of their families created a more holistic view of what the children experienced during the time span discussed in this research, especially during periods of cultural dissonance.

Although the stories of the children and families sounded these similar notes, it is important to emphasize that the children’s strategies and timelines differed. Allison initially pulled away from all friends, both at home and at school, and took over a year to develop friendships and appear comfortable in the classroom. Cindy also felt strong emotions when she could not understand the new environment at school, but confronted the situation and resolved the conflict quickly in comparison. In contrast, Aurora and her family suggested that she eased into the American school fairly easily. In addition, she told stories that focused on times when she was happy at school or enjoying her friends even though she realized they did

not always get along. This reminds us that stories are tellings of experience that do not necessarily represent a reality—or even experience—directly; instead, they are representations shaped by a number of factors.

Yet, to some extent, these differing narratives reflect their refugee community's timeline. Allison was the first Karen student to come to the school. Through her experience, the family learned more about the American school and shared what they learned with other families. For example, in the Karen community, mothers generally feed their children until they are 4 or 5 years old. However, when Allison started school, she became responsible for feeding herself during lunchtime. Her family then changed their practices at home and began giving utensils to the children during meals. As shared in the families' narratives, other families in the Karen communities heard about this and began having their children feed themselves in preparation for school. In this way and others, the Karen community adapted to ensure that their children were more successful in American schools. This reflects the findings of J. Lynn McBrien and others who have found adaptation to be a "two-way street" (2011; Rah et al., 2009). It is probable that the school also learned more about the Karen culture and community in the period reflected in the stories presented by the children and their families. The relatively short amount of time it took the younger children to adjust to school may reflect the mutual learning experiences across the school and the new Karen community.

Through the themes presented in the stories collected, Allison, Cindy, and Aurora focused their stories on finding commonalities with peers and those experiences that created connections or built bridges to their homes in order to facilitate their adaptation into the classroom. Similarly, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001) found that parental involvement in schooling can help children build bridges over the cultural gap between home and school (see also Ascher, 1985; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; McBrien, 2011; Rah et al., 2009). These findings can be translated into experiences that educators offer all children to help them adjust to a new environment. Providing young children experiences that promote the commonalities among all students and including families in children's education may aid their adaptation to the early childhood setting.

The stories shared by the children through their artwork, dialogue, and reflection are powerful sources of understanding the processes of adaptation experienced as each of the children encountered U.S. schools. The stories and reflections may not reflect an "objective" reality, but they do relate how the children come to make meaning of their experiences. How refugee children make meaning of their world is important for educators to understand. Observing how children "story" their cross-cultural experiences teaches us what they find meaningful; this kind of learning allows us to provide them additional meaningful experiences.

In future narrative research we would stress the importance of both generating multi-modal (oral, written, and art-based) stories from children and collecting narratives from families to develop a richer and more multi-faceted understanding of "storied" experience. The art provided ways to extend the researcher-child conversation about experience. As for the family narratives, parents were more likely to focus on periods of cultural dissonance or difficulty, providing meaningful context for our understanding of the children's stories.

A limitation of this project, however, was that Megan did not speak the native language of the children and their families. This provided an obstacle to the sharing and generation of narratives in the study. Megan responded to this limitation by including the family advocate in interviews to provide a liaison between the Karen community and the American school, as she is someone who is familiar with both communities. Additionally, although the fact that Megan was a teacher of two of the three children who participated in the study added to the trust and rapport necessary for this kind of study, some might view this

existing relationship as a limitation because of the potential for children and families to feel coerced into participating or to feel the need to tell Megan only positive stories about their experience. To ensure that children and families did not feel this way, Megan discussed the research first only with the participants' families. When the families expressed interest in participating, they were asked to discuss the research with their child prior to Megan asking the children if they would like to participate. In addition, she assured the families that all stories were confidential and shared her own stories to establish an open relationship with the families. Because the children and families told stories of difficulty and wanted to share their stories with other teachers and educators, we believe that this potential limitation was minimized.

Future research should include the use of narrative inquiries of young children and families, supplemented by the children's artwork, to provide greater understanding of the adaptation experiences across a range of refugee groups. In addition, other qualitative studies on the adaptation experiences of young refugees using greater numbers of participants could provide a more robust understanding of the young refugee's experience. Mixed method studies that include diverse groups of refugee participants could also broaden educators' understanding of the experiences of refugee youth in school. Together, these three recommendations for future research could capture the breadth and depth of refugee adaptation experiences and teach educators how to adapt their own classrooms to support refugee students.

As a greater number of children and families are finding refuge in new communities across the globe, it is essential for educators to understand how refugees of all ages are making meaning of their experiences and provide them with opportunities to tell their stories. These can teach us how to support children's and families' adaptation into a new community, how to foster smooth transitions, and how to adapt our classrooms to provide students with the best educational experiences possible.

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