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## A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF A FEMALE KAREN REFUGEE WHO EXPERIENCED ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN A TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL

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EXPERIENCED ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN A TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL**

by

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck, B.A., M.A.

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

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For the Degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative biographical study explored the life experiences of a female Karen youth who moved to the United States as a pre-teenager, entering a medium-sized Texas rural public high school as a freshman. Perceptions of English Learners are that they are ill-prepared for achieving success in rigorous academic subjects taught in United States public schools. Refugees are considered to have more difficulties because of the trauma associated with their pre-immigration violent environments, which often involve little or no organized education in the native country or in refugee camps. The biographical design allowed the Karen student who achieved academic success at a Texas public high school, in which every student must pass state-mandated academic exams in order to graduate, to recount the influences, personality characteristics, and context that she understood to be significant in contributing to her academic success.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I did not consult them; I merely informed them that I was going back to school to get my doctorate. Therefore, I am forever indebted to my husband, Steve Whitbeck, and my children, Samantha Whitbeck and Kendall Whitbeck, for supporting and encouraging me in my doctoral journey. They have endured after-midnight crises and an absent wife and mother. Through it all, they have uplifted me with words of encouragement, love, and dedication. And they have forgiven me my many transgressions. I also thank my extended family: my living siblings, Patricia and Michael, and their respective spouses Ricky and Carol; my in-laws, Richard and Mary; my nephews and nieces: Brent, Erin, Rylan, Kelsey, Destiny, Kristen, Steve, Grace, Brandon, Sarah, Britton, Julianne, and Toni; my Gamma Phi Big Sis Kathleen; and Kyle and Alex. They shared experiences with me as I labored through my studies, listened to me as I spoke of new insights, and tolerated my absences at several significant family events.

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I am fortunate to have met Ta Mu, taught her, and mentored her. I appreciate her sharing her story with me.



## **DEDICATION**

My mother, Patsy Ruth Wainwright Parrish, was a first generation college graduate. My father, Charles Truett Parrish, never completed his degree, but he, too, attended college. Their parents, C.S. and Florence Wainwright and Lowman and Dovie Parrish, rural East Texas farmers who did not enjoy the privilege of attending college, committed themselves to providing their children the opportunity to graduate from high school and experience higher education. Patsy and Truett in turn committed themselves to providing their children, Patricia, Charles, Katherine, and Michael, the resources to attend college. I dedicate this endeavor to my parents and their parents. I also dedicate my writing to my brother Charles, whose insights would have benefitted my doctoral journey. I miss my grandparents, Mama, Daddy, and Charles. While their physical presence is no longer in my life, their spirit is.

I also dedicate this endeavor to the students who immigrate to the United States of America from another country, not knowing how to communicate in English, the dominate language of this country. I applaud and admire their efforts. They inspire me to continue to teach.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

We ran when we heard the howling dogs because it most likely meant the Burmese armed forces were here to destroy us and our village. . . . Take a moment, and just imagine living in a particular place with no human rights, no education, and no democracy.

From the Essay of a Female Karen Refugee

### **Introduction**

The first time I heard that the Burmese refugees were coming to town was December 2010. I was newly-appointed as the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at Meece High School (pseudonym), the medium-size high school at which I taught, and I was overwhelmed with the concept of teaching these students the Cognitive Academic Language that they would need to survive the rigors of academically-challenging classes and to pass the Texas state-mandated End of Course Exams they would need to pass in order to graduate from our Texas public school. It was a relief to know that the school district central administration was planning to create a Newcomers Center; therefore, I would not need to worry about teaching these students who spoke an Asian language English nor the academic curriculum deemed important to teaching the students.

However, this was not to be. The Newcomers Center never materialized. And one day in September 2011, I was greeted by one of the educational leaders from the office of curriculum and instruction, and about thirteen students, whom I thought were Burmese. They were from Burma, or Myanmar. However, after several conversations with the students and after researching their background, I learned that the students were of Karen and Karenni descent and that they were refugees from the camps in Thailand, having fled southeastern Burma, where the Burmese army routinely attacked their villages, committing acts of violence, burning their villages, and pressing their youth into forced labor. Gradually, I learned the difference in who was Karen and who was Karenni.

Thus it was that I, the ESL aide, and the students' other teachers began the arduous task of communicating with the students and endeavoring to impart the subject matter for their different classes. Newly-certified as an ESL teacher, I felt incompetent in preparing the students adequately enough to pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the state-mandated assessment for students entering Texas public high schools as first-time freshmen from 2003 to 2010, and the newly-established state-mandated exams – the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) End of Course (EOC) Exams – that serve as the state-mandated assessments for students entering high school as freshmen for the first time in 2011. The STAAR EOCs were written to assess student's achievement in mastering the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for the different subject areas taught in Texas public high school curriculum. The task was a daunting challenge.

The Karen and Karenni refugees experienced varying success completing the coursework and passing the required EOC exams in order to matriculate and receive their diplomas from a Texas public high school. Some failed to graduate, either not completing their coursework and not passing the required EOC exams, or completing the coursework but failing to pass the required EOC exams. Others transferred to private schools, where they were not required to pass EOCs. Some students moved to other states, lived with extended family or friends in Karen or Karenni communities, and graduated from public high schools in states that did not require students to pass state exams to receive a diploma. Beginning in 2015, several students took advantage of Texas SB149, which allowed them to complete individual projects in place of one or two of the five EOCs they had not passed.

However, Ta Mu (pseudonym), a Karen female refugee who moved to the East Texas community and who entered as a freshman in high school in Fall 2012, achieved academic success. She passed her classes, she learned English well enough so that she achieved Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and excelled academically, and she performed well enough on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), the system designed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) “. . . to assess the progress that limited English proficient (LEP) students make in learning the English language . . .” (TEA, 2017, p. 1, para. 1) to exit the designation as a LEP student. Ta Mu also passed all five of the required EOC exams by the end of her junior year.

I was aware of some steps Ta Mu took to achieve this success. However, I could not fully understand what significant events in her life had inspired her to overcome the

challenges of being a refugee with limited education and to secure a high school diploma from a public high school in the state of Texas. Biographical research is defined as “a form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person’s life” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 70). By the age of 18 years, Ta Mu had survived the ravages of war, life in a refugee camp, limited access to education, a move to another country, and adjustment to different cultures, climates, and languages in different parts of the United States. Ta Mu had experiences to share with me.

### **Background of the Problem**

In 2015, the estimated worldwide refugee population stood at nearly 60 million, with the United States of America as “the top destination for refugees recommended for resettlement by the UN refugee agency, [the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] (UNHCR),” (U.S. State Department, 2015, p. ii). In 2015, with more refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons than at any time since World War II, the United States government approached the President’s authorized ceiling of 70,000 receiving refugee arrivals to America during fiscal year 2015 (U. S. State Department, 2015, p. ii).

Immigrant children represent one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. In 2009, 17.3 million, or 23.2 percent of youth and children aged seventeen and younger in the United States were immigrants, up from 13 percent of all youth and children in 1990 (Passel, 2011, p. 24). Many of these students accounted for the approximately 4.85 million students, or nearly 10 percent of the total K-12 population, who were enrolled in American public schools as English Language Learners (ELLs)



during the 2012-13 academic year (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015, p. 1). The state of Texas accounted for the second greatest population of ELLs, with 15.2%, or 773,732 students out of 5,077,507, of total K-12 enrollment (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015, p. 2).

Four school districts in Texas were included in the Top 25 U.S. School Districts ELL Enrollment, SY 2011-12. These included Dallas Independent School District, Houston Independent School District, Fort Worth Independent School District, and Austin Independent School District. However, even Texas rural school districts have experienced exponential growth in English Language Learners and immigrant student populations. In 1995, in one rural medium-size Texas independent school district, the demographics of the 6,061 students in the district included 32% Black, 15% Hispanic, 52% White, and 9% Bilingual/ESL Education (Snapshot 95). However, no LEP/ELL information concerning the percentage of students from Asian background was provided (Snapshot 95). By 2016, of the 6,448 total students in the district, the demographics had changed to include 20.5% Black, 45.9% Hispanic, 20.4% White, 2.4% Asian, 0.1% Pacific Islander, 28.3% ELL, and 28.1% Bilingual/ESL Education (Snapshot 2016).

The most recent immigrants entering United States schools include students arriving from Asia, with immigration from Asian countries increasing from 2,540,000 people in 1980 to 12,750,000 people in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006, 2010, 2014). Some of those Asians include a portion of the approximately 50,000 Karen refugees who have resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, and some European countries (The Karen people, 2015).

Texas is one of the states receiving Karen refugees. Differences in linguistic roots and lack of enough translators make it more difficult for school districts to accommodate their students' pedagogical requirements, to integrate the students into the system, and to help them attain academic success (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). The federal government expects all state educational systems, including the public schools of Texas to instruct immigrants so that they attain English proficiency within five years of identification as an English language learner (Pompa, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many English Language Learners, including Karen refugee students, struggle to attain Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984) within the five-year time frame expected by the Texas Education Agency. Cummins (1984) stated that while many children develop native speaker fluency (i.e. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills or BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between five-seven years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned. Arriving from refugee camps in Thailand, where they have received minimal education in their first language and in English, Karen students are unprepared to meet the rigors of multiple advanced courses to pass state-mandated testing.

Data from the Texas Education Agency reveal that for the 2013-2014 school year, English Language Learners enrolled in Texas public schools lagged behind the overall grades 9-12 student population with a lower graduation rate and a higher drop-out rate (TEA, 2015c). Students in bilingual and ESL programs had a graduation rate of 62.4%

and all English Language Learners had graduation rate of 60.3%, both lower than the 88.3% graduation rate for all students enrolled in Texas public schools (TEA, 2015b). On the other hand, the drop-out rates for bilingual/ESL students and English Language Learners overall exceeded the drop-out rate for all students in 2013-2014 at 4.0% and 4.8% respectively vs. 2.2% of all students (TEA, 2015a).

Thomas and Collier (1998) asserted that too often English Language Learners are viewed as a “. . . ‘problem’ for our schools . . . and so we ‘remediate’ by sending them to a specialist to be ‘fixed’ . . .” (p. 23). The discussion between English Language Learners instructors and specialists about the most effective method of assisting English Language Learners in acquiring not only BICS, but also CALP, continues as researchers explore the incorporation of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011).

Data from the Migration Policy Institute’s study of ELL students who entered Texas public schools as first graders in 1995 and graduated from high school in 2006 on-time indicated that ever-ELL (students who had been classified as ELL, but who exited the classification due to obtaining English proficiency) outperformed all students who were ever classified as ELL. Data was collected from a second group that included students who entered Texas public schools after first grade, had been held back, and who may have dropped out (Flores, Batalova, & Fix, 2012, p. 20).

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this biographical study was to recount in depth the remembered life experiences of one Southeast Asian refugee of Karen descent in her journey from a refugee camp in Thailand to a Texas high school setting in a medium-size East Texas town, where, instead of experiencing failure to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency in English, she excelled in her studies, passed the required Texas state-mandated exams, participated in extracurricular activities, and received awards honoring her for her character, leadership, and academic success in preparation for her transitioning to a post-secondary educational setting and her anticipated career as a nurse. In addition, in an effort to understand the refugee, the study explored the support systems, including family, church, community, and high school faculty, and the youth's personal characteristics, which determine her ability transition from the Southeast Asian culture to American culture.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are one Karen youth's reflections on her life in the refugee camps, her family's journey to the United States, and her adapting to American education and American Culture?
2. What events in the Karen youth's life have facilitated her ability to learn English?
3. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in public school by maintaining excellent grades, passing all Texas state-mandated exams, and graduating with honors?

4. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in her current endeavors?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following conceptual terms are found in literature pertaining to immigrant students and students who are classified as English Language Learners. The conceptual definitions are provided to enable the reader to understand the language as it is used throughout the study. Importantly, the terms and definitions also provide a connection to the biographical narrative and the language presented during the study. For the reader, understanding the language and the biographical narratives is important.

#### **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS).**

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are "surface" skills of listening and speaking which are typically acquired quickly by many students, often within two years of immersion in the target language; particularly by those from language backgrounds similar to English who spend much of their school time interacting with native speakers (Cummins, 1984).

#### **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).**

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is the basis for a child's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon her in the various subjects. Cummins (1984) stated that while many children develop native speaker fluency (i.e. BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between five-seven years for a child learning a second language to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned.

**Bilingual.**

Bilingual indicates that the student is enrolled in a Texas public school district that has an enrollment of 20 or more English Language Learners (ELLs) in any language classification in the same level district-wide. The student participates in a Texas state-approved full-time bilingual education program that provides dual-language instruction through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in the content areas (mathematics, science, health, and social studies) in the primary language of the ELLs. The bilingual program includes a carefully structured and sequenced mastery of English cognitive academic language development for ELL students in prekindergarten through the elementary grades (TEA, 2012).

**English as a second language (ESL).**

English as a Second Language (ESL) indicates that a student is participating in a state-approved ESL program. An ESL program in grades 9-12 is a program of intensive instruction in English from teachers trained in recognizing and dealing with language differences who use secondary language acquisition information to teach ELLs and the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) (TEA, 2012).

**English Language Learner (ELL).**

An English Language Learner (ELL) is a person who is in the process of acquiring English and has another language as the first native language. The terms English Language Learner and Limited English Proficient (LEP) student are used interchangeably (TEA, 2012).

**English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS).**

English Language Proficiency Standards are the English language proficiency level descriptors and student expectations for English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in Texas public school districts and implemented in the required curriculum (TEA, 2016).

**Refugee.**

Refugee status, as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention, applies to any person who, due to "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it [Convention of 1951, Article 1A (2)]" (UNESCO, 2017).

**Significance of the Research**

Immigration to the United States continues to increase. The number of student immigrants who speak first languages other than Spanish is increasing as well. The seventh most represented language of Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant ELL students in U.S. schools for School Year (SY) 2013-14 was the family of Karen languages with 5,195 students recorded by the Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education (NCELA, 2016). Approximately 50,000 Karen refugees have resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, and some European countries (The Karen people, 2015). Texas is one the states receiving the Karen immigrants. Differences in linguistic

roots and lack of enough translators make it more difficult for school districts to accommodate their students' pedagogical requirements, to integrate the students into the system, and to help them attain academic success. The state of Texas expects new immigrants to achieve CALP within three to five years after entering American schools (TEA, 2012).

Studying the life history of a Karen student will add to the body of literature that exists recounting the concerns of Karen immigrants, including Karen students enrolled in public schools across the United States and in other countries. In addition, the unique experiences of Ta Mu may be shared by other immigrants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other biographical studies could recount the lives of different immigrants, with researchers discovering experiences common to other immigrant students that influence their academic and career success.

### **Organization of the Study**

Spanish was the predominant language spoken as the first language of ELLs attending Meece High School and enrolled in Newcomer ESL classes. Bilingual teachers and aides who spoke English and Spanish provided additional support for students who spoke Spanish by communicating academic concepts to the students in their first language. The Karen students did not receive this accommodation. By focusing on the events in one Karen female refugee's life, I sought to understand what characteristics she possessed and what interactions with family, friends, fellow students, and school faculty and staff caused her to master Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) well enough to experience academic



success by graduating from high school. The framework design of biographical study provides the opportunity for the participant to share her experiences and her interpretation of their meaning.

A review of literature in Chapter II revealed that Karen refugees have experiences similar to and different from those of other immigrant students to the United States. Additional literature reviewed in Chapter II also revealed that ELL students require linguistic supports, extra time to process information, encouragement, and sensitivity to their cultural differences.

Seeking to answer the research questions concerning why a female Karen refugee was able to experience academic success in a Texas public school, developed a framework of biographical study as outlined in Chapter III. I interviewed the participant, Ta Mu, following a protocol of initial questions and follow-up questions based on her initial answers. I also read through some of her essays and examined artwork, certificates, and other artifacts provided by the student's. Follow-up conversations were conducted electronically. I also examined the student's recorded grades and test scores that I retrieved from her personal files at Meece High School. I analyzed her interpretations of her personality and the events in her life and interactions with others to find themes supported by the literature on refugees, immigrants, ELLs, effective teaching strategies for ELLs, and establishing authentic teacher/student relationships.

In Chapter IV, I recorded my findings. I communicated my conclusions and recommendations for further research in Chapter V. As interpretative biographer, I also

shared my reflections on the shared meanings of Ta Mu's and my experience during her four years at Meece High School.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Providing English linguistic support for students who speak a first language other than English has increased in importance since the federal government passed legislation requiring states to provide programs that provide linguistic support for English Language Learners (ELLs), as well as assess the improvement that English Language Learners make in becoming proficient in English. Much of the focus has centered on Spanish-speakers and providing bilingual programs for them (Cummins, 1984).

However, immigration of students such as Ta Mu who speak languages other than Spanish has increased (Jiménez & Horowitz, 2013). With the United States government allowing as many 70,000 refugees per year into the country, the refugee population has also increased. The literature on the immigration of all students to the United States, the immigration of Karen refugees, their life stories from the refugee camps, the type of English linguistic support that they have received in the public schools, and the progress in becoming proficient in the English language reveals the academic expectations placed upon Ta Mu by the federal and state educational policy and some of the obstacles she overcame.

## **Immigrant Students**

As a result of continued influx of immigrants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States is culturally and linguistically diverse (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). Immigrant students and their families face several social challenges. Unfamiliarity with their new culture and unfamiliarity with dominant language of the host country (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016) affects the ability of the immigrants to fully interact with the community. Communication between immigrant students' schools and immigrant parents has been a challenge for rural schools that have experienced an increase in immigrant population without being fully prepared for it (Shim, 2013). Examining parent-teacher communication through a postcolonial theory lens, Shim (2013) found that immigrant parents often felt oppressed in their relationship with teachers, believing that the teachers were unwilling to listen to parental input. In addition, the parents believed that the teachers judged the immigrant students, equating the students' lack of English proficiency with lower intelligence (Shim, 2013).

Another challenge for immigrant students learning the dominant language of a country or society as their second language (L2) is they often lag behind the native speakers of the dominant language in the academic setting (Cummins, 1989; Echevarria, Frey, & Fisher, 2015). However, Collier (1992) confirmed generalizations that

. . . the greater the amount of L1 instructional support for language-minority students, combined with balanced L2 support, the higher they are able to achieve academically in L2 in each succeeding academic year, in comparison to matched groups being schooled monolingually in L2 (p. 205).

In addition to struggling with the language of the dominant culture, immigrants also face the resistant attitudes of members of the dominant culture. Xenophobia and racism imbedded in federal, state, and local educational policy and exhibited by individual members of society (Choi, 2013; Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015) often negatively impact the success of immigrant students in learning the English language necessary for academic achievement. State laws aimed at denying enrollment of certain immigrant students by requiring specific documentation prior to enrollment have been enacted, challenged, and struck down (Mussey, 2014). Policies of English monolingualism in the community at large and within schools have been followed in an attempt to assimilate immigrants into the dominant Anglo American culture (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Harper & de Jong, 2009). Educational reforms brought about in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were developed for “English-fluent students” with the assumption that ELLs could be “. . . adequately served within these frameworks for curriculum content, teacher preparation and student achievement . . .” (Harper & de Jong, 2009, p. 139). In some communities, successful bilingual programs were dismantled (Cummins, 1998), and in others, immigrant students were placed in mainstream classes with teachers providing little or no linguistic instructional accommodations (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Nieto (1996) asserted that these policies have “silenced” immigrant students who are English Language Learners by regarding the use of languages other than English as a “serious handicap or deficit” (p. 147).

In contrast to teaching English Language Learners as if they are culturally deficit, teachers have a responsibility to honor different cultures and the different ways in which

students from different cultures interact with the teacher and other students and learn (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) concluded that culturally-relevant teachers, provide more effective learning environments than assimilationist teachers because they provide fluid teacher-student relationships, demonstrate a connectedness with students, encourage a community of learners, and encourage students to collaborate with and teach each other (p. 60). Gay (2000) noted that the ethnic background of a teacher was not as important as the teacher's knowledge base and positive attitude about cultural diversity in determining his or her ability to teach ethnically diverse students (p. 99).

Teachers' beliefs that they are unprepared to teach English Language Learners (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016) and their expectations that "English learners aren't capable of meeting high academic standards" (Echevarria, Frey, & Fisher, 2015) impact immigrant students. Self-efficacy of teachers to provide linguistic accommodations impacts the ability of the teachers to provide linguistic support. Immigrant students are often reprimanded for not following instructions that they do not understand, with the personnel insisting that the students "should know better" (Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015).

Immigrant students also come from different backgrounds (Duong et al., 2016). Some have experienced extreme trauma in their home country causing them to receive interrupted or no formal education (Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015). Others have attended school in their home country and are the children of highly-educated parents (Jiménez & Horowitz, 2013).

Immigrant youth are “. . . highly diverse in their English proficiency, language and culture of origin, parental educational and socioeconomic background, and other factors associated with academic achievement . . .” (Duong et al., 2016, p. 4). Immigrant youth and children vary from those who have experienced interrupted or no formal education to those who have received superior education in their first language (L1) in their country of birth and who are the children of degreed parents. Jiménez and Horowitz (2013) studied the community of Cupertino, California, ascertaining that findings from earlier research that focused on the achievement gap between immigrants and whites were reversed in their study. With a large immigrant presence, the norms were reversed. “Asianness is intimately associated with high achievement, hard work, and academic success. Whiteness, in contrast, stands for lower-achievement, laziness, and academic mediocrity . . .” (Jiménez & Horowitz, 2013, p. 850). Bankston and Zhou (1995) found that Vietnamese student immigrants in New Orleans who continued to identify strongly with their Vietnamese ethnicity and Vietnamese literacy found “. . . motivation and direction . . .” (p. 14) in addressing obstacles and challenges in the American school setting and the larger community.

Refugee youth are part of the immigrant population. Researchers studying pre-migration, migration, and post-migration of refugees found additional needs concerning the youth’s mental health. “Significant factors influencing levels of distress . . .” may have “. . . an adverse effect on the mental health of refugees . . .” (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011). Seeking to focus on the specific needs of refugee students, Hamilton and Moore (2004) reviewed the literature on refugee education, identifying

stressors for refugee students, such as separation from homeland, transition into a new culture, identification with the family, and loss of or separation from family, and recommending interventions, such as adapting to the needs of the refugee student, providing a safe environment, and committing additional time to fostering positive relationships with the students, that teachers and other school officials could implement to assist the students with achieving academic success.

### **Immigration of Karen Refugees**

Immigration to The United States of America has increased since 1970 (Passel, 2011). The latest immigrants to join the continuous influx include the Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Chin people who have escaped persecution in Burma to join refugee camps of Thailand and from Thailand to migrate to other countries including Australia, Canada, and the United States, with over 70,000, most of them Karen, participating in the migration between 2005 and 2011 (The Karen people, 2015). The Karen are one of several ethnic minorities who were originally granted their own state by the British government after it relinquished its control over Burma in 1948. However, Burma has been engulfed in civil war since it gained its independence. The Burmese government controls power and continues to oppress different groups who seek their own independence. One of these groups is the Karen ethnic minority (Bartholomew, Gundel, & Kantamneni, 2015, p. 1115). As a result, it is estimated that more than 150,000 people have left Burma for the seven refugee camps in the western Thailand (UNHCR, 2013). The United States has provided asylum and refugee status to many Karen, who upon fleeing Burma, encountered harsh conditions in the Thai refugee camps.



## **Karen Refugee Camps**

Fuertes (2010) explored the metaphor of “birds inside a cage,” (p. 20), which Karen refugees used to describe their situation, in a two trauma healing workshops he conducted in the Mae La Camp, outside of Mae Pot, in February and March 2005. The Karen employed the metaphor of the birds to refer to themselves as refugees, who live in the cage, the camp. Although birds are intended to fly, the Karen people in the refugee camp believed that they were deprived of the freedom to fly. The metaphor of a bird trapped in a cage manifested itself in the fences of barbed wire surrounding the camp and the gates to the camp, being heavily guarded by Thai military or security guards. In addition, the Karen were extremely dependent on the rations issued to them by non-government organizations (NGOs) for survival, thereby leading to a feeling of uselessness and futility (Fuertes, 2010, 21).

Lee (2012) found a different story visiting the refugee camps, suggesting that being a refugee does not necessarily connote spatial incarceration (p. 263). Instead, Lee (2012) focused on how the Karen camps on the Thailand-Burma border are connected to each other, with Mae La Camp and the nearby town of Mae Sot serving as the hub linking all of the camps together (p. 265). He attributed the interconnectedness of the 146,477 refugees living in the camps in July 2011 as connected by four factors: the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), the centralized Karen Education Department (KED), the churches, with the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Church (KKBC) serving as the umbrella, and the individual family members maintaining family connections with members in other camps by sending mail, money, and food via official and unofficial channels and

accompanying KRC and NGO workers when they drive from one refugee camp to the others (Lee, 2012, pp. 270-273). With the resettlement of Karen people to other nations, including the almost 57,000 resettled in the United States between 2006 and 2011, the interconnectedness has increased to a transnational level (Lee, 2012, pp. 277-278).

### **Karen Refugees in the United States**

The resettlement of the Karen in the United States has contributed to the exponential growth in the immigrant population, with the refugees from Burma representing the fastest-growing refugee group in America (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016). Karen families are among the newest wave of refugees whose children are in the public schools as English Language Learners (Association for Asian American Studies, 2014). Karen students, along with other immigrant students, constitute nearly a quarter of the population of youth and children under the age of eighteen, the highest proportion in last ninety years, with projections over the next 25 years to grow to one-third of the youth and child population (Passel, 2011). Three-fourths of immigrant children live in just ten states – Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Washington (Passel, 2011). Due to this immigration increase, over the past 15 years, the number of English language learners has nearly doubled to 5.5 million, and by 2025 it is predicted nearly in every four public school students will be an ELL (NCELA, 2007; Winke, 2011).

While they are settling in urban areas, Karen families are also settling in rural areas in states such as Nebraska, Texas, Arizona, Georgia, and Minnesota (Pompa, 2015; USCDC, 2015). As a result, rural areas are experiencing a rapid increase in racially and

ethnically diverse students, many of whom are ELLs, who present an educational challenge for teachers who may not be proficient in using the instructional methods imperative for assisting ELLs experience academic success (Reed, 2011). Many teachers are under prepared to make content comprehensible for ELLs or teach initial or content-area literacy to the forgotten population of secondary ELLs (Echevarria & Short, 2010). With respect to ELLs achieving high academic levels, some states are reporting higher drop-out rates and smaller graduation rates among ELLs (NCES, 2011). In some rural states, dropout rates have increased and graduation decreased mainly because of educational, linguistic, and social challenges that ELLs face (Walker, 2012). Because Karen refugees place a high value on education, social participation, and contribution to the community (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012, p. 137), this can be especially frustrating for the Karen students and their parents. Not being proficient in the English language causes all family members consternation (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016).

### **Linguistic Support for English Language Learners**

There has been debate about how many years English Language Learner services are required for English Language Learners to master not only Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), but also Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984). Researchers agree that it takes only a few years of exposure to English for immigrant children to approach native-like levels in conversational skills. However, they differ on the number of years, four to nine (Collier, 1987) or five to seven (Cummins, 1989) to become proficient in academic English necessary for learning in content areas.

To better serve the immigrant students, educators must develop an agenda for addressing the academic and social needs of all English Language Learner students, including those of immigrant status (McBrien & Ford, 2012). Educators must remember that an English language learner is a student for whom English is not the primary language and whose level of proficiency in English is not sufficient to make learning in a regular English class accessible without some linguistic support. Some of the services available to English Language Learners, many of whom are first or second generation immigrant students, include English as a Second Language (ESL), bilingual programs, scaffolding and other linguistic accommodations, co-teaching, and English Language Learners classroom aides (Hong, Gagne, & West, 2014).

ESL and bilingual programs provide the opportunity for students to master academic concepts in their first language before attempting to master them in their second language (Cummins, 1989; Collier, 1992). Teachers in mainstream classes who practice culturally responsive teaching also invite English Language Learners to communicate their cognitive understandings in their first language (Gay, 2000). In addition, teachers must be able to develop cross-cultural relationships with their students to connect with their students (Pawan, 2008, p. 1460).

Another support is scaffolding. Scaffolding provides content-area teachers (CATs) with an effective means for integrating English language instruction with content-area instruction for English Language Learners and for English Language Learners to demonstrate their knowledge without complete reliance on language (Cummins, 1984; Pawan, 2008; Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015). Scaffolding can be divided

into four areas: cultural, social, conceptual, and linguistic (Pawan, 2008). Cultural scaffolding involves helping students “bridge the particularities of their experience, knowledge and cultural heritage” with the classroom environment (Pawan, 2008, p. 1458). Social scaffolding provides opportunities for students to interact with each other and with the teacher in different groupings as small as partnerships and as large as including everyone in the classroom (Pawan, 2008, p. 1458). Conceptual scaffolding provides multi-modal approaches for students to access specialized knowledge. Some of these approaches include allowing students to read, perform, draw, or write the information they are processing (Pawan, 2008, p. 1458). Linguistic scaffolding requires direct teaching of literacy: reading, writing, and communicating (Pawan, 2008, p. 1459). “Clear guidance is necessary for [content area teachers] in distinguishing natural language learning processes from learning difficulties (Pawan, 2008, p. 1460).

Walqui (2000) contended that there are also contextual factors that hinder or assist English Language Learners in secondary language development considered from the perspective of the language, the language learner, and the learning process. Contextual language factors include the linguistic distance between the two languages, the student’s level of proficiency in the native language, the student’s knowledge of the second language, the dialect of the native language spoken by the student, the relative status of student’s language in the community, and prevailing societal attitudes toward the student’s native language. Contextual learner factors include whether the learner comes from diverse backgrounds and/or have diverse needs and goals. Second, adolescent language learners must contend with peer pressure, the presence of role models, and the

level of home support for the student to learn the second language. The learning process is the third contextual factor in second language acquisition. Teachers need to know how to distinguish between different learning styles, realize that intrinsic motivation aids learning, and that the quality of classroom interaction may determine student success in second language acquisition. Social and cultural contexts of second language acquisition have a huge impact on the ability of English Language Learner students, especially immigrant students to develop the second language (Walqui, 2000; Luster, 2015).

### **Summary**

Since the mid-2000s, Karen refugees have immigrated to the United States from the Karen refugee camps in Thailand. Their life experiences in the camps and their movement throughout the United States represent experiences that are different from other Asian immigrants and from Hispanic immigrants. How these Karen immigrants adapt to a different culture and learn about what is required of them to interact with others in their newly-adopted communities determines how successful they are at making the transition from one culture to another.

Public schools in America are mandated by the federal government to provide support to students whose first language is not English and must actively learn English as a second language while they master the academic subject matter required for graduation from high school and for successful post-secondary careers. How well public schools accomplish this mandate determines the success of immigrant student in transitioning from their first culture to their new culture.

The rich exploration of one Karen student's life that encompasses change in context from the culture of Southeast Asia to that of East Texas provides insight into one Karen immigrant's journey. It possibly will inspire investigation into the stories of other immigrant youth who strive to attain English language proficiency, academic excellence, and success in joining the American culture, while maintaining a connection with their home culture.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Educators have debated the best way to educate to English language learners (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Echevarria, & Short, 2010; Fritzen, 2011). Some of these studies have focused on assessments and scores on the assessments. Others have explored the perceptions that teachers have about their ability to teach ELLs and the ability of ELLs to achieve Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Biographical study provides the opportunity for one bilingual student who has immigrated to the United States, been classified as ELL, and made progress in her acquisition of the English language to meet the standards of academic success and the requirements for obtaining a diploma from a Texas public high school as established by the state of Texas to tell her story. She had the opportunity to share the significant events in her life, the “. . . key, turning point moments . . .” (Denzin, 1989, p. 22) that have shaped her life and led to her academic success.

#### **An Overview**

The seventh most represented language of Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant ELL students in U.S. schools for School Year (SY) 2013-14 is the family of Karen



languages with 5,195 students recorded by the Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education (NCELA, 2016). Approximately 50,000 Karen refugees have resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, and some European countries (The Karen people, 2015).

Texas is one the states receiving the Karen immigrants. Differences in linguistic roots and lack of enough translators make it more difficult for school districts to accommodate their students' pedagogical requirements, to integrate the students into the system, and to help them attain academic success. The state of Texas expects new immigrants to achieve CALP within three to five years after entering American schools.

Most Karen students struggle to attain CALP within that time frame. Arriving from refugee camps in Thailand, where they received minimal education in their Language 1 and in English, the students are unprepared to meet the rigors of multiple advanced courses to pass state-mandated testing. The life of one student who has defied the odds and has successively graduated from high school was the subject of this biographical narrative.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are one Karen youth's reflections on her life in the refugee camps, her family's journey to the United States, and her adapting to American education and American Culture?
2. What events in the Karen youth's life have facilitated her ability to learn English?

3. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in public school by maintaining excellent grades, passing all Texas state-mandated exams, and graduating with honors?
4. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in her current endeavors?

### **Research Design**

The study followed a biographical research design, which Creswell and Poth (2018) explained is “. . . a form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person’s life . . .” (p. 70). Exploring the specific topic of why Ta Mu experienced academic success in Texas public high school, I focused on a topical life document, which “. . . does not aim to grasp the fullness of a person’s life but confronts a particular issue . . .” (Plummer, 2004, p. 565). Following IRB request, I wrote a Letter to the Participant (see Appendix A) and requested her permission to participate. She signed and returned the Participant Permission Form (see Appendix B) prior to me sending her the first tier of interview questions and prior to me interviewing her. To “shape and generate the stories” of Ta Mu’s academic success in a medium-sized rural East Texas public high school, I interviewed Ta Mu over a three-day period. I utilized an interview protocol (see Appendix C). I wrote the questions and invited Ta Mu to write her answers. I also asked the same questions in oral interviews that I recorded on audiotapes. In addition, I looked at “documents, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 69), including artwork, awards, momentos, correspondence, that Ta Mu showed me. Because I am a participant in the contextual

situation of Ta Mu achieving her success, we also explored shared meaning and interpretation of events in her life (Denzin, 1989). I utilized member check to ensure that I am sharing her story. Ta Mu also assembled a memory book (Thomson & Holland, 2005) consisting of essays she wrote while in high school that revealed additional interpretations of her life story. I wrote a Letter to the Superintendent (see Appendix D) to retrieve documents from Ta Mu's personal file at Meece High School. The superintendent signed the District/School Participation Consent Form (see Appendix E). I obtained transcripts, documents related to her classification as an ELL, TELPAS essays and scores, and EOC scores from Ta Mu's personal folder at Meece High School.

Biographical study as narrative inquiry is temporal, research that is concerns itself with “. . . life as it is experienced on a continuum . . .” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, 19). Biographical study provides an opportunity for the participant to tell her story of her life that preceded her arrival in the United States, and which until now, has been difficult for her to communicate to American teachers, friends, and public. Ta Mu's rapid acquisition of English proficiency provided the opportunity for me, the biographer, to interview her and observe the artifacts that represent her life.

Biographical study reveals the journey through the perspective of the participant. She revealed her understanding of how she has successfully navigated the journey from a mountainous refugee camp in which she was born to becoming an honor graduate of high school, a leader in her Student Council, and a current college student, focused on obtaining her nursing degree. By utilizing interpretive biographical study, I revealed the story of an ELL whose story is different from Spanish-speaking ELLs, who have been the

focus of much of the research about ELLs. Using biography, I discovered the family support systems, community support systems, and personal perseverance that inspired Ta Mu to strive for excellence. In addition, I revealed the linguistic support services that the school district provided for Ta Mu, the pedagogical strategies Ta Mu's teachers implemented, and the affective support her teachers and other staff provided.

### **The Participant and the Setting**

Ta Mu is a Karen refugee to the United States who has navigated the world of American education to graduate in 2016 from a mid-size rural East Texas high school that she entered her freshman year, one year after she emigrated with her family from the Karen refugee camp in Thailand. She was born in the Karen Refugee Camp Mae Ra Ma Luang, in the mountainous region near the western border of Thailand and eastern border of Myanmar. She moved with her family to the United States July 27, 2010 to the state of Washington. She spent two years in the Newcomer ESL program in Seattle. In 2012, she moved to Texas, where she began her high school career in East Texas. By the end of her sophomore year she was mainstreamed into regular classes, receiving ESL support via tutorial sessions with ELL faculty and staff. Having passed all five state-mandated End-of-Course exams within her first two years of high school and her first four years in U.S. schools, she was exited by the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee at the end of her junior year in high school.

I selected Ta Mu to be the subject of this biographical study because her background as a refugee from Southeast Asia, who speaks Karen, contrasts with the majority of Spanish-speaking immigrants, also known as Newcomer English Language

Learners, who had previously entered the ESL program at Meece High School. The support from bilingual faculty and staff that has been available for Spanish-speakers was inaccessible to Ta Mu and her fellow Karen and Karenni immigrants. In addition, Ta Mu was required to pass the Texas state-mandated End of Course exams for five subject areas, including two in English. While other Karen students had fulfilled all requirements for obtaining a diploma from a Texas public high school, they had done so by completing all required high school coursework and passing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in the four core subjects. In addition, even though the students had completed their coursework by their on-time graduation date, they did not pass all of required assessments before that date. Therefore, they received their diplomas after their respective classes had matriculated. Ta Mu passed all of the EOC exams by summer of her junior year, completed all coursework within four years, and graduated with the rest of her graduating class.

I knew that I, and the rest of the Meece community, did not know who the Karen and Karenni were before they arrived in Meece. After their arrival, we attempted to learn. I also know what linguistic scaffolding I and other educators implemented to assist Ta Mu. However, I do not know the turning points in Ta Mu's life that inspired her to achieve academic success of obtaining her high school diploma. I wanted to know what her inspiration was.

Ta Mu made the journey from her birth in a Karen refugee camp in Thailand to graduation from a medium size high school in rural Texas and subsequent enrollment in a post-secondary educational institution. She first experienced the English alphabet while

in her school in Thailand. She then continued in ESL classes in public school when her family moved from Thailand to Seattle, Washington, in 2010. She entered high school in Texas as a freshman student in 2012.

Ta Mu has had the unique experience introducing her family's Eastern culture to the Western hemisphere by sharing her artistic abilities, her cooking abilities, and her family structure. At the same time, Ta Mu adopted Western style of dress and entered into the Western society of public school, participating in Student Council and earning membership into National Honor Society. Her family maintained its ties within its Karen community by attending worship services in the Karen Baptist Church in the East Texas town into which her family settled.

Ta Mu's experience as a recent immigrant to East Texas was unique because she is a Newcomer English Language Learner student who does not speak Spanish as her first language. Because of this, she did not receive the linguistic support of a bilingual aide fluent in her first language of Karen from the school district. Using biographical research, I intended to discover the family support systems, community support systems, and personal characteristics, as interpreted by Ta Mu, which inspired her to strive for excellence. In addition, I sought to reveal the academic and cultural support services that Ta Mu understands that the school district provided for her and the pedagogical strategies she perceives were implemented by her teachers.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

I have chosen the role of interpretative biographer. "When a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him- or herself into the life of the subject written about . . ."

(Denzin, 1989, p. 26). Ta Mu gives meaning to the significant incidents in her life, and it is my responsibility as the researcher to interpret these experiences (Denzin, 1989).

Some qualitative research commentators have “. . . called for researchers to indicate their own relationship to the study . . . However, there is a difficulty in assessing how much of the personal life of the researcher should be considered and entered in the text . . .”

(Roberts, 2002, p. 13).

I am part of Ta Mu’s story. I have worked with Ta Mu since Ta Mu’s freshman year in 2012-13. I am an ESL teacher, who taught Ta Mu in my ESL class. Ta Mu was then placed in my Student Council Leadership Class, during which time I encouraged Ta Mu to become actively involved in Student Council. I have established a close friendship with Ta Mu and am adamant about recounting Ta Mu’s story. As a result, a trusting relationship of comradery between student and mentor has already been established. The research was a collaboration of “. . . negotiating relationships between the researcher and the participant to lessen the gap between the narrative told and the narrative reported . . .” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332)

### **Data Collection**

By selecting Ta Mu as the subject of this biographical study, I chose to utilize purposive sampling, a technique Creswell (2003) described as appropriate when the researcher has a “specific purpose in mind” and wants “to select unique cases that are especially informative” (p. 213). Creswell listed eight verification procedures for qualitative studies, including (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) debriefing, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarifying researcher bias, (f)

conducting member checks, (g) providing rich, thick description, and (h) conducting external audits.

I collected data through semi-structured interviews with Ta Mu over a three-day period (see Appendix G). Observations were made and included Ta Mu's interactions in her home life, at her church, and with her friends. The collecting of Ta Mu's drawings, other artwork, and writings also served as a source of data collection. In addition to notes taken during the interview, I utilized audio recording of the interview sessions and transcribed the tapes into a typed hard copy. I invited Ta Mu to read my transcriptions and my findings and conclusions to check my analysis of the data.. I also utilized the technique of asking Ta Mu to assemble a memory book of previous writings and mementos to assist her in remembering key moments in her life (Thomson & Holland, 2005).

I maintained Ta Mu's confidentiality by giving her, her high school and community, and the students, family members, and educators she interacted with pseudonyms. All of my notes, the transcriptions of the interview recordings, the interview audiotapes, and documents from Ta Mu's personal file at Meece High School were stored and locked in a filing cabinet in my personal office. Email correspondence was saved in a passcode-protected file on my personal computer. Texts to Ta Mu were made from my personal password-protected cell phone. All texts, emails, hardcopies and audiotapes will be destroyed after the three-year period from the publication of the research per IRB approval.



## **Data Analysis**

As biographer I conducted follow-up interview sessions to check and verify the information related by Ta Mu and by others who are interviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also viewed some of the artwork and read some of the writings of Ta Mu to gather additional revelations of Ta Mu's personal interpretation of her surroundings (Thomson & Holland, 2005). In addition, by asking follow-up questions and seeking clarification via email and texting, I collaborated with Ta Mu during the analysis of the data to ensure as accurate an interpretation as possible (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). During the transcription of the data, I repeatedly listened to words and phrases, taking great care to transcribe the exact words Ta Mu used. I also documented sentences and phrases that I did not understand and verified with Ta Mu what she had actually said. Reading the written data, I was careful to write the English words Ta Mu used in the tense and form that she wrote them. If changed any words in direct quotations to provide clarity, I bracketed the words.

I looked for patterns to emerge and divided the data into the different areas, looking for themes that were supported the most often by Ta Mu's remembrances. I then referred back to the literature review. I categorized the themes with reference to the themes found in the literature review. After writing the findings and conclusions, I verified with Ta Mu that my interpretation of the events corresponded accurately with her understanding.

## **Trustworthiness**

Organization of data from multiple sources, including interviews, artwork,

personal writings, awards, and written correspondence between the participant and the biographer, contributed to the trustworthiness of the research (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The meticulous notetaking and transcription of the interviews, with follow-up questions for clarification provided reliability as well.

Because of my close relationship with Ta Mu before I began the research, biographical method provided an effective framework in which to construct the research. Conle (1999) advocated narrative inquiry, stating “. . . experience is always already interpretation and contains the history of the self who experiences, as well as the history of what is being experienced . . .” (p. 9). An authentic, trusting relationship between me, the biographer, and the participant that was established during the four years that Ta Mu was enrolled in high school. As a result, we quickly established a trusting and honest rapport and discourse during the formal oral interviews and through the formal written interviews. The authentic relationship also provided an impetus for me, the biographer, to utilize “superb listening skills” and responsibly interpret the participant’s understandings of her life events (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 81).

### **Communicating the Findings**

Using the interviewing method and examination of the creations of the participant in the form of visual artwork and literary art allows for the collection of a great volume of data from which to communicate the biography of the participant. Through meticulous note-taking during interviews, utilizing multiple methods of recording of the data, and carefully analyzing for themes and overarching ideas, I portrayed as accurately as possible the biographical narrative of Ta Mu.

Denzin (1989) asserted that “. . . a diligent, hardworking attentive scholar . . .” has the responsibility of interpreting the life of the subject of the biography (p. 19). The life of the person is “shaped by key, turning-point moments,” and the moments, whether profound or small, bring significant change to the direction of the person’s life or how the person interprets his or her life (Denzin, 1989, p. 25).

Ta Mu’s story is of interest to educators interacting directly with Asian English Language Learners and immigrants of refugee status. In addition, Ta Mu’s story is of interest to organizations advocating for social justice, including human rights organizations and religious institutions. Opportunities to communicate these findings include providing professional development sessions through the Texas Education Agency Region Centers, presenting findings to local, district, and conference meetings of the United Methodist Women, and interpreting the experiences of one Karen refugee female youth to other organizations dedicated to social justice for women, children, and youth of all backgrounds.

### **Summary**

The number of Asian immigrants to United States has increased. The number of refugees, including the Karen refugees, who have entered the United States, has increased (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015). Ta Mu is a Karen refugee. Immigrant students and ELL students experience difficulty interacting with teachers in American schools and accessing the curriculum presented in American schools (Choi, 2013). Ta Mu is a Karen refugee who integrated successfully into the culture of Meece High School, acquired BICS and CALP well enough to interact with students in the mainstream culture, earn

high grades for efforts, secure the admiration of her high school educators, pass all state-mandated exams, and graduate on time with her class.

This interpretive biographical study sought to explore Ta Mu's unique perspective as an ELL student who is a female Karen refugee student and her interpretation of why she experienced academic success. Ta Mu was chosen as the participant of the study because she is a female Karen refugee who experienced academic success in an East Texas public high school. The framework of interpretive biography provided an opportunity to focus on the rich data that could be gathered from in-depth interviews, conversations, and examination of artifacts. The interview questions for the initial interview with Ta Mu served as the basis for the conversation between Ta Mu and me, the biographer. The conversation, the shared experiences, the artifacts, and the documents provided the opportunity for Ta Mu, the person who best gives meaning to her experiences, to express these experiences and their meaning. I, as the biographer, had the responsibility of listening carefully to Ta Mu, analyzing the data, interpreting Ta Mu's experiences through biographical study (Denzin, 1989), and recording the interpretation.

After I analyzed the data, I recorded themes and provided details from Ta Mu's reported interpretation of her life experiences. I verified the interpretation with Ta Mu. I then offered my conclusions, my recommendation for future research, and recommendation for utilizing this research.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Overview**

The body of literature includes qualitative and quantitative findings that indicate immigrant students, English Language Learners, and refugee immigrant students experience difficulty in achieving academic success (Choi, 2013). Immigrants overall, and refugees specifically, endure indicators of academic dysfunction, including poverty, racism, sexism, and xenophobia (Choi, 2013; Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015). Refugees experience trauma in their homeland, statelessness in refugee camps, and struggles in adjusting to their new homes in the resettlement states (Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Lee, 2012; UNHCR, 2017). Whether in the refugee camps or as new residents in host countries, Karen refugees place a high priority on education, social participation, and contribution to the community (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016; Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012).

Ta Mu experienced more than minimal academic success. She excelled in her classes, passed her state-mandated exams, participated in high school extracurricular activities, served in leadership positions, received awards recognizing her commitment to curricular and extracurricular endeavors, and continued her education in college.

Educators often reflect upon the actions that students take, the character they display, the manner in which they interact with others, and the choices they make in moments of conflict. Students also reflect upon their actions, character, interactions, and choices as well. Through this research, Ta Mu had an opportunity to share those reflections with me, both her teacher and the biographer.

Upon examining the data and positioning it within the literature review, I recognized several themes emerge. Life in refugee camps is limiting in finding work, achieving education, experiencing adequate living conditions, and enjoying freedom (Lee, 2012). Family members rely on each other and others within their community to support each other, network, and collaborate within the refugee camps and once they have resettled in host states. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), bilingual liaisons, and social workers play significant roles in providing food, medical care, resettlement opportunities, transportation, and assistance in resettling in the host country. In the United States, federal and state social services, religious organizations, and other volunteer organizations provide assistance to the refugees resettling in the United States. Karen refugee students often honor the educational aspirations of their parents by applying themselves vigorously to their studies. Teachers and other school faculty and staff play a significant role in assisting ELLs, including refugee and other immigrant students, in acquiring English as a second language and comprehending academic concepts in their first language and in English. Ta Mu recounted her experiences and her perceptions of her transition from a Karen child

born to refugee parents from Myanmar to a young woman who achieved academic success by graduating from a Texas Public High School with honors.

### **Life in the Refugee Camp**

As of December 2017, Mae Ra Ma Luang Refugee Camp, also known as Mae Ra Moe, one of the nine refugee camps located in western Thailand near the Thai/Myanmar border, housed 10,600 refugees, 79.80 % of whom were of Karen ethnic background (TBC, 2018). Ta Mu was born in the Mae Ra Ma Luang Refugee Camp Clinic in 1997. Prior to her birth, her mother, Chrit Moo, endured the birth of a son, who died in infancy, and the birth of a daughter, who was born in the jungles along the Thai/Myanmar border. After Ta Mu's birth, other siblings followed. Two younger brothers and a younger sister were also born in the Mae Ra Ma Luang Refugee Camp Clinic. Her youngest brother was born in Texas.

Neither Ta Mu nor her siblings born in Myanmar or Thailand received legal documentation of their births. They, like their parents, were considered people without a state. Since then Thailand has taken "an important step to prevent statelessness among a new generation of refugees," implementing the revised Civil Registration Act in September 2010 and registering the births of refugee children, thereby, establishing a legal record of where refugees are born and who their parents are (Tan, 2012).

Ta Mu's birth was tenuous. She was born December 9, 1997, three days after her mother, Chrit Moo, a young woman 26 years of age, first entered the clinic with labor pains. When Ta Mu was born, she only weighed one kilogram (2 pounds, 2.37 ounces). She was born in the camp's clinic, attended by a doctor and a nurse for her and her

mother. They remained in the clinic for another two days. Ta Mu recounted the story of her birth as told to her by her mother,

I was a lucky girl that survived. I was born in a small clinic. The clinic was built out of plastic bags, bamboo, and leaves. It was December and we didn't have any blanket. The nurse wrapped me up with an old rug. The birth process was quite difficult for my mom because she had to overcome the pain for six days. I couldn't be more grateful because both me and my mom are alive.

From her birth in 1997 until 2010, when the family moved to the United States, Ta Mu only knew the life in a refugee camp in Thailand. The Thai guards closely watched the refugee camp. Ta Mu described living in the camp "like being in a prison or a mental hospital because we were locked up for years." If the refugees were caught outside the camp, they would possibly be put in jail or prison or be sent back to the country of their origin. For the Karen, this would mean being sent back to Myanmar. In additions, like many other Karen refugees living in the camp, Ta Mu's parents had difficulty finding a job in the camp. "It was hard in the refugee camp because my parents, they wanted to work and couldn't. They don't have work." There was not enough need for camp inhabitants to all participate in the jobs, such as picking vegetables or cutting grass with a scythe, that were available. Ta Mu described the life in the refugee camp as "hard . . . a life of destitution" in which she, her sister, and other children "were suffering from malnutrition." Some of Ta Mu's worst memories included "suffering from malnutrition and picking up food from ground." She also was upset by "rich kids looking down on the poor."



In spite of the hardships, Ta Mu recalled happy memories. Some of her pleasant memories included “fishing, taking care of birds, hunting, and playing marbles, shoes, and rubber bands.” Ta Mu revealed that because she liked to go fishing and hunting with her father and one of her younger brothers, everyone considered her a “tomgirl” (tomboy). Yet, even these activities were fraught with danger. The refugees were not to fish inside the camp. Ta Mu explained, “It was illegal, but we don’t have anything to eat.” Leaving the camp to hunt and fish was dangerous, too.

We were told, “Do not go to the jungle because there are always bad people.”

And there were landmines, landmines in the jungle, so whenever we walked, we would be careful.

Even though they were not supposed to go outside the camp, they went hunting and fishing in the jungle. They went into the jungle most often during the summer break from school, and when she went with her father, they often went into the jungle near the Karen soldiers’ camp. Ta Mu reiterated that the location of the Karen soldiers’ camp had to remain a secret. As Ta Mu remembered it, if the Burmese soldiers knew the location of the Karen National Liberation Army, the Burmese Army would attack the Karen. The Karen Army camped far from the refugee camp, and only a few people knew the location of the Karen Army’s Camp. “Like my family know. But like my neighbors, they have no idea.”

Because they are relegated to the refugee camps and because paid work is scarce, refugees are dependent upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide shelter and food. The Karen government, which has its base in the

Karen State in Myanmar also provides money for meals for the refugees. Because he could not find other work, Ta Mu's father served the Karen Army as a "peacekeeper." He delivered meals and assisted the Karen soldiers by keeping the peace. Although the Karen Army offered to pay Ta Mu's father, he would not accept the money, maintaining that the money should be used for the Karen government. Other Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) also provide assistance for refugees in Thailand. The Border Consortium "is the main provider of food, shelter and other forms of support to approximately 92,000 [current] refugees from Burma/Myanmar living in nine camps in western Thailand" (TBC, 2018).

### **Education in the Refugee Camp**

Even in dire circumstances of violence, poverty, statelessness, and restricted freedom, education has continued to be important to the Karen people. The Karen Education Department (KED) was formed during the British colonization of Burma and has continued to govern education in the Karen State after Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 (KNU, 2018). In 2009, the KED reorganized, creating the Karen Refugee Committee – Education Entity (KRC-EE) to supervise the educational activities in the refugee camps in Thailand (KNU, 2018).

Similarly, Ta Mu's family instilled the sense that education was important in Ta Mu and her siblings. The family lived in Section Six of eight sections of Mae Ra Ma Laung. The school Ta Mu first attended as a kindergartner was also located in Section Six. However, the school she attended starting in Grade 5 was located in Section Five, a 30-minute walk from her house. The students wore uniforms: white shirts and blue

trousers for the boys and white shirts and blue skirts for the girls. According to Ta Mu she wore one of the two uniforms for girls that her family owned every day to school, sharing the two school uniforms with her sister and washing them every two weeks.

Karen students, who first enroll in KGA (kindergarten), learn English, Thai, Burmese, and Karen. However, in the beginning, Ta Mu did not want to participate. She was extremely shy and sat by the door of her classroom instead of participating with the other students. She also would not take care of her personal needs. On several occasions, she urinated on herself.

However, her teacher continued to encourage her to participate in class activities and “get along with others.” After one of her cousins invited her go with him, Ta Mu eventually overcame some of her shyness and began to participate in the daily routine of the classroom. They began each day singing the Karen Anthem. They also sang other songs in Karen and songs in English. One song Ta Mu remembered singing was “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.” The students also learned the Karen and English alphabets. Beginning in elementary school, the teacher would go to the blackboard after the singing of the Karen anthem, write down what lessons the students would learn that day and what the students needed to do to learn the lessons. They wrote, read, learned math, and continued to learn “a little bit of English and a little bit of Burmese.”

### **Emigrating from Thailand and Transitioning to American Culture**

Education is important to the Karen people. However, their being refugees without any formal status in Thailand has made it difficult for them to continue with post-secondary education in the universities in Thailand. Knowing this, Ta Mu’s parents

decided to seek resettlement in a third country, a country that would offer their children the freedom to pursue a post-secondary education and better opportunities, a country such as Australia, Canada, or the United States of America. Ta Mu's father first attempted to find asylum in Canada. However, because of his association with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the family was not permitted resettlement the first time they applied in 2009. Ta Mu's father attempted again, and this time, he and his family were accepted to become refugees entering the United States. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR assisted them in migrating from Thailand to the United States of America. It took several months to complete the paperwork. Ta Mu's parents modeled the perseverance and courage that Ta Mu and her siblings needed to survive life in the refugee camp and that they would need to travel to and resettle in another country.

After Ta Mu's parents had completed the application for resettlement and were accepted, the family began the process of resettling in the United States. Ta Mu described the process.

From refugee camp, first step we took a car. We would have to ride in a pick-up truck, which is, we would ride in the back, which is illegal in America. And we get all dirty with dirt and all that. And then when we got to Kowikola, which is in a different city, town, we would take a big bus. And I never, ever been on a big bus. It feel so great. And then we stopped at a medical check station. We stopped there for a week. And after that we would ride a new bus. We would take a new bus. The bus was bigger than the other one because we get to sit and lay back and

all that. It took us almost all day. And then we stopped at hotel and spent the night there.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) continued to assist Ta Mu, the rest of her family, and their fellow Karen refugees in their departure from Thailand and entry into the United States. They rode a bus to the airport, and boarded a plane that took them to Hong Kong, and another plane that took them to America. Every step of the way, they found themselves separated from their fellow Karen refugees, who provided familiarity in customs, culture, residence of the world, and language. Ta Mu noted the stress she and the rest of her family and acquaintances experienced in losing everything that was familiar to them and experiencing new situations in different countries with people who were not familiar with them.

The next day, we get on a flight with everyone else. And we fly from Bangkok to Hong Kong, and that's where everybody split up. And there were two families, just me and another family. And we wanted to cry because everybody like, "Where's everybody? Where's everyone?" We were all split up. And then from Hong Kong to Los Angeles. We split up again. My mom was crying because we didn't know what to do. And then there was a guard. He came to us, and he asked us, and he gave us our last flight, Los Angeles to Seattle. We were all alone. Just my family.

Ta Mu and her family arrived in Seattle, Washington, where they were met by a caseworker, who assisted them in finding an apartment in Shaw, a suburb of Seattle, finding their way around the area, learning how to use public transportation, finding

employment for Ta Mu's mother and father, and enrolling Ta Mu and her siblings in school. In addition to the assistance provided by the caseworker, other Karen refugees helped Ta Mu and her family acclimate to the area. A fellow student, Eh Taw, showed Ta Mu where her classrooms were and helped her navigate the halls of her new school.

Some of the new things she needed to adjust to included finding her classrooms, communicating with students who spoke English and no Karen, getting to know new teachers, learning English, and grasping academic concepts that were taught in a language did not know. The family had to adjust as well. In Thailand in the refugee camp, their primary mode of transportation had been walking. Also, people had no compunction about riding in the back of a truck in Thailand. However, as Ta Mu pointed out to me, laws in the United States prohibit children from riding in the back of pick-up trucks. They also had to learn how to use American toilets. According to Ta Mu, the toilets in Thailand consisted of hole in the ground over which the user squatted. Ceramic/porcelain toilets in America were unusual for people such as Ta Mu and her family who were more familiar with using facilities that were built into the floor or ground and often did not involve indoor plumbing.

They also had to learn how to use the stove. Ta Mu recounted how her mother was scared of the electric stove in their apartment in Shaw; therefore, she made no attempt to turn it on for several days after the family moved into their new home. This was especially frustrating for the family because their rice cooker had broken and the family was forced to eat their meals without rice, a staple for them in Thailand. Ta Mu

noted that not having their rice was one of the more significant hardships for her after her arrival in the United States.

Because few Americans spoke Karen or Burmese, Ta Mu's family relied on nonverbal means of communication. Even though the social worker who assisted Ta Mu's family in Washington did not speak Karen, Ta Mu's parents figured out what they were doing by communicating with social worker one-on-one. Ta Mu's parents also built networks with fellow Karen refugees. When their jobs in Washington were not paying enough, they talked to cousins and friends in Texas and found jobs in Texas. They had no qualms about riding on a bus from Washington to Texas that took four days and provided them no opportunity to sleep in a motel on an American bed. Ta Mu recounted the bus trip as exhausting, especially since their route took them through the Southwest during the summer months.

From Seattle to [Meece], we took a bus. It was four days. It took us four days to get there because one of the bus broke down, and we have to wait at a station for almost one day, and we smelled terrible because four days we didn't get to take shower. It was so hot. The weather's very different from [Shaw] and [Meece]. The Karen liaisons, who worked for the industry hiring most of the Karen immigrants, assisted Ta Mu and her family in making the transition from Shaw to Meece easier.

The previous year, when the first group of Karen refugees arrived in Meece, leaders in the community worked with the Karen liaisons to inform the public about who the Karen people were and how the community could welcome them. The leaders provided presentations and ran news stories in the local newspaper and on the local TV

newscasts. The Christian religious leaders also collaborated, providing activities at which Meece community members could meet and interact with the Karen newcomers. One of the churches provided the space for the Karen community members to worship. I had the privilege of attending several of their worship services.

### **Effective Instructional Practices for Newcomer ELLs in American Schools**

After moving to Meece with her family, Ta Mu enrolled as a freshman in Meece High School. At the time, the high school combined Sheltered Instruction (SI) for English I and II, partial Sheltered Instruction for Algebra I, Geometry, Biology, and US History, with extra support provided during ESL I and ESL II classes, in the two ELL Resource Rooms before school, during lunch, and after school, and in the library for thirty minutes after school. Ta Mu attended mainstream academic core classes: Biology, U.S. History, and Algebra I, in a cohort with her fellow Newcomer English Learners. They attended their English I class as a cohort by themselves. Mr. Saunders, an ESL-certified teacher utilized effective instructional strategies for English Language Learners, following the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model developed by Echevarria and Short (2009). Describing Mr. Saunders' instructional strategies, Ta Mu remembered, "Mr. Saunders, he had us draw pictures. We use pictures, words definition, and Karen-Drum website and both English and Karen dictionary to learn English in class." During the ESL class period, Mr. Saunders assisted Ta Mu and the other students in studying for their other subjects. Their freshman year at Meece High School, Ta Mu and the other Newcomer English Learner students took the Texas State-Mandated End-of-Course (EOC) Exams for English I, Biology, U.S. History, and Algebra I. With



linguistic supports, including use of a bilingual dictionary and extra time, Ta Mu passed the Biology and Algebra I the first time she took the exams. Ta Mu followed her teachers' advice to take her time and use the dictionary, the "magic book."

During her sophomore year, Ta Mu enhanced her English acquisition, improving her BICS and her CALP. In Sheltered Instruction English II with Ms. Parker, Ta Mu remembers, "We worked on grammars, did lots of matching and contractions. Essays, of course. We did MLA and the topic, three points, and conclusion."

During her sophomore year, Ta Mu also received Sheltered Instruction in Geometry. The teacher, Mr. Andrews, accommodated linguistically for the Newcomer ELL students by providing extra time for them to process the subject matter. Ta Mu remembered that Mr. Andrews worked with the students "patiently." He would not "move on to the next chapter" if the students "did not understand the material." Ta Mu recalled, "I made the highest grade in his class!! I hated Geometry, but I really enjoyed his class."

That year, her second year of high school, Ta Mu passed the English I and the English II EOCs. As a result, the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee exited Ta Mu from the designation of English Language Learner (ELL). As a result, Ta Mu was enrolled in a mainstream English III class with Ms. Finley. When asked how being in that class differed from being in the Sheltered Instruction English I and II classes, Ta Mu stated,

It was different because I was alone. And I was scared. And although I had questions, I was scared to ask. But then there was a time where I . . . I said, "I

don't have a choice. I have to do something.” And I . . . I get up. I put my act together, and I get up and walk straight to her [Ms. Finley] and I ask her questions. And that's when she try to get to know me more. And she understood my struggles. And she work[ed] with me.

One instructional strategy that Ms. Finley incorporated that Ta Mu found especially helpful was using collaborative grouping.

When I was working in class, we did a lot of group work. That kinda helps me to get to know more about people. And when I need something, I will ask them, and if they have questions, they will ask me. And that's how I become more confident.

During her junior year, Ta Mu also participated in a mainstream Math Models class. Ta Mu credited the teacher, Mr. Harris, with providing the linguistic accommodations of extra time, one-on-one instruction, and use of the ELL Resource Room.

Mr. Harris is willing to help just like any other teachers. During the exam, we went to Ms. Limon's class to take the test. Mr. Harris accept one day late homework. I always turned in my assignments on time because he would check it and hand beck the next day. So I have time to prepare for the test.

Ta Mu also stated that the college students who tutored ELL students as part of a collaboration between Meece High School and the local university helped her and other students with their homework.

Ta Mu also demonstrated how important individualized instruction is for English Language Learners. “If I have a question, I come ask you. Ms. Parker helped me. Ms. Finley helped me.” Ta Mu worked with other immigrant students. She worked with Khin Le after school on the Algebra II Pre-AP project. The school had to be open extended hours for her to do this. School personnel had to be willing to stay to provide the space and the resources such as computers and tables and markers and tablet paper for her to complete her projects. School personnel also had to be available to interpret. They provided the safe space for her to feel brave to ask any question she wanted to ask.

Several school personnel worked individually with Ta Mu. Her counselor, Ms. Tarragon, asked me to allow Ta Mu to enroll in the Student Council Leadership Class, Ta Mu’s sophomore year. Many teachers lack ESL certification, the skills, or confidence in their skills to teach English Language Learners (Hansen-Thomas, Rochins, Kakkar, & Okeyo, 2016). Ms. Tarragon was having difficulty finding elective classes taught by qualified ESL teachers who provided the recommended linguistic accommodations for English Learners including providing scaffolding and individual instruction, and demonstrating compassion for the student and awareness about the student’s culture (August & Garcia, 1988; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). I could have relegated Ta Mu to reviewing for the EOC exams. I almost did. But then, I remembered that I believed and still believe that education, especially a public high school education is more than passing state-mandated exam. Instead, I introduced Ta Mu to the Student Council culture of an American high school. I assigned Ta Mu the daily task of picking up the local newspaper from the high school library, scanning them for photographs and

articles featuring students, faculty, and staff at Meece High School, cutting out the photographs and articles, and stapling them to the bulletin board in the hall of the high school. I visually demonstrated the task that Ta Mu was to perform. After that, Ta Mu completed the task without being reminded again. She retrieved the newspaper and a pair of scissors, entered the classroom, squatted down in her Asian squat, opened and scanned the papers, cut out the photographs and articles about Meece High School students, and posted the cut-out material on the bulletin board. If she had a question about whether a particular photograph or article should be cut out, she asked me; thereby, utilizing and improving her English speaking skills.

As a result of enrolling in the Student Council class, joining Student Council, and experiencing the opportunities for community service, Ta Mu decided to commit herself to this opportunity for community service in which she desired to participate. Ta Mu stated, "I want to help people." In honor of Ta Mu committing herself to working and serving an excellent role model for the other general members, the Student Council officers awarded Ta Mu the Outstanding Junior Class Member of the Year for Student Council. The summer before her senior year, an officer resigned and cancelled on attending the Summer Leadership Workshop. I asked Ta Mu if she wanted to take the other officer's place. Her parents, knowing that this was another opportunity and thus were willing to entrust their child to the teacher, allowed Ta Mu to attend the Summer Leadership Workshop in another city on a college campus for five days. The registration fees had already been paid by the Student Council, and the Student Council could not receive a refund. Therefore, Ta Mu, who like many other immigrants, comes from a

family of lower socio-economic status, did not have to pay for the opportunity. She learned more. She interacted with students from other backgrounds. She was surrounded by English speakers whom she did not know. Therefore, she had to assert herself, meet new people and speak English to them. Ta Mu also played the group-building games, participated in skits, danced in the line dances, and participated in the aerobic dancing and exercises. Her life was different from what it had been in the refugee camp in Thailand.

Ta Mu accepted the appointment by the Student Council Executive Committee to serve in the office of Points Secretary for Student Council. She was fastidious in completing her work. The job description of Points Secretary for the Meece High School Student Council includes “recording points of all student council members and keeping them updated on their active member status” (2015). To complete her responsibilities Ta Mu gathered the Student Council members’ points sheets, sat down at the computer, figured out how to construct an Excel spreadsheet, and entered the points into the spreadsheet. She presented an updated report of the members’ current points at the weekly general membership meeting of the Student Council.

Ms. Parker, who recognized Ta Mu enjoyed singing, encouraged her to join the Meece High School Women’s Choir. At Ta Mu’s invitation, I attended the Karen worship services to hear her sing with the choir and to present her sister’s high school diploma. Because of Ta Mu’s involvement in the Meece High School Culture Exchange Club, she experienced opportunities to share her culture and learn about other cultures. She wore her traditional Karen dress at the local Catholic Church’s Multicultural

Festival, danced in a traditional Filipino dance for the Festival, learned about Texas geography, history, and government by visiting one of the state parks near Crockett, Texas and the capitol complex in Austin, Texas.

Ta Mu received recognition for her academic success by being invited to join the National Honor Society at Meece High School. Ta Mu did not know what National Honor Society was; therefore, she showed me the invitation. I exclaimed, “Congratulations!” and explained to her that it meant that her grade average was good enough to be considered for the National Honor Society, an organization that invites high school students who display four qualities: scholarship, leadership, character, and service (NHS, 2018). Ta Mu applied for National Honor Society. Through the application process, she demonstrated that she fulfilled the other three requirements of National Honor Society membership. She participated in community of service, served as a leader, and displayed good character. Ta Mu’s application was accepted, and she was inducted into National Honor Society in the spring of her sophomore year.

### **The Immigrant Paradox**

Because many immigrants, such as Ta Mu and her family, come to the United States from harsher social conditions, they often experience the *immigrant paradox* of outperforming American-born students in school (Marks, Ejesi, & Coll, 2014). Ta Mu recognized that she had a commitment to her family to work hard, perform well, and succeed in bettering her life through education.

I must do this for my family who has sacrificed so much for me. My father and mother brought me here. Mr. Saunders, he worked with me, and you worked

with me. If I have questions I ask you. I remember telling [myself], “You can do it. Do the best you can. Don’t give up. Push a little harder.” They were there for me when I needed them, and I was there for them when they needed me because helping one another is like the best medicine in the world.

Ta Mu took advantage of the resources that were available to her to acquire the English language both for BICS purposes and CALP purposes. She asked questions of her teachers, the ELL aides, her cohort members who spoke Karen as their first language, her cohort members who were not Karen-speaking immigrants, English-speakers in her regular classes, and her new English-speaking friends. Ta Mu credited two friends who helped her study for the U.S. History EOC Exam. Ta Mu also availed herself of technology available to her, utilizing the online Karen/English dictionary and the Study Hall program created to assist students in studying for exams in their classes.

As a result of her persistence in her studies and English acquisition, Ta Mu graduated from Meece High School with her diploma, Student Council honor cord, her National Honor Society sash, and one of Meece High School’s 12 Who’s Who awards. The local news program honored Ta Mu and her accomplishment by interviewing her and sharing some of her story with the public. Soo after graduation, Ta Mu’s family moved another state where she, her parents, and her older sister could obtain better-paying jobs and have access to a larger Karen community and better social services. The move did deter Ta Mu from her other academic goals.

Accomplishing her goal of graduating from high school served as the precursor to Ta Mu working toward accomplishing her ultimate academic goal, earning a degree in

nursing. She began her post-secondary studies and completed two additional goals necessary for establishing her career. She learned to drive a car and received her driver's license, and she became a citizen of the United States. Ta Mu explained that she planned to become a nurse and return to Thailand to provide health and medical care to the current refugees in the camps.

### **Summary**

Ta Mu credits herself, her family, her friends, and her teachers and other school personnel with helping her achieve success in school. She overcame her shyness that she experienced first in kindergarten and then continue with throughout her school career. However, working hard and seeing outcomes gave her confidence. As she gained confidence, she took risks and talked to people. She knew she had a responsibility to make something out of the opportunity her parents gave her by moving from the refugee camp and the home she had ever known to move to a larger country with different expectations.

The faculty and staff at Meece High School who had educated themselves in working with immigrant ELL students knew that it was their responsibility to reach out to these students, work with them individually, utilize visuals, graphics, technology, and bilingual dictionaries, and provide the students opportunities to speak in their first language and in English. The faculty and staff were also willing to give more of their time than is minimally required for teachers. The faculty and staff also reached out to community. They visited the students in their homes, attended their performances at Meece High School, and at the Karen Baptist Church. The teachers developed a mentor



relationship with the students. They also worked to find native English speakers who were willing to share their lives with the Karen students.

The faculty and staff also worked with the Karen students to teach them about the culture of Meece High School. We helped them navigate rites of high school such as taking school pictures, attending pep rallies, and joining extracurricular organizations. Ms. Parker encouraged the ones who liked to sing to join the choir. I invited those who were interested to join Student Council and the Culture Exchange Club. This inspired the Karen students to develop friendships across the spectrum of students who attended Meece High School. With teachers at their side, Ta Mu and others were more willing to experience American culture. Their parents also felt more comfortable knowing that a person familiar with the culture and the landscape was there to protect their children. Individuals built meaningful relationships. With the support of her family, other ELL students, other Karen students, American students, and the Meece High School faculty and staff, Ta Mu developed the self-confidence to strive for success.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

Before the Karen and Karenni students entered Meece High School, I was concerned that the educators at Meece High School would not accomplish the task of preparing the students to pass the state-mandated exams, graduate from high school, and prepare for post-secondary success. However, Ta Mu accomplished the task. She was the first Karen refugee immigrant at Meece High School to complete all required coursework in four years and pass the EOC Exams administered to Texas public school students who entered high school as first-time freshmen beginning with the 2011-2012 academic school year. Ta Mu entered Meece High School as a freshman in the 2012-2013 academic year. She was required to prove mastery on five EOC Exams including English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History. She passed Algebra I and Biology the first time she took them. Although she took the English I, English II, and U.S. History exams more than once, she had proved mastery by the middle of her junior year. Because of my interactions with Ta Mu as her teacher, mentor, and extracurricular activities advisor, I had opportunities to observe Ta Mu and formulate reasons why I believed she was successful. However, I was curious to know what Ta Mu believed to be the reasons

she was successful. Therefore, I developed the guiding questions for the biographical study.

1. What are one Karen youth's reflections on her life in the refugee camps, her family's journey to the United States, and her adapting to American education and American culture?
2. What events in the Karen youth's life have facilitated her ability to learn English?
3. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in public school by maintaining excellent grades, passing all Texas state-mandated exams, and graduating with honors?
4. What life events have enabled her to achieve academic success in her current endeavors?

I looked forward to understanding what influence Ta Mu's family, Karen friends, teachers, American students, and other immigrant students had on her achieving academic success. I also looked forward to learning what practices she engaged in to assure that she succeeded.

### **Summary of the Study**

Having already established a mentor/mentee relationship with the Ta Mu during the four years she attended Meece High School, I built upon that relationship during the time frame of the actual research. I mailed her the Letter to Participant (see Appendix A) and the Participant Permission Form (see Appendix B). Before I interviewed Ta Mu, I formally reviewed the purpose and significance of the study. I conducted two formal interview sessions with Ta Mu, using the list of initial questions (see Appendix C), I

recorded the sessions on audiotape. Ta Mu often struggled to select the correct English words to answer questions. In addition, as she explored different topics, I focused on those specific topics, asking additional follow-up questions. To assist Ta Mu in her understanding of the interview questions, I emailed her the initial interview questions (see Appendix C) in written form. This allowed Ta Mu the opportunity to experience the English language in writing, look up definitions in an English dictionary and a Karen/English dictionary for the words she did not comprehend, and take the extra time she needed to process the questions and her answers in Karen and in English. As a result, Ta Mu's written answers provided additional details to her oral answers to the interview questions. Ta Mu also shared artifacts that included writing assignments, artwork, academic certificates, and academic awards, thereby revealing additional texture and meaning to Ta Mu's oral reminiscences.

I hand-delivered the Letter to the Superintendent of the school district to obtain Ta Mu's records in her personal folder (see Appendix D). The superintendent signed and mailed the District/School Participation Consent Form (see Appendix E) to me. Records utilized included Ta Mu's high school transcript, documentation of her passing the EOCs in the five required subject areas, and her TELPAS writing samples.

After I conducted the interviews, I transcribed the interviews. I then analyzed the data contained in the interview transcriptions, Ta Mu's written answers to the interview questions, and the written information found in essays she wrote while she was a student at Meece High School. Consistent with the review of literature, several themes emerged. I categorized Ta Mu's experiences into the areas of the atmosphere of the Karen refugee

camps and the dependence of refugees upon the UNHCR and NGOs, the importance of networking among family members and other refugees necessary for refugees to successfully adapt to the culture of the host countries, the appreciation by refugee children of the sacrifices their parents make to provide a better life for their children, and the important role teachers and educational leaders play in confidently and expertly providing a nurturing and challenging educational atmosphere for refugee students.

### **Conclusions**

The common theme binding Ta Mu's recounting of her experiences was one of communicating and establishing authentic relationships with other people. Ta Mu communicated with other inhabitants of the refugee camp, the people who worked with the non-government organizations (NGOs), her family members, fellow students from similar, as well as different, backgrounds, and educators in Thailand and in the United States. Teachers and teacher aides developed heightened awareness of the needs of Ta Mu to acquire linguistic skills and cognitive skills required for successfully graduating from high school. She also developed a schema that she could utilize as she prepared attend college, work part time, learn to drive a car, and interact with Americans in the larger community.

#### **Karen refugee camps and dependency.**

In Fuertes' 2010 study, Karen refugees described their confinement living in a refugee camp in Thailand as being like "birds inside a cage" (p. 20). Barbed wire fences surrounded the camp and Thai military personnel guarded the gates into the camp (Fuertes, 2010). Ta Mu also remembered that the Thai guards closely watched the

refugee camp. She compared living in the camp to “being in a prison or a mental hospital.” If the refugees were caught outside the camp, they would possibly be put in jail or prison or be sent back to the country of their origin.

Fuertes (2010) also described the dependency of the Karen refugees on the non-government organizations (NGOs) for food and other necessities. This led to a feeling of uselessness and futility (Fuertes, 2010, 21). Ta Mu described this feeling when she remembered that her father did not have a wage-earning job but worked for the Karen Army by helping other refugees. Ta Mu also described efforts she and her family took to earn money. In one of her essays, she wrote

There were no jobs, no money to buy our clothing or not enough foods. . . . In order to make money, me, my sister and my mom . . . sewed and weaved the shirts and sold these [to] some richest people.

As a result of the feeling of futility of living in the refugee camp, Ta Mu’s parents made the decision to emigrate from Thailand. They were dependent on the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Migration Agency dedicated to assisting refugees with the migration process to a host country.

### **Networking.**

Lee (2012) found that while the Karen refugees were relegated to the camps and dependent on the UNHCR and NGOs, the Karen people also maintained a network and interconnectedness that he attributed to four factors: the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), the centralized Karen Education Department (KED), the churches, with the

Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Church (KKBC) serving as the umbrella, and the individual family members maintaining family connections with members in other camps. He also concluded that because of increased emigration out of the refugee camps, the Karen people transferred the interconnectedness to a transnational level (Lee, 2012).

Ta Mu's experiences supported this theme when she described how her family established their home in the suburb of Seattle with the assistance of the social worker. Ta Mu also remembered that fellow Karen immigrants to the suburb of Seattle showed her and her family how to use public transportation. A fellow Karen student also showed Ta Mu around her new middle school. Even though the student, Chrit Loo, did not attend any of the same classes that Ta Mu attended, Chrit Loo helped Ta Mu find the classrooms and explained to Ta Mu the class schedule.

Ta Mu and her family also established connections with extended family members, other Karen immigrants, and Karen immigrants who served as translators and community liaisons for businesses who hired the Karen immigrants, for the medical community, for schools where the students enrolled, and for social and governmental services. Because Ta Mu and her family had a cousin in Meece, her parents learned of better-paying jobs where they could work longer hours to earn more money to cover their rent, food, and other expenses. The community of Meece, with the help of the Karen liaison who worked for the industry hiring most of the Karen immigrants, provided presentations about who the Karen were and how the community could welcome. The Christian religious community also collaborated, providing activities at which Meece community members could meet and interact with the Karen newcomers. One of the

churches provided the space for the Karen community members to worship. I had the privilege of attending several of their worship services.

Other opportunities in other communities opened up for the Karen immigrants. Ta Mu's family relied on their Karen connections again to make the decision to move to another town in another state after Ta Mu graduated from Meece High School. In addition to seeking support from Karen organizations, Ta Mu and her family sought help from American charitable organizations and social services. They also built on their new relationships with their American friends. Ta Mu's friends helped her study for the U.S. History EOC, the last state exam she needed to pass. These friends also provided rides for her to different activities and invited her into their lives. When Ta Mu needed recommendations for college and information from Meece High School for her college application, she asked me to assist her.

#### **Family support and personal resolve.**

Karen students and their parents place a high value on education, social participation, and contribution (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016). Ta Mu stated several times throughout our interview that her parents wanted better educational opportunities for her and her siblings. They believed they could secure those opportunities for their children if the family moved the United States. In one of her essays Ta Mu wrote, "But I feel bad for my parents . . . they do not want to come to America, but in order to have better opportunities for us they have to come to the U.S.A." Ta Mu recognized the sacrifice and felt inspired to take advantage of the opportunities provided to her. In the same essay, she wrote, "I am very thankful to God, to my parents, teachers, and friends that supported



me and helped me out in bad situations.” Ta Mu’s sister, who graduated from Meece High School under a different state accountability assessment system, served as a role model to her younger sister. In addition, she and Ta Mu inspired each other to continue in their struggle to earn their high school diplomas. Ta Mu struggled, but she also reminded herself that she must persevere.

### **Influence of educators.**

Previous research has revealed the challenges that immigrant students, including refugees, must overcome when entering school in a host country. Because of unfamiliarity with the dominant language, ELL students and their families experience difficulties communicating effectively with school officials and interacting in the community (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Shim, 2013). Teachers often assume immigrant students are academically deficient because of their lack of English proficiency (Shim, 2013). In addition, teachers often feel unprepared pedagogically to teach ELL students (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). Beyond the classroom, xenophobia and racism is often imbedded in federal, state, and local educational policy (Choi, 2013; Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015). These attitudes and structures negatively impact the success of immigrant students in learning the English language necessary for academic achievement.

However, immigrant students, including refugees, flourish in academic settings in which teachers exhibit sensitivity to and appreciation for diverse cultures (Gay, 2000). The English teachers and I sought stories that represented the Karen culture and their lives in Thailand. In my classes, we had opportunities to discuss similarities and

differences between Karen and American cultures. As evidenced by the essays she shared with me, Ta Mu had several opportunities to write about her experiences in Thailand, Washington, and Texas. She also actively participated in the Culture Exchange Club, which gave Ta Mu additional opportunities to teach me and American students about the Karen culture and learn about American culture. Ta Mu benefitted from this interchange of cultural backgrounds. In addition, she acquired more English and improved her reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Refugees also flourish in classrooms in which effective teaching strategies for ELLs are utilized. One effective strategy includes providing instructional support in the students' first language and in their second language (Collier, 1992). Ta Mu noted that all of her English teachers, her ESL teacher, and the ESL aide encouraged her to use Karen to explore different academic concepts. Mr. Saunders introduced her and the other students to the online Karen/English dictionary. Ms. Parker reminded her to use "the magic book" and to take her time when writing her essay and when answering questions on the English I and English II EOCs. Mainstream English III teacher Ms. Finley continued to allow Ta Mu to online resources and the hardbound Karen/English Bilingual Dictionary that the Meece High School librarian located in Australia. Ms. Young, Ta Mu's mainstream English IV teacher, allowed her to use her cell phone to look up words. During ESL class, I worked with Ta Mu and other students on their math concepts. I would demonstrate visually and then Ta Mu would discuss the concept with the other students in Karen, showing them visually as well.

**Karen students and the Karen language.**

A second effective teaching strategy that proved effective for Ta Mu was providing ELLs several opportunities to talk with other students and the teacher (Walqui, 2000). In the Sheltered Instruction English I and English II classes, Mr. Saunders and Ms. Parker provided these opportunities. Ta Mu was comfortable talking with Karen ELLs and Newcomer ELL students who spoke other languages as their first language. However, Ta Mu struggled in Ms. Finley's mainstream English III class. She was uncomfortable approaching other students. However, Ms. Finley assisted Ta Mu by choosing a student for Ta Mu to partner with. Ms. Tarragon, the counselor, also helped by enrolling at least two Newcomer ELLs together in the same section of a course. One example was enrolling Ta Mu and Khin Le, a student from Myanmar, in Pre-AP Algebra II class together with Ms. Fisher. The two worked together in class. They also assisted each with homework and with the different projects. Ta Mu enjoyed this arrangement, telling me, "It was great working with [Khin Le]. We always motivate[d] each other." The teachers were also available for tutorials. This provided Ta Mu time to talk with her teachers one-on-one and receive the linguistic scaffolding of individual instruction. If Ms. Fisher was not available, Ta Mu knew to work with the other Algebra II teacher, Ms. Allen.

A third effective strategy is to build authentic teacher/student relationships. Teachers who concern themselves with the social, linguistic, and academic growth of their students encourage the students to grow in all three areas (Walqui, 2000). Ta Mu recognized that her teachers cared about her. In her writing and in her interviews, Ta Mu

wrote in one of her essays written for Ms. Parker, “You were always there for me when I needed your help. You never complained.” Ta Mu said that many of the educators with whom she studied were her “inspiration.” She recounted that she often worked in my classroom or in the ELL Resource Room and that she asked her teachers if she had questions.

### **Implications**

Educating refugee immigrants requires additional monetary resources to pay for tutorials, technology resources, and supplies. Sheltered Instruction classes provide smaller classes with highly qualified ESL-certified teachers who can provide more individualized attention, addressing ELLs social development as well as academic and linguistic development (Walqui, 2000). ESL support classes provide the extra time that ELLs need to process the concepts they are learning. The ELL Resource Room provides another location for ELLs to receive tutoring and to interact with technology and other learning materials.

Educators who work directly with refugee immigrants need to be well-versed in teaching to culturally diverse groups that require linguistic support and academic instruction. Because refugees are settling in many different regions of the United States, including rural areas, educators throughout the country need educate themselves concerning their attitudes toward teaching refugees and their pedagogical repertoire of effective practices for working with refugees. Educators must also realize that working with refugees and other immigrant ELLs requires establishing more personalized, authentic relationships between educators and students. Educators also devote more time

assisting refugees in developing their understanding of academic subjects, acquiring the second language of English, adapting to their new culture, and developing their positionality between their original culture and their second culture.

Professional development addressing attitudes toward refugees and effective teaching strategies for ELLs would benefit teachers already serving in public schools. Instruction for pre-service teachers at the collegiate levels in working with ELLs would better prepare teachers entering the educational field for the first time. Biographical studies of refugee students who have experienced success provide detailed accounts that support the generalized concepts learned in professional development and in collegiate classes with specific, rich concrete stories.

If students, such as Ta Mu, share their stories, then educators have the opportunity to understand what the students consider effective practices in helping them acquire their second language, develop cognitive academic language, and develop deeper understanding of subject areas they explore in school. By reflecting on the assertions of their students, educators can better create an environment that helps students succeed in developing their goals and achieving the goals. The practice moves from the realm of the generalized abstract to that of the specific concrete.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

By graduating from high school, Ta Mu accomplished the first goal toward taking advantage of the better educational and career opportunities her parents envisioned for her in the United States of America. However, Ta Mu's journey is not completed. I would like to continue to interview her and correspond with her as she continues on that

journey. Her post-secondary experiences would also be of interest to educators who work with refugees and other immigrant students.

Biographical study of one participant provides a rich description of the participant's moments in life. However, other immigrant students of different backgrounds also experience academic success. Additional biographical studies about Karen student/refugee experiences in different regions of the United States would provide opportunities to compare and contrast the students' personalities and their life experiences, the influence of their families, and the characteristics of their teachers' attitudes and pedagogical methods.

Quantitative research methods would provide statistical data concerning high school graduation rates for Karen females as a larger sample. Additional studies of Karen males, other refugee groups, or other immigrant groups would provide additional literature about immigrant students to the United States. This biographical study explored the events of a student who attended a rural medium-sized high school that did not begin working with Karen refugees until 2011. Other studies could examine high schools that have served Karen refugees for a longer period of time or a shorter period, that are larger or smaller than Meece High School, and that are in urban areas.

### **Final Reflections**

When I first began teaching ELLs in ESL class, all of the students spoke Spanish as their first language. People were surprised when I told them that I did not speak Spanish. However, once the Karen and Karenni immigrants became my students, none of my friends and colleagues expressed an expectation that I speak Karen, Karenni, or

Burmese. We understood that we had a challenging task and that we would need to utilize every teaching method that we possessed in our repertoire.

Because I and the other ESL-certified teachers did not have the services of English/Karen bilingual aides, we relied on the ESL teaching strategies that we had learned during our certification process. The first that I observed us using was inviting the students to discuss the academic concepts we wanted them to master in their first language. We also provided the time needed for the students to discuss the concepts. Thirdly, we provided graphic organizers, scaffolding, and visual representations. Also, we provided a variety of resources for them to acquire English as their second language while they achieved academic mastery in their different subject areas. The dedication of the students inspired the Meece High School faculty and staff to work harder and search for additional teaching strategies to assist the ELL students.

After high school, Ta Mu worked as quality control manager in a chicken processing plant. She enrolled in college to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse. Because of her class schedule, she left the chicken processing plant where she worked 4:00 pm-2:00 am and began working part time in a retail store that offered hours that fit in with her class schedule better. Recently, Ta Mu communicated with me that she was struggling in one of her classes at college. I reminded her that every time she learned new concepts she completed two tasks, mastering the concept and mastering the English language required to comprehend the concept in her second language. Ta Mu also pursued another dream and became a citizen of the United States of America. As a U.S. citizen, she plans to “. . . travel to Thailand and provide medical outreach for the poor.”

No single educator at Meece High School secured the success Ta Mu experienced. The leadership in the school district provided the support needed to provide the optimum environment the Newcomer English Language Learners success, including sheltered instruction, after school tutorials, and access to computers in the ESL classroom and the ELL Resource Room. Throughout her interview, Ta Mu named different teachers, the ESL aides, her counselor, and student tutors from the secondary education methods at the nearby university as those who helped her and provided her materials to accomplish her goals. Educators working directly with Ta Mu did not limit our interaction to the classroom. We initiated communication with Ta Mu one-on-one, taking the lead in guiding her through life in an American high school and answering her numerous questions. We also supported Ta Mu in her Karen community, visiting her in her home, attending Karen Baptist Church worship services and programs, and participating in other activities within the Karen community. Educating ELL refugee students requires additional commitment and effort on the part of the educators and on the part of the students. When both of those qualities exist within the teachers and the students, then academic success can occur.



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## **APPENDIX A**

## Letter to Participant

Ms.

Date: May 31, 2017

Dear Participant:

The purpose of this letter is to solicit your participation in my research study. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

The purpose of my research is to explore the life experiences of a female Karen refugee youth who moved to the United States as a pre-teenager and who achieved academic success at a Texas public high school, in which every student must pass state-mandated academic exams in order to graduate, by having the youth and her parents recount the influences, personality characteristics, and context that she and they understand to be significant in contributing to her academic success. I am seeking your voluntary participation in my research.

The study consists of interviewing willing participants, having willing participants write their remembered experiences in memory books, and having willing participants collect share memorable artifacts as part of the memory books or of memory boxes. Your sincere and honest recounting of your experiences as a female Karen child who lived in refugee camps, moved to the United States of America, and as a teenager enrolled in a Texas public high school, successfully completing all requirements to earn a high school diploma, will help in understanding the challenges a female refugee student overcomes and the support systems instrumental in assisting the youth in achieving academic success.

The interviews will last approximately 90 minutes and with your approval will be videotaped and audiotaped. Interviews will be conducted, memory books will be written, and memory boxes will be assembled in the summer of 2017. You will set the time, date, and location of the interviews and the sharing of the memory books and boxes, and taping will be stopped any time you deem appropriate. Transcripts of our interviews will be available to you so that you can confirm the accuracy of the transcription. Confidentiality is assured, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name if that is your preference.

Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Risks may include remembering traumatic experiences that make the participants feel uncomfortable. If at any time this occurs, the researcher will discontinue exploring that experience with the participant.

I will contact you in a few days to determine your willingness to participate in this study. If you agree to participate, please complete and return the enclosed form to me. Any concerns with this research may be directed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 936-468-6606. Other questions or concerns regarding this research may be directed to:

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck  
950 FM 3314  
Nacogdoches, TX 75964  
kpwhitbeck@yahoo.com  
936-615-0843

Dr. Patrick M. Jenlink  
P.O. Box 13018 SFA Station  
Nacogdoches, TX 75962  
pjenlink@sfasu.edu  
936-468-1756

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck

## **APPENDIX B**

## Participant Permission Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Participant's Permission

I have read and understand the letter requesting my participation in the biographical research regarding my life experiences as a female Karen refugee youth who moved to the United States as a pre-teenager and who achieved academic success at a Texas public high school, in which every student must pass state-mandated academic exams in order to graduate, by recounting the influences, personality characteristics, and context that I understand to be significant in contributing to my academic success. I understand I will participate in interviews and share experiences I have written in a memory book and artifacts I have collected for a memory box. I understand that the interviews will be audiotaped and videotaped and that all information that I share will be secured and kept confidential. I understand that pseudonyms will be used and that my identity and other information about my identity will not be revealed. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project, and I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any time.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Protocol/Questions: Ta Mu**

Thank you for participating in my biographical study of the life experiences of a female Karen refugee youth who moved to the United States as a pre-teenager and who achieved academic success at a Texas public high school, in which every student must pass state-mandated academic exams in order to graduate by having youth recount the influences, personality characteristics, and context that she understands to be significant in contributing to her academic success. The information I gather from you will help educators to better understand the experiences of an immigrant student in learning English and striving to achieve academic success. From this understanding, these educators will more adequately provide instruction and support to assist immigrant students. Once the information has been collected, analyzed, and transcribed, it will be destroyed. Thank you for your participation and your willingness to trust me. In addition to the questions I will ask you during this initial interview, I am requesting that you collect artifacts for and write in a memory book.

#### Level One Interview

Level one interview will consist of the following questions.

##### *Interview Questions*

1. When were you born and where?
2. What were the circumstances of your birth?
3. What is your family like?
4. How old are your parents?
5. How old are your siblings?

6. What is the name of the refugee camp in which you lived?
7. What was your life like in the refugee camp?
8. What are the other refugee camps?
9. Did you see people from the other refugee camps?
10. What were your educational experiences in the refugee camp?
11. What are some of your best memories while living in the refugee camp?
12. What are some of your worst memories while living in the refugee camp?
13. Did you leave the refugee camps?
14. If so, when? What were your reasons to leave the camp?
15. Did you feel safe in the camp? Why?
16. Did you feel safe when you left the camp? Why?
17. Why did your parents decide to emigrate from Thailand?
18. What organizations assisted you in emigrating?
19. How was it decided that you would come to the United States?
20. What was it like when you first came to the United States?
21. Where did you live?
22. What was your community like?
23. How was family life different from being in Thailand?
24. What was your education like when you first came to the United States?
25. Why did you leave the northwest to come to Texas?
26. What was your education like in your Texas public high school?
27. What influenced you to achieve academic success?

28. To what do you attribute your academic success?
29. What influence did your teachers, friends, family, Karen community, and extended community have on your success?
30. What extracurricular activities did you participate in?
31. Did they assist you in achieving academic success? Why or why not?
32. What else did you do to achieve academic success?
33. What did you do to learn English to interact with people socially?
34. What did you do to learn English to use in your classes?
35. What did you do to prepare for the state-mandated exams you were required to take?
36. How did you feel when you took them?
37. What did it feel like to pass the exams? To be nominated for National Honor Society? To graduate from high school?
38. What else could have done to be even more successful?
39. What else could others have done?
40. What does it feel like to live in the United States rather than Thailand?

#### Level Two Interview

Level two interview will begin with a review of the member check provided in the interim between level one and two. Based on the analysis of the data collected in the level one interview, questions will be derived for further investigation or clarification.

We also look at previously artifacts.

#### Level Three Interview

Level three interview will begin with a review of the member check provided in the interim between level two and three. Based on the analysis of the data collected in the level one interview, questions will be derived for further investigation or clarification. We also look at artifacts.

## **APPENDIX D**

## Letter to Superintendent

June 26, 2017  
Superintendent Sandra Dowdy  
Nacogdoches Independent School District  
PO Box 631521  
Nacogdoches, TX 75963-1521

Dear Ms. Dowdy:

My name is Katherine Parrish Whitbeck, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

The purpose of this letter is to request permission to collect data for my doctoral dissertation. The title of my study is *Interpretive Biographical Study of a Female Karen Refugee Who Has Experienced Academic Success in a Texas Public High School*. I would like to collect data for one student who attended Nacogdoches High School. I would like to gather this data July-August 2017.

The purpose of my qualitative biographical research is to explore the life experiences of a female Karen refugee youth who moved to the United States as a pre-teenager and who achieved academic success at a Texas public high school, in which every student must pass state-mandated academic exams in order to graduate by having youth recount the influences, personality characteristics, and context that she understands to be significant in contributing to her academic success. While the majority of the data will be collected through interviews with the subject of the biographical study and her parents, I would also like to collect confidential information on the student from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) about her ethnicity, socio-economic status, immigrant status, LEP status, grades received, and EOC data. Neither the school nor the student's nor the other participants' real names will be used. All data will be confidential.

The result of this will be significant for teachers and administrators in Texas public schools in their efforts to address the needs of enrolled refugee immigrant students who are required to learn English in addition to mastering the curriculum required by the state of Texas. Upon completion of the study, a copy of the final dissertation will be sent to the school district. If you consent to participate in the study, please complete and return the attached Participant Consent Form.

### **Any concerns with this research**

Questions or concerns regarding this research may be directed to:

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck

Dr. Patrick M. Jenlink

950 FM 3314  
Nacogdoches, TX 75964  
kpwhitbeck@yahoo.com  
936-615-0843

P.O. Box 13018 SFA Station  
Nacogdoches, TX 75962  
pjenlink@sfasu.edu  
936-468-1756

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck



## **APPENDIX E**

**District/School Participation Consent Form**

I have read and understand the purpose of the biographical research regarding the life experiences of a female Karen refugee youth, and I agree to the researching collecting PEIMS data on the student who is the subject of the research. I understand that the name of my school district, the name of the school in my district, and the name of the student will not be used in the final report. I understand that I may withdraw my participation of the school in my district and/or my district from the research study at any time I choose.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Katherine Parrish Whitbeck graduated from Nacogdoches High School in 1978. She attended Southern Methodist University and received her Bachelor of Arts in English in 1982. She began teaching in 1985 at Nacogdoches High School and has taught in the areas of math, English, journalism, speech, drama, and English as a Second Language. She has also served as Language Proficiency Assessment Committee Coordinator for Nacogdoches High School and currently serves as the Nacogdoches High School Student Council Advisor. She obtained her Master of Arts in English at Stephen F. Austin State University in 1993. Whitbeck entered the doctoral program at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2015, obtaining her doctoral degree, May 2018.

Permanent Address: 950 FM 3314, Nacogdoches, Texas 75964

Style manual designation: *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition*

Typist: Katherine Parrish Whitbeck