

Refugees' Perspectives on Cultural Adaptation and Education of Their Children: Myanmar Refugee Parents' Story

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored Myanmar refugee parents' perceptions and experiences of social and cultural capital use for their children's education and cultural adaptation while resettling in the United States. Multiple sources of data were collected and triangulated, including a parent survey, individual interviews with three parents, a focus group with a number of parents, and meticulous field notes. The findings revealed three prominent social and cultural capital use themes among Myanmar refugee parents: education as hopes vs. concerns, language as an opportunity vs. disappearance, and community as social capital vs. social distance. The Myanmar refugee families engaged in complex negotiations for each capital as they supported their children's education and cultural adaptation. Refugee parents strived to utilize their past experiences as well as cultural and social resources, such as their home language, nurturing relationships, and networking with fellow ethnic parents, to provide diverse social and cultural capital for their children. This study offers valuable insights for teachers and policymakers when considering the successful integration of refugee children and families into current school systems.

Keywords: refugee, Myanmar, cultural adaptation, cultural capital, language, education

1. Introduction

Refugee children who are resettled in major countries, such as the United States, Australia, and Germany are often referred to by their families as embarking on a journey of hope toward higher education and a brighter future (Grandi, 2016; Grigt, 2017). However, despite some reported cases of success, many of these children face consistent challenges in attaining academic success within the new educational setting due to cultural and linguistic gaps between their school and home environments (Li, 2007). The situation is further exacerbated by the impact of previous traumatic experiences prior to resettlement (McWilliams, 2016) and the impacts of urbanization, which leads to limited access to under-resourced and overcrowded schools during their transition period (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Li, 2018).

The existing educational and policy factors further compound the complexity of the situation. Despite the growing linguistic and cultural diversity observed in many American schools, especially those in urban areas with students representing over 100 different language backgrounds, the majority of teachers (85%) are middle-class, white, and monolingual (Li, 2018). Moreover, 87.5% of teachers have little to no training in effective teaching strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse students and less than 30% have received training in designing instruction for racially diverse groups (Frankenberg & Siegel Hawley, 2008; Li, 2018). Adding to this challenge, teachers also lack a fundamental understanding of refugee children's experiences and socio-emotional issues, including their unique traumas and circumstances (McBrien, 2005; McWilliams, 2016). Consequently, these gaps and limitations in knowledge and training hinder these vulnerable populations' educational opportunities and support.

One such vulnerable population is Myanmar refugees who have been steadily increasing and now have a significant presence of 25% among the total migrant population in one Midwest city (Eaton, 2017). Most Myanmar refugee parents are primarily responsible for caring for their young children at home. However, when these children enter the

public education system, typically starting in kindergarten, they often exhibit lower literacy achievement compared to their white-monolingual peers (Ward et al., 2011). Therefore, it becomes crucial for teachers and policymakers to understand the Myanmar refugee children's home culture and educational perspectives to effectively support these children and families (Li, 2018; McWilliams, 2016). Previous research has focused on life in border refugee camps and consistently highlights their challenging health and well-being circumstances (Koh et al., 2013). However, this study explores the impact of social and cultural capital possessed by Myanmar refugee parents regarding their children's education in the United States. The research question includes: 'What are the perceptions and experiences of social and cultural capital use for childcare and education among Myanmar refugee families resettled in the United States?'

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) social and cultural capital theory to examine the child-rearing practices of Myanmar refugee parents. Traditionally associated with economic resources, capital extends beyond financial assets to encompass the broader social sphere (McLaughlin, 2010). Among the three distinct forms of capital—social capital, human capital, and cultural capital, in this research, we specifically examine the utilization of social and cultural capital among Myanmar refugee families to understand how these resources shape their children's educational experiences within the context of being refugees in the United States.

Bourdieu posits that social capital is the resource embedded in social networks and social relationships (McLaughlin, 2010). Specifically, social capital encompasses the connections, social support, and access to resources individuals can leverage through social ties (Miller et al., 2014). In addition, Bourdieu (1977) explains that cultural capital refers to non-material resources held by people, like their knowledge and tastes, which often symbolize people's socio-economic status. He emphasizes the unequal distribution of cultural competencies in society, with the dominant upper classes monopolizing certain forms of cultural capital (McLaughlin, 2010). He highlights that, due to how education systems and professional institutions are structured, some types of cultural capital, namely those forms of knowledge traditionally associated with the middle classes, are privileged (Gregory et al., 2004). Specific characteristics and resources are more valued and more 'legitimated' than others, including race, language, beauty, money, education, and attitude (Miller et al., 2014). As one moves higher in the educational system, they gain more cultural capital that can be translated into financial capital. Those with more cultural capital usually have more financial capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

Building upon Bourdieu's social and cultural capital framework, the concept of cultural capital extends further to encompass various aspects of parents' resources and practices, including those related to education, language, and cultural activities (Lareau, 2002). Lareau (2002) believes parents with higher cultural capital are rewarded for their cultural compatibility, while those with lower cultural capital are devalued and excluded. For Myanmar refugee families, their cultural capital can be understood in terms of their level of education, language competency, literacy cultures, and language practice. Moreover, cultural capital can also include how parents spend weekends or leisure time with their children as well as how they use public educational or cultural spaces with their children (Lareau, 2002).

Bourdieu's social and cultural capital theory provides a theoretical framework to explore how Myanmar refugee families' social and cultural capital (e.g., language use at home, time allocated for children's literacy activities, unique traditions, cultural experiences, and social connections) affect their young children's care and education in the refugee context. For this reason, we focus on Myanmar refugee families' cultural capital, such as their level of education, language proficiency, literacy practices, and cultural traditions. Meanwhile, we also focus on their social capital, such as their social networks, support systems, and community relationships that they possess. This study seeks to unravel how the interplay between social and cultural capital shapes the educational experiences of Myanmar refugee children. These findings will shed light on the mechanisms through which these families navigate their new cultural environment for their children's care and education.

1.2 Historical Context of Myanmar Refugee Families

Myanmar, previously known as Burma, is located in Southeastern Asia, with neighboring countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam (Zong et al., 2018). Since the late 1990s, approximately 100,000 Myanmar refugees have been resettled in the United States, with their numbers steadily increasing since 2007 (Pew Research Center, 2019). Myanmar is characterized by significant diversity among its ethnic groups, encompassing variations in languages spoken, cultural practices, political histories, and religious affiliations (Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). The refugees from Myanmar represent diverse backgrounds, including Buddhists, Christians, animists, and Muslims, originating from both rural and urban areas.

Language plays a crucial role in the diversity of Myanmar's ethnic groups. While some refugees from Myanmar speak Burmese, others, such as the Karen, Karenni, Chin, and other ethnic minorities speak languages specific to their respective ethnic groups. For instance, in the research site under examination, the significant refugee migrant population comprises the Zomi ethnic people who reside closely together and use the Zomi language (Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). The Zomi, one of Myanmar's Chin ethnic minorities, have left their homeland due to poverty and have sought religious freedom, particularly from the remote and underdeveloped mountainous regions in northwestern Myanmar (Klein, 2018).

1.3 Cultural and Educational Contexts

The cultural and educational contexts surrounding Myanmar refugee parents are characterized by limited formal education and inadequate financial resources (Pew Research Center, 2019). For instance, a significant proportion of Myanmar individuals aged 25 and above, approximately 65%, possess a high school diploma or lower educational attainment, which is notably lower compared to 27% of Asians and 39% of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2019). Furthermore, approximately 25% of Myanmar people in the United States live in poverty, in contrast to 10% of Asians and 13% of the overall American population (Pew Research Center, 2019). Collopy and Crouch (2011) studied the Myanmar community in Melbourne, Australia and interviewed 28 Myanmar migrants, including community leaders. They found that the Myanmar people strongly emphasize family ties and maintain a close-knit social structure. Within the home, it is customary for older siblings to take care of their younger siblings, as the practice of external childcare is uncommon in Myanmar (Huh et al., 2022). Children are expected to demonstrate respect towards their elders, obey their parents, and seek permission before taking any action. Cun's (2021) study emphasizes the presence of diverse cultural capitals within Burmese families, including strong educational commitment, proficiency in cooking Burmese food, and valuing the maintenance of their home language. Nevertheless, further research is warranted to elucidate the ways in which these social and cultural capitals are employed in supporting their children's educational pursuits.

1.4 Language Acquisition

Numerous factors influence the language acquisition of refugees along the language learning continuum. These factors include the parents' country and culture of origin (DeFeyter & Winsler, 2009; Winsler et al., 2014) and their beliefs about language learning (Mancilla-Martinez & Leseaux, 2014). The family's cultural and language background (Place & Hoff, 2014; Winsler et al., 2014) and socioeconomic status (DeFeyter & Winsler, 2009; Castro, 2014) also play a role. Additionally, the type and frequency of language inputs accessible to the child (Han et al., 2017) and the presence of siblings in the home (Bridges & Hoff, 2014) contribute to children's language acquisition.

It has been observed that children tend to acquire English faster than their parents after migration, which presents challenges on two fronts. Firstly, the linguistic brokering performed by young individuals produces stress, while secondly, it leads to a shift in family power dynamics, resulting in a deterioration of the parent-child relationship (Collopy & Crouch, 2011). These characteristics are noteworthy because parents' concerns regarding their child-rearing practices and the home learning environment are interconnected with their child's acquisition of English and the maintenance of their home language. Furthermore, parents' cultural capital, encompassing their previous experiences and socio-economic circumstances, are likely to influence these dynamics and need to be considered when studying refugee families.

2. Method

2.1 Procedures

This study utilized a qualitative approach to investigate Myanmar refugee parents' social and cultural capital in the context of their young children's education. To gather comprehensive insights, multiple sources of data were collected, including a parent survey followed by in-depth individual semi-structured interviews with three parents, a focus group involving five parents, and in-depth exploration through field notes. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1 Survey Participants

Survey participants were recruited from the local Myanmar community during a seminar conducted by the Head Start outreach program. Twenty-two Myanmar families consented and completed the survey.

2.2.2 Interview Participants

Cing. Cing participated in two interviews: an initial interview lasting 60 minutes and a follow-up interview lasting 30 minutes. She left the country at the age of 19 to seek religious freedom and escape the pressure from the Myanmar government on the Zomi (Chin minority group). Cing is 31 years old, has lived in the U.S. for eight years, is fluent in Zomi and Burmese, and has medium fluency in English. She acquired English language proficiency by working as a nurse assistant. She is a high school graduate and is currently studying nursing at a local community college. Cing has a 14-month-old daughter, and her husband works as an engineer in a local company.

Zam. Zam participated in three interviews; the first interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted 50 minutes. The second interview lasted 35 minutes, and the final interview lasted an hour, was in person and audio recorded. Zam is aged 53. She came to the U.S. in 1998 after marrying her husband and is fluent in English and Burmese. Zam has lived in the U.S. for 26 years, and she continued her studies even after she got married. She is a community leader and actively engages in community members' daily lives. Zam has two boys who are 23 and 16 years old.

Lun. Lun participated in one 45-minute interview that was audio recorded. Before arriving in the U.S., she spent five years in a Malaysia refugee camp. Her main reason for leaving her country was to escape from poverty and seek more freedom. Lun is 34 years old, has lived in the U.S. for 11 years, is fluent in Zomi and Burmese, and is learning English. She is a less-than-high school graduate with four children; her husband works in a local factory.

2.2.3 Focus Group Participants

The interview participants made recommendations to the researchers regarding Myanmar mothers with young children who might take part in the focus group. Researchers contacted these women, and five consented to participate.

2.3 Data Collection

Data sources included a parent survey, interviews with parents, a focus group, and a field notebook. The interviews and a focus group took place where the participants were comfortable, used a semi-structured format, were audio-recorded after receiving the participant's permission, and were the primary sources of data. All Burmese interviews and the focus group were translated into English and uploaded on Dedoose for analysis.

2.3.1 Parent Survey

A parent survey developed by Wasik and Hindman (2010) was modified and translated into the Burmese and Zomi languages. Parents completed the survey after attending a seminar on the importance of talking to their children about language and brain development conducted by a local Head Start center that routinely conducted training for the Myanmar community. The survey questions included demographic information, home language environment, and home learning activities.

2.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The research employed semi-structured interviews involving two parents with children aged 0-5 and one community leader from the Myanmar refugee population. The interview protocol was developed and adapted from previous studies conducted by Adair and Barraza (2014), McLaughlin (2010), and Miller et al. (2014). Each participant was interviewed at least twice, with the exception of one participant, on separate occasions to gather comprehensive insights into their experiences and perspectives. Topics included personal and family history, social and cultural resources (language, daily activities, community activities, etc.), experience with child education, etc. Audio recording devices were used to accurately capture participants' responses during the interviews, while the researcher made detailed notes in a field notebook, documenting gestures, nuances, impressions, and reflection.

2.3.3 Focus Group

In addition to the individual interviews, a focus group was conducted to facilitate discussion and exchange of ideas among the participants. This additional data source was chosen to ensure a thorough understanding of the participant's experiences and the perspectives of the broader refugee community. Five participants consented to take part in the focused group, which was conducted in a comfortable setting at one of the participant's houses. Most participants had educational attainment below a high school degree and fell within the age range of 30 to 39 years old. Three of the parents were identified as Zomi, while the remaining two were Kachin. All participants had children between the ages of 4 and 5, and three of them also had older teenage children. Most participants lived within close proximity, making it convenient for them to attend the discussion. The focus group lasted 60 minutes and was recorded using an audio recording device. A protocol for the focus group was developed based on the analysis of the interviews and is presented in Appendix A.

2.3.4 Field Notebook

A field notebook is a crucial tool in qualitative research as it provides additional detail and description, thus enhancing data for analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Each entry in the field notebook included the date, time, location, and contextual details to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the data (Bazeley, 2013). The field notebook was used to record the researcher's impressions and thoughts during interviews and the focus group. It also served to document the participants' emotions and body language, enabling the researcher to gather information that may not be apparent from the transcripts alone. The researcher recorded personal reactions and reflections in the field notebook after each interview.

2.4 Analysis

The interview transcripts were subjected to a coding process, initially conducted by the primary author and later independently reviewed and organized by the other authors. This iterative coding process employed techniques where codes were directly derived from the interview responses, thus establishing a systematic coding system (Saldaña, 2016). The authors then grouped the codes based on their similarity and frequency of occurrence and worked together to establish a consensus in identifying the emerging themes. The themes were analyzed from various sources, seeking connections, patterns, and discrepancies. Each data source was independently analyzed to identify commonalities, disparities, and unique insights within them. This comparative analysis allowed us to identify overarching patterns, themes, and emerging ideas across diverse data sources. Additionally, we aimed to identify overlaps, contradictions, or supplementary information among the sources. To ensure the reliability and consistency of our findings, we employed triangulation, which involved comparing and cross-referencing information from different sources. This multi-faceted approach enhanced the depth and reliability of our analysis.

2.5 Trustworthiness

The study employed several strategies to enhance credibility and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation, rapport building, iterative questioning, member checking, and reflective journaling in a field notebook were among the techniques utilized (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Triangulation involved collecting data from multiple sources, such as interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group, to enhance the robustness of the findings. Also, the research team members met on a regular basis to discuss our understanding of the analysis. The field notebook served as an audit trail, documenting the process of data collection and providing evidence to ensure the dependability and confirmability of the data (Bazeley, 2013). The use of the field notebook as a reflective tool allowed for ongoing self-reflection and evaluation throughout the research process. By employing these measures, the study aimed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research and provide reliable and valid voices and perspectives of Myanmar refugee parents.

3. Findings

The study explored the perceptions and experiences of social and cultural capital use among Myanmar refugee parents regarding their children's education and cultural adaptation while resettling in the United States. Three prominent themes emerged from qualitative data analysis. These themes highlight Myanmar refugee parents' complex negotiations regarding education, language, and community in the U. S.

3.1 Education: *The Journey of Hope vs. Concerns*

Refugee parents held high expectations for their children that were influenced by their traditional values. Cing expressed her desire for her daughter to become a doctor, emphasizing the independence such a profession offers.

She could have many opportunities. She can learn music; she can learn sports. If she were in Myanmar, she would only be expected to study. There are no other activities. Education in the U.S. is so good, much better than in Myanmar.

Zam also noted that many Myanmar refugee parents aspired for their children to pursue careers in medicine or engineering. Despite the challenges they faced in fleeing their home country and navigating unfamiliar environments, these parents prioritized their children's education to build a better future. They perceived education as a transformative force that could empower their children and provide them with opportunities they would not have access to in Myanmar. As a result, and despite limited economic means, Myanmar parents' expectations drove them to provide private schooling. Obtaining educational qualifications, often referred to as institutional cultural capital, is recognized as a means of acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In many non-Western countries, middle-class parents perceive Western education, encompassing primary, secondary, and tertiary education in countries like the United States, as more valuable than local educational opportunities in maintaining their social class privilege

(Waters, 2005). Thus, these refugee parents, who have sought refuge in the United States due to conflicts and turmoil in their home countries (Ogbu, 1982), shared similar expectations regarding the value of Western education for their future prospects. As Cing described above, parents' aspirations for their children to pursue postsecondary education arise from a desire to improve their lives, support their families, and assist those left behind in their home countries (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016). Notably, refugee parents expressed enthusiasm and anticipation for the educational opportunities their children would receive in the United States (Li, 2018).

Another participant, Lun, firmly believed in her child's ability to learn English and retain their home language; thus, she chose not to speak English to her child at home. She was convinced that her child would naturally acquire English in the U.S. without her intervention, stating, "I do not speak English to her because I know she will learn it anyway." This belief reflects her confidence in the child's environment and exposure to English-speaking contexts within the U.S., specifically the school system, to learn English. Additionally, her decision to encourage the use of their home language instead of English indicates her desire for her child to learn and maintain proficiency in their native language, thereby preserving Myanmar's cultural capital while also gaining U.S. cultural capital. Cun (2021) discovered a similar finding, highlighting the cultural capital associated with valuing the Myanmar language while also expressing a desire for their children's academic success.

While Myanmar parents held high aspirations for their children's educational future, they harbored concerns regarding the cultural differences their families would encounter. Zam expressed gratitude for the chance to raise her child in the U.S., but she also acknowledged the difficulty in equipping her children with school-readiness skills and expressed concerns about the lack of knowledge among many parents, "We don't know all the fancy stuff like some White moms do, teaching their kids alphabets, shapes, and numbers at home. Before we send our children to school, we can't really give them any formal educational preparation." Lun added, "I don't quite understand the school homework even though it's translated into Burmese. It's sometimes confusing, and I'm not sure what the assignment is asking for, so I end up asking my neighbors for help." These challenges stem from Myanmar refugee parents' limited cultural capital in different educational systems. They face higher burdens and expectations compared to their non-refugee counterparts that are compounded by limited resources such as English language proficiency and outside support for their children's education (Koh et al., 2013).

Racial discrimination also emerged as a prominent concern. Cing shared her worries about the potential abuse her child might face in school. She stated, "I saw on the TV that some people hit others because she came from China. I was worried that my daughter could get that kind of abuse. I know in America [that] some people hate not common racial people." As a refugee, Cing drew attention to the potential impact of prejudice on her and her daughter's experiences in the future. She highlighted instances where individuals from smaller countries or those perceived differently faced hatred and racial attacks. Lun also expressed her concerns during the interview, "I am concerned that she can experience some abuse because we are refugees, and I am concerned that she could get bad influence when she enters the school." These examples indicate that Cing and Lun have acquired new social capital and increased awareness of racial discrimination while highlighting their limited cultural capital, including ways to navigate and address these prevalent ethical prejudices in U.S. society. Their experiences speak to the complexities and systemic barriers refugees often encounter when attempting to integrate into a new culture (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017).

3.2 Language: Opportunities vs. Disappearing

Myanmar refugee parents had a shared belief that their children could achieve better opportunities by acquiring English language skills. One of the focus group participants expressed confidence in their children's ability to master English, saying, "I believe that my children can attain a high level of English proficiency and develop the necessary skills to understand our home language. They will also learn Spanish, which will provide them with greater opportunities to secure better jobs." For these refugee parents, the importance of English proficiency goes far beyond simply acquiring a new language. They are acutely aware that English holds the status of a global language for communication and business, offering significant advantages when it comes to accessing educational and economic opportunities (McBrien, 2005). On the other hand, they also wanted their children to retain their home language. Cing said, "Learning Zomi and speaking Burmese is so important in case she returns to Myanmar, Burmese will be the most important. I keep speaking to her in two languages [Zomi and Burmese]." She recognized the importance of her child keeping her home language and consistently conversed with her child in both. Cing's ability to communicate in English, Burmese, and Zomi represents multiple linguistic capitals and demonstrates cultural and linguistic connections to her heritage and the linguistic capital of her adopted country that she can teach her child.

Contrast Cing to Lun, who, despite being in the U.S. for over 11 years, stated that she couldn't learn English due to

taking care of her young children at home. “I cannot learn English because my three children were so young.” While this example illustrates Myanmar’s cultural capital of the mother caring for the children at home, it is also an example of the lack of social and cultural capital regarding community and educational resources available to her family. Lun felt that she sacrificed her own opportunities to learn English for the sake of caring for her children and now does not have the English linguistic capital to help them.

Refugee parents shared their challenges in English communication and a desire to have proper English language learning to help them parent their children in the U.S. For example, one of the focus group participants said she dreamed of learning English to communicate without a translator’s help.

As my child grows older, the stress intensifies because I struggle to convey my thoughts and wishes in English. My daughter only understands English, and I am unable to communicate with her sufficiently and effectively. When my child fails to grasp my words, it adds to my stress and erodes my confidence as a parent.

This example of a mother’s lack of English proficiency coupled with her daughter’s English-only proficiency illustrates how the linguistic capital of parents and children can have a profound impact on their relationship. In this instance, it resulted in the mother’s low self-esteem, which led to depression. Linguistic capital not only affects effective communication but also influences the emotional well-being of both parents and children (Collopy & Crouch, 2011)

Another refugee parent said she could not read a storybook to her children because her children thought her English pronunciation was incorrect. Moreover, a different focus group participant decided not to read storybooks in English because she was afraid of her child imitating the wrong English pronunciations. “My children said parent’s pronunciations are wrong. Moreover, my child did not want to listen to a storybook from me, and they kept saying, Mother is wrong.” This example indicates her frustration and concern regarding her inability to read storybooks in English. The pressure to ensure accurate pronunciation and language use adds an additional layer of complexity to parents’ role as language models for their children. It reflects the desire of refugee parents to provide their children with the best possible language skills, but it underscores the challenges faced by refugee parents in navigating their children’s language learning process.

Two final examples from highlight how children acquire English more quickly than their parents. One focus group mother shared that her children acquired English faster and better than she and her husband and that her oldest daughter was stressed when asked to translate for her parents and told them she needed her own time; the mother felt that her daughter’s behavior was disrespectful. During her interview, Zam stated that many refugee parents speak their language at home to their children, but surprisingly, young children picked up English more quickly. These examples demonstrate that despite the efforts of refugee parents to speak their home language to their children at home, there is a noticeable shift towards English becoming the primary spoken language among young children. It also indicates that the environment and context in which refugee children are raised, particularly their exposure to formal schooling, play a significant role in shaping their linguistic development.

Many of the research participants’ children understood some home language, but their first language for verbal responses was English. As children become more adept in English, parents often struggle to maintain their traditional roles as language mediators and may experience feelings of inadequacy. Collopy and Crouch (2011) posit that the power relationship changes and tensions arise between parents and children due to children’s higher English proficiency. This language proficiency gap adds additional stress to the parent-child relationship.

Bourdieu’s (1977) insights shed light on the social dynamics, where dominant cultures and languages are given higher status and privilege, while minority or immigrant languages are marginalized. This societal perception can create an environment where refugee families may feel pressured to prioritize learning and using the dominant language, often at the expense of their home languages. Parallel to this unequal distribution of language status is the shift in power between parents and children with higher English proficiency. While English proficiency offers potential advantages for refugee parents and their children, including improved job prospects, international mobility, and a more promising future, it can also add new social dynamics to families and challenge their traditional cultural capital. In their quest to achieve English fluency, refugees also hold a strong commitment to preserving their home language, recognizing its cultural and identity value for their community and future generations (Cun, 2021).

The disappearance of the refugee children’s cultural capital associated with their home language can be attributed to the dominance of English within the educational system and the broader societal context in the United States. The shift towards English as the first language for these children highlights the influence of the majority language and the limited opportunities for sustained use and development of their home language and multilingual abilities. The loss

or diminishing use of their home language can potentially result in a disconnection from their cultural heritage and limited intergenerational transmission of language and cultural values (Ball, 2012). As a result, this can lead to disconnections across generations, potentially impacting cultural identity and jeopardizing heritage preservation.

3.3 Community: Social Capital vs. Social Distance

Myanmar refugees are often a close-knit group with a strong emphasis on family ties, and children are expected to respect their elders, follow their parents, and obtain permission from their parents before doing anything (Koh et al., 2013). For example, Lun arrived in the U.S. through their parent's connections, and her whole family (parents, older brother, two older sisters, and uncles) all live close to each other in the U.S. Following traditional cultural capital, Lun asks for help from her parents whenever she has difficulties and needs help with child-rearing. She has also spent many hours looking after her elderly parents and relatives who communicated in Zomi. Lun also uses a traditional baby blanket from Myanmar to carry her little 14-month-old daughter. She said it was much more comfortable compared to the conventional Western baby carriers.

Myanmar parents pass down their language and cultural expectations through close community relationships and extended parents (Koh et al., 2013). One of the focus group participants shared,

I am able to gather all the necessary information for raising my children by relying on my neighborhood and my friends from Myanmar. I do not search the internet for this purpose. Instead, I make decisions about the location of our home and the schools for my children by consulting with my neighbors. So, my children can play with other Myanmar children; we can also help each other.

In addition to their families, the church helps Myanmar refugee parents maintain their identity and belonging but also provides a helping hand when needed. Although the church does not offer special mom's meetings or support systems, they communicate weekly to families in their home language to share information. However, the church does provide social interaction time for community children to be exposed to their home language and play in peer groups, thus reinforcing traditional cultural capital. A Myanmar parent in the focus group stated,

However, I live in the U.S., not our land, and I do not know many things, so I want them to follow only God's word. I want them to obey, just as the Bible says. I want them to have faith, and I want them to trust God's word. Furthermore, I also want my children to depend on God in their daily life. I do not have any otherworldly desire for my children, but I have a strong desire to have them in the Christian faith. I have been raising my children so far as I could; I have explained to them about God and shown examples. I do not know how they will grow, so I only pray for my children.

Myanmar refugee parents often draw on their religious practices as a source of renewing their strength and coping with stress. Therefore, the church holds particular significance for the Zomi people who left their homeland due to poverty and sought religious freedom (Klein, 2018). The participants in this study displayed robust spiritual practices that align with this observation. Similarly, Cun (2021) found that religion and spirituality served as foundational capitals and sources of resilience that parents wanted to pass on as a legacy to their children.

Refugee parents also expressed a sense of distance and otherness in relation to their home culture. Cing described her transformation as embracing new approaches to child-rearing and seeking improved educational opportunities after resettlement. In Myanmar, it is uncommon for children to be cared for outside of the home; typically, mothers stay at home, or older siblings take on the responsibility of looking after the younger siblings (Huh et al., 2022). However, Cing chose to adopt a new style of child-raising and enrolled her children in a local Head Start program. Moreover, it is not typical in Myanmar for married women to seek education for themselves, yet even after settling in the U.S., she remained determined to pursue a career as a nurse. Cing's willingness to adapt and embrace new norms in her parenting approach and personal aspirations highlights the transformative nature of the refugee experience, which is unique to each individual. Resettlement in a new country often exposes individuals to different cultural practices and values, prompting them to reevaluate their perspectives on various aspects of life, including education and family dynamics (Koh et al., 2013). By acknowledging and adapting to these changes, refugee parents like Cing demonstrate resilience and a commitment to creating a different future for their families despite the challenges they may encounter along the way.

Regarding child-rearing practices, Myanmar refugee parents shared how some of their views were changing or had already changed (Koh et al., 2013). Traditionally, a good and exemplary Myanmar child is obedient to their parents; one focus group parent said,

I also think 'leinbardae (good and exemplary child)' means when a child listens to parents and obeys their words. For example, parents tell their children to sit, and they sit down and say to their children to eat, and then children follow

[and] they eat well.

However, the meaning of *leinbardae* for several focus group participants now represents a new, Western way of child-rearing that includes children wanting to be more autonomous. For Myanmar refugee children raised in U.S. schools with a focus on being independent, high-performing, and autonomous, they do not understand the meaning of *leinbardae* the same way their parents do. The evolving meaning of “*leinbardae*” reflects the ongoing adaptation and transformation of parenting practices within the Myanmar refugee community in the U. S. Blending traditional values with Western ideals has resulted in a shift in understanding and expectations of what it means to be a good and exemplary child within the Myanmar refugee community. This highlights the complex interplay between the traditional cultural values of refugee communities and the influence of external social and cultural factors on parenting and child education in the U.S.

4. Conclusion

In 2022, the number of refugees worldwide rose by a record 35% (8.9 million people) to reach 34.6 million globally (UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). The United States committed to taking 125,000 refugees during the year 2023, the highest increase in U.S. history (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). To support the successful integration of refugees into the U.S. education system, it is critical to understand the refugees’ perspectives and experiences in both their home country and the new host country, then develop educational programs and policies for their success. Unfortunately, the U.S. is failing in the integration of refugees and migrant children into the school system, as indicated by the high rates of school dropouts (Moinolnolki & Han, 2017).

The current study uncovered three prominent themes in the perspectives and experiences of Myanmar refugee parents regarding childcare and education as they resettled in the host country: education as hopes vs. concerns, language as an opportunity vs. disappearance, and community as social capital vs. social distance. Refugee families were engaged in complex negotiations for each theme during their cultural adaptation. First, refugee parents expressed hopes and concerns about their children’s education. While there are various educational opportunities for the children in the host country, the refugee family’s traditional value of mothers staying home with their young children may exacerbate the challenges their children will face when they enter public school. Secondly, parents must navigate the challenges of embracing a new language and preserving their heritage language during child-rearing practice and cultural adaptation. As the gap in English proficiency widens between parents and children, the changing power dynamics challenge family relationships and their traditional values. Lastly, our study found the importance of social capital for building the community as part of cultural adaptation. Social capital, such as family, relatives, friends, and religious groups, plays a critical role in cultural adaptation and fostering a sense of community within the host country. Without these social capitals, refugee families can easily become isolated.

Our study also reported that, despite not having the same material resources as Western households, Myanmar refugee parents created a quality home learning environment for their children and held high aspirations for their children’s education. These parents actively provided language experiences and social interactions for their children within their kinship networks and local communities and tried to provide their children with the best experiences to maintain both languages. Therefore, it is crucial that collaborations exist between refugee families and educational institutions that focus on the best linguistic outcomes for their children. Language holds significant power for children’s future success and helps them maintain their identities.

Although our study did not directly address the practical implications for supporting refugee families and children, Moinolmoliki and Han (2017) offer suggestions for integrating refugee children into the U.S. school system, such as creating a welcoming school environment, culturally relevant teaching, integrating home language in school, and holistic/inclusive co-teaching. Understanding refugee families’ perceptions and experiences would be the first step while implementing these strategies. Moreover, Buell et al. (2020) also recommend considering multiple factors when designing a successful school program integrating refugee children, including family connections, classroom practices, teacher preparation, and coordination with other educational services. Collaboration is not easy, but we must strive to achieve the goal. Our study is not without limitations. It utilized a small number of participants and could be strengthened with more participants. Our qualitative study can also be strengthened by adding a direct observation method of family interaction. Future research studies can include teachers as well as parents to understand a more holistic view of perspectives and experiences. More research is needed to understand the perspectives and experiences of various ethnic groups of refugees and migrant children.

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