

**Barriers Faced by Burmese Refugee Youth in Educational Attainment and  
the Support They Need to Succeed**  
**By Jessica Corbett**

**Introduction**

Since 2001, the population of Burmese refugees has been the largest growing refugee group in the US, but very little research has been done about them (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016, p. 29). In the process of traveling to the US and resettling here, Burmese refugees face a plethora of challenges, and have to overcome many barriers, especially in regards to education. The Burmese refugee youth that are coming to the US today have spent part, or most, of their lives in under resourced refugee camps. In 1993, it was said that refugees spent on average 9 years in refugee camps, but in 2003 that number almost doubled to an average of 17 years (Lui, 2007, p. 185). Additionally, refugees who settled in the US used to be clustered in urban centers, but they are now found in almost every state and a great number of school systems around the US. Regrettably, most teachers lack the experience and training to support their new students both culturally and academically (Sadowski, 2004, p. 2).

There is a need for scholarly research to examine the educational attainment of Burmese refugees prior to resettlement in the US, how that impacts the schools in which they are placed, and their educational attainment going forward, and finally how educators can best support them in the classroom (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016, p. 29). For many years world news of conflict, poverty, and the refugee crisis in other regions of the world have overshadowed the human rights violations that have caused such an increase in Burmese refugees settling in the US (Lui, 2007, p. 186). These students have been overlooked for many years, and the few researchers who have considered their education can say that there are adverse effects due to this neglect (Lui, 2007, p.186). Students are not only unprepared for the continuation of their education and to adapt to

American culture, but these refugee students are also struggling to find the support they need to thrive in school (Koh, 2013, p. 297).

American schools are in a state of change. There is an increasing number of immigrant and refugee students in our schools, and they are starting to make a profound impact on school culture and classroom makeup. Because of the lack of research being done on this increasing student population, teachers are becoming rather ill-equipped to support them. In order to best support refugee students and their families input is needed from a variety of educators and professionals who support them. This study will examine interviews with refugee families and the professionals who support them in resettlement and in their educational attainment in order to reveal what barriers created by the refugee process affect their children's educational attainment, and what specifically needs to be done to support these students. This study is built upon the scarce research that has been done on Burmese refugees, and will hopefully enlighten the research community to an area that is under represented and needs to be explored.

RQ1: What factors are perceived by Burmese refugee families and the professionals who work with them as influencing the educational attainment of Burmese refugee youth?

RQ2: What strategic support can we give refugee students so they can achieve educational success?

### **Literature Review**

First, this literature review examines the general barriers perceived by professionals, researchers, and refugees alike that refugee youth face when entering the United States. It then examines the responses to these barriers by highlighting both the need for educators to understand the backgrounds that their students come from, and for educators to support their students by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. Lastly, this review explores the

various human rights violations and persecutions that have led to the influx of refugees from Burma and recognizes the specific challenges that Burmese refugees face.

### **Barriers that Refugee Youth Must Overcome in US Schools**

Refugee families, especially their youth, face a variety of barriers upon settling in the United States that educators and community members need to be aware of. The first barrier faced by refugees is that the word “refugee” carries with it a negative connotation that often causes issues in accessing necessary resources and proper education (Uptin & Harwood, 2014, p. 598). In order to destigmatize the word refugee and to add clarity for this research project the UN definition of refugee will be utilized going forward. The UN definition of refugee states, “The term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group or political opinion, and is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country” (Fagan, 2010, p. 58). The second barrier faced by refugees is that the lack of research being done on refugees has created a sizable gap in knowledge, leaving schools and educators unprepared for the influx of diverse students (Sadowski, 2004, p. 2). On top of teachers being unprepared for refugee students culturally and in regards to appropriate methodology, they are also unprepared for the trauma, and socioemotional challenges that these new students bring to the classroom (Amthor & Roxas, 2016, p.155).

In addition to often being thrown into schools that are ill-equipped to serve their needs, refugee youth face the barrier of often being tested unfairly and labeled as inadequate far too quickly (Uptin & Harwood, 2014, p. 598). Refugee students are often taken out of mainstream classes where they would thrive and placed into special education classes or other heavily assisted classrooms (Sadowski, 2004, p. 3). Once they are placed, it takes an average of six years

to get them out even if the placement was an obvious mistake (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 25). While many are held back because of cultural or linguistic misunderstanding, the opposite happens just as often. The fifth barrier faced by many refugee youths is that they are pushed ahead and placed in schools where they are expected to read and converse at an advanced English level, even if they have had only a few years of interrupted basic education in their own countries (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 162).

The last and largest barrier that refugee youths face is understanding how to both become a part of American society while also holding onto their cultural heritage. This point is well described by researcher and author Lee Cheng Koh (2013) when he states, “At the same time that they have to adjust to life in a new country, learn a new language and adapt to a new culture, they face parental pressure to conform to the behavior prescribed by their traditional culture” (Koh & Walker, 2013, p. 297). Many refugee youths are expected to help provide for their family and this mentality doesn’t change when they come to the US. There has been research done to show that some parents make their older children stay out of school, not for the many reasons stated above, but so they can provide for the family in this new country (Koh & Walker, 2013, p. 300). When these students move from primarily family-based cultures into a culture that glorifies the importance of the individual, it can cause a number of issues both at home and in school and only heightens the strength of the barriers which they already face (Koh & Walker, 2013, p. 298).

### **Response to the Barriers Refugee Youth Face**

One of the greatest needs by refugee youth is for their cultural identities to be accepted and represented in the classroom. The appropriate response to the barriers faced by refugee youth is therefore twofold; educators need to understand their student’s culture and former lives,

followed by the need for teachers to implement culturally responsive pedagogy. Educators will succeed if and only if they understand the linguistic and cultural diversity that their new students bring to the classroom (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 25). Without teachers acknowledging the cultural boundaries on the American testing system, no refugee child will ever be given a fair chance in American education. Stefanakis (2004) highlights the bias in our testing system when she gives the example of a Haitian preschooler who was being prescreened for placement and the heartbreak the researcher felt as she watched the culturally skewed assessment (p. 21-24).

The little boy spoke only creole and, therefore, needed a translator to go through the testing process with him. Before he left his mother, she told him to “listen to the teacher” and then he was off to the stations with a variety of teachers and therapists who would decide where he was developmentally (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 22). At each station the boy was unresponsive to the teacher’s direct questions and refused to make eye contact; by the end, the boy was deemed untestable by the educators and therapists and was sent out to his mother. After the assessment, Stefanakis (2004) was puzzled to see the boy playing and chatting with the other children while the mothers spoke in the lobby (p. 24). After asking the translator about it, Stefanakis (2004) was disheartened to find out that this was a rather common occurrence (p. 24). Children in many cultures are often taught to sit quietly and to be respectful at all times, which may partially explain the lack of eye contact and unresponsiveness from the Haitian boy. He may have simply needed more time, or may have needed his role in that assessment to be better defined (Stefanakis, 2004, p.24). In any case, his story is much like many other young students who lack the English proficiency to express themselves in these situations.

While the Haitian boy’s story is an obvious example of holding children back for lack of understanding their culture or a misunderstanding of linguistic differences, the story of Zham, a

23-year-old Rohingya refugee from Burma, experienced quite the opposite problem (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 162). From the ages of 8 to 20, he lived in a refugee camp and gained a mere two years of education. Upon arriving to the US at the age of 20, he was placed in a local high school in the ninth grade. With only two years of formal education under his belt, and little knowledge about the English language, it is not surprising that he failed his classes and was unable to continue at the school. McWilliams and Bonet (2016) say it well when they state, “Expected to not only learn English, but also compensate for more than a decade of time out of school, Zham saw his dreams of becoming a doctor crumble as his aspirations clashed with the difficult realities of being foundationally and linguistically underprepared in a school with few supports available to help him” (p. 163). Whoever placed Zham in that high school either had little knowledge about his background and his language ability, or had their hands tied because of his age; either way refugee youth and young adults are being treated and tested unfairly.

A large part of supporting these students and providing them with appropriate and beneficial education has to do with the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. Too many schools look for what refugee students lack instead of seeing their culture and their world knowledge as a positive asset to the classroom (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 25; Parker, 2013, p. 259). There is a teaching method though that provides dignity and confidence to ESL students, and it is the sociocultural method (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26). The sociocultural method assumes that culture and linguistic diversity helps students to thrive and to succeed in the classroom rather than seeing it as a hindrance (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26). The sociocultural method relies on three premises. First, that bilingualism is an asset to students and can help them with cognitive skills (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26). Second, that student’s learning is affected by the context of the environment in which they live and learn (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26). Lastly, that language

proficiency and student's educational attainment should be evaluated "in context and over time" (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26).

The sociocultural method then pushes against common thought and challenges teachers to think of their students not as lacking knowledge or skill, but as being full of abilities and world knowledge that will help them as they learn. By valuing differences, teachers then challenge the notion that cultures different from their own are problems that must be handled but instead see them as opportunities for growth (Stefanakis, 2004, p. 26). The implementation of culturally relevant, or responsive, pedagogy (CRP) as a response to the sociocultural method, then allows for the integration of culture into academia so that students can be supported and become more connected to what they are learning (Lee, 2010, p. 455; Amthor & Roxas 2016, p. 162).

By implementing CRP teachers will not only give their students the tools they need to achieve academic excellence, but they also give them the confidence to maintain their cultural identities (Lee, 2010, p. 469). To further understand how CRP works, Amthor and Roxas (2016) state, "Thus, the ways of communicating, conceptions of knowledge, methods of learning, and the overall context of the educative process are situated within a framework that is consistent with the students' cultural background" (p. 162). By following the route of the sociocultural method which values various cultures and languages, and pairing it with CRP which makes the student's culture a part of the learning experience, refugee students are then supported in a way that gives them the tools they need to achieve educational success.

### **Facets of Hostility Leading to Burmese Refugee Influx and Specific Burmese Barriers**

It is said that, "Bhutanese, ethnic minorities from Burma and Iraqis are the three largest refugee groups that have arrived in the US since 2007" (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 154).

Sadly, although Burmese refugees have great numbers flooding into the US and Australia, there is little research that has been done on their specific needs and their troubling backgrounds.

Often discourse about poverty and protracted issues in other areas of the world like Africa and the Middle East overwhelms the media, leaving little space for conversations about the human rights violations that have pervaded Asia, especially Burma, for centuries (Lui, 2007, p. 186). In response to this lack of scholarship, author A. Fagan wrote the book, *The Atlas of Human Rights* (Fagan, 2010), which sorts meticulously through the world of human rights infringements and gives new voice to the forgotten atrocities of Burma and the world (Fagan, 2010, p. 92).<sup>1</sup>

There are several broad reasons why people are fleeing Burma, many having to do with the civil unrest that has been a part of the country's story for centuries. Burma is one of the top ten countries in the world by number of armed conflicts involving governmental forces which have been fought within the country (Fagan, 2010, p. 51). Burma has also had a longstanding history of persecution of ethnic minorities groups and religious minority groups (Fagan, 2010, p. 64, 62). It has been noted that, "Burma's military regime has conducted systematic campaigns against at least four ethnic communities: the Karen, the Shans, the Rohingya, and the Zomis" (Fagan, 2010, p. 64). The ensuing civil unrest then lead many Burmese to flee the country either because of persecution, or the fear of it (Hickey, 2010, p.25). In the midst of all this unrest, education is still held as important and a large part of society, but when survival is on the minds of parents, the educational achievement of their children is often low in importance (Koh & Walker, 2013, p. 302).

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<sup>1</sup> His work is extensive, and gives wonderful detail on every country that he could get numbers on. I would highly recommend this book if you are interested in civil, governmental or religious rights around the world.



Many of the refugee youth who are able to come to the US, come with a sense of purpose. They feel as though they have been “chosen” to come here and have “obligations” to use their time and resources well so that they can help those they left behind, sadly these dreams are often cut short (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 160-161). Tom, a twenty-year-old Karen refugee, expresses this pending obligation when he states, “I want to become an English teacher because I can go to teach them. Maybe when they come to the United States, they will know more English and their lives will be easier than mine” (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 159). Most young refugees come with winning attitudes similar to Tom’s, but years of interrupted educational backgrounds, aging out of schools<sup>2</sup> and the major lack of documentation<sup>3</sup> for past educational experience puts them behind in ways that are hard to imagine and even harder to overcome (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 163).

Present research covers general information about refugees and the challenges they face, but very little of it gives voice to southeastern Asian peoples, or more specifically the growing number of Burmese stories. In 2001 researchers showed that the Burmese people were the largest growing refugee population in the US, and they have only continued to grow with each passing year (Quadros & Sarroub, 2016, p. 29). The present study aims to fill the gap in research pertaining to Burmese refugee youth and their educational attainment, and specifically looks at the barriers they face and what kind of support they need in order to gain educational success.

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<sup>2</sup> After a student reaches 21, they are not allowed to attend primary or secondary schools, no matter what their educational level they will be told to leave because of an age policy alone (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p. 164).

<sup>3</sup> Many students even if they are able to seek schooling before coming to the US lose documentation for it, or have documentation in foreign languages that cannot be used. Thus leaving the education of refugees in shambles as it becomes harder and harder to get them into schools (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p164).

## Methodology

### **Participants**

This study will be focused on the stories given by Burmese refugees, all of whom have taken up residence in Owensboro, Kentucky. I am in contact with an ESL Coordinator for the Owensboro Schools, {name omitted}. She works firsthand with refugee students and their families when they enter the school system. I have spoken with her about my research and she has agreed to put me in touch with a few families as well as agreeing to speak with me again in a more formal interview.

Besides my connection with {name omitted}, I have also been put in touch with {name and position omitted} of The International Center of Kentucky. The ICK works to support refugee families as they resettle in the US through a variety of ways, both in terms of what needs to be done legally, and what support they require as new families in a very different cultural setting. They help with paper work, with employment, with registering students in school and they overall support the refugees in any way they can. I have spoken with {name omitted} via email and he has agreed to help me with my research this summer. I hope to not only interview him, but get to know ICK better and see what they are doing to support students in their city. Most importantly, my goal is to speak with at least three refugee families. Their voices are ultimately the ones I am trying to amplify and their stories are the ones I can learn from most. Where these interviews will take place is yet to be determined, but I am hopeful that my contacts in Owensboro will be able to assist me in both connecting with families and trying to understand their present lives.

## Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, I will be conducting a series of interviews with parents, and the professionals who work alongside them in the community. The interviews will be based around answering my research questions:

RQ1: What factors are perceived by Burmese refugee families and the professionals who work with them as influencing the educational attainment of Burmese refugee youth?

RQ2: What strategic support can we give refugee students so they can achieve educational success?

My hope is that through these interviews, I will be given a glimpse into the lives of these students and their families and that I will be able to highlight their stories in such a way that makes a difference for those that come after them. The following table (Table 1) gives a list of possible interview questions and the aspects of my research questions that I see them best connecting with.

**Table 1: Preliminary Interview Questions**

Aspect of my RQ that it connect to	Interview Question	Possible Follow Up Questions
Background (Necessary for Gaining Context of Conversation/Data)	<p><b>Families:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where are you from in Burma?</li> <li>2. What is your ethnic background?</li> <li>3. Briefly tell me about your family: How long have they been in Burma? Do you still have family in Burma?</li> <li>4. Why did you choose to leave?</li> <li>5. Can you briefly tell me about your journey to the US? Refugee camps? Straight here?... Main points</li> </ol> <p><b>Professionals:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where are most of the refugees in Owensboro coming from?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Minority or Majority?</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Are they mostly of ethnic minorities?</li> <li>3. What is the most common reason they have to leave Burma?</li> </ol>	<p>2. Much of the research I looked at demonstrates a lot of violence against minority groups, does that seem to ring true from your experience?</p>
<p>Factors Affecting/Barriers to Educational Attainment: Here and There</p>	<p><b>Families and Professionals: (For professionals, these questions will simply be stated more generally)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During the transition from Burma to the US, how did your family view education? Was it different from how you viewed it in Burma?</li> <li>2. For your children, what do you see as barriers to their educational attainment? Please be as specific as possible</li> <li>3. Do you see any of the following as affecting your children or other children in your community?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The word refugee carrying a negative connotation in schools or the community</li> <li>• Unprepared schools/teachers</li> <li>• Under resourced educational facilities... here or along the way</li> <li>• Tested unfairly in terms of placement tests...pushed ahead or held back</li> <li>• Generally interrupted education</li> <li>• A fear of losing or being forced to push away their cultural heritage</li> <li>• Parents wanting them to provide for the family instead of pursuing an education</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Can you share any stories with me about youth who have failed to attain educational success?</li> <li>5. Can you share any stories with me about youth who have achieved educational success?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you have to focus on the survival of your family instead of trying to keep them in school?</li> <li>3. How did successful students overcome these issues?</li> <li>3. Is this only representing a small sampling of the population who struggle with barriers like this? Or is it more wide spread?</li> <li>4. What factors influenced that?</li> <li>5. What factors influenced that?</li> </ol>

<p>Educational Attainment of Specific Students</p>	<p><b>Families:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. What schools are your children at?</li> <li>7. Do you think your children were placed in the right grades?</li> <li>8. How are they doing in school? Academically and socially?</li> <li>9. How much English did they know before resettling in Owensboro?</li> <li>10. Are your children’s teachers becoming barriers for your children, or are they supporting them holistically?</li> </ol> <p><b>Professionals:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. From your observations, how are the schools doing with the new Burmese Refugee students?</li> <li>7. Do they have the resources they need to support them holistically (academically and culturally)?</li> <li>8. Are the teachers trained adequately?</li> <li>9. Describe what the ESL educators do: Do they pull the students out? Do they travel between schools? Are they with the students every day?</li> <li>10. <u>Are they having a positive impact on the student’s educational attainment? How are you seeing this?</u></li> <li>11. Do you have any final comments on how the refugee students are doing in schools?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. If they knew very little, how much has that affected their educational attainment? Or if they knew a great deal, how has that positively influenced their education?</li> <li>10. (Another way to say it...) Do they appreciate your language and your culture? Or are they trying to make your children walk away from their heritage?</li> <li>8. Do they utilize the sociocultural method of teaching? Do they implement culturally relevant pedagogy?</li> </ol>
<p>Community Support for Educational Attainment</p>	<p><b>Families:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. What has been the best part of the Owensboro school system and how they have supported you?</li> <li>12. Where could the school system have supported your student better in regards to their educational attainment?</li> <li>13. Are there places in the community that are trying to help your students succeed</li> </ol>	

	<p>academically? ESL programs? Tutoring?...etc. What about culturally?</p> <p><b>Professionals:</b> {name omitted}:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please tell me about ICK and what it does to support refugee families in general?</li> <li>2. What does ICK do for the refugee students? Is there tutoring available? How are you supporting their education?</li> </ol> <p>{name omitted}:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does your role entail when a new family is resettled in Owensboro?</li> <li>2. How would you describe the educational level of most students when they arrive? Are they prepared for their age level?</li> <li>3. What barriers do you see the Burmese refugee students facing when they enter your schools?</li> <li>4. How are you (or the ESL educators) supporting your students so that they can achieve educational success?</li> <li>5. Are there any areas you wish you could help them more in regards to their education, but are unable to?</li> </ol>	<p>5. Why are you unable to help them in this way?</p>
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**Data analysis**

After the interviews, the sound recording and my notes will be combined into a series of transcripts for each conversation. I will then analyze the data according to qualitative coding techniques. This technique creates preliminary codes and sub-codes by which I can organize and analyze my data. These codes and sub-codes were made specifically for this project, and align directly with my literature review, and the goals of my research questions. The responses I gather will then be categorized by the preliminary codes into two sets of barriers pertaining to

Burmese refugee youth, and lastly a section of strategies or tips on how to support refugee students for educational success. The sub-codes then further group the responses in a way that demonstrates more significant trends and helps to create cohesive groupings. The following table (Table 2) demonstrates the preliminary codes and sub-codes to be used in analysis.

**Table 2: Preliminary Codes and Sub-Codes**

Code	Sub-Code
Barriers perceived by Family members (RQ1)	-due to circumstances out of their control -due to choices they have made -due to their home culture -due to the change in culture
Barriers perceived by Community or Educational Professionals (RQ1)	-due to inadequate/interrupted education -due to legal issues -due to focus on larger matters
Strategies of Strategic Support for Educational Success (RQ2)	-change in teacher mentality -further training for teachers -culturally responsive pedagogy -greater community/school support

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