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## The Case of Three Karen Refugee Women and Their Children: Literacy Practices in a Family Literacy Context

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### Abstract

The lack of research about the Karen—one of 135 ethnic groups from Myanmar—limits literacy educators charged with educating this refugee population in public schools. In this case study the authors explore the literacy practices of Karen families when at school and in their homes and within an ESL family literacy program. The case of these refugee families and their experiences are analyzed within a sociocultural theoretical framework along with a focus on literacy adaptation through the lenses of crosscultural studies, adult and language teachers involved in literacy practices, and literacy studies. Four core themes emerged from participant observation, including adult/parent learners' engagement with memorization, parents' literacy practices through reading texts aloud (recitation) to improve their speaking skills, and parents' use of computers to engage with American media. The study offers important educational understandings of one of the world's least known diaspora.

### Introduction

The Karen people of Myanmar are some of the most recent refugee arrivals in the American Midwest, and schools are in the midst of figuring out who they are and how teachers can help them become literate in English. The Karen population is one of 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar that are divided into some subgroups who also have their own languages and cultures. These include the Sgaw Karen (the largest subgroup), Pwo Karen (the second largest), Bwe Karen, (who, because of the distance, prefer to hide in the jungle rather than walk to the Thai border), Karenni, Pa-O (who refer to themselves as “cousins” of the Karen people), and Karen Muslims, also known as Burmese Muslims in some regions of Myanmar.

In 2005–2011, the Myanmar population was the fastest-growing refugee group in the United States, totaling 16,972. According to Nohr (2012), the Karen population in Nebraska was one of the fastest-growing groups moving to the state, with nearly 600 people from Myanmar and another 287 from Thailand. The 2010 U.S. Census suggests that there are approximately 4,600 people from Myanmar as well as other Asian countries currently residing in Nebraska, and approximately 1,500 reside in Lincoln, NE, the state capital. The Karen families are among the newest wave of refugees whose children are in the public schools as English language and literacy learners (Association for Asian American Studies, 2014).

Literacy has been referred to in the research literature as an “elastic concept” (Kern, 1999). It regulates school practices according to the ideological stances and utilitarian needs of those who are engaged with it. Literacy does not solely refer to the ability to read and write; rather, it embodies social practices and the political nature of relations amongst people (Gee, 2008). Considering how such dynamics characterize the cultural and contextual

Researchers' Participation in the Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monday</li> <li>• Tuesday</li> <li>• Thursday</li> </ul>
Researchers' Home-visitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mornings</li> <li>• Evenings</li> </ul>
Participants' Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home</li> <li>• Classroom</li> </ul>

uses of print and other literacies, the lack of understanding or awareness about Karen women's literacy adaptation in new contexts as they negotiate becoming literate and functional in a new culture hinders the development of needed and appropriate schooling support in their new educational system. In investigating culturally different literacy events and practices with which immigrants and refugees engage, the concept of literacy is reinforced, argued, and challenged, opening opportunities for revision of curricular requirements and practices into new ways of viewing and assessing literacy. The Karen women, in particular, regard literacy and education as communal practices, and as such, in order to socialize their children into becoming literate in their American setting, they themselves must become literate and learned.

Sociocultural research scholars (Sarroub, 2005; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 1999, 1995; Gee, 2008; Street, 1984) highlight the need to investigate culturally different literacy events and practices with which immigrants and ethnic groups are engaged. Citing Street (2001) and Gee's (2000, 2008) work, Hull and Schultz (2001) suggest that literacy must be studied in its cultural, social, economic, historical, and political contexts, in the school context, as well as outside of it. Street (2001) offers a definition of literacy tied to social practices and ideologies, such as economic, political, and social conditions, social structures, and local belief systems (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Barton (1991) demonstrate how everyday literacies involve a differentiated use of media and symbolic systems, and Prinsloo and Breier (1996), in studying everyday literacy practices in South Africa, conclude that there is a need for a reconceptualization of literacy as local practice.

In connection to research literature about ethnic groups (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Bigelow, Delmas, Hanson, & Tarone, 2006; Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991; Gee, 2008; Jones, 2000; Street, 1995), little research has focused on Karen literacy and academic needs. The few studies about this population (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008; Oh, 2011; Watkins, Razee, & Ritchers, 2012), as well as one book (Marshall, 1922), concentrate on depicting aspects of the culture in the Karen's own villages (Marshall, 1922), educational issues within the refugee camps (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008; Oh, 2011), and Karen refugee women's challenges that affect their well-being while in school in Australia (Watkins et al., 2012). No research has investigated the literacy practices, forms, exchanges, and events that Karen families experience while in the U.S. school system or those they brought with them as literacy practices from refugee camps in Myanmar or elsewhere.

## Literature review

We explore through a sociocultural perspective the different dynamics and practices with which Karen women engage to become literate in their new language and context. Referring to Street's (2001) explanation of literacy as a social practice focusing on the understanding and use of knowledge, the Karen refugees also situated their learning process of a new language in ways that reading and writing were themselves rooted in conceptions and previous practices of knowledge, identity, and being (p. 7). Elaborating the concept of literacy as a social

practice, Barton and Hamilton (2000) argue that social literacy practices may not be observable because such practices involve forms and discourses of literacy, people's awareness of literacy, and the form in which individuals talk about and understand literacy.

In complementing such sociocultural perspectives of literacy, Kern (1999) interprets "literacy identity" as a process of socialization and acculturation of particular conventions that recreate and interact with texts from a particular discourse in community. This interpretation enlarges the comprehensiveness of literacy practices, shedding light on the impact of these Karen women's previous schooling and societal processes: becoming literate in the refugee camp, in a government school in Myanmar, and working as babysitters learning how to read and write with children. During this process of becoming literate in their mother tongue (mainly Burmese or Sgaw Karen language) and another language (English), their "literacy identities" are formed and shaped by the *Discourses* and *discourses* at play. Gee (2000) explains the meaning of *Discourses* as "ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using various symbols, tools, and objects, to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity" (p. 21), while *discourses* refers to language-in-use or stretches of language, such as conversations and stories (Gee, 2000). While these *Discourses* and *discourses* will shape school practices and contextual needs, the literacy identities of Karen individuals are also formed, resulting in literacy practices in new contexts of participation, and this hybridity involves reconciling cultural viewpoints (cf. Bigelow, 2011) about being an ethnic minority.

In forming "literacy identity" through ideological, learned, and required practices, Street (1984) explores the meaning and manifestations of literacy in two concepts: literacy events and literacy practices. Derived from the sociolinguistic idea of speech events (Barton, 1994), Heath (1982) first utilized the term as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive process" (p. 50). The literacy event, then, encompasses the repeated activities of everyday life linked to some specific routine sequences that are also connected to social structures and respective expectations, such as schools, workplaces, or welfare agencies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Furthermore, participants internalize apprenticeship and enculturation of a "literacy identity," and they learn how to control the conventions in their daily encounters with literacy. We also recognize that there have been decades of research supporting the use of home languages to acquire a new language, build resilience, establish identity, and so forth (cf. "funds of knowledge" in Moll & Gonzales, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). After all, the cultural uses and meanings of reading and writing refer to concepts that people proffer when they engage in the practice of reading and writing (Street, 1995). In sum, what we categorize as ways of interacting and practicing literacy are patterns created and enacted within social institutions (social or otherwise) and power relationships wherein some literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential than do others (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

In practical terms for the present study in an adult family literacy classroom, the idea of literacy as mastering social practices that connect to specific Discourses proposes a multiplicity of understandings of contexts, uses of text genres, and experiences. Problematic in this view of literacy are the challenges that the Karen population face as refugees. In exemplifying some of these challenges, Watkins et al. (2012), in their study of barriers for Karen women participating in formal schooling in Australia, argue that language proficiency "is an essential part of resettlement and both directly and indirectly affects well-being through increasing self-efficacy, reducing social isolation and enhancing educational and vocational opportunities" (p. 137). Additionally, because Karen refugees place a high value on education, social participation, and contribution, not being proficient in the language undermines key social relations (p. 137). As a recurring theme, Oh and Van Der Stouwe (2008) point out that refugees in Thai-refugee camps place a high value on education because it garners higher social status, better-paying jobs, and increased service for the community. They examine cases of exclusion from the benefits of schooling, such as religious disagreements and pregnancies, as forms of punishment and find that "exclusion from the school denies young people not just an education but also friendships" (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008, p. 603).

Given the research literature available, we define literacy practices as the patterned concepts created by social institutions that people enact when they engage with reading and writing. In order to investigate such patterns, events, and practices, we asked two central questions: (a) what are the literacy practices with which Karen families engage in their homes and schools? And, (b) what are the cultural norms of Karen lives that influence learning and adaptation in a family literacy program setting? In investigating these questions, we open space for discussion about prior schooling in non-U.S. settings and further research with Karen families as they continue to be educated in the United States.

## Research methodology

Our ethnographic case study approach offers researchers the possibility of collecting in-depth data through multiple sources (e.g., observations, interviews, documents, etc.) and generates case-based themes that serve as the bases for analytical assertions. Ethnographic case study methodology, which can also be combined with other research methodologies, allows for the triangulation of data emanating from diverse experiences, encounters, relationships, observations, and conversations. This approach is especially useful in the study of literacy practices of a little-known population in a family literacy setting in which the Karen population is currently situated.

### Site

Meadowlark Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska, held the highest concentration of Myanmar refugees enrolled in the Family Literacy Program (FLIP), accounting for 8 Karen parents (Sgaw Karen, Karenni, Pwo Karen) out of a total of 12 parents participating in the program. The FLIP program is part of the Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP), established in 2003 by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) with funding from Toyota to fulfill the educational needs of Hispanic and other immigrant families. The program serves parents of children enrolled in kindergarten to third grade, and it also recruits parents who hold refugee or immigrant status. The FLIP program is divided into four components: Children's Education, Parent Time, Adult Education, and Parent and Child Together (PACT) time. Each one of these segments in the TFLP works as a "system of influence" (*Toyota Family Literacy Program: Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009) that involves parents and children. In the FLIP program classroom, classes were held 1:30–3:30 p.m. Parents were divided into cohorts by their language proficiency levels, and during the first 30 minutes of the FLIP class, parents participated with their children in schooling activities within the children's classroom (PACT Time – Parent and Children Together). Once a week, parents participated in a special class called "Parent Time" wherein parents engaged in learning aspects of life and culture in the United States.

### Participants

Maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2012) was utilized for choosing the school with the most diverse number of Karen ethnic groups (e.g., Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Karenni, etc.) and, secondly, the sampling accounted for English learning levels as well as the academic background of the participants. The recruitment of participants occurred after our third visit to the FLIP classroom in October 2012, with the Karen translator as the gatekeeper to convey basic information regarding the project and also translate the consent forms. During this exchange, the gatekeeper recruited two participants, Hkee La and Tee Cha. The third participant, Kle Ser Mu, agreed to be part of the study when Quadros joined the advanced learners' group, of which Kle Ser Mu was part. Kle Ser Mu, who speaks Sgaw Karen but is literate in Burmese, was representative of an advanced English learner group and had graduated with a 10 standard from a government school in Myanmar. Tee Cha, speaking and being literate in Sgaw Karen, was at a beginning-intermediate level and had graduated with a kindergarten

<b>Table 2.</b> Totals of Data Collection		
Tee Cha	• Observations:	11
	• Interviews:	1
	• Home-visitations:	3
Kle Ser Mu	• Observations:	9
	• Interviews:	1
	• Home-visitations:	3
Hkee La	• Observations:	12
	• Interviews:	1
	• Home-visitations:	2

education from a community school in Myanmar. Hkee La, speaking and being literate in Sgaw Karen, was in the intermediate level and had graduated with a 10 standard from the refugee camp in Thailand. Attending the FLIP classroom at Meadowlark Elementary School were mostly women, and during our observations only one man attended, although he was frequently absent.

### **Data collection**

The data collection period started in October 2012 and ended in the spring of 2013. Quadros visited the school site three times a week during the period of the FLIP classes, participated in the FLIP staff meetings four times, and interviewed each Karen adult participant as well as the teacher once. Quadros also visited the participants' homes three times for approximately 3 hours each at the Karen women's suggested times as was convenient for them (except for Hkee La, who dropped out of the program before the end of the research; see Table 2). At the beginning of the data collection, one of the researchers also helped tutor the research participants in English. At other times, the Karen women would consult Author for grammar or vocabulary definitions and help. In this way, Quadros's role changed from observer to that of participant observer.

### **Data analysis**

A first step in the analysis of field notes and interview data was descriptive coding, regarded by Saldaña (2011) as just one of the approaches for analyzing ethnographic data. For the second coding stage, we utilized MaxQDA, identifying *in vivo* codes (Creswell, 2012; Strauss, 1987) as well as the themes followed and analytical memos. From the field notes and interviews a total of four main themes emerged: "memorize it," "ask her to help you," "I don't write (because) I practice my speak," and "I asked where I could find a job, and they said I should use the computer." These themes reflected the most observed and daily literacy practices of these three women, whether in their homes or in school-like contexts.

### **Reflexivity**

As authors, we chose to analyze the data from a sociocultural perspective due to our previous experiences with learning different languages, being involved with ethnographic research, and becoming literate in different settings and educational contexts. Also, having one of the authors living in Myanmar (during the review and

publication of this paper) for a period of one and half years helped in the review of findings in light of her experiences in the Myanmar educational system.

### The three Karen women's literacy practices

Targeting the promotion of education for their children during PACT time and their own language learning and skills as refugees in the United States, the three Karen women memorized vocabulary words during reading to use in their speech, answered written exercises orally, read aloud to practice speaking (recitation), searched for community involvement to "do homework," and used the computer to search for jobs and necessary information to navigate the computational U.S. context.

#### "Memorize it"

- R: *Tell me how you practice your reading.*  
 Hkee La: *Read the story, put it in my mind . . .*  
 R: *Uh-huh. Do you read with your eyes, take notes, out loud? Do you translate? What do you do?*  
 Hkee La: *Uh, I read and memorize it, and then I say.*  
 R: *(Asking to the interpreter) Is that very common, in Karen culture, to memorize?*  
 Interpreter: *Uh, reading out loud is easier for me, and then they would memorize and then we would try to say again, and again and again.*

The practice of memorization in Asian cultures has been explored as a strategy to effectively acquire language as well as engage with the school discourse of learning literacy (Ding, 2007; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kuper, 1985; Stevick, 1989; Yu, 2011), especially in learning vocabulary in English as in Foreign Language Classrooms. With Hkee La, the strategy to learn English included vocabulary memorization with the use of a dictionary given to her by a volunteer teacher, reading stories aloud in order to memorize the text, and reinforcing of English words with her children. Kle Ser Mu copied, read, and tried to memorize the U.S. citizenship test questions; Tee Cha, when learning vocabulary, would write and repeat words, checking for correct pronunciation with her tutor or with Quadros. These events of literacy, which are described as "activities where literacy has a role" (Barton et al., 1999, p. 8), embody not only processes of engaging with literacy contextually but also the theories of second language learning of strategies that adult learners adapt in their vocabulary learning.

In her home, Hkee La utilized an English-Karen dictionary to memorize words. During the time of Quadros's visit at her house, when Hkee La first showed the dictionary, she sat on the floor with the dictionary open and Quadros started reading random words, asking if her pronunciation was correct. Quadros would help her with the pronunciation, and when she asked her what a certain word was in Karen, Hkee La would read the Karen meaning and say that she did not know what that word was in Karen either. In examining this regularly observed event, Hkee La tried to apply a learned event from her prior schooling experience in a new context that required from her a meaningful understanding of what she was striving to learn. These "competing discourses" (Lee, 1992) were at work across the literacy event that Hkee La enacted in her home with her understanding of literacy at school. Accordingly, based on her first learning experience at school in the refugee camp, Hkee La's vocabulary memorization activity mirrored a literacy event detached from contextual forms of applying, understanding, and using vocabulary. In the refugee camp, for example, English vocabulary had served a different purpose than that of daily communication. Hkee La's argument of "I don't understand" the meaning or "I can't memorize" the words could be, aside from her personal difficulties with memorization, a consequence of the lack of contextualization and practicability of the literacy events that she was developing. In lacking the contextual use and applicability of the vocabulary words, Hkee La acknowledged her limitation in interacting effectively within schooling experience. Quadros observed the same

practice while living in Myanmar. Because the national language is Burmese and ethnic minorities speak their own languages, teachers from government schools teach children in Burmese, explain concepts and ideas in the ethnic language, and then have the children memorize lessons in Burmese. Assessment in government schools is also conducted in Burmese, and as explained by government teachers that Quadros visited in 8 school sites, for the end-of-the-year exams (standardized tests) and other assessment practices, children memorize the answers for the assessment tests in Burmese.

Kle Ser Mu, whose high status among the Karen students was connected to her higher level of English fluency, also utilized rote memorization as a cognitive strategy to study the citizenship test questionnaire in class. In copying, reading, and trying to memorize questions, such as “What is the supreme law of the land?” and “What does the Constitution do?” Kle Ser Mu would first take note of each question and answer it in her notebook, read it aloud, and ask or look for further explanation of some unknown word. Kle Ser Mu reported that her goal was to copy and “study” at least 10 questions in half an hour. Kle Ser Mu was also more fluent in Burmese than in Karen because she studied in government schools while in Myanmar.

With regard to more complex citizenship questions such as understanding state representation and the democratic government in the United States, Kle Ser Mu acknowledged that she did not understand the answers. Her goal was to memorize the 100 questions and answers in order to apply for citizenship status. For example, when Quadros sat with her to observe, she would sometimes ask questions such as, “If the president can no longer serve, who becomes president?” In this interaction, Kle Ser Mu asked what a vice president was. Other concepts, such as the “House of Representatives” and the “state representative” became more challenging to explain.

In examining some of the processes that learners use to understand text, Freebody (1992) and Freebody and Luke (1990) elaborated the Four Resources Model that explores four literacy “practices” involving participants’ engagement with the written text; namely, code maker (coding competence), meaning maker (semantic competence), text user (pragmatic competence), and text critic (critical competence). Within these components, which are necessary but not sufficient on their own, the adult English language learner needs to interact with the written word in a situated and authentic context. Whereas Kle Ser Mu was decoding and translating the meaning of the words, the meaning maker and the pragmatic aspects of the text were lost because of her limited knowledge of democracy within the political American system. The tutor focused on explaining the meaning of the words rather than the political context and the democratic implications of the government. Words such as “supreme” or “Constitution” were explained as “the highest law” and “a written document that was written when United States was first formed, like the laws and the rules of America/defines what the government does and the rights of the people. So, we have the right of life, liberty” as “something that is given to us, we just have that.” Within Luke and Freebody’s resources framework, adult learners’ main approach to literacy were as code and meaning makers, reflecting the Karen families’ focus on memorizing facts for the citizenship test.

Alternatively, as Freebody and Luke (1990) acknowledge, the Four Resource Models for literacy practices refers to a family of practices, wherein literacy is a feature of an individual’s history, capability, and possibilities, as well as a reflection of the collective or joint capabilities of a group, community, or society. In other words, the memorization events observed were the first instances of literacy practices of three Karen participants in a fairly new literacy program that had been moved to a school setting. Further research is required to examine the participants’ deepening and evolving development of the four resources suggested by Freebody and Luke (1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Inasmuch as memorization regulated the primordial literacy practices of the three Karen participants in their search to develop their literacy skills in the United States, other literacy practices commonly used at the refugee camp schools need to be investigated in order to understand the implications of memorization in the Karen settings.



### ***"Ask her to help you"***

*Suddenly a neighbor showed up with a little girl carrying a sheet of paper with activities to be completed. I was asked to help the girl with her homework. As I strove to explain and work with my language skills to make it easier for the little Karen girl, K'Paw came from school and started to explain in Karen what I was telling her to do. Her aunt, who brought her to Tee Cha's house, also gave instructions in Karen. The activity required the child to write down each person's name and then count all the letters in each name. Instead, each person around the circle grabbed the little girl's pencil and wrote their names on the worksheet. She counted the letters of the names in English while her aunt counted in Karen as well. We finished answering the exercise sheet and they left right after.*

The participation and involvement of neighbors in the lives of the three Karen participants occurred in different forms and during different times of the day. The above description occurred during Quadros's final home visit at Tee Cha's house. The neighbor with her child came in, asking for help with the homework. Tee Cha quickly pointed to Author, and the attention turned in her direction with translations in English, telling Author to help the child with her homework. The worksheet was completed with the participation of all four people writing their names on the homework sheet and the child trying to understand what Quadros was saying in relation to what her aunt and neighbors were translating in Karen. During this interaction, Quadros found herself wanting to ask the people to stop talking so as to let her talk and explain, but she did not interrupt them.

Marshall (1922), in a study about Karen life in Myanmar, acknowledges some of the dynamics of the community life that villagers engage with, saying, "there was little occasion for individual initiative among the Karen, on account of the important part played by communal activity amongst them" (p. 130). Marshall (1922) further observes, "In some sections it was the custom for the chief to beat a gong or blow a horn as the signal to go to the fields. Every one went to the signal. None would go without it. If a supply of fish was wanted, instead of an individual taking his or her rod and going alone to catch them, the whole village, or as many of its members as were free to do so, would join in a fish expedition" (p. 130). Marshall (1922) also explains that if members failed to participate in the community activity, they "were not left out in the division of the spoils, if they managed to be present at the proper time, and they usually did" (p. 130).

Attesting to Marshall's findings, albeit more than a hundred years later, in one of our conversations with Kle Ser Mu, she explained how the houses in the villages were built. She recalled that when one village member was about to build a bamboo house with a leaf roof, all the villagers or neighbors would help build the house. In an interview with Mrs. Jane, the teacher in the FLIP program classroom, she also pointed out the community engagement with one another's affairs, saying, "they are pretty strong at community, or at least that seems. Often they can tell me if someone's missing. Usually somebody in the group knows why or who ... what the situation is with that person and so they can often fill me in on, you know, who's sick or whose children are sick."

Parent Time also depicted the collective participatory characteristic of the Karen refugees. When Kle Ser Mu engaged in reading with her son and the kindergarten teacher, she not only sat beside him and helped him by pointing to words, but she also read with him by mouthing and sometimes speaking the words at the same time he did. Kle Ser Mu would also help her son with the written exercises by telling him what to write and which letters to use. For example, in completing sentences such as "a mat \_\_\_\_ a cat," Kle Ser Mu told her son to write "for" and spelled the word for him. During another writing activity, the children were supposed to spell a three-letter word dictated by their teacher and write it on the "sandbox" drawings in their exercise worksheets. The teacher said the word "cat," and the children used their arms to make the letters in the word "cat." Afterwards, they wrote each letter separately on their papers, and finally they wrote the word. When the exercise started, in an attempt to help her son in his process of learning how to write, Kle Ser Mu sounded out the words and told him what the letters were. Consequently, the teacher interrupted, addressing Kle Ser

Mu's son by saying, "Ywar, I know you can do it." Smiling and embarrassed, Kle Ser Mu quickly looked at Quadros with her hands on her mouth, showing that she had understood that her participation in the activity was not welcome. Interestingly, in Myanmar, Karen parents usually do not engage with their children at the "academic knowledge level" or in similar ways as this mother interacted with her child. Commonly, parent involvement is limited to parents providing children and the school with resources such as food provisions, school materials, uniforms, and so forth.

Gee (2000), referring to works from Cook-Gumperz (1986), Heath (1982), and Scribner and Cole (1981), notes that "literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (p. 45). We wonder, then, if the more centered and individualistic activities of PACT time would influence the Karen parents to focus on themselves rather than on helping their classmates or children. For example, in introducing the idea of taking notes for the journal during PACT time, which occurred at the beginning of January in the FLIP classroom, parents centered their observations on themselves as learners instead of helping their children during class. We think it necessary to examine the goals and outcomes of having parents in their children's classrooms.

### ***"I don't write (because) i practice my speak"***

*As Kle Ser Mu listened to the book exercise CD at the same time as she read aloud the texts and exercises, she turned to Quadros, asking if what she was doing was good for her to practice speaking. Quadros told her that if she would also write the answer to the exercises, she would practice the language even more and learn more. She replied by saying that she needed to practice more speaking, more dialogues to understand what people say to her.*

*At the library, Kle Ser Mu asked Quadros to help her to find a "dialogue" book to help her with speaking. I asked Mrs. Jane where the "dialogue" books could be found, and Kle Ser Mu and I followed Mrs. Jane, both working together to find some books for her.*

The Karen women privileged speaking over writing and read texts to improve speaking in English. As defined by Street (1984, 1995), literacy, aside from the narrow concept of writing and reading as decoding and encoding processes, ultimately refers to an ideological practice that differs culturally and contextually. In observing the literacy events practiced by these three Karen adult participants, the use of print text to practice speaking apparently fulfilled their need to become proficient speakers. In Kle Ser Mu's case, for example, the use of the print text to practice speaking did not seem to compromise the schooling and academic institutional notions and requirements. In adapting literacy to her utilitarian need, that is, finding a better job, Kle Ser Mu interacted with written language in a pragmatic way to become orally proficient.

In reading texts with her daughter, Hkee La also practiced speaking, and on one occasion after school, when she attended the Early Childhood Special Education (EXCITE) class, Hkee La checked her backpack and took out a couple of books. The first book that they worked on together was a vocabulary book that had pictures with names in English. Hkee La told her daughter the names of the pictures in English, and her daughter rapidly looked at the pictures, repeating the word. Later, after drawing lines, then writing the numbers 1 to 10 and counting them aloud, Hkee La called on her daughter to read the book *The Three Little Pigs*, which the EXCITE teacher had sent home. Before they started reading, Hkee La asked her daughter to write some of the alphabet letters, and she wrote from A to F. Hkee La reviewed the writing, pronouncing the letters aloud, with her daughter repeating after her. After finishing with the numbers and alphabet, they read the book. Hkee La started reading word-by-word, stopping for her daughter to repeat the words. As soon as Hkee La finished reading one page, she would explain to her daughter what was written in the story.

In this interaction, the use of written text to practice speaking skills reflects a similar literacy event used by Kle Ser Mu during classroom lessons. In this regard, utilizing Street's (1985) definition of literacy practices as folk models and beliefs embodying and shaping literacy events (Hull & Schultz, 2001), the event of

privileging speaking through the reading of the text might reflect assumptions about concepts of language learning, assimilation of vocabulary, and immersion with the immediate form of communication, the talk. Oral proficiency allowed for integration, more work choices, and higher status within the Karen community, with status being intimately connected to opportunities to help members who are not fluent in the language. Watkins et al. (2012) point out that “language proficiency is an essential part of resettlement and both directly and indirectly affects well-being through increasing self-efficacy, reducing social isolation and enhancing educational and vocational opportunities” (p. 137). For example, Tee Cha acknowledged her desire to be a missionary, but she noted that without English, she could not communicate with people. Kle Ser Mu referred to the same: “I also need to learn what is around me. I also need to learn what I hear what I see,” and she emphasized her need to “feel comfortable and successful [in speaking English], so I become independent by myself. I don’t need to ask help for anybody else. Maybe I can also help somebody.” When Quadros asked Hkee La how the program helped her, she noted that the FLIP program “help me to learn more English and understand English, and I can communicate with Americans or other people who do not speak the same language as me.”

***“I asked where i could find a job, and they said i should use the computer”***

*She repeated over and over again how hard it is to find a job and make friends. She said that when she asks people where she can find a job, they tell her to look for one on the Internet; however, she told me that “the Internet is not good for me” because she does not know how to use a computer, and she doesn’t have one.*

The use of computers and technology by adult second-language learners has been documented in studies by Warschauer and Kern (2000), Warschauer, (2003), and Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts (1996) that emphasize and demonstrate that computer technology has turned out to be an essential new means of language use. In addition to learning the lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and spoken aspects of language, learners also need to know how to utilize and communicate effectively through electronic devices, since the computer has become widespread in many contexts and aspects of modern-day life (Saltourides, 2008). Karen families similarly expressed their needs to learn and interact with computer technology. For example, Tee Cha used the computer to watch Thai channels in her bedroom. Hkee La used the computer to entertain her children when they were home, and Kle Ser Mu was in the process of buying a computer for her family as well as getting Internet service in her home. At home the computer was mostly used for entertainment, and, as Kle Ser Mu noted, she needed the computer to look for jobs and, perhaps, to learn English.

In the classroom the Karen participants used computers in their small groups. The website UsaLearns.org was used as a resource that provided diverse exercises by topics and levels of proficiency in English. UsaLearns.org was created to help English learners practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing at different levels and with different topics about American life. Despite the leveled and topical organization of the website, the topics, themes, and vocabulary were challenging. For example, during the two times that Kle Ser Mu utilized the website, she chose the low-intermediate level of the online course while trying to learn about “taxes, law, and community issues.” In the first lessons about “taxes,” the website addressed concepts such as “dealing with taxes,” “dealing with the law,” “discussing community issues,” and “civic participation.” Even with the presence of the tutor, the legal vocabulary in these texts and the tax forms were not only foreign concepts for her but were also difficult to understand in a meaningful way. Kle Ser Mu chose to change topics because of her difficulty in understanding the idea of “taxes.”

Tee Cha and Hkee La used the “basic skills” level that brought together topics such as food, the house, clothing, and numbers, with vocabulary that was more accessible and simple sentences that were known to them. However, Tee Cha mostly used the computer to interact with the website, rather than to check

e-mail or look for other information. Sometimes she would also ask for Quadros's help to type the website domain for her or read pop-ups on the screen. Hkee La was fairly proficient at typing the URL and accessing the UsaLearns.org website, as well as choosing levels and topics. In reading pop-ups on the screen, Hkee La had difficulty identifying and understanding the characters and meaning, often asking the tutors or Quadros for help.

In their homes, the computer was used for entertainment as well as a resource for learning and job finding. Kle Ser Mu had bought a computer for her family, and she explained that she desired to purchase a television but that there was not enough money for both. She asked for Quadros's help to find Internet service, and a week later she expressed her satisfaction with watching movies and using the computer to find out more about the meat-packing factory town where her husband worked as well as practice her English. In the field notes, we noted, "Kle Ser Mu had asked if it was a good idea to use the website that they use at school to practice her English at home, and [we] positively agreed with her." Kle Ser Mu reported two ways in which people responded to her when she told them she was trying to find a job. The first time, "people used to say to use 'google'" to find a job, but she did not know how to use the computer. The second time, "when she asked people where she could find a job, they told her to look for them on the internet; however, 'the internet [was] not good for me.'" She first had to learn how to use it.

In Tee Cha's home, her children were the ones who interacted the most with the computer as well as games on television. When Quadros helped her daughter with the homework, she asked Tee Cha if she had a computer so that Quadros could use the website that the math teacher gave to check math vocabulary and show how to do the exercises. Putting the computer on the floor where they sit and do homework, daughter, mother, and Quadros could not use it because it did not have the appropriate program to download the information from the website. Tee Cha's children informed Quadros that the computer stayed in Tee Cha's bedroom because she liked to watch Thai soap operas and movies.

With Hkee La, the computer was also used to entertain her children. They watched movies on the YouTube website and took pictures of the children with the webcam. She did not talk about using the computer to look for a job or even improve her English skills. Nevertheless, the children would spend hours on the computer, and sometimes her daughter, and more frequently, Hkee La, would look for the movies for them to watch.

Reflecting on the need to provide Karen adult learners enough input on computer skills, Saltourides (2008) argues that immigrants complained about not being able to follow along in class, being too confused, and not understanding what was expected of them, which reinforces Warschauer's (2005) and Egbert's (2005) assertions that second-language learners need sufficient literacy skills as decoders and meaning makers to begin computer literacy classes. Kle Ser Mu acknowledged the same difficulty when she expressed frustration at not being able to find a job without more computer literacy skills. Along with such challenges, determining which texts have more reliable information that would help with their needs (Murray & McPherson, 2002; Murray, 2005; Walz, 2001) and the additional lack of skills for examining nontext features such as visuals (Sutherland-Smith, 2002), pop-ups, or advertisements (Murray, 2005) can also be an impediment for second-language learners. In this regard, all three Karen women experienced similar challenges.

Through empowering and motivating students to have computer skills, Saltourides (2008) together with Toyoda (2001) acknowledge that learners' computer literacy skills had a meaningful impact on student perceptions, perseverance, self-esteem, and confidence, thus contributing to their sense of imagined community. As the Karen adults become more involved with computer technologies, whether by themselves or through their children, further research is needed to understand the impact that being digitally literate might have on language acquisition, literacy practices, and adaptation to life in the United States.

## Findings

Our findings suggest that Karen women's literacy practices in and out of school reflect cultural practices emanating from schooling experiences in refugee camps and villages in Myanmar. Contributing toward ongoing research and demonstrating the importance of carefully documenting their literacies in everyday life, we concluded that "literacy identity" for refugee Karen women entailed practicing memorization in order to develop language acquisition, emphasizing communal support to adapt to the new school system, using written language to learn how to speak a new language, and participating in a cybernetic culture in order to function in a new setting in the Midwest. Literacy was shared and the adult women engaged with it together and with their children, such that what was learned during PACT time in public schools was reconstructed as communal, not as an attribute of individual achievement but as information to be communicated within and across Karen households. In so doing, the Karen women also increased their social status. Additionally, the use of computer technology as a means of interacting with language learning, entertainment, and job hunts also resonated with the participants' immediate cultural, social, and educational needs.

## Limitations

Our lack of language fluency in Karen limited our understanding of communication among the women in the classroom. Also, the lack of research on the Karen people and refugees from Myanmar did not provide robust guidance or a comparative perspective for our work. We would have benefited from being in Myanmar earlier and at the time of the Karen refugees' arrival to make better sense of their schooling there.

## Implications and conclusion

Further research is needed to investigate varied dimensions and perceptions of communal and community engagement in relation to school literacy practices of parents and children. These factors work together (as well as the host country teachers) with assignments and activities, and interact with other reasons that may influence the "communal support" of adult learners, such as the lack of state support, the environment, the adaptation and learning processes of formal schooling, and the impact of computers in refugees' lives. Also, a longitudinal study is needed to investigate the evolution of the literacy practices themes we uncovered, from the perspective that such strategies are a reflection of social practices. Such a study will further contribute to discussion about literate identities in cross-cultural contexts. As Karen refugee families continue to arrive and participate in American society and schooling, the daily administration and management of their struggles in adaptation, in which language proficiency and formal literacy play a major role, demonstrates the dedication of these adult learners in "dribbling around" the inequities from their prior homes to succeed in a foreign culture that is not aware of their origins. Quadros's work in Myanmar with Karen refugees following the study has been informative in the writing of our article, and we advocate for more and continued comparative research by Western researchers and educators in places such as Myanmar to better understand language use and how families adapt to their host societies in the United States and elsewhere.

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