

*Leadership and Civic Engagement of Myanmar Refugee Students in
the United States: Experiences, Influences and Aspirations*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The refugee youth's involvement in civic engagement and leadership means an access to other opportunities in life, such as social recognition, psychosocial well-being, rewarding relationships and connections, exposure to professional employment, and ability to advocate for oneself and for his/her community (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Flanagan and Bundick, 2011). Likewise, student civic engagement brings significant social, economic, and civic benefits not only to refugee community, but also to the mainstream society as a whole (Jensen, 2008). By applying ethnographic lens, this study examines aspirations, influences and experiences of Myanmar refugee students who are currently active in their communities in the United States. Through disappointments and frustrations of community disunity, unchangeable egos of leaders and serious mistrust among ethnic groups, Myanmar students see the need for unity, collaboration, mutual respect and forgiveness. As such, their civic engagement aspirations and leadership activities are significantly shaped by their collective Myanmar identity and the sense of unity that they acquired through their lived experiences while they were in Myanmar and after resettled in the United States. Myanmar refugee students found a rallying point at reinforced national identity, and the need of unity within Myanmar community and among different refugee ethnic groups from Myanmar. Their narratives and reflections subtly show that unified identity as Myanmar student leaders and community unifiers—reinforced by their community attachments and social ties—is the major influence that empowers them to actively participate in the civic engagement activities in the United States.

Keywords: Myanmar Refugees, United States, Student Civic Engagement, Aspirations, Influences

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Introduction

For more than four decades, Myanmar (also known as Burma) has been struggling with civil wars, ethnic insurgencies and political turmoil, and consequently the international Myanmar diaspora had come to an existence due to continuous persecutions and displacement of populations (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). Some 140,000 refugees from Myanmar's main minority groups—along with former political prisoners and pro-democracy activists—have been living in nine isolated and closed camps on the Thai-Myanmar border for more than 20 years, and it has become the largest refugee settlement in Southeast Asia. Since the late 1990's, the United States has resettled about 100,000 refugees from Myanmar, and about 8,000 of them were resettled in the City of Clemens metro area (NYS BRIA, 2014).

Like all other refugees—due to sociocultural barriers, lack of language skills, limited access to education—majority of Myanmar refugees are failing to integrate into mainstream community and to achieve upward social mobility, even after several years of initial resettlement in the United States (Vang and Trieu, 2014). Likewise, it is observed that Myanmar refugee groups are very unfamiliar with civic engagement and collective decision-making processes that could impact refugee community well-being and social mobility. However, I have noticed the emergence of a handful of Myanmar refugee college students who are active in civic engagement and community leadership in the City of Clemens metropolitan area. The civic engagement of immigrant youth is crucial, because such activities not only pave way for immigrant communities to achieve greater political leverage and fair distribution of services, but also give young people better academic and career opportunities (Levine, 2008). In this qualitative study, I explore how Myanmar refugee students narrate and reflect upon their civic engagement experiences, and what socio-cultural factors influence their experiences and aspirations.

“Myanmar” versus “Burma”

Before I move on to discuss civic engagement of Myanmar refugee students in the City of Clemens metropolitan area, it is important for me to resolve the naming dilemma of their country of origin since it will play a critical role in explaining participants' identity formation later in the study. Lowell Dittmer (2010), a renowned political scientist and East Asian scholar, argues that the issue is both historical and political, and the controversy surrounding the name started with the political circumstances under which it was renamed. In fact, it was the military junta who staged a successful coup in 1988 renamed the country from “Union of Burma” to “Union of Myanmar”. During the British colonial rule, the name of the country was simply Burma—a name derived from the indigenous ethnic majority group, called “Burmans”.

Dittmer (2008, 2010) proposes that there are two contrasting arguments about the name change: 1) the junta argues that as the name “Burma” was bequeathed by the colonialists it needs to be replaced with a more traditional name, and “Myanmar” symbolizes freedom from the British colonial legacy; and 2) the term “Burma” refers to only one group of people, while the usage of “Myanmar” is inclusive of all ethnic nationalities of the country. However, in Burmese or Myanmar language, Burma is known as either “Myanma” or “Bama”, and “Myanma” is the written, literary name of

the country, while “Bama” is the spoken name of the country. In terms of meaning, there is no difference, as both names more or less refer to the majority group of people in the country. I need to note the significance of this naming dilemma in my study, because all participants, except one, identify themselves as “Myanmar” and insist that I use as is in my report. It is due to the fact that all participants grew up under military dictatorship, and most of them attended state-sponsored secondary schools where they were taught to regard “Myanmar” as inclusive term.

Literature Review

Civic engagement, indeed, is a much contested term, and scholars agree that it may take different shape and form based on political characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and societal beliefs. Levine (2008) suggests that the definition of civic engagement itself varies depending on people’s conception of the good society and beliefs about how individuals should behave. Small business ownership, responsible childrearing, tackling racism and discrimination at neighborhood level, participating in civil disobedience to counter unjust laws, joining the military to defend national values, or perhaps staging an uprising can all be counted as civic engagement. Regardless of the variation, civic engagement activities are essential pillars of civic society, because such activities enhance capacity and performance of communities, institutions and social groups (Putnam, 2001). A society with higher level of civic engagement is least likely to produce corruption, oppression and narcissism of the state due to fine-tuned checks and balances presented by active citizenry. In fact, “civic engagement is a kind of arbiter of other social goods, such as aggregate income, economic equality, personal liberty and security from crime” (Levine, 2008, p. 102).

As such, civic engagement of young students is especially critical, because it allows youth to understand the power of civic capacity, shared leadership and collective decision-making, and to experience values and benefits of democratic practices during their formative young adulthood (Sears and Levy, 2003; Levine, 2008). Youth who have been involved in civic engagement activities perform better in academics, peer relationships, and overall health (Davila and Mora, 2007; Lerner, 2004; Zill et al., 1995). In addition, civic engagement gives youth positive motivations, beneficial peer networks, self-perception and feeling of worth, and career development opportunities (Levine, 2008; Soria et al., 2015). Immigrant youth in the United States, in particular, are positively impacted by civic engagement, as it channels them to integrate into new society, and to get acquainted with new social norms and practices. Although immigrant youth’s civic engagements closely resemble that of their non-immigrant peers, many major differences can be observed (Levine, 2008).

Unlike non-immigrant students, immigrant youth center their civic engagement around collective needs and issues of their own communities. Mainstream civic engagement activities—such as, voting in elections, participating in political campaigns, and joining political parties or causes—are almost non-existence among immigrant youth, because many of them are yet to become the United States citizens, or are disenfranchised as undocumented immigrants in worst case scenarios (Hosang, 2006; Jensen, 2008; Stepick, Stepick, and Labissiere, 2008). Likewise, their aspirations and motivations to participate in civic engagement also differ from that of non-immigrant peers.

Arab-American students, for instance, participate in civic engagement to overcome negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, as well as to counter overly simplified media portrayal of Islam and its cultural aspects (Read, 2014). Latino students participating in 2006 anti-restriction and anti-discrimination protests were motivated and empowered by immigrant identity, sense of responsibility, and communal ties (Levine, 2008). Miami Latino youth—especially college students—attended daily demonstrations against the deportation of Elián, because they felt that they were treated differently than other Americans, and that they needed to express solidarity with other Latinos. Unexpected awareness of their “otherness” prompted them to reconsider their position in the United States, and encouraged Miami Latino youth to participate in civic engagement activities (Stepick, Stepick, and Labissiere, 2008).

Although existing literature extensively discusses both importance of student civic engagement and variations among immigrant and non-immigrant youth, there is a research gap in understanding influences, aspirations and experiences of civic engagement among refugee youth—Myanmar refugee students in particular. Chan (2011) conducted an exploratory study of civic engagement among Asian immigrant college students, and studied “facilitators and barriers” to civic engagement, as well as benefits and positive consequences resulting from civic engagement activities. Chan posits that civic engagement of Asian immigrant students are both intricate and subtle, as greater level of family obligation rather than well-being of the community or larger society is usually found among this particular group. In addition, she argues that Asian immigrant youth may have struggled to cope with cultural differences between mainstream American culture and their native culture, while embarking on civic engagement journey as young adults.

Drawing on the methodological framework of Strauss and Corbin (1998), Chan carefully explored “factors related to Asian American college students’ civic engagement” (2011, p. 198). She sought participants’ explanations on how they decided to participate in civic engagement activities, and the relative impact of such participation. Her study highlights relational, identity, and acculturation gap factors that influence Asian American immigrant students’ civic engagement, and competence, confidence, connection and character development they have achieved as the result of their participation in civic-oriented activities. Chan purports that Asian immigrant students are most civically engaged when they see their family members—especially siblings—close friends, and peers at school participating in civic engagement activities. As such, social identities of Asian immigrant youth compel them to see the value of civic engagement, and attract them to ethnic organizations, clubs and social gatherings. Religious activities, cultural events, and association with other active Asian immigrant students, in turn, reinforces their ethnic and social identities. However, they also face challenges and pushbacks from their own families, as most Asian immigrant parents consider civic engagement activities as interference for academics.

Regardless of the differences in influencing factors, Asian immigrant students achieve fulfilling experiences as the result of their involvement in civic engagement activities. Through their participation in civic engagement, immigrant students acquire “skills that would be beneficial to their future careers”, develop long-lasting friendships with peers, and build a stronger connection to their academic institutions (Chan, 2008, p. 201). In addition, students’ awareness of larger societal problems and social justice

issues increases, as they are more connected with their own communities (Chen, 2008; Stepick, Stepick and Labissiere, 2008).

Design and Methodology

Rationale, Researcher's Reflexivity and Positionality

Based on Chan's (2011) Asian American immigrant students' civic engagement construct, I designed a qualitative study that focuses on civic engagement and community leadership of Myanmar refugee students in the City of Clemens metropolitan area. Merriam (2009) discusses that a researcher should employ qualitative research method if the focus of the study is to understand meaning making process of participants, and to capture rich narratives. In order to capture subtle influences and aspirations, and to better understand how Myanmar refugee students make meaning out of their civic engagement experiences, I decided to employ exploratory ethnographic research.

Of course, I struggled with my own identity and positionality while conducting this research as I am not only a Myanmar (or Burmese) individual who was born and raised Myanmar (or Burma), but also an immigrant student who is active in civic engagement activities. In addition, I am very connected to the community, and I know most of participants in my study on very personal level. In fact, some participants have worked with me closely in several occasions, and I have acted as their mentor for more than a dozen times. As such, I may have several pre-conceived notions and feelings about my participants and their civic engagement work in the City of Clemens, and they may not have opened up to me entirely due to the nature of my relationship with them. Since I am their mentor and one of the leaders in Clemens Myanmar/Burmese community, they may have reserved themselves and their authentic voices (Weis and Fine, 2000). I, therefore, employed reflective inquiry—as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2014)—so that, my participants' voices are meaningfully presented to readers. While recognizing my own identity, potential biases, and positionality, I let my participants' voices guide me through data analysis.

Site and Sample Selection

The City of Clemens metropolitan area hosts about 8,000 refugees from Myanmar. No more than a hundred Myanmar refugees currently pursue post-secondary education in local colleges and universities, and a handful of them become active in civic engagement activities. Since my research purpose is to study civic engagement aspirations, influences and experiences of Myanmar refugee students, I conducted the purposeful sampling procedure. Through professional and personal relationships, I recruited 11 Myanmar refugee college students—four males and seven females. My participants come from Burman/Myanma (including Burman-Muslims), Chin, Zomi, Rakhaing, Mon and Karenni ethnic backgrounds—six of eight predominant refugee ethnic groups from Myanmar currently residing in Clemens. Although I tried to recruit from ethnic Karen refugee students, I had no luck as Karen students have stringent reservations on me due to my heavy involvement with non-Karen groups in Clemens. To avoid unwanted political and communal complications, I intentionally left out ethnic Rohingya (also referred as Bengali) refugees in this research; however, I intend to include this group in my future studies.

Data Collection Procedures

Two primary data collection methods—interviews and focus groups—are selected to maximize external validity and readers’ generalizability of the study. Merriam (2009) suggests that interviewing is “the best technique to use” when conducting intensive qualitative studies of a few selected individuals, as it could provide rich data to researcher (p. 88). I conducted face-to-face interviews with each of the 11 participants, and then set up at two focus groups. In fact, focus groups were also used as member checks of one-on-one interviews. I allowed participants to choose a preferred place to conduct one-on-one interviews—eight interviews took place in local cafes or restaurants, two in my car, and one at participant’s house. Focus groups were conducted at local cafes.

I primarily fielded unstructured interviews, both in one-on-one interviews and focus groups, that provide flexibility to both researcher and participants. With the permission from participants, I recorded all interviews with my Samsung Galaxy Note5. In addition to voice recording, I kept field notes to sketch in-depth person-to-person observation. All voice recordings were transcribed and translated (from Myanmar to English), and then back-translated (from English to Myanmar) in order to ensure accuracy and correct representation of participants’ narratives. I, then, used HyperRESEARCH tool to code the data and to conduct thematic analysis.

Findings

Unified Identity as a Powerful Force

Civic engagement scholars imply that immigrant students’ national origins, ethnic backgrounds, and cultural identities play a crucial role in their civic engagement activities (Chan, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Stepick et al, 2008; Levine, 2008). In my quest to explore various factors that influence Myanmar refugee students’ civic engagement activities, identity formation (and reinforcement) emerges as a quintessential, powerful force. The refugee students in my study not only identify themselves as Myanmar, but show unique pride in that Myanmar identity. As I analyze the narratives of Myanmar students, I come to realize that their identity formation (and reinforcement) is deeply rooted in their experiences as Myanmar refugees, and is strongly reflective of the political history and circumstances of their native country. The narratives stunningly indicate that each Myanmar refugee student’s civic engagement and leadership experiences have been significantly shaped by the historical disunity among various ethnic groups from Myanmar, and that the participant’s identity and convictions have been transformed or reinforced by those experiences.

Swe Swe, a female sophomore student who is currently pursuing bachelor’s degree in finance at the Small Private Catholic College, stresses her disappointment with community disunity. Albeit showing genuine sympathy and understanding, she narrates:

I am very disappointed by elders. There are so many leaders from different ethnic groups, organizations, and informal groups, but they are doing disservice to the community because of the division among them... Although we are different in terms of ethnicity and religion, we all come from Myanmar. Unless we are united and organized, we will not be able to show that Myanmar refugees can also achieve great things in Clemens.

Swe Swe's narration, in fact, highlights the importance of "Myanmar unity" and the embrace of Myanmar identity in her civic engagement aspirations. Her desire to become that unifying force—and her pride in being a Myanmar refugee student—encourages her to actively participate in a wide variety of civic engagement activities, not just within Myanmar community, but also in mainstream American community.

N'gun Sah, a Local Community College freshman and IT manager-aspirant, laments that he has never seen such division in the community since he was born in sleepy mountain town in northern Burma. His childhood was stable and peaceful, but his family relocated to Malaysia when unrest broke out in the region during his teenage years. As a son of farmers with very limited access to meaningful post-secondary education in Myanmar, he helped his brothers doing odd jobs in Kuala Lumpur. There he encountered a harsh reality of discrimination and indifference not just from Malaysians but also from fellow Myanmarans living in Malaysia. He also saw horrendous division among Myanmar groups, and witnessed bitter fallouts and infightings within Myanmar migrant and refugee community. After spending a few years in Malaysia, he resettled in the United States with his family. N'gun expresses:

The division was so deep and so bad in Malaysia, but I never expected to see similar thing in America... Like in Kuala Lumpur, we have so many leaders and groups in Clemens, and nothing really gets done. But we will change it. Divisions and infightings are usually among elders, not really among us. We must show that we can work together even if we come from different [ethnic] backgrounds. We must not pass down divisions and disunity to future generations and new leaders.

Zaliang Hmung, a design expert and a devout soccer player, attends Small Christen Private College while not working at a Thai restaurant or busy making banners for Myanmar Youth Group. Like other participants in this study, he too expresses his dissatisfaction with division within the community. However, he believes that instead of blaming elders and "others", it is important to know that division, disunity, and mutual distrust are products of decades-long tyranny and oppression. While stressing the fact that oppression from Myanmar military is the root cause, he also embraces forgiveness and hope for his fellow Myanmarans in Clemens. He reflects:

The most unpleasant thing I have experienced in the U. S. is discrimination—but not from Americans, but from our own people. For instance, when I was at International High I was usually mocked by Myanmar peers for my poor English skills. They also distanced themselves from me, because I am Chin and most of them are Karens. Of course I do not blame them, as it is not their fault. Children learn from their parents, and parents get all sorts of discriminative attitudes from dictators. But Jesus told us to forgive and to lead even enemies to a better place.

Through disappointments and frustrations of community disunity, unchangeable egos of community elders, and serious mistrust among ethnic groups, Myanmar students see the need for unity, collaboration, mutual respect and forgiveness. Their civic engagement aspirations and leadership activities are significantly shaped by their collective Myanmar identity and the sense of unity that they acquired through their lived experiences while they were in Myanmar and after resettled in the United States. Not unlike Miami Latino students (Stepick, Stepick and Labissiere, 2008), Myanmar refugee students found a rallying point at reinforced national identity, and the need of unity within Myanmar community and among different refugee ethnic groups from Myanmar. Indeed, their unified identity as Myanmar student leaders and community unifiers is the major influence that empowers them to actively participate in civic engagement activities in the City of Clemens.

Community Attachment and Social Ties

For many immigrant youth, a sense of community and attachment to that community (be it an abstract or a physical, geographical one) can be a cornerstone of civic engagement activities (Hosang, 2006). For Myanmar refugee students, the community is more than just a simple gathering of people at particular geographical location. Myanmar refugee students are deeply attached to their community, because intricate relationships among Myanmar people living in the City of Clemens, community issues that affect their daily lives, social connections and friendships with other students, and civic duties exist. In fact, Myanmar students are at the center of Myanmar community fabric of Clemens—as they are considered “a bright future” of the community—and their attachment to the community strongly influences their civic engagement activities (Lenzi et al, 2013).

Kyaw Tun, a freshman college student and a medical doctor hopeful, discusses that he would not have participated in any civic engagement activities, have he not been in Clemens. He draws his energy to participate in such activities from his closeness to various community members and established relationships with Myanmar student peers. Kyaw narrates:

If I am not in Clemens, I might not do these things. I might just go to school, hang out with American friends, and that's it. There is no need for me to engage in civic activities, if there is no Myanmar community. My main reason [to participate in civic engagement] is to help improve my community in Clemens. Look, there is no Myanmar medical doctor here. When [robbers] broke into Myanmar people houses, none of us really knew what to do. Also, I am seeing more and more of Myanmar kids struggling at Clemens public schools. At the school where I am assigned as tutor, I meet with boys and girls who could barely read or do simple math. It is such a shame. And I feel like I need to help them out. Because, you know, I just can't be someone who goes to college or get a good job for myself.

Kyaw Tun's feelings and sense of connection to the community channel him to participate in civic engagement, and even to become a strong, committed young leader in the community.

Aye Mya Kyi, a female recent graduate from an associate degree program at Local Community College, shares the similar sentiment with Kyaw Tun. Aye Mya Kyi comes from devout Muslim family, and she was initially discouraged by her father to get involved with Myanmar community in Clemens. However, she found relief and encouragement during her high school years in Clemens, although she had never gone through any formal education before resettling in the United States from a refugee camp in Thailand. She overcame language barriers and academic struggles with help from both teachers and close friends. Since then, she saw the value of friends, mentorship and unity. Not unlike Kyaw Tun, Aye Mya Kyi also feels the strong connection with other Myanmar students and the community at large through pressing issues. She expresses:

I am the oldest daughter in my family and I am supposed to take care of housework and chores... Also, in my religion, a girl is not supposed to go out and do things that are not related to housework and family. When I turned 18, I decided I must go out and get better life, regardless of my father's objection. But I realized that I need education. With education, I can grow beyond housework and chores. Now, I have an associate degree and I have started working at public schools. There, I meet with many Myanmar students who are like me 6 years ago, and I really want to help them. But I can only do so much on my own. I believe our community needs more unity, strength and capacity to provide effective and efficient support to these children.

From the narratives of Kyaw Tun and Aye Mya Kyi, it is clear that community attachments and social ties influence their participation in civic engagement activities, and especially aspire them to become young leaders who are determined to empower up-and-coming youth, to initiate positive change within the community, and to provide services and supports to other community members who are in need of help.

Nurturing Grounds

It is imperative that Myanmar refugee students' civic engagement activities are influenced by their unified identity and unique connectedness to the community, however, their ability to effectively engage in civic activities and participate in community leadership is largely shaped their acquired experiences at various institutions. Academic institutions, such as colleges, universities, or even high schools, can be nurturing grounds for youth in honing their civic engagement and leadership skills (Soria et al, 2015; Barnhardt, et al, 2015). Likewise, social clubs, religious organizations, and community events unveil opportunities for young students to practice their civic engagement and leadership skills (Stepick et al, 2008; Levine, 2008; Chan, 2011).

The focus group sessions give me a glimpse of how Myanmar refugee students are influenced by various institutions. One of the participants, for instance, was empowered by her experiences as a President of Asian American Club at her school. It gives her a chance to become leader and civically engaged outside of school. In addition, she learns important skills, such as event organizing, fundraising and program coordination, from Asian American Club. Another participant, although not exposed to formative activities at school, enjoys working with professionals at schools

and hospitals, and learns important communication skills as certified interpreter for Karenni refugees.

The narratives of my participants reflect that not just academic institutions and religious organizations empower Myanmar refugee students to be active in civic engagement; formal meetings, informal social gatherings and exposure to public officials and elected leaders also enhance their aspirations and commitments. Collaborations with peers and leaders from mainstream community give students a chance to stay connected with their peers, forge close relationships, and distribute exposure and privilege they have acquired to other youth who are yet to become active in civic engagements. This, in turn, creates a unique opportunity for Myanmar refugee students to reassure themselves as new, progressive young leaders and activists in the community, and enable them to further pursue civic engagement activities in the mainstream community (Chan, 2011; Levine, 2008).

Implications

It is claimed that immigrant students who are active in civic engagement activities are, in fact, assets to the American society (Levine, 2008). Although these students face initial social, cultural, and language barriers, they leverage their bicultural resources to succeed and excel in the civic engagement work. In my exploratory ethnographic study, I found that Myanmar refugee students have not only succeeded in negotiating acculturation gaps with their families, but also achieved empowering experiences by engaging in civic engagement activities. Fueled by the abhorrence of disunity within Myanmar refugee community in Clemens, they forged the unique identity as progressive Myanmar youth. This forged identity, indeed, provides a stage for the Myanmar refugee students to actively engage in civics that are pertinent to refugee issues. Likewise, students' close ties with their own community deem particularly crucial in reinforcing their aspirations to participate in civic engagements.

However, I must note other underlying factors that may have underpinned Myanmar refugee students' civic engagement aspirations and experiences. Scholars, such as Aihwa Ong (2003) and Stacey Lee (2005, 2009), posit that the lived experiences—as well as socioeconomic backgrounds and social origins—of South East Asian immigrants and refugees are neither simple nor uniform; in fact, they argue that certain groups are more advantaged than others due to their privileged social and ethnic origins. As such, the social and cultural capitals they carry can be significantly varied (Lucas, 2001). I observed that majority of the participants of this study come from more or less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, and are therefore better poised to engage in civic engagement activities more effectively than other students in their community.

In addition, I detected that Myanmar refugee students in my study may have subtly applied “othering”, and by doing so their positions as progressive student leaders in the community may have been more strengthened. Kyaw Tun's narratives, in particular, highlight how he considers himself as a different person than other “Myanmar kids [who are] struggling at Clemens public schools” or “[Myanmar] boys and girls who could barely read or do simple math”. It is the quest of a good kid to save other kids who are in limbo, and the good kid must strive to protect his community and make the society a better place through civic engagement. There is

no doubt that Myanmar refugee students who are active in civic engagement in the City of Clemens metropolitan area are doing great things for the community, and are brilliant leaders who have tremendous potentials in life. However, I must pay more attention to the intricate role of social class within the refugee students civic engagement context in future studies.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study, needless to say, is neither extensive nor exhaustive – it is an exploratory ethnographic work that tries to understand aspirations, experiences and influences of a handful of Myanmar refugee students who are active in civic engagement activities. Likewise, this may not be the best representation of civic engagement of refugee students who come from Myanmar; I could not recruit Karen or Rohingya/Bengali students to participate in my study. Therefore, in future, I project to integrate abovementioned student groups in the study. As I discussed earlier, I also intend to apply more “capitals” and “othering” lens in understanding civic engagement of Myanmar refugee students. I must stress that the civic engagement of Myanmar refugee students is not a simple matter as it interweaves several critical issues—such as, ethnic conflict—but it deserves more attention, as it may help scholars find better ways to empower disenfranchised youth in the United States.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my adviser and mentor, Dr. Lois Weis, SUNY Distinguished Professor, University at Buffalo, who provided guidance, insight, and expertise that greatly assisted the research. I would also like to show my gratitude to friends and colleagues who provided their comments and critiques that greatly improved this study. I am immensely grateful to my research participants who wholeheartedly shared their lived experiences and stories.

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