

***Identifying Educational Challenges:
Insights From Myanmar Refugee Parents in Lowell, Massachusetts***

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Abstract

This study examines the educational challenges faced by Myanmar refugee parents in Lowell, Massachusetts, as they support their children within the U.S. school system. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 parents from 10 families who have resided in the U.S. for over a decade. Analysis, supported by NVivo software, revealed three primary barriers: limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with American educational norms, and economic hardships. These factors hinder parental involvement and reduce their capacity to assist in their children's education. Framed within Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory and Coleman's Social Capital Theory, the study interprets these challenges as a function of limited cultural resources and reliance on community networks. It proposes targeted interventions, including enhanced language support, culturally relevant parent education programs, and increased access to community resources. These measures aim to empower parents, enabling them to better support their children's academic success and integration, ultimately strengthening the resilience and social capital of the Myanmar refugee community in Lowell.

Keywords: Myanmar Refugees, Educational Challenges, Parental Involvement, Language Barriers, Cultural Differences

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Introduction

The United States has long offered refuge to individuals escaping conflict and persecution, with cities like Lowell, Massachusetts, becoming home to diverse communities, including many refugees from Myanmar. These families have fled decades of ethnic and political conflict, seeking safety and stability. Myanmar, also known as Burma, has faced prolonged internal strife since gaining independence in 1948, with a military regime taking control in 1962. The situation deteriorated further after a military coup in 2021, which triggered widespread protests, severe military crackdowns, and escalated into violent conflict and significant displacement. Many families, fleeing the intensified unrest, have since taken refuge in camps in neighboring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Many of these families now await opportunities for permanent resettlement through programs like the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), as well as other developed countries that accept refugees.

In Lowell, Myanmar refugee parents encounter substantial challenges in supporting their children's education within the U.S. school system. They face barriers such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with American educational practices, and cultural differences, all of which affect their ability to engage in their children's schooling. These obstacles often limit parents' ability to support their children's academic progress and to engage fully in school and community activities, which in turn impacts the children's educational opportunities and sense of belonging within the community. While existing research highlights general educational challenges for refugee families, few studies focus specifically on Myanmar refugees. This study addresses this gap by examining the particular educational struggles faced by Myanmar refugee parents in Lowell and by proposing tailored strategies to support their children's educational success and integration.

Background

The United States has long been a destination for refugees seeking safety from conflict, with communities like Lowell, Massachusetts, becoming home to families from Myanmar escaping decades of ethnic and political turmoil. These families left Myanmar years ago due to prolonged ethnic and political unrest, driven by decades of military rule and armed conflict. Many sought stability and educational opportunities for their children and resettled in the U.S., joining over 26,000 individuals from Myanmar across Massachusetts, with approximately 377 now residing in Lowell (ZipAtlas, n.d.). While they are already resettled in the U.S., conditions in Myanmar have worsened since the 2021 military coup, which has led to further disruptions in essential services, increased displacement, and new waves of emigration for those still in the region.

Myanmar's conflict-driven migration began decades ago and intensified after the 2021 military coup, which severely impacted civilian life and forced many to flee. Most refugees spent years in neighboring countries, receiving critical resettlement support from international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM). By 2023, over 1.4 million Myanmar refugees were registered across Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, where they received essential aid such as healthcare, shelter, and protection from trafficking. These programs also provided pathways for migration to countries like the United States. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) facilitated resettlement in communities like Lowell, where refugee families contribute to cultural diversity and socioeconomic enrichment.

However, despite these supportive structures, the resettlement journey brings its own set of integration challenges. Parents, in particular, face the added responsibility of navigating a new educational system to support their children's learning and development. Adjusting to the U.S. educational environment, with its unique norms, expectations, and language demands, remains a considerable challenge for many Myanmar refugee families in Lowell, despite years of residence in the United States.

Literature Review

The integration of refugee families into the U.S. educational system presents a range of challenges, particularly for parents who support their children's education in a new cultural and linguistic environment (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The city of Lowell, Massachusetts, hosts a significant number of refugee families, including approximately 377 individuals from Myanmar, reflecting broader global refugee trends (ZipAtlas, n.d.). Research on the adaptation of refugee families has consistently shown that successful integration relies heavily on overcoming various obstacles, including language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and economic stability.

Language Barriers

One of the primary challenges faced by refugee parents is language proficiency. For many, limited English fluency restricts their ability to communicate effectively with teachers, understand school materials, and provide direct academic support to their children (Cummins, 2008). Language barriers not only limit involvement in school activities but also affect parents' confidence in engaging with the broader school community, often leading to isolation and reduced support for their children's educational journey (Olguín, 2021). Kirova (2001) notes that this language disconnect can be particularly pronounced in refugee families, where parental involvement in education is crucial for children's academic and social adjustment.

Cultural Differences in Parental Involvement

Refugee parents frequently experience cultural clashes between their traditional educational roles and the expectations within U.S. schools. Parental involvement in American schools often entails activities such as volunteering, attending meetings, and assisting with homework—practices that assume familiarity with U.S. educational norms (Turney & Kao, 2009). However, these expectations may differ from the cultural perspectives of many immigrant and refugee parents, who might view their role as primarily providing moral and social support rather than engaging directly with school activities (Isik-Ercan, 2012; Matthews, 2008). For many immigrant and refugee families, including those from Myanmar, this disconnect complicates their adaptation to the U.S. educational environment and may hinder effective engagement in their children's schooling due to differing cultural assumptions about parental roles (Isik-Ercan, 2012; Matthews, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Economic Challenges Impacting Educational Involvement

Economic instability is a common issue among refugee families and often limits parental involvement in education. Many refugee parents work long hours or multiple jobs to support their families, leaving little time or energy for school-related activities (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Financial constraints further restrict access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, and additional support services, thereby hindering their children's academic

progress (Kerwin, 2018). Such financial burdens complicate the ability of many refugee families to prioritize and actively participate in their children's educational experiences.

While prior studies have highlighted various barriers faced by refugee families in the U.S., research specific to Myanmar refugees remains limited. While existing studies have examined educational challenges among refugee populations (Cummins, 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Matthews, 2008), few specifically address the unique experiences of Myanmar families adapting to American schools. This study addresses this gap by providing detailed insights into the specific struggles of Myanmar refugee parents in Lowell, examining language, cultural, and economic barriers, and proposing targeted interventions to improve support for these families within the educational system.

Methodology

Using purposive sampling, 13 parents from 10 families were selected based on criteria including at least 10 years of U.S. residency, former refugee status, and having school-aged children in the family. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the educational challenges these parents face. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software, which enabled systematic coding to identify key themes across participant responses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory and Coleman's Social Capital Theory. Cultural capital—encompassing language skills, educational resources, and formal qualifications—significantly influences parents' ability to support their children within the U.S. educational system (Bourdieu, 1986). In parallel, social capital, derived from community networks, provides essential support and resources that can help bridge gaps in cultural capital (Coleman, 1988). Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding the challenges Myanmar refugee parents encounter as they navigate educational and social integration for their children.

Findings

Theme 1: Educational Support Challenges

The findings reveal that many Myanmar refugee parents in Lowell face significant challenges in supporting their children's education. Many parents emphasized their limited formal education as a key barrier, which affects their confidence in actively participating in their children's education. As one parent expressed, "The biggest challenge is my lack of formal education, which limits my ability to help my children with their schoolwork. It has been very difficult for me to assist them academically." For some parents, this limitation leads to reliance on community resources, such as after-school programs for their children and assistance from community members for translation and interpretation when communicating with school staff, highlighting their need for external support.

A considerable number of parents also struggled with understanding the U.S. education system, which differs significantly from their previous experiences. One participant noted, "I don't understand the education system here and I cannot support my children's homework

due to my language barrier." This unfamiliarity complicates their efforts to assist their children effectively.

Economic hardships add another layer of difficulty. Many parents work long hours, limiting the time available to support their children. One parent described the impact of these demands, sharing, "Life here is not easy. A single income is insufficient for our family, necessitating both of us to work... without proper days off. This leaves us with little time to adequately care for our children." This statement reflects the significant economic challenges faced by refugee families, where financial pressures require both parents to work long hours. Consequently, they have little time to provide the emotional and educational support their children need.

Theme 2: Parents' Perceptions of the Value of Education

The findings also illustrate the high value Myanmar refugee parents place on education, shaped by their experiences and aspirations for their children's futures. Many parents view education as a pathway to better opportunities and stability. One parent shared, "All I want for my children is to become educated and lead a good life. If they can help the community and contribute to society, it will be a blessing for us." This perspective underscores the importance of education not only for personal success but also for community well-being.

One mother expressed, "I really wanted to become an educated person and wanted to study badly when I was young. But I didn't get a chance to do that. But I am so glad and proud my daughters are getting a good education." For these parents, education is not only a means to overcome the difficulties they faced in their own lives but also a pathway to a more stable and secure future for their children. It represents hope and the possibility of breaking the cycle of hardship, allowing the next generation to thrive and contribute positively to society.

Furthermore, parents hope for better career opportunities for their children, with one stating, "I do wish my kids become well educated, get a good job and have a better life and help others." This strong emphasis on education reflects their desire to build cultural capital, which is essential for their children's success in a competitive job market. Another parent noted, "Back in the refugee camp in Thailand, we didn't have formal education or many opportunities... Here they have all the opportunities with the best education system in the world." This statement illustrates the significant contrast between their past experiences and the educational prospects available in the U.S. It underscores the belief that access to quality education can empower their children to achieve their goals, secure better futures, and ultimately contribute positively to society.

Theme 3: Communication Barriers Between Parents, Children, and Educational Institutions

The findings reveal that language barriers and cultural differences present significant challenges for Myanmar refugee parents in engaging with the U.S. educational system and supporting their children. Understanding school communications is a struggle for many parents, who find it challenging to interpret school notices, emails, and assignments. One parent expressed, "As I said, the language barrier makes it challenging to understand school notices, emails, assignments, etc." Additionally, during parent-teacher meetings, language support often falls short. "During parent and school meetings, there are translators for other

languages...but not for Myanmar," shared one parent, leading some to withdraw from school events due to these barriers.

Language barriers also affect parent-child communication, complicating family relationships and hindering parents' ability to support their children academically. "For my son, when we arrived here, he was so young...we had less interaction. That's what I regret most," one parent noted, illustrating how reduced communication impacts family bonds. This aligns with Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital, where effective communication within families is essential for academic success.

Cultural differences further complicate parental involvement. One parent remarked, "We trust teachers completely and do not question their methods, but here we parents are expected to actively involve in our children's education." This statement highlights a significant cultural gap: while many Myanmar parents have a deep respect for teachers and their authority, U.S. educational expectations often require parents to take a more proactive role in their children's schooling. As a result, this disconnect can make it difficult for Myanmar parents to engage in ways that U.S. schools anticipate, ultimately hindering their ability to effectively support their children's educational success. Some parents shared regret over outcomes that diverge from their hopes, such as early marriage due to weakened parental influence: "I often feel regret because my daughter married very early...our parenting skills are less effective because of the language barrier and cultural differences." This situation illustrates how language barriers and cultural differences can prevent parents from effectively guiding their children in both their academic and personal lives.

Discussion

The findings reveal significant barriers faced by Myanmar refugee parents in supporting their children's education in Lowell, Massachusetts, particularly in navigating language, cultural, and economic challenges. Language barriers hinder these parents' ability to communicate with teachers, understand school materials, and provide direct academic assistance, a challenge noted across immigrant populations (Cummins, 2008; Olgún, 2021). Furthermore, many parents expressed unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system, which differs substantially from Myanmar's educational norms, complicating their efforts to support their children's learning. This disconnect echoes Turney and Kao's (2009) findings that cultural gaps in parental involvement can exacerbate integration challenges for refugee families.

Parents also emphasize the high value they place on education as a pathway to improved social and economic stability for their children. Many view education as a means to overcome past hardships, reflecting Waters and Pineau's (2015) findings that refugee families see educational attainment as essential for future success. Yet, economic hardships, including long working hours and the resulting fatigue, significantly hinder parents' ability to engage in their children's education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Kerwin, 2018). This lack of time limits their ability to provide academic support, access tutoring, and participate in extracurricular activities. This situation underscores the need for community support and structured programs that can provide these parents with the necessary tools and resources to overcome these challenges, enabling them to be more actively involved in their children's academic lives.

These findings highlight the need for targeted support services, including translation assistance for communication with teachers, workshops on the U.S. educational system, and

community programs that provide tutoring and academic resources to help Myanmar refugee parents effectively support their children's education. As Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Coleman's (1988) social capital theory suggest, creating networks that link families to school resources can promote a more inclusive educational environment and improve the academic success and integration of refugee students.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant barriers faced by Myanmar refugee parents in Lowell, Massachusetts, including language limitations, unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system, and time constraints from long working hours. Despite these challenges, parents value education as a key to better opportunities for their children. To effectively support these families, targeted initiatives such as translation assistance, educational workshops, and community programs that provide academic tutoring and mentorship for students are essential. By providing these resources, we can empower parents to engage more actively in their children's education, fostering academic success and facilitating smoother integration into the community.

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