

Through my eyes: An autoethnography of a refugee's student educational journey

by

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B.S., Wichita State University, 1997

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum & Instructions
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Abstract

The goal of this research was to take readers through the intricate lived experience of a refugee student, navigating the U.S. public school system. Refugee students have continued to fall through the cracks, escalating the educational achievement gap. By 2050, the trajectory of U.S. public schools has indicated that immigrant youth, which includes refugees, will be one third of the 100 million U.S. children (Passel, 2011). Yet, schools across the nation failed to provide adequate education for this growing student population. Educators and school systems are still ill equipped to deal with the educational challenges and needs of refugee students. They may not understand or relate to the cultural background, language, socioeconomic, traumatic experiences, or perspective of these students. This qualitative study used an autoethnography research design to describe, explore, and analyze the essence of my own experience as a refugee student navigating through a U.S. elementary and secondary public school system. The autoethnography study offered my voice and interpretation, both as a refugee student and as a ESOL/Newcomers teacher adapting to American public-school culture. Vignettes and responses were used to encourage readers to reflect, understand, and empathize with some aspects of the educational experience of refugee students. Memories that spanned forty years ago served as the primary data source, which I used to construct my vignettes. The autoethnography study used five tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to discover, examine, interpret, and address its role in the experience of a refugee student in a U.S. public school. The five CRT tenets were: (1) permanence of racism; (2) intersectionality; (3) counter storytelling; and (4) commitment to social justice and change. These concepts were used to analyze and interpret my candid vignettes and self-reflective responses. The findings suggested that the issues of race, class, power, poverty, identity, and racism were pervasive in my educational journey. The data

exposed both sublet and overt racism that I have experienced throughout my primary and secondary education. The concept of intersectionality was salient throughout the analyzation and interpretations of the vignettes. The findings emphasized that my refugee educational journey included other overlapping factors such as, poverty, gender, class, and bicultural identity that contributed greatly to my overall experience as a refugee student. The second objective of this autoethnography was to look inward within myself and reflect on how my own experience as a former refugee student influenced my interactions and teaching practices with my refugee students. As I analyzed and interpreted my self-reflective responses, the following themes emerged: (1) family unit; (2) negotiating identity; (3) poverty; and (4) high expectation.

The study suggested that having a strong family unit did contribute to my ability to overcome educational challenges. The study also revealed my tendency to have higher expectations on the refugee student population in comparison to their other immigrant counterpart. The research study offered current refugee students and their families an authentic, narrative handbook to reflect on, relate to, and glean valuable insight. These vignettes also illustrated how teachers' deficiencies in diverse cultural background and sensitivity contributed to the education challenges of a refugee student as documented in the study. Hence, it is important for teachers of refugee students to recognize that the social and educational interactions with this group of students is impacted by their own assumptions, perceptions, comfort, knowledge, and understanding of the refugee culture. This study served as a catalyst for more discovery, discussion, and reflection, which can provide readers a greater possibility for better cross-cultural sensitivity and thus, influencing the adjustment and accommodation in the curriculum and instructions of refugee students.

Key Words: autoethnography, refugee student, refugee experience, critical race theory, education

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Approved by:
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The study suggested that having a strong family unit did contribute to my ability to overcome educational challenges. The study also revealed my tendency to have higher expectations on the refugee student population in comparison to their other immigrant counterpart. The research study offered current refugee students and their families an authentic, narrative handbook to reflect on, relate to, and glean valuable insight. These vignettes also illustrated how teachers' deficiencies in diverse cultural background and sensitivity contributed to the education challenges of a refugee student as documented in the study. Hence, it is important for teachers of refugee students to recognize that the social and educational interactions with this group of students is impacted by their own assumptions, perceptions, comfort, knowledge, and understanding of the refugee culture. This study served as a catalyst for more discovery, discussion, and reflection, which can provide readers a greater possibility for better cross-cultural sensitivity and thus, influencing the adjustment and accommodation in the curriculum and instructions of refugee students.

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To my refugee students, thank you for inspiring me to write about me, about you, and about us. It is my hope that this research will inspire you to write about your own educational journey. If we want to be understood and heard, then we must write and tell our stories.

Dedication

ຂອບພຣະຄຸນພຣະເຈົ້າ

ຂ້ານ້ອຍມີຄວາມພາກພູມໃຈເປັນຢ່າງຍິ່ງທີ່ໄດ້ມອບຜົນງານອັນສຳຄັນນີ້ໃຫ້ແກ່ພໍ່ແມ່.

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ໝົດທຸກຄົນເຊິ່ງຄວາມສຳຄັນທັງໝົດຂອງຂ້ານ້ອຍນີ້, ມີໄດ້ກໍ່ຍ້ອນພໍ່ແມ່ຍືນຍົງຄຽງຂ້າງຂ້ານ້ອຍຕະຫຼອດ
ມາ. ຂ້ານ້ອຍໄດ້ຮັບພຣະພອນຈາກພຣະເຈົ້າຫຼາຍທີ່ໄດ້ເກີດມາເປັນລູກສາວຂອງເພິ່ນ.

ຖ້າບາດສະຈາກພໍ່ແມ່ແລະອ້າຍເອື້ອຍນ້ອງທີ່ດີແລ້ວ. ຂ້ານ້ອຍກໍ່ອາດຈະບໍ່ໄດ້ຮັບຄວາມສຳຄັນໃນມື້ນີ້.

ດັ່ງນັ້ນ ຂ້ານ້ອຍຈຶ່ງຢາກຂອບໃຈພໍ່ແມ່ແລະຍາກບອກພໍ່ແມ່ວ່າ ຂ້ານ້ອຍຮັກພໍ່ແມ່ຫຼາຍ.

This work is dedicated to my parents, who have always loved me unconditionally. Thank you for your sacrifice, guidance, support, and love. You stood by my side throughout this entire journey; I could not have done any of this without you. It is such a privilege to be your daughter.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background of Problem

U.S. public schools have experienced an increase in student diversity and demographic patterns. In 2009, the United Nations reported that there are 15.2 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2012). This means that the issue of immigration and refugee has become a global concern. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United States had the fifth largest number of asylum-seeking refugees, people who have not been granted refugee status (2012). Since 1975, the United States has had 3 million refugees entering the country and just a little less than half of that number are refugees under the age of 18; furthermore, an average of 50,000 refugees enter the United States yearly (Krogstad, 2019). UNHCR concurred that a majority of refugee households admitted to the U.S. are school-age children (2012). Between 2009-2013, there were 941,000 children under the age of 10 living in the United States with refugee parents (Hooper et al., 2016). This fact would require U.S. school systems to reevaluate their policies and teaching practices for immigrant students, specifically, refugees.

Statement of Problem

The demographics of the American public-school classroom is rapidly changing. By 2050, immigrant youth, which includes refugees, will be one-third of 100 million U.S. children (Passel, 2011). Consequently, many of these youths are English language learners, or ELLs. U.S. public schools strived to provide adequate education for this growing student population. Unfortunately, The No Child Left Behind legislation illuminated the ever-growing achievement gap amongst different groups of students. Not surprisingly, refugees fell through the cracks or even worse, they were “left behind”. Goodwin (2002) suggested that the reason for this

achievement gap is that educators and school systems are ill equipped to deal with the educational challenges that groups of immigrants and refugees may be experiencing. Teachers simply do not understand or relate to the cultural background, experience, or perspective of these students. To compound the matter more, researchers have grouped refugees together with other immigrant groups (Coward & Coward, 2002; Pryor, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Indeed, there are similarities and differences in the educational needs of refugees and other immigrant groups.

Unlike other immigrants, refugees were forced to leave their home country (UNHCR, 2012). Some refugee children have seen and experienced civil wars, famine, diseases, political unrest, and traumatic violent events. Understandably, some of these refugee students came to American classrooms with very little, interrupted, or even no formal education; thus, making it difficult to adjust to U.S. public schools. In addition, the psychological and developmental condition of these students demand special consideration and approach. Clearly, refugee students have multifaceted educational needs; this, presents unique challenges to educators and educational stakeholders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to take the readers through the complicated educational journey of one refugee student. This educational experience can assist educators, researchers, stakeholders, and the readers to evaluate, reflect, and promote further discussions on possible contributing factors that lead to educational challenges and successes for other refugee students in U.S. public schools. To accomplish this goal, I conducted this qualitative research as an autoethnography. I wrote this evocative autoethnography with a personal narrative approach. This was my story to tell; the challenges I overcame and triumphs I tasted, once again, came

alive in the pages of my vignettes. My thoughts, frustrations, and appreciations spoke loudly in my reflective response writings.

I encourage and challenge teachers working with the refugee population to read my autoethnography. Teachers could gain insight and recognize that their social and educational interactions with this group of students was impacted by their own assumptions, perceptions, comfort, knowledge, and understanding of the refugee culture. For this reason, I believe that I have met one of the goals of autoethnography. Ellis and Boucher (1995) stated that, “all people who can benefit from thinking about their lives in terms of other people’s experiences” (p. 18). I hope my auto-ethnographical study enabled colleagues and educational stakeholders to reflect on their understanding, experiences, interactions, and teaching practices as it relates to refugee students.

Research Questions

Before I even embarked on writing this dissertation, I always wondered what factors contributed to my educational success. I wanted to go back in time, relive the refugee student experience, and reflect on that journey. I had two main goals for this dissertation. The primary goal of this dissertation was to provide teachers, administrators, parents, refugee students, and other educational stakeholders an authentic account of the experiences of a refugee student in an American public school.

Educators and policy makers need to understand that their decisions regarding best teaching practices, curriculum and instructions, and social and emotional learning affects the overall educational journey of these students. Refugee students must navigate and overcome many challenges: resettlement, poverty, cultural difference, language barrier, assimilation/acculturation, and acceptance in the mainstream American culture. Parents and students needed

to know that they are not alone in their struggle to create a new life for themselves and their children in their new home country. It was my intent that writing this auto-ethnographical research will provide valuable insight in the lived experience of refugee students. I wanted to add to the current, but limited, educational research on refugee students and their educational experiences, and further the discussions on potential factors that may have contributed to their academic successes and challenges. My second goal was to advance my own understanding and reflect on my experience as a refugee student in a public school system and its impact on me as a teacher. Keeping these two goals in mind, I strived to provide more understanding or answers to these research questions:

In what ways, if any, have my experiences as a refugee student in American public schools influenced my experience as an educator of new comers?

1. What insight could be gleaned from my experience as a refugee student?
2. What factors contributed to the challenges and success in my educational journey?
3. Were my interactions with refugee students and teaching practices for these students a direct result of my own experience as a refugee student?

The Significance of Study

The simple goal of the study was to explore, describe, and analyze my own experience as a refugee student and share this lived experience with readers to evoke empathy, understanding, and reflection. This autoethnography provided my experiences, both as a refugee student and a minority ESOL/Newcomers teacher, a voice in the larger framework of adapting to American public-school culture. This study offered educators/school administrators, parents of refugee students, and refugee students a personalized narrative account of my educational journey in a

public-school setting. By writing auto-ethnographical vignettes and responses, the readers may gain different and valuable insights and relate to some aspects of the educational experience of refugee students. Consequently, I hoped that the vignettes and responses would serve as a catalyst for more discovery, discussion, and reflection, which can provide readers a greater possibility for better cross-cultural sensitivity and thus, influencing the adjustment and accommodation in the curriculum and instructions of refugee students.

The unique recollections, perspectives, and interpretations of a former refugee student challenged educators and readers to reflect on their own understanding and assumptions of educational policies and curriculums of refugee students. As my experiences were unique, I still believe that they can contribute to the existing literature relating to the experience of refugee students' educational journey and of the complex dynamics that surround refugees and their families. Hence, this study could potential be greatly significant in better understanding and contributing to the ongoing discussion and literature of refugee students and their educational challenges, needs, and overall experience in U.S. public schools.

Theoretical Framework

This research exposed my experience as a refugee child finding my way in a U.S. public-school system. I highlighted issues of race, class, power, poverty, and identity in my vignettes and self-reflective responses. The autoethnography allowed readers to travel back in time, almost forty years earlier. Readers sat with me through revolving classrooms, as I journeyed through the educational school system. All these years later, and what have I remembered and learned from my experience? I learned a great deal about myself and how I, as a refugee student, interacted with the “mainstream” educational culture. I learned the ugly face of covert and subtle practices of preference. I learned how a nondescript child could live and survive in a bold black

and white world. I learned how wealth buys supremacy and how poverty loans out inferiority. I also learned that the voiceless speaks up accurately and loudly in “counter-storytelling” vignettes. Hence, as a researcher, I explored and analyzed what I have “learned” about my own experience as a refugee student through the lens of CRT.

This research study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to discover, examine, interpret, and address its role in the educational experience of a refugee student in a U.S. public school. Approaching this research study through the lens of Critical Race Theory also validated the use of autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology. Critical race theoretical framework served as a vehicle to address the experience of a marginalized population, refugee students within the U.S. public school system.

This dissertation focused and addressed some key components of CRT and how they are interwoven in the educational journey of a refugee student: (1) *the permanence of racism*; (2) *intersectionality*; (3) *the idea of counter-storytelling/experiential knowledge*; (4) *the commitment to social justice* (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). I elaborated on these tenets and showed evidence of its existence or lack thereof in vignettes and responses. I analyzed and interpreted the narrative vignettes and responses through the lens of these key components of CRT. I strengthened the use of autoethnography by connecting the qualitative research methodology to components 3 and 4, counter-storytelling and commitment to social justice. Likewise, personal vignettes and responses highlighted components 1 and 2 as it related to the educational experience of a refugee student.

Several critical race theorists may differ slightly on the key tenets of CRT, but many would accept that the *permanence* of racism or that racism is normalized, not aberrant in society lays the foundation for CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Landon-Billings agreed that CRT

begins with the notion that racism is, “so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture; thus, the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (1998, p.10). This research uncovered how racism was a common occurrence in the educational experience of myself as a refugee student. Data analyzed and interpreted from personal vignettes determined the occurrence of racism in the K-12 education.

The second tenet, *intersectionality*, acknowledged that race and racism is at the epic center of CRT; however, an individual’s identity often intersected with other subordinated identities (such as class, religion, gender, disability/ability, and sexual orientation) to impact the lived experience of marginalized groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The make-up of a person’s identity was born from many overlapping interests and traits derived from their social class, gender, and other oppressed identities (Kumasi, 2011). CRT highlighted the importance of intersectionality in understanding and analyzing the role of race and racism in marginalized groups.

The third tenet was the value of *counter-storytelling or experiential knowledge*. Critical race theorists recognized that to truly understand, analyze, and teach about race and racial disparities in education, the lived experiences (experiential knowledge) must be told, valued, and legitimized (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Delgado and Stefancic concurred that minority groups have the presumed competence to discuss race and racism because of their unique histories and experience with oppression. Counter-storytelling encouraged writers from marginalized groups to share their experiences with race and racism. Blacks, Asian, Indians, and Latino/a needed to share their experience and give “voice” to their oppression so that their white counterparts may understand their plight (2001). Unfortunately,

the lived experience and knowledge of people of color and other subordinate identities have often been discounted in higher education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). One way to correct this wrong was to write more counter-storytelling because “those who understand racism best are not its perpetrators but rather those who are victimized by it,” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 162).

The final tenet, the *commitment to social justice*, pledged to work toward a more socially just society and educational system by addressing and elimination systemic racism and inequities. CRT called for the end racial disparities in education and eradicate other forms of oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and national origin (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT advocated for the death of racism, disparities, and oppression of marginalized people. It worked to give their voice a mega-microphone in order to move towards an equal and just society.

Definition of Terms

Refugee: People who have experienced persecution or live in fear of persecution in their former homeland, due to their religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group (UNHCR, 2020)

Immigrants: An immigrant is a person who willingly chooses to leave his or her home and move to another foreign country with the goal of settling there. (IRC, 2018).

Immigrant Youths: Those children under age eighteen who are either foreign-born or U.S. born to immigrant parents (Passel, 2011).

Acculturation: The process of combining/integrating both cultures, customs, values, and traditional practices without giving up one or the other (Schumann, 1978).

Assimilation: The process of giving up the native customs, culture, and practices in order to fit in the new mainstream culture (Schumann, 1978).

Limitations of the Study

This research was limited in its scope to the memories, experiences, and perspectives of one refugee student's journey in a public school system. The personal narrative accounted of in the study may not necessarily yield generalizations relevant to other refugees and their public-school experience. However, this study was more than one individual's narrative educational journey; I hope it contributed greatly to the overall understanding and existing literature of refugee students' holistic experience in U.S. public schools. Another limitation was that this autobiographical study was the recollections and interpretations of direct or indirect participants in my vignette writings. Because this was solely my recollections and interpretations, direct or indirect participants did not have the opportunity to share their own recollections, perspectives, and interpretations revealed in the vignettes.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The decision to leave one's home country and migrate to a foreign country is simple, yet deeply complicated. People immigrate to a different or neighboring country for a better life and opportunity. Others will make their way to a foreign land for economic stability and growth for their family. Some people leave their home country to rejoin their family and loved ones. The younger population migrate to a foreign land to seek better educational opportunity.

Sometimes, migrating to a new and distant land is not a decision, but rather a necessity. People flee their country because they are forced to leave. These people arrive in a foreign land escaping fear, death and persecution. This group of people leave their place of birth because war, violence, famine, or natural disaster have occupied their homeland. Hence, the process of migration is an altering life experience for many; that many, includes school age children.

Earlier U.S Immigration Trend

United States has had a history of accepting immigrants to its shore. The ebb and flow of U.S. immigration contributes greatly to our nation's rich history. Since its birth, United States has been home, opportunity, and refuge for the earliest immigrants. They came to settle and seek opportunities in the vast, new country. They came for the freedom to practice their religion without suppression or fear. They came to sow and reap the booming industrialized economic of a foreign country. They came to flee war, violence, and political persecution. Hence, it is no surprise that our new generation of immigrants, today, still, follows the earliest immigrants' footsteps in their journey to America.

The record of legal immigration began in 1820; earliest periods of immigration to the U.S. were marked in four different phases: Frontier Expansion, Industrialized, Immigration

Pause, and Post-1965 Immigration (Martin, 2013). Prior to 1820, the first immigrant wave was predominantly Europeans, mainly from the British Isle, coming to settle to a new country, hence, the frontier expansion. The second wave of immigrants were again, European; however, this group comprised mostly of Germans and Irish. The conflict period from 1840 to 1850 between the Catholic and Protestant Churches brought immigrants, looking for religious freedom, to shores of the United States (Martin, 2013).

Cohn (2015) stated that restrictions on immigration began as early as 1875; the restrictions banned criminal, certain employments, people who were afflicted with certain illnesses and diseases, and Asian immigrants. Hence, earlier immigration favored and welcomed immigrants from Europe. The Industrialized phase describes the third wave of immigration from 1880-1914. These immigrants, mainly from southern and eastern Europe, came via Ellis Island to work hard at factories, seek economic opportunity, and simply, living the American dream (Cohn, 2015; Martin, 2013). Like many phenomenal, immigration to the United States has experienced a period of rise, spike, plateau, and pause. Immigration was interrupted, stopped, or pause during the Civil War, depression, and WWI and WWII. The immigration pause period in United States was from 1920 to 1960. It was not until 1965, the fourth wave of immigration, U.S. immigration began to rise. Contrary to its earlier immigrants, these immigrants' journeys, from Latin America and Asia, were enumerated in the post-1965 immigration phase (Cohn, 2015; Martin, 2013). The rise of these non-European immigrants was a direct result of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which no longer favored immigrants based on race or ethnicity; instead, it opened its door to all corners of the world. This landmark law gave preference to immigrants based on family reunifications and skilled laborers (Cohn, 2015). The

1965 Immigration Act contributed greatly to changing the racial, cultural, and ethnicity demographics of America.

Immigrants

As of 2016, 244 million people worldwide were living in a country different from their birth country. This accounts for 3.3% of the world population; this would make the immigration demographic, roughly the world's fifth largest population (Connor, 2016). The rise in past, present, or future immigration is not unique to American states and cities; worldwide countries have also shared in the distribution of immigrants. However, United States is home to 46.6 million immigrants, the largest number in the world. Although, America has the highest immigrant numbers, both Australia and Canada have the highest foreign-born immigrant population with 28% and 22% respectively (Connor, 2016). Foreign-born immigrants residing in the United States was currently at 14% of the national population (AIC, 2020; Connor, 2016). 39.4 million native-born Americans have at least one parent that was born in a foreign country; this accounts for 12% of the national population. The number of children who were immigrants, as of 2018, was 2.5 million (AIC, 2020).

The Pew Research Centers (2018) reported that the U.S. immigration numbers were at 49.7 million. Immigrants were coming in large numbers from Mexico, China, and India. There were 12.6 million Mexican immigrants living in the U.S.; this number was roughly six times the immigrants coming from China accounted for 2.4 million and India with 2.3 million (AIC, 2020). In terms of population size, the international migration was on an upward trend. Immigration worldwide from 1960 to 2015 saw a 200% increase, from 79 million to nearly 250 million (Connor, 2016). Following this trend, U.S. immigration will continue to rise. Immigration can bring both diversity or disruption, benefits or burdens, and celebrations or

challenges. Immigration also brought in a flux of immigrant and refugee students across American classrooms.

Immigrants and refugees are not synonymous; they are not interchangeable. They are similar, but different. Immigrants voluntarily choose to leave their home country while refugees were forced to leave their homeland (IRC, 2018). The process of leaving one's country and permanently resettling in another country is the definition of immigration (UNHCR, 2020). Thus, the act of leaving one's country and living in a foreign land to build a new life is identical, but the reason behind the migration is different. Perhaps, this is the reason why immigrants and refugees are often lumped into one group. Immigrants are people who voluntarily choose to leave their country of origin with the sole purpose of resettling in a foreign country; they can return to their homeland, if they choose to (IRC, 2018). Immigrants leave their homes to seek better employments, opportunities, and economic prosperity. Refugees seek these same things; after, they were compelled to leave their country of birth.

Refugees

Who are refugees? As defined under United States law, a "refugee" is someone who cannot go back to his or her homeland for fear of persecution because of religion or political affiliation, membership in specific social group, or race and national origin (USCIS, 2020). Refugees must flee their country of origin because if they remain in that country, serious harm can befall on them and their family. Survival means leaving the country; serious harm or even death is to remain in their home country. Hence, the distinction between immigrants and refugees should be clear.

The UNHCR reported that as of 2019, there were 79.5 million displaced people worldwide; 30-34 million of them were under the age of 18. These people were internally

displaced person, asylum-seekers, and refugee. They were fleeing their home country due to violence, persecution, political upheaval, or human rights violation (2020). Internally displaced person as defined by UNHCR is a person who is fleeing harm and is on the run, but has not cross the border; he or she is still remaining in the home country (2020). An asylum-seeker flees one's country to seek international protection from fear of danger, violence and persecution. They have applied for the protection of a refugee status; yet, they have not been granted or met the refugee status criteria, not all asylum-seeker will eventually be recognized as a refugee (IRC, 2018).

The United Nations estimated that the number of international migrants, people moving from one's home country to live permanently to another country at 258 million. 10% of the international migrants were refugees and asylum seeker; one in 300 people were a refugee worldwide (UNHCR, 2020).

There are currently 3 million refugees in the United States (UNHCR, 2020). Refugees did not choose to leave their country, nor can they choose which country accepts and sponsors them. A recommendation from the UN Refugee Agency determines the availability and willingness of countries to sponsor the refugees. UNHCR described the refugee resettlement process in the United States to be thorough and lengthy that includes many governmental agencies. The refugee applicants must pass a comprehensive background and security check, pass the medical screening, and go through 3 day of intense interview by the officers of the Department of Homeland Security. The entire resettlement process can take 12 to 24 months to attain refugee status (2020).

Since the 1970, America has led the world in welcoming and resettling refugees for many decades (UNHCR, 2020). Recently, this trend is changing. The numbers of refugees allowed in

a country depends of many factors. Global crisis, civil war and unrest, natural disasters, or changes in political world leaders affect the fluidity of refugee population in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act and the end of the Vietnam War brought close to 140, 000 Vietnamese refugees to the States of America (Krogstad, 2019).

The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 also enabled many people from Southeast Asia to seek refuge in America. Similar to the first wave of refugees from Vietnam, these refugees were mainly comprised of people from Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia); they were also fleeing their home because of the Vietnam War. There were a little over 200,000 refugee admissions in the United States in 1980, the highest number of refugee resettlement ever in U.S. history. 55% of this group of refugees came from Asia, 28% were from Europe, 13% were African, and only 4% came from Latin America (Krogstad, 2019). The numbers and racial group of refugee resettlement is contingent upon the geopolitical climate and priorities of its country.

From 1989-1999, the U.S. admitted refugees mainly from Europe, Russia, former Soviet Union, and Kosovo. The average number of refugees admitted from 1990-1995 were 116,000. Then, September 11 happened and the number of refugees decreased; there were only 27,100 refugee admittance in 2002 (Krogstad, 2019). The U.S. continues to see a shift in country of origins, religious affiliation, and admittance rate in refugee resettlement.

Refugee Students in U.S. Public Schools

According to the Refugee Processing Center, there are currently 3.5 million refugees residing in the United States. From 2016-2020, there were a little over 200,000 refugees resettling in America (2020). Bridging Refugee Youths & Children's Services stated that school age children account for 35-40% of the total refugee population (BRYCS, 2011). Furthermore, it was estimated that one in every five children in U.S. schools are immigrants or refugees (BRYCS, 2011). An influx of refugees and immigrants have altered the face of America's classrooms and have influenced our society in so many ways: racial, culturally, socially, linguistically, religiously, and ethnically. Understandably, U.S. public educational systems struggled to meet the unique educational needs of this new diversification of refugee students (Rah et al., 2009). School districts across the United States must help them successfully navigate through their educational journey. In many cases, educators and school systems were simply ill prepared to work with refugee students because they lack the awareness and understanding of the unique cultural perspective of this diverse group of students. Still, schools have the challenging responsibility to address and meet their academic needs (Goodwin, 2002). First, teachers, administrators, and educational policy makers must understand their unique experiences prior to their arrival in America's classrooms.

Trauma and Refugee Children

Over 50% of the refugee population have experienced war. Some have witnessed the killings of loved ones. Many have gone without the necessity of life: food, clean water, and shelter. Yet, others are the victims of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Mollica et al., 1993). Sadly, many refugee children have also suffered this same fate. Educators need to be cognizant and understand that many refugee students come to school with heavy baggage. In

most case, these children have spent some time in refugee camps before they reach United States. Some refugee camps did provide refugee children some form of education; unfortunately, a good number of refugee children have had very limited of disrupted educational opportunities in their countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Once in their host country, the United States, refugee students continued to experience unpleasant and traumatic events. They have had to learn how to adjust to US school systems, learned new customs and traditions, tried to fit in socially with their classmates, and experienced isolation or bullying in the new school. Lastly, refugee students had to live and survive in their new country with very limited or no English at all, their new language. Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to gather as much information as much as possible about the histories of recently resettled refugee children. Dryden-Peterson (2015) believed that the lack of crucial information regarding refugee students' previous schooling experience, psychosocial service needs, social relationship with teachers and peers, and the sense of belongingness in school were due to cultural misunderstanding and stereotypes, privacy concerns, and language barriers.

Language Barriers

The projections of demographic trends within U.S. public schools estimated that ELLs were the fastest growing subgroup of students (Passel, 2011). Refugees and immigrants were often identified as ELLs, or English language learners, a label refer to students for whom English is not their first language. The academic success or challenges of refugee students was contingent upon their ability to master good English language skills; this, also lead to better adjustment to their U.S. school environment (McBrien, 2005). Likewise, a study done on Indochinese refugee students indicated that insufficient English skills was the source of

alienation (Nicassio, 1983 as cited in McBrien, 2005). Refugee students who have thick, heavy accent and struggle with English felt dismissed or ridiculed, deepening their sense of isolation.

While refugee students were learning how to speak English themselves, they were somewhat responsible for helping their parents understand, translate, interpret, and communicate in the new language. Refugee children often translated at school conferences or functions, set up doctors' appointments, or even wrote checks for rent (Zhou, 2001). When the roles were switch between child and parent, the latter felt embarrassed, harassed, and ridiculed for not learning how to speak English well. This created identity confusion and conflict between the two generations (Zhou, 2001). The added responsibility of helping their parents with English compounded their own stress in learning a new language.

Socioeconomic Status

Many refugee families dreamed of the elusive, "American Dream." They believed that America is a land of wealth and plenty of job opportunities. To the contrary, many refugee families found themselves unable to secure employment because of lack of transportation, lack of English proficient, and lack of jobs skill training. Thus, some families had to depend on government assistance just for basic survival. Consequently, many refugee families settled down in economically disadvantage neighborhood. The low housing rent cost, but high crime area provided them basic needs and shelter; however, it increased their risk factors for anxiety and depression (Katsiaficas et al., 2013). This made adapting and integrating to their new country and community extremely difficult. The family's financial hardship added extra burden on the refugee student.

It was very common for many refugee students in high school to work part-time to assist the family with their financial challenges. This put their educational attainment secondary to the

survival of the family. Refugee youths acquired conversational English more easily and rapidly than their parents; therefore, it was easier for them to contribute to the immediate needs of the family (Blackwell D. & Melzak S., 2000). Some refugee students took on the responsibility of providing for their family; this led to them falling behind in their schoolwork. Consequently, some students fell through the cracks and dropped out of school altogether.

Acculturation and Assimilation

The adjustment to the U.S. public schools can be very difficult and traumatic experience for refugee students. Research has indicated that successful integrating in U.S educational system was easier for younger refugee children compared to their older counterpart. Younger children had adequate time to adjust to the country and culture and acquired the English language faster. On the other hand, older refugee students struggled to learn English faster and they required more time to understand and adapt to the U.S. culture (McBrien, 2005). Here again, refugees must navigate between two vastly different cultures. Some learned how to acculturate and some simply assimilated to the host country's culture. Yet, some refugees chose not to assimilate or acculturate.

Acculturation occurs when refugees choose which aspects of the new (host country) culture they like to acquire and which aspects of the old (native) culture they like to keep. The refugee students are comfortable with their identities and can easily switch back and forth between the two cultures depending on the social environment. In other words, acculturation is the “degrees of socio-culture distinctions” that ethnic groups maintain while deciding which aspects of mainstream society they choose to adapt (Nguyen et al., 1999). The process of acculturation is an individual journey for refugees. People in the same family may differ in their comfort, ability, or willingness to embrace the new culture while cling on to the old.

Assimilation happens when refugees leave their old culture completely behind and fully embrace the new culture of their society (McBrien, 2005). The refugee students fully adopt to the culture and belief systems of the new culture and society. It is usually the younger generation of refugees that fully assimilate to their new country. For many young refugees the decision to assimilate or acculturate to the new country is yet another stress factor that burdens them.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

“I don’t have a story; write about my life experience as the research for my dissertation, and who would even want to read it? What can people possibly learn from putting my life in print?”

I had these thoughts, doubts, and questions when my department chair pensively suggested that I write an autoethnography as a research method. Another committee member encouraged this by telling me, “It is obvious that you are very passionate about helping your refugee students do well in school; so, you should write about your own experience as a refugee student.” I left the meeting not convinced that I could pull it off. I contemplated the credibility of my journey as a refugee student and now, as an ESOL middle school teacher teaching English to refugees and immigrants. Was it possible that my unique experience could offer readers that lived experience and insight of a refugee student’s educational journey? If the answer was “yes”, then, I needed to do it. I must put memories into words, gather thoughts into sentences, organize self-reflections into paragraphs, and finally, transport experiences into this research.

I knew that conducting a qualitative research made the most sense to me. However, which qualitative research approach would be the most effective? I wavered between ethnography and narrative inquiry. Both research methodologies made sense to me. It only became clearer to me after I left the meeting with my department chair and committee members. It finally made sense to me, “Why not combine both ethnography and narrative inquiry, but add the “I” aspect”, which ultimately was the genesis of this autoethnographic research. Before I began to write a single sentence, I needed to ask myself some important questions. What was my place in this research? How can I gain knowledge, understanding, and interpretation about the experience of a refugee’s educational journey in American public schools? Since I was the

subject, researcher, and writer of this study, was I an effective and credible researcher due to my critical and personal role in the study?

Narrative inquiry was a possible research method that I could have uses because it would allow me to write and tell my story as a refugee student. Creswell (2002) defined narrative inquiry as “a narrative study of an individual’s personal experience found in single or multiple episodes” (p. 524). However, being a former refugee student learning English and completing the educational journey in public school settings does not define me. But, is has shaped me today. It has directed my choices in life. This experience has changed, educated, and inspired me. The experience had influenced me as an ESOL teacher. As both a former student and teacher, I was afraid that my experiences could influence my interpretations of the experiences of other refugee students. I acknowledged that this could happen. It was important that I not only share my educational journey as a refugee student, but I capture and give voice to other refugee students: past, present, and future. It became apparent to me that I would need to observe the culture of a group, refugee students going through the public-school systems. I incorporated ethnography research method to bolster and gave credence to this study.

Historically, anthropologists have usually favored ethnographical research; now, more social scientists in other fields, such as, education, health care, criminology, and cultural studies have increasingly conducted more and more ethnographies. Ethnography focused on the writing and studying of a phenomenon or particular cultural group (Lapan et al., 2012). This research approach aimed to understand the social and cultural life of communities. LeCompte and Schensul asserted that an interpretive story or narrative of a group of people is the product of an ethnography (2010). Ethnography is simply the study of people and culture (Ellis, 2004).

What if I am part of that cultural group that was being studied? What if I had first-hand experience in going through the public school system as a refugee student? I shared the same lived experience as the research participant. I had thoughts, feelings, views, and opinion regarding refugees and education. My experiences, reflections, insights, and interpretations should be included in the study. The primary data, insight, and reflection I contributed to the research were just as valid and valuable, were they not? I was part of the refugee culture; therefore, my writing and storytelling as a researcher should not and cannot be discredited. Could being the researcher, subject, and writer simultaneously, possibly strengthen the phenomenal being researched? I believe that writing the research as an autoethnography study answers affirmatively to these questions.

Autoethnography

What is autoethnography? It is a mixture of three crucial elements: ethnography, biography, and self-analysis. A qualitative research method that employed personal data and context to get a better understanding of the connection of self and others within the same context (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Autoethnography developed from self-reflective and analysis accounts in ethnography that makes the researcher's experiences as the foundation of the study (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis, 2004) Writing personal narratives, personal experience narratives and self-stories, first person accounts, and personal essays are the core existence of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In addition, autoethnography is research writing, narrative storytelling, and connecting autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is not just are-telling of one's personal experience, it includes the interactions and connections to others in the context of culture. Culture is self and others; therefore, autoethnography is not writing and

studying about self, instead, it is a study of self as the principal focus within the context of culture (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography-Personal Narrative Writing

“Don't forget - no one else sees the world the way you do, so no one else can tell the stories that you have to tell.” ~ Charles de Lint

Currently, there are more than twenty forms of autoethnographic writing (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The many approaches to writing an autoethnography derived from how much focus is given to the researcher's self and interaction with others, study of others, and power relationships (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is not a “one size fits all” research approach, hence, the emergent of variations in autoethnographic study. Still, there were five key themes to delineate autoethnography. The five important themes or ideas were: autoethnography considers critical reflectivity; autoethnography consider educative experiences; autoethnography considers privilege-penalty experiences; autoethnography considers relational ethics; and autoethnography considers supported-salient narratives. (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

I was drawn to the research that used a personal narrative approach to write autoethnography. As Ellis (2004) stated,

Personal narratives to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to others participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (p. 46)

Was I ready to bare my soul? Could I truly unearth the emotional layers that perhaps, had been dormant for so long? Could my story give voice to those refugee students who came before me? Could it bring to life those who sat with me in the same classroom? Could it speak to

the students who are sitting in my classroom now? The purpose of this study was for the readers to sit with me in the classroom as I told my story. I wanted them to see and understand the world through my eyes. I encouraged them to make meaning of my educational journey. I challenged the readers to empathize with the refugee student, analyze, and interpret her experience. The intent of this study was also to glean insights from the vignettes and its responses through the lens of CRT. I believed that writing an autoethnography research helped me meet these goals.

The Researcher's Role

Autoethnography research was not without criticism. One of the challenges of writing this form of research method was the role of the researcher. Chang (2016) warned, “as you play a multi-faceted role as researcher, informant, and author, you should be reminded that your story is never made in a vacuum and others are always visible or invisible participants in your story” (p. 69). When one person is the researcher, participant, and writer, then the roles can easily be blurred.

I have been teaching in the public school system for the last 19 years. Learning and teaching languages have always been a part of my life. As I reminisced on my career path as a Spanish and ESOL teacher, it transported me back almost forty years earlier, sitting in a classroom learning English, a foreign language for the first time. That trip to memory lane served as a catalyst for my decision to be the researcher, participant, and author. I wrote this research using my own voice. By using myself as the primary vehicle to describe, explore, narrate, and understand the cultural experience of a refugee student's educational journey, I believe the readers can gain much from this personal narrative account. I, as the author, wrote about the educational journey of a refugee student, which was the subject, participant, or

informant of the research. In this case, I, as the researcher wrote about my personalized account of my own experience in the public school system.

My role as an autoethnographic researcher required me to collect and presented data in a manner that neither embellish nor withheld the facts. Maintaining objectivity was observed throughout the research process: collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and presenting the data and its finding. I presented the data and findings in a clear and concise matter, offering better understanding of the refugee educational experience as the paramount objective.

My role as the participant or subject of this study demanded that my recollections relevant to my educational journey was as accurate as possible. I conceded that memories from almost forty years ago can be a hazy and difficult to remember. I mitigated this possible interference in two ways. First, I used photographs from the past to help conjure up experiences. I also discussed with my siblings, friends, and parents to help invoke important memories throughout my earlier school years. Secondly, I only presented vignettes that my siblings, friends, or parents could fully corroborate. Their corroboration of my memory was through their direct or indirect participation in that experience or simply through conversations I have had with them in the past. I believed that by observing these guidelines mentioned above, it gave more credibility to use personal memory data as the foundation for my vignette writings.

Finally, my role as an author allowed me to add some creativity in my storytelling skills. The author used an evocative autoethnography approach to write this research. This study was in first person point of view. Both the vignettes and self-reflective responses were written in a way to appeal to the emotions of the reader, the hallmark of evocative autoethnography writing. Hence, as an author, my goal was to evoke emotions from the readers; so they would cry and laugh with the challenges and triumphs of the main character in the vignettes. I wanted the

readers to gain a better understanding and insight of the cultural context of a refugee student by living in those pages of the vignettes and its responses. As an author, I challenged my readers to reflect on their own understanding and assumptions of refugee culture. The goal was simply to write the research in a manner that elicit emotional bonding between the refugee student and the readers. Ultimately, as an author, my intention was for the readers to experience the educational journey of a refugee student and further the discussion bridging the achievement gap of refugee students.

Data Collection

In collecting data, the study employed personal memory data as a primary source of information. I relied heavily on my personal memory to write the vignettes and responses to tell my story. Personal experience is the foundation of autoethnographic research. The first-hand experience and personal interpretation gave a context to my past and present. Recalling memories required an autoethnographer to discern which personal memory data is relevant to the study (Chang, 2016). The goal was to select memories relevant to elementary and secondary school years. I opened the door to my past and made meaning of it in two productions: pages of my vignettes and my authentic responses to those vignettes. Utilizing memory as a method to write an autoethnography is important and valid (Ellis, 2004; Denzin, 2014).

Wall (2008) defended her use of memory as data for her dissertation by challenging that “if a researcher had interviewed me about my experiences as an adoptive mother and had recorded and transcribed it, it would have legitimacy as data despite the fact that both the interview transcript and my autoethnographic text would be based on the same set of memories “ (p. 45). Furthermore, “ethnography is an act of memory” because fieldwork and the resulting texts cannot be separated for the memories that shape them,” (Coffey, 1999 as cited in Wall,

2008). Wall used her memories to write her vignettes about her experience writing an autoethnography regarding her international adoption experience.

More recently, in the article, *Effecting Epiphanos Change in Teacher Practice: A Teacher's Autoethnography*, the writer used vignettes to describe her teaching journey of transformative and epiphanous change. Memories that expanded across fifty years were used to construct some of her vignettes. These vignettes were stories of her childhood, school years, teaching career, and years as a teacher of Autism (Barley & Southcott, 2019).

Selected memories from my past also served as the basis of an autoethnographic data (Chang, 2016). I wrote vignettes to bring these memories alive for the readers. These vignettes and responses were presented in three sections: (a) *The Crawling Caterpillar*, (b) *Emerging from the Cocoon*, and (c) *The Soaring Butterfly*.

It made sense for me to use the metamorphosis of a butterfly to section off my vignettes. My transformation from being silent and finally finding my voice mirrored that of a butterfly. Like the butterfly, “*The Crawling Caterpillar*” represented the elementary years from first grade to sixth grade. Here, like caterpillar, I couldn’t do or say much because I was still too young, just barely crawling. “*The Emerging Cocoon*” symbolized my frustrating and trapped middle school years. Similar to a cocoon, I wasn’t quite ready to fly or find my voice yet. I felt frustration, tested my boundaries, and I was ready to flex my wings. Lastly, “*The Soaring Butterfly*” was the final state of my transformation. It narrated my high school years. Here, the vignettes illustrated how I became stronger and advocated for myself. I was more comfortable with my own identity. I finally found my voice. It was my hope to share with the readers the struggles and achievements I experienced during those years. I used meditation to retrigger

some of these memories. I strove to be completely candid with my vignettes and interpretation of these memories.

I collected self-reflective data to bolster the credibility of the study. According to Chang (2016), “self-reflective data result from introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation of who you are and what you are” (p. 95). The self-reflective data is in the form of my written responses to the vignettes. My emotional state at the time of re-reading the vignettes were likely to dictate the responses. I did not hold anything back when I wrote my responses. Some of the responses displayed a myriad of emotions. I did not hold back in writing these responses. The raw emotions plastered on the pages came from a suppressed and dormant part of my being that exploded after writing these vignettes. I did not have a particular method on who I choose to respond to. Again, my emotional state at the time of writing compelled me to respond to certain people. Interestingly, sometimes, I wrote to my former teachers, my family, current and future refugee students, or refugee parents.

Data Analysis

Simply describing an experience without making any cultural connections to self and other is not data. Similarly, data collection without an effective way to makes sense of its meaning is insignificant. The aim of this study was for readers to make emotional connections, gain understanding, be opened to changing perspectives that promotes both personal and societal change, and furthered discussions relating to refugee students and the public school system. To accomplish this objective, I presented the data collection, analysis, and interpretation in a holistic manner to produce a narratively engaging, cultural meaningful autoethnography (Chang, 2016).

In the book, *Autoethnography as Method*, Chang (2016) wrote,

Data analysis is at the center of research endeavors, whether qualitative or quantitative research. Until you give meaningful structure to collected data, they may appear to be a “messy” pile of fragmented bits. Data analysis and interpretation are the processes through which the data become a cogent account of observed phenomena (para .1)

The four tenets of CRT were used to analyze the eighteen vignettes. Through the lens of CRT, I looked for themes in vignettes that were parallel to the issues of race, intersectionality, social justice, and counter storytelling. The vignettes were chosen, analyzed, and interpreted based on its relevance to understanding CRT and its presence or lack thereof in our educational school system.

I also used the vignettes and self-reflected responses to analyze how my being a former refugee student influenced my own teaching practices and interactions with my own students. I looked for emerging themes that were frequently present in my writings. I elaborated on the themes and insights I gleaned from vignettes and self-reflective response to answer my research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Unlike other research methods, measuring reliability and validity could be a difficult feat to accomplish. It was simply not about numbers, statistic, and graphs; rather, it was everything about “truths”, authorship, and the ability of readers to understand the experience and empathize with the writer. Autoethnographers acknowledged this, and have submitted that the context, meaning, and effectiveness of reliability and validity were modified. Evaluation of autoethnography were based on the reliability of the research study by the credibility of its narrator (Ellis et al., 2011). Could the author be trusted? Did the event and experience truly happened as the writer has written and reported? Was there factual evidence to support the

account? I believed that I was able to achieve substantial level of reliability by presenting a highly personal account of my experience as a refugee student.

The validity of autoethnographic research depends on the ability of the readers to relate and empathize with the writer and subject matter. Ellis and colleagues (2011) suggested that validity was accomplished if the readers can see, feel, experience, and understand the written experience through the writer's perspective. I hope that by sharing my experience through vignettes and self-reflection responses, I have achieved validity in the research. The vignettes transported the reader in the writer's educational journey. In addition, writing the research in a personal narrative style made the rapport between readers and writer easier. Hence, the emotional connection of the reader and character gave validity to this research.

Ethical Considerations

The blueprint of this study was my lived experience as a refugee student. My educational journey came to life through my storytelling. However, can perceptions, interactions, and narration be truly be one person's story? I do not think so. Others' stories were found in those vignettes. Morse (2002) championed the same thought, "The narrative is rarely entirely one's own. It includes information about others who are, by association, recognizable, even if their names have been changed" (p. 1159). I was very cognizant of the role of others in telling my experience. There was a balance between protecting others and sharing the personal experience of the writer. The writer will contemplate the merit and risk of others and self when presenting personal memory data (Morse, 2002).

Therefore, I considered the code of confidentiality when vignettes and any collected data include the identity of others. The study protected the privacy of others by using pseudonyms for non-family members whose interactions and connections to the writer can serve as the

background for this autoethnographic research. Likewise, I also omitted the names of the I attended. The goal was not to do harm or cause embarrassment for the schools due to the personal recollections and interpretations of the events. I was fully aware of the power of perception and interpretation to tell my story; hence, I made every effort to assert that the story was told solely through my emotions, thoughts, and eyes.

Chapter 4 - Vignettes

The Crawling Caterpillar: Elementary School Anguish

First grade to sixth grade
1981-1987

When I was in elementary school, Ronald Reagan was the President of the United States and George H.W. Bush served as his Vice President. The bombing of U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon dominated the news cycle. Reagan defeated Walter Mondale on November of 1984 for his bid for a second term. The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986 brought a whole nation to tears, especially many teachers and students because Christa McAuliffe, a teacher and astronaut, also perished in this disaster. In 1986, The Iran-Contra affair scandal rocked the Reagan Presidency.

The evolution of personal computers also developed during the 80s decade. In 1981, IBM introduced its first personal computer. By 1985, Microsoft created Windows. In that same year, the very first dot-com domain name was registered.

The early 80s marked significant milestone for females across the nation. Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female Supreme Court associate justice in history on September 21, 1981. Likewise, in 1983, Sally Ride became the first American woman to travel into space. In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro became the first female to run as a Vice President candidate.

The 80s introduced Madonna and her hit *Material Girl* and *Like a Virgin*. Madonna was everywhere; she seeped into the mainstream fashion and style of young American girls. She had big hair, styled with bottles of hairspray. She made lacey reveal top, fishnet stockings/gloves, black capri pants, min-skirts, and black ankle boots all the rage. Madonna was the ultimate pop culture icon. Other notable celebrity was Michael Jackson with his hit, *Thriller*. As a response to

the AIDS epidemic worldwide, *We Are the World* became a hit song and a symbol of hope and unity.

Molly Ringwald, one of the original “Brat Pack” actors, was a major star in many classic 80s movies. Her most popular movies at the time were *Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Sixteen Candles*. Classic films such as, *E.T.*, *Gremlins*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Back to the Future* were also released during the awesome 80s.

Vignette 1: “What’s in a Name?”

It was the first day of second grade. The teacher was doing roll call.

“Oh, dear. I’m so sorry, but I’m afraid I’m going to butcher this name so badly. “Four-Ra-Sami?”

“Is Phourasami here today?”

“Please raise your hand,” she ordered, but I heard a question. My teacher whispered, what, she thought was my name. She tried again; this time louder. “Four-Ra-Sami,” I heard the frustration in her loud voice and I became scared. My heart was on the treadmill running faster and faster, trying to escape her voice.

Quick! Let go of me; let me go. I want to go home. I want to feel safe again. I need to get away from here, get away from her. She’s going to call me out and accuse me of this God awful, foreign name. Please don’t call me out. I don’t want to be the brown blob of paint that taints this untouched white canvas classroom of yours. She glazed over the room and then, she saw me, her target. She slowly narrowed in on me. Caught! I was found out. I slowly raised my right hand in dejection and defeat.

“Sweetie, how come you didn’t answer me when I called your name?” she interrogated me.

“Because that’s not my name”, my anger screamed loud and clear; but, my voice remained lost and silent.

“Are you, Four-Ra-Sami?” she cajoled me into admitting it. I shook my head with the little defiance I could muster up. “That’s okay, so, you’re not Phourasami, but how do you say your name?” she finally asked. She smiled slightly and her eyes twinkled, sensing and tasting her imminent victory. Victory or not, I sensed the compassion in her voice and clung tightly to that feeling. It made me feel better, safe and reassuring. I gained an ounce of courage and whispered my name, “Pra-Sa-Me.”

“Four-Ra-Sami,” she retaliated. “Four-Ra-Sami,” she stated, assigned; she was determined. She looked at me quietly, waiting for an answer. It seemed forever before I heard the hesitation in an unrecognizable voice. Still, it was my voice. I’m not exactly sure how I even formed the simple, one word.

“No,” I said simply, my voice shaking. “Pra-Sa-Me,” I offered her an olive branch. Holding my breath, just hoping she would take it. Please try to say my name and don’t embarrass me, I begged.

Instead, she plucked the olives, popped them in her mouth, and broke the branch for good measure. Hmm, so much for a peace treaty, I thought. “Well, since you have such a long and difficult name to say, why don’t we just call you Sami for short,” she offered her own peace treaty. She smiled sweetly, proud that she was able to solve the issue at hand. “Sami is such a sweet name. I think it fits you perfectly,” she negotiated.

NO! I don't want to change my name. I don't want to "fit in" your classroom or world. It doesn't even matter what name I am called. No one will call my name anyway. So, why should it matter? I looked at her emptily and slowly bowed my head down; my eyes were getting misty. The tears were threatening to fall rapidly; I had to stop the flow. She will not see me cry; I was determined to keep the tears unshed. My head needed to remain downwards because any slight movement would cause the tears to spill. After forever, when I was ready and felt in control of my emotions, I looked up at my teacher and nodded. With that simple act, it was the birth of Sami and the death of Phourasami, simultaneously. I bowed and accepted Sami. I nodded and denied Phourasami.

Vignette Response 1 - Dear Phourasami

I'm sorry I couldn't defend your existence. I didn't know how. At the tender age of seven, I didn't have the courage to deny the simultaneous birth and death of "me". I remembered that day so vividly because I was given an identity, not by my parents, but by a teacher, who altered my name, hemmed it up for the sake of comfort and ease. Unbeknownst to her, her renaming me was the genesis of slowly shedding of my former self.

At that moment, I didn't want them to see me cry. I didn't want them to see my sadness, weakness, and fear. I just wanted to be like all the rest of the students. Give me a name that my teacher can say effortlessly. Call my name and for a brief moment, let me forget who I am. Why can't I be a Mary or an Ann? What is in a name, anyway? So what, Sami will suite me just fine! Who cares what they call me, at least they are calling me, right? I'm still the same person, am I not?

Yeah, right. It worked well enough all through my elementary and secondary school years. Students, teachers, and even family and friends called me "Sam". It grew on my, but I

still resented the name. Secretly, I would write my real name, Phourasami, repeatedly. As if this action alone would bring it back to life. I longed for me, the real me. In my own subtle way, I did protect you; protect me, Phourasami.

In 1987, a twelve-year-old refugee child, finally became a naturalized US citizen; my official name became Samanta Phourasami Souriya. Yes, the very same name that my teacher amputated and I discarded, boldly and legally became part of my name. Dad gave us children the freedom and choice to change our names. Still, I chose you, Phourasami. I love the name Phourasami because you fit me so, perfectly. I love this name because my parents chose this name for me.

I chose Samanta as my first name because I couldn't fully escape "Sami". Everyone called my Sam and I actually preferred Sam to Sami. I was known as Sam and changing it completely would be difficult. So at twelve, I was able to compromise with myself. Keep Sam, but make it feminine; so, I chose Samanta. Notice, the spelling. Yep, I didn't want to fully Americanized my name. The rebellious streak in me intentionally left out the "h" in Samanta. My name is pronounced Sa-man-ta!

So, please don't be upset with me. I did what I could as a child. Sometimes, I just had to go with the flow and not cause too many waves. Yes, at the time, I was so hurt by this name change, but I made it work for me.

Now, I love my name, Samanta Phourasami Souriya, it's a beautiful mix of me, my parents, and my new life in America. "Sami" is the last portion of my Laotian name, which was recycled by my teacher. "Sam" is what everybody calls me. Samanta is the name I gave myself to assert my own sense of "power and control". Phourasami, my given name is not called often,

but it is still there, legally and inside of me. You see, my former self has never really left me; it comes and goes, as needed.

Vignette 2 - “Show and Tell”

“This is our first week of school and I am still trying to learn all your names and interesting things about you,” my teacher was talking to the class, as we were getting ready to go home. “So, I really want you to start gathering photos or items to share with your class. We will be having a “show and tell” time on Friday,” the teacher stated.

“A show and tell means that you will need to bring something, it could be a toy, picture, or anything that is important to you. You will show it to the class and tell us why it’s important to you,” she explained the assignment again.

“Can we bring anything, like our favorite toy?” asked one of my excited classmates. “Wait, wait, I have a question too, teacher,” I thought to myself. “Does it have to be clean and new?” I wondered aloud in my head.

“Sure, you can bring a favorite object, toy, family photos, and anything you want to share with the class. I’m giving you three days, so don’t forget to bring them on Friday. I’ll see you tomorrow, have a great day,” she dismissed the class.

My legs slowly walked me home, but my head was already there, thinking about the object I needed to find. The homework assignment occupied the space in my head; I was in a very pensive mood. I was on a mission. I finally arrived home and I veered straight to the bedroom.

“Hmm, what can I share with my class? What toy can I take? Raggedy Ann, what if they laugh at old Raggedy Ann?” the questions kept coming.

“Come eat, hurry, let’s eat dinner,” mom came looking for me in the bedroom.

“I can’t yet; I have to look for a toy to take to school, Mom. Oh, I need pictures of me when I was a baby and maybe one family picture too,” at least I will have the photos to take with me; I thought.

“Well, you can look later; it’s time to eat. Your dad’s waiting,” as she was gently pushing me out of the doorway.

“Ok, can you give me the pictures after dinner?” I kept badgering her.

“We don’t have any pictures. YOU don’t have any pictures. Now stop with all these questions. You will just have to draw a picture of the family and take your old doll, Ann,” she said. I heard the finality in her voice and I knew better than to continue being a pest.

My doll, Ann, was really old and dirty. Alas, I didn’t “show and tell” Ann to my classmates. She stayed home with my embarrassment. Ann was my one and only doll that was given to me at the Thai refugee camp. I left the refugee camp when I was almost four years old. I clung to Ann, as the plane was taking off and heading to a completely different world. It was faithful, raggedy Ann that was my constant companion when I first arrived. Ann was my best friend and still, I was too ashamed of her.

No, Ann and I didn’t belong in the classroom. She was safe at home; I wanted to be home with her. Taking Ann would have just expose her to embarrassment and merciless laughter. No, I couldn’t do that to me or Ann. I didn’t want my classmates to laugh at me. I didn’t want to explain why I didn’t have any baby pictures. I didn’t want “me” to be the object of the “show and tell” assignment.

Vignette Response 2 - Dear Ms. J.

May I “show and tell” you something?

You embarrassed me. I couldn't even face the students because of you. Yes, I do know the difference between a photograph and a drawing. At least, I attempted to do the assignment. I drew a picture of my family. What did you expect me to do? Explain to you why I didn't have a precious family photo album with my limited English? Just because I'm unable to express my thoughts in English does not mean I lack comprehension.

I understand a great deal. I understand that you were not equipped to deal with a refugee student like me. I understand that you were probably not well trained in differentiating your assignments for English Language Learners. I understand that you didn't know that correcting a student in front of their peer is a big "loss of face" in my culture. I understand that you tried really hard and did the best that you could. I understand that you have never walked in my shoes. Therefore, I also understand that you are blameless in not understanding me. How can I be upset with you when you simply didn't know? It wasn't your fault. I just wished you had taken the time to build some kind of rapport with me and learn more about refugee students. Understand that we are we are just a little bit different from our peers.

I wanted so desperately to explain myself to you. No, it wasn't because I was lazy and didn't care about my homework assignment. I didn't draw my family picture because I was trying to outsmart you or it was just an afterthought. It wasn't something I pull together before school started. The simple truth is that I didn't have photos of me when I was a baby.

My mother buried all my baby photos, wedding pictures, and family album in preparation for our escape to Thailand. She didn't trust anyone with our photographs, especially photos of my dad. My father was a Captain in the Royal Lao Army. Our very lives survival depended on hiding my parents' identity. Mom couldn't bear the thought of just "burning" our existence, our

memories, and our lives in Laos. That is why she buried the past in her beloved home country, hoping that one day it would somehow be unearth and discovered like a hidden treasure.

Vignette 3 - “Us and Them”

I don’t recall having many friends in elementary school. The friends that I do remember vividly hanging out with were also refugee students. Most of us refugee kids were from Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. We were natural friends, even though we didn’t even understand each other’s language. Perhaps it was the false sense of security that we would be safe in large numbers that bind us together. At that time, refugee students were still rare. We would probably have approximately 10-20 refugee students in one elementary school.

I remember being in the second grade when the concept of “us and them” came to life. A group of us, refugee kids, were walking home from school. As a second grader, I was the youngest of the group of five. My older sister and her friends were ahead of me on our walk home. Suddenly, a group of boys from our elementary school started to make racial comments to us. This group of boys were telling us to go home. They were hurling onomatopoeias to identify and insult us!

“Go home, you GOOKS! We don’t want you here. Go back to Viet-Nam! CHINKS! CHING CHONG CHING!”

They would taunt us and repeat these chants like a broken record.

At the time, I didn’t even know what “CHINKS” or “GOOKS” meant. I did know that I wasn’t from Vietnam; I was from Laos, the land of a million elephants. Whatever these boys were saying were very bad and upsetting because my older sister and her friends were angry. The kind of anger that cause steam to come out of their ears, faces were turning tomato red, and fingers curled up into a fist. The put downs, insults, and racial slurs were ping-ponged back and

forth between the two groups: the newly arrived refugee students and the well-established, mainstream White students.

A full fledged fight broke out and I scanned the sea of faces for a protective, familiar one. I located my sister and she yelled at me to get behind her while she was throwing punches, kicking aimlessly, and yelling profanity in our native language. I ran cowardly behind her to seek refuge. I was so scared. I didn't want to get punch, kick, or slap. Soon, my imaginary fort wall behind my sister was crumbling down right before my eyes.

I had a choice to make. I had to contribute to the safety and survival of the group or run, hide, and save myself. Scared as I was, I went blindly to battle with no experience, but adrenalin kicked in and I contributed to the well-being, safety, and survival of the refugee "gang". In five short minutes, I had learned the rules of "Us and Them"

Vignette Response 3 - Dear School Administrators

I realize that it must be difficult to see everything that goes on after school. True, the school is only responsible and concern for the well-being and safety of students on school grounds. By no means, am I placing blame on the school administration; however, I would expect schools to create an environment that is conducive to learning and safe for all students. It was not a safe environment for newly arrived refugees. The verbal taunting, bullying, physical intimidation, and "gang" fight did not end at the back of a churchyard field.

Looking back at this unfortunate event, there was an unspoken tension between refugee students and the majority mainstream students. It carried over in the classrooms, but it always subtle. The teachers would never see or hear what is going on in the background. It spilled over in recess; still, the racial tension was never identified or addressed. Sometimes, the teacher's aide would turn a blind eye when one of the refugee students got hurt playing soccer. Honestly, I

cannot recall the classroom teachers making an effort to discuss and teach about bullying or cultural sensitivity.

You were ill prepared to provide a welcoming and safe learning environment for students, especially for those students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Surely, you anticipated how kids could be so brutal and mean to one another. Were there any programs or initiative to help refugee students ease into the public school district? I can understand how it must have been difficult for your school to have an influx of refugee students with little or no warning at all. I honestly think that school administrators did what they could at the time. It was all very novel to school districts across the Nation.

It was not until the mid-80s that ESL pullout program was even available. I remember going to my first ESL class for thirty minutes daily as a fifth grader. I loved it. I think for the first time, I felt safe. I was in a class with other refugee students. We rolled our tongues and tried out the new language without fear or judgment. It felt safe when I went to ESL pullout time. I learned a lot because my teacher created a classroom that was conducive to learning. It is too bad that I didn't experience this until my fifth grade. It is too bad that a safe learning environment didn't necessarily transformed into a safe and welcoming school. It is too bad that it was only for thirty minutes that a refugee child basked in a safe and learning environment.

Vignette 4 - "Detour to Kwick Shop"

Today was going to be a bad day. I just knew it. Our class was going on a field trip and I didn't have a sack lunch. I forgot to ask my parents for money and didn't remember to tell them I needed a sack lunch. I wanted to crawl into bed and disappear and not go to school and face my problems. I can't escape this problem; I had to go to school. I was in a horrible mood and was especially quiet walking to school that day.

“Why do you look so sad, Sam? What is wrong with you?” my older sister asked me.

“Nothing. Nothing, nothing is wrong with me except I can’t go to my field trip today,” I stated with my dejected voice and my eyes filled with tears of frustration.

“Why don’t you have a sack lunch, do you even have money to go?” she asked me.

With anger and defeat in my voice, I yelled at her, “I don’t have anything; I forgot about the dang, stupid field trip!”

“I hate my life! Why can’t I just remember to give mom and dad that stupid note? Why do bad things always happen to me?” I complained and soon, the tears trickled down my face.

“Stop, Sam! Stop acting like a damn baby. I’ll find a way. All you have to do is just goto school and stop crying!” Nessa yelled at me with annoyance in her voice. “Gosh, I am so sickand tired of having to take care of you,” she muttered angrily to herself. “It’s your own fault fornnot giving the note to mom and dad and now you expect me to deal with all this?” she asked me. Her question was met with silence. She was already familiar with my silent ways.

As we approach the front door of the school, Nessa told me not to worry and that everything will be okay. She and a group of her friends headed the opposite direction of the school. I went to class that morning trusting that my sister would save the day. She did not disappoint. She always pulled through for me whenever I had any problems.

I did go on the school field trip with my sack lunch in hand. You see, my sister and her friends decided to pool their money together to buy me snacks to eat. Instead of going to class that morning, a group of sixth graders took a detour to the Kwick Shop 24-hour convenient store. Convenient, it was! The store was within walking distance of the elementary school. It took them about 30 minutes running to and from the school to the shop.

Yes, they were late to school, but it didn't matter. What did matter? I went to school. I went on the field trip. I had lunch to eat. At that time, these things mattered to me the most: making it to school, going on the field trip, being part of a group, and having lunch to eat. It is the simple things that contribute to a child's feeling of normalcy, happiness, and security.

Vignette Response 4 - Dear Nessa

You were so good to me. I know I was a brat. I was being irresponsible and I still had to have my way. I want to say "thank you" for all the times you stood by me, protected me, and always solved my problems. I am so lucky. I wished all younger sisters had their own guardian angel or in your case, a living superhero!

As a second grader, school was a big, isolated, and scary place. I would always look for you in the hallway; just a quick glimpse of you would put my mind at ease. Of course, I would never see you because we were in two separate parts of the building. At recess, I would scan the sea of faces, hoping to see you. You never appeared. Again, you would not show up; we had separate lunch and recess for upper and lower elementary classes. Knowing this full well, I still searched for you. The mere act of searching for you gave me a sense of control, calmness, and security.

Sometimes, when I was having a bad day, I would just cry silently. I would ignore my teacher and shut them out. I would sit there at the desk and put my head down. I just wanted you. The teachers would scramble to figure out what to do. I chose not responding to them. This was my choice; I was doing the choosing that day. I dismissed their efforts to comfort and talk to me passively. I didn't want the teacher, the nurse, or the principal. They finally gave up and called dad. Per dad's request, they FINALLY, asked you to come and calmed me down. Yeah, I remember those days. You would comfort me and tell me everything will be okay.

Your embrace cocooned me from the outside world. You wiping my tears erased my anxiety and fear. Your nearness transported me back to the security of home and family. Your soothing voice brought me back from the brink of depression.

The day you took a detour to Kwick Shop and got in trouble for being late to school, was one of many sacrifices you did on my behalf. Growing up, you put my needs before your own. I know that dad held you back in elementary school. He was worried that I had to walk to school alone. I was only seven. He needed you to protect me, make sure I made it safely to and from school. He passed the responsibility of taking care of me on to you. I can't blame him; he didn't have a choice. There was no one else to take me to school.

I don't blame you if you ever felt any resentment for being my caregiver. As it was your nature, you never let it show. I felt guilty that you had to take care of me. I felt guilty that you were the adult and I was the child. I felt so bad that you were the oldest student in the 6th grade.

I can still remember how you worked so hard in high school just to catch up. You had to take classes in the summer. You did everything within your power to graduate a year early. You finally did something for yourself. I was proud of you. You finally had the opportunity to think about you and not about me. My dear sister, how can I ever, thank, you? You were my guardian angel and superhero, rolled into one.

Vignette 5 - "Meet the Parent"

"Are you in trouble?" Dad asked me as we were driving to school. "How many times did I talk to you about school and the importance of always listening to your teacher?" he grilled me.

Dad was mad. I can tell when he gets upset. He can be loud. "I don't have the time to go and meet your teacher; I had to take a day off just for this. If you are in trouble, you are going

to get a big thrashing from me.” I felt like a criminal being hauled to jail instead of simply going to school.

“Dad, I am not in trouble. I didn’t do anything wrong; she’s talking to other parents too, I think. I don’t know why she wants to see you. Didn’t you read the note?” I was trying desperately to defend myself. I was upset with Dad for not believing in me and I was annoyed at my older sister for pleading the fifth.

My older sister, finally, intervened. “Dad, she’s not in any kind of trouble. It’s just conference time, teachers just want to meet and talk to parents,” Nessa explained to my confused father.

“So, how come, I didn’t meet your teacher, but I have to meet hers?” he asked her. “My conference was also this week, but you couldn’t go because you had to work at your second job, remember, I told you about it,” Nessa pointed out.

“I don’t know about this; you two girls better be telling me the truth. Do they have this conference thing at the other school where your older sister and brothers are at?” he continued quizzing us. “How come I didn’t meet any of the middle or high school teachers?” he still wasn’t convinced.

“Well, because you never know what is going on, Dad,” I thought quietly to myself.

“Lord, why does he have to come to my conference, why me,” I I thought to myself as I questioned my luck.

We finally made it to school and I had no clue what my teacher was going to say about me. We met in the classroom. My teacher was sitting at the table waiting for us. We took our seats across from hers. This is it; three against one. I was sandwiched in between dad and Nessa.

“Hello, Mr. Souriya. It’s so nice to finally meet you,” my second-grade teacher said, as she extended her right hand for a handshake. My father hesitantly took her hand in his.

“Yes, Hi, teacher,” Dad replied with uncertainty in his suddenly timid voice.

“Hi, Sami. How was school today? It was a fun day, wasn’t it? Oh, and this must be your older sister?” she asked me kindly. I slowly nodded my head and that, was the ominous cue that conference had finally begun. My teacher started talking and talking nonstop. “Sami this and Sami that,” yadda yadda she continued. She finally stopped and realized that my dad didn’t fully understand what she was saying.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Souriya,” she apologized sincerely. She smiled softly and asked my sister who was only twelve to interpret. My teacher continued the conference with Nessa. She stopped talking to dad. She discussed my academic strengths and weaknesses with my older sister. She was actually having a full-blown conversation with another child; my dad became the third wheel. In that one moment of realization that Dad couldn’t fully understand her, she unknowingly stripped his right to be my dad.

Vignette Response 5 - Dear Dad

I am sorry you had to go through that. I felt humiliated. I can’t even image how you were feeling. I wonder what was going through your head. Did you feel humiliated and embarrassed, the way I did? She was so busy talking and talking that she misunderstood your confused look for not knowing how to speak English all together. Why didn’t you speak up, dad? Sure, your English wasn’t fluent, but you spoke enough English to hold down two jobs.

To be honest, dad, I was so disappointed in you. When I feel disappointed in you, this makes me feel guilty. I hate having this feeling of guilt. I don’t like not feeling proud of my dad. Why did you allow her to treat you like a child? Why didn’t you stop her from talking to

Nessa and just ask her to speak slowly? I know you wouldn't have known all the academic terms, but you do speak enough English to know that I was doing well and that I was never in trouble. Why did you allow her to think that just because we were refugees that was somehow synonymous to being uneducated? She may or may not have believed that, but the way she just ignored and dismissed you and had conference with Nessa just proved my point! YOU, allowed her to treat you this way.

She probably thought that simply talking to Nessa during the conference was the only option for her. I'm sure she thought that Nessa would relay everything to you in detail once we get home. I know; she tried. She really didn't have much to work with at the time. There was no Laotian interpreter available for the school districts to employ at the time. Like us, refugee parents just took older siblings or a family friend to any school functions. Still, she could have simply use simpler sentences and speak slowly. She could have engaged you in the conversation by having eye contact with you and speaking to YOU and having Nessa interpret sections of the sentences to you. She could have simply, asked YOU if you had any questions for her. The only time she asked you anything was right before the conference ended.

Why didn't you just speak to her in your broken English? I wanted her to know you and that you had a good life before we came to the States. You were once a proud Captain in the Laotian Army Police Unit. You could speak enough French, Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese to survive and have a decent conversation. You attended university before you joined the army. You were respected by your people and peers.

Dad, why can't you just show off, just this once? I wanted to show my teacher that I was proud of my daddy. Just because we didn't speak English well or we didn't have money in this country didn't mean we were poor and illiterate in our home county. Dad, this was your chance

to shine and you ruined it. I really wished at that moment, you would have been stronger. Go ahead and converse with her with your broken English, at least it would have been my daddy speaking to my teacher and not simply a child listening passively. I hate conferences. It just makes everyone feel uncomfortable, inadequate, or guilty

Vignette 6 - “Extra Credit”

“I don’t want to go to church with you Mom,” I whined as my mother dragged me to the car.

“Stop it right now; it will only take one hour. Now, grab your homework and let’s go; I’m already running late,” my mom insisted.

I was hoping for a quiet drive to the church, but, no, that didn’t happen. Here we go again, I got a lecture from Mom about how she and my dad sacrificed everything they had, so that we could have a better opportunity in America. Why couldn’t I just be a dutiful child and go with my mom quietly? By now, I know this lecture by heart. I could recite it verbatim, word- by- word.

We weren’t late, but we were the last two students to get to class. My mom was a very punctual person and she hated being late to anything. There were usually about ten to fifteen adults in the ESL class and I was the only child there. No, let me rephrase that. I was the only child who was forced to go to night class. The students were mainly from Southeast Asian countries: Laos, Vietnam, Cambodian, and Thailand. Occasionally, there would be students from Mexico and Central America.

It was funny, seeing my mom like this. She was a good student, very attentive and outgoing. I can tell that she loves to learn. My mom was definitely not timid; she was a go-getter. She would always volunteer and raise her hand and try the new language on her tongue.

Sometimes the words would come out as smooth as silk and other times the words were stuck and difficult to maneuver on a rocky mountain. Somehow, with her Laotian tongue opening, rolling, twisting, and pausing, she makes it to the summit before the class is over. Mind you, she usually tried out no more than five to ten vocabulary words a session.

We got in the car and Mom started with her routine questions. “How I do at school, today?” mom asked me in English, seeking approval and validation.

“You were good, Mom; you just need to practice the /r/ and /w/ sounds,” I encouraged her.

“Willy, was I willy good in class today?” she always needed confirmation and compliments from me.

“Yes, mom, you were really, really good in class today. We just need to practice your sounds, that’s it. When we get home, I can help you with your homework. I promise,” I reassured her.

“What this, exsta kedit, what teasher mean?” mom was on a roll, she was asking me in her “English” again.

“Oh, yeah, extra credit is when you do more work to get good grades, Mom,” I explained this foreign concept to her.

“Okay, good. I do exsta kedit at home, you help me? You speak English all time with me, in car and at school, okay? But speak Lao when we home, okay? You good girl, do good in school like me. I like exsta kedit, work hard and good thing happen in life for you,” Mom was lecturing me about the importance of extra credit and a good education.

“Yes, Mom,” I replied thoughtfully. “I know how important it is for me to do well in school. I promise to do my best and help you learn English. Don’t worry,” I told her. By the

time we reached home, I was once again her dutiful and reasonable child. I was no longer in a bad mood; instead, I was very proud of Mom for learning English.

Vignette Response 6 - Dear Mom

It must have been difficult for you to learn a new language when you were already well in your mid-thirties. I had mixed feeling back then about you going to church to learn English. I was so proud of you for taking the initiative to educate yourself and at times, I just wanted to stay home with my sisters. You were a great role model for hard work and perseverance.

You showed me the importance of acculturating to our new adopted home country by first learning its language. You were adamant and determined to speak English because you knew that our success in creating a new life was contingent upon your ability to work. Despite your broken English, it was sufficient enough for you to be gainfully employed at Wichita Country Club. You would work an eight-hour shift, come home, and prepare dinner, and still you forced yourself to go to ESL night class.

I was part of your journey in bettering your English. Just you and I, two times a week for an hour, you were my student and I was your tutor. We sat side by side at church learning the grammar rules of a noun and a verb. When you didn't understand what your teacher was saying, you would ask me to explain it to you in our native Lao. Back then, this was the part I hated. I hated having that big responsibility of explaining things to you.

I felt the pressure and burden of being the adult in this situation. I didn't even know how to say noun or verb in Lao. How was I supposed to help you? I felt helpless. These were the times that I didn't like you going to night class. Why couldn't I just be a carefree child and do normal things like my classmates? Why couldn't I just snap my fingers and you would

miraculously speak English fluently? Why did you and I have to go through all this hardship of adapting to a new language, culture, food, and just everything!

Mom, I don't know if I have ever said "thank you". I should have done it a long time ago; it is long overdue. Thank you, Mom. Who would have known that the first step you took in learning English would be an important catalyst in my journey to complete my dissertation? Had you not taken that important step, where would I have been today? Would I have learned the value of hard work, education, and sacrifice? You wanting an English voice is now helping me find the lost voice of refugee child.

I know it was hard for you. Sometimes, you would need encouragement to go to night class. You always did your homework right after class or an hour before class starts. You squeezed in time to do the assigned homework because you knew that learning English was our ticket out of poverty. Learning English was not an option; it was survival. You were a fighter; you overcame so many obstacles just to be here in the States. You fought your way to better opportunities and once here, you did not squander that chance. I admire you for that.

Vignette 7 - "The Ties That Bind"

The sea of orange invaded my parent's small living room. The monks sat chanting rhythmically, chasing the evil and bad omen away from my family. They were too late. Last week, that evil spirit had already taken my oldest brother away from us. He died tragically in a car accident; he was one month away from celebrating his high school graduation. I sat confused and quiet in the somber and long ceremony. The lullaby chanting faded softly and friends and other family members started to gather around my family. They started to tie our right wrists with a white cotton string.

“Please protect her from harm and evil spirits. Give her peace, have mercy on her soul,” a religious elderly woman spoke her blessings as she tied the final knot on the string.

“Give her good health and save her from all evil things,” another sage family member said, securing the protective, white string on my wrists.

By the time the orange wave and throng of friends left the house, I had at least thirty white strings tied around my right wrist. Supposedly, the blessings and protection bestowed upon me would overcome any more visits from the bad omen. With this armor of defense and good will, I was finally ready to go back to school.

“I am so happy to see you back Sami,” my fourth-grade teacher said sincerely, giving me a hug. “I am so sorry to hear about your brother’s death, if you need anything, please let me know,” she offered kindly.

“Thank you, Ms. H,” I whispered. I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t want to talk or feel anything. But I couldn’t escape the feeling of “death”. It came suddenly and uninvited. I finally knew how “death” was like. Death is the knife still lodged in my heart. Death was the uncontrollable wailing of loved ones that haunts the stillness of my nights. Death was my brother’s smiling face coming to life as I close my eyes, but the smile disappears gradually as I open them. He was no longer real; he was just a dream, gone.

Pent up, unshed tears trickled down my face when I accepted the finality of death. I wiped them away quickly, trying not to draw sympathy or attention to myself. Just that moment, my teacher looked up from her desk. She saw me crying. She walked towards me with some tissue and offered them to me. I grabbed the tissue and there, she noticed my homemade dingy bracelet string.

“Oh, dear, that’s a lot of strings tied to your wrist, it must be uncomfortable for you.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s not that bad,” I answered her shakily.

“Well, it looks like it’s been there for a long time. It can’t be good for your circulation.”

“It doesn’t hurt me.” Nothing hurts me anymore. I didn’t want to talk to her anymore.

Just go away and leave me alone I pleaded quietly.

“I know it doesn’t hurt you, but let’s just cut it off. You’ll be more comfortable and I bet it’ll make you feel better,” she decided.

She walked back to her desk and grabbed the frightening scissor. Now let the snipping begin. Each cut was final, like death. Each cut separated me from a blessing of good health and prosperity. Each cut released me from the protection from the evil spirit. Each cut opened the door to bad omens.

Vignette Response 7 - Dear Ms. H.

I was hurt and lost my will to fight that day. My instinct told me to stop you from cutting the white strings from my wrist. I tried to, but nothing came out. It was just a little over a week ago that I lost my brother and frankly, I just didn’t have enough energy to stop you or anyone anymore. I was learning how to deal with death in my own way. This was the first time a very close family member died and I really didn’t have anyone to talk to.

I was in big trouble when I went got home that day. My mom took one look at my right wrist and she went into a complete flying rage. She was no longer recognizable to me when she learned that you cut off the strings from my writs. I was frightened; I didn’t understand why she was yelling at me and trying to hit and slap me repeatedly. My dad had to pull her back and restrained her before she actually physically hurt me.

Why was she so crazy mad? It was just some stupid strings around my wrist, right? No. Wrong. Very wrong. Of course, at the time, I didn’t fully comprehend the significance of the

white strings. It was much more than blessings, good health, and fending off evil spirits and bad omens.

My mom was scared that my brother's spirit would continue to wander in search of his family. Since he was so young and died tragically, his spirit might still be looking for his loved ones. The string tied on the surviving members would ensure that my brother's spirit would not be missing and wandering endlessly. The strings should be there for at least three to seven days. You cannot CUT the ties that bind. Instead, the strings should be unknotted or let them fall off naturally from the writs.

This really was a lot of information for a fourth-grader to digest. Perhaps, had I known how the strings tied around my writs would help my brother find his way, I would have been more adamant that you didn't cut them off. I don't blame you for any of this. Just like me, you didn't know the significance of it. How could you know? You thought you were trying to make me comfortable.

The only thing you could have done was to discreetly ask other refugee students in other grades and class if they knew anything about the strings. Maybe, you just thought it was some homemade jewelry. Maybe, because I wasn't being assertive when I answered you, you didn't it was a big deal. Still, it would have been nice if you would have thought about these things before you acted. Your intention was right, but the method was wrong. I was in the middle of this whole mess. This mess left my mom hurt and grieving, she was afraid my brother's soul would remain missing and wander aimlessly.

Emerging from the Cocoon: Middle School Angst

Seventh grade to eighth grade
1988-1989

The end of Reagan's presidency marked the beginning of the Bush-Quayle Administration. Three major events that marked the beginning of the Bush presidency. In March of 1989, President Bush dealt with the biggest oil spill disaster caused by Exxon Valdez. Internationally, an historical event unfolded with the end and dismantling of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989. Bush authorized United States to invade Panama in December 1989. The goal was to depose the Panamanian dictator, Manuel Noriega.

In the entertainment world, Michael Jackson still enjoyed great popularity. "Faith" by George Michael and Chicago's "Look Away" dominated the top 100 billboards. "Don't Worry, Be Happy," was a catchy tune that almost every American knew the lyrics to. American families tuned in to *The Cosby Show*, one of the most popular television show of its time. The top grossing movies of 1988-89 were *Who Killed Roger Rabbit?*, *Coming to America*, *Batman*, and *Rain Man*. *Rain Man* won the best picture award in 1989.

The late 80s was still combating the "War on Drugs". The former first lady, Nancy Reagan coined the term, "Just Say No" as a slogan in schools across the nation. The U.S. had a drug crisis, especially with cocaine and crack, beginning in the early 80s and well into the early 90s. With the rise in intravenous drug use, the HIV and AIDS epidemic continued. In 1988, Ryan White, an Indiana teen became a national spokesperson for AIDS education. World AIDS Day was observed for the first time in December of 1981.

Vignette 8 - “Math and the Bleeding Nose”

We were taking a math test that day. I hate math, especially seventh grade math. Still, I tried very hard on the test; I needed to pass it. I was concentrating very hard when all of a sudden, I felt a big thump on the back of my chair. I turned around to confront the kicker. I couldn't confront the suspect because her eyes were cast down focusing on her test. I turned my attention back to my test and the kicking started again.

Repeat. I turned back again, this time she smiled at me. “Can you please stop kicking my chair?” I asked her and I went back to work.

Thinking the issue was resolved; I went back to taking my test. Repeat. Kick. Repeat. This girl was able to kick my chair when my teacher was not looking. My teacher sat at her desk while the students were testing, so of course, I was being bullied and she was oblivious to it.

I finally had enough! I went straight to the teacher and told her what had happened. I'm not sure if she believed me or not, but she simply told the girl who was sitting behind me to “cut it out”.

Finally, I can go back to my test now, I thought. No. The kicking became more aggressive and frequent. The insistent kicks felt almost as a dare to retaliate. I turned around again to face the bully.

“I asked you nicely to stop kicking my chair; now I'm telling you to stop it!” I told her slowly and softly through clenched teeth.

“So, what you go do 'bout it?” she mocked my English.

Seriously, after eight years in the United States, I knew that my English was close to be fluently. Just because I have black hair and brown skin does not mean that I am incapable of speaking English correctly. Ooh, I was livid! Mocking my English was what broke the camel's

back; there was no trying to reason with me at this point. This experience transported me back to the first time I learned the lesson of “us and them”. I did not want to go there, but at that moment; I found myself “there”.

I had enough; I was going to take matters into my own hands. The pent-up years of frustration concentrated on my right fist and I swung with all my might.

It hit her square on her piggish nose. Her nose bled and she cried straight to the teacher. I was sent to the office. I sat there in the office, feeling liberated. I smiled and felt no regret. I didn’t even worry about my parents. I was pass caring. I was no longer scared. I was no longer silent. I was no longer sitting. I stood up. I found my courage to rise.

Vignette Response 8 - Dear Bully in the Making

I bet you were surprised when I punched your nose and spilled blood. Bam! Bam! I warned you, but you refused to listen. Well, you picked on the wrong “foreigner” this time. What gives you the right to harass me? Is it because I look different from you? Perhaps, you just wanted to exert your control and dominance over me. Why me? What did I ever do to you? Did you actually think that I was somehow inferior to you?

Just to let you know, my parents raised me well. When I got home that day, my parents gave me a big thrashing for putting my hands on you. So, how does this work, you were bothering me, kicking my chair, but I was the one who got in trouble? I was minding my own business, just taking a math test. YOU were the one who didn’t know how to keep your leg to yourself. You do understand, why, I did what I did? No, you will not tell my story. I will tell you how it is.

You see, in my mind, if I let you treat me this way, then, you will never know when to stop. You would have continued to bother me, because I allowed it to happen. I was disturbed

that you had no qualms in harassing me mercilessly. I mean, how would you feel if someone else did that to you? Would you have fought back? If you can fight back, then, why can't I fight back? Do you see where I am coming from? What is the difference between you and me?

What is it; did my English accent bother you? You are better than I am, because you're white and I'm not? You have more rights and dominance because your family has more money and status and mine has little wealth and resource? You get to decide and dictate, while I have to accept and follow your order. I don't think so.

Of course, I felt ashamed for my violent behavior. This was not my proudest moment. I felt cornered and trapped. Just to remind you, I did ask you to stop, more than once. I asked the teacher to intervene, but she didn't. I felt that I had no choice, but to put matters in my own hand. Do I regret it? I can't say I do. Given a second chance, I think, I would have done the exact same thing. It worked.

dYou never bothered or harassed me after that day. I think I got my point across and you learned your lesson. You knew that I was never going to be a victim. I wasn't accepting the position of inferiority. Just because you labeled me that way, doesn't mean you were right. You moved quickly to another target and messed with another minority student. Someone who was also different from you, someone who didn't fight back. You liked them like that, the ones that were quiet and submissive. Well, sadly, I can't fight everyone's battle. If you treated others as your equal, then, no one would need to go to battle. You stay on your side and I'll stay on mine.

Vignette 9 - "Escaping to Spain and Africa"

Social Studies was my favorite class in Middle School. I loved learning about geography and the many countries and its people. I will always remember a project that I really enjoyed doing. We were supposed to write to an embassy to ask for information about its country,

culture, and people. I chose Spain because I wanted to learn about their land, customs, and the language. We would also get extra points on the project if we actually received a letter or souvenir from our chosen country. That became my mission; I wanted Spain to respond!

Three weeks later, a package bearing my name arrived. My teacher gave me her congratulatory smile and handed me the mail from the long awaited, far away country of Spain. I was beyond excited. I ripped into it and read the letter as if it were an acceptance letter to an Ivy League university. My smile was so contagious; my teacher smiled proudly at me and publicly praised me for my work. That particular day, I, Sam Souriya, was the only student who received a package.

I was proud of the miniature flag, colorful country brochure, and a traveler's map that was included in my response letter. This one project opened the vast world to me. I wanted to travel the world, learn new languages, and partake in the different customs and culture. This one, simple project shaped me into the woman that I am today. I realized that being from another country was actually cool; I began to feel comfortable in my own skin. It was okay that I did not look like the other students, spoke another language, or was born in a different country.

Geography class was my escape. It was my vacation from reality, my sliver of paradise, a place I felt completely relaxed and free. The textbook became my virtual passport. If only in my head, I traveled the world often and I enjoyed every journey. I felt safe, welcomed, and at home. Geography class became "my home" away from home. I loved geography; it made me strong and confident.

In Geography, the mainstream students and I were at equal footing. Well, if I were honest, I would admit to having a slight advantage. At the time, I was the only student who had actually traveled and lived in two different countries. I could actually speak two languages

fluently and most students only spoke English. I had a different tradition and culture and my peers had the same. I ate American food at school, but when I went home, a confetti palate of exquisite cuisine awaits me. I became more self-assured and stronger when I was learning about the world around me.

Second semester I begged to be in Spanish class. I continued to take Spanish throughout high school and college. Seventh grade geography class inspired me to research more about different languages, countries, people, and cultures around the world. My love for learning about different countries and languages inspired me to eventually volunteer as a Peace Corp English teacher in Benin, Africa.

Vignette Response 9 - Dear Mrs. P.

Did you know that you were my favorite teacher? I never had the opportunity to share this with you. I enjoyed your class because you made it come to life. I learned so much from you because you made it relevant to me. I actually participated in class discussion because you valued my unique background knowledge. Thank you for sharing your love of geography and learning with me. I smiled; reminiscing on how one geography project influenced my life choices. You don't know this, but you definitely left a lasting impression on me all these years later.

I became an avid world traveler because of you. I was fortunate enough to visit, study, volunteer, and trained in thirty countries. I became a Spanish teacher for seven years because you nudge me to learn Spanish way back in the seventh grade! I took two groups of my eighth grader students to Spain because you showed me how to bring real life application in the classroom. I spent two glorious years in Benin volunteering because you encouraged me to be

curious and learn more about other people and their cultures. You always said, “Understanding self involves the understanding of others.”

I appreciate how you saw me as an individual person. You asked me questions and never assumed anything about me. You genuinely cared about my well-being. You understood me without me having to say anything. You had the discernment to give me space and time when I didn’t want to talk or interact. You did not allow my classmates to laugh at me when I gave the wrong answer. You would shoot them down with one of your deadly glares. You insisted and encouraged students to work together and work with different partners frequently. You held me responsible for my own learning. You pushed me to overcome my struggles and educational challenges that I unwittingly placed upon myself. What I love the most about you was that you were genuine and never fake. I wished I had more teachers like you in my life.

It pains me to admit that you were the only teacher that had such a profound and positive impact on my educational journey. Now, as a teacher, I often refer back to you when I teach and interact with my students. You were the epitome of excellence in teaching. I strive daily to acquire the qualities that made you so great. My goal as a teacher is to inspire life-long learners and to have a positive lasting impact on my students. Mrs. P, you have done that to me and see how far I’ve soared!

Vignette 10 - “Attention to Detail”

I was never certain if some of my teachers really knew or cared about me as a student. Was I simply one of many in their teaching careers? I didn’t expect much from my teachers because experience in elementary years have taught me that most teachers just didn’t know anything about my country. I doubt that many of my teachers even knew where Laos was geographically located.

I can confidently say that my teachers just knew I was from “some Asian country”. During the mid 80s and early 90s “some Asian country” often referred to the Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Vietnam War highlighted and heightened the awareness of Vietnamese conflict, people, and government. However, this familiarity with Vietnam did not justify grouping all black hair, non-speaking English, and light brown people into one country. I hated that some of my teachers always asked me about Vietnam. Like, what am I supposed to know? Did they not know that the Vietnam War affected, displaced, and disrupted neighboring countries, such as Laos and Cambodia?

“Welcome to class, I am glad to have you in my class,” my teacher welcomed me. “This is the first time I have a student from Vietnam, and I am so excited to learn from you,” she proclaimed.

I just smiled up at her. I didn’t have the heart to correct her and the teachers before and after her. This was getting old. The oblivious teacher assumed I didn’t speak enough English because I didn’t reply.

“It’s okay, sweetie. You just sit right there. I understand, don’t worry about anything,” she assured me. I knew she felt bad and it was not intentional; so, I spoke up.

“Actually, I’m not from Vietnam. I am from Laos,” I gently corrected her.

“Oh, I see. Well, where is Laos? I have never heard of it,” she confessed softly.

“Laos is a country that borders Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia,” I schooled her uncomfortably. My teacher didn’t stop there, she fetched for more information.

She asked, “So, can you speak Vietnamese or do you speak another language? Just like many countries in South America speak Spanish?”

Clearly, she was not my geography teacher. A continent and a country are two very different things. I didn't understand why my teacher couldn't see the obvious difference in our physical appearances. Did she not see it? The obvious difference in our accents, did she not hear it? The obvious, maybe not so obvious for her, difference in our last names, did she not read it?

Is this the case of "all Asians" look the same? No, I am an individual. I have my own appearance, language, and customs and culture. Stop. Stop, painting me with one big, lazy stroke. Paint me with the distinctive and complexity detail that I am.

Vignette Response 10 - Dear Future Teachers

I'm not even going to pretend that I'm not fuming mad. Whew! It's getting hot in here from the steam that is escaping my ear. The one thing that annoys me, no, let me correct myself, what **ANGERS** me the most is when teachers assume they know me. No, you know nothing about me. Please keep this in mind, the next time you have a refugee kid in your class.

1. Please know my name. Put effort into learning how to say it.
2. Be curious about me and ask me about my country, language, and culture.
3. I am an individual; don't you dare stereotype me.
4. Do not water down my curriculum because you feel sorry for me.
5. When I am silent, it doesn't mean I'm ignoring you.
6. It takes more time to process what you say; I have 2 or 3 languages in my head.
7. I get hungry and tired in the afternoon because I can't stomach the school lunch.
8. My parents care about my education; they just don't know how to communicate it.
9. I do want to participate in class or join clubs; I'm just scared because I lack the language confidence.

10. Do not treat me differently from the rest of the class; don't give me a "crutch".
11. Find a way to reach out to my parents consistently; no, email does not count.
12. Do a quick study about me before you actually meet me in class.
13. Make me feel WELCOME in class without singling me out.
14. Not all refugees are uneducated and poor in their country.
15. Understand that I struggle to "fit in" in both host country and my home country.
16. Sometimes, I don't know how to ask for help.
17. I can lash out sometimes because I'm under extreme stress.
18. I may suffer from some traumatic event that I carry to school.
19. Don't give me a list of things to buy today and expect to get it tomorrow. My parents have to wait until they get pay first.
20. Do not get me or another Asian student's name and grade mixed up. We are two different people.

Vignette 11 - "Slumber Party"

My friend continued to pester me, "Well, Sam Souriya, can you spend the dang night or not?" She was getting visibly upset with me. She followed me quickly to the bus; and she wouldn't let me in the bus until I answered her. I turned around to face her and hesitated to give her the bad news.

"Girl, I don't know. I have to ask my parents. You know how they are," I replied sheepishly. I hated having to tell her "no" all the time. Shoot, if I were her, I would be upset with me too. She's been asking me to spend the night since we were in the middle school. It's not as if we haven't been friends since forever. Our families even know each other, for crying out loud!

“Sammmm, please! They’ll be other girls too and your mom knows their parent too,” she argued. “I can even ask my mom to call yours, would that help?”

Hmmm, I don’t think so, I thought to myself. How in the world, am I going to broach this topic with my mom? None of my older sisters ever went to a slumber party. They were too smart too even ask my parents about this. Why would mom let me go to a slumber party, when she never even entertains the thought with my other siblings? Am I asking from trouble?

Mom flat out said, “No.” She didn’t give her explanation. She was done with this discussion and I would be wise to heed her final answer. Her dismissal and finality of my request left me sad and frustrated. I wiped my traitorous tears away and looked desperately at my dad. If Dad wanted a “best father award”, now would be the time to claim his prize.

Dad peered at Mom and cautiously suggested, “It’s not like we don’t know the family. What’s the harm in her spending the night at her friend’s house?” Mom shot him a murderous look demanding him to stop his nonsense and interference. Dad ignored the hit and pressed on while he still had the courage.

“Look, I think, you’re too hard on her. She needs friends and this is normal here in American. Kids do these things all the time. Besides, Sam already has two sisters in college; she won’t go astray,” he finished thoughtfully.

Mom shot back angrily, “Well, my KIDS don’t do this all the time. Last, I check, she is still my daughter. You are spoiling her!” She looked away from him and threw darts at me with her eyes.

“Mom, relax. Dad’s right, don’t make this a big deal,” Vanna and Nessa rushed in. Gaining courage when they realized dad was on my side. They decided to gain up on Mom and

mention the many reasons why attending a harmless slumber party will not be my ruination or the death of me.

“Sam’s different and you have to “give and take” with her, mom,” Vanna advised carefully. “She has a bit of a rebellious streak, unlike me and Ness,” she continued. “You have to understand, she was only four when she came here; so, of course, she’s going to be a little bit “Americanized.””

Vignette Response 11 - Dear Refugee Students

Give your parents or parent a break. They love you. They want to give you all the opportunities in life, that’s why; they immigrated or escaped here to the States. They want to help you and understand you, but sometimes, they just don’t know how. Remember, you are not the only one that is learning and adjusting to this new country. Be patient with them. Remember, just like you, they are learning too.

I know and understand how difficult it is for you to constantly live in two cultures. It doesn’t help that the two cultures are so vastly different, like and day and night. When I first came to United States, I loved my Lao culture and really didn’t have any problems. It wasn’t until I was in high school that I wanted to me more “Americanized”. This is very normal. Some students go through this struggle at an earlier or later stage.

My parents were strict and they didn’t allow the girls to go out after dark. I don’t know what they were so scared of. The only thing I was allowed to do was to work, but that’s because they knew where I was! I couldn’t do anything and that made me not want to have friends, especially White friends. I was embarrassed that my parents were treating me as if I belonged in the Medieval period. “A girl or woman can’t do this, can’t do that,” was their “broken record”

every time I asked to go anywhere. I couldn't even go to the movies until I was a senior in high school. Can you believe that? So, when I say, I understand; I really do understand.

What has really helped me with my parents was having sisters that really supported me. They would tell me if I'm wrong or if I've pushed my parents too hard. I talked to my parents too. In the beginning, it was extremely difficult for them to understand me. I heard a lot of "No, you can't" before I began to hear, "yes, go ahead, but I'm not happy with it." It took a while, but through lots of talks, arguments, shed tears, and compromise, they began to accept me more.

I'll be the first to admit that I was not an angel with my parents. I learn how to pick my battles wisely. I didn't ask them to go out or do things with my friends all the time. I made them trust me first. Then, slowly, I would ask respectfully for what I wanted. I never completely turned my back on my native culture, customs, or traditions. I learned how to move back and forth from two cultures as I see fit. Pointers, I also learned that I was more successful with my parents if I asked them in my native language.

Please remember that your parents really love you. They sacrifice so much for you to be here, in America. Talk and spend quality time with them, so they don't feel like they are losing control or losing you. It is scary for them because they don't know how to raise you in two different cultures. They know one culture. That culture is safe for them. That culture is their whole identity. That culture is home.

Vignette 12 - "The List"

I loved my home economics class. It was an easy "A" class, so I thought. All you had to do was learn how to cook, bake, and sew. It can't be that hard. Well, I didn't know how to cook or sew, so I'm definitely in the right class.

“Class, we will be starting another project,” my teacher said enthusiastically. “We will be sewing pillows and I want you to start looking for some patterns that you might want to do.”

“When are we doing this and what do we need to buy Ms.?” an overachieving student asked.

Here we go again, I thought. Man, where do these people have all this money? I was talking quietly to myself again. I barely have lunch money. Okay, let me clarify something here. I actually get “free lunch” because my parents qualified for it. I get free lunch, but I don’t eat school lunch because I hate it. I don’t ever like what they serve. The food is so bland and I’m just not used to eating American food. So, I just starve or when I do have money, I buy things from the vending machine. I was trying to figure out when my parents would get their paycheck when my teacher’s voice interrupted my concentration.

“Well, I’ve made a list for you on this sheet here and you can start the project when you get your materials.” She passed out the worksheet. I quickly peeked at it and winced at the list. I don’t even know most of the materials that are on here. Hmm..I wonder how much all this will cost me.

“I don’t get pay until Friday, you’ll have to wait.”

“MOM, I can’t wait until Friday, today is Monday and most kids will start their project tomorrow. I can’t wait until next Monday to start the project,” I was almost in tears pleading with my mom.

“What am I supposed to tell my teacher now?” Raising my hand in an exasperated gesture, I continued. “I’m sorry teacher, I can’t do the project yet, I don’t have any money to buy the materials.” The moment the offending words came out, I wished I could have just taken them back and shoved them down my throat.

Mom flinched with the mockery and tone of my statement. She was close to losing her patience with me. Shame and regret etched her dejected face.

Clearing her throat, she asked softly, “Do you think, I want you to wait that long?”

I wisely noted the calmness and restraint she displayed.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I tried to comfort her. “I know you’re doing all that you can,” I apologized. I was contrite and Mom knew it.

“It’s okay, just, next time think before you speak,” she advised me. She smiled softly and an idea popped in her head. “Maybe, I don’t have to pay for this bill just yet. We can go ahead and buy your stuff first and I’ll just be a little late for the other stuff.”

“Are you sure, Mom?” Guilt laced my question. “It’s okay, Mom, don’t worry. I’m sure that I can work it out with my teacher.”

Vignette Response 12 - Dear Mrs. S.

I enjoyed your class. It was a fun class for me in the eighth grade. Who wouldn’t enjoy hands on projects all the time? It was also a very expensive class too. We always had to buy materials for projects. Many of your students didn’t have any problems with this. But, some of us students did struggle to buy the materials in a timely manner.

Some families live paycheck to paycheck. My family did. I dreaded getting “the list” whenever we started a new project. My mom always tried to buy the materials the next days, but sometimes we just couldn’t do it. It wasn’t feasible; she had to pay the bills first. When the pressing bills came before my school project, it made my mom sad because she felt that she failed me. It made me very sad because she was sad. I was the cause of her unhappiness and worries. I hated having to tell you the next day that I didn’t have my materials yet.

I was embarrassed because I couldn't start my project yet. I sat completing worksheets while my classmates were happily working on the fun project. I felt like I was in "time out" sent to a corner to sit out my punishment. Not being able to do the project with the class until I bought my materials was as good as having a sign around my neck, that declares, "the have nots." Secretly, I always felt better when other students couldn't work on the project too because they forgot the materials at home or they didn't buy it yet. At least, I didn't feel so left out, so singled out.

You were kind to me. You never asked questions. You graded me fairly and never docked points off for being late. I thank you for your understanding. I was just thinking if there was another way for teachers to help a student like me in this situation. Maybe, there should have been some materials already available for students like me. I'm not saying that I should get free things or materials to do my projects. I'm not saying that at all. I should pay for them, just like my classmates.

Maybe, if I you had some extra material already, I could use them. When I was able to buy the materials, I could replenish what I used earlier. In this way, I wouldn't have to feel so embarrassed and I could do the projects with the class. Again, maybe you didn't have extra materials too. I know that teachers don't make a lot of money too.

You probably knew that my family was struggling financially. I'm surprise you didn't pull me aside and ask me anything. I'm not sure if I would have told you anything, if you did ask. I appreciate that you graded me fairly. Again, I both loved and hated your class. Loved it because it was about doing projects galore! But, I hated because I was poor and it was broadcasted to the whole class.

Vignette 13 - “The Yellow Brick Road”

When I was in the eighth grade my oldest sister, Vanna, was the first one from our family to go to college. Both my parents went to college in Laos, but Vanna, was the first child to do the unthinkable for our family in America. A college degree for one child meant a college education for our whole family. It was a family business, a family’s honor, a family’s chosen vehicle out of poverty.

I remember at the time, college seemed so distant and foreign to me. I didn’t fully comprehend why Vanna needed to go to college. I just knew that she was in school trying to build a better future. Going to college was something my parents expected all of us to do. There was no choice, no compromise, no plan B.

Vanna didn’t go far for college; she still lived at home. I knew she took out student loans and had some Pell Grant to finance her education. She also saved some money from her summer job to help her buy textbooks. Our parents didn’t have the luxury of setting aside college funds for their seven young children. The huge financial burden did not allow them to even open up a savings account.

“Man, college is so expensive, and where are you getting all this money,” I wondered aloud.

“We just have to take out student loans, there’s really no other choice. It’s either that or don’t go to school and end up like Mom and Dad,” Vanna concluded dejectedly.

I rolled my eyes and retorted back, “Well, that sucks big time! I don’t want to borrow anybody’s money and then have to pay it back. No way, I’m not that stupid!”

“What is stupid is getting paid minimum wage, if you would just work harder and get a job that pays a salary. In the end, it’s worth it. It’s like an investment in your future, Sam.” My

sister shook her head as if she wanted to shake some sense into me. “Whatever, you don’t understand anything; you’re just a kid,” she sighed and gave up on me. She walked away from me with her student loan in tow.

My parents always reminded us children that they escaped from Laos, so that we can find our own path to a brighter future. They did their job. Our job was to want more in life. So, going to college for Vanna was a challenge, a duty. She knew she had to graduate and find a better job; one that didn’t pay hourly minimum wage; she needed a salary. Our parents had hourly paying jobs because they didn’t have a choice. They had to start from scratch and take any jobs they could. Vanna was determined that her sisters not have the same experience as our parents.

At an early age, I knew I needed to follow my sister’s footsteps on the yellow brick road. You see, when Vanna started college that fall, she took me with her on this unprecedented journey. Never once did I stray from the paved yellow brick road. The yellow brick road became the “rite of passage” for the four remaining younger sisters to travel the same path. The same path that included a substantial amount of student loan.

Vignette Response 13 - Dear Vanna

Yes, I owe you! You were our family’s pioneer exploring uncharted territories. I don’t even know what my future would have been had you not gone to college. You took that leap of faith and paved the way for all of us. I know I don’t say this often, but I am very proud of you. You obliterated the prefix from impossible and made everything so possible.

It must have been so hard for you to be the first. I wonder if you had a trusted counselor to help you navigate all the necessary financial and application forms for college. No doubt, it was difficult to do all this without asking Mom and Dad for help. Even if they wanted to help

you, they didn't have the language, experience, knowledge, or means to assist you. At eighteen, you did all this by yourself. I commend you for that.

Even though, going to college was an expectation in our household, you could've rebelled and simply not go. I always wondered how life would be if you just graduated and found a job. Where would the rest of us be? Sure, Mom and Dad would have been disappointed, but you would have worked and contribute to the family's finance. Just like Don, he wasn't able to continue his education after high school; and that's okay, he turned out just fine. Still, I think it would have been harder for Nessa or the rest of us girls to go to college if you hadn't blindly taken that first step.

Looking back at some of your high school friends, there weren't many refugee kids in the late 80s that went on to college and received a bachelor's degree. If I'm not wrong, I think you were the only refugee student that went to college from your high school. Your friends went to work to help their family out and some married at a young age. Actually, continuing your education was definitely not the norm.

I honestly think that some of the refugee students didn't go to college because they believed they would not be successful and graduate. Some of them came to America when they were in their teens; so, obviously, they acquired basic English and not academic English. Most of them probably received little help from their teachers and counselors. As you and I both know, none of them had money and resources to further their education. It is easily understandable why many refugee students in the mid-late 80s just joined the work force and sidestep the college path.

After 18 years, we bought a brand-new house. The family had three college graduates and two just started their college years. I am very proud that it took our family almost two

decades to break the cycle of poverty when we started with nothing in a foreign land. This was our American Dream. All this was possible, because you went off to college.

The Soaring Butterfly: High School Journey

Ninth grade to twelfth grade
1990-1993

George H.W. Bush was still the U.S. President. The most significant event that affected people globally and nationally was the end of The Cold War through the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then, in 1991, because Iraq invaded Kuwait, the U.S. responded with Operation Desert Storm. Clarence Thomas became the second African American man to become a Supreme Court justice under the Bush administration. In April of 1992, President Bush was heavily criticized for his response to the Rodney King riots that broke out in Los Angeles. On November 3, 1992, Bill Clinton defeated the incumbent Republican president, George H.W. Bush, and denied him his second presidential term.

Bill Clinton's Presidency began with two major crises. On February of 1993, Islamist terrorist bombed New York's World Trade Center. This attack killed six people and injured at least a thousand people. Just two days after this, David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidian, began his fifty-one day standoff with the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Tobacco. The siege in Waco, Texas finally ended on April 19, 1993. At the end, seventy-five people lost their lives.

Digital toys and video games were popular in the early 90s. Super Mario World and Mortal Kombat were just a few of these video games. Animated films began to increase during the early 90s, films such as, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Tom and Jerry: The Movie*. The most notable movies during 1990-1993 were *Ghost*, *Pretty Woman*, *Home Alone 1-2*, *Terminator 2*, and *Silence of the Lamb*.

Many girl and boy bands started in the early 90s. Girl bands such as Destiny's Child, TLC, and Dixie Chicks had hits. The boy bands that were popular at the time were Boyz II Men and New Kids on the Block. Whitney Houston became a household name with her hit song, *I Will Always Love you*. Michael Jackson was crown "The King of Pop" in the 90s.

Vignette 14 - "Don't You Know Math?"

Like most students, I hated math with a passion. I dreaded going to high school because of math. My older siblings had warned me about a particular math teacher. As luck would have it, he was going to be my Geometry teacher. There was no avoiding math, Geometry, or his class.

I went to class with positive thoughts. He wasn't a bad teacher at all. I actually liked Mr. K. He was hard on the students and I appreciated that. I was used to that because my parents always had high expectations and standards for me. I was beginning to enjoy Geometry. Then, the unthinkable happened.

"Did you guys even do your homework?" Mr. K asked the class. His voice did little to hide the disgust and disdain he had. He got up slowly from his desk and made his way to the chalkboard. "Sam, what is the answer for the next question?" he interrogated me.

"Umm, I don't know Mr. K., I didn't understand the assignment. I don't know how to do it," I gulped my admission. I was so scared and nervous; I'm surprised my unsteady voice was even audible. Unexpectedly and out of nowhere, I saw a flying chalkboard eraser across the room. Thankful, it did not hit any of the students. The whirlwind activity and aimless chattering in the classroom came to a screeching halt and we can literally hear the Mr. K getting red face mad.

“What do you mean; you don’t how to do this? Don’t you know math? Aren’t you supposed to be good in math? You’re Asian; you’re supposed to know math!” he yelled out his frustration. “I don’t get it, both your sisters were good in math and you struggle to understand basic math,” he accused me loudly and very publicly. He dismissed me then went searching for another victim.

I know that he didn’t intentionally throw the chalkboard eraser at me. However, I think I was embarrassed and a bit traumatized for not know how to answer a stupid math question. At the time, I just wanted to dig a hole, bury myself there, and just simply disappear. I hate that he had to stereotype me and assume things about me just because of my skin color. Throughout my school years, I cringed when teachers assume or expect things about their students based on their race and ethnicity.

From that moment on, I shut down when it came to math. My brain would automatically refuse to try to solve math problems or anything dealing with numbers. I would freeze. I believed that I was deficient in doing basic math. I continue to struggle with math and numbers throughout high school, college, and even postgraduate work.

Vignette Response 14 - Dear Mr. K.

I don’t know what to say to you. I’m no longer mad. I don’t feel anything anymore. It’s almost as if I’ve erased the experience from my memory. Perhaps, this is the reason I feel so indifferent in this letter to you. I remember that my older siblings liked you as a math teacher. So, I recognize that you are a good teacher. I never had any bad experience with you, except for that one incident. If I had the courage that day to talk to you, I would say these things.

Please don’t compare me with my sisters. All my life, I’ve been compared to them. Telling me that I can’t be basic math, made me feel stupid and ashamed. Then, to continue and

blame me because I couldn't answer your question was not even fair. But the thing that bothered me the most was the fact that YOU expected all Asians to know math. So, I don't even like being compared to my siblings, how would I feel being compared to a whole race?

Most students cringe when they are admonished so publicly. I'm not a snowflake; so, I can handle it. But, to have the chalkboard eraser being thrown in mid-air and yelled at in class at the same time, that was too much. That day was traumatic for me. I don't want to place the blame at you, but I do associate math with you; yelling, stressed, and freezing up.

Maybe, you just had a very bad day. These things happen and it's unfair to judge you based on this action. It could have happened to anyone and not just me. I just want to say that I forgive you, because I know you probably felt bad about the incident too. What I learn from this whole experience is that even good teachers can have a negative impact on a student's educational journey. I believe in the goodness of people. I was taught to give people a chance because I truly believe that people are inherently good. The fact that my siblings like you proves that you are an effective teacher.

After that day, I completely shut down when it involved math. I had to learn how to disassociate negative and stressful feelings from math. With time, I accomplish that. I chose to forgive you, just as I have chosen to give math a chance.

Vignette 15 “My Children Sick, No Go School”

“Wake up,” as I shook the twins out of their sleeping slumber. “Shhh...” I pressed my finger to my lips. Quietly, I told them the agenda for today, “Let's ditch school today, it's Friday.” It was an understanding among the three of us that Mondays and Fridays were our early and extended weekend!

“We’re gonna get in trouble and I have a test today in English,” Mani wisely reminded me. I was the older high school sister and she was still in middle school.

“So, shut up! If you’re scared then you freakin’ go to school, be a good little girl and take the test; and I’m gonna enjoy myself with Sam at home,” her twin barked backed.

“Stop, yelling,” I whispered quickly. “Vanna and Vanessa will hear us and we’re gonna get a good beating soon,” I warned them. “Shh...listen to me, same routine, follow my lead.”

The three of us would get dress to go to school slowly. Then we would walk to the bus stop, but always eye the house to see when everyone else left for the morning. We got off the third bus stop and walked very slowly home. By that time, there were no cars in front yard. Jackpot! We had the house all to ourselves.

We even have had our own job to do when we would skip school. My job was to be “Mrs. Souriya” and I had to call the school. The twins’ job was to clean the kitchen and prepare things for me to cook raman noodles.

“Okay, do I sound like Mom or an adult?” I asked them.

“No, dummy, you can’t speak good English. You got to pretend like you can’t speak English to make it believable, use broken English,” Kao rehearsed me.

“Maybe, you should call, since you know how it’s done,” I suggested sarcastically.

“No. That’s not my job, plus, you’re the one who wanted to miss school today,” Kao replied, rolling her eyes.

“Both of you, stop arguing! Sam, just call the school, you’re good at it, let’s not waste time. She was ready to enjoy the day off and let the partying start!

“Fine,” I muttered. “Silent...shh...I’m calling now,” I waiting for the other line anxiously. “Hello, yes, call for my children,” I began my charade. Silent. Waiting. Answering.

“Children sick, name Samanta Souriya,” I answered on cue. “She grade 11, not come to school today, she sick. Okay, thank you teacher.”

I hung up the phone with my heart trapped in my throat. Turned to the twins, still, waiting for their critique. The twins busted out laughing and giving me high fives.

“That was so good, Sam!” They flattered me with approval. I did the exact same thing and called the middle school to excuse the twins from being absent. Once that was taken care of, we would just relax and watch soap operas. We would have lunch and indulge in our favorite pastime, gossiping. We spent our free day complaining about school and our teachers.

Vignette Response 15 - Dear Refugee Students

Yep, that was not one of my proudest moments. Okay, I’m simply going to tell you the truth. School was brutal. The twins and I hated school because of many things. We never felt like we belonged there. Other students were mean. Teachers didn’t care or showed that they care about our education. They made us feel like we wouldn’t amount to anything. They gave up on us before they even tried. Our parents were busy making a living that they didn’t notice we staying home being lazy bums. Lastly, ditching school was made easy because the attendance clerk lady got fooled by us. Well, I don’t know that, but maybe she didn’t care to investigate more and make some phone calls. All I know is that, we never got caught.

Now, why should you not skip class like the twins and me? Well, I regret it. The thing is, because I missed so many school days in middle and high school, my grades were not as high as it should be. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I was doing okay, getting mostly As and Bs, but Ds in math, of course. Had I gone to school more consistently, I might have gotten a college scholarship instead of taking out student loans. But, of course, no one told me the importance of GPA and how that can potentially finance your college education. Had I known all this in

middle school, I would have been a straight A student. Well, maybe; I still wouldn't have done well in math, probably.

So, when you just want to give in to temptation and miss school, don't give in. Don't let other extraneous circumstances dictate your actions. Surround yourself with good friends who will motivate and encourage you to come to class. Talk to a trusted adult or teacher at school about your isolation and hatred of school. Please remember that it is okay to ask for help. Sometimes because of extreme stress or traumatic events in your past, seeing a counselor can help you. Talk to your parents about how you are feeling. They deserve to know what is going on in the head of yours. If you have siblings, don't corrupt or be corrupted by your siblings. If you know, it's wrong to miss school, just stand your ground and do the right thing.

Lastly, YOU need to be responsible for your own actions. Own up to your wrongdoing. Admit to yourself that you blame others for not wanting to go to school. No, you didn't go to school because you chose not to go to school. It's not the bully's fault you didn't go to school. It's not your ineffective teacher's fault that you skip school. It's not the difficult curriculum and language barrier that made you ditch school. All the excuses you have in your head were created by you. You will have to be the one to destroy the excuses you gave yourself.

Eventually, one day, I realized that skipping school was harming me and no one else. I fell behind academically, but I fought my way back. I learned how to ignore, handle, and manage my own excuses. I learned that my attitude and actions in school would mirror itself in the real world. I didn't want to spend the rest of my days watching soap operas, gossiping, and sleeping the day away. I didn't want to end up like my parents making minimum wage. I realized that; I changed my thinking and slowly changed my attitude about going to school.

Vignette 16 - “Paying My Dues”

“No, I can’t work this Sunday evening,” I told my boss. She wasn’t happy to hear that. She was desperate because someone called in sick. I was one of her most reliable workers, but I was also a high school kid too.

“But, Sam, I really need you. I have no one else to fill that time,” she explained. “Please, pretty please,” she begged. I hated when she begged. It made me feel uncomfortable. It’s not like I have a choice when I can work, my parents did. I had rules that I had to abide by, if I still wanted to work while I was in high school.

“I told you before I even started working for you, my parents only allowed me to work on Friday evenings, Saturdays all day, and Sundays in the afternoon,” I reminded her of my working condition. “If you make me work today, my parents are gonna make me stop working on the evenings all together,” I told her reluctantly.

Once we were in high school, we all worked to help our parents out financially. We were only permitted to work on the weekends, school breaks, and the summers. All seven children paid their dues. Four of us sisters, worked at Long John Silvers, throughout our high school years. We had to work, but we also had to do well in school. We gave our parents money to help with the bills and to build a new house for us. We got to keep some of the money to pay for our personal things too.

I enjoyed working because I felt a small sense of control over my own life. I liked working for something and seeing “green” every two weeks. It was a sense of pride to see that I didn’t have to depend on my parents for everything. It taught me how to be good with money and the importance of saving.

Working in high school also made me realize how difficult it was to save money when you were making minimum wage. I can finally relate to my parents and see how hard they work and how little and insufficient their earnings were. When my parents came to America, they spoke very little or no English at all. They were on government assistance for the first six months of our arrival. Then, they found low paying, hourly jobs, just to make ends meet. Sometimes, they even worked two jobs sporadically to feed the large family. With seven children under the age of ten, it was extremely difficult for them to get ahead in life.

“Sam, I can’t give you that many hours in the summer,” my boss told me.

“Oh, come on, you know I’m a good worker. I’ve been working with you for three years now,” I pleaded with her. “I need the money. I have to save for a car, senior pictures, and prom dresses. Just think about it,” I conceded reluctantly.

“Fine. You’re right. You have been a good worker and loyal too. I’ll give you as many hours as I can,” she promised slowly. “Just don’t go around and tell other’s you got special treatment,” she smiled.

I gave her a quick hug and replied, “Awesome, thank so much! I got to pay my dues!”

Vignette Response 16 - Dear High School Teachers

You had your share of students sleeping in your class and I know that makes you angry or uncomfortable. Some are dead tired, but still dragged themselves to your class. This is not an ideal situation for the student, but it is the real situation for many refugee students. Family duty is so ingrained in us that everything else is simply secondary. We know that it’s only through education that will break the cycle of poverty. We also know that students working part-time is the only way for some refugee families to make ends meet.

I was lucky that I only worked on the weekends when school was in session. Therefore, working a part-time job had very little impact on my schoolwork. Occasionally, I fell asleep on Mondays if I had to work late on Sunday night. Again, this didn't happen often at all and I am so thankful for that. Perhaps, it is because my parents had many kids to help. So, none of us had to work on school nights. I can't say the same thing for my other refugee friends.

Some of my friends had to work on school nights and they were so tired the next morning. Some of friends dropped out because they were so far behind in school. Others manage to stay in school, but their grades were barely passing. Some were lured by the consistency of incoming money, graduating from high school faded gradually.

I understand that we can't sleep in your class, but can you show us some grace? You can always wake us up softly and write a pass for us to wash our face. Can you also talk to us in private when we happen to turn in a late assignment? Will you allow us to work on the same assignment with our friends? We don't need to work independently all the time. Is it necessary for us to do so many questions for one homework assignment? Would it be possible to abbreviate that assignment? All these are just simple accommodations that will help us greatly. I think some refugee students might come to school more often or stay in school if they didn't feel too behind and just overwhelmed.

Please don't think that this is an excuse or special treatment. We can still meet your high expectations if you would give us some tools. We don't want you to treat us differently from others. Giving us some of these accommodations is just giving us an opportunity to be successful in your class. Most of us want to do well in class; we just need extra time and support. The best thing that you can do to help us is to talk to us. Listen to us. Understand us. Don't assume or judge our family or us. Lastly, care about us, as a person first, then a student. I

promise you, if you can do these simple things, we'll sit up tall and alert in your class, ready to learn.

Vignette 17 - "Finding My Voice"

"What do you think I should do? I have Mr. N for History?" I asked my older sisters for advice. "I already know both of your experiences in his class. So, what do you mean when you say that he's a "racist?" I pressed them for clarification.

"I don't think he's aware of it, but it just seems that he never calls on the Asian kids when we raised our hands," Vanna explained matter-of-factly. "He didn't want to explain things to us or help us with anything. I just stayed out of his way and I didn't have any problems," she advised.

"Yeah, what Vanna said, pretty much describes my experience in his class. He's not mean or anything, but I just feel like he's ignoring my existence in his class," Nessa chimed in her assessment. "Maybe he's not a racist, he just doesn't want to deal with us," she shrugged her shoulders and continued. "I don't know. It's not a big deal, Sam. Just stay in the dang class and keep your mouth shut," she told me what to do.

I gave them both my annoyed look and suspicious eyes, asking them, "Seriously, guys...what kind of advice it that? Stay in the class and be ignored?" I was appalled at my sisters for expecting me to sit there, take it, and not do a dang thing! "Unlike, you two, I happen to like History and I want to learn and do well in that class," I argued.

"Ness, I don't know why she bothers to ask us and then get mad at us," Vanna responded.

"You know, she doesn't listen. Just let her be," said Nessa.

I explained gently, "I'm not mad; I just don't understand why I have to accept all this without doing something about it."

Like a rehearsed choir on cue, they both snapped, “Because not everybody is like you, Sam!”

I didn’t take their advice. I went to the school counselor and asked to have my schedule change. I shared and voiced my concerns. Once, it was said and done, a calmness came over me. I was proud of myself for speaking up. I didn’t want him to be in trouble; but I really wanted to learn about history. Perhaps, even at a young age I knew the importance of taking responsibility for my own learning. I realize that confronting issues don’t necessarily mean there is a right and wrong person. It means having the strength to address the issue and find reasonable solutions for all parties.

Vignette Response 17 - Dear Refugee Students

I know. I’ve been there. I understand you. You hate school. You hate life. You hate everything. You feel trapped like you can’t go there or here. Sometimes you want to say something and stand up for yourself. At other times, you just feel like it’s not worth it and just keep your mouth shut. You don’t fit in here at the school and sometimes, you don’t fit in at home. Your parents get on your last nerves because they don’t know anything. You teachers get on your last nerves because they have no idea what you’ve actually been through.

Throughout your school years, you’ll meet all kinds of teachers. There are good teachers, okay teachers, and “I want a paycheck” type of teacher. I can tell you this, I truly only had one good teacher. Most teachers were okay. So, enough about me and let’s go back to you. I hope you meet teachers that will actually talk to you, teach you, and help you out. So, what should you do if you end up with a teacher who doesn’t even know your name? You can do what I did or you can do what my sisters did. There is no right or wrong way to handle this. There is just only, how do YOU want to deal with this?

If you feel like you can't do anything, then, just sit in class and don't complain. You know you won't get any help from your teacher. Find some friends to help you out, so you can pass the class. Pay attention in class and take good notes. Don't draw attention to yourself and basically just do a lot of independent learning. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is. I just want to keep things real for you.

So, you decide to do something about the situation. First, I hope you are comfortable confronting a problem. You must commit. You can't do things halfway. If you know you are right, then, you have nothing to fear. Just like me, I went straight to the school counselor and shared my concerns. I gave her detail examples from my sisters' previous examples. I wasn't disrespectful or trying to create problem for the teacher. I told her that I really want to learn History and me being moved out of his class would help me achieve that goal. I'll admit that I was a bit of a coward because I didn't talk to the teacher face to face about my fear and concerns. Truth be told, my heart was palpitation rapidly when I was in the counselor's office. I think she heard it too.

Remember, it's okay if you don't speak up. This does not mean you are weak. Sometimes, these things take time. Not everyone will "find their voice" in every situation. You must find "your voice" in your own time and in your own way. There is no right or wrong. My sisters weren't wrong when they kept silent and I wasn't wrong for getting my schedule changed.

Vignette 18 - "Prom"

I walked hesitantly over to talk to Vanna and Vanessa about something that was bothering me. One look at me and my sisters knew. My head was spinning up an unpredictable tornado.

“You watch, Nessa, she’s gonna create a ruckus for mom and dad, again,” Vanna prematurely accused me. “Mark my words,” she emphasized.

“Stop being mean to her, it might be something important,” Nessa offered. They were both waiting and very ready for me. They already knew the usual drill with me.

“Hey, can I talk to you, guys?” I asked quietly. I wanted to hear their thoughts about my dilemma. Even though, I already knew how they would react. I still wanted to practice with them before I confront my parents.

“Oh my gosh, Sam! Are you freakin’ crazy?” My sister seriously questioned my sanity.

“Sam, you cannot expect Dad and Mom to be okay with you going to prom! Even Vanna and I didn’t ask to go to any dances in high school, let alone, prom,” Nessa stated the obvious in disbelief.

“What is so wrong with going to prom? It’s not like I’m going to sleep around just because I went to prom,” I contested angrily. “What the heck, I’m American, but not fully American, nor am I a real Lao either.”

I shook my head in complete confusion and sighed heavily. I was exhausted. I didn’t want to argue anymore. After living in the States for twelve years, I still didn’t know which culture I belong to. Where is home, here, now, or there? Which langue can I best express my thoughts and wants fluently? “I’m tired of not truly “fitting in” anywhere,” I realized, I just uttered that out loud.

“Hey, don’t look so down, Sam. If you really want to go, you know, we will support you,” Vanna tried to console me. “If you want me to help talk to Mom and Dad, you need only ask. Don’t know if it will work, but I’ll try,” Vanna offered generously. I appreciated her

understanding and willingness to help, but presently, that did nothing to move my foot closer to prom.

“Look, you just need to ask Mom and Dad, nicely, in Lao and English,” Nessa suggested. “Don’t be disrespectful and give them your plans, WHO you’ll be with, and your whereabouts at all time, she concluded. “Oh, and don’t forget, expect the worst answer, but hope for the best,” she said finally.

“Hope for the best, huh...in that case,” I trailed off mischievously and my brain was working overtime. My older sisters literally saw the plan emerging in my head.

“Sammi, you better not cause another unnecessary tornado storm in the family!” Vanna warned quickly. She had such little faith in me, I thought to myself. A beautiful long black dress soon invaded my thoughts.

Vignette Response 18 - Dear Refugee Parents

Well, I can’t say that I understand everything that you are experiencing right now. I don’t understand because I’m not a parent. But, I was a very rebellious refugee child, back in days. I turned out okay. I have a very loving relationship with my parents that took years to nurture. Both my parents and I had to learn, understand, adjust, and compromise.

My parents were not there for us because they were always working to provide for the family. That situation made it easier for my siblings and I to get into trouble. Luckily, we never got into real trouble. We were not a perfect family either. Most of the time, my older siblings took care of the younger ones. Still, my parents laid out expectations and rules that we must follow. They expected us to do reasonably well in school and go off to college. Those were their demands. We needed to work to help they pay the bills, but we were only allowed to work on the weekends. Education remained our first priority.

When I was going through my crazy “identity” crisis, they gradually adjusted on how to raise me. My parents let me do things that they never allowed my older siblings to do, but that’s because each child is different. Somehow, they knew that they couldn’t not raise me entirely in the Laotian culture. The stricter they became the more rebellious I became. They learned to give in to me sometimes and stay firm with their beliefs and traditions when it mattered the most. My parents raised me utilizing the buffet line. That is, I get to choose whichever culture I prefer at any situation. Essential, I don’t have to give up one culture just to enjoy another culture. There is no competition between the two cultures; both are equally superior. I can enjoy and live in two cultures simultaneously. For example, sometimes I speak to my parents in both English and Lao in one sentence.

I know it feels uncomfortable and scary to raise your children in the host country’s culture. You must observe, learn, and adjust to your child’s need. Even amongst siblings, there are differences. Sometimes my older siblings will be more “Americanize” in one area; yet, they will behave in a traditionally Lao manner in another area. To their credit, my parents differentiated our upbringing to meet our individualized cultural needs!

Remember that your children love you. It is a time for learning, adjusting, and compromising. The important thing is to continue to talk to your kids. Ask them about their day when you get a chance. Be interested in their friends and life in school. Understand that they may need some outside help and it’s okay to accept help. If you are overwhelmed, seek out help from other family members, friends, and from the refugee community. If you feel comfortable and have a good relationship with your children’s school, talk to a teacher or counselor. In normal circumstance, raising a child is difficult already. Raising a refugee child learning a new

language and constantly caught between two distinctive cultures requires the partnership of the family and school.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and the Future

It was my intent that in writing this autoethnographic account, it would provide valuable insight in the lived experience of refugee students. I wanted to add to the current, but limited educational research on refugee students and their educational experiences and further the discussion on potential factors that may have contributed to their academic successes and challenges. My second goal was to advance my own understanding and reflect on my experience as a refugee student in a public school system and its impact on me as teacher. Keeping these two goals in mind, I strove to provide deeper understandings to these research questions:

In what ways, if any, have my experiences as a refugee student in American public schools influenced my experience as an educator of new comers?

1. What insight could be gleaned from my experience as a refugee student?
2. What factors contributed to challenges and success in my educational journey?
3. Were my interactions with refugee students and teaching practices for these students a direct result of my own experience as a refugee student?

The Butterfly Transformation

In writing and analyzing my vignettes, it became apparent to me that my own understanding, reaction, and acceptance of identity, poverty, and race and racism throughout my educational journey emulated the transformation process of a butterfly. The metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly required four distinct stages. These same stages were also metaphorically present in my vignettes and self-reflected responses.

The creation of a butterfly began with a single egg. Similarly, this was also my path into this world. I was born in Laos in 1975. I had vague memories of my life in Laos or of my brief time in a Thai refugee camp. My family immigrated to United States when I was almost four years old. None of the vignettes reflected my time prior to living in American.

The second stage changed an egg into a caterpillar. Here, the caterpillar's main job was to eat voraciously and stay safe and strong. The caterpillar must also learn how to adapt and hide from potential predators. I was no different from the caterpillar. In my mind, the caterpillar eating mirrored my own "eating and digesting" of my new life, culture, language, and encounter with race and racism. Vignettes in "The Crawling Caterpillar," represented my introduction, education, and experience with identity and racism. I had to ingest "new information" about school, issues of race and racism, and my own identity. The more I learned of my new surroundings, the stronger I became. Vital nutrients were in the form of observation, information, experience, and adaptation of my new life in America.

The third stage of the metamorphosis process transformed the caterpillar into a cocoon. The caterpillar was in the safety net of the cocoon where essential body parts were created to transform it into a butterfly. Although the wings were present, it was not quite ready to fly just yet. Vignettes and self-responses from "Emerging from the Cocoon," reflected my own development of identity, power, and strength. It was in middle school that my essential body parts, my "heart" and "brain" were fully developed. I realized and accepted that I was both, simultaneously, American and Laotian. I gradually persuaded my parents to accept my bicultural identity. I didn't do it with my unsteady wings fluttering immaturity; I did it carefully with my protected, strong wings emerging from the cocoon. It was also in middle school that I started to understand the intersection of class, identity, poverty, and racism. My understanding and

responses to these complicated issues were developed cautiously through my keen observation of my environment and my experience. I knew enough about discrimination, bullying, and racism to react guardedly at school, but I was not strong enough to do anything about it. I had thoughts about how to address the injustice of life, but I still did not have a voice yet. Like the cocoon, I had wings, but I was not ready to fly.

The final stage of the transformation was the birth of a soaring butterfly. The butterfly is now ready to fly and pollinate many flowers in the garden. Vignettes in “The Soaring Butterfly,” symbolized my own transformation from a scared young child learning and adapting to my new world to a confident young woman who was comfortable with my own identity and confident enough to advocate for myself. I was no longer cautious about my responses to identity and racism. My wings were ready to fly and I finally found my voice. I found my voice to talk about my educational journey as a refugee student. The completion of my vignettes gave me a sense of liberation in a metaphorical sense, I wanted to spread my wings and fly. As the butterfly takes flight and pollinate, as many gardens as it can, I too, must share my experience and journey with as many readers as I can.

The Vignettes as Viewed through the Lens of Critical Race Theory

The intent of this autoethnography was to explore, expose, interpret, and address the issues of race, class, poverty, and identity through the lens of CRT and how they played a role in the educational experience of myself as a refugee student. I used four key tenets of CRT to highlight and analyze how race and racism exist in the lived experience of a refugee student in U.S. public school system. These four tenets included: (a) intersectionality; (b) the idea of counter storytelling/experiential knowledge; (c) permanence of racism; (d) the commitment to social justice (See Table 1). My goal of utilizing the CRT’s framework was to reveal the social

and educational disparities between dominant and marginalized groups (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Hence, the vignettes and self-reflective responses of my authentic account of k-12 public school experience were discussed and analyzed through the critical eye of CRT.

Intersectionality

Although the research delved into the issues of race and racism, other factors also contributed to my overall experience with stereotyping, preferential treatment, and conscience and unconscioned judgments. Discrimination or preference was not just limited to race and ethnicity. It included gender, identity, and class. My vignettes showed how the intersection of gender expectations and cultural norms played an important role in my freedom to certain activities. My parents allowed more freedom for my older brother to hang out with his friends or go out late at night. They did not give this same liberty to their girls. Immigrant girls were expected to follow a traditional path; consequently, were held to a stricter set of rules and restrictions than their brothers were (Olsen, 1988; Rumbaut, 1994).

Likewise, class was also a variable when it came to the issue of racism, identity, and power. My parents were lower middle class in the United States. They had to start from scratch. Because my family was working class, the vignettes showed how I felt isolated to fit in with the mainstream student population in middle school and high school. I did not have the right clothes, proper language, or mannerism and etiquette. People, teachers, and students treated me differently because I had little money and I belonged to a lower socio-economic class.

Contrary to our life in the United States, my parents came from upper middle class in their native country of Laos. My mother's side of the family had many politicians who were influential. They had power and privilege. My father was a military man who also enjoyed

having high-powered friends and family connections. Perhaps, this is the reason why they saw poverty as being a temporary situation. They experienced first-hand how their influence, power, and social status were contingent upon the rise of communism and the fall of a monarchy.

In analyzing my vignettes, I wonder if my parents' social standing in the upper crust of Laos society contributed to my success in my educational journey. My parents knew what life was like with money, influence, power, and privilege. They wanted the same thing for us, here, in the United States. Perhaps, that was why they expected all of us to finish high school, graduate from college, and seek higher degrees. It would be very interesting to see in a broader sense, if refugee parents' class/social status in their home country might have an impact on their child's educational perspectives and success.

In researching the issue of race and racism through the lens of CRT, I do believe that the concept of intersectionality can contribute greatly to the existing literature of refugee students and their experience with race, identity, gender, poverty, and racism. The process of assimilation or acculturation (Rumbaut, 1994) also served as an intersection with my other identities. The vignettes have shown that my identity was never limited to just a "refugee". I was also a young girl, who had limited freedom because I was a girl. I was an American-Laotian girl who was grappling with my own identity living in a bicultural world. I was also a poor girl with limited money and resources. I also came from a working-class family trying to move up and improve our social standing by making sure I go to college. All these identities intersected and overlapped to shape my educational journey.

The findings showed that six vignettes and responses highlighted the tenet of intersectionality and its influence on my educational journey. The data revealed how my identity was comprised of multifaceted factors that make up myself as a whole person. Issues of gender,

poverty, culture, language, age, and acculturation intersect to depict the complexity of a refugee student's acceptance of her own identity. Two relevant data showed the impact of poverty, acculturation, and gender collided in my experienced navigating through the U.S. educational journey.

In response to Vignette 11 - "Slumber Party", the data showed how the intersection of my gender affected my parents' decision to give me the freedom to go to slumber party or prom. Because I was a female, my parents placed more restrictions on when and with whom I could hang out with. This limit set on my activities caused me much frustration and embarrassment. I believe that I had little friends because I wasn't allowed to do anything after dark. This caused me to become more introverted and less social in school. Hence, the result was that I felt different, alone, and unwelcome in school. The unintentional consequence of all this was that I did not enjoy going to school.

My parents were strict and they didn't allow the girls to go out after dark. I don't know what they were so scared of. The only thing I was allowed to do was to work, but that's because they knew where I was! I couldn't do anything and that made me not want to have friends, especially White friends. I was embarrassed that my parents were treating me as if I belonged in the Medieval period. "A girl or woman can't do this, can't do that". That was their "broken record" every time I asked to go anywhere. (Vignette Response 11 - Dear Refugee Students)

Table 1 The Vignettes as Viewed through the Lens of CRT

Narrative	Permanence of Racism	Inter- sectionality	Counter Storytelling	Social Justice	Emerging Theme
The Crawling Caterpillar: Elementary School Anguish					
Vignette 1 “What’s in a Name?”			X		Negotiating Identity
Vignette R.1 Dear Phourasani					Negotiating Identity
Vignette 2 “Show and Tell”			X	X	
Vignette R.2 Dear Mrs. J.				X	
Vignette 3 “Us and Them”	X				
Vignette R.3 Dear School Administrators				X	
Vignette 4 “Detour to Kwick Shop”					Family Unit
Vignette R.4 Dear Nessa					Family Unit
Vignette 5 “Meet the Parent”					Family Unit
Vignette R.5 Dear Dad		X			
Vignette 6 “Extra Credit”					Family Unit
Vignette R.6 Dear Mom					Family Unity
Vignette 7 “The Ties that Bind”			X		

Vignette R.7 Dear Ms. H.		X		X	
Narrative	Permanence of Racism	Inter- sectionality	Counter Storytelling	Social Justice	Emerging Theme
The Emerging Cocoon: Middle School Angst					
Vignette 8 “Math and the Bleeding Nose.	X	X			Negotiating Identity
Vignette R.8 Dear Bully in the Making			X		
Vignette 9 “Escaping to Spain and Africa”					Responsibility/Expectation
Vignette R.9 Dear Mrs. P.				X	
Vignette 10 “Attention to Detail”	X	X			
Vignette R.10 Dear Future Teachers	X			X	
Vignette 11 “Slumber Party”		X			
Vignette R.11 Dear Refugee Students					Negotiating Identity
Vignette 12 “The List”					Poverty
Vignette R.12 Dear Mrs. S.		X		X	
Vignette 13 “The Yellow Brick Road”					Family Unit
Vignette R.13 Dear Vanna					Family Unit
Narrative	Permanence of Racism	Inter- sectionality	Counter Storytelling	Social Justice	Emerging Theme

The Soaring Butterfly: High School Journey					
Vignette 14 “Don’t You Know Math?”	X				
Vignette R.14 Dear Mr. K.				X	
Vignette 15 “My Children Sick., No Go School”	X				
Vignette R.15 Dear Refugee Students					Responsibility/ Expectation
Vignette 16 “Paying My Dues”		X			Poverty Responsibility/ Expectation
Vignette R.16 Dear High School Teachers		X		X	Poverty
Vignette 17 “	X				
Vignette R.17 Dear Refugee Students			X		
Vignette 18 “Prom”		X			Negotiating Identity
Vignette R.18 Dear Refugee Parents					Negotiating Identity

My response in Vignette 12- “The List” uncovered how, being poor, I was unable to buy my materials for a school project on time. This financial burden caused me to have undue stressed and embarrassment that interfere with my self-confidence in school. I did not feel confident in school because I knew my family didn’t have money, power, or status. Lacking all these things, clearly influence how I saw myself in relation to other students in school. I was not confident because I belonged to the “have nots”. I didn’t have a voice because I didn’t have power. I struggled with my identity because I didn’t have status.

Some families live paycheck to paycheck. My family did. I dreaded getting “the list” whenever we started a new project. My mom always tried to buy the materials the next days, but sometimes we just couldn’t do it. It wasn’t feasible; she had to pay the bills first. When the pressing bills came before my school project, it made my mom sad because she felt that she failed me. It made me very sad because she was sad. I was the cause of her unhappiness and worries. I hated having to tell you the next day that I didn’t have my materials yet. (Vignette Response 12 Dear Mrs. S.)

Counter Storytelling/Experiential Knowledge

My main goal of writing the vignettes and self-reflective responses was to offer my readers another point of view of my educational experience as it relates to race, racism, identity, power, and poverty. I used counter storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) as a tool to expose and analyze my experience to my readers and myself.

So, what was “my story” counter or opposed to? My whole refugee educational journey experience was the opposite of dominant white students’ educational experience. My story countered that of the mainstream American family, social, and academic culture. My experience

was opposite of those students who were native born American, not a refugee. My educational journey was completely different from students who had wealth, power, and privilege. My vignettes and self-reflective responses counter the experiences of those who have never walked in my shoes. My vignettes and experience were opposed to the storytelling of white culture, beliefs, assumptions, interests, practices, and perceptions that were normal and dominated.

The findings from the vignettes and self-reflective responses suggested the effectiveness of counter storytelling/experiential knowledge in demonstrating how mainstream U.S. public education system interacted with a refugee student relevant to racism, poverty, and identity. The use of counter storytelling legitimized the experience of marginalized group (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Vignettes and self-reflective responses were justified data analyzed to expose racism, conscience and unconscionced bias, and racial stereotypes.

Although all thirty-six vignettes and self-reflective responses were fundamentally counter storytelling, six powerfully illustrated its effectiveness in exposing my experience with racism and dominance of the mainstream culture in the classroom. Three data points were highlighted to further validate the use of counter storytelling as a method to help decrease the frequency of racial disparities in U.S. classrooms.

The response from Vignette 8 - "Math and The Bleeding Nose" described my emotional state when I punched the person who was kicking my chair in Math class. The response illustrated why I felt the need to fight back. I restored power and control back to me through counter storytelling; I was able to challenge the girl on why she thought she could pick on me.

If you can fight back, then, why can't I fight back? Do you see where I am coming from? What is the difference between you and me? What is it; did my English accent bother you? You are better than I am, because you're white and I'm not? You have more rights

and dominance because your family has more money and status and mine has little wealth and resource? You get to decide and dictate, while I have to accept and follow your order. I don't think so. (Dear Bully in the Making)

In Vignette 2 - "Show and Tell," I described how I was embarrassed to bring Raggedy Ann to school and how I didn't want to explain why I didn't have any family photos. This exposed how the teacher projected her own cultural norms in the classroom. Indeed, family photos and favorite toys were expected and normal things that American children had. This was not the case for many newly arrived refugee children.

Ann was my best friend and still, I was too ashamed of her. No, Ann and I didn't belong in the classroom. She is safe at home; I want to be home with her. Taking Ann would just expose her to embarrassment and merciless laughter. No, I couldn't do that to me or Ann. I didn't want my classmates to laugh at me. I didn't want to explain why I didn't have any baby pictures. I didn't want "me" to be the object of the "show and tell" assignment. (Vignette 2 - "Show and Tell")

In the same vein, Vignette 7 - "The Tie That Binds," offered the readers an unfortunate glimpse of how one teacher's lack of cultural and religious awareness and understanding resulted in my additional heartache after the traumatic death of my older brother. Again, this teacher was subconsciously operating in the dominant religious and cultural context; she failed to realize that the dingy strings tied around my wrist bonded me to my culture, my belief, my sacred world.

You'll be more comfortable and I bet it'll make you feel better," she decided. She walked back to her desk and grabbed the frightening scissor. Now let the snipping begin. Each cut was final, like death. Each cut separated me from a blessing of good health and

prosperity. Each cut released me from the protection from the evil spirit. Each cut opened the door to bad omens. (Vignette 7 – “The Ties That Bind”)

Writing the vignettes and responses have been emotionally draining and therapeutic for me. It was not easy to relive some of these negative and bad experiences. In spite of that, counter storytelling was paramount in this study to unearth the permanence/pervasive of racism in a refugee’s student educational journey. I would submit that in this study, it was through narrative, evocative counter storytelling that race and racism were exposed and reflected upon.

Permanence/ Pervasive of Racism

Although I have referred to one of the key tenet of CRT as permanence of racism, I would like to offer my own clarification and understanding of the issue of racism. When I thought of the word, permanence, another word automatically came to my mind, permanent. As an American and a teacher, I found it discouraging to think that the issue of racism in our society and our schools is forever lasting. Anything that was permanent implied that nothing could be done to change the situation. Instead, I would suggest that racism is pervasive. I believe that racism exists and existed in all aspects of our lives, like a disease, it spread to many parts of our lives. However, this does not mean, that racism is here to stay with forever. To me, it means that as a society, we can combat racism with honest conversation, understanding, and counter storytelling. The primary objective of counter storytelling is to help decrease the occurrence of racism in the society and school by offering perspectives of the oppressed and victims of racism. Through this storytelling, empathy can arise.

The findings from the pages of the vignettes and self-reflective responses would suggest that the issue of race and racism throughout my K-12 educational journey was a common occurrence. Similarly, to counter storytelling, permanence of racism was observed in the

majority of pages of my vignettes and self-reflective responses. There were six overwhelming examples of stereotyping, conscience and unconscioned racial bias, bullying, overt and subtle racism. I chose three data analysis to showcase and extrapolate on the range of severity to the subtleness of racism in my classroom experience.

Vignette 3- “Us and Them” showcased racism in its most physical and ugliest form. I believe that most children learn and adopt their parents’ beliefs and behavior. The elementary boys physically and verbally harassing the refugee students had to learn about race, supremacy, power, and privilege at home, their surroundings, or cultural and societal norms. Likewise, I, also had to learn how to understand and adapt to race and racism through family, environment, and society.

Scared as I was, I went blindly to battle with no experience, but adrenalin kicked in and I contributed to the well-being, safety, and survival of the refugee “gang”. In five short minutes, I had learned the rules of “Us and Them”. (Vignette 3 – “Us and Them)

Vignette 15 - “My Children Sick, No Go School” revealed the ease in which I was able to skip school. I started missing classes in high school because the school did not contact my parents. No phone calls were made, nor were there any truancy letters sent home. The attendance person simply took my “excused” phone call at face value. The lack of parental contact led me to surmise that because of my “broken English”, the school did not want the hassle of finding an interpreter or translator to inform my parents. I suspect that had I been a white student who spoke fluent English, there might have been a follow up or confirmation call/letter. The likelihood that white parents were made aware of their child’s attendance issue would have been high. Unfortunately, this was not my parents experience when I was in high school.

“Silent...shh...I’m calling now,” I wait for the other line anxiously. “Hello, yes, call for my children,” I began my charade. Silent. Waiting. Answering. “Children sick, name Samanta Souriya,” I answered on cue. “She grade 11, not come to school today, she sick. Ok, thank you teacher.” I hung up the phone with my heart trapped in my throat. Turned to the twins, still, waiting for their critique. The twins busted out laughing and gave me high fives. (Vignette 15 - “My Children Sick, No Go School”)

Lastly, in Vignette 1 -“What’s In a Name?” the subconscious preference and familiarity of English names of my teacher inflicted unnecessary pain on me. Understandably, my first name was extremely difficult to pronounce. Therefore, she changed my name without my permission. Perhaps, her action could be explained away because she didn’t mean me any harm when she simply shortened my name. I would argue to reject this explanation. I believe she abbreviated my name because she wanted a name that was easy and “mainstream” American. It was to her benefit to call me, “Sam.” Calling me Sam was easy for her to remember and speak. I would conclude that in calling me Sam, my teacher exposed her familiarity and preference in Anglo origin names. Her familiarity and preference were at the expense of stripping me of my identity, my worth, and my name. “What’s in a Name?” highlighted the most subtleness form of racism, but it was just as dangerous and painful. Racism in any form should be address, exposed through counter storytelling, and demand for social justice and change.

Commitment to Social Change

The overarching aim of this autoethnography was to advocate for social justice in regards to issues of race, racism, power, poverty, and identity. It is my belief that a commitment to social change would be possible if researchers, educators, and educational policy makers have a tough and candid discussion on race and racism in the public educational system.

The intent of this autoethnography was to inspire change in our educational system; hence, vignettes and responses served as the blue print and primary sources to expose racial, social, and educational inequalities. The result of the study, suggested that the need for public educational system to commit to social justice and change in regards to issues of race, racism in marginalized groups, such as, the refugee student population, persist. A high number of data demonstrated the need for educators, administrators, and educational policy makers to commit to social change; the need was very salient in one vignette and eight responses. Interestingly, I wrote the responses addressing former teachers, favorite teacher, future teachers, and administration.

The response to Vignette 9 - “Escaping to Spain and Africa” exemplified how good teaching should be. Ms. P. was an excellent teacher and the response letter to her was to challenge and encourage more teachers to emulate her skills in teaching. It was sad to acknowledge that throughout my educational journey, I only had one teacher that was positively instrumental in my success in school.

You always said, “Understanding self involves the understanding of others.” I appreciate how you saw me as an individual person. You asked me questions and never assumed anything about me. You genuinely cared about my well-being. You understood me without me having to say anything. You had the discernment to give me space and time when I didn’t want to talk or interact. You did not allow my classmates to laugh at me when I gave the wrong answer. You would shoot them down with one of your deadly glares. You insisted and encouraged students to work together and work with different partners frequently. You held me responsible for my own learning. You pushed me to overcome my struggles and educational challenges that I unwittingly placed upon myself.

What I love the most about you is that you were genuine and never fake. I wish I had more teachers like you in my life. (VIGNETTE RESPONSE 9 – Dear Mrs. P)

In my response to Vignette 10 - “Attention to Detail”, the goal here was to share and give suggestions to future teachers on how to understand, interact, and teach refugee students. True social justice and change would be possible if educators are open to reflectivity in their teaching practices. This response served as a guide for basic information and tips on refugee students.

1. Please know my name. Put effort into learning how to say it.
2. Be curious about me and ask me about my country, language, and culture.
3. I am an individual; don't you dare stereotype me.
4. Do not water down my curriculum because you feel sorry for me.
5. When I am silent, it doesn't mean I'm ignoring you.
6. It takes more time to process what you say; I have 2 or 3 languages in my head.

(Vignette Response 10 – Dear Future Teachers)

In Vignette 10 - “Attention to Detail”, I was generalized and lumped into one big continent and simplified to a language and country that I was not familiar with. I was frustrated because I knew she could not distinguish me from other refugee students. Her lack of attention to detail about my country of origin and language spoken made me suspect that she saw and treated all Asian refugee as the same.

I didn't understand why my teacher couldn't see the obvious difference in our physical appearances. Did she not see it? The obvious difference in our accents, did she not hear it? The obvious, maybe not so obvious for her, difference in our last names, did she not read it? Is this the case of “all Asians” look the same? No, I am an individual. I have my own appearance, language, and customs and culture. Stop. Stop, painting me with

one big, lazy stroke. Paint me with the distinctive and complexity detail that I am.

(Vignette 10 – “Attention to Detail”)

Likewise, in Vignette 14 -“Don’t You Know Math?” my teacher was guilty of stereotyping me. He incorrectly assumed that because I was Asian, I was also good in Math. Furthermore, he compared my math aptitude to my two older sisters’ proficiency in Math. Even students from the same family should not be group, generalized, or stereotyped.

“What do you mean; you don’t how to do this? Don’t you know Math? Aren’t you supposed to be good in Math? You’re Asian; you’re supposed to know Math!” he yelled out his frustration. “I don’t get it, both your sisters were good in Math and you struggle to understand basic Math,” he accused me loudly and very publicly. (Vignette 14 -“Don’t You Know Math?”)

In the response letter to Vignette 16 - “Paying My Dues”, the intent was to shed some light for teachers on why some students missed school or fall asleep in class. Some refugee students have to work to help with the financial burden of the family. The response revealed that refugee students did not want to be treated differently; we just wanted a real good chance in succeeding in school. To help students achieve their educational goal, teachers could play a major role by understanding the factors that might impeded their educational growth and success.

Some of my friends had to work on school nights and they were so tired the next morning. Some of friends dropped out because they were so far behind in school. Others manage to stay in school, but their grades were barely passing. Some were lured by the consistency of incoming money, graduating from high school faded gradually. (Vignette Response 16- Dear High School Teachers)

Researchers, educators, and administrators who want to commit to social change and advocate for bridging the educational achievement gap of refugee students must first understand this group of students. Teachers' awareness, understanding, and racial prejudice and bias of refugee students must be address and reflect upon. I believe that social justice and change is possible, once we acknowledge the role and its frequency of CRT in our educational system.

Personal Reflections

The second goal of this autoethnography was to answer these three following questions:

1. What insight did I glean from the vignettes and its responses?
2. Were there factors that contribute to the successes or challenges in my educational journey?
3. How has my own experience as a refugee student affect my interactions and teaching practices with my refugee students?

As I journeyed back and analyzed the vignettes and self-reflective responses, I discovered the following emerging themes: (a) importance of family unit, (b) negotiating identity (c) high expectations, and (d) poverty.

The Importance of Family Unit

I did not find it surprising at all when I reread my vignettes and concluded that I devoted nine vignettes and responses to family members. They had such an impact on my educational journey that memories including family members were always at the forefront. The data suggested that my family contributed greatly to my educational journey. Each family member played an intricate role in my educational success. This was evident in Vignette 6 - "Extra Credit," when my mom was setting an example for me on the importance of learning a foreign language, trying to acculturate, and reminding me of the sacrifice my parents made. Knowing

that my parents gave up their comfortable lifestyle to give me better opportunities in life compelled me to finish school, and ultimately end the cycle of poverty.

There is no doubt that my dad has helped shape the woman I am today. He had the wisdom and courage to raise my siblings and me in both cultures simultaneously. The vignettes, “Slumber Party” and “Prom” illustrated how he allowed me to participate in activities that were more “American”. Why is this so important? I believe that my family’s acceptance of me, especially my dad, switching back and forth from Laotian and American culture enabled me to be more comfortable with my own identity. In turn, I became more confident and it made it easier for me to “find my voice” and advocate for myself at school. Again, I was nearly four when I came to United States, had my parents raised me in a more traditionally Lao household, I cannot say with certainty that I would have gone to college and pursued higher degrees.

My sisters were also vital in my success in school. Vignette 4 - “Detour to Kwick Shop” and Vignette 13 - “Yellow Brick Road” portrayed how influential they were in my educational journey. Both my parents had to work long hours and often times, they were rarely home. Nanna and Nessa had to pitch in and help with homework check. Nessa was my protector when I was in elementary school; she made school safe for me. She was my security. The response letter to her conveyed how she being my “safety net” made school less frightening and bearable. Vignette13 - “Yellow Brick Road” showed how one sister going to college influenced the educational trajectory of four younger sisters. The response letter to her was a testament of her contribution to my educational success.

Despite the challenges I had in school, I was able to overcome these struggles because of my strong cohesive family unit. I am certain that strong family unit was one of the factors that attributed to my educational success. Our parents made sure we knew our family history. They

reminded us why we had to flee our home country and immigrate here, to America. Thus, their job was to instill duty and remind on why we must fulfill our obligations by not squandering the opportunities they have given us. My older siblings were to serve as caretakers and role models to the younger siblings. They knew that their every move would determine the steps their younger sisters took. My family worked together as a solid team with each team member fulfilling their role, working towards a common goal.

A college degree for one child meant a college education for our whole family. It was a family business, a family's honor, a family's chosen vehicle out of poverty. I remember at the time, college seemed so distant and foreign to me. I didn't fully comprehend why Vanna needed to go to college. I just knew that she was in school trying to build a better future. Going to college was something my parents expected all of us to do. There was no choice, no compromise, no plan B. (Vignette 13 - "Yellow Brick Road")

Understanding that my family played a huge part in my success in education, I am always excited to meet my students' families. I always looked forward to parent/teacher conference because this gave me the opportunity to really talk and get to know my students and their families. I learned from experience to never assume anything about their family dynamics, experience, language skills, and educational level. I remember too well the painful experience my dad and I had during my teacher conference.

You were once a proud Captain in the Laotian Army Police Unit. You can speak enough French, Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese to survive and have a decent conversation. You did attend the university before you joined the army. You were respected by your people and peers. Dad, why can't you just show off, just this once? I wanted to show my teacher that I was proud of my daddy.

Just because we didn't speak English well or we didn't have money in this country didn't mean we were poor and illiterate in our home county. (Vignette

Response 5 - Dear Dad)

I always ask if the family/parents would like to have the conference in English or their native language. Some parents spoke English, some preferred to have an older child interpret for them, and yet some parents requested for an interpreter. Some refugee families brought a friend to help overcome the language barrier. Even when I had to rely on an interpreter or an older sibling, I made every effort to converse with the parent. I often spend a little more time during conference with refugee parents because I want them to know that I was once "their child" and I understood what the student, the parent, and the family was going through. Once I share my own refugee journey with them, I could feel and see an instant connection forming. It was almost as if the parent, the student, and the whole family gave themselves permission to trust me. I was one of them.

Although, a strong family unit contributed to my success in school, this may not be the case for other refugee families. Some of my refugee students only have one parent. The family unit might consist of much older siblings and an aunt or uncle. Not all families have the same traditional nuclear family that functions well as a team. As a teacher, I was very cognizant of this important detail about my students. I try to be the adult that they could talk to and trust. Without having that strong family support, it becomes more imperative that students need trusted adults, older siblings/other family members, friends, or caring teachers to go to for help.

Negotiating Identity

All my life, I did not fit-in anywhere. When I went back home to Laos for the first time in my mid-twenties, I felt completely like a foreigner; never mind, I could speak the language

fluently or the fact that I was well versed in Laotian customs and cultures. Yet, as an American, having lived here for over forty years, I still feel inadequate and out of place sometimes. So, at an early age, I have accepted that my identity was more complex than simply my place of birth, language proficiency, physical appearance, or my current address.

The analysis of the data highlighted the issue of identity in five different vignettes and responses. I believe that my ability to be comfortable in my own skin, not fitting in here or there, had contributed to both challenges and successes in my educational journey. It was interesting for me to see that poignant childhood memories revealed my struggle with my own identity.

I did not start negotiating my identity with my parents and frankly, with myself until I was in middle school and high school. In elementary, there was not a need for me to participate or adhere to American norms and cultures yet. Still, I wanted to fit in by having a name that was not too complicated to pronounce. At the same time, I was not quite ready to give up my own name yet. This is evident in my response to Vignette 1 - "What's In a Name?"

I was given an identity, not by my parents, but by a teacher, who altered my name, hemmed it up for the sake of comfort and ease. Unbeknownst to her, renaming me was the genesis of slowly shedding my former self. I just wanted to be like all the rest of the students. Give me a name that my teacher can say effortlessly. Call my name and for a brief moment, let me forget who I am. Why can't I be a Mary or an Ann? (Vignette Response 1 – Dear Phourasami)

As I got older, I shifted closer to the American culture significantly more than my other siblings. My brother and sisters acculturated in their own different timeline. Their bicultural transformation was more gradual and subtle. I, on the other hand, had more difficulties growing up in two different cultures because I was more rebellious, challenging my parents' authority,

beliefs, and customs. The vignettes “Slumber Party” and “Prom” confirmed my desire to act and behave more “American” even if it meant disrupting the peace in the family.

“Sam’s different and you have to “give and take” with her, Mom,” Vanna advised carefully. “She has a bit of a rebellious streak, unlike me and Ness,” she continued. “You have to understand, she was only four when she came here; so, of course, she’s going to be a little bit “Americanized,”” Vanna explained. (Vignette 11 - “Slumber Party”)

“What is so wrong with going to prom, it’s not like I’m going to sleep around just because I went to prom,” I contested angrily. “What the heck, I’m American, but not fully American, nor am I a real Lao either,” I shook my head in complete confusion and sighed heavily. I was exhausted. I didn’t want to argue anymore. After living in the States for twelve years, I still didn’t know which culture I belong to. Where is home, here, now, or there? Which language can I best express my thoughts and wants fluently? “I’m tired of not truly “fitting in” anywhere,” I realized, I just uttered that aloud. (Vignette 18 - “Prom”)

As an educator, I realized that some refugee students were possibly struggling with their own identity crisis too. I was very sensitive to this because I went through it and I felt I could offer some advice to my students. I not only teach English to my refugee students; I find myself giving them advice that I wished I had when I was in their shoes.

For example, my Muslim refugee girls would wear their hijab to cover their hair at school. Not often, but sometimes, I would catch one of them not wearing their hijab in class or the hallway. I would make it a point to spend some time talking to that student during lunch or passing period. I would tell her I understand where she’s coming from and that I too, wanted so

much to “fit in’ and look like the mainstream students. I told her that it is okay to feel this way, but she needed to discuss this with her parents first, before she decides to forgo wearing the hijab altogether. I explained to her that my niece, who is also Muslim, does not wear a hijab to school, but this was a decision she and her parents made together. I encouraged her to talk to her parents about her feelings regarding wearing or not wearing the hijab.

Likewise, a similar issue came up with some boys from Congo. In the beginning of the school year, they would wear the school uniform without any incident. But later on, as the school year progress, some of our Congolese refugee boys were sagging. They wanted to look and act like the African American boys in school. I pulled two of them aside and talked to them about this sudden change. I explained to them that I understand how it feels like to be on the outside. It was okay to be different, but I understood how they just wanted to fit-in. I told them to celebrate their heritage and reminded them never forget where they came from, how much their parents sacrifice to get them here, and how important it is for them to try their hardest in school.

Responsibility/Expectations

Three vignettes and responses demonstrated the importance of accepting responsibility and having high expectation for oneself. Taking personal responsibility and having expectation occurred mainly in high school years. Vignette 9 - “Escaping to Spain and Africa” displayed how I took full ownership of my own learning in Geography class. I didn’t give in to a “victimhood” mentality, and I celebrated being different.

This one project opened the vast world to me. I wanted to travel the world, learn new languages, and partake in the different customs and culture. This one, simple project shaped me into the woman that I am today. I realized that being from another country was actually cool; I began to feel comfortable in my own skin. It was okay that I did not

look like the other students, spoke another language, or was born in a different country.
(Vignette 9 - “Escaping to Spain and Africa”)

The Vignette Response 15 – “Dear Refugee Students” also highlighted how important it was to take responsibility and have high expectation of oneself. The response was directed to refugee students; here I wrote how I regretted skipping school, but I took full responsibility for my actions. I did not find excuses or blame anyone for me missing school.

Lastly, YOU need to be responsible for your own actions. Own up to your wrongdoing. Admit to yourself that you blame others for not wanting to go to school. No, you didn’t go to school because you chose not to go to school. It’s not the bully’s fault you didn’t go to school. It’s not your ineffective teacher’s fault that you skip school. It’s not the difficult curriculum and language barrier that made you ditch school. All the excuses you have in your head were created by you. You will have to be the one to destroy the excuses you gave yourself. (Vignette Response 15- Dear Refugee Students)

In Vignette 16 - “Paying My Dues”, I described how wonderful it felt to have some control of my life. Here again, I didn’t complain about not having money. What did I do? I went and worked the limited hours that my parents permitted. I was not a victim of my circumstances; instead, I took control and created my own “circumstances”.

I enjoyed working because I felt a small sense of control over my own life. I liked working for something and seeing “green” every two weeks. It was a sense of pride to see that I didn’t have to depend on my parents for everything (Vignette 16 - “Paying My Dues”).

My own sense of having personal responsibility and high expectations of myself definitely influenced my interactions and teaching practices of refugee students. I do not like

excuses or students playing the victim card. I didn't have a choice; my parents were strict and excuses and playing the victim were not allowed at home. This definitely translated into my classroom. I am a very strict teacher, especially with my refugee students. I believe that I am so much harder on my refugee students because I see myself in them. Therefore, if I succeeded, then, they too, must succeed. I understand from firsthand experience how difficult it was for me to learn English, adjust to a different culture, and be comfortable in my own identity. In my mind, if I could do it, they can do it too.

When I give them homework assignments, I expect them to do it. If they don't get the assignment done, then I give them a class lecture on why it's important to take ownership of their own learning. I reminded them that I was once like them, and here, today, I am their teacher. I get visibly upset because I feel that their doing well in school is such an urgent pressing matter. I keep them for recess and make them do their assignments. I take it personally when they slack off in class. I take it to heart because I failed to show them the importance of their education.

I never allow myself to feel sorry for my refugee students, nor did I think I treated them differently from my other students. But actually, I have higher expectations of them because I know this will help them more in the end. I called their parents more often when they have any missing assignments. I kept them during lunch recess when they have missing homework or behave badly. It's during lunch recess that I reminded them that I was once a refugee student. I told them that I can relate to their struggles at home and at school. I encouraged them not to make or find excuses and play the victim; instead, they should take full responsibility for their own learning or lack thereof. I ended my talk with them by saying, "I have very high expectations of you because I know that if I could do it, you can do it too."

Here, my own experience as a former refugee student greatly influenced how I am biased towards my refugee students. Upon deep reflection and honesty, I was being unfair to these students because I was so much harder on them compared to my other immigrant students or my reading intervention students. For example, if my non-refugee students did not complete their work or homework assignment, I would simply make a phone call home. They did not have to spend lunch recess with me. At the time, my justification for keeping my refugee students for recess was because I felt that they needed more time and help to do the assignments.

Poverty

In this study, the issue of poverty did not appear to be as salient as compared to other emerging themes. I was expecting to see my family's socioeconomic status relevant in the pages of vignettes and responses. Only three vignettes demonstrated how poverty affected my educational journey. Although, my family lived from paycheck to paycheck and we had very little money and resources, it did not stop me from staying in school, graduating high school, and going to college. Vignette 13 - "Yellow Brick Road" illustrated how my sisters and I ignored poverty from preventing us from achieving our goal to go to college.

I knew she took out student loans and had some Pell Grant to finance her education. She also saved some money from her summer job to help her buy textbooks. Our parents didn't have the luxury of setting aside college funds for their seven young children. The huge financial burden did not allow them to even open up a savings account. "Man, college is so expensive, and where are you getting all this money," I wondered aloud. "We just have to take out student loans, there's really no other choice. It's either that or don't go to school and end up like mom and dad," Vanna concluded dejectedly. (Vignette 13 - "Yellow Brick Road")

Vignette 16 - “Paying My Dues” explained why I had to go to work when I was of legal age. Again, not having financial security was frustrating and challenging, but it did not have a lasting negative consequence in my overall educational journey. Vignette 12 - “The List” amplified how being poor was uncomfortable and embarrassing when I was unable to purchase the materials for my assignment. Not being able to start my project with the other students exposed my family’s financial situation in a very public way.

My school does a wonderful job in helping our refugee population. These students get free school supplies, help with school uniforms, and sometimes they take a backpack full of nonperishable food items to give them something over the weekend. This makes me so happy because I feel like schools have progressed so much in the last forty years since I was a refugee student. I feel happy that we are doing what we can to help these students.

I try to do my part in helping refugee student how little I can. I keep granola bars, crackers, and other snacks in my closet for the students. I hated the taste of American food when I first started school. I was hungry all the time because I simply would not eat anything at school. For some refugee students, eating school lunch or breakfast is just not appealing to them because they are not yet accustomed to American food. This is especially hard for our Muslim students too because their selection of school lunch would be limited. Still, the school does provide non-pork alternative lunch for these students. Over the years, I did have students spend lunch recess with me to eat crackers, granola bar, or chips; they could not stomach the school lunch.

I tried hard not to give my students lists of things to buy. I would use my procurement card or my own money to purchase materials for the classroom or upcoming projects. I would tell my students about the supply they needed and give them about a week to two weeks to

purchase the items. If they did not have the materials by then, I just told not to worry about it. I gave the items/material they needed that I kept extra in the closet. I asked them to replenish the item whenever they have a chance. Most of the time, these students do replace the material they took from the closet. I cannot save every refugee student, but I can provide materials and classroom supplies when they need it. To lessen this financial burden for them makes me feel heroic in my own way.

Because of my own experience with poverty, I have a very soft spot for students who also come from lower socioeconomic household. One year, after the end of Ramadan, I bought seven of my Muslim refugee students, their school yearbook, to celebrate their achievement in fasting for 30 days. They were so surprised and appreciated that I bought them a gift. On the last day of school, they beamed with joy when they went around asking other students to sign their yearbook. Just for that day, they were no longer “the have nots”.

Implications

The interpretation in the qualitative autoethnography study revealed the effectiveness of exploring, understanding, and analyzing the issues of race, racism, power, and identity through the CRT framework. Teachers should challenge and reflect on their own understanding, assumptions, interactions, and teaching practices with the refugee student population. Educators need to understand their own cultural bias if they want to help refugee students feel welcome and included in the classroom. Acknowledge the pervasiveness of explicit and subtle racism in the school or their own classroom; identifying racism for what it is, is the first step needed to getting rid of it. Encourage counter storytelling from their students whether it is verbal or written form. This validates their unique experience and promotes racial and educational equalities by sharing their different perspectives and listening to their individual voices. Teachers should try to get to

know their students through a holistic, intersectionality approach. In doing so, teachers reduce the risk of indirectly stereotyping, generalizing, cultural and racial bias, and subtle form of racism.

The research findings also illustrated how my own self-reflection on my own experience as a refugee student influenced my interactions and teaching practices with my own students. It exposed my own form of unintentional racism inflicted on my Asian refugees and Hispanic immigrants. Effective teachers self-reflect to improve and adapt their teaching strategies and instructions to decrease the educational gap for students. Self-reflection is a powerful tool for teachers to use continuously to ensure students have the best version of their teacher. I was deeply emotional and disappointed when I realized what I was favoring African and Muslim refugee students over my other students. I wanted to change this unfair and hurtful practice. I was committed to social, racial, and educational justice beginning with my classroom and me. I wrote this autoethnography about my educational journey as a refugee student in the hopes that it would contribute and give more credence in the existing literature about refugee students and their educational journey. I believe that an authentic account of a refugee experience written by a refugee student is powerful and much insight could be unearthed from this study.

My main objective in writing this dissertation was to give a candid account of a refugee student's educational journey. The existing literature regarding educational gap of refugee students have focused mainly on singular characteristic, such as, language barriers, newcomers program/policies, process of assimilation/acculturation, teacher professional development, or parent involvement. While all these existing research and studies contributed greatly in helping to bridge the educational gap, more research is needed to view the refugee student in a holistic approach.

My autoethnography provided a glimpse of how many factors contributed to my overall experience in school. There were so many variables in my life that added to my challenges in learning to read, write, and speak English. A Newcomers program, ESL pull out, or particular policy did not shape my educational experience. Poverty or lack of parent involvement were not dominating factors in my educational outcome. Furthermore, teacher professional development may help students bridge the educational gap, but more must be done. Educational needs and challenges of refugee students understood or fixed by one simple factor. Instead, understanding the educational needs of refugee students merits an approach that mirrors them: unique and multifaceted. Looking at the whole experience of a refugee student's educational challenges may provide educators a more in-depth knowledge on how to help the student overcome these educational needs.

In order to close the achievement gap of refugee students, promote social change in our schools; we must encourage, attract, and hire teachers with in-depth diverse cultural experiences. I sincerely believe that there is a growing need for ESOL/Newcomer's teachers to be more diverse culturally, ethnically, and linguistically. Refugee students can benefit greatly from teachers who have "walked in" their shoes. As an ESOL Newcomer's teacher, I was very fortunate to understand and experience many different cultures. I used this wealth of knowledge in the classroom to create a welcoming and safe learning environment for refugee students.

I have helped many of my colleagues when they have questions or concerns about certain group of refugee students. I have served as the go-to person in my ESOL team when questions and concerns arise regarding refugee students from Asia, Africa, or Muslim majority countries. I have taught diversity/multicultural class in my own school and at a private university. I believe it is evident that my experience as a refugee student has determined my career choice and the

group of students I work with. My commitment to social justice for refugees and their educational journey in U.S. public schools is by writing this autoethnographic research study, teaching English to refugee newcomers, and serving as a “go to” person for refugee questions and concerns.

Suggestion for Future Research

The current global events and political U.S. climate have always affected the acceptance or rejection of refugees admitted in the United States. As the debate of refugees’ contributions or burdens to the American culture and economy is forever ongoing, the issue of educating refugee students continues to remain both imperative and challenging for U.S. educational school system. There is extensive research on refugees’ educational experience and journey, but so far, the past and current study places great emphasis on refugees’ attainment in post-secondary education.

Research relevant to K-12 educational studies delve further in the language barrier and proficiency of refugee students, parental involvement, teacher readiness and professional development, educational needs and challenges of refugee students, and community and school perception and support. I have found that qualitative research conducted on young refugee students were done primarily in United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. These research studies have contributed to the growing literature on refugee education in various host countries, very few autoethnography research were conducted on refugee students’ educational journey are available.

The research study suggested that my parents had very little parental involvement in my education. They had to work long hours; so, the parent support fell on the shoulders on my two older siblings. Yes, my parents valued education and had high expectations for me to graduate

from school; however, they were not actively involved in my success in my educational journey. Hence, an interesting research question to explore would be to determine other possible factors that helped my siblings and I beat the odds and succeed in K-12 educational journey without the active participation of our parents' support and involvement.

Another finding that was compelling to me was the impact on teachers throughout my K-12 educational journey. As a teacher, I believed that teachers do matter in the lives of their students. This autoethnography did not indicate that teachers played a major role in the success of my educational achievement. Yes, they taught the contents to be proficient in different academic skills, but they did not have an overall positive influence on my educational journey. Ms. P was the only teacher I could remember that left a positive impression on my educational development. I still had lingering question as to why all my siblings and I were able to graduate high school despite having very negative and sometimes harmful experiences with our k-12 teachers. A future research study to conduct is to explore the overall refugee students' perception on the positive and effectiveness of K-12 teachers on their educational journey.

I was not surprised to discover that the issues of intersectionality, negotiating identity, and acculturation were often times interrelated. I wondered if my own ability to negotiate between two cultures made the process of acculturation easier for me. Within my own family, the acculturation amongst us siblings differ greatly due to many variables. I suspect that age of a person's arrival in the United States, birth order and number of siblings, and individual personality traits and temperament all influenced the acculturation process. Likewise, the many factors that likely contributed to my multifaceted identity recognized the importance of intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and culture. Was I able to succeed in school

because I learned how to accept and mesh all these intricate identities into one complete, complex person?

Lastly, the research findings would suggest that I showed racial bias and preference towards my African and Muslim students. A future qualitative research study would be to determine the impact on students when the teacher self-project their own experience and background in her interactions and teaching practices. Furthermore, I would like to examine deeper the root cause of my apparent prejudice against Asian refugee students. I find that uncomfortable and disturbing, since, I, myself am Asian.

The autoethnography study is limited in its scope because it only studied my unique educational journey. Researchers and educators can still gain valuable insight through the lived experience of a refugee student in the pages of vignettes and self-reflected responses. There are some circumstances that all refugees encounter, such as, resettlement, language barrier, financial instability or burden, and acculturation in the host country that remain the same. It is the families and individual responses to these factors that determine the differences and similarities within refugee communities. Refugees come from all parts of the world, we are not alike; therefore, it is important to acknowledge the concept of intersectionality to understand the holistic person's identity. Consequently, this will help lessen the occurrence of overt and subtle racism in the educational system. Refugees and researchers, alike need to do more counter storytelling to expose the racial bias and racism in marginalized groups, refugee student population. It is through counter storytelling that the oppressed can have their voices heard, call to action, demand a committee to social change, and eradicate race and racism in U.S. educational system.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to take readers through the intricate lived experience of a refugee student, navigating the U.S. public school system. Refugee students continue to fall through the cracks and widen the educational gap. By 2050, the trajectory of U.S. public schools indicates that immigrant youth, which includes refugees, will be one-third of the 100 million U.S. children (Passel, 2011). Yet, schools across the nation fail to provide adequate education for this growing student population. Educators and school systems were ill equipped to deal with the educational challenges of refugee students; they may not understand or relate to the cultural background, language, socioeconomic, unique experiences, or perspective of these students.

This qualitative study used an autoethnography research design to describe, explore, and analyze my own experience as a refugee student. The raw data collected, vignettes and self-reflected responses offered my voice and experiences, both as a refugee student and as a minority ESOL/Newcomers teacher adapting to American public-school culture. I wrote these autoethnographic vignettes and responses to encourage readers to reflect, understand, and empathize with some aspects of the educational journey of a refugee student. My voice, experiences, challenges, and celebrations lived in the pages of this research.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was employed as a framework to discover, examine, interpret, and address its role in the experience of a refugee student in a U.S. public school. The findings suggested that analyzing vignettes and responses through the lens of CRT was appropriate and effective in highlighting the issues of race, class, power, poverty, and identity.

The study indicated that intersectionality played an important factor in my overall educational journey. The colliding factors that added to my overall identity were challenging and frustrating; still, I overcame my identity crises with negotiating identity with my parents.

My ability to acculturate to the host country accelerated to the overall academic success of myself as a refugee student. Similarly, although I came from a family with little means, the family accepted poverty as a temporary condition. It did not impede my educational success; but it did interfere with my overall confidence and self-esteem in school.

Readers stepped in the flip-flops of a refugee student and experience an authentic account of how and what it means to be a refugee student in a U.S. public school system. This was made possible with the effective method of counter storytelling. Vignettes and self-reflected responses legitimized the experience and voice of one refugee student. Despite the unique experience of my educational journey, educators were encouraged to glean some valuable insights from the study. I believe that reading and learning about racial, social, and educational disparities through the eyes and story of a refugee student is powerful and credible.

Permanence of race and racism were discovered frequently throughout the data analysis.

Teachers' deficiencies in diverse cultural background, racial bias, and assumptions all contributed to my education challenges. Bullying, racial preference/bias, generalization of refugee experience and identity, and stereotyping were documented in the pages of my vignettes and responses. Although, I did experience both overt and subtle form of racism. I did not allow myself to be a participating victim. I overcame racial bias and preference by believing that my teachers were ill prepared and did not have effective professional development to interact and effectively teach refugee students.

The research study offered researchers, educators, and refugee students and their families an authentic, narrative handbook to reflect on, relate to, and glean valuable insight. Additionally, the study challenged and encouraged teachers to recognize that the social and educational

interactions with refugee students was impacted by their own assumptions, perceptions, comfort, knowledge, and understanding of the refugee culture.

As a society, we must have the courage to reflect, identify, address, and confront the issues of race and racism, especially in our educational system. The study advocated for social change in racial and educational inequalities by three simple approach. Readers should understand the complexity of identity through recognizing the importance of intersectionality. It is also important to identify, address, and confront the permanence of race and racism in the educational system. Finally, the voice and experience of refugee students must be heard and validate.

This autoethnographic study was a catalyst for me to examine and reflect my own refugee experience and its impact on my students and my teaching practices. I looked honestly to my vignettes and response to see if my experience as a former refugee student affected my interactions and teaching practices of refugee students. I made some expected and uncomfortable conclusion. First, I always knew that my family unit was crucial in my educational success. The family working as a team gave me the support to overcome any challenges I had in school.

Poverty was an issue, but it was not significant enough to stop me from my educational goal. I treated poverty as a temporary inconvenience and annoyance. However, it did influence how I saw myself in terms of acceptance, status, and worth in the context of my educational culture. I lack self-confidence and friends because I was embarrassed of my family's financial situation.

My parents' wisdom to raise the children in a bicultural household made acculturation easier for all of us. My wanting to be "Americanized" was usually a point of contention with my parents, and sometimes my siblings too. At a young age, I learned how to negotiate my identity,

which in turn, enabled me to accept my own identity in being both Lao and American. This gave me the confidence to find “my own voice” in school.

The last finding was a bit uncomfortable and surprising to me. I definitely had high expectations on my refugee students. The simple fact that I understood them because I have already walked in their shoes, gave me this false permission to be very strict and expected exceedingly high expectation of them. I treated them differently from my mainstream and other immigrant students. I made them serve lunch recess with me if they misbehaved or if they did not turn in their homework assignment. I did not require the same consequences from my other students. Here, I was guilty of racial bias and preference. Subconsciously, I did what I was trying to prove that racism was still a normal occurrence in our educational system.

Furthermore, I discovered that I was naturally drawn to two groups of students; African and Muslim refugees. I was very saddened and emotionally distraught when I carefully scrutinize my vignettes and self-reflections and found that I did not mention any Asian refugees or Spanish-speaking immigrant students. I love them and care deeply for the educational growth and success, but somehow, they were not present in my vignettes and responses.

I searched honestly for this apparent favoritism and I understand where this bias came from. I believe I favor African refugees because I lived in Africa at such a critical time in my life. I was twenty-two when I joined the Peace Corps. Those years spent learning a different language, culture, and religion had helped shaped the woman and teacher that I am today. I lived in the predominately-Muslim village of Segbana, Benin. There, I would also wear the hijab when I was in school teaching or interacting with my neighbors around town. Also, my niece and nephew were raised in a Muslim household. This too, contributed to my partiality towards

Muslim students. It pains me to write this, but I must acknowledge that I am guilty of contributing to the racial and educational disparities of refugee students.

Finally, it is my hope that after reading and reflecting on my unique educational journey, readers will be inspired to self-reflect on their own comfort, understanding, and assumptions of race and racism in our educational system. Perhaps, this research can add to the limited study of autoethnography of refugee students' K-12 educational journey. It was my hope that greater possibility for better cross-cultural sensitivity to refugee students and the educational experience, there would be more adjustment and accommodation and effective curriculum and instructions of refugee students.

The genesis of this research was my desire to help refugee students close the educational achievement gap. I wanted educators to experience how it felt like for a refugee student to navigate the public school system. I wanted other refugee students to succeed and write their own story. I looked inward and asked myself...how and why did I make it so far in my educational journey? I took to heart the wise words of Charles de Lint, when he wrote,

“Don't forget - no one else sees the world the way you do, so no one else can tell the stories that you have to tell.”

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