Experiences of Female Refugee Students from Burma in Multicultural Middle School Classrooms

Matthew C. McParker, *Portland State University*

Abstract

In middle school, adolescents are particularly focused on peer interaction to help form their identities. For marginalized students, especially refugees, peer interaction is especially important. To be successful in schools and gain cultural and social capital, refugee students must learn and internalize the specific norms of their classrooms. In multicultural settings, students have ample opportunities for intercultural interactions, which can help refugee students navigate their new settings and become more successful. One of the largest refugee groups entering the United States recently is from Burma. Refugee students face a daunting set of challenges, from language and cultural differences to living in poverty, and in becoming successful in their new homes. Unfortunately, there has been little research on the experiences of Burmese refugee students in classrooms in the US. A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach was used to study how three female Burmese refugee students experienced multicultural middle school classrooms in the US, especially their intercultural interactions and identity formation, through interviews, observations, and stimulated recall. The participants reported wanting to understand what they were learning, stay on task, and be kind to other students. Those traits developed from their experiences in their countries of origin and combined to create a picture of what a good student should be. In observations, students acted out their ideas of what it meant to be a good student. Their intercultural interactions in class reaffirmed their identities as good students. Implications based on the findings include setting up intentional intercultural interactions with a diverse group of students in classrooms with multicultural approaches and that researchers examine the experiences of various groups of marginalized students while accounting for the context in which they learn and acknowledging a multifaceted view of adolescent identity development.

INTRODUCTION

Students in middle school spend much of their time learning how to navigate their places in the world (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Students tend to rely on peers for support as their allegiances shift from adults to other adolescents (Larson & Richards, 1991; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). For students from refugee backgrounds, this is especially important because not only are they learning their places in the world, they are learning to navigate the norms of the hegemonic culture (Banki, 2012; Kirova, 2012).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and further clarified by the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Article III of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, refugees are groups of people who have been forced out of their countries of origin. Valenta (2010) distinguished refugees from immigrants in how they identify as being marginalized. Refugees' past history, having been forced out of their countries of origin, significantly contributes to their sense of marginalization, and, thus, their overall identities. According to the UNHCR (2017), in 2016 51% of all refugees were children, meaning educators need to work to meet the needs of these students.

Refugees face many challenges, including navigating differences from the dominant culture, managing past trauma, learning English, lack of education, and living in poverty (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; McBrien, 2005; Valenta, 2010). Refugee students must learn how to be academically and socially successful in interacting with others while learning how to navigate an unfamiliar society (McBrien, 2005). Many of these students experienced significant trauma and live in poverty (McBrien, 2005), both of which are associated with low achievement in school (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012). The combination of academic and social pressures in an unfamiliar society often leads to marginalization, discrimination, and struggles in academic achievement (McBrien, 2005; Pugh et al., 2012; Valenta, 2010).

While all of the challenges refugee students face can seem bleak, it is possible for students to overcome these challenges. Peer interaction is one way for marginalized students to do so, especially if those interactions are with peers from other cultural backgrounds (Gurin, Nagda, & Sorensen, 2011; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, Baker & Russell, 2012; Yoon, 2012). Reliance on peers for support is especially important in middle school (Kiefer, Matthews, Montesino, Arango, & Preece, 2013). Through interactions with peers, middle school students learn and form identities (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). According to Wentzel et al. (2012), peer support in adolescence plays a larger role in encouraging academic success than either teacher or parent support. Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) argued that students with secure ethnic identities have positive attitudes toward other cultural groups, which may be influenced by opportunities for intercultural interaction. If positive peer interactions lead to secure identity formation, and secure ethnic identity leads to positive attitudes toward students from other cultures, it follows that positive interactions with students from other cultures might lead to more secure identity formation and higher overall achievement.

For refugees in particular, these peer interactions may be especially important (Banki, 2012; Kirova, 2012). In multicultural classrooms, interactions with students from other cultural backgrounds lead to greater understanding between cultures (Gurin et al., 2011), help refugee students adjust to unfamiliar environments (Pugh et al., 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), learn in various content areas (Alfassi, 2009; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Janzen, 2008; Piccolo, Harbaugh, Carter, Capraro, & Capraro, 2008), and form identities (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005) while decreasing marginalization from the hegemonic culture (den Brok, Fisher, Rickards, & Bull, 2006; McBrien, 2005).

Between 2009 and 2011, nearly 52,000 refugees from Burma (referred to as Burma instead of Myanmar because of participants' preference) entered the US (UNHCR, 2015). Though the number of refugees from Burma has decreased since 2012 (UNHCR, 2017), many children who arrived through 2011 are still in school. Refugees from Burma provide a relevant lens through which to examine the experiences of refugees and other marginalized populations.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the experiences, particularly in intercultural interactions and identity formation, of three female Burmese refugees in a multicultural middle school in the Pacific Northwest. Over the course of several months, the participants were interviewed, observed, and participated in stimulated recall sessions to explore their thoughts and behaviors in their middle school.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed around Bourdieu's theories of field and social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) positing that people bring their collective experiences into fields shaped by the actions and attitudes by those in the field. The norms of the field, in turn, shape the actions of the people in the field. Those whose actions most closely match the norms of a particular field gain more power to shape the field in which they operate. In other words, the contexts in which people operate affect their actions. At the same time, the field is shaped by people's actions. People whose actions most closely match the norms of the field gain cultural capital, or valued interests, skills, and behaviors (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The concept of cultural capital is central to the theory of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973). In this theory, schools are a key place for the transmission of cultural capital from one generation to another. Adults teach acceptable cultural norms to students, reproducing ways of behaving that grant access to privilege.

Yosso (2005) examined these concepts from the lens of critical race theory and contended that Bourdieu's description of capital placed a deficit view upon marginalized people. Yosso (2005) argued that marginalized people bring their own types of capital into fields, including (a) aspirational, (b) linguistic, (c) familial, (d) social, (e) navigation, and (f) resistant. According to this theory, marginalized students are able to shape the norms in a classroom through the capital they bring with them.

Literature Review

In adolescence, children explore their identities (Erikson, 1950) and tend to orient themselves toward their peers while distancing themselves from adults (Larson & Richards, 1991; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), though not unilaterally

(Berndt, 1979; Smetana, 1988). Most of the studies indicating the shift toward peer orientation used relatively homogeneous participants, excluding ethnic minorities, who may form identities slightly differently (Phinney, 1988, 1989).

Ethnic identity formation, based on the work of Marcia (1966, 1980), provides four statuses founded on exploration and commitment: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, or achieved. A person has a diffuse identity when he or she has not engaged in nor committed to an identity, a foreclosed identity when he or she has settled on an identity without exploration, a moratorium identity when he or she is exploring without having made a commitment, or an achieved identity when he or she has explored possible identities and committed to one.

During adolescence, when students increasingly focus on their peers (Larson & Richards, 1991; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), multicultural settings grant students the opportunity to interact with peers from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. According to Allport (1954), interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds can help to reduce prejudice as long as they have equal status, common goals, mutual cooperation, and the contact is supported by authorities. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated that prejudice reduction still occurred even when all of Allport's (1954) conditions were not met. Based on the work of many researchers (Ata, Bastian, & Lusher, 2009; Binder et al., 2009; Cheah, Karamehic-Muratovic, Matsuo, & Poljarevic, 2011; Leung & Chiu, 2010; Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007; Phinney et al., 2007; Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchinipawan, & Wang, 2012; Uryu, Steffensen, & Kramsch, 2014; Verschueren, 2008; Zimmerman, 1995), it is clear that when minority groups interact with other groups, they become more comfortable in their environments and begin to learn the norms of the dominant society, helping them gain cultural capital and shape norms.

Among ethnic minority groups, refugee students enter the country especially marginalized (McBrien, 2005). According to Ogbu and Simons (1998), refugees have traits of both voluntary and involuntary immigrants. Like voluntary immigrants, they chose to leave their country of origin because of fear for their safety (UNHCR, 2005), but did not necessarily choose to enter the US, similar to involuntary immigrants. As such, refugees tend to hold both the norms of their countries of origin and their countries of resettlement, which can make it particularly difficult for them to learn the norms of the hegemonic culture.

According to Banki (2012) and Kirova (2012), intercultural interactions can help refugee students feel more comfortable and learn the norms of the dominant society. Intercultural interactions could help groups other than those who are marginalized as well (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

Though Burmese refugees were not a large group where the study took place, they are one of the largest groups of refugees admitted to the US in recent years (Martin & Yankay, 2012). Unfortunately, a lack of research exists regarding the experiences of Burmese students in the US. Though several different ethnic groups make up Burmese refugees (Fuertes, 2010; Ranard & Barron, 2007), the Karen have been the focus of the majority of research efforts (Bird, Brough, & Cox, 2012; Cross, 1854; Gilhooly & Lee, 2014; Oh, 2012). Collectively, Burmese refugee students tend to have experienced poor educational environments in their refugee camps (Letchamanan, 2013; Oh, 2012; Purkey, 2006) and feel disconnected from school in the US (Isik-Ercan, 2012).

The little research focused on female refugee students (Harris, 2010; Oikonomidoy, 2007, 2009) indicates that they simultaneously hold on to their past experiences and look toward the future to be successful.

School Context and Participants

The participants attended an urban middle school in the Pacific Northwest with approximately 900 students in grades 6-8. Over 35 different first languages from all over the world were spoken and over 90% of students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch. The classes in which the participants were observed were mainstream core classes with between 25 and 35 students representing 15 or more ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Three female Burmese refugee students participated, Khalidah, Ohma, and Shamshidah. Ohma and Shamshidah were in seventh grade; Khalidah was in eighth grade. Khalidah and Shamshidah identified as Rohingya, Ohma as

Burmese. All three identified as Muslim. All three had been in the researcher's social studies class prior to the study, but no part of the study took place in those classes. The three were selected based on their refugee status and that they could be observed during different core content classes (science, social studies, and math).

Ohma was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, where she lived until moving to Texas, then the Pacific Northwest. Ohma was relatively social, but with a small group of friends. Of the participants, she was the least connected to her family. She was a hard worker and did well in school. She was in English language development (ELD) level four, which meant she could speak conversational English fluently and needed some focused support in acquiring academic English. Ohma was observed in her science class at the end of the day.

Khalidah was born in Bangladesh, where she lived until she moved to Texas before settling in the Pacific Northwest. During some of this time, Khalidah lived with Ohma. Khalidah was the most outgoing of the participants; she reported having more friends than the other participants. That said, she was also very connected to her family. She enjoyed having fun in class and was very focused on relationships with others. She was in ELD level five, which meant she was fluent in conversational English and nearly fluent in academic English. Khalidah was observed in her social studies class at the end of the day.

Shamshidah was born in Thailand and later moved to Malaysia, where she lived until she moved to the Pacific Northwest. Though she struggled in school, she worked very hard and achieved good grades. Shamshidah was less social than the other two participants; she preferred to work by herself and was so quiet the audio recorder often failed to register her voice. She reported that she spent most of her time outside of school with her family. She was in ELD level three, which meant she was still acquiring conversational English and needed quite a bit of support in using academic English. Shamshidah was observed in her math class at the end of the day.

Methods

A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was used in this study, specifically interviews, filmed observations, and stimulated recall were used to explore the experiences of the participants.

Semi-structured protocols were used for the interviews (Appendix A) to maintain consistency between each participant (Barriball & While, 1994; Seidman, 2013), while allowing for flexibility (Marshall & While, 1994). As recommended by Seidman (2013), three interviews with each participant were conducted, focusing on their home lives and experiences in their countries of origin, their experiences in school in the US, and their experiences interacting with students from other cultural backgrounds. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant was given a copy for member checking.

Semi-structured protocols were also used for the observations (Appendix B), which focused on the interactions between the participants and students from other cultural backgrounds. The context in which the interactions occurred, the content of the interactions, and verbal and non-verbal reactions by the participants were all taken into account. Each observation was filmed for use in stimulated recall sessions.

In stimulated recall, students watched video of the observations and made comments about their thoughts and actions. Participant were initially asked to identify important parts of the videotaped sessions and comment as they watched. If students were unable to identify important parts, the researcher asked them to talk about parts that were important to the researcher. A video screen shot recording was taken for each session so the researcher could refer back to the participants' comments.

Analysis

A process described by Maxwell (2013), in which interviews were read and assigned tentative codes, was used for analysis. Creswell (2013) called this step finding, "significant statements" (p. 82). Codes were selected in light of Bourdieu's theory of field (1977) and theory of cultural and social reproduction (1973) as well as Yosso's (2005) critique. In addition, attention was paid to capturing the essence of each participant's experiences by bridging their noema (their direct experiences) and noesis, (their interpretations of their experiences)

according to a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994).

Nine initial themes were identified. One theme, the dichotomy of experiences, ran throughout the study, as participants described various phenomena in an either/or manner. Because it seemed to be an underlying philosophy of the participants and manner in which they discussed phenomena, rather than something they outwardly talked about, this theme was not bracketed out.

The other eight initial themes (importance of Islam, importance of family, importance of friends, importance of being nice, struggle in class, importance of learning, importance of speaking English, and importance of being on task) were collapsed into three categories due to their similarities in how the participants discussed them: (a) focus on understanding what they were learning (collapsed from struggle in class, importance of learning, and importance of speaking English); (b) the importance of staying on task (collapsed from importance of Islam and importance of being on task); and (c) the importance of being kind to others (collapsed from importance of family, importance of friends; and importance of being nice), which the students used to describe a model of what a good student should be. The importance of Islam was included into the category of staying on task because the participants emphasized following the directions of adults while discussing their experiences with their religion.

Results

The three main themes identified during analysis were that the participants focused on understanding what they were learning, staying on task, and being kind to others.

Focus on Understanding

Understanding was a struggle for all three participants, especially when it came to acquiring English. They seemed aware that they were able to understand the material even while they struggled to grasp certain aspects. Acquiring English was a key part of the process of understanding for all three participants.

Ohma. Ohma expressed two powerful statements that spoke to the importance of understanding what she was learning and the role struggle played in that understanding. In the first, she said:

> Sometimes, like, I don't really get how they [*the teachers*] say it, so, like, I have to ask the teacher and then, like he will say, like, really simple, and then I'll like, read the sentence again it was, like, so difficult, so like, I listen to the teacher instead of, like the sentence on the paper.

When she did not understand what she was reading, she would listen to a teacher's explanations several times until she understood.

In a second quote, Ohma framed the importance of helping other students understand, which gave her a better grasp of the concept. She stated, "I try my best to, like, make them understand stuff, and like, I understand stuff."

Working with other students was beneficial even when it was someone helping her. She stated, "If I don't know something, then they'll help me, like, figure it out." She trusted that someone (either the teacher or another student) would help her and she would eventually grasp a concept she did not understand.

Ohma's comments during interviews were borne out in observations. Ohma was in a loud science class with many transitions. In one observation, students worked in partners to identify objects hidden in film containers. In this class, there were many opportunities for students to take short cuts to complete the worksheet. Ohma, instead of taking short cuts, collaborated with a female student, who identified as Turkish and Muslim, to arrive at hypotheses. Once Ohma asked the teacher for help, who said she should test her hypothesis that the container was empty. Ohma proceeded to shake an empty container and seemed satisfied that the test container was empty.

During stimulated recall, Ohma said she "had to ask" for help because she was confused about not being able to hear any sound. When asked why she asked her teacher instead of her partner, she said she had already asked her partner, who also did not know. She resolved her confusion by shaking a container she knew was empty and comparing it to the test container.

When speaking about a time a friend from Nepal helped her with an assignment about the

periodic table, she said, "I just don't copy. Then, I really don't know what I'm doing and then I get confused easily." Clearly, understanding what she did was more important to her than getting a good grade on the assignment.

Khalidah. Like Ohma, Khalidah acknowledged how struggle led her to understand concepts, especially in learning English. She said reading was the most difficult thing to learn when she moved to the US. When asked what was so difficult, she answered, "They [*the letters*] were difficult. I didn't see those kind of letters before." Her native language was Bengali.

Through acquiring English, Khalidah gained an understanding of how to learn as much as possible. She reported wanting to work with other students so that she could learn more in saying, "The more I work with people, the more I get in my head. And that helps me think more." She later restated the same idea by saying:

> When people talk or things… it comes… It kind of gets me to think more. I don't know why how that works, but I just think more when peoples like working it together, instead of, like, individually.

Khalidah had previously struggled to acquire English, and, thus worked very hard to understand the material in social studies. As such, she was typically more focused on her work than her peers and was in a position of helping them when she was partnered with others.

Shamshidah. Shamshidah found school difficult. She said, "Some studies hard. Um, we have a lot of tests. We get to write a lot. That's all." She also said of her classes, "They're hard. Some confusing too."

Despite her struggles, she still wanted to do well academically; she said, "Because it's how I can be… it's how I can take my careers. So it opens my knowledges." She also said of her favorite classes, "You get to study a lot. You get to write a lot." She framed this positively; she thought studying and writing were important and took pride in doing those things. She was motivated to understand the material. Later, she stated, "I like to study a lot." When I asked her why she enjoyed working in class, she answered, "So I can think well."

Shamshidah asked her partner (a Caucasian American female) for help during each observation. Students were supposed to complete a series of answers, then discuss the process they used with a partner. In every occasion, Shamshidah could not finish the problems during the time allotted, and her partner guided her toward the answers. Her focus seemed to be on understanding the correct process before trying to discuss her answer with her partner.

Shamshidah spoke about seeking understanding during stimulate recall. She thought it was important to finish the problem before sharing with her partner. She wanted to share, but first, she had to understand what she was doing.

Summary. Despite struggles in learning English, Ohma, Khalidah, and Shamshidah worked very hard to understand the material. They thought the purpose of school was to learn, and finishing assignments was a way to ensure learning. As such, they focused on understanding rather than just going through the motions of finishing work.

Staying on Task

The participants ensured that they were learning the material by staying on task. They spoke of staying on task independent of seeking understanding, though it certainly helped with their learning. Staying on task was a way to do well in school, but it also seemed to have value in and of itself.

Ohma. Ohma reported the connection between staying on task and doing well in school when she said, "When we talk too much, we don't, like, finish our work. And, like, if we don't finish our work, we will have bad grades." Good grades were important to Ohma, and being compliant was a major factor for her.

She was annoyed by other students being off task or copying and wanted to let the teacher know, but did not want to disrupt class. She said:

> If they just want to copy off, I will… I will, like get mad, but like, I will be staying still and, like, saying nothing. So, like, I don't really express the madness.

She would not let herself get distracted by the off-task students so that she could stay on task.

Ohma's emphasis on staying on task may have come from her experiences in Muslim school in Thailand. Describing her school, she said:

> We don't use technology, like right here. And we don't have, like many posters. No crayons, no coloring. And… we don't use… like we don't have, like… um, we actually have outfits, uh, uniforms. And we have to wear scarves, and, like, the teacher, like, has this big stick. If, like we don't get it, he will, like, just hit us on the hand, like [*demonstrated hitting on the hand*] slowly. But, like, some kids get hurt, but not much.

The punishment for not doing well was one of two instances when Ohma mentioned ways the teacher kept the students on task. She also said:

> Because, like, we used to use, like, these technology, and like, there, we just had to sit down, read our stuff, and, like, work as hard as you can. If you don't get it, you have to do these, like, difficult sit and down things.

She acted out and described squats with her arms held out in front of her. To be successful, she had to do what the teacher asked and work hard. That was the same attitude she brought to her classroom experiences in the US.

In observations, Ohma consistently stayed on task despite opportunities to do otherwise. In one instance, Ohma asked her friend (a student from Nepal, with whom she tended to be silly and playful) for help on an assignment about the periodic table while the teacher was on the opposite side of the classroom. Neither got distracted, and Ohma did not copy any answers.

Though Ohma worked well with students from other cultural backgrounds, she was cautious in working with those she did not think were good students. In one activity, Ohma and four girls (one identified as Croatian, two as American, and the fourth as African American) tried to locate barriers hidden under a box by rolling a ball under it and mapping its path. Ohma and the girl who identified as Croatian took the lead and effectively left out a student, who Ohma identified as one who copied.

Ohma highly valued staying on task, even when she had opportunities to not do so. She was able to stay on task even when working with students who she did not trust to work well. Some of her belief that students should follow directions seemed to come from her experiences of school in Thailand.

Khalidah. Khalidah focused on other students' behaviors more than the other participants. She said of working with students who were not on task, "I get mad, and then I don't like working anymore. So I just sit there quiet while we do the work." She felt powerless in letting the teacher know that other students were off task, which she expressed by saying, "They usually say, um, 'just try. Next time I'll try to put you up with another person'." Even though she disliked working with a person the teacher chose, she also said, "I'm okay working with anyone." This suggests that she placed high importance on following the teacher's directions even if she did not want to.

Khalidah framed school in Bangladesh around conformity. She said that if they did not follow the rules, the teacher would punish them in much the same way described by Ohma: "Um, if you don't do something they tell you to do, they like hit you with a stick." She clarified that being hit with a stick did not hurt.

In one observation, Khalidah worked with three different partners to identify important events leading up to the U.S. Civil War. With each of the three partners, Khalidah either led the discussions or was ahead of her partner on the assignment. She often explained the answers to the others. With her second partner, a Latino male who had a lot of work to complete, Khalidah continued to stay on task even while her partner wrote his answers. He became distracted toward the end of the brief work time and began talking with other students, but Khalidah worked ahead on the assignment instead of letting herself get distracted.

Like Ohma, Khalidah talked about not trusting other students to do their work. Her mistrust of other students could be a reason she took the lead to make sure she got her work done. Even when working with friends, Khalidah did not allow herself to get off task until she finished the work.

Shamshidah. Perhaps more clearly than Ohma or Khalidah, Shamshidah valued being compliant. When asked what made her day go well, she answered, "In class I just… do what else the teacher says and just listening and do all work." Though she did not say much more directly speaking to staying on task, many of her

comments had an implicit message that she would do whatever the teacher asked of her.

Shamshidah never spoke to any particular behavioral expectations from school in Malaysia, but indicated an expectation of conformity. She clearly said she was surprised she had so much freedom in schools in the US.

In observations, Shamshidah worked hard to stay on task. At times, she worked too slowly to do exactly what the teacher was saying, but she never intentionally disobeyed the teacher. When she shared with her partner, she did so very quietly, often pointing to the work rather than talking about it.

In a stimulated recall session, Shamshidah said she wanted to share her answers, but had to finish the problems first. She wanted to do what the teacher said, but had a difficult time keeping up with the teacher's time constraints.

When asked how she would work with a student who speaks the same language as her, Shamshidah said they would talk more, but they would still only talk about math. To her, the content was the most important part of the class, and she would not spend time distracting herself with other topics.

Summary. One way the participants tried to ensure their understanding was to follow teacher directions. This value seemed to come from their experiences in their countries of origin, where compliance was emphasized. Even when it was difficult to follow directions, the participants nearly always stayed on task. While it was a way to ensure understanding, staying on task was important to all of the participants in and of itself.

Being Kind to Others

In addition to seeking understanding and staying on task in their classes, the participants emphasized being kind to others. While friendships were important to each participant, they were secondary to doing well in school. One way they ensured doing well was to be kind.

Ohma. Ohma was clear about her values in saying, "I like it when people, um, like, teachers, friends, and all the people are nice. And, like, funny, and, like, kind." Throughout her interviews, it was clear she valued having nice people around her and being nice to others.

Ohma enjoyed spending time with her friends in school. Her favorite parts of school were, "seeing my friends, and, like, having classes with my friends." Regarding why she worked well with her friends, she said:

> Because they know me better than other people. They know that I don't like copying. I like, like, asking. And then, like, they are, like, smart, and, like, funny, so, like, I can stay with them. And, like, whenever I do something stupid, like, they will do something stupid and then we both will laugh.

Friendliness, and kindness were key parts of her experiences with other people in school, whether with adults or other students.

Even though Ohma disliked when students were off task or copied, she was reluctant to tell the teacher. She explained why when she said, "because I don't want, like, other people, like, to get, like, hurt and, like, I don't want them to be sad at all." She did not want other students to be upset or sad that she said anything.

In observations, Ohma displayed the kindness toward others she emphasized in her interviews. She never got outwardly frustrated, even when she was one of the students taking the lead on an activity and other students were not working, or when she was paired with a student she identified as one who copies.

Ohma worked hard to be kind to everyone because kindness and humor were so important to her. She went so far as to not tell on other students who were cheating. Clearly, being kind to others was something she valued highly.

Khalidah. Khalidah put a high value on having friends in class. When asked what she liked about her favorite classes, she answered, "Um, fun people there." She also said, "I have friends in every one of my classes." While some students might have emphasized these traits as a way to get off task, Khalidah was able to value having friends in class while also seeking understanding and staying on task.

One reason Khalidah valued friends in school so much was that she did not see her friends outside of school very often. When asked if she sees her friends outside of school, she replied, "No, not really." School was an important place for her to make friends, because aside from

Ohma, she reported that she met all of her friends at school. Regarding how she met her friends, Khalidah said, "[Ohma], I used to live with her in um, one of our old apartments. And the other ones I met at school."

Khalidah indicated a preference for working with smaller groups rather than large groups when she said:

> If it's, like a bigger group, some of them, they might not like you. They work by themselves. And, like, if it's, like a smaller group, then you could like, interact with each other. You could say things, like, share your details and things.

Trying to get along with other students was important to her, especially in finishing her work and understanding the material.

During observations, Khalidah was very helpful to her partners. In one instance, when working with a Latino male who had very little of his assignment completed and was distracted, she coached him through it. She was nice to him even when he was distracted and off task.

Khalidah said during a stimulated recall session that working with students from other cultural backgrounds was easier than working with students from her own cultural background because she would be more likely to get off task and talk about non-school related things if partnered with a student from her own cultural background.

Khalidah was very peer-oriented, getting along well with every student with whom she was partnered. She enjoyed working with friends, but was willing to work with anyone. Even when the students were distracted, she acted nicely toward them, and had a generally positive opinion.

Shamshidah. Shamshidah emphasized the importance of acting kind toward others. She described smart students as, "Kind, respectful, responsible." When asked what she thought of her friends, she said, "They're friendly sometimes. They're nice to people." Several other times, she mentioned being nice and kind as desirable traits. Describing one friend, she said, "She's kind. She's nice."

Like Ohma, Shamshidah would not tell the teacher when other students were off task. Shamshidah explained, "It would make more problem." When asked to clarify, she indicated that other students might get mad at her and that it was important that everyone be nice.

Shamshidah reported not liking to work with others, even though she thought it was important to still be kind. She said, "I just like to work myself, so it's more comfortable." When asked why, she answered, "I feel nervous." Ultimately, Shamshidah stated, "Some people might be smarter than me." She then offered an example of students doing something that made her feel not smart when she said:

> In science class, me and there's two girls. So we are in groups. We are doing some projects. So, we have me, she, and she's a girl so she don't talk with me. She just talk with the people. Like to her friend, just her friend. So she just talk with her, you know. Like when we were doing some projects together. She don't talk to me, at all.

She reported feeling most comfortable working alone. To her, isolation seemed to be a sign of others being unkind, which she did not like. She compensated by preferring to work alone. That said, she appreciated the help available when she worked with other students.

In observations, Shamshidah was partnered with a Caucasian American female who was very good in math, but who was very quiet and kept to herself. Shamshidah frequently asked her questions and was always very polite in doing so.

Even though Shamshidah preferred to work alone, she was still invariably nice to her partner when they were supposed to interact. Combined with her emphasis on kindness from her interviews, I conclude she viewed being nice as roughly on the same level as being compliant when it came to success in schools in the US.

Summary. Being kind was a strong value of all three participants. They valued others being nice to them, and they were nice to others, even when they did not have to be. They seemed to understand that being nice to other students would help them do well in school. They did not want to cause problems between other students, so would not tell on other students.

Discussion

The participants were firmly in Erikson's (1950, 1968) identity versus role confusion stage, in which a primary focus is to re-orient from family toward peers (Larson & Richards, 1991; Smetana el al., 2006). The three participants displayed three different levels of this process, with Shamshidah very family-oriented, Ohma very friend-oriented, and Khalidah in between. Another facet of Erikson's (1950) identity versus role confusion stage is that adolescents protect themselves against embarrassment. Despite their range of family and friend orientations, all three participants reported being reluctant to work with their peers. Due to the various challenges faced by refugee students (McBrien, 2005), especially struggles in school, it could be that the participants were reluctant to engage with peers for fear of being embarrassed. Both Ohma and Shamshidah reported not wanting to work with other students. Khalidah wanted to work with small groups or partners, but typically worked alone before checking her answers with partners. Shamshidah spoke to this directly when she talked of other students being smarter than her. Another explanation for their reluctance might be related to their lack of experience with child-centered educational practices, making them uncomfortable when working with other students (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

One interesting note is that the participant who was most reluctant to work with others (Shamshidah) only interacted with one other student; she also struggled academically more than Ohma or Khalidah. Perhaps Shamshidah would have been more successful academically if she had engaged in more intercultural interactions.

While they were working to be successful in school, the participants identified with their countries of origin. Many times, they referenced their lives prior to arriving in the US, often emphasizing what was considered successful behavior in school in their previous countries. Especially for Ohma and Khalidah, and to some extent for Shamshidah, they strongly identified with their countries of origin while also wanting to be successful and comfortable in the US. Their dual allegiances echo the framework from Ogbu and Simons (1998), who described refugees as having traits of both voluntary and involuntary immigrants, which is consistent with a framework from Mosselson (2006), who found female Bosnian refugees constructed their identities through, "*roots & routes*" (p. 20); they simultaneously looked back upon their origins and looked forward to their future. Their identities "remained fluid" (p. 22). Instead of working toward a final stage of identity, the refugees in Mosselson's study constantly reshaped their identities.

The participants' experiences in schools in their countries of origin were very teacher-centered and emphasized compliance. In the US, they certainly saw the teacher as the authority figure, indicating that they preferred to ask the teacher for help first. They understood, however, that the teacher could not always help them, so they sometimes would need to ask peers for help.

Despite fluidity in many parts of their identities and dual allegiances, each participant saw herself as a good student. In this sense, according to Marcia's (1980) framework, Ohma, Khalidah, and Shamshidah would be in foreclosed statuses. They settled on their identity as good students without actively exploring different options. All three drew on their experiences from their countries of origin to form a picture of what behaviors good students exhibited. Ohma, Khalidah, and Shamshidah focused on trying to understand the material, staying on task, and being kind because those values were emphasized in the schools they attended prior to coming to the US.

The super-diverse nature of their school (Vertovec, 2007), in which their classes consisted of students from 15 or more cultural backgrounds, may have made the participants' experiences very different from students in a less diverse setting. In such a setting, nearly every interaction was intercultural, and hegemonic norms did not form easily. Essentially, more students had equal standing, allowing them to act out the values, or forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), they brought from their countries of origin. In less diverse settings with a stronger hegemonic culture, the participants may have had a more difficult time interacting with others. Because they were able to interact with such a wide variety of students, the participants may have been better able to navigate the various norms of their school.

Implications

This study was very narrowly focused on three Burmese refugee students in one diverse middle

school in the Pacific Northwest. The conclusions are not meant to be widely generalizable. Based on the results of this study, there are a few recommendations for practice and research.

Implications for Practice

Though the participants reluctantly interacted with others, having opportunities to act out their ideas of being good students allowed them to integrate their beliefs about school they developed in their countries of origin with their current identities in the US. An integral part of the participants' success in class was the multicultural context in which they worked with other students.

In classrooms that are not as multicultural as those in the study, teachers should intentionally set up intercultural interactions, which may help marginalized students navigate the various norms existing in a classroom (Gurin et al., 2011; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel et al., 2012; Yoon, 2012). The participants used intercultural interactions to solidify their identities as good students and navigate the norms of their school. They defaulted to wanting to ask the teacher for help, but were willing to work with peers when the teacher was unavailable. Teachers could facilitate this by intentional structuring intercultural interactions.

In addition, teachers should vary the students with whom refugee students work. Ohma, Khalidah, and Shamshidah did not report any preference for their work partners and appeared to work equally well with everyone, which was attributable to the super-diverse context (Vertovec, 2007) in their middle school. That said, Ohma and Khalidah worked with a variety of other students and were quite successful academically. Shamshidah only worked with one other student and was less successful. In less diverse contexts, students might not have the same opportunities for intercultural interactions, limiting their exploration and inhibiting their ethnic identity formation. Educators in contexts with less diversity would need to ensure the widest variety of groupings possible by being intentional about varying with whom refugee students work.

Implications for Research

To provide high quality education to all students, including refugee and other marginalized students, educators need to understand their experiences. McBrien (2005) and Portes and Zhou (1993) advocated differentiating the experiences of different refugee populations. To differentiate those experiences, researchers need to have a deep understanding of the experiences of various refugee populations. To build a collective understanding of a variety of different groups, researchers should continue studying the experiences of individual groups of marginalized students (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

The multicultural context in this study was important as it allowed for multiple sets of norms to exist in which the participants could match their habitus. Different contexts may have different effects on the experiences of marginalized students. When researchers examine the experiences of various students in classes, they would benefit by paying careful attention to how the contexts affect the participants.

Last, researchers should examine identity formation, especially for ethnic minorities, as a multi-faceted process. The participants in my study had all settled on identities as good students in school. Outside of school, however, they were in different stages in their identity formation processes according to Erikson's (1950) framework. If they were foreclosed according to Marcia's (1980) framework, but still in process of shifting their orientations from parents to peers (Smetana et al., 2006), it follows that adolescents have multiple identities continually in process. According to Mosselson (2006), refugee students' identity formation is in a constant state of flux. If the identity formation process for refugees is constantly changing, it makes sense that it may happen in more than one area.

Summary and Conclusion

After exploring the experiences of three female Burmese refugee students in a multicultural middle school, especially focusing on their intercultural interactions, it is clear that more work should be done to improve educational access for marginalized students. The participants highly valued understanding what they were learning, staying on task, and being kind to other students. In doing so, they solidified their identities as good students. They acted out what they knew from their past experiences while making better futures for themselves.

Because of the super-diverse context (Vertovec, 2007) of their classrooms, they had ample opportunities to work with students from other cultural backgrounds. Even though the participants were generally reluctant to work with other students, they worked well with students from various cultural backgrounds. They understood that working with others helps them better understand the material they were supposed to learn. Intercultural interactions also helped the participants navigate several different norms to be successful.

Moving forward, teachers can help structure classrooms for such students by providing opportunities for intercultural interaction. In addition, researchers can continue examining the experiences of a variety of marginalized groups with an eye on educational context and identity formation.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Part 1

1. Tell me about your day.
2. Tell me about yourself
    a. What is your family like? Tell me about your family.
    b. Who are your best friends? How did you become friends with them?
3. What do you do when you go home after school? What do you do on the weekends?
4. How long have you lived in the U.S.?
5. Where did you live before coming to the U.S.?
6. What do you remember about your life before coming to the U.S?

Part 2

7. How do you like school?
8. Did you go to school before coming to the U.S.?
9. When you first started school here, what things surprised you?
10. What things do you find confusing about school? Classes? Routines?
11. What are your favorite subjects? What do you like to learn most?
12. What do you dislike about school, both in class and other times (e.g., recess, lunch)?
13. What do you like about school, both in class and other times (e.g., recess, lunch)?

Part 3

14. Do you enjoy working with other students? Why or why not?
15. Do your best friends go to school with you?
16. If you could choose anyone to work with in your class, who would it be?
17. What makes you choose someone to work with?
18. How do you feel when the teacher has you work with someone you do not want to work with? Do you let the teacher know how you feel?
19. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about that I have not asked?

Appendix B: Observation Protocol

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the day (e.g., different schedule, infrequent events, weather, new students)?
2. What is the classroom layout?
3. What is the classroom atmosphere?
4. What is the intended content of the lesson?
5. What are the students actually talking about?
6. Describe the students involved in the intercultural interaction (e.g., cultural background, languages spoken, academic achievement, friends or not).
7. Describe the body language of the students involved.
8. Were there any interruptions during the interaction?
9. How long did the interaction last?
10. Was anything accomplished during the interaction?
11. Were there any other interesting characteristics of the interaction?