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## CHAPTER 3

*From Mandalay to Nickel City:  
Exploring the Changing Identities and Struggles of Karen Burmese Youth*

### INTRODUCTION

After independence from British colonialism in 1948, Burma, once part of the Raj system and one of Southeast Asia's largest countries, became engaged in one of the longest civil wars in the region's history. A democratic republic from 1948 to 1962, Burma experiencing the turmoil of nation state building in a post colonial world was unable successfully to incorporate its ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse population into one national identity, forcing hundreds of thousands of ethnic Burmese into refugee camps throughout Southeast Asia. Historically, British interest in the region was centered on its strategic position between the British ports of Calcutta and Singapore and the economic importance of Burma's extensive teak forests (Harvey, 2000). Britain was also concerned that the last independent ruling king of Myanmar, Thibaw, favored economic relations with France furthering British determination to annex Burma into the Raj. Burmese territories were annexed separately in various stages of imperialism following aggressive colonial wars. Also, the long term British colonial administration resulted in British systemic destruction of villages and the exiling of large communities. The subsequent successful subjugation of the territories appears to have created a precedent followed by the later independent and oppressive Burmese government. The separate administrations and ethnic favoritism in these territories may contribute to contemporary Burmese difficulties in state integration of its diverse populations.

In response to the military coup of 1962, a police state was established which increased state sponsored brutality and effectively closed Burma off from the rest of the world, renaming itself as Myanmar. From 1962 to the present, the military government of Burma has experienced many popular challenges to its legitimacy with continuing flight of its population as refugees to neighboring countries (Charney, 2009). In 2008 the ruling party promised a constitutional referendum in 2010 to a "disciplined flourishing" democracy. The Union Solidarity and Development Party won over 70% of the election results with allegations of wide spread election fraud and increased opposition from pro democratic factions. Increased protests threatened civil war. The move to a Constitutional Referendum was also a direct result of cyclone Nargis which has been described as Burma's most devastating national disaster. With over 10 billion dollars in damages and over 1million displaced and homeless, Burma's secretive government hindered the distribution of medical and food supplies creating additional protests and thousands more fleeing to refugee camps across the border. The government of

Myanmar has been responsible for state sponsored terrorism of its ethnic populations in order to curb movements for semi-autonomous ethnic zones responsible for the preservation of language and culture, as well as direct representation in government. The Karen language and ethnic group of South and Southeast Burma has been especially targeted for ethnic cleansing. Many have escaped to refugee camps in neighboring Thailand (Marshall, 2011.)

On the other side of the world, since 2005, “Nickel City,” a northern postindustrial metropolis in the US, has become home to over 8,000 Burmese refugees. This city has become the unofficial state capital for refugee resettlement, taking in more than 30% of the state’s refugee population and the majority of Burmese refugees resettled in the state. Unofficial population tracking by local resettlement agencies suggests the actual number of Burmese refugees is closer to 12,000 as a result of child birth and undocumented internal migration. This makes Nickel City’s Burmese population one of the largest in the US.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the acculturative experiences and perceptions of Burmese refugees, particularly the youth, living in Nickel City, and to contribute to the extremely sparse and limited literature on Burmese refugee youth in general. My intention is to shed light on the lived experiences of young refugees who struggle to negotiate identities and navigate complex social institutions while adjusting to their new lives. In this chapter I argue that the transnational experiences, resettlement in socially and economically marginalized communities, and placement in a public school system ill prepared to manage their needs, is positioning the Karen youth to a future of failure. In addition, the inter-ethnic conflicts and racially charged experiences of the Karen youth are creating an early oppositional identity to particular minority groups in the US. In many instances their experiences have been harsh and very contradictory to the myths refugees typically hold of the US. In the words of one narrator: “I believe America truly understands the idea of individual liberty but doesn’t really understand justice for all.”

#### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Data presented in this chapter are from field work conducted in the fall of 2011 and spring 2012 in which I explore the acculturative experiences and perceptions of several recent refugee groups, including Karen Burmese, in Nickel City. Specifically the data presented explore how Karen Burmese youth begin to negotiate their identities. Four prominent refugee non-governmental resettlement organizations were contacted whose staff provided the most recent refugee and immigrant data for the Nickel City community since the 2010 census. These agencies also provided general information on the neighborhoods which contain the largest clustering of Burmese refugees in the city.

I began this research by driving and walking through recent immigrant and refugee neighborhoods familiarizing myself with the general atmosphere of the communities. I spent time shopping in neighborhood stores and eating when possible in the recent ethnic restaurants that have rather suddenly appeared to serve the needs of the newly arrived refugee and immigrant populations. After meetings with agency staff and the establishment of trust, agency personnel introduced me to

Burmese youth and their families who then later introduced me to others in their community. Together the field observations as well as the interviews have provided a broad understanding of the acculturative experiences and perceptions of recently arrived Karen people in the Nickel City region (Creswell, 2009).

Data for this chapter include field observations from Karen Burmese neighborhoods conducted intermittently over 8 months, as well as informal interviews of 7 agency staff, 15 Karen Burmese youth (ages 18 to 25), 2 Karen families, and 3 members of the Karen Burmese community that have been identified by resettlement personnel as emerging leaders in the Karen Burmese community. Three public school teachers who teach Karen students were also interviewed for data collection. Both resettlement agency personnel and teachers provided initial contacts for current students or former students to interview for their experiences and perceptions. All interviews were conducted in English, and in the homes of students, in the classrooms of teachers, and in the offices of resettlement agency administrators. Pseudonyms are used throughout this analysis (Creswell, 2009).

The Karen Burmese community I discuss in this research is located in the lower west side of Nickel City. The local Burmese population is heterogeneous with 3 prominent ethnicities represented, including the Karen, Chin, and Karenni, with the Karen the largest. The Karen more commonly define themselves in terms of religion -- specifically, Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim. They make little differentiation between Roman Catholics and other Protestant groups that comprise the Christian community. The majority of Burmese interviewed report intergenerational Christian working class or agricultural backgrounds in Burmese villages, but all have spent the majority of their lives living in refugee camps in Thailand. In fact, some have never lived in Burma, spending their entire childhood in a Thai refugee camp. All 15 Burmese youth interviewed have spent 7 years or less in the US. At no time during my data collection did any interviewee refer to Burma as Myanmar.

For this research I engaged the assistance of Law Eh Soe, a prominent member of the Burmese community, photographer, and activist in Burma. Mr. Soe is well known and respected by the Karen Refugee community and has assisted and guided me through the various language and cultural differences I encountered throughout my research. Though not Asian, I am familiar with the experiences of immigrants as a first generation immigrant myself who identifies as an Antillian from the French speaking West Indies. Throughout my life I have identified with the local Latino community and am the director and curator of the region's only Latino visual arts organization. I have lived in marginal communities my entire life though admittedly now continue to do so by choice. Like my narrators I am personally familiar with the lack of city services, and the problems encountered by my friends and neighbors who struggle to navigate often complex and sometimes contradictory social institutions. I am familiar with the graying meats, redistributed produce, and nearly expired products in my neighborhood grocery store. However, I now do so by choice whereas the narrators of Karen Burmese community explored here have little to no choice (Creswell, 2009).

Nickel City, a once important transportation center and urban hub connects major Atlantic cities with the mid-west through train and water routes. At the

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beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nickel City was poised to be one of the most important, influential, and perhaps richest cities in the US with its population peaking in the fifties at nearly 600,000. The end of the 1950s began a gradual decline as a result of its manufacturing and industrial sector decimated by the transfer of capital to overseas industry in search of cheaper means of production. White flight to the suburbs, race riots, and forced busing of school children to satisfy federal desegregation laws of the 1960s led to the steady drain of middle class families out to other areas. The shift from rail and sea transportation to transcontinental trucking as a means to transport goods, and an unsuccessful urban renewal plan, further left Nickel City with an overwhelmingly poor inner city (Centrie, 2004). A greatly reduced tax base, marginalized poverty stricken population, and the continuing exodus of the middle class left behind emptied decaying neighborhoods with a greatly decreased population of 261,310 as of the 2010 US Census.

Today Nickel City is listed as one of the top 10 poorest cities in the county with a notably segregated population. The estimated per capita income in 2009 is \$20,003 with a mean household income of \$29,285, up from \$24,516 in 2000. The city's total combined non-white and relatively poor population slightly exceeds half of its total population. When examined by race and ethnicity Nickel City's income disparity between cultures is described by one regional think tank as a chasm with African Americans earning \$1 to every \$2 earned by a white resident. The same report goes on to say:

(Nickel City's) poverty is highly segregated and racialized. (The greater Nickel City Region) is now the fifth most racially segregated large metro in the nation; (Nickel City) is 38.6% African-American; the county is only 3.5% African-American; in the metro area, 81.4% of African-Americans and 58.9% of Hispanics live in high poverty neighborhoods, compared with 10.7% of whites; as of 2005, the poverty rate in the metro area for African-Americans was 32.3%, for Hispanics 29.8%, and for whites 8.7%.; in the city of (Nickel City), of the 18,454 foreign born people, 34.05% are living in poverty. In the metro area, of the 65,724 foreign born people, 24.97% are living in poverty with African Americans earning less than half of whites in the city.

However, Nickel City's leaders contend that the city is poised for a renaissance with the creation of a state of the art hospital sector, expansion of its higher education sector, and nascent scientific and established artistic communities. The city's downtown is being revitalized by a young and educated middle and upper middle class population wanting to live closer to employment with access to its prominent cultural assets and increasingly attractive harbor development.

An influx of immigrants and refugees from around the world too has dramatically increased since 2000. These families are reinvigorating devastated neighborhoods on both the east and west sides with businesses to support their communities' needs and home ownership of its neglected late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century housing stock. A recent news article in the City's only remaining paper reported that the Burmese community, one of the nation's largest, now composes

1% of the city's total population. Karen Burmese, along with other recent refugees and immigrants from around the world have become a significant presence in the region. However, not all refugees and their resettlement experiences are the same. Changes in the immigrant and refugee experience from past models is affected by transnationalism, the cultural capital differing groups bring, as well as the receptivity of their hosts, transnational encounters, and even the community in which they are placed.

I am introducing here the notion of social class as a significant indicator by which people interact and experience the world around them and indeed the refugee experience itself. Class as a framework to understand the perceptions, interactions with social institutions, and life outcomes, to a certain degree always been an area of investigation in the identity production literature (e.g. Brantlinger, 2003, Burawoy, Chang, & Fei-yu Hsieh, 2010, Lareau, 2003; Masey & Denton, 1993; Patillo-McCoy, 2000; Reay, Crozier, & James 2011, Torres, 2009). As argued by Weis (2012), class has gained importance in two ways. First there is the greater recognition of class as a key signifier of positionality (Lareau, 2003; Reay et al., 2011, Vincent & Ball 2006). It is as Weis (2012) argues "to be additionally understood as the practices of living—and better understood, perhaps as "the social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive and cope" (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 27).

Over the past decade there is increasing evidence that social inequalities are widening not just on a national level but on an international level as well (Aron-Dine & Shapiro, 2006; Chauvel, 2010; Gilbert, 2003; Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006). The middle class once an indicator of economic well being is growing smaller while poverty increases and the opportunities for upward social mobility decrease (Kloby, 2004.) Further, as argued by Weis and Dolby (2012), economic inequalities are increasing both within nations as well as internationally between nations (Cheval, 2010; Gilbert, 2003, Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006, Sherman & Aron-Dine, 2007). As refugees, some living their entire lives within the artificial confines of refugee camps, many find the common practices of their daily lives indefinitely suspended, often waiting for 10 years or longer to resume their lives. For many of the Karen, their entire lives from infancy to young adulthood, has passed without the traditional social institutions to support socio-economic mobility.

Globalization and changes in migration patterns have altered the way in which everyone experiences contemporary society. Massive changes in communication, media, remediation, and accessible global transportation have altered the refugee experience as well, particularly as to how groups adapt to their host country. Research has demonstrated in a global context that refugees and immigrants retain strong social ties to their home countries while adapting to their host country. Burmese Karen have expressed in interviews that they have had limited or no direct communication with family or friends in their homeland. They evidence a powerful desire to return home and aid in the reconstruction of the country.

Like the interviews have suggested, recent scholarship has moved to deterritorialize place and space with an understanding that refugee experiences have become multi layered, and perhaps more importantly, ones which transcend national boundaries (Crespo-Sancho, 2012) reflecting the ways in which

individuals and groups adapt and form identities. As presented here, social class is viewed as a collection of cultural resources which guide individuals, families, and even communities to interact with society along specific lines. This perspective highlights the ways in which non-material goods or resources such as ways of behaving, community bonds, and individual and collective perceptions allow or disallow access into mainstream society and transformation of such into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Capital in this sense is not strictly economic but rather attributes, possessions, and personal qualities that are exchangeable for goods, services, or even esteem which exist in many forms -- symbolic, social, linguistic, and economic (DiMaggio, 1979.) In US society the importance of ethnicity, race, or national background is important and must be considered as in the case presented here. The Karen refugees are beginning a process of social critique as they interact with middle class Nickel City communities and multiple ethnicities within their own neighborhoods which represent working class and underclass groups.

In this study all 15 Karen youth describe backgrounds in which they lived in Thai refugee camps before being resettled in the US. Eight youth have never lived in Burma. Respondents were not asked to recount their experiences in Burma which necessitated their flight or their experiences in the camps in order not to re-traumatize them. However 7 individuals volunteered their general experiences while describing resettlement here in this country. All Karen youth, community members, and families narrated oppressive conditions in Thai camps with limited access to education, health care, or day to day interactions with traditional social institutions. Instead refugee camp life was expected to be a temporary and somewhat artificial life with an anticipated ending with a return to their homeland or acceptance into a host country.

Since 1984 Karen Burmese have fled oppressive conditions in Burma and sought asylum in Thailand. In their study of life in Thai refugee camps, Oh and van der Stouwe (2008) report that for Karen refugees it is extremely difficult to control the development of their societies and participation in social life in these camps:

Officially, refugees do not have access to services provided outside the camps, nor are they permitted to leave the camps to earn an income. International nongovernmental organizations [NGOs] provide most basic and capacity-building services in the areas of food, shelter, health, education, and community services. Despite these contributions and the good intentions of the NGOs, the protracted refugee situation and the restrictions on refugee movement have created a deadlock situation in which it is extremely difficult for the refugees to control the development of their own society.

In the six camps studied, the vast majority of camp residents share rural roots: 91.8 percent of the refugees come from small villages in Burma, and only 6.5 percent lived in towns or cities before living in camp. Since it is not possible for the refugees to work outside the camps, their monthly incomes are low, with 69.3 percent of the camp population earning between 0 and 100 baht (about \$2.85) per month (Oh et al 2006). These

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low incomes are supplemented, however, by the free food, shelter, health care, and education provided to the refugees by NGOs.

Descriptions of life in the camps were described by participants as meager. While refugee's basic needs were provided for, there was little possibility for creating a life which resembled normal for anyone. As described by one narrator, "You only live from day to day. Each day you hope that this day is the day you can find a host country that will accept you and you can begin your life."

#### MAKING A NEW LIFE

The Karen Burmese like other refugees apply for asylum to the host country of their choice. Deciding on a host country is often based on several factors such as the likelihood of a quick acceptance, where other members of their family have been accepted, and whether there is a large community of Karen Burmese already established. The minimum waiting period is two years, with many individuals waiting much longer periods of time, sometimes as long as 10 years. Refugees accepted by the US become sponsored by a federally-funded agency that has the responsibility of working with that individual or family during the resettlement process.

For more than 30 years, the US federal government has attempted to place refugees across the country as not to place too much burden on several states such as Florida or California as has been the case in the past. It is not unusual for refugees to experience secondary internal migration to locations they believe to be more acceptable. Their decision to migrate is often based on climate or to place themselves in larger established communities of the same ethnic group (Centrie, 2004). New groups of refugees such as the Karen, however, more often remain in the location of original settlement compared to Vietnamese or Laotian refugees of past waves. During interviews with resettlement directors I asked why that was the case and why was Nickel City home to such a large community of Karen Burmese:

Ms. Johnson: Over the past 20 years various areas of the country have experienced considerable loss of population to warmer climates and to areas where jobs are more plentiful. This has certainly been the case here in (Nickel City). At some point the state realized to send newly arrived refugees to big cities such as New York City was really setting them up for failure. It's just harder to live in these places and really hard if you are coming from a (refugee) camp where you have been for 5 or 10 years. There is plenty of cheap and available housing here, and it's a less complicated place to live, less expensive overall. You can get more bang for your dollar. The Karen Burmese have created a large community here. In general, I think they find the area more accepting and rather easy to manage.

Mr. Addison, from another resettlement organization, had this comment when asked why they have placed so many refugees on the west side:

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We have to look at cost of living as a major factor. The far west side and to some extent the east side are the less expensive places to live. And more importantly, we are trying to create a critical mass. It's easier for the refugees because they have other friends and family they can rely on and it's much easier for us (resettlement agencies) to deliver services.

Much of the comments by resettlement agency directors were very positive. It appeared over the several decades of refugee resettlement, changes such as federal funding and finding appropriate locations to live for refugees, particularly the Karen Burmese, was regarded as a success. Ms. France, the director of a "post resettlement agency" agreed with the comments of her colleagues from other agencies in regard to federal funding and general approaches to initial resettlement:

Placing refugees in urban and sometimes rural areas can work well for both the refugees and the communities they settle in. In cities like (Nickel City) where there has been a major decline in population, refugees revitalize neighborhoods that are in decline and they (refugees) make big contributions to the regional economies because they're setting up ethnic businesses to serve their communities like markets for familiar food, or even a Laundromat where people from the refugee communities can go to wash clothes if they don't own a washer or dryer. Cities like Utica and Rome were devastated by the loss of businesses and industry and the population decline. But these cities are rebounding and it's because of the influx of refugees and other immigrants to these communities. For a long time they (Utica and Rome) were the state's choice for resettlement but now we are replacing them as the preferred place for resettlement. We now have the largest concentration of refugees outside of New York City.

C.C.: Can you explain the difference between a post resettlement agency and resettlement agency? I've not ever heard this term before.

Ms. France: Well, a post resettlement agency is a place where refugees and recent immigrants can go for assistance after six months. Resettlement agencies only work with clients for the first six months after they arrive. I worked for (Refugee Assistance) for several years and I realized that most of the problems, the big problems refugees experience occur after six months. So I proposed this post resettlement agency to (Resettlement Care) and they found it to be a great idea.

CC. Can you tell me what kind of problems you are talking about?

Ms. France: Well, the resettlement agencies only help with refugees' initial resettlement problems like general orientation, finding housing, getting them into the county system etc. but after six months and once they are placed they don't have anything more to do with them. They aren't funded to do more. And most of the major problems with schools, medical attention, and translation problems, or problems with landlords don't come up until after they have been placed.



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Much of what the agency directors stated sounded very hopeful and was supported by many articles written in local newspapers. Nickel City was on the verge of a renaissance and some of its recent successes were in part due to the new life refugees were bringing to socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Reporters were also positively commenting on how cosmopolitan the region was becoming, and how the influx of refugees and immigrants was beginning to reverse the decreasing population trends in the national census. It all appeared very positive for both the refugees and the region. The newspaper reporters of course are interviewing agency directors. However, Ms. France illustrates how the resettlement system is in fact flawed. Government funded resettlement agencies are not funded to assist refugees beyond six months. At the conclusion of six months, clients are listed as successfully resettled, and follow up reports claim major successes allowing for continued agency funding. Very little is known about the general health or psychological well being of refugees, or as resettlement professionals explain, the long-term quality of their housing.

Resettlement agencies try to find appropriate housing before the refugees arrive. If that is not possible, they are placed in temporary housing. Refugees are also placed in orientation classes which cover the basics of living in their new location. Such an orientation may include basic language classes in English, becoming acquainted with the city and neighborhood, learning to take the bus or subway, familiarizing the refugee with the monetary system, understanding the basic rules of crossing the street, learning to shop at a supermarket etc. One agency director comments she has been involved in refugee assistance for over 10 years and that resettlement has improved considerably:

C.C.: Tell about the resettlement process. You comment that it has improved, can you explain how.

Ms. Johnson: Before 2005 each refugee was provided \$400.00 per person from the federal government. That amount stayed the same for a long time. I don't even know how far back that goes. That is for everything -- housing, furniture, dishes, pots and pans, sheets, towels -- everything. Since 2005 the federal appropriation is \$1,800 per person which is making everything much easier. So if you have a family of 4 we now have \$7,200 to get them started. You know, things have become so much more expensive. Even on the west side where we place most of our clients. You know, the west side was once a very inexpensive place to live. But now, even on the west side things have become so much more expensive. Even really bad apartments begin at \$500 and go up from there.

The experiences of resettlement can create major anxieties and other barriers to accessing services. Language issues, a lack of understanding of procedures in medical establishments, and lack of finances can impede receiving medical or dental services. Post resettlement may also include housing problems, education related issues, employment concerns, and cultural clashes with existing ethnic groups in communities in which refugees are resettled. Problems such as these are commented on by case workers in resettlement agencies. Ms. Lipsky, working in housing, remarks:

Many of the resettlement agency executive directors are not in touch with the day to day realities of resettlement. They are not in the trenches. They are mostly concerned with statistics and financing of the agencies. For example, there have been lots of problems with housing. There really isn't enough money for agency staff to investigate the condition of housing in all cases or there is an agency need to get refugees like the Karen in housing quickly. There are several cases I am aware of where Karen refugees were placed in apartments where there was no water for extended periods of time or the heating systems were not working properly.

In one case, this Karen family lived next door to another Karen family who helped them. They had to go to their neighbors to take showers, get water for cooking and cleaning. It was really a horrendous situation. On my own time I helped them search for an adequate apartment because they were already documented as resettled and technically the agency has nothing more to do with them after six months. It was so heartbreaking though.

Understanding the plight of these Karen Burmese refugees can be more difficult than other refugee groups. As agency field representatives have commented and much of my field experiences mirror, the Karen are far less likely than other groups to complain, making corrections more difficult for the agencies. When asked why Karen refugees are less likely to complain, various resettlement agency personnel responded that it simply was cultural. No complaining or little complaining in fact is similar to the Vietnamese studied earlier (Centrie, 2004.) When asked about this particular point, Mr. Sung, a Karen Burmese community leader remarked: "Yes, that, true; we are not likely to complain. That is part of Burmese culture." In one field session to collect data, I passed by the home of a Karen family I had met several weeks before. Sung, one of the Karen youth I interviewed saw me and invited me in for tea with her family. I remembered they lived elsewhere and casually asked:

C.C.: Sung, you and your family have moved. Weren't you living on Albany Street not too long ago?

Sung: Yes, we lived on Albany Street. But the house, it was not so good.

C.C.: Oh, what happened? I thought everyone liked it there.

Sung: Yes we did like the street. We had (a) lot of friends there. But it was kind of, you know, difficult. Many of the windows didn't close so it was very cold in winter and everyone was getting sick. My mother and her friend, too, they were cleaning and they looked under the rug and found much black mold. Then we started to look more around and find so much more of this black mold behind the wood on the walls (paneling). And my father said he thinks maybe it's because of this that we are always so sick. And then one day we don't have hot water but the

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landlord, he doesn't want to fix this. So, with the help of our friends, we looked for a new place to live and we found this one and we moved.

Nearly every interview contained some comment about poor housing or problems with landlords who would not repair broken or malfunctioning mechanicals. The housing in this part of the city like much of Nickel City is old, often predating the turn of the previous century. Unlike more affluent neighborhoods that boast restored Victorian Queen Ann housing, the lower west side is mostly composed of small worker style cottages, many of which are owned by absentee landlords who purchased the properties for little money, sometimes at city auctions, and who make minimal repairs.

Before Nickel City experienced large increases in its immigrant and refugee populations, the lower west side was first home to a tight knit Italian community and later in the seventies, replaced by poor Latinos/a and African-Americans who also had less agency to articulate demands for better housing. The lower west side is also a community with limited city services, few if any repairs to the city's infrastructure (such as sidewalks and sewers), few supermarkets and health clinics, along with limited public transportation, making the area somewhat isolated. The poverty rates moreover are as high as 72 %. In this sense, the total impact of the neighborhood itself has a profound effect on all aspects of quality of life, and acts as a barrier to good employment, access to education, and other institutions that facilitate personal and group success. Since 1990 there is a growing body of literature (e.g. Ainsworth, 2002, Burton Price-Spratlen, & Beal Spensor, 1997; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) which posits that the neighborhood and community in which children live has a large impact on life outcomes. Likewise, the limited resources of the community and concentration of poverty also creates tensions between groups in the lower west side. A prominent theme arising from the data are racial and ethnic conflicts which occur with some regularity.

## COMMUNITY CONFLICT

The lower west side is often referenced as the melting pot of the city. It is a community which is known regionally for its diversity as well as high concentrations of poverty. More recently it is known as one of the more dangerous communities of the city, and one which is known for its youth gangs. As previously stated, the lower west side was once an Italian community which became home to a diverse Latino/a population with a large Puerto Rican majority. More recently, a large and growing African American population has resided here. African Americans, traditionally, since the mid-1900s, have lived on the city's east side. They have however migrated to the lower west side in hopes of accessing better housing and city services. Over the last 30 years most of the Italians have left for the northern communities of the city or, if they have become very successful, to the suburbs. Along with the Italian community, many businesses have left, homes were sold to absentee landlords, and diminishing city funds have left this community as a low priority while the city's revitalization efforts have targeted other areas. The very problems African American families have tried to escape on the east side have expressed on the west side.

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Resettlement agencies chose the west side for many reasons such as lower rents and creating a critical mass, and anticipated that the preexisting diversity of the lower west side would make acceptance of refugees and immigrants easier. However, every Karen participant commented on inter ethnic conflicts without being questioned or prompted to do so, making racial or ethnic conflict one of the most significant concerns. When asked how she and her family like Nickel City and their neighborhood, Linn, a 19 year old Karen female, describes:

Linn: We love Nickel City and are so grateful for the opportunity to start our lives over. Maybe now we have a future. We didn't really have a future before. But sometimes it can be little difficult here.

C.C. Can you tell me a little more about why it's difficult here?

Linn: Sometimes when we are walking to the store or going to school... people call us names and say really bad things to us. Sometimes they tell us why we don't (you) go home. You know why we come to their (neighborhood) hood. At first I don't know what "hood" mean. Now I know, they [Puerto Ricans and African Americans] want to know why we come to their neighborhood. Most of the time I don't answer; but sometime I say we have a right to be here too. America is for all (every) body. Not just for them. Once these girls got very angry and came after us. I thought they would hit us or hurt us, so me and my brothers and sisters, we ran, ran away. This happen a lot and we are kind of, you know, scared.

A young 20 year old Karen male who calls himself Rick made this comment:

Rick: Me and my friends, sometimes when we walk around, the other guys in the neighborhood they want to fight with us. We only walking and someone will hit us.

C.C. Who hits you Rick?

Rick: If we go to 18<sup>th</sup> Street it could be black guys, if we walk to West River Street its, maybe some Puerto Rican guys. Sometimes I don't know who they are.

C. C. Why do you think they do this?

Rick: I don't know. They just don't like us. Sometime they think we are Chinese. I tell them, we are not Chinese. We are Burmese, Karen Burmese people. One guy he say, "I don't give a damn what you are mother fucker, you a chink as far as I know."

In one narration, Soo, a 21year old Karen woman explains:

Soo: Poor Mr. Un, he our neighbor. He has six children. He walk to the Burmese food store and when he come out these men they just start

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beating him. He came home and his face was all bloody. They really hurt him bad and now, Mr. Soo, he is afraid to go out at night.

Depictions of harassment and general antagonism are prevalent throughout the Karen youth narratives. In one instance, while sitting in my car and packing up my notes and other materials, I witnessed a scene which I immediately wrote up as data. Four Karen youth -- two presumably older teens I did not know and two younger children -- were walking down Johnson Street, the main business street of this west side community. As they passed a corner grocery store they had to walk by a group of 5 young Latino looking youth:

Latino male: Hey, you got a cigarette? (no response)

Latino male: Hey, I'm talking to you! (no response). The Latino male now starts walking after the group of Karen and throws an empty can he was drinking hitting the one Karen male in his back.

Karen male: Don't throw (anything at) me!

The group of Latino males all start laughing.

Latino male: Shut the fuck up you stupid fucker! Who you think you are? You're just a fuckin' Asian nigger.

Karen male: Says something to the other Karen and they now just walk faster away from the scene.

This was not the only time I witnessed street antagonism between Karen youth and other US minority ethnic groups. Throughout nearly a year of data collection I saw five incidents between Karen youth and other youth groups on the west side. Not all confrontations end with the Karen youth acting in a passive manner. Thien, a 22 year old Karen male narrated the following story which previously had been told to me by one of the education directors of a resettlement agency:

Thien: We, my three friends and I, we were students at "Neighborhood High School." Every day we went to school together and walk home together after school. We ate lunch together and we are good friends. For months, this gang of Latin guys would fight with us after school. It was getting pretty bad, you know. So I began to take a heavy piece of wood with me. I hid it behind some bushes on the school grounds before we went in and get it when we were leaving for protection.

CC: Why do you feel it was necessary to take such a big piece of wood with you?

Thien: These guys, they (were) kind of big and one of them I know was carry(ing) a knife. They were always fighting with us. One time there were about 10 of them and they surround(ed) us. I took this piece of wood

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and really hit this guy. I think I got him good. Just at that time a teacher was coming out and all of us, (the Burmese) were suspended.

CC: Didn't anything happen to the other group of guys?

Thien: No, nothing. The mother of one of the guys came to school the next day and complained about us but we already were suspended.

The school system chose not to investigate the incident more thoroughly. Rather one incident witnessed by one teacher was evaluated as a solitary event removed from its larger context. I was concerned about this particular narration and was aware that Thien very well may have provided me an especially biased version. However, this particular incident was repeated by 2 teachers and 3 resettlement education counselors who verified Thien's version. As Thien explained, the antagonism between him and his three friends and a group of Latino youths had been on-going since the beginning of the year or for 7 months. Thien later detailed that although he and his Karen friends had remarked on this problem to various school personnel, nothing had been done to alleviate the problem. Since Thien was "caught" being aggressive, it was the Karen group that was punished.

Burmese families living in Nickel City are not exclusively located on the lower west side. A growing community is also established in the city's Littlerock district. In this community poor and working class ethnic whites are the predominant population. When asking several Karen youth who live in this community to share their experiences of living in Nickel City, the responses were somewhat different. Law a 21 year old Karen Youth comments:

Law: "Speaking for myself, I like living here in Littlerock. I like it more than where some of my friends live on the lower west side."

C.C. "Tell me why if you can."

Law: "its nicer, cleaner, I like the people more. It always seems like there are a lot of problems in the other neighborhood. My friends are always having to get into fights. It seems dangerous or something."

C.C. " Law, I thought you mentioned earlier that you and some of your friends here in Littlerock were experiencing problems with some of the neighborhood kids?"

Law: "Yes, yes that's true we are, but it's not as bad as over on the west side. I don't know, I just like it better here."

Ling, a 19 year old Karen asserts similarly.

C. C.: "How do you feel about living in Nickel City?"

Ling: "My family is happy to be here because we have friends and family here. My father's mother, my grandmother, is here and I have aunts and uncles from both sides of my family here, cousins too."

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C.C.: “That is really great that it was possible to unite families. Do they also live close by in Littlerock?”

Ling: “No, we have to drive there or take the bus. They live on the west side. I wish they lived here.”

C.C.: “So that it would be easier to visit with them and hang out with your cousins?”

Ling: “Well, yes, and also because I don’t really like the lower west side, not as much as here in Littlerock. “

C. C.: “Tell me why.”

Ling: “To be honest, I think it’s really dangerous over there. There are so many, you know, black people that live there and they always give all the Burmese lots of problems.”

The prevalent inter ethnic tensions on the lower west side are beginning to create identity shifts within Karen youth. On one occasion a Karen mother whom I became familiar stopped me on the street and asked me about numbers her 12 year old son and 13 year old Karen neighbor came home with tattooed on their arms. Initially I stated I did not know what the numbers meant. But over the next few weeks I began to see these numbers spray painted on buildings. I started to ask questions from people in the community and with resettlement counselors, and found this to be a well known youth gang operating on the west side of Nickel City and in other cities across the US. Of particular concern are the ages of the children. Also of concern is the lack of information Karen adults have about such realities and how to prevent their children from being recruited.

Similar to Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese of the 1990s and early 2000s (Hein, 1995; Centrie 2004), the Karen Burmese are experiencing racism and interracial conflict in their quest to become a part of US society. Further complicating an understanding of Southeast Asians is the dual image of model minorities on the one hand and images of low achievers, high school drop outs, and youth gangs on the other (Lee & Ngo, 2007). What appears clear is that the location in which refugees are settled determines various perceptions and outcomes. Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees settled in predominantly middle class white communities frequently experience racism as a result of the black/white binary construction of race historically inherent in the US (Centrie, 2004). However, in Nickel City, with a majority of non-whites and located in a poor diverse neighborhood, an understanding of Karen experiences becomes more complex.

I have come to understand inter ethnic and interracial conflicts, particularly as it pertains to poor and minority communities in the US, to be a product of racial and ethnic hierarchy. As a result of colonization, interracial/inter ethnic conflicts occur within the same nation, sometimes as a strategy of the colonizer and sometimes as a result of economic marginalization as groups search for recognition and parity with the dominant culture (Fanon, 1952). While the Karen are not experiencing

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anything unique in terms of intergroup politics in Nickel City, the fact they are being targeted by two groups, African Americans and Latinos/a, suggest turf wars of domination in the community and the expectation that everyone find their place in the hierarchy. Despite having similar problems in the predominantly white Littlerock district of Nickel City, several Karen youth who live there prefer it to the lower west side.

Throughout Karen youth's narrations are the uses of the terms "them" and "we" or "us." This suggests Karen youth are beginning to formulate a racialized critique of US society. In their work exploring race, Fine and Weis (1998) find groups look to identify the "other" as a means to define themselves. McLure (2003) contends the most common way in which people create a self is through binary constructions of opposition in the form of "us" versus "them." Within this framework there is the understanding that difference of the constructed other is one which hierarchal difference is implied. Within the context of the transnational, the additional "space" created by a transnational experience allows for a dual reference framework based on previous experiences. In the case of the Karen they have a collective memory of interethnic conflict in Burma as well as similar experiences in refugee camps in Thailand.

Stacey Lee commenting on race dynamics in the US (2005) posits "white" as viewed as the normative standard of "good" while Blacks and Latinos/a become the "bad" and undesirable "other." In the narratives presented here, Karen youth have identified white people as a preferred standard to emulate for personal and group success despite experiencing similar ethnic tensions. When discussing the communities in which they live, various Karen youth suggested they would most prefer to live in the northern part of the city among its predominantly white communities. They believe they would not have as difficult of a time there where the "neighborhoods are cleaner and seem safer, and where (they) don't think they would have such big problems." Although there are few differences between the lower west side and the Littlerock district of the city, the Karen youth would also prefer to live there. The major difference is the population composition which is more diverse on the lower west side and primarily poor and working class whites in Littlerock.

#### A BETTER FUTURE

Nevertheless, a majority of Karen youth comment they believe their futures are brighter living in the US because they have access to education -- something that was nearly entirely lacking in the refugee camps. In the interviews, getting an education was always explained as having central importance among Karen youth leaders and parents. Most of the Karen youth I interviewed, 12 of the total 15, remarked going to school was the road to a solid future and a major advantage of coming to the states. All of the Burmese youth I interviewed spent at least 5 years in Thai refugee camps and most spent 10 years or longer as they and their families waited for a host country assignment.

In Burma, children's education was often disrupted by civil war and in the refugee camps education is often spotty at best. In the case of the Karen, education that is available is rudimentary. In addition, camp members are not allowed to



manage their own schools, teach their language, nor teach a curriculum of Burmese history that does not conform to the Burmese government sanctioned version. Compared to their Thai peers, refugees are generally disadvantaged in the depth and quality of education (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008). As all Karen parents and students describe in the interviews, they came to the US with no documentation of any schooling or what they may have learned.

All of the Karen youth I interviewed stated they are or have been enrolled in the Nickel City public school system. Everyone arrived with English language skills that were limited to the necessary phrases they learned in their orientation sessions sponsored by the resettlement agency. The youth who attended school in the US or are still in school have acquired a better command of English. However, English is almost exclusively limited to use when interacting with US institutions such as school while the Karen language is always spoken at home and within the community. Many of the Karen remarked that communication with non-Karen people is almost non-existent.

With no documentation, the school system places children in age appropriate classrooms rather than at skill level. Ms. Rocco, a public school teacher in one of the neighborhood schools that many west side Karen youth attend comments:

Ms. Rocco: "The Karen come with no papers, no documentation, no anything which gives an indication of what kind of education they may have had. Instead of testing, the public schools place them in a classrooms levels they would be in if they had gone through the system.

C.C.: "How is that possible?"

Ms. Rocco: "On the one hand, what is the school system as it is configured supposed to do? Let's say that a student comes with little or no English has no documentation and is 15 years old. They are placed in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. And let's say this student has the equivalent of a second grade education. They can't be placed in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Everyone else would be around 8 years old."

C. C.: "How then do they make this work up?"

Ms. Rocco: "They don't. They have to get up to speed or they don't. Based on their ages, many of them just get passed to the next level."

In an interview with a resettlement education coordinator, Ms. Weinstein states: "The Nickel City school system is simply not prepared to handle the needs of refugee children. As a matter of fact, I would say that the school system sets them up for failure." The perception that the schools are not prepared to accommodate the needs of refugee children was uniform in all of the narrations of school teachers and education coordinators of the resettlement agencies. Because of language problems, their inability to keep up with heavily language based courses (such as English, history, and social studies), many of the older Karen youth simply drop out of school. Helen, a Karen youth from the Karen Baptist community explains:

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Helen: “yes, I am glad to go to school. I want to be a fireman or a police officer when I grow up. I do really good in Math and my science classes but I don’t do so well in English and history.”

C.C.: “I’m glad to hear you like school. Why do you say you don’t do so good in English and history?”

Helen: “I don’t understand what the teacher is say most times.

C. C.: “How are your grades?”

Helen: “I get A’s in all my math and science classes but mmmmmm I think I don’t do so well in the other things. I get C’s and sometimes a D.”

Karen youth often commented that language based courses were the most difficult and were discouraging them from continuing their education. However there were differences with younger children and teenagers. All education coordinators agreed that for the younger children, those in grammar school are in a much better position to handle the changes then older teens:

Ms. Weinstein: “Education for refugee children is not in a good state of affairs generally, but it’s in a particularly bad state for the older children, the teenagers.

C.C.: “Explain to me why that is?”

Ms. Weinstein: “the younger grammar school children, they can adjust better. A child in second grade, third grade, they are going to quickly adjust to the language, cultural changes in the school, and just the education system itself. But the older teenagers, they are really getting it bad. There is no room to make the adjustment. They become frustrated. Many of them just drop out. Imagine that you are 21 and all your peers in the neighborhood are going to college, working, or planning to go to college and you are still in high school and you are not really getting it. It’s hard; we are losing them.”

The community leaders and parents of Karen children agree. The leaders and parents believe they have a lost generation of children. They are concerned they will be losing the cultural values the community believes are important and they are being absorbed into US street culture. The teenagers for the post part are not doing well in school, and many are dropping out. John, a Karen adult often identified as a major leader in the Karen community comments: “We feel we are losing the older Karen children. Many have dropped out of school and they are joining gangs. They are unable to find work and are just going about the neighborhood and getting into trouble. It’s a big worry for us.” Sharing a similar concern Ms. Rocco explains:

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Remember that group of 4 Karen teens we all talked about last interview; the ones that were suspended for getting into a fight outside of school? The saddest part of the story for me is that after the Karen students were readmitted into school, after they were, in my opinion, unjustly suspended for defending themselves, but also they were placed in different high schools to break them up as a group. They all dropped out after that. It really makes you wonder if administration is thinking at all.

From the perception of both resettlement education coordinators and Karen community leaders, the Nickel City public school system is not prepared to provide the necessary support to Karen refugee children for them succeed in education. What is clear from the narrations is the Karen youth most devastated by ineffective education policies are the older students, especially those in secondary education. The younger grammar school students are described by teachers and education directors as more flexible and are most likely to adapt. The older students however have much less time to catch up and are more likely to become discouraged. While catching up is an important theme in educational rhetoric, it is of particular concern that Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, which recognizes the complex needs of limited English language ability students, is not being enforced. It is the older youth who are most at risk and appear to have fallen through the cracks of the system. One teacher lamented that refugee children are expected to take State English exams that are so difficult she doubts even native speakers can do well on them without intensive practice.

## DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The members of the Karen community presented here describe backgrounds from small villages and rural areas in their native Burma with the majority of Karen youth and families interviewed claiming family histories of agriculture as their occupations. In Burma, the Karen faced a long history of oppression from the central Burmese government to disenfranchise them from a voice and to prevent Karen cultural and linguistic autonomy and government representation. Subsequently, the central Burmese government unleashed force to silence their voices resulting in thousands fleeing Burma, many finding shelter in Thai refugee camps. While there are exceptions, the majority of Karen refugees spend 2 to over 10 years in refugee camps as they await approval from a host country to accept them. As often as possible, refugees are reunited with family members living abroad.

The US, to its credit, accepts more international refugees than any other country in the world with over 70,000 arriving annually. Since 2005, the Karen Burmese have been one of the largest ethnic groups to come to the states. Nickel City has one of the largest Karen communities in the nation, with over 8,000 documented Karen refugees. It has become the state's preferred destination in the last 5 years for newly arriving refugees of all backgrounds, creating a large and visible diversity to the city's once traditionally white and African American populations. Once accepted to the US, Karen and other refugees are sponsored by a number of resettlement agencies which meet them at the airport and settle them in an

apartment that can accommodate one individual or an entire family. Over the last 7 years, federal appropriations for refugee individuals has risen from a meager \$400 per person to \$1,800 making a more comfortable settlement for a family of 2 or more.

Out of necessity, Karen refugees are placed in the lower west side and the Littlerock urban neighborhoods. Both communities are poor and working class but are distinctive in the respect that the west side has historically a diverse community comprised of African American and Latino families and Littlerock has historically been a poor or working class white neighborhood. The decision to place the Karen Burmese in these specific communities is based on a number of practicalities including the cost of housing, the need to create a critical mass, and the extent to which resettlement agencies believe these environs will be more accepting of refugees. In addition, although not in the most accessible parts of the city, refugees in these urban neighborhoods do have access to better public transportation, schools, city and county government, and health services. Not all communities may be as accommodating. As one school administrator from a nearby affluent suburb commented to me in a personal communication, “We certainly don’t want all these immigrants and refugees here in Jamesville (upper middle class suburb). They should stay in the city. Besides the city is a mess anyway. Let them stay there. We are already footing the bill for them through County assistance.”

No matter where these families are placed there are challenges. Unlike the Vietnamese I researched 10 years ago, (Centrie, 2004), the Karen Burmese do not come with middle and upper class backgrounds. In spite of the South Vietnamese also being subject to state sponsored oppression by the previously North Vietnamese, and risking flight to Thai refugee camps, the initial wave of Vietnamese came with a great deal of cultural capital. This served them well in organizing their community and negotiating benefits with the public school system. Such benefits include advocating for special Vietnamese homerooms with an educated Vietnamese teacher and aides to look out for the well being of their young. Later waves of Vietnamese, like the Karen refugees, were also primarily rural with agricultural backgrounds. By the time these groups arrived, the Vietnamese community had long established itself, and despite class background differences of significance in Vietnam, created a common biography of one community with similar experiences of oppression that bound the group together. The Karen Burmese community presented here has far less cultural capital to negotiate with US social institutions. When considering class background as a framework for understanding the refugee experiences of the Karen Burmese, they are placed at a deficit when negotiating US social institutions.

An overwhelming concern of Karen parents is that their youth maintain the Karen language and culture, the very reason why they fought in Burma and ultimately became refugees. The Karen also place a strong emphasis on “family values,” defined as the maintenance of strong ties to their families and communities, marriage within the group, children remaining at home until they are married, respect for parents and family and taking care of the elderly. These values are understood to be challenged generally within US culture but especially so in the lower west side and in Littlerock. They voice concern over the violence their children are exposed to and how limited they are in protecting them. On one visit

to a Karen family, I was quickly ushered in the apartment because a man was shot to death outside of the home only hours before. Within minutes the neighbors knew the reason was a drug deal that had gone bad. The Sung family was regretful that their children ranging from 5 to 14 years old saw the entire event.

Some of the Karen youth express fear while some older youth in their late teens and early 20's are prepared to fight back. Children as young as 11 and 12 are being groomed to join youth gangs. Though not pleased with this alternative, some youth interviewed suggest this might be the only way to survive in these communities. Ainsworth (2003); Burton, Price-Spratlen, and Beale Spenser (1997); and Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003) contend the neighborhoods in which children grow up have a significant impact on outcomes. The Karen Burmese communities are part of larger areas with few positive role models to look to for guidance. Like the West Indian neighborhoods explored by Waters, (1998) these surroundings may be viewed as toxic areas in the sense they are short on city services, have marginal public transportation, and are challenging to find healthy and affordable food. The social problems associated with poverty exist in abundance and influence Karen youth identity choices.

Though not new to ethnic differences, the Karen are confused by the binary race relations of US society. The youth are developing identities which differentiate the Karen from African Americans and Latinos/a as they create a "we" versus "them" dynamic. Though perhaps not fully developed, Karen youth are beginning to understand the subtle realities of white privilege (Fine & Weis, 1998). They are also understanding the extent to which identifying with African Americans and Latinos/a in their communities has limited social value in US society except as a mechanism to survive the brutalities and realities of street culture. With a scarcity of assets in the lower west side and in Littlerock, youth groups vie for control and dominance, creating an ethnically based pecking order which attempts to place the newly arrived Karen at the bottom and which these youth are fighting. As one African American colleague discussed with me, Black youth become resentful of the perceived special treatment of the refugees and cannot understand how many of them find employment while they (African Americans) struggle to survive after 400 years of building this country.

Ms. Sung, the mother of a family of 6 sees this quite differently. She works like many employed Karen in the service sector industry 7 days a week as part of a housekeeping staff for a local hotel. She has come to realize national chain will not employ her full time to keep from giving her benefits. She now also understands that the service sector which employs the Karen as bus boys, dish washers, and housekeepers prefer them over African Americans and Latinos/a. In the view of Ms. Sung, this is because the Karen are known to work hard, do not complain because they are afraid to lose their jobs, and have limited English ability to make their concerns understood. Ms. Sung's children know how difficult it is for their mother and wish they could help.

Historically, education in the US has been viewed as the great equalizer. Reproductionists such as Bowles and Gintis (2002) have posited through correspondence theory that schools exist merely to maintain the status quo. These researchers continue to defend their position 23 years after their ground breaking piece of the same name. Still others as early as the 1980s (e.g. Willis, 1981) have

argued that students are not merely recipients of school culture but are active participants in its production. Sometimes the production of school culture is oppositional. In the case of the Karen, it is too early to tell what their long term relationship will be with the education system. The data presented here suggest a number of things. The Karen have a strong belief in the value of education, perhaps even more so since they were denied the full benefits of schooling in refugee camps and in Burma. Both the Karen youth and parents have narrated that education is viewed as one of the benefits of living in the US.

Education coordinators of resettlement agencies and teachers alike believe the public school system is positioning Karen youth for failure. Teachers and educational coordinators believe the policy of placing students in age appropriate classes without regard to previous educational levels makes it most often too difficult for students to play catch up. The lack of English language ability is also making catching up much more difficult, especially in courses that are heavily based on language ability. This is less of a problem with younger grammar school children, but is especially problematic for older teenagers who have less time to make up lost skills and material and whose courses are more difficult. Further, school administrators appear to be unaware of the ethnic conflicts which occur even within their schools. By not addressing these problems there is additional alienation being experienced by older Karen youth which is contributing to a drop out problem with this age group. There is a keen understanding in the Karen community that education is the key to getting a good job and having a promising future. For the older Karen youth their futures are looking bleak. As many Karen parents and community leaders believe, these young people may be lost.

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