

Conceptualizing Education within a Thai Refugee Camp Based on a ‘for Them’ and a ‘by Them’ Paradigm*

Subin Sarah Yeo Professor, Hannam University

This study reveals the marginalized narratives in refugee education discourses by highlighting local perspectives on how education is formed, maintained, and conceptualized inside a refugee camp. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the data was collected during the author’s 5 months full-time stay between 2019 and 2020 inside the Mae La refugee camp, located on the Thai-Myanmar border. Focusing on the voices of various educational stakeholders from the community of Mae La, it expands the existing discourses of refugee education that have long been objectifying the refugee learners as beneficiaries, to encompass local perspectives that conceptualize the refugees as active participants. For scholars and practitioners in the field of refugee education, this study claims that education is not only provided and managed ‘for’ refugees, but ‘by’ refugees, where education plays a central role of enabling refugees to pursue nationhood and recognition, resulting various tensions and power dynamics.

Keywords Refugee camp; Education; Thai-Myanmar border; Qualitative research

I. Introduction

Providing quality education in refugee contexts is certainly challenging in a way that consists of dynamic power structures with various actors

* Acknowledgements

This paper is partially revised from the author’s Doctoral Dissertation (2021, Seoul National University). The fieldwork in the refugee camp was possible with help of various organizations including KKBBS (Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School College, Thailand), RCSD (Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand), OIA (Office of International Affairs, Seoul National University) and SNUAC (Seoul National University Asia Centre).

involved in the ‘crossroads of globalization’ (Dryden-Peterson, 2016: 473). With overlapping sources of authority from international humanitarian and development actors as well as the community-based organizations in refugee contexts, children in the refugee camps are often described as ‘restricted’ objects of educational interventions while they can also be seen as ‘resilient’ subject beings (McConnachie, 2016: 407). Dominant discourses in the conventional literature of refugee education tend to present a shift from humanitarian relief to rights-based and developmental approach in rationalizing educational provision for refugees in developing countries. Yet, while shifting from one approach to the other, many of the same problems may persist, as long as the refugees “are subjected to the choices of others to the extent that their decisions are no longer their own because they result from external prescriptions” (Freire, 1974: 4). In other words, there is a need for the refugees to be considered as a “conscious social actor who has the ability, the desire and the opportunity to participate in social and political life” (Frymer, 2005: 4). However, for many spend much of their time in exile inside the camps where restrictions are placed on their basic rights and freedoms, there are three assumptions reflecting on practical barriers to education (Zeus, 2011). First, refugee camps — despite having in many cases existed for several decades — still carry a connotation of temporariness. Second, schooling, as a formal type of education in refugee contexts, is often believed to be dependent on the existence of a nation-state. Third, refugees are merely perceived as traumatized victims of war and conflict, who are dependent on external aid with no agency. For this reason, humanitarian actors often regard refugees as “their object of knowledge, assistance, and management” (Malkki, 1996: 377). They are usually believed to lack the capabilities to cope with the challenges of education. All of these assumptions make refugee education almost an impossible endeavour and continue to regard refugees as a homogenous group of

stateless people in liminality as in “having left one nation-state ... not yet accepted by another” (Zeus, 2011: 259).

Given these challenging situations encountered by refugee learners, coupled with narrow perceptions on them, it is easy for international community to mainly focus on technical solutions that do not acknowledge the historical and political aspects, merely providing humanitarian interventions and development projects that continue to be ineffective within the community (Jenkins, 2017; Ferguson, 1994). While a thousand tragic stories can be framed through the refugee crisis focusing at the deficits of the situations, some scholarly works — based on their fieldwork — perceive refugee youth as capable beings and underline the importance of refugee education as a hope and freedom amid their adversity. Notably, they point out that refugee children are resilient and capable (Pieloch et al., 2016; Oh et al., 2019; Joliffe and Oh, 2018; Yeo et al., 2020). From this point of view, schooling can have an ameliorating effect in extreme, conflictual and post-war settings by building utopian hope (Maadad and Matthews, 2018). This hope may enable people to believe that there is a better community to be strived for and imagine their future beyond current conditions and constraints. In this context, the article investigates how refugee education is shaped, sustained, and conceptualized from diverse viewpoints. To explore how refugee education plays the role of reconstructing communities of belonging and stability — or even sustaining pre-existing hierarchies and inequalities — the knowledge, experience and understanding of specific refugee communities are to be taken seriously (Maadad and Matthews, 2018).

II. Method

Since every refugee camp has its own history and context, the purpose

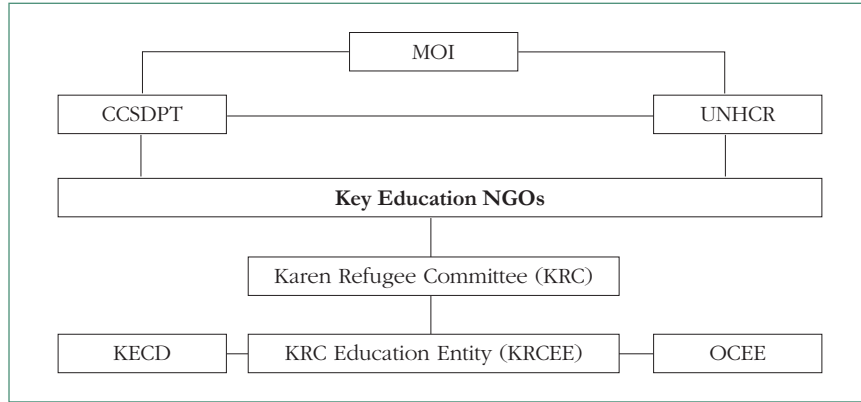
of this article is to explore how the refugee education is formed and maintained in a real-life context through a case study. Considering the history of prolonged conflict situations, as well as accessibility to the camp location, a community in Mae La refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Myanmar was selected for a research field. The camp was initially established in 1984, under the name of 'temporary shelter', currently housing approximately 35,000 refugees from Myanmar (UNHCR, 2020). It comprises predominantly Karen refugees who fled from the conflict between the country's military government and ethnic armed groups. Despite the effort of international organizations encouraging refugees' voluntary repatriation, Mae La has become a centre for political, educational, and other community development activities, attracting refugees from other camps as well. As a largest refugee camp of the nine camps that are housing over the total of 95,000 refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border, it currently remains one of the oldest and largest refugee camps in Southeast Asia (UNHCR, 2020).

After making several preliminary visits to build rapport with community members in 2019, data used for this article was collected from January to March 2020. Using qualitative research methods, multiple forms of data collection included individual interviews, focus group interviews, participant observations and field resources altogether involving over 40 individuals who could be categorized by three groups. First group consists of the Karen refugee community members residing in the camp including teachers consisting both principals and administrative staff at schools, community leaders, and parents and students. Second group consists of Karen refugee educational stakeholders residing outside the camp including teacher-trainers at Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), and education coordinators at Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD). Third group consists of humanitarian and development

workers including project officers at the UNHCR and international NGOs. For the privacy and well-being of the research participants, all names of individuals and affiliations have been omitted to ensure the plausible deniability of identities in the refugee camp community. Through full-time stay inside the Mae La camp during the fieldwork, valuable opportunities to observe camp-wide teacher-training sessions, school graduations, staff meetings, and cultural ceremonies helped to refine and improve the credibility and dependability of the data. This qualitative research uses direct quotations, however, the representation of their words reflects the researcher's interpretation of their experience, as their voices are filtered through the researcher's lens as the primary research instrument for the discovery and interpretation of meanings (Creswell, 2007).

III. Education 'for' Refugees in Mae La Refugee Camp: "Is Education to Prepare Resettle, Return, or Remain?"

Educational activities available for the Karen refugees in the Mae La camp community are heavily influenced by the NGOs working under the umbrella of Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) invited by the Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI), as illustrated in Figure 1. Explicitly, the key NGOs that are currently providing education services in Mae La are: Save the Children (SCI), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and Right to Play (RTP). On the ground level, they are coordinating with the KRCEE, which is an education department of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC). In other words, basic and secondary schooling within the camp is funded and controlled by the international NGOs while partnered and managed by the KRCEE. While the KRCEE oversees all the refugee camps alongside the border, Office of Camp



Source: Author.

Figure 1 Structure of Education Coordination in the Camp

Education Entity (OCEE) is also established inside each camp to assist the KRCEE by coordinating and managing the regular activities at schools.

In the case of Mae La camp, unlike other refugee situations, “the UNHCR does not run the camps nor implement education programs” (Participant 1). Initially, the Thai authorities “were concerned that the presence of the UNHCR might attract more displaced people from Myanmar, as it did during the Indochinese relief effort” (Participant 2). Hence, the government restricted the UNHCR’s role until 1998. Up until now, “the UNHCR has a minor role in coordinating the CCSDPT while the NGOs have actively taken roles to cooperate with KRCEE for the educational management and administration in Mae La” (Participant 3). In the midst of the tensions raised between the reliance on external funding and the structure of education coordination left as a legacy of the protracted refugee crisis in the Mae La community, there are many challenges and limitations for education that is viewed as provided ‘for’ refugees. The community members of Mae La, including the refugee parents and teachers, expressed that the external stakeholders from international community tend to place less

value on education compared to themselves. This was observed that while the overall international assistance is consistently declining for the camp community, the resources and funding available for education have declined rapidly. An education coordinator at KECD expressed that the refugee learners in the camp have no choice other than adapting themselves to the current situation.

We are actively adapting and responding to the changing and evolving situations. Because we are not receiving the amount of the support that we used to receive. So we have to find the best possible ways to cater the needs and integrate to cope with the situation ... From the donors' sides, they say, "this is the pipeline we can provide" and the KRC and the Camp Committees have to deal how to use and live with it (Participant 4).

As the global refugee relief regime is focused on humanitarian coordination, while declaring 'integration' as a long-term solution at the same time, various actors including international NGOs have been acting as key players of the 'pseudo-State' (Waters and Leblanc, 2005). It means that NGOs have been in overall control of the community, profoundly influencing the ways in which the camp schools operate by providing project-based funding. For example, the curricula for subjects such as English, Mathematics, and Science were designed by international NGO staff in consultation with the KRCEE. According to an education coordinator at KRCEE, "through external assistance, ideas focusing on very much of neoliberal values are naturally incorporated into the curriculum as well as teacher training used in the camp schools" (Participant 1). In their decision-making in technical areas to do with curriculum, pedagogy and school administration in refugee camps, the educational stakeholders that are heavily influenced by the NGOs tend to plant the seeds to direct

Table 1 Thai government’s Restrictions on Education in the Refugee Camp

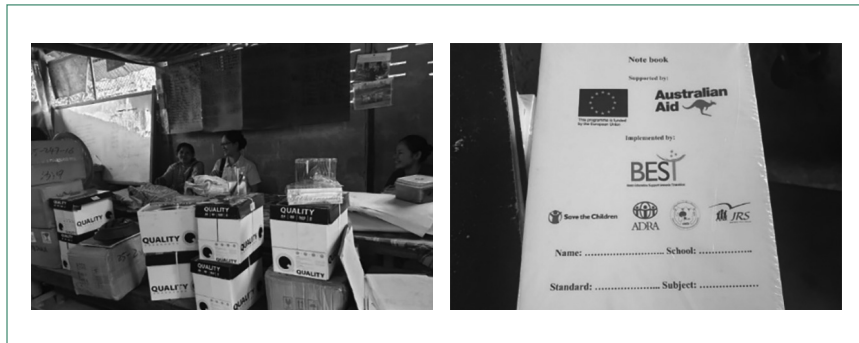
Restrictions on Schooling in the camp
1. No permanent school buildings may be constructed. It has been amended recently and it is now possible to construct semi-permanent buildings; iron poles, small wooden poles and steel roofs can now be used in place of leaves and bamboo poles. Concrete cannot be used.
2. The area designated for school buildings cannot be expanded.
3. NGO personnel are allowed to work as advisors to teachers, but not as teachers.
4. Publications distributed in schools may not contain political ideas, attitudes or values.

Source: Oh (2012).

into certain future (Waters and Leblanc, 2005). This future might be limited as “repatriation, resettlement, or remaining” without much of a choice in limbo (Oh, 2012).

While education provision without a nation-state is influenced heavily by the external international organizations, lack of sustainability is a critical issue not only in finance but also in management of the schools. Even though the Thai government genuinely permits the refugees to manage their own schools and allows the consortium of international NGOs to fund infrastructure, it has imposed various restrictions. Embedding the temporary and emergency perspective, Karen students and teachers are not allowed to use permanent building materials at school. It means that NGOs — in cooperation with the KRC — are allowed to fund infrastructure, provide teacher training, school materials and resources, and establish systems for providing education services. However, both NGOs and CBOs are structured to commit to the humanitarian enterprise with temporary and minimal stance (Lang, 2002). Restrictions on educational activities are shown in Table 1, which set the parameters within which the refugee community, with the assistance of NGOs and management of KRC, sustain its educational endeavours.

In consequence to these restrictions, Karen refugees struggle with not



Source: Author (photographed on May 20, 2019).

Figure 2 Photos of school materials delivered by NGOs and CBOs on the first day of a new semester

only poor infrastructure and resources, but also with limited staff capacity who can implement and sustain the schooling activities. As the NGO personnel are not allowed to work as teachers, most teachers in Mae La — except the foreign teachers who stay as a volunteer teacher on a short-term basis — are the Karen refugee teachers who live in the camp. According to an education coordinator at KRC, the teachers are prepared through teacher training sessions organized only twice a year for in-service and pre-service teachers respectively.

KRCEE, along with the international NGOs providing education services, helps to organize the trainings with the support of OCEE staff. Subject content training is provided only once a year to help the teachers feel more competent in their teaching. Higher education teacher trainings are provided only upon the request of schools, but most of the time the teacher trainings are self-organized to meet the teachers' own needs. Trainings commonly requested by the schools are for curriculum development, classroom management, lesson planning, and financial management. Due to limited time and resources, the trainings are usually conducted for only one or two days (Participant 5).

In the midst of the refugees' identity-building purpose and the NGOs' humanitarian purpose, the Thai government consistently adopts a laissez-faire attitude regarding education provided in the camp, officially emphasizing the temporary and minimal nature of its humanitarian commitment. In this context, educational provision 'for' refugees reinforce the Karen refugee students and teachers to merely survive without critical consciousness, and remain oppressed as 'uninvited temporary guests' (Oh, 2012), who are perceived to have no capability to transform their own surroundings. This is explored in more detail in the next section discussing perception on refugee students and teachers when education is provided 'for' refugees from external perspectives.

For the outsiders' perspective, refugee education is like emergency education. It is to survive and overcome traumatic experiences and not to fall behind while they are in the camp. They think Burmese language is the most important subject in the curriculum because education in the camp should not be too far from whatever is going on inside Burma. However, the perception between outsiders and insiders is very different though. What is the insiders' perspective? We don't want to learn anything to do with Burmese. 99 percent of the students here, in fact, will refuse to speak in Burmese language and learn Burmese history. They get this from their teachers, of course. We don't want to integrate into Burmese education. For us, it is not all about integration (Participant 6).

Education 'for' the refugees in the camp appears "outwardly open and consensual but is in fact managed by unaccountable elites" (Kapoor, 2013: 1). It appears as awkwardly structured by the pseudo-State comprising global governance, national jurisdiction, and local management. The top-down development paradigm that perceives refugee education merely as an emergency endeavour on the humanitarian ground is easily rationalized. Within this context, it is difficult to understand the dynamics

of power in the structure of refugee education in Mae La camp. Through depoliticization — “the removal of public scrutiny and debate” (Kapoor, 2013: 3) — the issues of social justice are transformed into technocratic matters to be resolved by coordinators, ‘experts’, or in this case, humanitarian and development NGOs. Consequently, when they speak for the Mae La refugee community on various educational challenges — such as the limited link between education and employment, lack of sustainability in funding and management, lack of consensus for the student future — they tend to act as ‘witnesses’ on behalf of refugee ‘victims’. They reduce the refugee community members as ‘other’ and into ‘passive bystander’, unilaterally representing the needs and desires. Similarly, when the spectacle of humanitarian relief ends up valuing the crisis’s outwardly visible aspects, it tends to divert public attention away from the long-term and structural causes. All such instances are depoliticizing because it is easy to eliminate disagreement and conflict between various stakeholders, thereby upholding both a top-down politics and the status-quo. To develop more holistic understanding on the purpose of refugee education and how it is shaped, sustained and conceptualized in the refugee community of Mae La, it is essential to also explore the perspective of the refugee stakeholders focusing on the refugee-led institutions and leadership. With the historical understanding of why education is important to them, it is also worth exploring how they attempt to play subjective role in its implementing process, that is education ‘by’ refugees.

IV. Education ‘by’ Refugees in Mae La Refugee Camp: “Education is to Empower Students to Become a Revolutionist against Unjust Status-quo”

To understand what education means to the Karen refugees in protracted displacement, it goes all the way back to the history of Karen nation, as a prominent ethnic group in British colonial period. During the British period, elites from hill-tribe ethnic groups such as the Karen came under the patronage of Christian missionaries and state administrators. While the ethnic strife existed over hundreds of years, the British colonial practices further divided the numerous ethnic minorities and caused the unequal distinctions by favouring certain groups, such as the Karen, for positions in the military and in local rural administrations. In consequence, towards the end of and immediately after the Second World War, the ethnic majority Burman sentiment turned against the Karen, because the Karen were perceived to be tightly associated with the British colonial rulers (Lall, 2016). The Karen history is narrated in the Karen refugee leader’s voice, found on the wall of a university-level college in Mae La refugee camp.

We, the Karen people, possess all the attributes of a nation. Our population is more than eight million. We have our own culture, history, tradition and literature. We have our own national anthem and national flag. Our national flag bears the rising sun and a bronze drum. The drum on our national flag ... signifies prosperity, unity and cooperation. The rising sun signifies the rise of the Karen people for progress and dignity. The red colour signifies ‘courage’, the white colour signifies ‘integrity’ and the blue colour signifies the ‘honest’ and royal character of the Karen people (observed on the wall of a college in the camp).

Under the name of *Kawthoolei* – literally meaning ‘a land without evil’



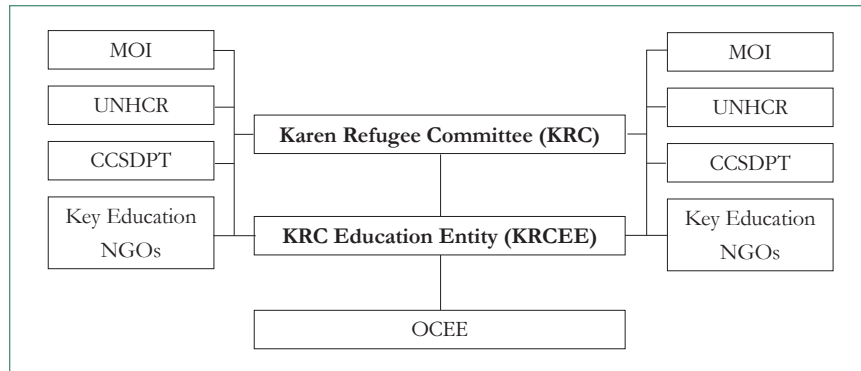
Source: Author (photographed on March 13, 2020).

Figure 3 Photos of a Karen Refugee Student proudly holding Karen National Flag (left) School Graduation decorated with Karen National Colours (right)

in the language of Sqaw Karen – Karen people still consider themselves as a nation without modern-state (Yeo, Gagnon, and Thako 2020). By my research participants predominantly representing Christian Karen, *Kawthoolei* is imagined as a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful country. However, it has a double meaning and can also be rendered as the land burnt black; hence the land that must be fought for (Smith, 1991). The following lyrics of the Karen national anthem that Karen refugee students sing at a middle school’s weekly assembly in the camp represent how *Kawthoolei* is described as a blessed land yearning for a freedom. Within this historical context, the Karen educational leadership under the pseudo-State system shaped and sustained their own educational institutes such as the KECD and KRCEE. Despite the lack of formal recognition, they did not give up their own attempt to run ‘formal’ type of education within their own community and they obtained a strong belief that education means everything to their existence (Observation in staff meetings). In response to the military regime’s suppression and “Burmanisation” of national culture, Karen ethnic group sought to develop separate education systems to preserve and reproduce their identities and cultures (Lall, 2016). They came

from civil society, and, from religious associations. With an influx of external support after the 1988 democracy uprising in Myanmar, non-state education provision expanded, leading to an extensive ethno-nationalist-oriented school system running parallel to the official state system (Lall and South, 2014). Likewise, when the research participants were asked persistently why education particularly means so much to them, their common view was to build a modern Karen society and that this would be achieved when more people had attained high quality education. They desire “to have more educated people with university-level qualifications” so that they would “have the skills and knowledge to build a developed society on their own” (Focus Group Interview with Participant 7, 8, and 9). These same sentiments are spread out and echoed by overall educational stakeholders in the camp community including teachers and administrators, as well as parents and students.

Considering the present educational circumstances in the community of Mae La, the rationale behind education tends to be oriented towards the distant future. There are no jobs available to the refugees in the Thai society except those which are menial and illegal while the number of jobs in the camps is also very limited (Oh, 2012). Within this unique setting, it is significant that the Karen refugee leaders and members in Mae La have robust aspirations of an advanced society in the future. They undoubtedly believe that this future will come about through the educational endeavour towards attainment of high levels of formal education. Since 1980s, the Karen refugees have set up their own livelihoods including schools and hospitals by adopting the village structures that they had employed in the Karen State on the border of Myanmar. The community within the camp setting has also maintained and developed a system of indigenous administration with camp leaders, committees, zones and sections reflecting the traditional structure of village management within the Karen



Source: Author.

Figure 4 Structure of Education Coordination in the Camp from community' point of view

state (Lang, 2002). With this root, alongside the Thai government that continues to take a stance providing minimal commitment while the international NGOs provide educational assistance with temporary views, the community's aspirations for quality education have grown consistently, "oriented towards Karen identity and nation building" (Participant 10). In this sense, the protracted nature of the refugee crisis did not lead the community to passively rely on the external assistance merely, but it gave a room to the community to take their own initiatives. Figure 4 presents a structure of education coordination illustrated from the community's point of view. In contrast to Figure 1, which was illustrated from the perspective that education is provided 'for' refugees by external assistance, the KRCEE is placed in the centre of education coordination.

While the administrative structures in education is dominated by Christian Sgaw Karen-speaking elites, these stakeholders make important decisions about the management of camp education resources and coordination. Thus, from the Karen refugee community's point of view, the education in the camps is perceived as managed and controlled by the Karen leadership in accordance with their beliefs and values about what

constitutes identity formation in schools. This is done in collaboration with the NGOs and CBOs working for educational assistance along the border. A school calendar hanging on the wall of primary and secondary schools in the camp displays the KRCEE's vision statement, mission and objectives as follows:

[Vision Statement] To build up true lasting peace and justice by producing graduates who are critical and creative thinkers, competent learners, good citizens and proud of their identity.

[Mission and Objectives] To serve and represent the Karen refugees, temporarily sheltering along the Thai-Burma border, through providing education services in areas of basic education and tertiary education to refugee students and children. Towards this end, KRCEE will strive to:

1. Serve as the policy and implementation mechanism for education for Karen refugees in the fields of basic education and tertiary education by providing education information, resource collection and centres dissemination.
2. Provide or enhance education service and support in Karen refugee camps.
3. Set up educational policies and codes of conduct for educational personnel.
4. Solicit and receive fund raising for educational services and policies for Karen refugees (observed on the school calendar provided by KRCEE).

Along with the different quality and system of learning between Myanmar government schools and the schools within the refugee camp on the border of Thailand, students often shared that there is discrimination and exclusion back in Myanmar based on their identity as Karen. This discrimination and exclusion often manifested itself in 'mysteriously' not passing the final exam of high school which was required to graduate after years of study and expense. With this kind of discrimination, students wondered why anyone would put in the effort to attend school at all

in Myanmar. On the other hand, they are proud to be attending Karen schools inside the refugee camp, as frequently expressed in both formal and informal conversations by teenage students in Mae La:

We are privileged to access good education here in the camp. We will have to do our best at school here and grow as a proud Karen leader. We will have to teach the next generation to become a proud Karen, not a victim or refugee as others describe us. We need education to realize that we do not need to be ashamed to be a refugee. We are Karen (Participant 11).

Exploring the essential values and knowledge in Karen education shaped and sustained by the Karen education leadership critically demonstrates that the education in Mae La is not provided in a form of education in emergency. With a long history of running their own education values and system as an ethnic minority in Myanmar, the education system in the camps is run in a systematic and organized manner, although it accommodates the participation of external actors in various ways (Lee, 2007). This provides some insight into how it is that a nation without an international recognized state and territory, and with hundreds of thousands of its members living in global diaspora, can persist and, in terms of identity, even thrive. The Karen educational leader reflects on the importance of education for Karen identity as follows.

I feel that I have the obligation; I believe that I need to do something for my people before I die. Out of many things I pick up, I see that the best thing, so as not to lose our identity or our freedom or our human rights, that I need to do for our people is education (Participant 12).

To develop holistic understanding of refugee education in Mae La community, it is important to encompass not only the view of education

‘for’ refugees but also of ‘by’ the refugee community leaders and members. Though refugee children worldwide are generally portrayed as victims having to depend on others, or potential criminals in extreme perception (Ryu and Tuvilla 2018), the internal refugee stakeholders of Mae La including education committees, teacher-trainers, administrators, and community leaders perceive the refugee teachers and students as Karen revolutionists. From several observations in classroom teaching and informal conversations over a meal or tea with in-service teachers at schools within the camp, refugee students are perceived to play a part to build a Karen nation. Moreover, observations in annual teacher training sessions conducted by KRCEE and NGOs as well as in school level teacher trainings by Residential Teacher Trainers (RTTs) revealed significant narratives in which refugee teachers are perceived to play critical role with strong commitment to support and sustain the community as a nation. In the challenging environment of the camp education that can be described as neither temporary nor permanent, a deficient perspective emphasizing merely the refugees’ needs and predicaments can easily neglect the refugees’ endeavour to perceive themselves as an “active participant in society” and to play “subjective role in and through education” (Participant 13).

V. Role of Refugees in and through Education

Education makes “a cultural, symbolic and identity boundary that is constantly being defined and negotiated, in turn influencing the way in which national boundaries are constructed” (Oh et al., 2019: 3–4). Within this view, the Karen refugee teachers and students are presumed to play significant roles to create and sustain the boundaries of Karen as a stateless nation, and to often expand the boundaries of their ‘imagined community’

(Anderson, 1996). Myanmar has been attempting to enclose nation and people within boundaries of territory that it defines through cultural (Lewis, 1924; Berlie, 2008), social (Callahan, 2003; Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012), political and territorial (Lambrecht, 2008; J. M. Ferguson 2014) practices for decades. What is noteworthy is that these practices are often causing tensions with the way in which the Karen refugees displaced along the border (Horstmann, 2014). From “insiders’ perspective” (Participant 13), Karen people residing in Mae La camp also perceive the border as a construct that is acknowledged, challenged and negotiated as a process, rather than an object that is fixed and ahistorical entity (Oh et al., 2019). For this reason, Karen refugee students and teachers are thought to play significant roles for nation-building in and through education. During an interview, a Karen education coordinator made a metaphor of education as a house:

Our education is recognized within the Karen community, within the Karen system. When we talk about recognition issue, I always say, the recognition can come with different meaning. Even before Aung San Sukyi and her government came in power, they said, Myanmar education system is falling apart, and it needs to be reformed. So, by that means... Even though the house is falling apart. They called it a house. Everyone calls that is a house. Even though you may not be able to live in that house. We also built a house. We called that a house. What I am trying to say is even if they say, “this is not a house because it is built with bamboo trees”, it is a house for us (Participant 14).

With this understanding, it makes sense there is a robust school system in the camp despite the most urgent issue from outsiders’ perspectives is that school completion certificates do not give graduates access to further educational opportunities in Myanmar or Thailand, and “neither are their diplomas recognized for employment purposes” (Participant 15). When the community leaders were asked to share their opinion about what

the teachers need the most in the camp school environment, they often responded that they need “more committed people like those teachers” (Participant 16, 17, and 18).

Conversations with numerous community leaders and faculty members have revealed that education in the refugee camp does not need to be always future-oriented for the students to think about life outside the camp. Instead, they emphasized education can be present-oriented by providing a space where students are encouraged to regard themselves as a subject that can reflect and act, rather than the objects to be acted upon. In this view, education is significant not only for students’ life after the camp but for their ability to question their identity beyond the refugeehood.

Education is not to prepare children for something that will come later, but education is a vehicle through which human beings can begin their action as subjects and not as objects to be acted upon ... Education should not be seen as a space of preparation but should be conceived as a space where individuals can act, where they can bring their beginnings into the world, and hence can be subjects ... The key educational question is how individuals can be subjects, keeping in mind that we cannot continuously be a subject, since we can only be subject in action, that is, in our beings with others (Participant 19).

When education is conceptualized based on a ‘for them’ paradigm, it is tempting for both internal and external stakeholders to assume that refugees are living in a ‘floating world’ in which they are simply victims, regardless of their politics and history (Malkki 1995). However, Education in the Karen refugee learners’ context cannot be separated from the wider political environment. Therefore, the purpose of schooling expressed by various local stakeholders within the Mae La community is commonly shaped and sustained with its historical roots. It means that the educational

objectives during displacement are shaped not only by refugee identity but also by the Karen ethnic identity. Considering the intersectionality of identity markers as a Karen and a refugee, Karen community living in the border over a protracted period is perceived to make their own educational endeavour. From the Karen educational stakeholders' point of view, while education is both a last resort and a pride to sustain Karen's identity, Karen teachers and students in the camp have significant roles to preserve and reinforce the Karen ethnic identity. For them, education is not only to give sense of belonging to help surviving, but also to become a responsible and active participant toward building the Karen nation. In addition, the insiders' perspective emphasized that education does not need to be always future-oriented for the life outside the camp. Instead, it can be present-oriented by providing a space where students are encouraged to regard themselves as a subject that can reflect and act, rather than the objects to be acted upon.

An understanding of education 'by' refugees — as well as 'for' refugees — informs various attempts by members of the Karen community to not only survive along with the global support, but also to manage their own systems regardless of their status. As previously mentioned, academics and practitioners in the field of refugee education tend to associate the refugee learners and teachers with deficient perspective having to depend on others. However, the narratives in the community, focusing on the voices on what education means for refugees and how they play a subjective role, explain the important function of education as 'a boundary making device' (Oh et al., 2019), in the Karen refugees' formal and informal efforts for nationhood and recognition. Under the unique environment of the camp — set up as a temporary and liminal space outside the modern states — external stakeholders' rationale for schooling tend to be 'unsettled' leading to inconsistent and mixed curriculum content. Meanwhile, the support of

international refugee regime in education sector promotes its own version of refugee identity. In consequence, conceptualization of refugee children has been framed around their vulnerability and role as victims (Boyden, 2003; Hart and Tyrer, 2006). In contrast, the community leader from Mae La camp asserts a critical role of education “empowering students” to respond to unjust status-quo.

Education is capable of dislodging students from intellectual stasis and rigid conformity to an unjust status quo. At the same time, education is capable of empowering students to respond thoughtfully to the social controls that undergird oppression ... to become a change-maker against unjust status-quo ... The aim of education is to make people realized that a better tomorrow is possible, and it has to foster a belief among the oppressed that oppression as a reality could be struggled against and that education could be an effective agent to conscientize people of their actual quality to unleash potential change (Participant 20).

VI. Conclusion

Focusing on the case of Mae La refugee camp located on the border of Thailand and Myanmar, the article highlighted the marginalized narratives, including the local perspectives, and voices on how meaning of refugee education conceptualized differently between the stakeholders involved. Clearly, education ‘for’ the refugees in the camp appears to be awkwardly structured by the pseudo-State comprising global governance, national jurisdiction, and local management. The top-down development paradigm that perceives refugee education merely as an emergency endeavour on the humanitarian ground is easily rationalized. Through depoliticization, so called ‘experts’ — humanitarian and development NGOs in this case —

speak for the Mae La refugee community's various educational challenges, such as the limited link between education and employment, lack of sustainability in funding and management and lack of consensus for the student future. While they act as 'witnesses' on behalf of refugee 'victims', they tend to reduce the refugee community members as 'other' and into 'passive bystander', unilaterally representing the needs and desires. Under the unique environment of the camp — set up as a temporary and liminal space outside the modern states — external stakeholders' rationale for schooling tend to be 'unsettled' leading to inconsistent and mixed curriculum content. Indeed, the support of international refugee regime in education sector promotes its own version of refugee identity. Overall, the conceptualization of refugee children has been framed around their vulnerability and their role as victims.

On the other hand, the narratives derived from refugee-led institutions and leadership have conceptualized refugee education as education 'by' refugees. Highlighting the refugee voices on what education means to them and how they play a subjective role in it, education is described as 'a boundary making device', in the Karen refugees' formal and informal efforts for nationhood and recognition. The purpose of schooling expressed by various internal stakeholders in the camp is deeply connected with the historical root of *Kawthoolei*, the Karen nation without a state. Acknowledging a critical role of education to empower students and to respond to unjust status-quo, education is seen as both a last resort and a pride to sustain Karen's identity. Education 'by' refugees informs various attempts by members of the Karen community to not only survive by depending upon the global support, but also to manage their own systems admitting the intersectionality of refugee and Karen ethnic minorities. As an attempt to develop more of a holistic understanding of how refugee education is shaped and sustained in the context of a segregated and

protracted refugee camp, this article has addressed fundamental questions about to what ends education is pursued from the perspective of education ‘for’ and ‘by’ refugees.

While various global actors provide and manage education based on the paradigm of ‘education for refugees’, the Karen refugees continue to be confronted with various tensions in defining the purpose of education. The tensions include those between the exclusionary policies of accreditation, based on the logic of modern state system, and the inclusive approach from the universal rights to education. In the midst of this reality, the Karen refugee leadership and community institutes are utilizing education to provide each learner a sense of belonging, based on the paradigm of ‘education by refugees’. While the Karen refugees are regarded as active participants for boundary-making of their own nationhood, many individuals are confronted again with various tensions. The tensions may include those between the wider community imagined based on the logic of the Karen nation, and the logic of modern state system. Without an orientational consensus on education toward national integration, global citizenship, or statelessness, the mixed practices of education ‘for’ and ‘by’ refugee set the multiple boundaries by the multiple political actors intertwined in the power dynamics. To conclude, the article provides a room for rethinking refugee education in a more comprehensive way embedding community-based perspectives, practices, and their contextual background. Acknowledging that there are various paradigms and practices intertwined in protracted refugee situations, this research has explored how — and to what end — the refugee learners in the camps are educated. this article expands the view beyond the reality from resource concerns and traditional donor-driven models of assistance.

Submitted: October June 9, 2022 | Revised: July 16, 2022 | Accepted: November 30, 2022

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1996. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Berlie, J. 2008. *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- Boyden, Jo. 2003. "Children under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience." *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 (1), 1-29.
- Callahan, M. 2003. "Language Policy in Modern Burma." In *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, edited by M Brown and S Ganguly, 143-176. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Creswell, John. W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Designs*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. 2016. "Refugee Education: The Crossroads of Globalization." *Educational Researcher* 45 (9), 473-82.
- Ferguson, James. 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ferguson, Jane M. 2014. "The Scramble for the Waste Lands: Tracking Colonial Legacies, Counterinsurgency and International Investment through the Lens of Land Laws in Burma/Myanmar." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35 (3), 295-311.
- Freire, Paulo. 1974. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Frymer, Benjamin. 2005. "Freire, Alienation, and Contemporary Youth: Toward a Pedagogy of Everyday Life." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 2 (1), 1-16.
- Hart, J. and B. Tyrer. 2006. "Research with Children Living in Situations of Armed Conflict: Concepts, Ethics & Methods." *RSC Working Paper* 30.
- Horstmann, A. 2014. "Stretching the Border: Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public Among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29 (1), 47-61.
- Jenkins, Julie. 2017. *James Ferguson's The Anti-Politics Machine*. London: Macat International.

- Joliffe, Pia and Su-Ann Oh. 2018. "Learning, Migration and Intergenerational Relations: The Karen and the Gift of Education." *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33 (1), 211–214.
- Kapoor, Ilan. 2013. *Celebrity Humanitarianism*. London: Routledge.
- Lall, Marie. 2016. *Understanding Reform in Myanmar: People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Lall, Marie and Ashley South. 2014. "Comparing Models of Non-State Ethnic Education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44 (2), 298–321.
- Lambrecht, C. 2008. "Oxymoronic Development: The Military as Benefactor in the Border Regions of Burma." In *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*, edited by C Duncan, 150–181. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Lang, Hazel J. 2002. *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Lee, Sang Kook. 2007. "Integrating Others: A Study of a Border Social System in the Thailand-Burma Borderland." Doctoral Dissertation. National University of Singapore.
- Lewis, J. 1924. "The Burmanization of the Karen People: A Study in Racial Adaptability." University of Chicago.
- Maadad, Nina and Julie Matthews. 2018. "Schooling Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Building Hopeful Futures." *Educational Review*, 1–16.
- Malkki, Liisa. 1995. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1), 493–523.
- _____. 1996. *Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. Cultural Anthropology*. Vol. 11.
- McCannachie, Kirsten. 2016. "Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp." *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7 (3), 397–412.
- Oh, Su-ann. 2012. "Identity and Inclusion: Education in Refugee Camps in Thailand." In *Refugee and Immigrant Students: Achieving Equity in Education*, edited by Florence E McCarthy and Margaret H Vickers, 65–85.

- Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Oh, Su-ann, Melanie Walker, and Hayso Thako. 2019. "Karen Education and Boundary-Making at the Thai-Burmese Borderland." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 34, 1–16.
- Pieloch, Kerrie A., Mary Beth McCullough, and Amy K. Marks. 2016. "Resilience of Children with Refugee Statuses: A Research Review." *Canadian Psychology* 57 (4), 330–339.
- Ryu, Minjung and Mavreen Rose S. Tuvilla. 2018. "Resettled Refugee Youths' Stories of Migration, Schooling, and Future: Challenging Dominant Narratives About Refugees." *Urban Review* 50 (4), 539–558.
- Salem-Gervais, N. and R Metro. 2012. "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar." *Journal of Burma Studies* 16 (1), 27–78.
- Smith, Martin. 1991. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. New York: Zed Books.
- UNHCR. 2020. "Thailand-Myanmar Cross Border Portal." Estimated Number of Refugees from Myanmar. 2020. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/thailand>. (Accessed: May 30, 2022)
- Waters, Tony and Kim Leblanc. 2005. "Refugees and Education: Mass Public Schooling without a Nation-State." *Comparative Education Review* 49 (2), 129–146.
- Yeo, Subin Sarah, Terese Gagnon, and Hayso Thako. 2020. "Schooling for a Stateless Nation: The Predicament of Education without Consensus for Karen Refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar Border." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 8 (1), 29–55.
- Zeus, Barbara. 2011. "Exploring Barriers to Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations: The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24 (2), 256–276.