Karen Perceptions of Self and Learning within an Informal and Multigenerational
Context

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Valentine and my son, Korben, who are my motivation and strength for everything I do in this life.

Abstract

This thesis explores individual and group perceptions about learning in an informal and multigenerational context, as exists within a particular sub-group of the greater Karen community in Minnesota. The Karen people are an ethnic group from Myanmar (Burma) that began immigrating to the Minnesota in 2000.

Data for this dissertation was gathered at a church, where many families and generations of the Karen population attend for congregational worship as well as religious, cultural, and language learning opportunities.

This thesis examines and reflects on qualitative data (gathered through large group observations and personal interviews) regarding the importance of learning within this community, and the perceptions Karen congregational members have about their own learning on site, in their family ties, and in their own lives.

The analysis of data collected examines elements of culture, history, and environment that shape these perceptions, and identifies shared and differing communal themes among participants of Generation 1, 1.5 and 2.

The final product is a critically based reflection on the population observed, the focal participants interviewed, and the researcher involved, which presents (partially in narrative style) larger ideas about the value of learning in this community and to the individuals connected.

Keywords: Karen, multigenerational, learner perceptions, informal learning contexts, westernization

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Prologue: Clarification of Selected Concepts Used in this Research

Before an audience engages with this text, I want to list, define and clarify the use of certain terms, which in the realm of education and research could have wide and multiple meanings. Therefore, for the purpose of contextualizing these terms, the following list should help readers frame their understanding of the words as I use them in the following text.

Assimilation: In the following text, the concept of "assimilation" refers to the diminishing of one group's cultural identity and the subsequent adaption/evolution of that group's constructs into the dominant power's political, social, economic, and religious structures.

Critical Theory: I wish to clearly explain that the following work is not situated in Critical theory and was not designed nor treated as critical ethnography, however; as I observed and experienced the phenomenon in the field, I found Critical theory an intriguing aspect to introduce into the analysis of data collected, as well as important in the enriching and deepening of my work as a researcher. I wanted to see what an integration of Critical elements could bring to this research, and therefore refer to the use of a "Critical" lens or filter—which I note quite openly, is only a beginning stage to completely utilizing this theory.

Culture: When referring to "culture" in this writing, I am mainly referring to historical contexts of a particular group of people and their communally accepted symbols of ethnic identification (Gans, 1979). I acknowledge that the culture of any given group or people, according to other conceptions, is malleable and is constantly

evolving, however; in order to effectively draw implications and conclusions about the

social, political and religious forces affecting *this* community studied, culture (as used in

the context defined above) serves as the primary conception from which I explored data

and discussed implications.

Ethnography: As used in this research, "ethnography" refers to a qualitative

methodology of anthropological tradition (Geertz, 1973) which allows certain levels of

adaptability and flexibility in the ongoing research, but also involves specifically

designed protocols in data collection (template field notes for large group observations

and semi-structured questions for focal participant interviews) which are then analyzed

through pre-determined procedures. Additionally, ethnography of this type also

encourages the researcher (when acting as the sole recording observer of phenomenon

witnessed) to focus the research on the specific activities observed within the specific

physical location of the field site, and within the specified time limits determined in the

research design. Although I am familiar with other forms of ethnography, (e.g., critical,

activist, participatory) that could allow for more flexible boundaries as a researcher, I

made certain choices in several moments and situations in order to remain focused on this

project's more traditionally designed conceptualizations of the ethnographic method.

Informal Education: "Informal education" within the context of this work refers to

learning spaces, opportunities, and methodologies where non-standardized, non-grade

based learning takes place—which is organized, facilitated and /or attended by people

who may or may not have experience in formal educational systems. In the specific case

of this research, this type of informal education occurs in a church setting, where learning

opportunities are organized and facilitated by its congregational members.

   Learning and Education: In the course of the following writing, I use the phrase

"learning vs. education" in several sections, and I acknowledge my interpretation of these

terms are one of many. To clarify, in these instances I am referring to "education" as a

formally structured, governmentally required, expert led, subject and grade-driven entity,

whose goal is to assess learner proficiency for the purpose of meeting determined

standards in order to move on to higher levels (i.e. the public K-12 system). In contrast,

"learning" in this context refers to the more organic occurrence of existing, experiencing

life, and growing—and as a result, developing preferences or passions for things

important to each individual.

   Perception: The word "perception" is used frequently throughout the text. In most

instances the term refers to the personal understandings, values, and beliefs that

individuals within the participating population had regarding learning in their lives and in

in the church environment. The term also refers to views expressed and actions observed

in the large group, as well as the personal inclinations and interpretations this author

integrates within the context of the research.

1. Background and Personal Framework for this Research

This study's conception is a synthesis of my professional life experiences, and has

come after many years of working in traditional 9-12 classrooms, informal learning

contexts, community education contexts, and with learners of all ages. During my years

as a secondary educator, I noticed that many learners in the 9-12 environment were

failing core subjects, but discovering success and feelings of personal value in their extra-

curricular environments. This observation was combined with additional insights I

developed regarding positive learner engagement and improved perceptions of self-worth

in other educational settings (where at different times, I worked as a facilitator or

coordinator for infants, toddlers, school age, youth, adult learners and seniors). I believed

the linking characteristics of positive self-worth (perceptions of success and value)

among all these age groups (including the failing 9-12 students) lay in the promotion of

cooperative/social learning, with increased attention given to personal interest in the

subjects/skills being taught.

After returning to school, work from my doctoral and Director of Community

Education Administrator's certificate coursework, exposed me to learning theories

focused on the freedom of choice and personal interest through individual learning styles

experiential learning, social learning, and learning in informal contexts and "third" spaces

(Gutierrez, 2008). Through these experiences I became interested in the idea of what

would/could happen if all these generations I had worked with separately were joined to

learn together under a unified purpose. After some research, I discovered this concept

was known (mainly in Europe) as *Multigenerational* (or *Intergenerational) Learning* (Almieda Pinto, 2010).

Add to all of these observations and experiences, my work as a research assistant at the *Center for Spirituality and Healing* on the topics of wellbeing in the community and the relationship between issues of social justice and community capital (Putnam 2000 and Prilleltensky 2006)--and it seemed I was starting to generate a concept of the research I hoped to pursue.

In order to bring focus to the general concept of Multigenerational (MG) learning, I engaged in personal studies on Inter/Multigenerational education and started combining them with individual learner theories from Howard Gardner - Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1999), David Kolb - Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984), and Neil Fleming - VARK theory -Visual, Aural, Read/Write Kinesthetic (Fleming & Baume, 2006). I wish to insert a personal comment here: I am aware as a professional educator and researcher that learning style theories often get "bad press" or go in cyclical patterns of acceptance or rejection, but in my experience I have found these theories to hold validity. To clarify, I am aware that simply having knowledge of one's own learning style may not in itself improve learning, but, as Neil Fleming frames it:

> That [idea] is just as true as that knowing one's weight does not help weight loss. However, knowing one's learning style can be beneficial if learners take the next step, and consider how and when they learn, as part of a reflective, metacognitive process, with action to follow. You don't fully understand how you learn with a learning style inventory alone. What happens afterwards has the potential to make a difference. Just as what you do after you find out that you are overweight makes a difference to your weight. (Fleming, 2006)

After solidifying my thoughts through all the experiences and observations
mentioned, I framed those ideas into the context of *Community Wellbeing Theory* as
purported by Robert Putnam (2000) and Isaac Prilleltensky (2006), who both theorized
that there are proven issues of social justice reflected in the overall wellbeing of
individuals and the communities in which they reside. The healthier a person is
emotionally, physically, socially, educationally, and spiritually, the healthier the state of
their community is as well.

The above description of events brings me to today, and it is in the entire combination
of items above, which provide a personal backdrop for this research.

**1.1   My Personal Introduction to Karen Multigenerational/Intergenerational
Education and its Influence on the Focus of this Research**

My introduction to the Karen occurred in 2011 when I was hired by the Roseville
Area school district (Minnesota ISD 623) to oversee production and direction of a "Glee"
style music show for school-aged children in the Roseville Area Community Education
Summer Program. The staff and I proposed and received, a grant that helped us to
produce "Bridges to Friendship": a live show containing a series of vocal and dance
performances focusing on friendship-building between Karen immigrant children and
other children in their school district. Through this experience (where song, dance and
music were shared between the Karen and local children) I got to know the children,
parents and community members/leaders. By the end I had established some
relationships and became very fond of the Karen people I had met--especially their desire

to learn from others and their eager willingness to share their gifts of song, dance and music. After the summer was over, I left the community education program to pursue a job at the University of Minnesota, but kept in contact with some people from the Karen community. When it came time to propose and complete my research for this dissertation, I naturally gravitated toward the Karen community again, remembering their joy and dedication to any and all experiences in learning. To no great surprise, I was able to reconnect and gain a wonderful opportunity to join them again, and to observe the community in one of their own contexts. It is from the reflection and study of these observations and experiences that allowed me to complete this research project and the analysis of my time there.

The focal point of this particular thesis is to present theories and discussions regarding the areas of learning in informal, multigenerational and immigrant (Karen) contexts. Within and surrounding these conversations will be my own insights and reflections as well as personal thoughts provided by members of the large group observed and by focal participants recruited. These participants volunteered to share their perceptions about themselves and learning within their own community context and also the importance those perceptions have in understanding themselves within the current community, and its overall history.

1.2. The Influence of Critical Theory on this Research

Critical theory is a school of Social Critical theory that comes from a Western European Marxist tradition known as the *Frankfurt School*, which included Horkeheimer

(1982) and Fromm (1994), and later extended to works of more theorists including

Foucault (1980), Derrida (1978) and Freire (1970). Additionally, critical work by

specialists in various qualitative methodologies such as Geertz (1973 and 1983), Lather

(2004) and Denzin (2001) became prominent in the fields of education and/or

ethnography. Although individual theorists or schools of thought have their own

definitions, for the purpose of this research Critical theory will reflect many influences

and therefore refers to:

> …The ways in which political ideology shapes Education as a way of
> maintaining existing regimes of privilege and social control [C]asts a
> critical eye upon the history, the development and practice of education
> and educational theorising. It holds that education in the modern western
> world is shaped by the ideologies and power structures that devolve from
> Capitalism, and that its purpose is to reproduce these conditions in ways
> which benefit the already-powerful. ("Critical Education Theory," n.d.)

In the final two years of PhD program coursework, I was able to take a course in

Anthropological research methods and a course in Critical Ethnography. Both courses

introduced the idea of forming research through a critical framework, where Critical

theory would help shape the design, analysis and findings of an ethnographic study.

Although, as will be described further in Section 4 regarding the research plan for this

project, creating a "critical" ethnographic plan was not my first inclination.   This thought

wasn't because I didn't deem critical theory to have a place in my research (as I had been

introduced to it in earlier coursework); rather it was because I didn't know how to

purposefully incorporate the framework into what I was looking to study--namely

multigenerational learning in informal contexts. Most of my intended study focused on

these two educational entities, but as I searched for sites that would provide informal

learning opportunities in a multigenerational context, it became increasingly apparent that in this country, the populations that embodied these practices best were immigrant populations. Therefore, the population of my research became an important part of the overall design, and a critical lens was added after it became clear I could not ignore the elements of critical theory that were surfacing in the ongoing experience of my research with the Karen congregation. In an epiphany of sorts, I decided to take a look at the original research design and revisit it (I will discuss how and what was reworked in Section 4.4).

The historical relationship between the British Imperialists and the Karen people (along with the current influence of American systems) is an important point of this research, because, the influence of this relationship permeates every aspect of the individuals and community observed. Therefore, in Section 6 of this dissertation, elements of Critical Theory as defined above will be used to frame the discussions around data gathered and the analysis of that data.

2. Learning in Informal, Multigenerational, and Culturally-Based Contexts

An individual who values life-long learning is of benefit to everyone: the learner themselves, their family, their cultural group, their school/workplace, and their community. It is the goal of many community leaders to help their members, of any age, reach positive levels of wellbeing that provide them with a life's passion, and the self-esteem and self-efficacy to follow it. Although it may still seem unrealistic to some, a meaningful relationship between community members and their community can occur

through various learning contexts. Alternative learning environments such as charter

programs, community-based organizations, community education classrooms, youth

groups, charity-based organizations and churches have provided models of

Multigenerational practices to examine (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005).

In part, this research study may encourage readers tied to educational and

community work to consider the benefits Multigenerational learning contexts offer to

both personal wellbeing and community capital, which can promote improved self-worth

and instill a value of life-long learning, regardless of current age. For this researcher, no

place, or community of people has embodied the ideas behind learning for the betterment

of self and community, more than the Karen people residing in St. Paul, Minnesota, and

who do so utilizing multigenerational practices within informal learning contexts.

2.1. Informal Learning Contexts

Current research on the subject of learning in *MG* learning contexts is not

abundant; however, there have been projects conducted worth mentioning, and

recognized as having common theoretical characteristics with MG learning and the

promotion of learner motivation, passion, and self-worth. The following is an overview

of research conducted regarding successful characteristics of informal learning

environments, as researched by Wood, Larson, & Brown (2009), Eccles & Gootman

(2002), and Heath & McLaughlin (1994).

Informal learning contexts such as community-based organizations (CBOs)

provide insight into the development of theory surrounding informal learning

environments. Much of the research conducted in this area centers on how informal

contexts/CBOs have positive effects on youth educational success and overall

development, as well as how the integration of organizational tactics and methodologies

used in these organizations may hold the key to overall learner success (Heath &

McLaughlin, 1994). A research project conducted by Wake Forest University in 2009

determined that learners involved in CBOs felt the need to be more responsible in their

tasks and duties because someone else was depending on them, but more than that, they

realized that learning to be responsible was to their own benefit, and was a positive skill

to have heading into adulthood (Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009).

McLaughlin's (2000) continuation of the 1994 study echoed this original work,

the work by Eccles and Gootman (2002) and the above Wake Forest study (2009)

concerning intrinsically motivating learning opportunities. These results, in combination,

create a list of five characteristics, which promote the perceptions of improved learner

self-worth in informal contexts.

The first characteristic of effective informal learning settings includes having

clear organization and well-planned activities. Learners demonstrate feeling comfortable

in settings that are orderly with activities that are clearly directed and have a purpose

leading to defined objectives and goals. Learners feel a sense of personal control over

their activities when they are motivated by the task(s) given them, and when that task has

been explained or demonstrated in a clearly understood manner. This isn't to say that

informal learning settings should only provide directions or instructions to be carried out,

but rather, they should also give parameters to learners and promote constructivist

learning. Encouraging this type of learning can provide learners with a feeling of order,

and therefore create a manageable environment in which to work (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 91).

The second characteristic of effective informal learning settings involves the facilitator expressing clear expectations that are high. Learners, as described by the research conducted by Eccles and Gootman (2002), reacted positively when they knew precisely what was expected of them, both for the single event, and in the long term (p. 102). An ability to check off smaller goals on the path to a bigger goal, provided evidence for the leaners that they were making continual progress towards their goals, and, that they were experiencing success on a regular basis. Interestingly, this research also noted that learners *appreciated* when the facilitators of the groups had high expectations. It was explained by participants that high expectations in these environments conveyed a message to them that the facilitators believed learners could complete these more difficult tasks even if similar tasks in their classroom environments were previously determined to be beyond their ability (p. 103). The high expectations, coupled with clear goals, encouraged and empowered learners to react positively rather than dejectedly to challenges posed.

The third characteristic involves open communication between all members and positions within the organization/community including the facilitator/leader. Learners, who felt they could express themselves, (within appropriate boundaries) saw this openness as a positive motivator and factor of success. As with the unspoken message regarding high expectations, the message given here by facilitators that anyone and everyone could talk and listen to others without a "middle man" or someone else acting

on their behalf was empowering, and contributed to a positive learning experience, and ultimately successful learning within that environment (p. 94).

The fourth characteristic centers on offering choices to group members in key decision making activities. Similar to open communication, the inclusion of learners in decision-making that directly affects the group or the task at hand gave the learners some autonomy, while simultaneously allowing group cohesion (as they worked to come to agreements that helped both the individual and the group). Allowing collectivity in decision making processes by the group may require a very facilitative type of leader, but the research infers that learner investment in crucial decisions made on behalf of individuals and the group fosters self-efficacy, builds communication abilities, and exposes learners to culturally recognized manners of conflict resolution (p. 96).

The fifth characteristic involves frank discussion about, and with, those group members who are not meeting expectations. Ironically, there is evidence that suggests learners failing in the traditional environment but who are invested and successful in their alternative settings, do not wish to waste time or effort on those who do not want to be there in those alternative settings. Evidence implies that this concept is tied to the voluntary nature of these informal learning settings. Further, wanting to "cut the dead weight" so to speak, may also be a reflection of learner recognition regarding previous destructive patterns they do not wish to bring into an environment where they are currently experiencing success (p. 101). There were very strong reactions from the learners to the perception of lazy or non-invested people in groups--and CBO youth groups especially.

2.2. Multigenerational Learning

The central concepts behind Multigenerational (MG) learning (sometimes known as *intergenerational learning*) encompasses the following points, which are focused on experiential environments which support individual learning styles and foster community relationships throughout the entire process. In general, the main concepts of MG learning contexts assume that:

- Projects take a long-term approach, with a series of activities allowing time for relationships to develop.

- Staff has appropriate skills and training to deal with both older and young people.

- There is pre-preparation of participants before they engage in intergenerational activities.

- Activities are focused on developing relationships between generations.

- Activities are shaped by participants and so meet the needs of all participants, whether older or young.

- There are mutual benefits from activities, and that activities are appropriate to [different] generations.
                    (Springate, I., Atkinson, M. and Martin, K., 2008, p. v)

Successful MG learning relies on constant planning and reflection, as each group of learners in each program implemented will ultimately vary. To address this point, a list of general, MG Best Practices has been developed by IGE/MG Researcher, Dr. Rachel Pain. She states that successful MGs include:

- Sustainability of long term approaches, funding and plans for monitoring and evaluation.

- Staffing that includes high levels of skill and training, commitment and enthusiasm, time and availability, and stability of low turnover.

- Development of activities that are participatory, varied and diverse and focused on developing relationships.

- Inclusion of participants who are prepared to learn in this new paradigm, and are aware that benefits gained are for the group and community as well as the individual.

- High levels of organization that utilize advanced planning, timetabling, and transportation.

- Developing partnerships through strategic involvement and operational relations.

(Pain, 2005)

According to Dr. Pain, following these best practices will assist facilitators in the implementation of MG models, whether in partnership with the community, self-functioning, or as separate educational entities (2005).

MG advocates Zeldin, Larson, Camion, and O'Connor (2005) attest that MG learning contexts address the issues that current mainstream organization structures do not, because the main points of MG implementation are not founded on theories of age-based development, rather, they are based on theories of experiential learning, and the recognition and celebration of multiple intelligences and individualized learning styles (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). MG learning environments purposefully address the age-based classroom issues of disconnected learners, achievement gaps and subject relativity by producing benefits for the individual as well as the community; issues, which the age-based, public school system have not been able to resolve (Rogoff, Bartlett, Turkanis, 2001).

Community leaders and facilitators implementing MG learning models

are mindful that the benefits achieved, can be specific not only to the community as a whole, but also to the intergenerational levels of each learner involved, even in the context of learning *together*--which is in direct contrast to the competitive nature of the mainstream classroom. According to additional research conducted by Alan Hatton-Yeo in 2007, there are particular benefits to the following groups: Youth, Adults/Seniors, and Community. Note here that MG learning doesn't normally group learners in age-based grades like traditional school systems which terminate at age eighteen, but rather they create much broader and inclusive groups based on social characteristics or legal definitions (Hatton-Yeo & Centre for Intergenerational Practice (Beth Johnson Foundation), 2007). Further research resulted in a list of benefits to organizations that integrate IG and MG learning programs. They include:

Benefits to All Participants:
- Increased understanding of learning
- Friendship
- Enjoyment and confidence

Benefits to Youth:
- Gaining of skill
- Increased self-esteem

Benefits to Adults/Seniors:
- Reduced isolation
- Renewed sense of worth

Benefits to Community:
- Improved community cohesion
- Positive impact on community-related policy areas
- Diversification of Volunteering
- Formation of partnerships with entities in the community
  (Springate, I., Atkinson, M. and Martin, K., 2008)

The lists provided and research reviewed strongly implies that MG learning has the opportunity to strengthen individual interest, skill, and education, and also a community's capital.

2.3. Equity in Culturally-Based Learning Contexts

According to J. Whitehouse, et. al (2000) issues of equity are always a concern for facilitators in the field of MG learning. MG leaders firmly believe that a community's support of empowerment, diversity and social justice are at the core of learners' perceptions of self-worth, and the community's perceptions of learners' contributions (J. Whitehouse, Eve Bendezu, Stephanie Fallcreek, Catherine Whitehouse, 2000). The core of this issue is not a debate; rather, it is seen as a constant struggle against mainstream society to stop the marginalization of certain communities, and the promotion of empowerment/action by MG facilitators, individual learners, and community entities.

Educational psychologist and MG learning proponent, Isaac Prilleltensky notes: "Whereas psychological, social, and economic factors are often listed as determinants of family and community wellbeing, justice [has been] conspicuously absent" (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). Prilleltensky's list of social justice principles for a community echo the ideals set forth for MG learning. They state

- All members of the community are treated with fairness and justice

- Basic needs are met (and there is adequate access to health services, decent housing, food security)

- There is personal security for all

- There is equal opportunity for education and for all members to meet potential

                                        (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007).

MG facilitators feel they should promote facets of equity and reflect them in their learning environments by supporting them in the larger community as well (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). These facets include the following:

1. People must have increased access to economic, political, and psychological power to experience community wellbeing.

2. Citizens require public resources to pursue private aspirations. There cannot be caring without justice, or justice without caring.

3. Personal and collective needs represent two faces of wellness. The third aspect, the relational domain, is crucial because individual and group agendas are often in conflict. Indeed, like power, conflict is imminent in relationships.

4. Sets of needs are primordial in pursuing healthy relationships among individuals and groups: respect for diversity and collaboration and democratic participation.

5. Diverse contexts require unique configurations of equity-promoting factors and values. (2007)

The struggle for equity in any aspect of society is difficult and requires constant sword rattling, but there are leaders in most communities who have become acutely aware of the inequity that exists, and are working towards larger awareness in action and policy. For the MG facilitator, struggles with equity are perhaps most evident in their work with English Language Learners (or ELL) and immigrant families. Based on this observation, MG educators working with these families provide a context for the

specifics of this debate.

2.3.1. Immigrant Populations and English Language Learners. MG facilitators work with a variety of people who are first or second generation immigrants to this country. Contrary to the common perspective that educational workers should be "experts" in their positions, more equitable views in MG would argue the key actions of a "traditional" perspective, (preserving the language in the home, accepting culturally based family structures, etc.) could help avoid a non-reciprocal experience between learners and MG learning opportunities (or with associated community services). According to the traditional perspective of MG facilitation, any negative type of experience could stunt cultural transitioning and inhibit families from becoming empowered in their own structures…thereby burdening the social system more, and not improving the state of the family or community's future (Arcus, 1995).

Focusing on the transition of immigrant families into U.S. culture, the MG facilitator as teacher, or in the above-mentioned *expert perspective,* would view the immigrant's situation as one where they are coming to the U.S. to *improve* themselves and their circumstances. This perspective is the primary lens through which American social policies (including CBOs, social systems and curriculum) are created. Likewise, some informal learning opportunities are implemented through the understanding that MG facilitators should be specialists in a given field, and that the dominant culture from which these experts are taught and work, do so within the assumption that this framework is best for all immigrant families in transition.

This *expert* perspective should not be equated, however, to a belief that MG

educators have egalitarian or privileged intentions per se, but rather that their base

presumption is all families can be helped through improvements provided by science and

educational research. Science, in the manner described here, is based in positivist and

post-colonial concepts, which according to western ideology has the purpose of studying

phenomenon in order to find ways to utilize that phenomenon in a manner that will

benefit humankind and its deficiencies (Arcus, 1995). Therefore, supporters of the *expert*

perspective believe there is usually a way to use science and data to improve familial

situations in how they currently exist or interact. Therefore, these philosophical concepts

are basic to the methodology and curriculum of MG learning for immigrant and/or ELL

populations, often manifesting in the form of the "intervention" or "prevention":

programs with the goal of preventing or re-directing certain perceived negative aspects or

factors in the generational unit.

        Methods utilizing these types of programs are usually developed in this manner:

> In "the [first] three stages of the prevention/intervention
> development process - problem analysis, program design,
> and pilot testing; [the] goal is to show the productive
> interplay between applied and basic research in making
> decisions about how, where and with whom to intervene.
> (Dumka, 1995, p.78)

    Such interventions/preventions in this case of MG immigrant families may include

classes for parents (focusing on learning English), training for a job, preparing children

for transition into the American school system, as well as moving members into

medical/dental services.

    The *expert* perspective does make some historical and cultural assumptions, but due to

the empirical data used with in it, can also produce some meaningful and lasting results

for community members in need (Crosbie-Burnett, 1992).

However, in critical opposition to the expert perspective is an alternative perspective,

which denotes that MG learning should be purposeful and open to

> …Additional forms of knowledge generation [which] would support the further development of the field, because it would encourage [MG] scholars to examine different and additional kinds of questions, and would encourage them to ask questions differently. (Arcus, 1995, pg. 242)

This opposing idea forms the main argument for those supporting the *traditional*

viewpoint. The main criticism the MG traditional perspective has of the MG expert

perspective derives from the expert perspective's assumptive main idea that all families

who immigrate to the U.S. are in need of improvement, in accordance with U.S.

standards. The traditional perspective believes that immigrant families may not fit the

dominant, American definition of family, and therefore these families must be

empowered to sift through any pre-conceived or pretentious expectations put upon them

(Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako, 1992). The traditional perspective is a more

individualized perspective, and in the case of immigrant families, takes a number of

familial/cultural elements into consideration in order to avoid such assumptions. In

collaborating with these families, the main focus of those working through this

perspective is to value and recognize the important cultural and/or ethnic identities a

family brings with them into the community. It is also valuable to recognize the

importance of language in their family, and how the family interacts, is organized, and/or

functions within the familiar context of their homeland community (Crosbie and Burnett,

1992). Once these things are understood, MG facilitators in this traditional perspective

would work at empowering the family to identify for themselves, aspects of their family

unit they wish to keep, enhance, or improve upon. This process often follows specific

work with the families (in an informal and communal context) in how to recognize and

combat negative messages sent to them via the dominant culture and media. The belief

here is that when families can recognize their own strengths, as well as areas for progress,

they can work with MG facilitators (not as experts but as collaborators) to find their

voice, and use it (Jessel, 2009).

The traditional perspective aims to bring all available resources and aspects of the

family, in conjunction with the facilitators' ideas, in order to work together to help the

family help themselves and their community--and therefore learn how to make changes

or adaptations in their new country in the manner and pace that *they* have chosen. It is in

these decisions that those working in MG can support and assist the learner and family,

so that all involved feel valued and respected.

It is apparent from the information provided regarding the debate between the

"expert" or "traditional" MG viewpoints that both sides wish to strengthen communities

and the overall wellbeing of entities within them, such as culturally transitioning families,

immigrants, those with low SES, and other marginalized populations. Therefore,

regardless of preferred perspective, the current focus in MG learning to address issues of

equity is to 1) follow the initial ideals for MG as they were created many years ago for

the european Gen 1 immigrant communities and apply them today; 2) promote factors of

wellbeing and social justice as described in research literature about the impact of social

justice on community wellbeing; and 3) be vigilent in their communities about the

bringing awareness to the marginilization of people with whom they work and support

(Jessel, 2009). However, how to specifically go about achieving this goal is missing

from the literature, especially concerning specific populations like the Karen, and this

absence encourages a space for this study.

3. Background Information about the Karen People

The Karen People are an ethnic subgroup from Myanmar, which they refer to as

"Burma" after the political renaming of the country by the political forces (State Law and

Order Restoration Council (SLORC)) that came to power in the late 1980's (South,

2007). The conflict behind the country's two names is one root cause of division among

the over 135 ethnic groups in that country, and is also one of the issues that separates

those that support the current government from those that are persecuted—such as the

Christian Karen (2007). The Karen, and others who refer to the country as *Burma* are

using the name given to the country by the British, who in 1886 imposed their

imperialism within the country after winning a series of military incursions during the

Anglo-Burmese wars and then annexing the country as part of Imperialist India ("List of

ethnic groups in Burma," 2015).

3.1. A Brief, Collective History of the Karen Population

The Karen themselves number about 7 million of the 53 million people that live in

Burma and there are estimates of about 400,000 additional Karen living in Thailand. The

Karen people are among the largest of what are known as the "hill tribes" which live along the Thai-Burma border (Neiman, Soh, & Sutan, 2008).

The Karen group is divided into twelve smaller sub divisions, which have their own related dialects. These sub-groups are mainly "characterized by cleavages and segmentation, along religious, ethnic, ideological, and regional lines" (South 2007). Religious affiliations of these sub-groups are recorded at 25% percent Christian, 65% Buddhist, and 10% Animists (2007).

3.1.1. Religious Identity and Persecution. In the early nineteenth century the Karen People were introduced to Christianity through Baptist missionaries who entered the area as a part of the eventual annexation of Burma by the British and subsequent Imperialist rule. It is recorded that up to 30% of the Karen population converted during the time between the Anglo-Burmese Wars and events leading up to World War II (minorityrights.org, n.d.). As the Karen converted, religious affiliation superseded ethnic identity and the Karen sided with their Imperialist counterparts, and, contrary to the experience of other Burmese, the Karen became involved in British military services--even acting as guides in many military exploits. Subsequently, as the trust between the Karen and the British strengthened, the Karen became involved in helping the British quell rebellions against the Imperialist forces in lower Burma (minorityrights.org, n.d.).

As World War II grew in intensity and Japan gained ground in Burma, some of the Karen retreated into India while others helped fight, assisting the Allies in regaining Burma. After the War, the Karen had hoped to be rewarded by the British for their loyalty, however "the ensuing political arrangement under the Panglong Agreement –

promising an eventual federal Burma – was concluded without Karen approval"
(minorityrights.org, n.d.) and they were essentially abandoned in their own country; a
country where the majority population now viewed the Karen as a traitorous religious and
ethnic minority.

In 1948, Burma gained independence from Britain, and the Karen and their
organizations the *Karen National Union* (the KNU) and its armed branch, the *Karen
National Liberation Army* (KNLA), were seen as threats to the majority power. Any
attempt at maintaining Karen independence and religious freedom "became futile"
(minorityrights.org, n.d.) and by 1994 any semblance of control the Karen had over their
own identity and future in Burma, was violently quelled. Since that time the Karen have
suffered from forced labor, forced relocation, the confiscation of land and other human
rights violations such as discrimination, burning villages and sexual violence. The year
2003 witnessed the peak of these crimes, with villages being attacked by the Burmese
Army creating reports that as recently as the years 2005/06 the Karen people were being
used to clear landmines to provide land for their own camps--all of which reflect actions
of ethnic cleansing.

> Discrimination against the Karen remains deeply entrenched in the institutions of
> the state. State schools in Karen areas, even where they are the majority of the
> population, are exclusively provided in the Burmese language and government
> offices provide no access to services in Karen languages. Numerous reports
> continue to point out that government jobs in Karen areas appear to be
> increasingly the reserved domain of ethnic Burman. (Minorityrights.org, n.d.)

Increasingly in those years (and as continues today), world peace and religious
organizations began assisting the Karen population in relocating to new countries, where
they could be free to practice their religion and way of life. In many cases Christian

churches help facilitate immigration, as the bond of shared religion promotes

relationships between congregations and families in camps seeking to emigrate.

International assistance is the manner in which the specific Karen population in this

research came to Minnesota, and eventually formed the congregation known as Ebenezer

Karen First Baptist Church.

3.2. The Congregation of Ebenezer Karen First Baptist Church

The *First Baptist Church* of St. Paul, which houses the *Karen Ebenezer Baptist*

congregation within it, describes itself as the oldest, and thusly "first" Baptist church in

St. Paul. The church itself is an older building consisting of a main sanctuary with

handmade stained glass from the mid 1800's adorning the sides, and the lectern, pulpit

and organ frame the front. The color of the wood is dark and the fabric of cushions and

drapes are of deep, red velvet (see Fig. 1). A newer addition created in the early 1900s offers a foyer and three stories of space, which in the 1940s were converted to office and learning spaces.

Figure 1: First Baptist Church of St. Paul

Today, in this environment, the main church offers the expected learning opportunities most local churches offer such as:

prayer groups, quilting circles, youth, and choral groups. These events, open to all

Ebenezer congregation members, are in English and combined with other congregational

groups of the much larger First Baptist church. However, due to the shared cultural and ethnic background of the Karen People, the Ebenezer congregation has created additional learning opportunities both formally through community-sponsored classes and informally through generational teaching.

The multigenerational environment of the Ebenezer church presents the Karen population with opportunities for several learning events not generally found within a typical church context. Through church services and Sunday school classes, members of Ebenezer Baptist not only receive religious teachings, but also have the opportunity to learn languages (English and Karen) as well as culture (American and Karen) and music (which consists of singing and dancing) from each other. Other than the CBO-offered English language classes, all other learning events are planned, organized, and led by Karen congregational members--and often led by members who at one time were learners in those same contexts.

4. Research Plan

The specifics offered in the following section are derived from both the personal background information presented regarding researcher experiences, and the literature reviewed. The design is also based upon parameters and practice provided for this researcher at the University of Minnesota, in CI Core/Methodology Courses: 8150, 8148, 8133, 8146, and Anthropology 8203, as well as texts by qualitative design specialists, Michael Q. Patton (2002) Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2011), Matthew B. Miles (1990), and J.A Maxwell (2005). Synthesizing the samples, outlines and

suggestions provided by these sources, as well as my previous research experience, I

developed a qualitative methodology that uses an ethnographic design. The details of

that design are detailed below.

4.1. Overall Approach

The overall approach of this research design is qualitative, which, due to its

methodologies, support research designs that involve the experiences of people.

Qualitative research methods promote the exploration of people's perceptions and

qualitative research also recognizes that people are unique. Qualitative Inquiry (QI)

searches for its own "truth" in each *unique* study (Patton, 2002). QI is also focused on

the *unique* phenomenon that happen in *unique* settings, and their *unique* social constructs.

According to Maxwell (2005), qualitative research design must always be reflexive and

flexible, utilizing all aspects of research at the same time (in contrast to a quantitative,

linear model).   Working with people and observing their processes of learning and

interaction, while asking them to tell their own stories about their own perceptions, is best

researched through methods that acknowledge there are phenomenon unique to each

human experience. Therefore, I created the following qualitative design, as I understood

the need for adaptability and flexibility throughout the this experience, and I wanted to be

prepared to follow other paths that might present themselves during the course of the

study. Qualitative methodologies provided me such elasticity.

4.2. Type of Study

This research was designed as an *Ethnographic* study, which is a type of qualitative research that comes from an anthropologic background, and answers the overarching question, "<u>What is the culture of this group of people</u>?" (Patton, 2002, p.132). At its core, ethnography wishes to understand the idea that, "any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture" (p. 81). Using ethnography for this study not only allowed for observations and interactions on the individual level, but it also shed light on interpretations of the cultural/multigenerational structures of the learning environments observed, and identified characteristics these contexts shared (which made the environment more nurturing for learners as individuals and as members of a community). **Note:** In this study, the term *community* is a construct, and refers to 1). The group of multigenerational learners who are gathered together for the same purpose; and 2). The larger group of people living in or belonging to a recognized geographical area, and their correlating cultural/ethnic group (see the section 4.2.3.1: *Site and Population* for more detail).

This ethnographic study focused on a multigenerational learning environment unaffiliated with any formal educational system (Ebenezer Karen First Baptist Church). More than four months were spent in the various programs at the site, which typically met at least one to two times a week. The units of analysis were the participants within this learning context, the facilitators involved, community leaders, and, a subset included five focal participants (from three families) of diverse generations with which the interviews were conducted.

Since I was interviewing children under 14 and observing an immigrant population (both identified as vulnerable populations by the IRB) the IRB application for this study went to full committee. After revising the consent forms, fleshing out some more particulars and describing modes of declination for people who did not wish to participate, I was granted permission to complete this study as outlined below.

4.2.1. Research Design

4.2.1.1. Beginning Assumption. The availability of learning opportunities provided for immigrant populations in an informal (non-school) and multigenerational learning environment will have unique and positive impact on learners' perceptions of self-worth, thereby creating value of life-long learning, which in turn helps a community's capital and the maintenance of cultural identity.

4.2.1.2. Research Question, Guiding Questions and Measures

Research Question*:*

How do members (of all ages) at Karen Ebenezer Baptist church describe the learning experiences provided by their community, and how do they perceive their personal value as individual learners to that community?

Guiding Questions:

1. How do learners perceive the church as a learning context, and do these learners recognize any value of community input in formation of learning opportunities within it?

2. How is the community and/or family included the communal nature of this MG environment, and how does the church engage in fostering learners' interests?

3. Do learners in this community develop an independent value of life-long learning supported in MG and community-based learning environments?

4. How is a sense of community expressed in this learning environment, and do the unique multigenerational and experiential/social contexts of these opportunities promote self-perceptions about the value of learning?

5. Are there common traits found among learners who feel valued in MG environments?

Measures

1. This qualitative study examines, through observation of learning activities and interview of focal participants, data regarding perceptions of learning in a multigenerational context as provided through a community entity (in this case, a church).

2. The study also describes a possible awareness of the relationship between the positive self-perceptions of individuals (coming to learn from the opportunities provided in this locale) and their community's capital.

3. Most importantly, this study provides opportunities for some Karen members (from varying generations) to share their personal stories regarding learning together, and how these opportunities/activities affect their own thoughts towards learning, and their perceptions of value as community members to the greater Karen community.

   4.2.1.3. Site and population. As mentioned, I gained access to, and worked with,

the Karen population (originally from Myanmar in Southeast Asia, who began

immigrating to the U.S. in 2000). St. Paul, and its first ring suburb, Roseville, are home

to the largest Karen population in the U.S.: currently more than 7,000 people. The Karen

population in St. Paul is a devoutly Christian population, and most members of the larger

community regularly attend one of four Karen churches within the St. Paul area (about

1,500 members per congregation). One of the prominent community leaders, and

director of the KCM (Karen Community of Minnesota) organization, invited me to join

their community in the multigenerational (three to four generations represented at once)

and informal learning context provided by *Ebenezer Karen Baptist Church*, situated

within the First Baptist Church of St. Paul. Ultimately, this site and population were

chosen mainly due to their "newness" to Minnesota and American culture; the Karen are

still learning skills and information as a group, and therefore can provide the rare

combination of a multigenerational learning environment within an informal context and

for an identified community. In addition, previous work with the population gave me

familiarity with members who were happy to work with me again, and their

communications regarding my research inquiries were welcoming and open.

4.2.1.3.1. Presentation to the congregation and recruitment of focal

participants. Once I was on site, I was given the opportunity to personally address the

congregation of Ebenezer Karen Baptist Church and let them know the scope and intent

of my research. I wanted to build trust by being completely transparent about my

intentions and my reason for being there and so I gave a brief presentation about myself,

and the purpose of my research. At that time I went over the manners in which members

of the congregation could participate including the large group observations and focal participant interviews. Officially (as described on the IRB application) due to the size of the group (over 500 congregational members) and the fact that the location of the group was in a public space open to anyone, consent was waived for the large group observations, however; out of respect and in an effort to build a trusting relationship with this community, congregational members were told they did not have to participate. It was also strongly reinforced that there were no consequences to them or their families in the declination of participation. At that same time, members of the group were given an info sheet (in English and Karen) that included the dates/internal locations (classroom, sanctuary, library, etc.) of large group observations including purposed videotaping. The members who did not wish to participate in the study could speak to the community contact or I, and we would make note of their declination of participation and then I encouraged them to either:

1.) Sit in a back or other peripheral location (that is "out of camera shot" when the camera is present) **OR**

2.) Avoid attendance on any given date to the particular internal location (classroom, sanctuary, library, etc.).

The members were also told that any videotaping of the large group correlated with special event dates only and were not conducted every time I would be on site. In addition it was described that when the camera was not present, I would not observe or take notes about people in the back or in peripheral portions of the observed space,

understanding this action to be a declination of participation, and therefore, no information or notes would be recorded about them. In the end, no one in the large group declined, and all members of the congregation were very open and eager to help by participating.

I recruited my focal participants from the larger congregation. During the address to the full congregation I also asked for volunteers to become focal participants. I explained that any volunteers would be interviewed and recorded, but that I would use pseudonyms in any published or presented materials resulting from the research. It was important to the goal of the study to make sure I chose participants of varying ages so that I would get the multigenerational perspectives of the context. My goal was to interview someone of either gender in the 0-10, 11-18 19-30, 31-50, and 51 and over age groups. After a couple weeks on site, I was fairly successful in recruiting individuals by approaching them (or their parents) directly or by having them approach me. All volunteers, prior to being interviewed, were given written consent forms as required by the IRB.

To note: I did have two interviews (a 33 year old woman and a 45 year old man) that did not occur due to some miscommunication, but in the end I had five focal participants for my vignettes which was in the range originally proposed. The vignettes of these five participants follow later in this paper, but I will identify the participants here as well. I interviewed Ronnie, a male aged eight years; Jared, a male aged 15 years; Dana, a female aged 22 years; Edward, a male aged 57 years, and Thelma, a female aged 93 years. Ronnie was born in the United States, Jared was very young when his family emigrated,

and the other three lived part, or the great majority of their lives in Burma. In the end, I

had a good range of participants for the vignettes, and the data/information gathered

through their communications were very rich, and made up much of the data presented

for analysis. Even more important, the focal participants appeared to like talking with

me, and I enjoyed conversing with them immensely.

　　　　4.2.1.4. Data gathering methods. Data collection involved the following

methods as best match the research methodology and purpose proposed: observation,

field notes, focal participant interview/video transcripts, and collection of

documents/artifacts. Observation and field notes occurred every visit, video was taken

during specific learning events (determined by schedule and programming) and

artifacts/documents were collected as they were introduced. Creation of the interview

questions, interview schedules and artifact collection were determined during the actual

study.

　　　　4.2.1.5. Analysis procedures. According to Alan Peshkin and his description of

analysis within qualitative research, "interpretation is an act of imagination and logic. It

entails perceiving importance, order, and form in what one is learning that relates to the

argument, *story*, or *narrative* that is continually undergoing creation (2000).   With his

words in mind, the methods of analysis for this research study included a *Constant*

Comparative Analysis (Glaser, 1965) for field notes and observations, *Transcript Review*

(Davidson, 2009) from interviews, *Discourse Analysis* (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) from

observation, interviews and vignettes, and *Symbol (Theme) Identification /Charting* (*The*

Sage handbook of Qualitative Research, 2011) for the artifacts/documents…all used

conjunctively, in order to best determine/organize "key linkages" (Erickson, 1985) or

themes that occurred between the main research question, guiding questions and all forms

of data gathered. Additionally, in the final write up, I followed the advice of Mr.

Erickson, and utilize as many of the "nine elements of reporting" that help make sense of

data within this type of study including but not limited to: empirical assertions, quotes

from field notes, quotes from interviews, synoptic data charts, interpretive commentary,

and theoretical discussion (p. 145).

In addition, I used the analysis method of *Narrative Vignette* in order to present

unique and personal information through interviews, observations, and interactions with

the study's focal participants. Since a large part of my study involves the perceptions of

individuals, vignettes allowed me to present such perceptions in a manner best reflective

of the Karen community's value in storytelling. In qualitative research,

> Vignettes provide a snapshot, or perhaps a mini-movie, of a
> professional practitioner at work. They engage the
> [researcher] directly in reflecting on a recent episode of
> practice, first describing it, and then producing thoughtful
> explanations. They combine a systematic, structured
> approach with the expression of "emic" or personal
> meanings. (Miles, 1990)

As a former literature teacher who focused on personal writing, I am drawn to the use

of narrative vignettes as a means to analyze and present information gained from people's

individual perceptions, and to give voice to their own thoughts and my reflections as

researcher. This type of data analysis and presentation is gaining momentum in the field

of ethnography. According to qualitative researcher, Donald Polkinghorne,

> There is an increasing interest in narrative inquiry among qualitative researchers.
> This interest is merited because narrative is the *linguistic form uniquely suited for*

displaying human existence as situated action. (1995)

I was also attracted to the uniqueness of a type of analysis that is not based in positivist design, because, "the abandonment of an essentially positivist paradigm also has potential methodological benefits" (Wilks, 2004) to the immigrant community in which I was situated. Therefore, in the analysis phase, I produced one vignette for each focal participant as similar to the style of *HomeGirls* (Mendoza-Denton, 2008) *The Pastoral Clinic* (Garcia, 2007) and a previous study, *"Equal Footing or Higher Ground?"* (Nystuen, 2013). It was through the creation and editing of these vignettes that the rich themes, which formed the main points of my analysis, surfaced and became identifiable.

In a last note, I integrated the use of a computer software data management tool (Dedoose) as well as computer aided transcription tool (Transcriva) in order to create more accurate records and visual charts of the data gathered. Both tools assisted me in my analysis process, which entailed: identifying and organizing phenomenon, creating categories, and ultimately chronicling generationally shared and differing themes for *critical* discussion. This process of analysis determined which elements of the data were the strongest representatives of the research questions posed, and the determined measures listed.

4.3. Design Rationale

The meaning of this research comes from my personal experience and current scholarly inquiry about MG learning contexts and individual learning experiences, all of which are

valid rationales for qualitative research (Peshkin, 1993). As mentioned, specifically, I

utilized the qualitative methodology of *Ethnography* and used *Large Group Observation*

and *Focal Participant Interviews* to examine questions posed. Again, Ethnography is a

methodology understood to be more adaptable and flexible throughout the course of

theory development (Maxwell, 2005), which melded well with this project's purpose and

objectives; as it allowed myself as a researcher to engage in observation of all activities

and functions presented in the environment. Ethnography permitted me to focus on the

whole group as well as on a few participants willing to engage in personal discussions,

fostering relationships with them during the process. It is through this kind of

observation and discussion as promoted in ethnographic methodology that I learned about

the perceptions of the learners/community members/facilitators themselves--regarding

their own passions, self-worth, and value of learning, as well as any perceptions about

learning formed with the larger community.

In summary, the rationale for using the method described was to make the research

process as deliberative, but yet as flexible, as possible so as to gather rich data and thick

descriptions (Geertz, 1973) which helped me create an effective and meaningful analysis

that best moved toward describing the situations presented (Jacob, 1987), and to best

understand the perceptions of involved participants.

     4.3.1. Limitations. The largest limitations to this study were 1.) The initial

limitation of available sites and populations that offered MG learning contexts in an

informal community setting; 2.) The identification and maintenance of informants from

various generations for the duration of the study; 3.) Language barriers with Karen

members who did not speak English or speak it proficiently--as well as my inability to speak Karen; 4.) Scheduling conflicts and calendar mishaps, 5.) Influence of familial culture on analysis and implications (some focal participants came from the same family groups, which may have influenced the similarity of certain perceptions shared) and 6.) The obtainment of personal funding that allowed long-term research to occur, as well as the needed time for subsequent analysis and write up.

I had anticipated initial entry issues, as my area of study is very unique, and therefore, I needed to respect the policies and procedures of the community presented, which took some time. I was also, at times, dependent upon an interpreter for language translation, although I had had a community member volunteer to serve in this manner when it was needed, and by far the vast majority of my interactions were with people who spoke English very proficiently.

In final note, due to the qualitative nature of the study and uniqueness of the multigenerational learning environment of the Karen People in this specific location, the data I collected and subsequently analyzed is likely difficult to replicate or transfer in its exact state.

4.3.2. Ethical and Political Considerations of this Study. Ethnographer, Marina Gonick, in her essay *Who Are the Participants? Rethinking Representational Practices and Writing with Heterotopic Possibility in Qualitative inquiry (2005),* inferred that there is no such thing as a truly ethical ethnography. Echoing the thoughts of critical theorists mentioned in Section 1.2, she states that is that there is no way for an ethnographer, indigenous to a group or not, to be completely able to represent the experiences of her

informants with 100% accuracy. The ethnographic stories created and told, or re-told, are

in themselves incomplete and biased, simply through assumptions made, or through what

the ethnographer focuses on (or excludes) in the course of study, analysis and

interpretation. In this vein, I was the sole proprietor of the data collected in this study,

and although I utilized the theories and experiences of experts in the field, I was

ultimately the one who determined the themes analyzed and the manner in which the

analysis was interpreted and presented.

4.3.3. Role of Researcher. It is in these grey areas, I found myself running into

ethical issues, which I will attempt to explain. The position of myself as researcher in

this project was one of observer and interviewer, and therefore I was a visible and

approachable entity within the environment I gained access (entry issues themselves

always were handled with great transparency, respect and honesty). Although it was not

my intention to be a *participant observer*, (meaning that I did not plan to take part in the

actual teaching, activities, or learning processes that went on in these environments) I did

have a presence where the members of the group interacted with me and had

discussions/encounters with me in a familiar and comfortable manner. I made myself

approachable by being open about my reasons for being there and building rapport with

those I interviewed--and I always attempted to maintain appropriate and professional

boundaries as expected by my advisor, the University, the IRB and myself.

However, I was involved in some level of the learning experiences and I did form

relationships with people in that environment, which immediately brought up issues of

bias and subjectivity. The dilemmas I faced included becoming too empathetic towards

subjects, and wanting to intervene or "help" the participants. My personal reflections on these issues are discussed further in Section 7.2, and the ethical dilemmas described here also became political ones.

In the political vein, I acknowledge as researcher, I didn't know if I would be involved in *critical* ethnography until the particular situation was occurring, therefore I had deemed it important to devise strategies ahead of time to help me with any possible ethical dilemmas of misrepresentation, creation of descriptions through power binaries, marginalization of the population, or continuation of culturally dominant discourses (especially those promoted by educational and political structures of my own experiences). Constantly, in all areas of this study, I attempted to avoid these situations, and therefore the strategy devised was to, on a regular basis, remind myself as I entered the environment that I was there to conduct research and to understand the phenomenon present, and not harm the population I was studying. This meant I faced questions of Self and Other (Briggs, 1986), and had to be reflexive and adaptive in my design as events unfolded. I did my best to be conscious of the fact that I cannot ever possibly know how to truly represent someone else in my story telling, but through that realization I hoped to have a constant awareness of how to minimize potential violence to the Karen through my writing. Through the use of narrative vignettes, I devised ways to include my informants in the process of telling their own stories, and I was transparent in all my endeavors…which brought me to the realization that I, in order to best represent my participants and my interpretations of data gathered, did in fact need to incorporate a

critical lens to the field procedures, as well as the analysis and interpretation of data

gathered.

In the end, I knew it is unlikely to anticipate all the possible dilemmas that arose

in my study, but I thought a good first step in avoiding unethical situations was to be

aware that they *could* happen, and when they did…to be responsive, honest,

collaborative, and reflexive in the manner in which the situations were handled. In short,

I hoped for the best, but prepared for the difficult, and the difficult did happen. In the

early phases of my research I determined it was best for all involved to engage a critical

lens to this work, and therefore I had to revisit elements of the overall research plan.

4.4. Revisiting the Research Plan

The above presented research plan was an honest effort to produce a viable design

for the site and population studied. The design certainly reflected the intentions of my

desired research, and although I knew as things fell into place that some items were likely

to change, I hoped to implement a study, which provided unique data on Karen

perceptions about learning in this multigenerational context.

After a couple weeks on site, I found it necessary to acknowledge that elements of

the study (integrating with my experience as researcher) reflected elements of *critical*

ethnography, which was not an approach I originally anticipated to integrate. However,

in order to be flexible and adaptable, which as mentioned frequently, are paramount traits

to a good ethnography (Maxwell, 2005) I needed to revise/add on to some elements of the

original design plan, including the Research Question/Guiding Questions, Measures and

Theoretical Frame in which I would complete my analysis. As certain themes arose in

the large group actions and focal participant interviews, I reflected again on the main

question/guiding questions as well as the measures, reworked them, and then and added a

critical theory lens to the literature review and analysis portions of this study. The

following describes the initial research elements and their revised counterparts with

explanations.

> Original Research Question:
>
> How do members (of all ages) at Karen Ebenezer Baptist Church describe the
> learning experiences provided by their community, and how do they perceive
> their personal value as individual learners to that community?
>
> Revised Research Question:
>
> How do members (of all ages) at Karen Ebenezer Baptist Church describe the
> learning experiences provided by their church community and how do they
> perceive the value of learning within this context, and as individuals?

I revised the research question to rely less on participant perceptions of their personal

value as learners to the community and more on their individual perceptions of the value

of learning within their community. This was because, as I realized quickly, participants

had a difficult time articulating their personal value outside the context of the community.

This taught me for most, their individuality was intrinsically bound to their role within

the community. This phenomenon will be discussed more in the *Data Analysis* section

(6) of this paper.

<u>Original Guiding Questions:</u>

1. How do learners perceive the church as a learning context and do these members recognize any value of community input in formation of learning opportunities within it?

2. How is the community and/or family included the communal nature of this MG environment, and how does the church engage in fostering learners' interests*?*

3. Do learners in this community develop an independent value of life-long learning supported in MG and community-based learning environments?

4. How is a sense of community expressed in this learning environment, and do the unique multigenerational and experiential/social contexts of these opportunities promote self-perceptions about the value of learning?

5. Are there common traits found among learners who feel valued in MG environments?

<u>Revised Guiding Questions:</u>

1. How do learners perceive the church as a learning context, and do these learners recognize any value of community input in the process of learning?

2. How is the community and/or family included in the communal nature of this MG environment, and how does the church engage in fostering learners' interests*?*

3. Have learners in this community developed an independent value of life-long learning, and is this value supported within this community-based learning environment?

4. How is a sense of community expressed in this learning environment, and how do the unique multigenerational and experiential/social contexts of this site promote perceptions of improved learning among the participants?

5. Are there common opinions expressed among congregational members regarding the value of learning in the Karen community?

When the original question was revised it then required some of the guiding questions to be revisited as well, so that they better supported the new elements of the overall research question; and would bring forward some of the critical aspects of the research study that were appearing in the data being gathered.

Original Measures:

4. This qualitative study examines, through observation of learning activities and interviews with focal participants, data regarding perceptions of learning in a multigenerational context as provided through a community entity (in this case, a church).

5. The study also describes a possible awareness of the relationship between the positive self-perceptions of people (coming to learn from the opportunities provided in this locale) and their community's capital and cultural identity.

6. Most importantly, this study provides opportunities for some Karen members (from varying generations) to share their personal stories regarding learning together, and how these opportunities/activities affect their own thoughts towards learning, and their perceptions of value as community members to the greater Karen community.

Revised Measures:

1. This ethnographic study critically assesses, through observation of learning activities and interview of focal participants, data regarding perceptions of learning in an informal and multigenerational context as provided through a community entity (in this case, a church).

2. The study also examines both 1.) Large group activities and 2.) Personal descriptions about cultural identity (especially regarding the relationship between an individual in this context and their community's value in learning).

3. Most importantly, this study provides opportunities for some Karen members (from varying generations) to share their personal stories regarding learning, and how provided opportunities/activities affect their own thoughts towards learning, and their perceptions of its value to themselves and the greater Karen community.

The revisiting and subsequent revision of the elements above were needed in order to stay true to the themes generating during my ongoing analysis of the data collected. Part of ethnography, in addition to flexibility and adaptability, is the constant and comparative analysis of data as it is gathered and reviewed. As a researcher in the field experiencing much of the activity at the same time as the participants, I had many opportunities for reflection while on site or during a particular experience. This isn't to say I was simultaneously gathering and analyzing all the data being collected, but I was surely making note of any thoughts and reflections that did come to mind, which shortly thereafter would go through an initial analysis. After a month or so of field visits, it became too crucial to the research to ignore that themes surrounding perceptions of learning that were emerging, regardless of my initial assumptions or hypothesis. Therefore, in order to be most true to the data, and more importantly to the stories, opinions and thoughts shared with me by the Karen participants, I had to acknowledge these new elements of the research as they appeared. Although these new facets most definitely threw a "curve" into my original plan, they rightly led me to accept that this

study has critical ethnographic elements to it. Key to this realization were focal

participant interviews and the creation of their individual vignettes, which allowed me to

identify that such a critical frame could and should be applied. The section below

contains the narrative vignettes created from interviews with the focal participants.

5. Personal Histories and Self-Perceptions of Learning in this Context: Vignettes of Participants

The following sub-sections are a collection of first-person vignettes featuring this

study's focal participants, as I became familiar with them through observations and

personal interviews. The interviews conducted where semi-structured, and were recorded

via computer software and then transcribed to written documents. Although the

questions created for data gathering focused on the concepts of informal learning

opportunities within the church and the multigenerational influences within the context,

often the focal participants would offer information outside the parameters of my

inquiries, which in many cases provided far richer and meaningful data to myself as a

researcher, but also to the participants in opportunities for their own self-reflections. A

stylistic note about Section Five: in the interest of maintaining the look of a book chapter,

the vignette dialogues, although cited, are not formatted in block text in order to preserve

the narrative form of the stories.

The focal participants ranged in age from 8 years old to 93 years old, and two lived

most of their lives in Burma, while one was born in the United States and two had lived

some portion their lives in both places. The following paragraphs are brief introductions

to the study's focal participants and how they came to be part of the interview process.

For the purpose of recognizing patterns and themes that I will discuss in later analysis, both the focal participant introductions and their narratives to follow are presented in the order of their age (from oldest to youngest).

Thelma, a 93 year-old, matriarchal figure of the congregation, was recommended to me by many congregational members as someone who should certainly be a focal participant for my research because she has earned the respect of the entire Karen community at Ebenezer. Everyone I spoke with knew of her and recommended her to me but she was a bit elusive for a couple weeks. Then, one Sunday the pastor found me and asked if I would like to interview Thelma at that moment. It seems she was present that morning and had been told about my research and indicated that she very much wanted to do an interview with me. In most circumstances, I had been observing my focal participants during large group gatherings, in order to become familiar with them and their activities in the church, but with Thelma, I had had no such experience. I didn't want to ignore this opportunity however, because I had heard so much about her that I wanted to get to know her for myself, and see what the others knew that I didn't--yet.

Edward is a very stoic man in his mid-fifties. I asked about interviewing him because I was told that he used to be very active in Karen causes while he lived in Burma, and had experience raising his family both in Burma, and here in the United States. This appealed to me as I thought him a man of action. The Pastor identified Edward for me out of the large group but I was not able to talk to him that day. The pastor then found him later in the week and asked him if he would allow me to interview him about his thoughts

concerning learning, and I was told he seemed very interested in why I wanted to know about his opinion. Later, in personal conversation, I explained about my research and its goals and parameters, and expressed to him that mainly, I just wanted to hear his story: his thoughts about what learning meant to him at this point in his life and if that was different than at other points. He agreed to work with me and we set up a time for an interview in the coming week.

Dana approached me and asked if I would like to interview her. She explained that she was 22 years old and had just completed her own research for her Master's degree at Hamline and that she wanted to help me with my research and learn a little more about what I was studying. Dana would be the first interview scheduled and I was very excited to hear her story. I learned that she was a Sunday school leader for the younger kids as well as a choral director for the youth groups at the church. She was effervescent and bright-eyed, and genuinely curious. Her passion for education was apparent from the content of our initial conversation and so I was very happy to have her be the first of my focal participant interviews.

To be honest, I fear Jared was "volunteered" to me by his mother who had chatted me up several Sundays in a row. I was very concerned that Jared was feeling "forced" to be interviewed, but after a brief conversation, I learned this was not so and that he was quite happy to talk to me. A remarkably insightful young man, Jared's quiet spirit intrigued me. I had been observing him in the large group gatherings and in some other activities, and he looked like a typical teenager, but I would come to find that he spoke and

reflected like someone twice his age. His interview was the shortest and quietest, but in it I found much to reflect upon and integrate into the analysis.

Ronnie is an adorable 8-year old boy. As he was Jared's little brother, he told his mom he wanted me to interview him too, because Jared "got to talk to me". I thought it would be fabulous to interview someone first, who was so eager, but also to interview someone who only knew learning in American contexts (having been born here in the United States). He wanted to watch my computer screen as I recorded "cause it is cool" and at the end he asked me if he could hear his voice on playback. He was high energy and loud, but very respectful and regaled me some very fun stories and personal information, like his favorite shows and movies.

The introductions above provide a brief description about the people who agreed to work with me as focal participants. In the following subsections I present original, narrative vignettes, fashioned from the interview experiences and transcripts created thereof, but also from large group observations and casual conversations held in the church before and after services. My rationale for using vignettes as a part my analysis process is described in Section 4, but and additional goal in creating them was to give some Karen congregational members, of varying generations, a mode in which to share their personal stories and perceptions. In the end, the creation of these narratives brought very significant data to the table, and provided important ideas on which the final analysis and implications were derived.

5.1. Thelma

"Will you be my friend?"

"I would love to be your friend, Thelma. Will you be here next Sunday?"

"I am here every Sunday I can get a ride, which is very often. If you come very often too, then we will be good friends!"

I look into the light, weathered eyes of the old woman. Her smile brightens her face and shows her teeth, which are remarkably white after 93 years on this earth. Thelma is a fixed figure in this community and I can understand why; her kind spirit exudes from her mannerisms and the politely quiet way she speaks, and, underneath one gets a sense of her passion for learning created from years of trial and persecution, loss and love, sacrifice and selflessness. Thelma's command of the English language is very good, and I can understand most of what she ways without difficulty. I am drawn to her warmth and just want to give her a hug! Instead she takes my arm and I lead her to the pastor's office where we can talk in quiet.

"I am…I was a teacher" she says towards my computer. We had just gone through the protocol regarding the interview and after I ask her name and age, she offers this bit of information without coaxing. Quickly turning the recording on and feeling the need to let her expand on her thought, I am at the same time conscious of the interview questions. I respond in a way where I try to bring the thought around to her perceptions of learning, but find that I cannot but follow her lead.

I tell her I was a teacher too, and then I ask her about when she came to Minnesota, and more specifically, Ebenezer Baptist Church. Even in these basic questions, I receive deep and rich answers from the heart of a woman dedicated to the cause of education.

Throughout our conversation it becomes increasingly clear to me the importance education played in Thelma's life…enough to where she would sacrifice everything to ensure her "children" (her actual children and all the other children she taught in the jungles of hilltop Burma - and later the camps along the Thai border) would have an opportunity for a better education.

"I stayed there (in the camps) eight years (after the first refugees came to Minnesota) praying for my students. If they are in Thailand and Burma, they will only get high school education. I want them to get education from the university and college, so I prayed to God, "God, please let my students, my children, my grandchildren to go to the third country (the USA) to get education for the next generation. They can leave the country.' I prayed for eight years and then got permission to come" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

I sat there in awe of her account, just looking at her and her sheer look of desperation, that even now, here, years and miles away from that place and point in time were very much alive in her memory.

She clarified, "I taught not for pleasure, not for work. I want to help my children to guide them, to lead them, to see them go" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

Thelma continued to explain her choice about staying in the jungle and the camps even after her oldest and eventually youngest son would leave Burma and to head to Minnesota. She felt that it was her *duty* to make sure any children left behind in the jungle or the camps were taught until they could join the others in Minnesota. After eight years in the camps, all the students she had taught relocated to the states, and so, Thelma

decided to come too. That was in October of 2005. At 83 years of age, and after teaching

in Burma for over 40 years, Thelma made her way to the United States, and then to

Minnesota, rejoined with her sons, and was brought into the congregation. Retired and

proud, she is still very active in the Karen community through the opportunities provided

by the church.

   I reflect as I listen, and come to a realization that Thelma has suffered great sacrifices

for her actions--not only as a result of the Myanmar Revolution for Independence, but

also personally. For me, she unwinds the story of her life, and I am so enraptured that I

make little attempt for some time to get back on track or to "rein in" this interview.

   As she continues to answer my questions, her voice is steady and she speaks with her

hands. She tells me that at the age of 32 she married, and then taught for 12 years. At

that time her husband fell ill and Thelma was told she could not accompany him to a

main city in Burma for treatment of his TB--because no one would be left to teach the

children if she went. She decided he would have to go without her and she would not

know if he would respond to treatment, or even come back. Young in their relationship,

they had not yet had children of their own. She tells me she was heartbroken. Suddenly,

a sparkle enters her eyes, a smile comes upon her lips and she exclaims,

   "Then after two years, he was released out of the hospital and then I go and get him.

We stayed together, and he said the doctor told him if people get TB they didn't get

children. If we didn't get children it would be very sad, because we loved each other, but

I got two sons. I got the best two sons" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

Defying the odds, Thelma and her husband had two sons, and she tells me of how she was able to focus on her family for a happy time until suddenly, her husband, on a trip from Theology School to visit his mother, was taken to the hospital and died. She was fifty-two years old when he passed. She paused at this moment, tilted her head up, and looks deeply into my eyes; I see great pain in hers. Her face becomes solemn as she continues,

"They sent a telegraph to me, but after 10 days I got the telegraph. A Burma telegraph. I found the grave, and I had to see him just once" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

Following her husband's death, Thelma struggled greatly in her faith as a Christian, and questioned God continually for her loss. She expresses to me that she tried to find solace in her children, but they had their own families by this time, and were somewhat scattered, due to political unrest in the area.

She continues, bringing her head up and speaking much louder again, "I wanted to dream of my husband every night. Why didn't [God] let me dream my husband? He (God) said, "You didn't need your dead husband. You like coffee. You like tea. You like bread. Your children have everything ready for you. You like to read, and so you're still here…for the children: Burmese, Karen. And you like teaching and your granddaughter needs you. Why do you want to dream your husband?" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

Thelma tells me this was a moment of realization for her in that she found her life had purpose and so she needed to move on. Thelma then returned to the jungle where her people lived and taught there for more thirty-two years. When the students were relocated to the refugee camps along the Thai border, she joined them and taught there

eight years, until her youngest student who began her education in the camps had left for the United States.

I am moved by Thelma's dedication to see her students and her sons go before her. I find her passion for teaching remarkable and I want to know what fuels her passion.

"Were you ever paid for your work teaching the children?" I inquire.

"Because my father was officer from police, so we get stipend. At that time, police got 15 rupees for one month."

"15 rupees a month." I echo.

"You can use 10 rupees and save five rupees. After 10 years, you can get house. I would get 15 rupees and used five rupees toward the school fees for the books and five rupees to take to use. But you can save four rupees, and you can use only one rupee. We bought cookie or ice cream or anything" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

Thelma retells of how she and her family made money when she was a child (her father was a policeman), and the how her husband operated the radio for the British Navy and was given some funds, but how most of the small amount she received for her teaching went back into materials and snacks for the children.

"And when Christmas, we can keep some rupees to buy presents. Our school – I learned with other girls at American Baptist Mission School…So we bought cookies, and we learned everything religious. That's why I went in the jungle; I can help the people" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

It dawns on me: Thelma used her own money, as many teachers do, to make sure her children had food and supplies, and Christmas gifts. She had been trained to give and to sacrifice by Christian mentors, and she knew her calling, and followed it.

Although I could spend days listening to Thelma tell me of the stories of the jungle and the revolution and her family and students, I also wanted to hear about her perceptions regarding her life now. What is important to her now that all her children have come to the United States and she isn't teaching in the jungle? I ask her if she ever sees children that she taught back in the jungle. She tells me that she still sees many at the church on Sundays where they come now with their own children. This statement piques my curiosity.

"So you still see some of them today?" I ask her.

She responds with a light smile on her face. "Every Sunday they come. I can't remember them all, but I know they come".

Looking at my protocol I realize that I haven't asked her much about how she feels regarding learning opportunities here at the church, so I inquire some about her church activities, and she informs me that she likes to sing with the choir sometimes and that she is still teaching. She explains that on Saturdays, she gets together with women in their 70's and 80's who can no longer transport themselves to the church, and she goes through bible lessons with them, and leads them as they pray for the new generations.

"Do you think that learning here is different? Do people value it differently here in American than they do back in Burma?" I ask.

"This is better than Burma", she says flatly. I am a bit taken aback by this statement considering I had just listened to story upon story about her love for teaching in the jungle. I pause, and determine I genuinely want to know why she has this opinion.

"Better? Why so?

"Because in Burma – some graduate from college, but they can't teach English at Burma. Before, we were ruled by British, and all people can speak English. But now they can't speak. They graduate from college, but when they came to our school, they can't teach high school children. They can teach only primary. So I had to teach. Fourth grade and eighth grade is the government exam. They teach one year and, still they [the students] didn't pass. The teachers from Burma not pass (either)" (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014).

"Do you think they (Karen students) are getting a better education in the U.S?"

"Yeah. Better here. And first when British ruled us …"

A myriad of thoughts swirl in my head from this statement. I have trouble understanding her absolute belief that the students are better off learning in the United States, even after dedicating her whole life to the jungle system--and her total acceptance of the British model of education being superior. Her distaste at the Burmese-taught teachers in failing their own history test was palpable in her tone.

I want to guide her back the questions specifically about learning opportunities in the church but she is unable to, or perhaps prefers not to, separate for me "learning opportunities" from "education", and most of the next questions are answered with some comparison to how the whole of education is just better here in the States.

She does pause however, to talk a bit about the church and the Karen children born in the United States. We talk about tradition and culture and language, and the new generations. She tells me,

"I told their parents to pray for them so that they [U.S born Karen children] can learn, and they can take, so, when they go back, do many things there to help our people. I told them not to waste their time [not learning]. Parents have to teach them those things. I told the parents to pray for our children, to be ready for our country and our nation and for the next generation." (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014)

I understand she cares about the continuation of culture, language and historical knowledge to the new generations, but she feels it is the job of the parents and older generations to teach these things…not a school. Although it is unclear (as it was through most of our time together) if she was including the church in this line of thinking, in the end I understood the most important things for the children to learn were the English language and the skills to go back and properly teach the Karen youth of Burma, so they can pass the required tests, and have a better opportunity. She explains that it is the duty of the States-born generation to get an education, go back and pass it on. After a bit more talking about the newer generations, Thelma for the first time seems a bit tired, and so I thank her for talking to me today, wrap things up and walk her back to the sanctuary where she says goodbye to me and tells me I am beautiful. I hold back my tears…for in my mind, she is the one who is beautiful.

During the remainder of my time at Karen Ebenezer, I would have many more casual conversations with Thelma, and learn about a scope procedure she was going to

undergo soon. Hospitalized for three days, she returned home and the next Sunday was

in her usual seat singing and praying, bright eyed and happy. I so appreciate Thelma and

her story. I find her an amazing woman, and although through my critical lens I was very

interested in reflecting on how some of her views and opinions were influenced by

Imperialistic forces in her youth, her passion to teach and desire to help others was pure,

and left an indelible impression upon me.

5.2. Edward

Edward comes up to me in the Church lobby and asks if I am "student from the

University". I nod and introduce myself.

"Yes, yes! I am Sara…you are Edward?"

He nods and tells me that he wants me to interview him "now". Unbeknownst to me, the

pastor had arranged a place for us to go, and so we went to one of the Sunday school

classrooms, which was filled with tiny tables and chairs about a foot off the ground.

"Is this okay?" I ask looking down at the tiny seating and unsure about my own

ability to get up and down from these miniature chairs.

He responds "yes" and so I decide to deal with the cramped position for the time being,

and we sat and began the interview protocol.

Edward, at first, appears to be a very straightforward and straight-laced man. Sitting

in his suit coat made from the traditional maroon and white woven cloth of the Karen I

have become familiar with, the rest of his attire is western and his tie lays in a neatly

engineered knot. When I first begin to ask questions, he answers them much like how he

is dressed: crisply. The conversation thus far is a stark contrast from my experience with

Thelma, but at the same time, I sense his shortness is because he is concerned with my

perceptions of him. I can see him thinking about what he should say every time I pose a

question.   I take a moment to remind him that there are no right or wrong answers, and I

just really want to know his opinions.

This clarification seems to put him at ease and I ask him a question that I know he

won't have to think much about for an answer.

"When did you come to Karen Ebenezer and why did you come here?"

"Ebenezer?"

"To this church."

"To the church? The strategy works and I get a longer response; he seems more at

ease in giving it.

"Since 2000, I arrived to Minnesota – St. Paul. I lived at the First Baptist church here

for a while, almost two months. Then we moved to the apartment. At that time, we didn't

have Ebenezer yet. We just had the First Baptist Church only. Because of the sponsor of

the First Baptist Church, that's why they have been very helpful for our people and also

for our family as well. And then a couple years ago, like two or three years or four or five

years, they formed the Ebenezer Church. We are Karen, and that's why we split to two

different churches. The one is the First church, and the other Karen church is Ebenezer"

(FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014).

Although from my observations and discussions with my site contact I have a basic

understanding of the partnership between First Baptist Church of St. Paul and Ebenezer

Karen First Baptist Church, I appreciated gaining more information about how the Karen congregation was formed and the nature of the relationship between the two.

Edward looks up in recollection and tells me why and when he came to St. Paul…and also to Ebenezer. In his description he tells about being a Karen representative for the government when a friend, Mr. Andrews, currently located in St. Paul contacted him. For reasons on which I am not totally clear, Edward had been planning a governmentally-related trip to North Carolina when he abandoned that plan and instead, agreed to meet Mr. Andrews in St. Paul.

"I deserted my plan or my schedule, the government schedule. We would be in North Carolina, but I canceled. Then I came to St. Paul, Minnesota. I have a close friend here. That's why I chose this state. Then in 2000, we [Edward's family] arrived to St. Paul, Minnesota. We lived here, as I told you before. Everything is fine. And then in 2003, we formed our Karen community in Minnesota. Mr. Andrews was first chair. After one year, I became the chair of the Karen community in Minnesota from 2004 until 2010" (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014).

Edward is an organizational man, and it is clear to me that business and politics are his comfort zones: taking his skills as a government worker and then applying them to help his community establish themselves in a new country. As a result he tells me after Mr. Andrews, he eventually served as the head of the Karen Community of Minnesota (KCM). The KCM is an organization I know of, and in fact was the organization that helped me obtain entry to the church for my dissertation work.

Edward told me how, under his leadership, the KCM grew and eventually established itself as a non-profit organization.

Edward proudly continues his story, "And then in 2009, we got a grant as a 501©(3). Then we named our current organization in Minnesota. I was the first director of the (nonprofit) Karen organization in Minnesota."

Edward takes great pride in this fact…he sits up straighter on his tiny chair as he speaks. I compliment his thoughts a lot and ask about the relationship between KCM, First Baptist and Ebenezer. On this he is able to tell me quite a bit. He tells me how as an immigrant the First Baptist church had reached out to the first Karen people coming from Burma. Again, he got that wistful, remembering look in his eyes. He briefly looked down and then told me why he felt this church was "home".

"They [First Baptist] welcome the immigrant who came to St. Paul, Minnesota. Especially they are a very warm welcome to the Karen people. Karen refugees to come to this country--came to the state and the city. Also for Karen, we have benefitted of that. When I compare it with other states, Minnesota is the better state to stay for the refugees or immigrant people. There is a lot of chance, a lot of benefits, a lot of opportunity to work here and live here. Like the education system is very, very helpful for the immigrants. Everything: job, education, health system, and social welfare. Everything is in good for immigrants" (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014). His analytic view of the immigration process and state's support system for the Karen people reflects his own specialties and experiences.

Edward then tells me of a time where he briefly moved to South Dakota to see if there was a place for the Karen in a rural living scenario. He told me that South Dakota was not very friendly toward the immigrant and that there was no comparison to the opportunity afforded to the Karen by Minnesota and First Baptist. Although St. Paul offered only urban dwellings for his people, he tells me that a rural environment is not helpful if there aren't supporting services and opportunities for people to make careers and get homes. He has no great like for South Dakota--although he agrees with my shared perception that it is "very pretty".

Edward also conveys that three years after arriving, First Baptist approached him about forming the Ebenezer Karen congregation within the bigger church--and because the church had been so gracious to his people and his family, he was totally on board. The idea was welcomed and fostered by other Karen leaders, and the congregation, and according to Edward, became the largest solely Karen-run congregation in Minnesota (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014).

Edward then tells me about all the opportunities the church provided from transportation to housing, and how they arranged for ESL classes at a nearby Help Center. Those classes are now held within the church. He described his experience with that learning opportunity,

"When I came here in 2000, it was suggested for me to go to an ESL class at the Help Center. I started over there, an ESL class there. At that time I was level six (high functioning) or something like that. And then after that, I quit because I was very busy – the one who worked for the family. I worked full-time" (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014).

I want to inquire about his personal perceptions regarding learning opportunities provided by the church, and once again as with Thelma, I find the conversation goes directly to the quality of the Western educational system in comparison to Burmese education.

"[America is] very different between back home in here, especially for the education system. It's very, very good – very, very different. Here, we can learn from basic and then forward until college or university and something like that. Back home it's very different. When you graduate from the 10th grade, like a high school. You finish the high school, and then depending on your school marks you have your choice depending on the school – not like here. In here it's after 12th grade when you graduate, you can do whatever you want. It's very different. Back there, no. You cannot choose that. Here there is a lot of opportunity for the kids here. Also, the kids who came from another country…there is a lot of opportunity here, a lot of chance, and a lot of benefits here. Most of the people from back home want to come to the United States especially, and then second they want to go to Europe or something like that. For me, myself they ask me "Which country do you want to go?" Always I said I wanted to go to the United States. That's why I came to the United States from then until now." (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014)

This is the most animated I have seen him since we started talking. I want to know more about what "set him off," or what struck him in his own memory that makes him so adamant on this point. As I ponder how to stay close to the interview protocol but at the

same time allow for the freedom for him to expand his own thoughts, he murmurs, "This church is very important too".

This redirects my focus once again to the church and the opportunities offered and his perceptions about the value of these opportunities.

I make my query: "Why do you think the church or your organization – or do you think that a place like this is important?"

"It's very, very important"

"Why?"

"Because we came here for almost 15 years already, so that we are very familiar with this country. And also the church member – they also provide whatever we need here. That is very helpful for the new arrivals. It's very important. When we first came here, we don't know anything about this country and living like that, so we need help from other people to help us; one family after that, and then one family again and again. We have each other, and then also we are helping other people came to this country. According to my experience, I really recommend people to come to this church because we can help them directly. They find success" (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014).

Success. "Now", I thought to myself "that is a loaded word!" I have spent much time in my own research and studies examining the connotation and denotation of that term within the context of education and opportunity. I cannot let that one lie, as I feel Edward might be able to give some real insight into his perceptions of how learning, or education, leads to success.

So, I ask him, "How do you define success?"

He looks at me as if I have asked him the toughest question yet, and indeed I believe I have. He thinks for a moment and rubs his forehead and slowly responds.

"If I lived in another state, instead I live in this state, when I compare this. I saw many people who lived in other states. We live here. People who lived in Minnesota are very successful – more than the other states, the other Karen who live in other states. That's 100 percent sure." I realize this response is not what I was looking for, so I try to expand on the question.

"What do you attribute that to? Why do you think that is?

"That is because of a lot of opportunity here and a lot of services here. Many people help you, and if you work hard, you have success".

I eventually understand from his statements and the context of responses that Edward equates success with two things: money and the ability to function "successfully" within this society--the implications of which will have to wait for later analysis.

I quickly determine the current line of questioning is more abstract that I am able to convey well, and so I turn to a different subject. I ask Edward if his whole family is here. He answers in the affirmative, and then tells me however; they did not all come over at the same time. He the describes for me how various members of his immediate and extended family all made the trip to Minnesota fairly quickly, but that the hardest part of gathering his family in their new country was that he had to wait many years for his own mother to come join everyone.

I look up from my computer intrigued why it would take one particular member of his family so long to emigrate when the rest came in quick succession. I ask for clarification,

"You say your mother came many years after you did? Why?"

I am not prepared for the answer, and yet should have been struck by the connection. He tells me that his mother stayed behind to teach the children still residing in the camps, and only came to Minnesota once the youngest had graduated. And then it fully donned on me--Thelma was Edward's mother! This realization enhances the forming frames of my ongoing analysis, but more importantly than that, simply brought a big smile to my face.

Apparently Edward does not know I have interviewed his mother, but he tells me he is not surprised, "She loves to talk to everyone". For the first time in the course of our conversation he looks straight into my eyes and smiles, and I decide this is a great place to stop. The interview is done for today.

5.3. Dana

Of all the people I observe at Ebenezer, no one seems as happy and effervescent as Dana. A pretty girl in her early twenties, Dana flits around the sanctuary running from one group to the next, sometimes listening, sometimes giving information and sometimes leading. In our discussions I would find out she is involved heavily in the church's youth and college programs and is a key organizer for their annual music and dance festival fundraiser held at the church. She is a young woman of determination, and she intrigues me. I want to know what drives her--what motivates her--and how she manages to maintain such a peaceful look when she is rushing around like that! She had asked me early on if she could be one of my focal participants, and I heartily agreed.

Dana, due to her hectic schedule, reschedules with me one time for our first interview, but she is so sincere in her apology that I really don't mind. After reworking our date and time, we are finally able to meet and sit down to talk. After the interview consent process is completed, I start at the beginning of my interview questions in order to get a "feel" for which direction she may want to go.

"So, Dana, you are a member here at Karen Ebenezer First Baptist Church?"

"Yes." I already knew this, but I want it on record. I continue with my questions.

"Awesome. When did you come to this church… why did you come here?

She answers me without hesitation and with a huge smile on her face. Her voice is warm and calm, and she leans forward when she speaks to me. Perhaps it is the sunshine coming through the window behind her, but she appears to literally have a soft glow around her. In a shower of light she begins to share her story.

"I came to this church back in 2003 when I first came to Minnesota, and then I come here because there was a Karen community here already when I came here. It was about, I think 67 families here. My parents know those people, and then we started coming to this church. Pastor was already here with the Karen people and helping them out. That's why we are here" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

I ask her more about her life and when she came to the United States. She tells me that she came with her family when she was about 11 or 12 years old, and that although she doesn't remember a lot about the transition, she does remember a lot about coming from the Thai border to Minnesota.

"I remember riding the plane for the first time. It was not fun at all because my ears hurt really bad. Then I tried to put music on, but it still didn't work. You know when the flight is coming down? It hurt a lot! When I get here, I felt kind of sick. Also, day and night are different from Thailand here. It's hard to sleep. You don't want to eat anything. But then later, you get used to it" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

I share with her that I, myself, have made the plane ride from Thailand to Minnesota, and that I also struggled for comfort on that long flight. But of course, I have traveled on a plane many times, and can only imagine what it must have been like for her to be taking that long trip, heading somewhere you had never been but were now to live, and also knowing that you were never going back from where you were leaving.

I want to explore more about what she remembered about living in the camps, but I sense from some of her comments and the small talk about plane rides, flight attendants, and trips, that she wants to talk more about the present. She shares with me about when she was little and first arrived in the United States, all she wanted to do was become a flight attendant. In trying more to "be in the moment ", I decide to ask some questions more in line with the present--in hopes of returning to questions regarding her childhood experiences.

"Did you choose to join in any learning opportunities provided here? What are you involved in besides attending the church service?"

"I'm also doing Sunday school, so I teach Sunday school for the kids. I'm also helping my sister. She's the youth leader in Ebenezer. I'm helping her practicing songs with the

kids there. I also do praise and worship, leading the song here for the American church, and also help the kids with their music, too"   (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

We speak in more detail about her working with the kids and the music program and I am delighted when she invites me to come to one of their practices Saturday morning, or even better--to come to their annual concert in a couple weeks. I tell her I think it would be a great idea for me to come and so I put it on my phone calendar as she gives me the details.

As she is talking to me about the concert and working with the kids, I notice her genuine excitement about the subject, and more interesting is that she is very candid about taking ownership of the event's success. She catches herself talking excitedly and apologizes to me about her passion.

"Off-topic." Dana looks down as she says it. I reassure her that it is anything but.

"No, it's totally great because I asked you about the learning opportunities. So, that's great!"   I want to ask her more specifically about her own learning opportunities here in this environment so I inquire if she ever partook of the learning opportunities herself when she was a child.

"Were you in Sunday school before you taught it? Did you go to Sunday school here?

"Yes. I go to the American Sunday school. When I came here, my teacher was Ingrid. Now she's not teaching anymore. She is one of the congregations in the audience over there during church time. Yeah, I was 12. We were in the middle of the junior class. After that, when I'm in eighth grade, then I go to Sally's class. That's with all the youth: people that are in high school" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

This response is somewhat curious to me. She uses the term "American Sunday school", and I want to learn more about that, so I dig a little more for clarification.

"You mentioned it was American. Do they have an American program and then a Karen program for Sunday school?"

"Yes."

"Why did you choose to be…?" Dana anticipates my question and quickly interjects her explanation.

"When I first came here, there was only American. I joined American. Then I just keep going to American Sunday school. Now they have the Karen Sunday school, too. I don't attend them.

"Why? I asked, genuinely surprised. I guess I am assuming she would want to attend the Karen Sunday school, even though I don't know why I have this assumption. I make a note to reflect upon this thought later. Dana is pretty forthright in her answer here, but still smiling, she warmly responds,

"I think because I have friends in the American Sunday school, so we already know each other. We get along pretty well. So I kind of go to that Sunday school instead of the Karen."

I ponder for a moment again about my initial surprise in her telling me she chose not to go to the Karen Sunday school once it became available. But then again, after her explanation, I am not so surprised. She was a teenager at the time, and she simply went where here friends were going, which makes complete sense to me. "I would have done the same." I think to myself.

I continue to ask Dana about her own learning experiences, and she shares with me that she loves to sing and that most of what she does now with the kids surrounds the teaching and practicing of singing for various church activities and events. Suddenly, she confesses to me,

"I don't have that good of a voice, but I still love singing." She suddenly becomes shy--a side of her I had not seen up to this point. I find it endearing and her honesty touches me; my natural instinct to nurture takes over.

"It doesn't matter. If you love it, you do it!" I look at her warmly and she looks up at me and gives me the biggest smile I have seen thus far. I feel so grateful to be with her in this moment. Again, I find myself thinking about what it may have been like for her back in the camps along the Thai border--and sensing that she might tell me now, I ask her about the differences between learning in here at the church and learning back in the camps. She thinks for a moment, but doesn't look annoyed or panicked, and begins to tell me details of her experiences.

"Before coming to America, I didn't get to learn that much because I was in the refugee camp. I didn't have that much opportunity, but I did learn a little bit. Over there the classroom is a very small classroom, and then the teacher kind of has us pick a couple subjects. I had to learn Karen, a little bit English, and Burmese, and then Math, and the Geography. Those are the things that we learned" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

Dana continues and I can see her eyes tracing the memories as she chooses her words,

"The teaching style there and here are very different. Over there when the teacher comes in, you're going to stand up and greet your teacher. Everybody stands up and

greets the teacher, and then you get to sit down, and then you just go on to the lesson. You have to be very respectful. Then whenever the teacher talks to you, you have to look at them, like how it is here. You have to stand up, and – how do you say this? 'Cross your arms'. Here, when we cross our arms like that, they're saying that we're not respecting; we're not listening. But over there when you cross your arms, that means you are listening, focusing (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

I am not sure why, something for me to analyze when I go over my field notes tonight, but I get the distinct feeling that she is trying very hard to not say one system is better than the other, but rather, she speaks mainly to the differences. I do notice however, that she refers to a "we" which I understand to be Karen students. She has obviously been told at some point about how in schools here, crossing one's arms when being addresses is a sign of disrespect. I keep leaning forward and listening, as Dana gets more comfortable with the subject matter. She continues,

Also like teachers, we would call them "teacher" over there. We can't call them by name. But over here, the teacher prefers names, like Miss This-That. When I first came here, I also called the teacher by "teacher". She did not like it.

She pauses for reflection, "I don't get it. Why? That's how we were taught. I want to call you teacher because you're my teacher. That is a way of showing respect." She quickly resolves the conflict within her mind and completes her thoughts as I listen intently--literally watching her make rationales and justifications in her mind. She shakes her head a bit.

"Later on, I just got used to that. When I went to Hamline, I taught this program with one of the fellows. So I taught the kids to call me like [Naw], meaning like older sister. It's just a way of showing respect. But with the other teachers, they are American and they can call them by name. Some of them prefer to call them [Naw], too." She smiles and looks down and then back up to me. "They like that. It's a way of showing respect. It's part of our tradition" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

Clearly Dana feels that some things she was taught in Burma are still important to do here in Minnesota, but at the same time she appreciates the learning opportunities provided in the United States. She, after all, has just completed her Master's program. As we talk more about her life as a student here she tells me a little about her educational opportunities, and the perceptions of her own success. She tells me,

"I think success is part of who is in you. Some of the people – if you try hard, then you will be successful. I think it's just part of trying and getting to learn things. It's part of you – it's a hard to explain. It's this thing in you that you want to learn, and you want to do things. If you want to be successful, then you will learn. Especially I think education-- we need that in the Karen community. It's going to be a big success if all the kids graduate high school – at least high school. If some of them are going to college or university - that would be a way bigger success that we would have" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

Dana's statements make the second time I have heard success tied into working hard and levels of education. Although I consistently use the term *learning* in my interview, Dana consistently uses the word "education" to refer to all inferences. I wonder to

myself if this is perhaps a language issue, as the words have similar meanings, or rather, if she doesn't recognize any distinction. She continues her train of thought,

"It's (education) important because kids need education. They need to know things when they grow up. If they don't go to school and don't have education, then people can trick them easily. They will not know anything and they will not have any success in their lives. Knowing some people around the streets, you feel sad for them because they're not trying. I want kids to try. I want them to be successful in life and to have a good job (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

I ask her if this is her personal belief, and she nods in the affirmative, but she also tells me that it is a very core belief in her community that education is the key to living a successful life and for being successful within the community too. This belief is a *value* passed down between the generations.

I find this interesting--as one of the bases of my main assumption is that the multigenerational setting promotes values of learning from one generation to another, as well as inter-generationally.

I lean forward intently, as if I am going to ask her a very important question. She leans forward as well and focuses very hard, as if she is anticipating a difficult question. Ironically, I decide not to ask a question, but instead I make a statement, hoping to witness a realization on Dana's part about what I have been trying to convey about learning opportunities.

"You know what?   I think that learning is not just in school. Learning happens." Without missing beat she responds,

"I get inspired by my parents because they always push me and supported me in education. It's like "You need to do good. You need to help out your family, your community. There a lot of people over there that needs your help." And then they come to America for our education. It's not for them. They could live there, and they are fine. They come here for us so we have better education and better work" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

Inside my heart drops a little, because I was hoping my statement would somehow bring about an epiphany. It didn't, but then I know in my head, it shouldn't. I remind myself that as the researcher, I am there to listen to participant perceptions and their experiences, not mine. I also realize that in this moment, I have gained a lot of data regarding this lack of distinction between the word "learning" and the word "education". I make some notes, and plan to revisit this bit of revelation later.

I decide to ask Dana a question about the multigenerational nature of the church to see what her perceptions are on this topic.

"The church allows everyone to come together. You said every week they come together. You have baby age up to Thelma age. Do you think – how do you feel about the importance of having all ages together? Or is it important?" I ask.

Dana nods excitedly as she responds, "I think it's important because the younger kids when they look at the older people, it becomes their role model. And for the older people, then they can look at the younger kids and see their success and be proud of them. Also because like I said before, a lot of different families come here for their children, so they

want to see their children successful in whatever they do. Yeah, I think it's important that we have all ages here" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

Dana and I talk some more about how children go through the different learning opportunities at the church and how more often than not, many children eventually become the leaders. As an ironic example, although Dana is a business major, I find she speaks the language of a natural teacher. I tell her as much, and she tells me many people have told her she should have been a teacher, but that in some small way she feels she does teach--every week at the church--and I know in truth, that is exactly what she does. So in that vein, I ask her where she sees herself in the church context, and I also ask her about her sense of purpose. I am aware I am asking very personal things, and I find the last part of our time together very touching and inspiring. Again with those bright eyes Dana smiles and explains,

"I think the church encourages [community]. Coming to Sunday school every week, and that has made courage. It's kind of also how to live. It's learning about God, Jesus, what Jesus does, and then makes you feel like you want to be like Jesus. You want to do good things like he does. You just want to keep continuing doing good things – not just church, outside of church, too. It's hard to do…. I always think of how people look at me. I think it's important, especially having a big community like this. I want to be a good role model for other people. It's very important."

I think to myself, "She is right…it is important." Inwardly I know she doesn't need to worry as I am sure she is a good role model, for I, myself, see in her things that are very worthy of being modeled after.

As our conversation finishes, I stand up and thank her heartily for her time, openness and honesty. As I do, she grabs my hand and shakes it and then asks me if I will come to the concert so I can see what she and "her kids" have been working on. I tell her,

"I would be honored…as one teacher to another".

5.4. Jared

I have to be honest, looking at Jared; I don't feel that he wants to be here with me. The pastor told me that Jared told his mother that he wanted to help me with my study, but his body language is telling me the opposite. He is sitting in the chair, sprawled, eyes down and chin aimed upward with kind of a smug look on his face. I need to make sure he is on board with this so I ask him,

"You okay if I have you sign a release too? I had your mom sign one, but your signature is needed too. It is very important. Do you want to read the info sheet about my research?

He nods his head and takes the consent form and looks it over. He gets about two-thirds of the way through and says,

"You won't use my real name?"

"No, no…to protect identities, I use pseudonyms…ya know…fake names." I warmly smile thinking I have alleviated his fears. Instead, he looks up at me and appears even more concerned. He thinks for a moment, breathes in, and then asks me,

"If you don't use my real name, how will people know I was part of your cool thing?"

I laughed out loud but thought to myself…"okay he is on board; he is just a teenager, acting like a teenager for whatever that means". I tell him that I will let him know what

fake name I use, so that if he chooses to tell people, he can do so. He sits back and says, "Alright, it's cool".

Jared looks like any other teenager I have worked with in my experience. He is wearing jeans and a t-shirt and has his hair kind of done in a spikey, off center kind of way. He has a very soft voice, and the demeanor to match, but I have been watching this young man for some time among the congregation, and I sense there is more to this book than the cover.

I get the recording program up on my computer and I begin the interview. I feel that although Jared has made it clear to me he is willing to talk, pulling longer descriptions of his observations, feelings or perceptions, might be a little tougher than with the other focal participants. But speaking few words does not equate to lack of depth or meaning in those words, I know this, and so I continue on. I really want to know what Jared thinks about the church (in my experience, and even in my own teenage years, I hated going to church…it was so boring, and I can easily think of several teenagers I know right now that would say the same thing).

I am concerned, however; that this interview is going to be shorter, but then again isn't it about the quality of the conversation? I don't know why, but I am anticipating some great data in however long the conversation turns out to be. Jared continues to look around the room as I get myself more situated. Tape is rolling, so to speak, so I ask Jared some questions about when he came to Minnesota and the church, and what he remembers about that transition. I intently listen as he relates to me how he came over when he was one year old, and that it was in 2000 (before many other families would

emigrate), and how when his family first came to Minnesota, they did not come to the church right away, but throughout his life he remembers hearing about how his folks said someone told them the church could help them, so they started attending. Jared's family officially joined the Karen congregation when it was formed out of the main congregation a few years later.

"He was so young when he came here", I think to myself. I am not sure which direction the questions will take as a result, but I press on, curious.

I ask him what school he goes to, and he names a nearby high school. This question transitions well into my next.

"How would you describe the learning you do here versus the learning you do at—the high school do you go to? I mean, the differences in the types of learning that you do?" I try to reword the question to be clear to him, but I see with his nodding that he understands the question immediately.

"Well, I'd say here is religion, moral ideas. School is more like an academic kind of thing." Jared looks at his hands in his lap when he answers and then kind of bounces them before he looks up.

"Do you think those are different things?"

"Yeah." Bouncing again. I didn't think he was nervous before, but perhaps as the questions start becoming more about his own perceptions and less about his history he is becoming a little shaky. I try to project warmth and acceptance as I lean forward towards him.

"Tell me about that."

"Academic-wise, I mean, the basic things you need to know to graduate, to go to college, for the future. The church is to help you become better or learn more, just wiser, I guess" (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014).

I think it interesting that chose the word "wiser" to indicate the type of learning he does at the church versus the "basic things" one gets from formal schooling. We talk a bit more about learning at the church. He shares with me that the most valuable learning for him has been to learn the Karen language from those at the church. It is with some surprise that I receive this information because I am under the impression that if he came to Minnesota when he was one, that he would have heard enough of the Karen language at home to learn it. He tells me he has had to go to the church to "pick it up" as his parents didn't read or write.

Jared volunteers the next bit of insight without any prompt from me.

"So, just when people talk to me. I understand. It's just my dialect is not, like, original from—I just sound weird when I speak Karen." He notes that although he can read and write Karen now, he cannot *sound* Karen. He continues,

"There are many kids (from all over) who just have moved here. I like to talk to them. They make me feel normal."

"Wow." I think to myself. That is one powerful word that just made its appearance. I am panicking inside: trying to figure out quickly enough on my feet on how to follow up this train of thought. Jared is looking down, but I sense he will expand on what he said if I prompt him to.

"So do the new kids, the ones from Burma, when they come here—they must be coming to the high school right away…." I trail off as he speaks.

"I think because they get introduced to the school. Then I just try to help them since they're new here and they don't speak a lot of English. I like showing them the ropes to what high school is" (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014).

I recognize that Jared's thoughts here are very significant: he is equating "normal" with speaking English well, or by behaving "more American"--at least American enough to show the new kids "the ropes". His words have implications with some deep-seeded roots in critical educational theory. My mind races to courses with some of my University professors: courses about critical theories of post-colonial, post-imperial and westernized influences on immigrant populations, which temporarily distract me. I try clear my mind quickly, making a mental note to return to this data, and I continue my conversation with Jared--who is still looking down in thought, perhaps in realization about what he himself has just inferred.

Since we are on the topic of school, I decide to ask him about his plans for the future, to see if he has aspirations for a higher education. We engage in banter that I expect, as a fifteen year old in my experience, will prove he doesn't have a firm idea about what he wants to do. Either way, I am curious as to what he will say.

"When you get a little older, are you planning to go to post-secondary, any kind of after high school?"

"Yeah." Jared nods.

"What are you thinking?

"College. I was thinking maybe the U, or maybe somewhere else. I try to make a connection with him on this point, in an attempt to draw him out more.

"I go to the U. It's a good school. It's big."

"Yeah, it's pretty big."   Struggling to keep this line of conversation open, I offer,

"But it gets smaller the further you go.

"I already get a lot of students there, like, yeah, one teacher." Still grasping, I figure I will just ask the logical question.

"Do you have any idea what you want to do?" I ask even though I think I know the answer.

"I just haven't been really interested in what I want to be yet. I'm just experimenting on my way there". Well, this is an honest response, and I appreciate it. After a little chat about the subjects and extra-curricular activities with which he was experimenting, we settle into a brief conversation about the learning opportunities he likes and the stuff he has done at the church, and then it all comes around again to thoughts of the future.

"So do you think you will continue to go here when you graduate from high school?

"Of course, it's like a home." His face looks wistful for such a young man. "Home?", I repeat to myself. I find his word choice endearing. It is obvious that this place is important to him.

"Describe how important this church is to you."

"It's important coming to learn the lessons, just like myself—it's a place for peace. It's where I come a lot and, like, focus on God" (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014). Jared's sincerity surprises me and I reflect on what it is that may make this space so

important to him when so many adolescents I have worked with before can't wait to get away from their churches. I need to know.

"That's really nice, because you hear a lot in churches nowadays that when people get 15 to 18, that they start—you know, you hear about the younger generation kind of moving away from the church. Why do you think that happens?"

"Well, just because people are too focused about themselves and don't give their time to God."

"And that doesn't interest you to go to the other way?" Jared's response is truthful and sarcastic.

"I have enough time on my hands."

It is nice that he realizes this as a teenager, as the saying goes… "Youth is so often wasted on the young". At this point, Jared's demeanor becomes very soft and warm, and I get a very spiritual "vibe" coming out of him. I don't know why or how; I just have a sense that Jared is very aware of himself as a person within this institution, and in what he thinks the institution is for, and about what it all brings to his life. I also realize that throughout our conversation, the church and its people have brought clarity to his thoughts, and his related responses in this vein are firm and clear.

"Is your relationship with God important to you?" I ask with genuine curiosity.

"Really important to me."

"How so?"

"I talk to Him when I am troubled, or when I need—just when I'm alone."

"The church is your place to come to for that?"

"Yeah. Renew myself." "Renew": another word that doesn't often come out of the mouth of a teenager--it is a spiritual term, an inward term--a term of self-actualization from one so young. I want to see if his clarity of spiritual self extends to how he might see himself in the future.

"When you become an adult, do you want to get married someday and have a family?"

"Yeah. I want to have that experience of being a father, husband, having kids."

"Do you think you will bring them here (to this church)?" I ask, curious about if he would stay at Ebenezer once he graduates. He answers in the affirmative.

"Yeah. I'd bring them here, a place I know is a good church!" Jared looks up at me and I feel from the look on his face, that he has indeed thought about this part of his future.

"So for your own kids, you would bring them here too?"

I notice that the conversation has taken an unexpected turn. Jared, I hope in sensing that he can trust me, really opens up his relationship with God and his connection with the church and the community there and how he will not leave it even when he has a family of his own. I make more notes about some other implications regarding his Christian faith and how this view plays into the perceptions he has about himself and his place in the community (Jared sees himself as a fellow Christian but not necessarily as full Karen).

In the end, Jared's future includes schooling, and marriage and kids, and the things one would expect in this current society. But what one may not expect, and certainly

what I didn't when I walked into this interview, is to find a young man with a spiritual

understanding of himself beyond his years. I ask him a final question.

"So where do you see yourself in five years--ten years?" Once again I expect an

answer based on the other future plans he has discussed, but he surprises me once more,

and says very effortlessly,

"Just living life at this church. Just having fun and focusing on God."

I smile and nod as I turn the off the recorder. Not such a bad goal. Not bad at all.

5.5. Ronnie

Ronnie sits down with me in the church gymnasium. He is wearing jeans and a ninja

turtle t-shirt, and I find him adorable! His mother, who has just signed the consent form

for me to talk to him, is sitting in a chair a little distance away. Ronnie is very excited to

"talk into the computer" and he starts talking before I get the recording program set up. I

am just loving his unbridled enthusiasm! I look over at his mother, who is looking down

and chuckling to herself.

I ask Ronnie the usual first questions,

"Can you tell me your name again?

"Ronnie."

"How old are you, Ronnie?"

"Eight."

"Eight years old. What grade are you in?"

"Second grade."

"Second grade. Do you come here to church every Sunday?

"Sometimes." His mother looks up and at Ronnie after this response, I can tell she wants correct him, but gratefully, she understands that she shouldn't. She, like myself, wants to hear his honest answers without her correction.

"Sometimes." I say with a smile to his mother. I continue to talk to Ronnie. "When you come here, what do you do? The dialogue that follows feels like a Ping-Pong match.

"Sing on the stage."

"Sing on the stage. Anything else?"

"No."

"You just sing?"

"And pray."

"And pray." I know I need to get him to say a bit more, but the recording program on the computer mesmerizes him, and I can tell he isn't really thinking about the questions. I try a different question:

"Do you go to Sunday school?"

"No." He says, still staring at my computer, which I keep inching away from his gaze, but he leans over so he can keep watching it.

"No?" I know he goes to Sunday school often, as I have seen him. I am hoping that the pointed question mark on the end of my sentence along with the newly limited view of my computer will get him to engage with me.

It works--suddenly he looks up and starts talking to me instead of the computer screen.

"Oh, yeah!" he exclaims.

"You do, Sunday school. What do you do in Sunday school?"

"Reading, the person reading a book to us. We get to color, and do the stuff that we have to do."

"And do the stuff you have to do." I repeat after him. This last bit is interesting to me. I want to know what it is that an eight year old feels he "has to do". He never really tells me what it is he has to do, but he does inform me that if he does it, he gets candy. I think to myself that BF Skinner would be proud of some good ole' conditioning in Sunday school class and I can say from experience that candy nearly always works. Time to end the candy fixation; I want to try and lead Ronnie into some thoughts about his learning, so I talk to him about his teachers in the hopes of framing the next few questions. A little bit of ping ponging again, but I do get some thoughts.

"Who are your teachers? Are they older than you?"

"Yeah."

"Are they girls or boys?"

"Boys and girls."

"Boys and girls…but I don't know their names."

"You don't know their names? That's okay. Do you see them any other time in the week, or do you only see them only Sunday?"

"Maybe Sunday."

"Maybe Sunday, okay". Ronnie is really trying to answer me. He is just the cutest, squirmiest, little eight year old boy…but regardless, I know he has things to say that I can learn from. So I continue on.

"Do you think Sunday school is the same or different than your other school?"

"Different."

"Different. How is it different?"

"Because it's at church. We read a book, get candy, and do stuff that we have to do. (I still don't know what that is). At school, we get to do writing, math, and do recess."

"Which one do you like better, do you think, the Sunday school or regular school?"

"Both of them."

"Well, this is a very politically correct statement" I laugh to myself. He hasn't looked at his mother once for any kind of approval of these answers, so I am confident the is saying out loud, the first thoughts coming to his mind.

"Both of them, okay, because they're different. What do you like about Sunday school; what is the thing you like about that?"

"Get candy!" He exclaims excitedly. Ah…there it is again. Candy makes up for everything.   A little dejected, and to keep off the very distracting subject of candy, I clarify the previous series of questions with some questions about his favorite things in each learning environment.   I find out he likes reading, math and recess at "regular" school and that he likes singing, dance and reading (and again, candy) at Sunday school. It is at this point in our conversation I realize through all our little joking and ping ponging that there is an important thing to note here: that Ronnie can differentiate between the two types of learning environments, and at the same time can list why he likes them both the same amount, but for different reasons. This is information I can use, and so I add these thoughts to my notes.

The most natural part of our conversation however, comes near the end of our previous Ping-Pong match. I think as a way to avoid going with his mother, who had started approaching us, Ronnie initiates further conversation with me.

"How about my favorite animal?"

"Oh sure, you could tell me your favorite animal". I look at his mother, who retakes her seat and smiles.

"My favorite animal is turtle. I used to have a pet turtle a long time ago, but it died."

"What was his name?"

"Leonardo."

"He was named after a Ninja Turtle?"

"Leonardo and Michelangelo too." So cute. Ronnie goes on to tell me, after he asks if I am still recording, (to which I nod in the affirmative) about all his other pet turtles, including the mean turtle, Shredder. Quite the little storyteller we have here for sure, but I just can't resist him. It is a good thing however, that I allowed Ronnie to complete his conversation, because if I hadn't, I wouldn't have gotten some of the best info of the entire discussion. In the midst of talking about his turtles (which I am not sure he actually ever owned), he said he shared one with his brother and this reminds me to ask him about his family. Can't believe I almost forgot that piece of my interview! Ronnie isn't the only one distracted, apparently.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"One. Wait, two sisters, one brother."

"Are they older or younger than you?"

"Younger."

"They're younger? "

He corrects himself, "Oh, they way older. They teach me things." Wow! This is a great

little bit of info. I follow him up on this unfettered revelation.

"What do they teach you?"

"George teach me how to make—how to play piano."

"How to play piano? Wow, wow. Who else taught you; anybody else taught you

anything?"

"Jared taught me how to make swords."

"Make swords? Oh, my. Did he teach you how to use them?" I chuckle, as perhaps I

shouldn't ask this. I look over at Ronnie's mother; she shakes her head "no". Ronnie

doesn't see her.

"No, just to fight bad guys."

"Okay, just to make the swords."

"And my sister, Tanya, she teach me how to sing."

"How to sing. You like to do that."

"Yeah."

"Anybody else, any brother or sister left?"

"My cousin."

"Oh, your cousin. What'd your cousin teach you?"

"He teach me how to do yoga."

I am just enjoying this conversation so much, but even more now than that I am getting some great information on the inter-generational and inter-familial teaching and learning practices that go on in the church and home. Ronnie also informs me that his Mommy teaches him how to clean, and I think it is great that he thinks cleaning is a *skill* to learn because I surely know a few people in my life that never really learned that skill.

Ronnie also tells me that his Daddy cuts hair and that he wants to learn how to do that too. Ronnie also adds that he has learned to cook and make cupcakes from his sister, who wants to own a cupcake shop. Again, I think it is astounding that Ronnie is so in tune with his family's skills and preferences that he is able to talk to me specifically about them. To me it says a lot about the communication between the generations. I know his family has first, 1.5 and second generations (immigrant) represented in the immediate family, so the distinctions between family member's perceptions are fascinating to me. I make additional notes and plan to explore this facet of our conversation more.

Ronnie notices that I am writing a lot and he asks if the sound recording is still going. I tell him that it is. He leans towards my computer and starts listing off his favorite movies and characters. Feeling that our interview is waning, I turn the computer towards him so he can see his voice waves as he speaks. After listing a lot of movie, cartoon, and television show titles, he asks me if he can hear his own voice on playback. His mother looks at me and rolls her eyes, but I am certainly happy to oblige his curiosity; after all…he just obliged mine.

6. Researcher Analysis and Critical/Theoretical Implications

The first of the following sections (6.1) will review the process for data analysis as outlined in section *4.2.1.5. Analysis procedures*. Through the procedure described, interesting facets of the unique (informal, multigenerational and immigrant) learning context are identified along with several themes, generated from the context, actions, and dialogue of participants.

The second of the following sections (6.2) will explore and discuss the site's organizational structure as a learning environment, as well as analyze notes about the Karen's use of the First Baptist Church as a community hub.

The third of the following sections (6.3) will discuss main and supporting themes, identified in participant perceptions (both *shared* and *differing*).

The fourth and fifth of the following sections (6.4 and 6.5) will discuss the inferences found within elements of the analysis. Theoretically critical implications will be discussed as they relate to the aforementioned themes and to other aspects of learning in this particular environment. In conclusion, I will discuss how these implications could reflect or imbue other informal learning environments.

6.1. Review of the Analysis Process

In review of the information provided in Section 4, my process of analysis entailed the following: Constant Comparative analysis for field notes and observations, Transcript Review from interviews and videos, Discourse Analysis from observation/interviews, and Theme Identification /Charting for the artifacts/documents…all in order to best determine/organize "key linkages" (Erickson, 1985) or what I will refer to as *correlating*

references occurring between the identified main themes, sub-themes and all forms of data gathered. Additionally, in support of the data interpretation and analysis, empirical assertions, quotes from field notes, quotes from interviews, interpretive commentary, and theoretical discussion are also utilized. Here, it is prudent to note that part of the analysis process occurred in the writing and editing of narrative vignettes created. This part of the analysis process is to me, is the most important—and, the most effective. There is an analytic sub-process in the creation of the vignettes which allows me to delve deeply into the actual words said and more importantly, into the meanings behind those words, the intentions inferred, the gestures made, and the conversations experienced. In the transcription of the interviews into text, and then the subsequent writing of the interview stories, I could clearly see the patterns emerge into the categories and themes. I then used particular concepts from Critical theory to further examine and develop the written analyses and eventual implications. More than any other process, the complete engagement of myself in the process of vignette creation has a profound impact on the essence of this research. More importantly however, the vignettes give concrete voice to members of the congregation, and bring to life their thoughts and perceptions as they were shared in that space, and in those moments.

The effect of this entire process as described above is important for the reader to retain while reading the following presentation of the data analysis—in order to understand that the multi-faceted process utilized, drove the critical filter implemented in the overall interpretations presented.

After the analysis process occurred, I determined that data fell into two main sets: 1). The ironic dichotomy between the uniqueness of the Karen Community's multigenerational/informal learning environment and its frequently westernized pedagogy and structure (section 6.2); and 2.) Themes in perceptions about learning as developed among various generations within large group interactions and focal participant interviews (section 6.3).

6.2.   Set 1: The Karen Community's Learning Environment

It is interesting that an immigrant community chooses a church to be one of the main places for them to maintain their group identity, because, the best way to describe this Karen learning environment is to note that is remarkably westernized. What I mean by this is that the structure and organization of the church services and subsequent Sunday school classes and other church-sponsored groups, follow a pattern familiar to someone like myself who is a member of the dominant culture. Barring the language, clothing, face cream painting[1] (see Fig. 2) and occasional food, I viewed the whole setting and structure as very similar to the Protestant church and Baptist services I attended at one point in my life).

I was surprised at my first observations of the large group congregation (at a Sunday

Figure 2: Thanaka Face Cream

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[1] Thanaka, a yellow-white cosmetic paste produced by grinding the bark of the Thanaka tree on a flat, smooth stone with water. The milky yellow liquid dries quickly when it is applied to the skin (Mymagicalmyanmiar.com, n.d.)

morning service) in that the Karen followed the same liturgical sequence to the churches I knew - similar to the point that although I did not know the language, I was able to easily follow along with the service, even singing some of the songs (in English) to hymns I knew.

The similarities continued in the Sunday school classes I attended as well. The classes were structured like a formal classroom even though the setting was very informal, meaning in most rooms there were no desks or traditional items one would associate with a classroom. Sunday school classes are held in small rooms in the basement or upper level of the church where most learners sit on the floor or in folding chairs with the leaders in the front, standing and delivering content.

Other groups (youth, women's, band) also fit recognize-able western structures; having coordinators or leaders determining content, organizing and leading the group, which have set meeting dates and times. During the first few observations of the services and Sunday school meetings I thought I might be in "trouble"--meaning that everything the Karen people had demonstrated so far in their "informal and multigenerational context" - concepts key to my research - was remarkably formally-structured and age-based. What unique data was I possibly going to get from these scenarios? Well, to be fair, first impressions are often incomplete, and I would quickly find there was plenty to learn from these people, and plenty of "informal and multigenerational" learning events to observe, however; the fact that the site and it activities were initially so familiar and predictable to this researcher is a major facet of the overall analysis, and the base theme from which all others implications come.

In the same vein, to recognize the westernized style of the Karen services and subsequent learning opportunities is not to dismiss the very real goal that the Karen community has to use the church as a location for teaching the Karen language, cultural history and ethnic traditions…as the church is most certainly utilized for those purposes. Over and over again, I heard in the interviews and I observed in the activities, that the importance of maintaining the traditions, language and history of the Karen is paramount to the congregational community, but, in the way they choose to go about communicating these things; embedded in western tradition and imperialist design (aspects which will be discussed more in section 6.4, *Theoretical/Critical Implications*).

6.2.1. **The church as an informal learning context.** As described earlier in Section 3.2, one of the largest congregations of Karen immigrants is located in St. Paul. Of the several thousand that live in the immediate area, over 500 of the Karen community come to Ebenezer Karen First Baptist Church, downtown. They utilize the church as a hub for all types of learning opportunities and community events throughout the week and run their calendar similar to an academic year (Fall, Winter, Summer).

Sunday is the biggest day of the week for the Karen congregation who come to the church for services, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and special focus Sundays (themed to a particular person, organization, or holiday). The Karen Sunday morning at church is structured very much like a traditional, American church morning: Sunday School/Bible Studies are at 11:00 AM, foyer activities follow, with the service (and embedded kid's church) starting at 12:30 PM and the occasional after-service activities (for example, a luncheon) following at about 2 PM.

During the week the church is host to a myriad of classes including: the Women's groups, Choir, Youth Choir, Church Band, and Dance Group. In addition, there are some outside groups that come and use the church for the purpose of engaging the Karen congregation. One of these groups is the *Hmong Organization of Minnesota* who came at various times of the year to offer English classes, and additionally the KOM (*Karen Organization of Minnesota*) who offered citizenship classes.

Although in my observations, the church seemed very consistent with the structure and organization I am familiar with in my own experiences, the following section will discuss the few manners in which the congregation did not reflect the norms of the "dominant culture's" structure; utilizing the church in ways I have not (in my experience) seen a church used for before.

   6.2.1.1.   Community check-in, announcements and recognitions. The first few times I attended the service, I always thought I was late. In several instances I had checked with the site coordinator about the start time and I was told 12:30 PM, but those first few times I entered the sanctuary at that time it looked as if everybody was already there. It took me a couple visits to figure out that the Karen had not actually started the service yet, but where instead, holding what I will call a "community check-in meeting" before the official start of the church service at 12:30. I should have figured this out sooner, since before I was embedded in the site I had attended one of these meetings for my introduction and recruitment, but that was during the summer, so I thought perhaps the schedules for services had changed--as churches often do in the summer.

The check-in meeting was led by Karen community leaders, not church leaders (who would remain out of sight until the service officially started) and these meetings were accompanied by multi-media presentations utilizing Power Point, movies, or YouTube videos, in which information was shared with the community regarding opportunities or stories, of which the leaders thought the community should be aware. Often people from the community were brought forward and introduced and the community was given some background about them, and then the person (or people) being introduced would speak. A few times the people introduced were new individuals/families arriving from Burma and sometimes it was someone who had been or was going on a mission trip, and sometimes it was a person who had just graduated from the university or some post-secondary institution. I thought the latter was a nice gesture on the part of the community to recognize academic accomplishments, but as I will describe in future sections (6.3.1.1 and 2) this recognition holds far more meaning than just a "nice gesture".

After the announcements and introductions of featured guests, the leaders would take a collection. This activity is why, in the beginning of my time on site, I thought I was witnessing part of the liturgy, because the ushers were passing around the offering plates as if in a service. What was unusual however (but made sense once I figured out this was a collection and not an offering) was that the money was brought up and then counted in front of the community. This action is very different from common Baptist collections, but why the leaders did it this way during the community check-in eventually became clear: the counting of funds in front of the community demonstrates to the people that all

money collected is going to the intended parties. Counting among the group helps determine how much was collected for that day's cause.

Transparent counting builds trust and reciprocity between the community members, the community leaders, and the individuals or small groups benefitting from the collection. Later in my time at Ebenezer, I grew to love this part of the Sunday schedule, because I had the opportunity to celebrate in the accomplishments of many a community member and also see the genuine gratitude of collection recipients, and the outpouring of love and generosity from the larger community. In the end, the community check-in represents important things happening within the Karen community worthy of their own recognition, and also demonstrates the interconnectedness of a shared culture and their purpose in coming together, especially when during the rest of the week they may be scattered apart.

6.2.1.2. *Intra-Community Philanthropy: Extra tithes, offerings and collections.* The check-in meeting collection was one of four weekly collections I witnessed each week during my time at Ebenezer. I remember in my own experience the church would take an offering during the service, and that there might also be a piggy bank in the shape of a bread loaf in the Sunday school room in which one could donate change, but I have no memory of four collections. I never did receive any formal verification of the purpose these four offerings served, but based on context, actions and audience, I ascertained the main reason for each.

The first collection is the aforementioned check-in collection taken in assistance for the special groups and individuals brought before the community.

The second collection occurred during the Sunday school classes where the leaders collect bills and change from the children and other participants. The intent of this offering is to collect funds, which are then be sent back to the schools of Burmese children still residing in the camps along the Thai border. There are pictures on the rooms' walls of children (in similar age) sitting in open-air school "huts" and smiling. Underneath these pictures are posted visual graphs indicating how much money has been sent back to these schools. Through additional observations and conversations, I came to understand that the different class levels would send funds back to the camps, specifically to their own aged-counterparts.

The third collection transpires very early in the church service, before the pastor and other leaders came out from the prep room. The ushers collect the funds in the same plates as the usual tithe collection, but it is not brought forward as I would expect. This offering is brought to the back and discreetly counted by the ushers inside the sanctuary. Again, I never fully understood what this collection was for, but based on some conversations with elders, along with the fact that the collection occurred before the church leaders took their places, I made the educated assumption that these funds were given to those leaders, perhaps as a weekly tribute or honorarium for the position. Except for the head pastor, the other leaders who spoke or led the service rotated and included both men and women.

The fourth collection happens in the second half of the church service, where I am used to seeing a collection plate get passed around. This offering was for personal tithes and would be given to the church as part of the funds to keep the space up and running.

This collection occurs in every church I have attended. As in other churches, "special"

music performed by congregants often accompanies the time spent gathering these funds.

The reason to include the information about offerings and tithing at Ebenezer is

because the collections relate to the perceptions people have of themselves as individuals

within the greater community: a paramount underpinning to this research. In addition,

these instances teach the community about the value of *intra-community philanthropy*,

and the importance of giving money for specific purposes. Most interesting to this

topic's analysis is that every family I observed, gave in every instance, every time, and

every single week. Before the church service and after the community check in, I would

witness fathers running around to different members of their family (and sometimes

extended family) handing out bills to them so that they could participate in the giving.

This action in itself isn't unusual…I remember my father handing me a dollar to put in

the plate. What is unusual is to watch the process happen multiple times in the same day.

This action by the families' patriarchs (and matriarchs) models a behavior of

generosity, (reflecting a sense of duty as will be discussed in section 6.3.2.2) which these

familial leaders wish to pass on to the younger generations.   Time and time again I

heard from participants that most Karen families struggled financially, and yet time and

time again, I would witness this ritual surrounding the collection of money in the church.

Nearly every hand had in it at least one bill, and nearly every time the plate or bag was

passed, a multitude of those hands would drop in the bills.

6.2.2. **The multigenerational aspects of the learning context.** The church, as

an informal context, creates a representative cross-section of Karen people, which

includes members of families and extended families, neighbors from shared residences and individuals/families from other neighborhoods within the community. Because the ages of the larger group range from newborn to 93 years old, it is commonplace to see several generations of one family (mother, father, children, grandparents and great grandparents) attend services and subsequent learning opportunities together.

The multigenerational nature of this learning context fosters unique opportunities for people of many ages within the community to teach, learn, or organize learning events to, for, and from each other.

During fieldwork I witnessed several times where younger people led older people (and vice versa), and also I observed people of differing generations working together for the purpose of instructing classes or leading events. Often, I saw teenagers working with and/or learning together with very aged members of the community and so, in many cases, (as with the music opportunities) there were no age requirements between learner and leader or co-leaders.

I gave this phenomenon of multigenerational interactions the name *inter-generational guidance* because members of different generations would work together in order to meet goals encouraged by the church community (goals include the designing, organizing and leading/teaching various learning opportunities sponsored by the Karen congregation).

6.2.2.1. Inter-generational guidance. Inter-generational guidance, again, refers to the interworking of church members of multiple generations towards a similar goal or purpose--within a specific learning opportunity and/or in the church at large.

Shared goals were previously identified (Sections 2.1, 2.2) as one of the five aspects of successful informal learning (Eccles and Gootman, 2002)(Pain, 2005). In this setting such cooperative endeavors are most evident in Sunday school classes, and in other informal classes offered on site, all of which are created to meet intended community goals.

Through my observations I noted several occasions where people who appeared quite young were in positions of leadership, or acted as teachers. In Sunday school classes for instance, there was often someone older or even of advanced age attending the same event, normally sitting or standing off to the side, and who would often wander in and out. During my interviews I asked about this activity and I was told that these older people were generally the former teachers or leaders of the particular event (sometimes even leading back to the previous learning environments in Burma), and although in many cases these older people had not assumed a regular leadership position for some time, it was always accepted that these former leaders can come and go as they please, or sit or stand near the front of the space as recognition of their former role, and as a type of visual support for the current leaders/teachers. Although the current leaders may not ever actively seek the advice or knowledge of the older mentor, it is understood that originally, the particular class or event was the older person's domain, and as a sign of respect, the previous leaders and teachers are allowed free access to the learning space. I was also told that the younger leaders appreciate their presence, and do not feel threatened or judged, but rather the younger generations understand they are but one person in a bigger picture, which includes those that have done the job before them. This acknowledgement brings credence and respect to the current leader's work; to

recognize themselves as one in an important line of people who have contributed to the same goal. There were some classes observed which had up to four people sitting off to the side or walking in and out, demonstrating to me the rich history belonging to that particular learning opportunity.

There were also several cases where younger people are the original leaders and organizers of several learning opportunities. These opportunities mainly surrounded music and technology, but they are not exclusive to those areas (although I assume the younger people were more in positions of leadership in these areas due to the fact that later generations grew up with the access to technology and certain types of music that people of older generations didn't). Either way, there was no difference in how any particular member of the event was treated; regardless of age, everyone was treated with respect. So, it is within this concept of inter-generational guidance, that I observed one of the best examples of this community *maintaining* cultural/historical practices over the more recent western influences (influences that would not usually support the idea of young people as experts in a facilitative role over people older than themselves).

In review of this entire section (6.2), an exploration of the data reveals the importance of several aspects of the learning environment to the individual, and the community. First, the analyzed data establishes that Ebenezer Karen Baptist church is used as a physical location identified by the community as a place for them to gather for religious and civic purposes, as well as a place to participate in various learning opportunities. Second, the large interactive space of the church allows the Karen to utilize Ebenezer as a place to check in and keep in contact with the greater community about important

information and events outside of the church service itself. In many cases small groups

and individuals are brought before the community for reasons of support and recognition.

Third, the church acts a funnel to collect and divvy out funds for various community

entities including community recognized groups and individuals, the church leaders, the

running of the physical space, and funds sent back to members of their community still

residing in the Burmese camps. Lastly, an exploration of the data reflects how the

multigenerational nature of the environment creates a phenomenon I refer to as *inter-*

generational guidance, in which members of the community, regardless of age, work and

learn together in order to lead events or learning opportunities. In this dynamic, current

leaders are able guide others and reach set goals while recognizing, utilizing and

honoring the previous experience and influence of other members in the community.

6.3. Set 2: Themes

As presented in the introduction to Section 6, the second set of this data analysis came

from the identification, definition, and exploration of themes, shaped from statements,

conversations, ideas, actions and observations of both focal participants and the larger

group. The main themes identified are arranged into two groupings: 1.) Themes of

shared multigenerational perceptions*;* and 2.) Themes of *differing* generational

perceptions. Each grouping also contains subthemes, further identified from responses to

questions posed in the semi-structured interviews which focused on exploring personal

perceptions about learning in the Karen church context and learning for the benefit of self

and/or community. Transferring the focal participant's interview responses into narrative

vignettes (Section 5) represents the "story" of each experience and our interactions,

which helped me better identify, organize, and subsequently reflect, on all subthemes presented. It is important to note, that all subthemes in this grouping are identified with, or explored through, the lenses of *cultural identity*, *generational disparity,* and *religious duty*.

6.3.1.   Shared multigenerational perceptions in this context.

Table 1: Themes of Shared Perceptions	
Perception 1	"Learning" vs. "Education".
Perception 2	An American Education is Good, and Equals "Success".
Perception 3	Importance of Continuing Karen Tradition and Identity.

Before delving too far into the *shared* perceptions grouping in this section (and the *differing* perceptions in the following Section) it is important to note that by far, the higher frequency of perceptions about learning in the church context are <u>shared</u> by the great majority of the large group and among the focal participants (see Table 1). Although subthemes are presented in both categories, the numbers of discussions on topics in this *shared* section far outweigh the frequency of those presented in the section on *differing* perceptions (see Table 3, pg. 110). While frequencies of subthemes were compared and identified (see Table 2, below), it was not the sheer number of references to a topic that determined further exploration of a sub-theme; sometimes an intriguing revelation of Focal Participant experience contributed to a subtheme's identification. The following three sub-subsections explore the most frequently occurring *shared* perceptions, and discuss their corresponding subthemes as determined from overall data collected.

Themes	Shared: Learning=Education	Shared: Western Education is Best and Leads to Success	Shared: Importance of Continuing Karen Tradition and identity	Differing: Academic vs. Moral Education	Differing: Individual Duty= Good Person
Log Series 6	X	X	X		
Log Series 5	X				
Log Series 4	X	X	X		
Log Series 3	X				
Log Series 2	X		X		X
Log Series 1	X		X		X
Participant 5 (Gen 1)	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 4 (Gen 2)	X	X		X	X
Participant 3 (Gen1.5)	X	X		X	X
Participant 2 (Gen 1.5)	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 1 (Gen 1)	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2: Frequency of Shared Themes and Differing Themes

6.3.1.1. ***Karen perceptions of "learning" vs. "education".*** The first

subtheme evident from the categorizing (and subsequent coding) of shared perceptions is

one of the most interesting dichotomies observed during this study.   In the opportunities

provided by the Ebenezer congregation, this subtheme centers on a lack of distinction

between the concepts of *learning* and *education.* Often used interchangeably, in reality,

the words themselves have different denotations. In a very general sense, an education is

something gained through instruction and teaching, while learning is something that

happens organically through observation and experience (Holmen, 2014). One of my

favorite quotes by MIT Lab Director, Joi Ito, explains the difference nicely. Ito says,

"Education is what people do to you. Learning is what you do for yourself" (2015).

While of course learning can happen when receiving an education and vice-versa, it is in

the difference of meaning where the perceptions of the Karen people becomes most

interesting.

I gained the unique facet of these semantics through the observation of the services,

Sunday school classes, special events and focal participant interviews. The clear theme

in analysis of my notes and transcripts identifies the importance of education to the Karen

people in this congregation (see Table 2, pg. 104). However, in general, I find the people

I interviewed and observed did not make a distinction between the concept of learning

and education as defined above. When I used the term "learning" they use the word

"education" in the same context, especially in repetition of, or in answering a question I

had posed. The understanding of "education" to this population, in this space, was of the

strictest sense; participants learning from leaders acting as experts and facilitating pre-

determined curriculum for the development of knowledge and skill in the subjects of

reading, writing, history, and music.

Therefore, the Karen peoples' perceptions of learning focus on obtaining a "proper"

education, or in achieving certain levels of education. At first I thought my focal

participants were just giving me answers that perhaps they thought I wanted to

hear…knowing I was a PhD student from the University, but as I explored further into

the data looking for shared perceptions, I realized that their ideas around education and

their interchangeable uses between the concepts of learning and education go much

deeper than what is represented by the population at Ebenezer. The in-distinction in

terminology is the result of historical and political influences going back many years, and

on two continents (Whitehead, 1981). A critical aspect of this subtheme will be explored

more in *Discussion I* of section 6.4. *Theoretical/Critical Implications.*

>   ***6.3.1.2.*** ***An American education is good, and equals "success".*** The

second subtheme to occur in analysis of shared perceptions about learning in this context

centered on the idea that having a "good" American education is necessary for "success"

in life. In order to fully comprehend the intentions of the stories and comments shared

with me, as well as large group interactions which supported the identification of this

subtheme, it is first necessary to discuss a). How a "good education" is defined by the

Karen participants, and b). How the same people define "success".

A good education is clearly described for me in the responses during interviews, and

focal participant definitions are supported by actions occurring within the larger group

(see Table 4, pg. 121). According to the focal participants, a good education is equated to

the school system of the United States (or Minnesota) mostly because one can learn about

"more things", and go on to college as a result of the system. Focal participants were in

unanimous agreement on this, regardless of age. The following statements comprise a

few key perceptions about the topic of American education equating a good education, or

how American educational systems provide a better education than in Burma.

- I want them (Karen youth) to get education from the university and college, so I prayed to God "God, please let my student, my children, my grandchildren to go to the new country to get education for the next generation. They can get

from the [old] country… "They have to do everything to get education to college… (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014)

- And then they (Karen families) come to America for the education… They (parents) come here for us so we have better education and better work. (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014)

- Schools here, academic-wise, I mean, they are good because they give you the basic things you need to know to graduate, to go to college… for the future. (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014)

- Because it's (school) at church. We read a book, get candy, and do stuff that we have to do. At school, we get to do writing, math, and do recess! We do more! (FP #4 Personal Interview, 2014)

- [School is] very different between back home in here, especially for the education system. It's very, very good – very, very different. Here, we can learn from basic and then forward until college or university. (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014)

The greater congregational community also supports a preference to American (or previously British) education. During the community check-in time (as described in section 6.2.1.1) a common occurrence was to bring forward members of the congregation that had just completed a program, certification or degree from a post-secondary institution. The community leaders would introduce them, sometimes talk about their work with a Power point presentation, and then the featured students would speak about their accomplishments and area of study, as well as any future plans.

Together, the statements and actions of the participants demonstrate a great preference for the American educational system, and gave higher individual and communal value to this system over the Karen/Burmese systems.

Concurrently, the completing of an American system of education and the subsequent continuation in a post-secondary institution was identified among focal participants as a

key element to being "successful". Success is defined by focal participants as getting

things or earning and providing for oneself or one's family, and is framed within western

conceptions of monetary, materialistic or entrepreneurial measures.

Once again, all five participants noted that receiving a good education or having

opportunities, assisted with being successful and having more things. Some key

references regarding perceptions of success are shared below.

- If you want to be successful, then you will learn. Especially I think education; we need that in the Karen community. It's going to be a big success if all the kids graduate high school – at least high school. If some of them are going to college or university, that would be a way bigger success that we would have [in Burma]." (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014)

- If I lived in another country, instead I live in the states, when I compare this. I saw many people who lived in other [places]. We live here. People who lived in Minnesota are very successful – more than the other [places with less opportunity]: the other Karen who live in other states. That's 100 percent sure." (FP #4 Personal Interview, 2014)

- Yeah. (Education is) Better here. And, first when British ruled us … save [money]. Our school – I learned at [inaudible] girls at American Baptist Mission School. We get everything there. So we bought cookies, and we learned everything." (FP #1 Personal Interview, 2014)

- When she (a sister) grows up, when she rich, she's going to have a cupcake store… And my brother is going to have a swords store." (FP #4 Personal Interview, 2014)

- I just haven't been really interested in what I want to be yet (after graduation). I'm just experimenting on my way there. Yeah… I want to have that experience of being a father/husband, having kids…supporting a family." (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014)

Similar to the congregational presentations of recently graduated students, people

from the community who are opening new stores, venturing in entrepreneurial

opportunities, receiving promotions or new positions, or in receipt of recognition from outside community, are also brought before the large group and recognized.

It became clear through observations and interviews, words and actions, that the multigenerational perceptions about having a good (western) education as key to being successful (able to support family, run a business or get things) was communally shared (Steinberg, 2010).   The forces that shaped Karen perceptions of success and its impact will be explored more in section 6.4: *Theoretical/Critical Implications.*

   6.3.1.3. Importance of continuing Karen tradition and identity. Despite the praising of American education and its influence on subsequent successes in life, the last *shared* perceptional subtheme is core to the Karen experience at Ebenezer, both to individual learners and community.

I noted in earlier observations that Sunday school at Ebenezer Karen church is not used specifically for religious training. Although some content presented is certainly about Jesus and things Christian in nature, the main focus of the classes are intentionally provided to teach the Karen language, and customs surrounding dance and music. Similarly, the focal participants and the pastor of the church told me, that the liturgy of the church service itself is kept very close to traditional Karen church services.   As discussed earlier (in section 6.2) I noted the services as familiar to me, and very similar to church services I attended in my life, so this statement about remaining consistent with "traditional Karen" services was very surprising. Other than the language, clothing and Thanaka, I could not readily identify any other differences between the Karen space and other western, Christian (Protestant) spaces. Regardless, the participants assured me that

the services and Sunday school classes are key to cultural preservation, which is of

concern to the community-- because there is no current way for the overall community to

know if individual families are passing down this important cultural and historical

information in their homes. As Focal Participant #2 describes,

> I think that to keep the traditional, I think it depends on each family. If your
> family wants you to keep those traditions, they will keep doing what they've been
> doing. Also tell their kids about the story back there so that the kids know what
> their parents have been through. And also for the people that have been fighting
> for the Karen freedom – if they tell them about that, then they will still know.
> Some parents if they don't tell their kids, then the kid will not know and then
> grow up and then just become like American, not realizing what the parents had
> to go through. I think it's part of the family that needs to maintain that. And then
> **coming to church, yeah, the church usually** – we have that big community that
> always is going to support each other. They're going to keep the traditional.
> (Personal Interview, 2014)

The duality of preserving Karen tradition through western pedagogy (Neiman, Amy,

Soh, Eunice, & Sutan, Parisa, 2008) will be explored more in section 6.4:

Theoretical/Critical Implications.

6.3.2. Differing perceptions of learning between generations 1, 1.5, and 2.

Table 3: Themes of Differing Perceptions	
Perception 1	An "Academic" vs. "Moral" Education
Perception 2	Individual "Duty" as a Community Member Equal to Being a "Good" Person

The second grouping of data analysis regarding perceptions of learners in this

environment involves themes that come from conversations and observations of learners

in different generations, having *differing* perceptions on repeated concepts. Although this

section focuses on these *differing* perceptions, it should be noted that the perceptions

within a specific generation were often the same (see Table 2 pg. #).

For analytic purposes, I divided these differing themes among the participants according to recent *immigrant generation identification categories* (1, 1.5 and 2) described by Moffet (n.d.) and Rojas (2012). First generation immigrants are defined as immigrants who come to a new country and are the first to receive citizenship (Moffet n.d). Generation 1.5 immigrants refer to people who immigrate to a new country before adolescence (Rojas, 2012) and second generation refers to children of Gen 1 immigrants who were born in the country of emigration (Moffet). Within these defined categories I worked with two Gen1.5 focal participants, two Gen 1 participants and one Gen 2 participant. The large group observations contained fairly equal numbers of all groups. The following three sub-subsections discuss the themes identified in the analysis experience, but which are themes of conflict, or *differing* perceptions among the Karen participants.

   6.3.2.1. ***An "academic" vs. "moral" education.*** As described in the *shared themes* section (6.3.1), there was little to no differentiation among all participants between the term "learning" and the term "education"; however, there are differences in perceptions regarding the types and purposes of learning opportunities provided at Ebenezer. Between the Gen 1.5 and 2 participants, learning at the church is perceived differently than learning at local schools. Although similar terms are used like "class", "teacher", "lessons" etc., it was mentioned by many participants in Gen 1.5/2 that the purpose of learning at the church is for *moral/religious* reasons (tied to the community), which is a very different purpose than the education given at the formal schools. Focal Participant #3, who is Gen 1.5, relates this very well:

> "Well, I'd say here (the church) is religion, moral ideas. School is more like an academic kind of thing… The church is to help you become better or learn more, just wiser, I guess". (Personal Interview, 2014)

Likewise, Participant #4 (Gen 2) echoes this sentiment:

> "Because it's (learning) at church. We read a book, get candy, and do stuff that we have to do (religious lessons). At school, we get to do writing, math, and do recess". (Personal Interview, 2014)

As well as, Participant #2 (Gen 1.5) states,

> "I think the church encourages it (moral education). Coming to Sunday school every week, and that has made the courage. It's kind of also how to live. It's learning about God, Jesus, what Jesus does, and then makes you feel like you want to be like Jesus. You want to do good things like he does. You just want to keep continuing doing good things…". (Personal Interview, 2014)

All participants in the younger generations express that learning opportunities in the church (outside language and citizenship classes provided by non-church groups) are for moral education, that is, an education in the values and religious teachings of the Baptist Church regarding Jesus and Christianity. Although the younger perceptions of this type of learning were very positive, they are not equated to success as defined earlier (Section 6.3.1.2), and therefore give the suggestion that this type of learning is of more use to an individual than the larger community, which is a different perception from those of Gen 1.

First Generation participants have different perceptions about the learning opportunities provided in the church. In interactions with focal participants and in conversations with members of the larger congregation who fit the definition for Gen 1, it is repeated on several occasions that Sunday school and other learning events (such as music and dance) are meant to promote cultural identity and preserve ethnic traditions.

Within that scope, religious training is intrinsically included, because members of the

older generation do not separate religious beliefs and practices from cultural traditions

and ethnic identity. For the older generations, The Myanmarian persecution of the Karen

religion has made their faith inseparable from their ethnic identity (minorityrights.org,

n.d.).   This perception is the reason for disconnection between Generations 1 and 1.5/2.

Above, the younger generations clearly refer to Sunday school and other church-based

learning opportunities as *moral* entities. However, Gen 1 participants view it differently.

For example, Participant #5 is very concerned about the loss of cultural identity due to

western assimilation, and acknowledged that the church was the best mode in which to

preserve the Karen culture among younger generations. Participant #5 states,

> We have to teach them (culture). We have to acknowledge them (younger
> people). It's (Sunday school) very important for the kids. If we don't
> support the kids, I worry for the Karen; the Baptist Church that it would
> disappear from this country. Because of our people who became a
> Christian and became a Baptist, we will be able to hold it until the end. It's
> very important. (Personal Interview, 2014)

FP #5 is also concerned about the continuation of Karen tradition, but he understands that

some cultural assimilation is impossible to avoid. He continues on further,

> I don't know about the future, but we have to try our best to put our heads
> together, like the Karen people and also people from here. Put our hands
> in and help them to be – kids who are born here, they don't have to forgo
> what happened before back home, about their parents or grandma and
> grandpa suffering. They don't have to forget that. That's very important
> for them. We have to teach them. We have to help them, to support them
> to know what's involved in their life. (Personal Interview, 2014)

In similar sentiment, Focal Participant #1 (Gen 1) echoes these thoughts, but for a

different outcome. For example, above FP #3 infers that he would like to see the Karen

cultural identity continue here in the states (although likely in some altered fashion), but

FP #1 wants Karen culture to continue less nostalgically and more intently so that

younger generations can go back to Burma someday and fit in.

> They have so much (opportunity at the church) for religion and also to learn the language. I've seen when they learn the songs and they write on the board. I've listened to people, and sometimes I hear people speaking in English. Sometimes I hear them speaking in Karen. So I think teaching the younger the Karen, is very important because they are going to go back. (Personal Interview, 2014)

Although there is a slight difference in the perceptions of FP #1 and #3 regarding

where cultural identity can be reflected in the lives of the younger Gen 1.5 /2 members,

ultimately, these older participants both identify Ebenezer as extremely instrumental in

continuing Karen tradition and language in correlation with religious learning.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this discussion concerns the oldest of the Gen 1.5

participants. Although Participant #2 mainly connects with her younger cohorts, FP#2

also expresses, what I refer to as *bridge* perceptions; meaning, that although FP#2 shares

similar perceptions to the younger participants, FP#2 also acknowledges and understands

the perceptions of the older, Gen 1 participants. In discussions with Participant #2, she

identifies *both* that the church is a very important place to learn about the cultural identity

and the language of the Karen through song, dance and religious instruction (for the

purpose of maintaining the Karen communal identity here in the United States), *and* that

these learning opportunities are also important for one day returning to Burma. FP #2

states,

> Usually when I was in the youth singing – usually when I have to go up there, they (older generations) always look for us to be there. If we're not there, if we go back home (to Burma), they're going to ask, "Where were you? Why didn't you go sing?" That's the thing. I always have to come practice, so you can't skip. (Personal Interview, 2014)

Above, Participant #2 acknowledges that Gen 1.5/2 individuals may return to Burma someday and that they will be held accountable for knowing the language and culture, however she also notes how hard it is for Gen 1.5 /2 to learn the things asked of them while at the same time working hard to become successful, in and through, the system and a culture of another nation. This paradoxical perception is explored more in section *6.4.3 Assimilation as Normalization.*

The large group observations also reflect *differing* generational perceptions regarding the purpose of religious and cultural learning opportunities at the church. In addition to general conversation on the topic, the actions of those who plan and schedule opportunities at the church promote events with specific cultural purposes more so than with other opportunities (such as ESL or Citizenship classes). The event that most embodies this difference is the annual fundraiser for the music program. Occurring in mid-November, the concert is sponsored by the youth of the church but highlights all ages that came to participate in traditional dance and song, and the displaying of traditional woven pieces created by the Karen people. The type of music and dance performed falls mainly along generational lines.

In additional opportunities at the church, such as traditional music and dance as presented in Sunday school, I notice the pedagogical strategy of using music to enhance language learning, is integrated into every class I observe, and at every level. This isn't to say that current or popular (American) music is never sung or performed…such songs were regularly performed at the services; however, in the classes and events I observed, only specifically Karen-cultural and Christian-centric content, methods and materials are

utilized. Although, as previously mentioned, these classes are led by people of various

ages, the content of the classes more closely reflects the importance of facilitating

cultural identity, which as described earlier, is a perception among the Gen 1 members.

Regardless which generation is describing the learning opportunities at Ebenezer as

either a type of moral education, a type of cultural education, or both--all participants

deemed the learning opportunities offered as necessary for becoming a "good" person. In

these discussions, however, a point of dissention occurs between the generations. Gen 1

perceives being a good person as one who gives back to their own community, but Gen

1.5 /2, perceive "being a good person" as someone who demonstrates Christian values in

all environments and is helpful to anyone in need. This difference in perception is once

again generationally divided and is discussed in the following section.

6.3.2.2. *Individual "duty" as a community member equal to being a*

"good" person. As written in the narrative vignette for "Thelma", a sense of duty to her

students, her faith in God, and her passion to teach drove her to put the needs of the

greater community in front of her own, and her family's needs. The *differing* theme of

individual "duty" as a community member demonstrates additional opposition in

perceptions that once more, are split between Generations 1 and 1.5 /2; with Focal

Participant #2 again acting as a "bridge" and expressing words of support for both

perceptions.

The participants of Generation 1 express their general thoughts as follows: first, a

person needs to discover which skills god has gifted them, and second, that person is to

use those gifts to help the Karen people become better (sometimes "better" means

"successful" and sometimes it means "better off" in very general terms).   Conversely, the younger generations share thoughts that being a good person is less a community thing and more of a general thing…meaning that being good is just the right thing to do not only as a member of the community, but also as a member of humanity. Both perceptions agree in the importance of the church's learning opportunities (and family/community) in instructing people on how to be "good", but again, each generation has a different understanding of the purpose.

Focal Participant #5 believes it is the duty of "good" Karen people to help other members of the Karen community. He discusses his own sense of duty in a reciprocal fashion; in response to help that was given him. He says,

> When we first came here, we don't know anything about this country or like that, so we need help from other people to help us… one family after that, and then one family again and again. We have each other, and then also we are helping other people came to this country. According to my experience, I really recommend people to come to this church because we can help them directly. (FP #5 Personal Interview, 2014)

Similarly, FP #1 also acknowledges the duty of "paying back" those who helped members of the community escape Burma and thrive in Minnesota. She gives advice to the upcoming generations, who have little or no memory of the camps,

> I told their parents to pray for them (the younger Karen) so that they can learn, and they can take. When they go back, so many things to help our people. I told them not to waste their time (doing anything else). Parents have to show them. I told the parents to pray for our children, to be ready for our country and our nation and for the next generation. (FP #1, Personal Interview, 2014)

Both members of Gen 1 explain their sense of duty to help other members of their own community, whether it is in this church, this state, or back in Burma.

The younger Gen 1.5 participant (#3) has strong feelings about his own sense of obligation, but infers his idea of duty doesn't come from any concept of reciprocity, but rather from inside himself as a result of his religious teachings. Therefore, the idea of being a good person is directed towards a much broader scope of people than just the Karen community at Ebenezer.   In essence, FP #3 doesn't see a "duty" to give back to other Karen people per se, but rather he sees "goodness" as a moral obligation to help anyone he is capable of helping. FP#3 has an articulate way of describing his understanding of being a "good" person and how the Ebenezer learning environment affects this perception. He says,

"The church is to help you become better or learn more, just wiser…" He continues,

> There are many kids who just have moved here. I like to talk to them. I think because they get introduced to the school… Then I just try to help them since they're new here and they don't speak a lot of English. I like showing them the ropes to what high school is.   [It is] important coming [to church] to learn the lessons, just like myself—it's a place for peace. It's where I come a lot and, like, focus on God. (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014)

This statement demonstrates recognition of empathy towards immigrant students in general and as a result, a desire to help. FP #3 doesn't state that others expect this behavior from him, or that he owes anyone, rather FP #3 helps others as a choice, due to his personal belief system the church assisted him in developing.

As before, FP #2 presents an understanding of both perceptions, meaning she acknowledges the "duty" Karen share to help other Karen as a reciprocal action, but she also supports FP #3's perception that one should help anybody in need because, simply,

that person needs help or guidance. When discussing the topic, FP #2 first gives an explanation of how she is inspired by her family to help other Karen. FP#2 states,

> I get inspired by my parents because they always push me and supported me in education. It's like 'You need to do good. You need to help out your family, your community. There a lot of people over there (Burma) that needs your help.' (FP #3 Personal Interview, 2014)

However, shortly thereafter she notes in contrast,

> "Nobody really can force you to do anything that you don't want to do" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

The didactic nature of these statements again demonstrates the influences of the church and its community on the actions of individual members to help others, but at the same time, a necessary intrinsic motivation on the part of the individual is needed as well. When asked for clarification, FP#2, again, the older of the Gen 1.5 members interviewed, did acquiesce to the elder generation's idea of duty. I asked her,

"Do you feel that you're able to foster personal interests when you're in the community here? You've kind of expressed, but do you feel free to really explore some things that you want to explore, or is it all about helping other Karen?" She responds,

"I think it's a little bit of both. Mostly helping others" (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014). Then in the next breath she reflects on her inconsistent statements and says,

"I feel good. I think that I'm doing a lot to help the community" (2014).

FP#2 demonstrates in these reflections that she, herself, is conflicted between a sense of duty to the community (instilled in her by the community/family) and being a good person (instilled in her by the church) along with her own, personal feelings--which fall somewhere in-between. The dialogue we shared on this subject exemplified once again

that FP #2's perceptions acted as a bridge between the newer generations' perceptions and the older generations' thoughts on the subject. In the scheme, her waffling makes sense because her statements represent a verbal expression of the cultural assimilation occurring among the younger Karen, correlating with her time lived in Burma versus her time lived in Minnesota.

In the end, analysis of the *differing* perceptions regarding ideas on the church's place as a learning environment discloses that those members of the community who lived in Burma longer, desire to hold on to their community ideals and values through church learning opportunities, the generational passing down of cultural knowledge, and the duty of inter-community assistance. Conversely, those born in Minnesota demonstrate a broader perception of the church's instruction as religious or "moral", and see the congregational community's sense of "duty" as a model for how to be "good" people in general, and to do good for all people.

Among the differing perceptions (determined to fall between generational lines) the unique statements of the oldest Gen 1.5 participant…who lived half her life in Burma and half her life in Minnesota…demonstrates verbally, a combination of all views by blending the other generation's perceptions together, much like she has blended her two lived experiences.

Focal Participant #2's *bridging* perceptions are important for another reason. Her statements represent the paradoxical and dual nature of the Karen experience at Ebenezer and perhaps, overall in Karen lives. The next section will examine additional concepts

determined through analysis procedures, which require a more critical/theoretical lens of explanation.

6.4. Theoretical/Critical Implications

As mentioned periodically in the sections above, some aspects of the previous analysis of *shared* and *differing* perceptions regarding learning opportunities at Ebenezer prompt additional and deeper insight. Although the previous section mainly examines focal participant perceptions (along with some supportive large group data) the analysis identifies themes constructed from personal thoughts, feelings and actions. Inside these personal statements however, are deeper and wider implications, for which this next section is dedicated (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Critical Discussions Regarding Perceptions of the Karen Learning Experience	
Discussion 1	Influence of Western Ideology on the Karen Community • Cultural Identity • Education • Careers and Business • Technology • Clothing
Discussion 2	Congruence Between Christian Values and Materialistic Goals.
Discussion 3	Assimilation and Normalization

6.4.1. Influence of western ideology on the Karen community. The beginning of the analysis section implicated an opposing nature in the construct of the church's organization, and the actions of congregational members within it. In review, Ebenezer Karen Baptist Church's liturgical structure, event organization and teaching pedagogy are remarkably westernized, meaning that although within the church services and informal

learning spaces content presented is communicated in the Karen language, and is about

things important to the Karen people, the way this content is presented and/or shared

mirrors the churches and classrooms of *this* country. These observations, more than

anything else surprised me in my research.   Before beginning data collection I assumed I

understood what teaching and learning in a jungle environment meant (the experiential

passing down of knowledge within the constructs of an agricultural lifestyle). It was

quickly made clear to me, through my conversations and observations, that everything I

had heard regarding the Karen experience in the jungle church or classroom, was heavily

influenced by historical forces in power and religious conversion…in this case, the

British and the Baptist (Whitehead, 1981) and therefore, Karen systems reflect these

ideologies. Furthermore, since the American educational system and religious services

are themselves reflections of the same British system (Bonomi, 2003), it should not have

been so surprising at how "familiar" it all seemed. The trouble with my initial

assumptions about the site and its participants will be further discussed in Section 7.3, but

here I will discuss the implications of the Karen people's relationship with British

Imperialism, and how that experience affects the perceptions of the Karen currently

living in Minnesota and attending Ebenezer Karen Baptist Church.

     6.4.1.1.   Cultural Identity. A significant portion of earlier analysis was

spent discussing shared perceptions about the church maintaining and teaching Karen

cultural identity. Aspects of this cultural identity are everywhere…in the traditional

woven fabric of the blazers and dresses of the participants, the beige face ointment

(Thanaka) openly worn in the population, foods served in the foyer, and in the language

used for services, classrooms, and media presentations. As a researcher and non-Karen, I was very aware of these cultural differences, but for all I could muster I kept focusing on the things that *weren't* different and the impact of those things in the cultural identity and ethnic history of the Karen learners at Ebenezer. As introduced in the brief history presented (Section 3), and as inferred in the immediate section above, the similarities between Karen and western society are due to the direct influence of the British Empire and the Baptist Missionaries on the Karen experiences in their own country.

Due in part to other correlating political scenarios, but mainly due to the Karen conversion to Christianity and their support of the British military against the Japanese in WWII (Thawnghmung, 2008), the Karen people found themselves persecuted outsiders in their own country, and turned to a find asylum in countries that reflected a way of life that made sense to them. Through a critically theoretical lens, two questions arise from this fact, 1.) "Why does it matter that the Karen adopted the culture and ideals of their imperialistic rulers?" and 2.) "What difference does it make that the Karen identify with Christian and/or British systems of society?" Discussion follows.

The Karen adherence to an imperialistic structure after the end of such a period demonstrates a loss of original identity, which left the Karen people open to persecution and political excommunication and in turn, searching for a home which would be more welcoming, and more "familiar" to them than post WWII Burma. Ironically, their new home, which seems comfortingly familiar in many ways, may be the very influence that could ultimately diminish what elements of ethnic Karen identity still remain (Rogers, 2004). The following sub-sections will describe the influence of western structures on

certain areas of life experiences by Karen learners (currently attending Ebenezer Karen

Baptist Church) as determined through analysis of all artifacts produced through the

course of this project. The sections will also critically examine the implications of those

artifacts, as,

> Identity cannot exist apart from a group, and symbols are themselves a
> part of culture, but ethnic identity and symbolic ethnicity require very
> different ethnic cultures and organizations than existed among earlier
> generations. (Gans, 1979)

6.4.1.1.1.   Education. The influence of western pedagogy and formal

educational structure is evident in all areas of the church's learning opportunities,

however, the times it is most evident is during ELL classes and Sunday school. To be

specific, the ELL classes (English Language Learner) were led by an outside group (the

Hmong Cultural Center in conjunction with the Ebenezer congregation). This community

group was specifically created to help Hmong immigrants, but I was told their

pedagogical tactics are commonly transferred between "similar" immigrant populations.

There is a critically undergirded problem with this arrangement, however; the Hmong

and the Karen are not similar immigrant populations. In fact, the Karen at Ebenezer,

represent only one of several distinct Karen groups that come from Burma (Rogers,

2004). In this specific case, I found the general assumption regarding pedagogical

methods for one East Asian population interchangeable for another, culturally insensitive

and misled. My thoughts were solidified in short measure.

   In the Fall I was given the opportunity to observe and help facilitate one of these ELL

classes at the beginning of its run. The purpose of the class was to provide English

language instruction to the newest incoming Karen members of the congregation. To meet demand, transportation was provided from Karen neighborhoods to the classes, which ran two evenings a week for eight weeks.

I went to the second class in which I was asked to assist when the instructor found out I was a former English teacher. I agreed to help as I thought I would be able to record data from observation and conversation, which I did (I also set up my video camera to record the event so I wouldn't miss anything in the observation due to assisting the class). Right away, I was given the task of trying to register new students using their state issued ID cards (which not all attendees had with them). This process posed a problem, because the master list I was given did not have all the names, or they were often spelled incorrectly, and the learner could not always identify their name because the list was in English and/or misspelled. Unfortunately these snafus did not motivate many learners to want to engage in the experience, and I could tell from the increased mumbling and sighing, that some of the learners were very frustrated in this process while others became discouraged.

Another issue in this process arose from the manner in which the class was presented, which involved an initial baseline test of the English proficiency of each learner. After completing a timed, one hour test, each learner was assigned a category of proficiency: Level or L 1, 2, 3 and so on, with the higher number indicating higher proficiency level. I found this approach surprising as it used test booklets and bubble sheets for the students to answer questions. The questions themselves ranged from "name this object", to "fill in the blank", and "finish this sentence in English". I thought that the test had pretty high

level instructions/expectations for a population that was coming from another country and may have had little to no formal (American) English training. And as suspected, the majority students did not understand the instructions and scored very low, but the bigger problem was that neither I, nor the instructor for the class, spoke Karen and therefore, were completely inept in describing what was needed or expected. I was able to locate a learner who was very adept at conversational English, and he explained the procedure to my group. This individual could understand everything I said, and spoke really quite well. However, he himself tested at level 4…which was a higher score than most, but still far under-representative of his actual ability--which touches on a much wider and controversial subject regarding the ability for these types of tests to accurately access actual language ability. Outside the scope of this research project, but related, is the criticism of tests that use skills being assessed to actually assess the proficiency of that very skill. Expecting Karen learners to be tested for English Language proficiency through tests that require a certain level of English language proficiency (Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp, 2003) within the process of a timed, bubble test is problematic, and does not create an accurate assessment of one's ability, as exemplified by my "assistant".

    In the end, I found the experience, although good in intention, inefficient, ineffective and elitist in nature. According to Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp (2003) who have completed studies on bias and efficiency in English Language tests, the issues of bias not only appear in the manner in which the tests are proctored, but also in the assumption that the English being tested in "standard" English in the first place. The Karen people at

Ebenezer, who had learned some English, learned it in a British dialect, which is not what

an American would consider Standard English. In clarification these authors state,

> "We are not aware of any study that has measured the difference between
> Standard American English and other standard Englishes, and it is a claim
> that must be approached cautiously. Reference range is specific to a
> particular population so that the occurrence and distribution of a lexeme's
> usage and meanings within a community is part of the sociolect of that
> community. (p. 580)

In this church's context there are many issues in testing the newly arriving Karen in

order to identify their proficiency. To what end do the results contribute, especially if the

learner is an adult or senior? If the goal is simply to help them learn English, are their

current levels of proficiency ignored, especially if the tests are biased to Standard

American English? Unfortunately, I know the instructor had the best of intentions and

the students came voluntarily, but to my observations, I did not find the process to be

functionally beneficial. Other learning events at Ebenezer reflected theoretical concerns

as well.

The Sunday school classes are different from the ELL classes in that they are

organized and run completely by the Karen and in the (previously named) context of

inter-generational guidance. The class organization however, is very structured and rote.

Material is presented on chalk or white boards and students are asked questions, which

they repeat back as a group, memorized. Songs are used to help teach the language and

occasionally a live guitarist or a musical recording accompanies singers. There are some

workbooks and other books utilized at times, and attendance is taken and homework is

given. In the classes I observe, there is little religious instruction specifically, other than

the topics of the readings and songs were Christian in nature. As stated in the previous

section on themes (6.3), the use of Sunday school as a way to promote and continue

cultural identity and language through its classes is a popular idea, however; the manner

in which this instruction is practiced is quite uninspiring and reflects a much older (yet

still often used) "banking" pedagogy of British and American systems (Freire, 1970).

There is a disconnect existing here although once again, the intention is good; the Karen

are using the Sunday school classes to foster connection of Gen 1.5 and 2 members to

their ethnic roots and history, but the pedagogy of a banking methodology only allows a

learner to simply memorize and act out, and does not create actual experiences in order to

make personal meaning. If the Karen people truly want to have the younger generations

identify as Karen and to have them understand their heritage, utilizing an educational

system of a former imperialist entity could actually be detrimental to the very goals the

congregation is hoping to achieve.   The biggest obstacle however, is that the Karen

identify this originally foreign system as their own. Even among the eldest, like Thelma,

there is no communicated recollection (to me) of how the Karen learned, or what the

Karen learned prior to the British occupation.

   6.4.1.1.2. Careers and Business. The Karen at Ebenezer are very

resourceful and take great pride in their ability to create and maintain jobs within the

greater Karen community, but also when their work involves the representation of their

community to the larger society. From my interviews and communications with my site

coordinator I learned that many relatives and ancestors of the current Karen, along with

some of the current members of the congregation, worked in civic or political

occupations, such as police officers, military radio operators, and regional secretaries to

the Burmese Government. Therefore, there is a history of these types of occupations by this rural population. The Karen people at Ebenezer take great pride in their ability to embody a connection between their own community and the grander society in which they live. As FP #4 explained to me, even though there were times Karen individuals had these positions within the Burmese government, their people weren't ever really considered seriously, and instead were frequently excluded, ignored, and eventually persecuted. The Karen people, therefore, have great appreciation for the opportunities they have here in Minnesota -not only to be heard, but to have services and programs created specifically to help their people be visible and have voice in this country. Many of the Karen leaders in the church have jobs with school districts and other governmental agencies as well as several Karen-based nonprofits. These affiliations are one reason why the church is often used as a space to sponsor activities or opportunities provided by outside groups, and, a member of the congregation often acts as a liaison between the organization and the church or sometimes works for the organization itself. As mentioned in Section 4, it was one of these organizations that arranged my entry into the site, and the president of the organization is a congregational member as well.

Why does it matter that the Karen people engage themselves in promoting these types of relationships with the dominant culture? It surely reflects their entrepreneurial nature (as expressed in interviews and in large group conversations…owning a successful business is highly valued among the participants and is one desired outcome from obtaining a "good" education) and such engagement contributes greatly to the community's capital. However, at the same time, similar to the issue with using

westernized methodologies in Sunday school, utilizing business and political models of

the dominant culture, to represent themselves in the dominant culture, could ultimately

diminish their cultural identity as well. According to George J. Borjas, author of

Heaven's Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy,

> Immigrants face tough challenges because of factors such as a lack of
> English proficiency, lack of knowledge of the labor market and lack of
> knowledge about geographic locations best suited for job opportunities.
> (2001)

The basic assumption here is that immigrants, like the Karen who come to America

already speaking English and skilled in the professions that America respects or needs,

will ensure their success and with that a better overall economy for everyone. However,

this viewpoint does not take into consideration the loss of cultural identity in the name of

economic prosperity. Currently the Karen people at Ebenezer are balancing the tightrope,

but if the *differing* perception of the Gen 2 members regarding helping all peoples and

not specifically their own prevails, the Karen community could face a major cultural

evolution.

> *6.4.1.1.3. Technology.* The Karen people are a population from the

jungles of Burma, forcibly moved to camps along the Thai border. These camps have the

basic necessities such as shelter and schools (which ironically, in the camps, due to the

high value of education by the Karen, are better than in most of Burma), accessibility to

technology is limited and nearly absent (Refugee Camps, 2013). Yet, when I observe the

learning opportunities and the services, I see a high level of technology use, especially at

the concert where all levels of technology were employed. The Karen people leading

these events have a high level of proficiency in audio and visual technology, and they

regularly use computer technology for the services and community check-ins. The

proficiency doesn't exist solely among the leaders. A scan of the participants at services,

or in the foyer, or in the classes, reflects a heavy use of cell phone technology among the

varying ages of all participants. In addition, I was personally communicated with via

email and text on regular basis. What these observations demonstrate is 1.) The Karen

participant's adaptation and quick assimilation of technology into their lives, and that 2.)

The learning curve for integration and use of such technologies is significantly shortened

through the accessibility to equipment provided by the church environment. The

majority of the participants at Ebenezer came to the States in 2003-2010, and therefore;

were not born or raised in Minnesota, and yet that same majority is seen comfortably and

expertly using technologies not available to them for most of their lives. This

observation is important to note because this behavior demonstrates another ironic way in

which the participants have quickly assimilated western methods into their learning

opportunities, including those on cultural identity…an identity that did not include those

technologies.

   The integration of technology is simply another way in which the influence of

American society is embedded in the daily experiences of the Karen people at Ebenezer

which poses another question to ponder: if the Karen at Ebenezer see their proficiency

with this technology as a way to become better at school or more successful in business,

then is this a bad thing? Technology use is an aspect of assimilation that they will have

to weigh. At this time, from my observations, they are not concerned in any possible

consequences and there is research that supports the idea that technological assimilation

as a positive thing. A critical ethnographic study performed by researcher Jenny Hsin-

Chun Tsai in 2006 regarding technological integration into the lives of new immigrant

populations determined positive effects, in that,

> … Technology facilitated their (immigrant) adaptation to language, economic survival, loss of social networks, and social disconnection. (Tsai, 2006)

I think the majority of the current population at Ebenezer, would agree that the

benefits of their quick assimilation and proficiency in the use of technology has

benefitted the overall population and promoted group cohesion. However, in the data,

there exist stark disagreements, surprisingly among the younger generations. Focal

Participant #2 shares her concerns regarding technology and the younger generations,

> They learn with iPads, iPhones – more than reading books. Back then you don't have that. It's easier I guess when you don't have that. I think it's easier when you don't have that reading. I think electronics are like distractions for kids. But I guess they (the elders) think it's working for kids.

Despite the few thoughts to the contrary, technology is one part of assimilation Karen

perceptions have demonstrated they can live with.

> *6.4.1.1.4.*   *Clothing.* The items most apparent to me as culturally

reflective and identifiable came in the form of Karen traditional clothing. This is not to

say that there aren't people dressed in American fashion…there certainly are, especially

among members of Gen 1.5 and 2, but in my observations, other than language, clothing

was the most consistent manner the Karen demonstrated their own identity, culture and

community.

The practice of wearing the traditional Thanaka sunscreen paste in patterns on the face was the first thing I noticed about the participants and for which I needed explanation. The patterns, I was told, don't mean anything specifically, it is just that this paste (made from bark) is meant to keep the skin moist and protected from the sun. The patterns are drawn in the paste to vary things up a bit--as many participants wear Thanaka every day and it therefore becomes an accessory that can change, like make-up colors or jewelry. The paste, in combination with the traditionally woven fabric of the Karen people, creates a beautiful tapestry of color on any given Sunday.

A unique note here regarding the clothing, however; is that although the women and girls wear the fabric as dresses and skirts, and the boys as little short-sleeved tunics, the men often wear the woven fabric in well-constructed suits or blazers. Once again a Karen cultural entity echoes their western influence. The blazer or suit represents a more formal societal structure from the west, and still has connotations of formality in today's society, especially in the professional world (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1989). So although the fabric strongly reflects a Karen heritage, the blazers …integrated into their culture at some point, now serve in recognition of the more formal nature of the church as was represented in earlier Imperialist culture. Hamilton and Hamilton express why this is important, in general reference, but from overall regarding the Karen,

> It (clothing) suggests that dress may serve as a symbolic metaphor of the relationship of the individual to the cultural system. As such, dress can be an extremely powerful symbolic way of expressing and reinforcing subtle values, relationships, and meaning in human culture. Dress can contribute to the maintenance of cultural continuity by interaction with ritual to cause individuals to want to act as they must act in order to preserve their own cultural system. (1989)

It is important to ask through a critical lens however, when does the wearing of western-style blazers (and dresses) actually represent the Karen cultural system of dress instead of reflecting a previous imperialist influence? As a researcher I can certainly share this quandary and come to an academic conclusion, but to be true to experiences and shared history of the Karen community, this is something only they can really answer…and only if they choose to.

   6.4.2. Congruence between Christian values and materialistic goals. Data analyzed from the large group observations/interactions and focal participant conversations, as often described in this paper, are as I construct, *dual* or *ironic* in nature. This didactic construct of the Karen experience at Ebenezer is most prominent in learner perceptions about Christian values and materialistic desires.   In honesty, as a person (who has extensive experience with Christian/Protestant ideology) and as a researcher, I found this duality most confusing. Making sense of these Karen perceptions allows me to closely analyze the data, taking off my "cap of Christian experience", in order to explore the possibility that this construct is not actually dualistic in nature, but rather, is a unique phenomenon between an immigrant culture already exposed to and affected by western ideals. Certainly in the West, the ideals of Christianity and the materialism of capitalism have long been incongruent in theory, but in reality have co-existed at the very foundational level of this country (Borjas, 2001). Add to that phenomenon, however; another layer of immigrant identity, and it presents some interesting constructs in Karen values. The Karen I observed, whole heartedly accept and use the highest levels of technological devices; the vast majority of individuals own or use cell phones and

computers. In addition, as noted previously, the Karen take great pride in running

businesses that profit in the main community, and it is a common core belief that a good

education leads to a successful (materialistically based and financially secure) future.

   The impressions presented by the Karen people, demonstrate that their Christian ideals

and desire for monetary/materialistic success are not incongruent at all--in fact, they see

their work ethic as a direct result of opportunities provided as gifts from God, which

promotes a cultural perception that it is their "right" to take all of these opportunities and

make the most of them. It is expected that members of the community should strive for

success, and this, as demonstrated in an earlier section (6.3.2.2) are values exhibited by

the younger generations. Also, as described in that same section, not all younger

generations see sharing their successes as a specific right of their ethnic community,

however; it is a *shared* multigenerational perception that the harder one works, the more

one will be rewarded, the more one can share, and the more others will benefit.

Therefore, in perceptions shared and actions observed, the Christian command of "help

they neighbor" is achieved *because* the community strives for monetary/materialistic

success, and many families reach a above middle-class SES and in turn, the community

actually becomes philanthropic unto itself. This isn't to say that the Karen take their

successes for granted…the people I interacted with and spoke were absolutely aware their

community is provided with opportunities, they worked hard to make productive. FP #5

notes in reflective appreciation,

> They (Minnesotans) welcome the immigrant who came to St. Paul,
> Minnesota. Especially they are a very warm welcome to the Karen people.
> Karen refugees to come to this country; came to the state and the city.
> Also for Karen, we have benefitted of that. When I compare it with other

states, Minnesota is the better state to stay for the refugees or immigrant people. There is a lot of chance, a lot of benefits, a lot of opportunity to work here and live here. Like the education system is very, very helpful for the immigrants. Everything: job, education, health system, and social welfare. Everything is in good form for immigrants. (FP #5, Personal Interview, 2014)

He continues to discuss how opportunities are only effective if one works hard and makes use of them:

I can say 75 percent (of this community) is the same as me, very successful in this country in the state. But you can see all human beings. You can see some of them are not very tough, not like us. But the majority here is very successful. (2014)

This sentiment is shared in other interviews/conversations and in the giving actions of the community at Ebenezer (see Section 6.2.1.2), and it is evident by their rich community capital that religious belief directly results in the Karen ability to dutifully strive for monetary/materialistic success in their new country.

Once again, critically focused questions remain; "Are the Karen then, not in the same conflicting/hypocritical state as American Christians who achieve wealth and success?" What is the difference? And once again, the repeated influence of the West provides an easy analysis…or does it? Does the Karen congregation simply reflect a system of values, both religious and societal, imposed upon them through the Christian missionaries and the British Empire? Surely this entire dissertation has claimed as such, and it is evident that the general idea of "God helps those who help themselves" runs through the data collected. What is not as clear however is if this concept (making the most of opportunities given) comes from imperial influence…or instead reflects a general gratefulness regarding the escape from Thai camps and Myanmar persecution, further; is

it a belief reflective of a deeper identity Karen have of themselves as hard workers, dating

back to pre-Imperialist times?

The origination of this cultural belief is important, because it is the first time that I,

based on the data, can see this value embedded farther and deeper than any influence the

British may have had, or American society is currently producing. According to Karen

Researcher Ananda Rajah (2002) (who spent time analyzing the influences on Karen

identity in Burma) believes that the Karen still reflect a long and rich history predating

the Burmese-Anglo Wars.   Rajah notes that the KNU (Karen National Union)

themselves address their pre-imperialist history, describing their drive and work ethic,

> Historically, the Karens descend from the same ancestors as the
> Mongolian people…We were, according to most historians, the first
> settlers in this new land. The Karens named this land Kaw-Lah, meaning
> the Green Land. We began to peacefully clear and till our land free from
> all hindrances. Our labours were fruitful and we were very happy with our
> lot… Here we lived characteristically simple, uneventful and peaceful
> lives. (Karen National Union, n.d.a)

Although it would be easy for this researcher to once again infer that this value too is

the result of British Influence it would not be accurate. The Karen's sense of work ethic

and desire to utilize all opportunities given them is a value that goes much deeper than

such recent history, and the group's conversion to Christianity only enhances the concept,

benefitting the population at Ebenezer and their counterparts arriving from Burma.

6.4.3. Assimilation and normalization. One of the most interesting parts of an

interview I had was with FP #3 who as a reminder, is a young Gen 1.5 member of the

Karen congregation. Deeply spiritual, this participant as the reader may recall, spent a lot

of time discussing his desire to help others, especially newcomers to his school. There is

one thing he said however, representative of something much deeper than helping others; he inferred that helping others, also helped him. That may not appear so unusual…surely doing good makes one feel good…but he didn't tell me that his actions made him feel "good". He said,

"There are kids who just have moved here. I like to talk to them. They make me feel normal" (Personal Interview, 2014).

Feel *normal*. I made several notes regarding this word usage and the connotation within that context of the interview, and upon analysis I found that the sentiment was widespread in the Gen 1.5 and 2 members of Ebenezer. I had already established, as explored in the previous section, that the Karen of Ebenezer perceive themselves (as individuals and as a group) to be hard workers and as a result, they utilize many opportunities to help "better" themselves so they can help others in their community but this idea of interacting in an "expert role" (as described in section 2.3.1) to help others as a way to feel *normal*, is something that reflected postcolonial influence and impacts from the dominant culture. "Normal" in these cases meant being a native English speaker, or well enough versed in the language to pass as one. This divide between the Gen 1.5/2 and Gen 1 are defined as "those with an accent, and those without" (FP #3, Personal Interview, 2014).

The Gen 2 (and the Gen 1.5's that came to Minnesota before they were of school age) perceive themselves as Americans with Karen ties, and are far more likely to break from the traditions described throughout this research, however, the idea that being able to speak English with no accent as a way to be *normal*, (or "identifiably American"), is an

extremely powerful understanding, because the opposite of that understanding then, is those that cannot or do not speak English well are *abnormal*, which has a very negative connotation.

It has been heavily researched that in immigrating to a new country, the later generations of immigrants more and more assimilate into their adopted society (Keyes, 1979) At the very beginning of my research I asked several Karen participants if they were afraid of total assimilation, and the most common answer was in the affirmative. This perception as described previously, is one of the main reasons Ebenezer Karen Baptist Church was founded…as a place for the Karen to continue their traditions and to join together in community. However, I believe the Karen, in repeated pattern, have two manners in which assimilation is occurring: 1.) As an extension of the assimilation started with Imperial Britain, and 2.) In the wish by the Karen members who arrived very young or were born here, to be "normal teens".

First, as made clear in the research, the Karen people already have instances of assimilation into Western societal norms due to their conversion to Christianity and their allegiance to Imperial Britain. It is not strange then to believe that a population, who has already been influenced by some western structures and ideals, when coming to a similar westernized country, would feel that certain elements of the new society are already familiar. In this perception, assimilation is not really occurring now, but rather as a progressive integration of norms already existent in the culture…simply becoming more widespread through the new generations (Htoo, 2009).

Second, I observe overall, that Karen adolescents (and younger) reflect significant

assimilation: in their language, clothing, technology, media and pop culture references.

The social pressures of high school breathe heavy on these youngsters, who are already

struggling with finding a personal identity while at the same time trying to "fit in". Focal

Participant numbers 2,3, and 4 all gave instances where they chose to be identified as

American, or to socialize more with Americans when given the choice. These

participants perceive themselves as Karen, but in compartmentalized ways, mostly

depending on the environment or social situation.

6.5 Brief Conclusion of Analysis

Ultimately, it will be the task of the Karen population at Ebenezer to determine in

what ways they will need to, or want to, preserve their cultural and ethnic identity. In the

same fashion they may need to consider what ways their immigration to America has cost

them culturally, which realistically, may be perceived among the group to be little or

nothing. Those that work and interact with the Karen at Ebenezer--including this

researcher, need to remember that these people come from horrible conditions of

persecution and ethnic cleansing, so it just may be that there is no price too high to pay in

order worship freely and live safely, despite what the theoretically critical implications

may infer. I think Edward said it best,

> There is a lot of opportunity here, a lot of chance, and a lot of benefits here. Most
> of the people from back home want to come to the United States especially…for
> me, myself they ask me "Which country do you want to go?" Always I said I
> wanted to go to the United States…They help us here. We can do what we
> want…what is important to us. (Focal Participant #5, Personal Interview, 2014)

7. Implications of the Analysis, Suggestions for Further Study, and Personal Reflections on the Experience

The following section will focus on the overarching implications of the entire analysis presented and analyzed. These implications are a culmination of all data, but they are especially reflective of the information gleaned from the process of writing the narrative vignettes--as it was in this process more than any other, where the themes and critical implications came to life through the personal stories, views, and lived experiences of those interviewed. It is in the deep dialogues, and in the sharing of space and time with these participants, which allowed me to write the vignettes --ultimately embodying within each of them, the entire essence of this research. Therefore, these overall implications are created for the purpose of articulating this researcher's perceptions about the analyses produced, and are presented in the following subsections.

The first subsection will describe, as based on the analysis presented, implications of the research for the Karen community attending Ebenezer Karen First Baptist Church.

The second subsection of this chapter will discuss ways in which the analyses produced from the data, may present opportunities for further study. I will suggest four possible studies that could parallel or extend the work done in this project.

The final section of my dissertation is a reflection of my overall experience as the primary and only researcher in this study, and the impact the experience had on me professionally. Although much of this qualitative experience is reflective in nature, both on the part of the researcher and the participants, the first subsection will examine those

"aha" and "feel good" moments, as well as those moments of struggle, conflict and insecurity.

7.1. Implications in the Analysis Regarding the Karen Community at Ebenezer

Throughout the data collection and analysis procedures of this dissertation, I always kept the people of the Karen community in the front of my mind, so as to respectfully and honestly represent them--in whatever light they appeared. So, what does the research completed imply about the values and perceptions of the people who attend services and learning opportunities at the church? An overall review of the analysis forms three main implications:

> 1.) The multigenerational and informal context of the church and its learning opportunities are not always effectively designed or implemented to meet the goals of the community (as they have expressed), and may be detrimental to the pursuit of life long learning.
>
> 2.) The shared perceptions of western education being the best system and necessary for success in life is at times duplicitous and often models to Karen members of Gen1.5 and 2, values contrary to the ones promoted by the larger community.
>
> 3.) Cultural divisions among the generations are growing and pose the risk of rapid assimilation of the youngest.

The following paragraphs will discuss these implications in the order listed. Please note that implications shared, derive from patterns in the data identified as undesirably

impacting the population studied, however, the subsequent suggestions provided are formed from constructive aspects of the same community, and therefore, if implemented, may promote feelings of community empowerment. In transparency, I will admit a great irony: it was very difficult for me to rise above my own biases in establishing these implications, and even more so in the creation of the toted suggestions, because in their creation, I find that the reader could interpret that there is something "wrong" with the way the Karen choose to exist in their own experiences. Of course, this is not the intention of the study's implications; rather, the implications are just an honest representation of my own interpretations. Such a reflection is important to note, and just another part of the learning I experienced in this process (a more specific reflection is presented in section 7.3).

The first implication made clear through analysis is that learning opportunities offered at Ebenezer are structured and organized following very western-influenced pedagogies-- which at times are incongruent with the community's goal of using church events to teach the culture, language and history of the Karen people. As mentioned in section 6.4.1.1.1, the leaders most often use a "banking method" (Feirre, 1970) in the delivery of content and also utilize books and chalkboards to present information. Although using songs to teach the language seems effective, the methodology for the majority of learning events, regardless of age, does not encourage personal interest--or foster the value of learning outside the school system. This notion is clear in all observations and interviews. Other than singing or dancing, there was little mention of the desire or ability to follow personal preferences.

The implication here is that the Karen are not creating meaningful experiences for their learners, which eventually, could cause less attendance, leading to the disintegration of cultural identity. In this case, the methods used to obtain community goals, may backfire. By considering more constructivist activities and a wider curriculum, and by implementing the best practices of MGE (Pain, 2005) as conveyed in section 2.2, the Karen could reignite a more personal interest in their culture, especially among Gen 1.5 and 2 and in turn, continue the passing on of values important to their community.

Another suggestion is to follow *inter-generational guidance* practices (as demonstrated in several Karen-led learning opportunities) to ELL classes and stop "outsourcing" these events to community organizations that aren't knowledgeable about the Karen enough to be effectively equipped to instruct them. Considering this idea, the Karen would have control over the content and methodologies of English instruction, which would reflect a more accurate assessment of individual's actual proficiency.

Additionally, it is in this community's unique aspect of *inter-generational guidance* that the Karen people diverge from the influence of western educational ideologies. The fact that members are not only open to young people leading and facilitating learning opportunities, but are also encouraging them to do so, acknowledges that the community can and will maintain some cultural traditions over western educational ideologies (which maintains that older people are better situated as experts for instruction).

The second implication concerns the Karen belief that western education is better than all other systems of education, and is necessary for being successful in life-- as this belief is indirectly driving a more American value of consumerism among the younger

generations (who are heavily influenced by media and peers in this country). As discussed in Section 6.3.1.2, the shared perception among the generations was that western education leads to monetary and materialistic success in this country, and if that kind of success is used to give back to the Karen community…it is a good thing. However, among the younger generations, perceptions of obtaining success for the sake of the community's capital are waning, and the analysis describes the differing perceptions on this topic forming along generational lines. A suggestion here is to have the older generations and members of the family build on the younger generations' shared perception about the importance of being a good person, which is a more moral concept taught through the church--as opposed to specifically valuing a western education as the only means to position oneself for doing good. By focusing on the idea of doing "good" now (instead of obtaining a certain level of education or success before one can help) is driving younger people who struggle at school to feel inferior in the community, while driving others to utilize their education in making money for no specific reason other than to do so.

If the Karen want to continue philanthropy within and for their own community, they could create a shift in the current values among the older generations, by recognizing (especially in the community check-in meetings) Gen 1.5 members like Dana who "bridge" both perceptions, and who can help model how to complete an education for better reasons than monetary gain, as well as how to concurrently do good for the Karen community through engaging in non-academic or non-monetary opportunities.

The third implication is that the influence of American mainstream culture, which echoes some of the British assimilation already evident in the Karen population, could, within a short amount of time, merge the Karen into more American ways of living. The younger generations are already adept at the language and technology as described in section 6.4, and participants interviewed/observed alluded to consciously losing their Karen accents in order to better be "normal" at school. There were also statements shared that inferred a preference to attend the American events at the church--in order to be with friends outside the Karen community. These younger members of the community are aware that they "should" care more about their Karen history, but the general thought among those observed was summed up by Participant #2, who said,

> "Nobody really can force you to do anything that you don't want to do"
> (FP #2 Personal Interview, 2014).

A suggestion for the community to consider is similar to previous suggestions. To keep autonomy in the community, people need to be immersed in the community. Of course, it is not feasible for families or the church to force younger generations to stay away from all things "American" (and because of other deeply engrained values regarding western education, they wouldn't want to); instead, the community could more heavily promote: Karen holiday celebrations, using the language, the creating and wearing of traditional clothing and the preparing/consumption of traditional foods--not only at church, but also in partnership with the families, and residence apartments where high numbers of Karen live together.

In final thought regarding information presented in this subsection: if the reader hasn't identified it already, I am aware that some of the suggestions I have made here

regarding the implications identified are problematic, but to be honest, the problem is one

currently in great and deep debate…with lots of ideas from lots of people, but no truly

implemented solution (Alba & Nee, 2009). I am also aware that these suggestions will

not actually preserve the current culture of the Karen from disappearing here in the

States, because to say food, language, clothing, or even values in education or good

deeds are the only representations of Karen identity and their long and rich history, is

inherently short sighted. It is also important to note here, as mentioned in the Prologue

(pg. ix) that the interpretation of culture in the analyses, implications and suggestions is

mainly historical or symbolic. Any group's culture surely evolves, and the assimilation

of any element into an existing community does not necessarily mean the demise of that

particular group's identity; rather, assimilation can mean the purposeful acceptance,

adaptation, evolution and growth of the community's identity and structure. However, at

this time, within the scope of this study, these ideas are what I offer, because I do believe

these suggestions will help with the more negative implications presented here. The

good news (as I believe there is always good news) is that there is data I could not cover

which could produce more positive implications, and perhaps evolve into more beneficial

suggestions for the Karen population studied.

7.2. Suggestions for Further Study

I understand, and as stated in previous sections on the Research Plan (sections 4.1 and

2) the qualitative nature of ethnography does not easily produce generalizable results.

(Peshkin, 1993) (*The Sage handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2011). However, there are

exceptions to this idea. Results that come from data involving human subjects may have similarities, because in many ways, humans are similar. So, it is reasonable then to conceive that results from this research may be transformable in some fashion for the purpose of replication with another population.

A more likely scenario however, is that further research in this area would be an extension of this research and with these participants. To that end, I would suggest further research regarding the political structures and organizations of the Karen here in Minnesota. In my time with the congregation I had interactions with many people involved in non-profits and government run branches of organizations, specifically created for Karen immigrants. Further research on how these organizations are run, their purpose, and their effect on the lives of the population…could provide interesting and informative data.

Likewise, a study extending the results I discussed involving the assimilation and deterioration of cultural identity in Generations 1.5 and 2 could also provide some data to assist other Karen community leaders, general educators or policy makers regarding the preservation of culture in this immigrant population.

Additionally, a longitudinal study following a Karen family from the Burmese jungle to the Thai camps, then to the U.S. and finally to Minnesota, would be a very interesting project, perhaps to determine specific experiential anomalies and/or the impact these types of experience have on a family; their familial roles, their culture, traditions, and history.

Finally, a study designed to tell the stories of more Karen people, could result in a published book along the lines of *HomeGirls* (Mendoza-Denton, 2008) or *The Pastoral Clinic* (Garcia, 2007). This suggestion is something I am personally very interested in pursuing; even though this dissertation included short vignettes from the Focal Participants of various generations, I know only scratched the surface. There are far more stories from these people--to listen to and learn from that could impact a variety of people in their professional and personal lives, and better humanity in general.

Although the further research ideas listed here are merely suggestions, these ideas came from notes I made during my observations, and so they are rooted in possible data sources that in the scope of this study, I was not able to investigate. In the future whether I, or another decide to follow up on any of these suggestions, I feel confident that project will be as rich an experience as I have just had, and in that case, once again, the Karen congregation will open their arms and share their special world of unique experiences and life lessons, from which I, professionally and personally, am further enriched.

7.3. Conclusion: Researcher Reflections of the Experience

I can easily state I learned a lot in both the process of designing this study, in the execution of the actual study and the subsequent analysis and writing process. I will also add I learned a lot about my professional and personal self.

As a professional, I learned that it is extremely difficult in a study to expect that other people, including participants, will see your work as important as you, yourself see it. There were many times where I relied on some people to assist me in finding space, or

scheduling interviews, or in providing times and dates for events, and there was just a lack of communication or general adherence to plans made. I can't make a firm statement regarding whether or not this lack of focus to time was a cultural norm, or just due the fact that people are busy; either way, learning to be flexible and understanding were paramount to gaining people's trust and respect--which was key in my desire to maintain transparency in all aspects of my research with this population. At the end of my field work with the congregation, I felt I had learned to be flexible and adaptable in this way, and I did get a large part of what I was hoping to accomplish, done.

In addition, I learned that I came into this study, professionally, with a large bias. I can dress it up and use research language and call it an "assumption" or a "hypothesis", but in the end it was just this: I made determinations about this population based on some previous knowledge and work (with the Karen people in another location and time) and I also believed some notions I had alone developed in my own mind, which in the end turned out to be completely incorrect. The biggest of these ideas was that the Karen, because they are a persecuted and marginalized population in their own country, would when in the United States, fiercely protect their traditions and way of life, and defend the way they lived prior to the western influence of the British, and the current influence of American society. Especially in the case of learning, which was the basis of my entire original research question, I expected to observe different phenomenon than I did. Instead of an obvious and strong pattern to the preservation of the Karen way of life and ethnic identity, it was determined that this population came to the United States already affected by and partially assimilated to, Western societal norms…despite their

experiences in the camps. As a result of this revelation my research took on additional

scope into the realm of *critical* ethnography…which was not the original intent, however;

to ignore the obvious elements for such an analysis would have gone against the flexible

and adaptable ethnography I had promised to run, and I would not have been honest to

myself about what I was observing, analyzing and writing. Although revisiting my

design and adding areas to analyze caused me to have to think a lot more, analyze a lot

more, and write a lot more than I had anticipated, it was the only way to truly remain

honest to the experience, and to the participants, which I was representing with my work.

In the end I know expanding was the right thing to do, and I can say I am a better

researcher because of it.

Personally, I learned I have a great love for people of all ages, even more so than I

first thought. I also learned that this love of people would sometimes cause me to

struggle with maintaining my role as researcher. The very thing that makes me a good

ethnographer (attention to detail, easy to talk with, engaging, warm) also causes me to

straddle the lines between becoming a friend and maintaining a professional relationship.

I found this especially true with Thelma and Dana and some others in the larger group. I

personally liked them very much and had to turn down repeated invitations to "hang out"

off site during the research. I wanted to use their very impactful stories for my data, and

therefore felt I had to keep the protocol the same, and so I declined…making me sad to

do so. Perhaps in the end, I really didn't need to decline their offers, but in order for me

to keep my lines from being blurred, it is what I needed to do in order for me feel

responsible about myself, and my actions.

On another personal note, I learned I am also more capable of handling and juggling more than I ever thought. I never anticipated becoming the mother of a newborn in the middle of my research and dissertation writing, but that is what happened. I learned that I am able to balance personal life and researcher task, although to be honest, it was the hardest thing I have ever had to do…because it is in my nature to want to do the best I can at whatever I do, and I didn't want to on one hand, let my family down, but on the other hand, do less work for the Ebenezer congregation. In the end, I learned to lean on others and to be okay with that.

At the end of it all, with the help of cohorts, friends and family, and due to the wonderful, inviting nature of the Karen congregation, I was able to navigate this period in both my professional and personal roles, and come out feeling accomplished in both. It is my sincere hope that the reader will have learned something from this work, but what they will learn is not something I want to assume, or define. The most important thing I learned in this research project is that although there are correlations, themes and implications running through the experiences of a group of people, the people within the group are individuals who have their own stories and perceptions, and these stories are far richer than any data collected for analysis…they are the living experiences of humans from whom we all can learn and then ourselves, grow.

Figures

Figure 1:
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   http://blog.firstbaptiststpaul.org/

Figure 2:
My Magical Myanmar," Thanaka: Myanmar's Fragrant, Versatile Cosmetic. (n.d.).

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