

Voice, identity and listening: reflections from a refugee

Meh Sod Paw, Minkyung Choi and Jihae Cha

To better understand and respond to the real needs of refugees, we need to learn from the stories of people like Meh Sod who resettled in the USA aged 12.

In formulating, designing and implementing policy, practice, and research related to displaced populations, the perspectives of refugees are seldom reflected or prioritised. Instead, the agendas and voices of those with power or those who provide financial funding are put first. This is not to say that these decision-makers' intentions are unsympathetic, but rather that their responses may not always be culturally appropriate or relevant to displaced populations, and may therefore fail to offer holistic, long-term support.

Meh Sod, who resettled in the US from a refugee camp in Thailand at the age of 12, describes her younger self as 'voiceless'. But listening to Meh Sod's stories, which paint rich portraits of her journey, reflections, challenges, and joys, we felt that she was anything but voiceless. The problem, then, seemed to lie in the lack of opportunities

provided for individuals like Meh Sod to share their experiences. Meh Sod explains how she navigated the resettlement process, her schooling experience and her identity (re)formation, while her co-authors reflect on whose voices are overlooked and why.

Relocating to the US

The morning before my family made our way to the bus station, my last stares went to my childhood play areas – my house, the bamboo and tamarind trees, and the dusty road. The station was packed with goodbye handshakes, conversations and tears. It was just loud enough for us to hear a man yelling "household number A1-73, get on the vehicle", and so we left the refugee camp for America.

As we settled into our new home in Georgia, we became accustomed to the rhythms of our new life. Every Saturday morning, my family and I prepared to make our weekly trip from Stone Mountain to Clarkston. It took approximately an

hour and thirty minutes by foot for us to get there. Because we did not own a car, we selected the route most amenable to the shopping cart we pulled along with us. Along the way, my siblings and I picked up pecan nuts that had fallen from the trees and garlic chives that grew at the side of the road, marvelling at their abundance. People passing in cars stared at us, but it did not bother us that much. Our steps became lighter as we drew closer to our destination: the Clarkston Thriftstore. Thriftstore has a plain exterior, its sign bearing no catchy logo, but for me it was more than just a store. On our trips, we would buy big bags of rice that were reminiscent of the ones that UNHCR distributed to the refugee camp in Thailand where I grew up. Whenever I saw fellow Burmese on trips to the grocery store, I felt unexpected joy. Those moments of connectedness, albeit momentary, eased the weight of the strangeness I had to adjust to.

Schooling: representation and belonging

I still remember the first day of school. Along the walls were banners with the word Welcome in different languages – Chinese, German, Spanish and more. I was fascinated by the diversity of languages, but more importantly I was excited by the idea that the classroom would be a space where I could finally process some of the experiences and thoughts that had been bottled up inside me for many years. However, I quickly learned that the celebration of multiculturalism that was openly on display never left the walls. The different languages were never practised in classroom discussions, and there were no opportunities to share our stories.

Compared with regular students, refugee students have personal experiences and valuable skills that are unrelated to topics valued in the classroom. I appreciated how the materials we encountered in class showed me different perspectives, enabling me to understand different communities and topics I could not always relate to like racism and gender issues. As I learned about American history I developed empathy towards African Americans. I thought, 'I wish they could be treated equally'. But I don't think that recognition was reciprocal because my story, my history and my culture were never brought up in class discussions. There was no equal sharing of knowledge. The other students did not know about me – what it means to live in a refugee camp, what it feels like to live without family members... I was

engaged with other people's stories and history and disconnected from my own. In the educational setting, my first language was no longer useful and my culture was not needed. I interacted with texts that did not contain representations of myself or people like me. I felt invisible.

For refugee students, I think the most basic need is a sense of belonging. If we could see that the material we absorb is not just for survival but for connection too, then the experience of learning would be more meaningful. Our situation might be difficult for many schools to fully understand because we, ourselves, do not pay attention to our feelings or know how to communicate them. For instance, a lot of refugee students in Clarkston don't have people around them who really understand them. I also recognise that it is really hard to work with refugee children because of the difficulty in communicating with their parents, either because of language barriers or a lack of communication channels. So refugee students don't always get the attention they need. In fact, we don't know what we need. Now, I know what kind of things the students need so I think I'd be able to come up with strategies to support these kids.

Finding my identity and voice

In America, we were granted the opportunity to meet new faces and forge new relationships. But when I turned around, the person next to me was no longer a familiar face in the neighbourhood. Life in America made me realise the necessity of having a heritage that has been preserved for me. I realised that I had left behind pieces of my Karen origin and history as I encountered new cultures on my journey: Burmese, Thai and American. Being accustomed to living on the border but not being welcome in nearby territories, I carry with me a sense of inferiority that distracts me from seeing the worth of my own culture. Having an identity that is only half-established while learning to adapt to the American lifestyle keeps me in a bubble that distances me from the community I live in. Coming to the realisation that I am no longer being held in one place on the border, I want to search for the home my ancestors came from.

I have learned from oral traditions that my Karen ancestors travelled across the 'River of Running Sand' (the Gobi Desert) searching for a place where they could create a home. Instead of trying to create a new home for myself within

the multicultural community I have been brought into, I want to reflect on the cultural home that lies inside me and be recognised for my whole story and not just by one dimension of my life that labels me as a refugee.

I carry the stories of my ancestors. Through their folktales, stories and history, I hear the voices of individuals like me who are on a journey to go somewhere where their ancestors have gone. My journey is one of preserving what I find in order to allow subsequent Karen generations to trace our origins back from the present day to our ancient roots, like a little stream being able to flow back into the big ocean.

Concluding reflections

After listening to Meh Sod's stories, we (Minkyung and Jihae) learned that refugees are not given much choice in decision-making on matters pertaining to their own livelihoods and day-to-day lives. Generally, the average person may understand one aspect of refugees' lives but recognising their fuller emotional needs takes time. Therefore, as forced migration researchers, we felt that Meh Sod's voice was crucial to all phases of our project; from research design to implementation and publication. Looking back, Meh Sod acknowledges that community, a sense of belonging, and mentorship are crucial for youth with refugee backgrounds, although she was not aware of these needs when she was younger. In education specifically, students need guidance and advice that address the unique situation of youth from refugee backgrounds. "I'm not sure if I can speak to [administrators and school leaders] about the needs of the students. I'm not sure if they are willing to listen. There are so many problems and I'm not sure where to begin", Meh Sod explains. Additionally, because schools prioritise examination scores above all else, Meh Sod feels that students' needs are often pushed to the side. "To support refugee students in the classroom, schools should be encouraged to make the classroom a familiar setting by incorporating their culture, music and art, to make them feel safe and comfortable."

As the years go by, Meh Sod is slowly but surely finding her voice. "After a long

time, I have found support for different aspects of life, and feel equipped to tell our story," she says. She acknowledges that for youth like her, much time and patience are needed to help them recognise and assert their needs. For this shift to happen, instead of decision-makers making assumptions about what displaced populations need and desire, refugees should be invited to these discussions. Providing tools and resources is essential in the resettlement process, but it is of paramount importance that there are ample spaces where refugees can share their stories.

Meh Sod calls for "the patience to work with refugees" and for "spaces to share and hear from refugees". Perhaps for policy, practice, and research to be truly significant and meaningful, we just need to listen. This may entail time-consuming processes that are not immediately fruitful, but such approaches may provide the holistic, long-term support that is truly in the interest of those like Meh Sod.

Meh Sod Paw mehsodpaw@gmail.com

Master of Arts Candidate, University of Northern Colorado

Minkyung Choi minkyung.choi@bcc.cuny.edu

Assistant Professor in Education and Academic Literacy, Bronx Community College, City University of New York

Jihae Cha [@cha_jihae](mailto:jihae.cha@gwu.edu)

Assistant Professor of International Education, George Washington University

