Influence of Karen Immigrant Students on Teachers’ Instructional Decisions in the Rural United States

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Abstract: Across the United States, the number of classrooms welcoming young students who are new English language learners (ELL) is rapidly growing. Motivated by a dramatic increase in the number of Myanmar- and Burma-originating immigrants now attending English-speaking schools in the rural, upper midwestern United States, this study systematically considers how the presence of Karen immigrant students impacts the instructional decisions that K-12 classroom teachers make using an exploratory case study method. Several recurrent themes emerged, and findings can be used to help better prepare both pre-service and in-service teachers to meet the needs of their ELL students, as well as policy makers. These emergent themes include the following: (a) authentic teacher–family relationships are key; (b) visual/hands-on learning and the use of technology enhance student achievement; (c) student work must be completed during the school day in classrooms; (d) teachers’ purposeful use of parallel language is critical for learning; (e) rigor can be maintained, although quantity is often adjusted; and (f) targeted ESL/cultural training for pre-service and newly hired teachers is positively influential. Such informed training often seems to help teachers learn key cultural distinctions and become better able to identify the most effective ways to meet the needs of students.

Keywords: English language learners (ELL); English as a second language (ESL); teacher’s instructional decisions; Karen immigrant students; student success

1. Introduction

In an era of dramatic educational reform, enhancing the quality of classroom-based education for children of immigrants is of widespread interest to education stakeholders across the United States and elsewhere [1]. There are several reasons why providing high-quality education to immigrants is becoming more important than in earlier times. For one, immigrant children coming to the U.S. from other countries are quickly beginning to make up a considerable portion of the future U.S. workforce. For another, if the U.S. continues to serve as a robustly integrated cultural melting pot of immigrants, immigrant children will be an ever-growing part of the democratic voting populace and play an important role in shaping the future U.S. political arena. Consistent with what the original founders of the U.S. believed, meaningful participation in democracy is likely best achieved if a country’s citizens are well educated. Thomas Jefferson’s views are often represented by the phrase, “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people” [2]. In the U.S. in the 21st Century, that citizenry is represented by an exceedingly wide degree of diversity.

Inarguably, teachers and schools are well situated to play a pivotal role in creating and nurturing an educated citizenry. This citizenry includes citizen students who are very much like their teachers demographically and citizen students who are very unlike their teachers demographically. As a result, teachers need to be effective at teaching a wide range of students to support the U.S. goals of democracy. Disappointingly, scholars argue that extant teacher education and professional development programs provide only a modicum
of preparation regarding research-informed best practices on how to successfully include recently arrived immigrant children in their instructional decision-making [3].

1.1. The Rural Context of the U.S.

Teachers in the far northern reaches of the midwestern U.S. in the state of South Dakota face a similar challenge as the rest of the U.S. in teaching a rapidly widening range of students due to a recent influx of immigrant students from widely diverse cultures. In 2009, the Urban Institute reported that 40% of immigrant children in South Dakota come from “linguistically isolated homes” where parents speak little, if any, English at home, and that this state has experienced a growth of more than 80% in the number of immigrant students in its schools [4]. Such a situation naturally presents a dramatic change in the nature and culture of classrooms that were once filled with students of nearly identical demographics to those of their teachers.

1.2. Teachers’ Response to Immigrant Students

What is not yet well documented is how in-service teachers overall—and in South Dakota specifically—are adapting instruction based on this recent and rapid influx of immigrant students. Of the many rapid student population changes in the U.S., South Dakota teachers are encountering a perhaps unexpected challenge—integrating immigrant students from the Karen culture. Karen students are the children of resettled refugees from Burma (Myanmar), with many pushed from their country due to long civil wars. The Karen are also known as Kayin, Kariang, or Kawthoolese, and they are an ethnolinguistic group categorized by their language. The Karen people live primarily in Kayin, a state in southern and southeastern Myanmar [5].

During their long civil wars, many of these Karen students have spent their past years before moving to the US living in refugee camps in the jungles of Thailand. As such, these students have experiences and challenges far removed from those of most of their South Dakota teachers. Prepared or not, South Dakota teachers are tasked with including these Karen students in their classrooms and maintaining high standards of academic rigor, as are other teachers around the country in their own particular environments [6]. This situation begs the question: just what are South Dakota in-the-trenches teachers doing to adjust their classroom environments and instructional decisions? And, perhaps more importantly, what lessons are these teachers learning that can be shared with the larger community of educators to help to improve the quality of education that immigrant Karen students can experience. Unfortunately, there are few if any studies describing the specific needs and success pathways for Karen students in the scholarly literature, making this both a timely and needful domain for study.

Whereas the current study is focused on rural settings, one can look to Morefield’s work in ethnically diverse urban school districts that provides valuable insight to schools into how to work successfully with immigrant students [7]. In particular, Morefield reported that students consistently have the greatest level of success when teachers’ instructional decisions include content that connects to students’ personal lives, is engaging, and guides students towards understanding. This is a profound finding that bears out in multiple contexts of English language learners—and is wholly consistent with seminal work of Luis Moll [8], among others—as teachers who connect personally with students make more appropriate instructional decisions than those who do not. But the question remains as to the extent to which these recommended approaches can or will be adopted in the extreme rural areas of the U.S.

Even more important, the most unprepared teachers available are often placed into less desirable districts that are seen as being less desirable because of uncompetitive salaries and the enrolling of high numbers of children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Children from diverse backgrounds receive the least-prepared teachers. Along the same lines of working with an unexpected wide variety of students, but even more insightful, Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden [9] studied why teachers feel unprepared to
meet the needs of the classroom when they graduate from their pre-service programs. Ensuring that teachers have the necessary preparation to be able to reach their students with the instructional decisions that they make in their classroom is an essential element for achieving improved outcomes in student achievement. Their research revealed that the best path to student achievement is through consistent, coherent curriculum implementation across all grade levels while still maintaining academic rigor. Achieving such impacts is admittedly difficult for untrained teachers, but data confirm that it is worth the effort. In this context, it seems consistent that a teacher’s past experiences and present attitudes and beliefs are well poised to influence their perspectives and decision-making in the classroom. At the same time, one hopes that with awareness and targeted training, teachers will also have the autonomy and motivation to improve their instructional decision-making and make the best choices for their students and their classroom.

1.3. Extant Training Programs for ELL Teachers

Given that the vast number of ELL students entering the U.S. school systems is rapidly further increasing, one would hope that the current national cadre of teachers are well trained for this prior to encountering such diversity. Yet, few U.S. teachers are fully prepared to fully include these students in their classes. There are, of course, some large-scale and well-funded efforts underway to support the retraining of teachers across the U.S. For one, the National Professional Development Program (NPD) is a federal program offering professional development to teachers that specifically addresses the needs of ELL students. This program provides five-year grants to institutes of higher education to make sweeping changes to their teacher enhancement programming. The institutes then work with local community school districts to ensure that teachers are best prepared to meet the needs of ELL students in those districts. This has great potential to be a beneficial tool for both new teachers and practicing teachers. When ELL students are students are in the process of working towards the acquisition of the English language, teachers can be positioned to provide vitally needed support in order to access and develop the skills necessary to become language proficient and access academic content in order to be successful in school [10]. But, access to these programs is typically only available in high-density population centers.

What is clear is that far too few teachers receive sufficient specific ELL—referred to as EL students by Polat [11] rather than ELL students—training during their pre-service education, although, at the same time, when these students are in a teacher’s classroom, that teacher is responsible for all students’ academic achievement and language development through culturally responsive pedagogy. This is advocated because of past studies’ findings that teachers hold strong beliefs that strongly impact their pedagogical decisions, and these beliefs can often be unintentionally harmful to their ELL students. This certainly holds true in the domain of understanding how teachers teach ELL students as well. One of the most well-known studies was that carried out by Coady and colleagues [12], who performed mixed methods to study the beliefs and practices of two teachers in considerable depth. When these researchers looked carefully at recent graduates of teacher education programs that included second-language training to complete the teacher preparation program, they found considerable evidence that classrooms within the U.S. are becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse and that teachers were becoming more and more overwhelmed by the need to differentiate instruction wherever possible. Teacher preparation programs that include cultural and English as a second language (ESL) training seem to consistently lead to more successful classrooms and increased student achievement [13,14].

Although it might be quick and easy to place blame on existing teacher education programs for not preparing pre-service teachers to teach ELL students, Lucas [15] advocates that much of the blame should be aimed at the lack of resources because these resources do not often exist for teacher educators. Additionally, Lucas further advocates the importance behind teachers’ knowledge and comprehension of understanding that identity, culture, and language have deep ties to one another, stressing the importance of allowing students
to express themselves in their native language. This holds a deep connection to their past and gives them their identity.

1.4. Teachers Are Tasked with Educating a Variety of Students

Confounding sincere attempts to improve teaching of ELL students, many preconceptions and stereotypes have been documented to exist when encountering a diverse classroom. Although somewhat controversial in her broader views of education, many scholars agree with the perspective of Ladson-Billings [16] that teachers and their students would benefit much more by teachers walking into the classroom and focusing on the strengths of the students in front of them. In this sense, it is not essential for a teacher to be of the same cultural background as their students, but it is important for teachers to be accepting and including of the differences, as well as celebrating of the achievements of all students. Moreover, intellectual disagreement in this domain lies in the delicate realm of creating or forcing social reforms within the schools while ensuring that teacher education programs prepare teachers to meet the needs of a diverse population of students. What is not controversial is the notion that incorporating language interaction that is common to the cultures within a classroom or varying language interactions based on the wide range of cultures present in the classroom should help students to achieve at a higher-than-predicted level. In this way, instructional decisions are changed when pre-service and in-service teachers are able to articulate and put into action the idea that inclusion in the classroom is the best approach for ELL students, as everyone in the classroom benefits. The end result is that teachers’ belief in relevant instruction leading to academic achievement leads to greater proficiency.

More recently, Owens’ research [17], with much of its basis designed around Ladson-Billings’ theoretical frameworks about culturally relevant pedagogy, revealed that even schools that utilize cooperative learning, as well as a variety of instructional practices in the classroom, do not yield the highest academic achievement for ELL students. What Owens observed is that collaborative relationships with students help to break down barriers between students and teachers and build a welcoming learning environment. The end result is that ELL-trained teachers are better equipped with the necessary teaching skillset tools to communicate with ELL students, whereas general education teachers do not always have the skills necessary to do so. Such a situation calls for more teacher professional development. Owens goes on to conclude that including ELL pedagogy in all classrooms would increase the achievement of ELL students. In the end, thanks to the advocacy of Ladson-Billings, more focus has been placed on creating alternative approaches to reaching and teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The result is that we now have strong evidence suggesting that incorporating a student’s culture into the teaching and learning process benefits students [18].

This is not the end of the story. One question that still remains is if entrenched in-service teacher attitudes can be changed, thereby impacting classroom practice. According to Polat, who was cited earlier, although the results for changing teacher attitudes toward the instruction and inclusion of ELL students are not astounding, some progress came be made through additional training. It seems obvious that teachers should always be aware that different decisions about the instructional materials used to teach a student and the pedagogical practices used to teach the material can have an impact on student understanding. Yet, it is still unclear how the presence of different groups impacts the teaching decisions that are made daily in rural U.S. classrooms.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Questions

In response to the sudden influx of Karen immigrant students in South Dakota, we are motivated to conduct a research study centered around interviewing teachers in a school district with an unusually high proportion of Karen students to uncover and explore several fundamental questions about what is occurring in modern classrooms. The research
questions are as follows: How does the presence of Karen children in classrooms impact and influence what teachers do in the classroom? What should pre-service teacher programs be doing to better prepare teachers to work with Karen immigrant students based on the former question? Knowing the answers to these questions is important because this information can better position teacher educators to better prepare teachers to meet the needs of a wide variety of students.

2.2. Participants

Research participants consisted of educators in a rural South Dakota school district. The district is composed of the following student proportions: 44.3% White students, 28.2% Hispanic students, and 21% Asian students, with most of those students being Karen. This population of research participants is important because they have first-hand knowledge and experience working with Karen students in their classrooms. The criteria for participating in this study include employment within the district and a willingness to participate. Participants were interviewed during a private video teleconferencing session where dialogue was transcribed, and transcribed dialogues were approved by the participant.

Participants included 14 male and female educators, ranging in age from 28 to 64 years old. Participants represent a wide range of grade levels, beginning with kindergarten and spanning through high school. Additionally, one participant was a district-level administrator. All participants were Caucasian, representative of the nearly 100% Caucasian certified staff within the district. These educators have been working in the field for a range of 6 to 42 years. Only one participant had any specific English as a second language (ESL) training, while another teacher holds a minor in an unrelated language.

2.3. Methods

Exploratory case study was primarily used for this research. An exploratory case study examines specific phenomena that lack detailed preliminary research and conclusions [19]. When used, exploratory case studies can help us to explore phenomena in context and allow the researchers to use one or multiple data collection methods. In turn, this describes the cases in depth [20]. This study aims to look at the specific environment of classrooms that a large population of ESL students, specifically Karen students, attend. There are links that exist between Karen students in the classroom and how teachers adapt to meet the needs of their students. Simply surveying the teachers would not yield the same information as in-depth interviews about pedagogy, content, and classroom culture, as well as student–student, student–teacher, and teacher–parent relationships.

Case study research serves as a way for researchers to understand complex social interactions, allowing the emergence of real-life events [21]. To answer the research questions “How are teachers’ instructional decisions influenced by the presence of Karen immigrant students?” and “Which instructional decisions do teachers find most valuable in helping Karen immigrant students succeed in U.S. schools?”, an exploratory case study is the best approach. Exploratory case studies look to solve “how” and “why” research questions, while explanatory case studies are best for answering “what” research questions. The researcher has little control over the actual behavioral events in the classroom. This study is a contemporary issue, with little prior research being performed in the areas home to Karen refugee students. This research deals with technically distinctive situations that contain many variables that data points and surveys would not capture. Multiple sources of evidence are necessary to paint the picture of what teachers of Karen immigrant students do differently to create a successful learning environment.

Participants were interviewed for 40–60 min using the clinical interview script described below. Each interview was transcribed, and the data were analyzed using the best practices of thematic analysis advocated by Yin, cited earlier, by reading, highlighting, and rereading the transcripts repeatedly to identify the most common themes, continuing this process until no new themes emerged. The six main interview questions were as follows:
1. I want you to know that with the questions I am asking you, I am NOT judging or evaluating your instructional decisions, but instead trying to understand what influences teachers’ instructional decisions in the notably unique environment of South Dakota. Imagine I walk into your classroom. What do I see? What are you doing? What are the students doing?

2. What do I specifically see with the Karen students? Are they doing anything different than the other kids? Are you doing anything different with them? Why is that?

3. How does the presence of Karen students in your classroom impact and influence what you do in the classroom now and how is that different than your prior teaching experiences (even student teaching experiences)? Please explain?

4. Can you give some specific, concrete examples of what it is like to have Karen students in your classroom, for teachers who haven’t worked with diverse populations? Is there anything unique about the Karen culture, the student as a whole person, their family, etc. that sets them apart?

5. What specifically is it about Karen students that is important to know and appreciate in order for them to be successful? What strategies/interventions/tools have worked well in your classroom that could be shared in other classrooms?

6. What should “preservice educational programs” be doing to better prepare teachers to work with Karen immigrant students? Why is that? Explain.

3. Results

This study made use of standard qualitative research methods for coding and interpreting interview data by identifying emergent themes. As a result of considering and making sense of the emerging themes from the study interviews, the results frame a theory for instructional decisions that seems to consistently create success for Karen immigrant students composed by six themes: (a) authentic teacher–family relationships are key; (b) visual/hands-on learning and the use of technology enhance student achievement; (c) student work must be completed during the school day in classrooms; (d) teachers’ purposeful use of parallel language is critical for learning; (e) rigor can be maintained, although quantity is often adjusted; and (f) targeted ESL/cultural training for pre-service and newly hired teachers was positively influential.

Although all students have similarities, the interviewees consistently reported that teachers strongly believe that Karen immigrant students learn best when teachers’ instructional decisions adequately incorporate Karen culture. Teachers in this study further reported that their Karen students benefit most when teachers first build relationships and trust with their Karen students and Karen parents as a precursor to learning. This is most likely because Karen students seem to consistently be unlikely to communicate and fully engage with the learning process without establishing a healthy relationship with the teacher, who they highly respect as the leader of the classroom. Learning new material can be an inherently risky endeavor, and relationships seem to help to mitigate that risk. Teachers in this study described Karen students as flourishing best when teachers understand that schoolwork is best completed in the classroom, as outside-of-the-classroom time is rarely available for schoolwork in the lives of most Karen students.

Karen students seem to perform well when learning from and with their peers, and they do not have the necessary supports at home to complete work outside of school. Teachers in this study reported that many parents of Karen students work long hours, and many students are responsible for the care of the home and their younger siblings after school. Many Karen parents do not speak sufficient English to be able to assist their children with schoolwork. Moreover, teachers in this study consistently reported that their Karen parents understand and fully respect that the teachers are dedicated experts at schooling and are best equipped to meet the educational needs of Karen children.

Teachers in this study stress the importance of learning about Karen students and their cultures. To accomplish this, teachers can ask district leaders for assistance with this formally but can also research and ask questions on their own to further their understanding.
of Karen culture. Karen students are unlikely to communicate and participate in the learning process without establishing a healthy relationship with the teacher, who they highly respect as the leader of the classroom. Those relationships are more easily built when the teacher knows about the students’ culture and can create talking points for relationship builders.

At the same time, interviewees strongly believe that differentiated instruction works. Similarly, teachers in this study consistently hold the belief that the widest range of students are most successful when teachers diversify their teaching strategies beyond “stand and deliver”. In order for this to occur, teachers must become inquisitive anthropologists to learn about their students so that they can make informed instructional decisions to meet the educational needs of all students in their classroom.

In this study, teachers reported that particular teaching strategies seem to work best with their Karen immigrant students. For one, teachers in this study said that Karen students often learn best when they can see and touch the materials. Karen students consistently thrive when they can directly connect knowledge that they possessed prior to coming to the U.S. to the new information being presented. Seeing things to be tightly connected appears to help Karen students to make and retain those connections. Naturally, this requires an adept teacher to make the effort to become familiar with the experiences of Karen students.

Perhaps surprisingly, teachers in this study reported that technology is tool that can benefit Karen students in many ways. For one, many teachers can use technology to connect new ideas with prior knowledge through pictures and videos, as has been widely advocated by Collins and his colleagues [22]. Other teachers find that technology can also be used to quickly translate information between English and other languages, still enforcing the understanding of concepts while cutting out the time that is needed to translate every piece of learning material. Moreover, another beneficial instructional strategy is the use of parallel language. What seems to be true is that as Karen immigrant students are learning the English language, it is important for teachers to note that local American slang interferes with learning and that Karen students benefit from removing local slang from their teaching discourse and instead emphasizing the use of common terms, both in specific courses and across all educational coursework.

In all cases, the teachers cited in this study believe that Karen immigrant students are held to the same high standard in regard to quality of work and rigor of curriculum. These students may, however, need adjustments in the quantity of work assigned. As students work to translate an English assignment into a concept that they can understand in their mind through the Karen language, formulate a response, and translate that back into English to answer the question, a great deal of educational time is spent.

To best prepare teachers to make instructional decisions that most benefit Karen immigrant students, experienced teachers in this study prescribe that specific training is necessary. In this case, not only should pre-service teacher education programs incorporate a wide variety of culturally relevant pedagogical instruction, but in-service teachers also benefit from frequent, reoccurring training that specifically targets the needs of these immigrant students.

Statistics show that the number of ELL students in U.S. schools is continuing to increase, as cited on homepage of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a part of the U.S. Department of Education. These students are working to gain the necessary language skills to achieve academic success. Teachers and pre-service teachers benefit from being equipped with the best tools and instructional strategies to be able to successfully meet that needs of all students in their classroom. This case study shows that teacher training on the specific culture of students in a classroom leads to more culturally relevant pedagogical instruction.
3.1. Emerging Theme 1: Relationships Are Key to Nurturing Student Success

While building relationships with students in the classroom is a research-proven approach to reaching all students, those interviewed found that building relationships is increasingly important for their Karen students. As much as learning about what is going on in a student’s life helps to build trust with that student, teachers also find benefits to be vulnerable depending on what is going on in their own lives. Sharing personal experiences and stories about one’s own family helps Karen students to see teachers as someone who they know and can trust. Although Karen students are hesitant to initiate the building of such relationships with teachers, they are inherently inquisitive and eager to learn. Once Karen students trust a teacher and feel comfortable in their classroom, Karen students feel like they are a member of the group instead of an outsider. Teachers should provide opportunities in the classroom for Karen students to open up not only to the adults but also to other students in the classroom. These foundational relationships help Karen students to be more successful in the classroom. When positive relationships are established between the teacher and students, Karen students are more willing to ask questions about the material and ask for clarification if they have any misunderstanding. Being able to ask clarifying questions during instruction ultimately leads to greater understanding of the content being taught, increasing student success in school.

Aside from feeling comfortable with the classroom teacher, Karen students also seem to have considerable reluctance to speak up in the class for fear that they might be wrong or say something incorrectly. There are many long-lasting cultural differences that Karen students remember from their time in refugee camps in Thailand. The students bring these memories with them to their classrooms in the U.S.. In the refugee camps, the punishment that ensued when answering questions incorrectly in Thailand was that of pain and shame. Students were slapped on the wrist or hit with sticks when the wrong answer was given. Karen students fear that the same repercussions will happen in the educational setting in America. If positive relationships are not established between the teacher and student, this fear remains. This is another reason why positive relationships between the teacher and students are vitally important.

Teachers in this study believe that it is important for teachers of Karen students to be cognizant that that Karen students may be new to the U.S. culture all together. Due to being new to the country, students might be separated from their extended families who they once saw every day and unfamiliar with the way of life in the U.S. This includes the language that we speak and slang words that we use, foods that we eat, the houses that we live in, and, more specifically, our educational system. Many times, when Karen students arrive, only a few members of their family arrive with them. Grandparents, parents, or siblings may still be living in Myanmar or the refugee camps in Thailand. With members of the family living in areas of the world much different and more dangerous than the U.S., students miss and worry about their extended family. Watching national news and hearing international stories about the constant and long-standing civil war occurring in their home country of Myanmar naturally makes students fear for their loved ones’ safety. This may lead to feelings of isolation and despair, causing students to be more withdrawn and less willing to participate in class. This situation can be helped when positive relationships exist between the teacher and student. A teacher’s knowledge of where Karen students came from and the hardships that exist in their lives makes it easier for them to empathize with the students and lets the students know that the teacher cares about them, outside of and beyond the classroom. When these relationships are fostered, students are further willing to participate in classroom learning, benefiting everyone.

3.2. Emerging Theme 2: Visual/Hands-On Learning and the Use of Technology Has Benefits

When students are not fluent in the language spoken in the classroom or even if students speak English, but it is not their first language, students can benefit from interacting with the learning process through visual or hands-on materials [23]. For Karen students, whether new to the country with little English language speaking ability or resident in the
country for years and fluent in the English language, visual and hands-on materials can increase their understanding of key pieces necessary for success in school.

In addition to research supporting visual and hands-on learning, technology has become a part of everyday learning in most classrooms across the U.S. Technology integration starts at the beginning of the day as teachers take attendance, answer parent emails, and grade work submitted via a Learning Management System (LMS). It continues throughout the day with the use of 1:1 student devices and Smart Boards used to project learning material. Since the use of technology is only increasing, it is important to highlight how the use of technology can benefit learning for Karen students. These devices, which are readily available in most classrooms, can meet even the educational needs of students.

English is a complex language and can be difficult to learn. There are several vocabulary words that can have the same meaning and other terms that can mean several different things. This is true not only in day-to-day language but also in formal educational language that is necessary for academic achievement. This is complex and can be difficult to understand and keep straight for Karen students in American classrooms. Allowing students to see visuals of what you are discussing in class, as well as finding a way for students to interact with the materials, enhances learning. Students can connect a name with a corresponding picture, thus connecting the learning.

Using technology, students can look up words that they do not understand and quickly translate them to their first language. This not only helps in learning the English language but can also help in all subjects. Teachers can also utilize this technology to translate Notes documents. When Notes documents are translated, students have access to class materials in both English and Karen, increasing understanding and the use of the English language. When terms or places are unfamiliar to Karen students, a quick internet search helps to build a picture in a student’s mind, connecting the learning.

3.3. Emerging Theme 3: Work Must Be Completed during the School Day

Scholars have long argued about the supposed benefits of homework. What is even more uncertain about the research on homework is the age at which when homework benefits students’ learning. Depending on the student and the household, different advantages or disadvantages may exist. For Karen families, it is common for parents to work long hours and into the evening. This leaves Karen students with younger siblings with the responsibility of taking care of the home and their siblings in the evening. With a list of responsibilities, it is difficult for Karen students to find the time to complete work that is sent home. It is also common for Karen parents to not have any formal education in English. This means that parents may not speak or read English at the same level as their student or at a level that would allow them to assist their student with homework. Both of these create barriers for Karen students to complete their work at home.

Parents of Karen students also have an immense amount of respect for teachers in U.S. schools. Parents revere teachers as educational experts and want their students to learn from those experts during school hours. Karen parents seem to consistently push their student to do the very best that they can and support everything that the teacher says. They do, however, feel that their student has the best chance of success when students are in the presence of their teacher. A secondary advantage of Karen parents supporting teachers and schools is that there are very few classroom disciplinary issues among the children. Karen parents are adamant that their children are always respectful to teachers and others, especially in school.

3.4. Emerging Theme 4: Parallel Language Is a Consistently Successful Strategy

With the mention of how the English language can be confusing to learn due to many words with multiple meanings and many words with the same meaning, it is important for teachers of Karen students to use parallel language. Parallel language refers to the use of common terms throughout a subject and even between subjects. The use of parallel language benefits Karen students and also benefits every student in the classroom. It is a
secondary advantage that all students benefit from parallel language, but it is a necessity because it benefits the most marginalized students in the room.

When Karen students are learning to master the English language, they need simplification with terms that can have the same definition. Once students have mastered those words, then additional words can be introduced with the explanation that those words have the same meaning as a term the student learned previously. An area of school where this can be especially beneficial is in the math classroom. The terms “add” and “plus” mean the same thing. They are even represented with the same symbol, but these terms can be confusing when learning the English language. Simplifying the language while students learn the terms and then adding in additional terms to match the definition later gives time for students to comprehend the material.

3.5. Emerging Theme 5: Rigor Can Be Maintained If Quantity Is Reduced

Learning new information in a language that is different than the first language that you learned and the language that is spoken in your home is a challenge. Doing so creates an additional step. Students are required to read the material in English while translating that information into their first language. They then formulate a response in their home language, translate it back into English, and then write their response. This takes additional time and effort for students.

Teachers in this study stressed the importance of keeping the rigor of their coursework the same for all students, regardless of their English language level. Those interviewed stressed the importance of keeping the rigor the same for students who are new to the country, those who have been in the U.S. for years, and those who were born here whose first language is English. Lessening the rigor results in an intentional difference in results. Teachers want all students to excel in their classes and, thus, push them all in the same way, giving them the same expectations.

Teachers do, however, recognize the importance of adjusting the quantity of work to meet the Karen students’ needs based on where they are at in their learning of the English language. It may take a Karen student twice the amount of time to read a question, convert it to Karen to be able to fully understand the question, formulate a response in Karen, convert that response to a response that they then write in English, and then write it in English. If this is the case, then it makes sense to reduce the number of problems that the student is required to complete by half. Ultimately, this leads to the same amount of work for the student, and the teacher has still completed enough work to be able to assess all students’ understanding of the topic.

Teachers have also found that it is only necessary to assign and grade work that they plan on assessing. Busy work such as providing multiple worksheets on the same topic is unnecessary. Without unnecessary work being assigned, teachers have more time to complete all assignments that they want to use for assessment during class time. This technique solves the problem of students facing difficulties when asked to complete work at home and gives teachers more time during class to work one-on-one with students, as well as work with students to master the standards for that course subject.

4. Discussion

These results delineate clear pointers toward effective teacher education. It is often tacitly assumed that far too few teacher education preparation programs place an emphasis on preparing new teachers for work with ESL students and students from different cultural backgrounds. Depending on the state, some licensing boards require specific classes on one culture, for example, Native American culture, but do not extend that to include all the cultures within the state, as well as cultures that new teachers are likely to see as they head into their first teaching jobs. In the district that was the focus of this study, over one-fourth of the student population identifies as Asian, and more than one-fourth identifies as Hispanic. Neither of these cultures are a focus in teacher preparation program in South Dakota, nor are they a focus in teacher preparation programs across the U.S.
Taken together, each of these themes revolves around strategies and best practices that benefit all students. Some of these strategies were developed specifically to help the most marginalized, and now end up helping everyone [24]. However, these strategies are not continued because they help everyone; they are continued to continue meeting the needs of the marginalized.

In terms of future research, more in-depth examination of teacher experiences through a systematic ethnographic study may yield additional insights. Interviewing Karen students and families may allow for a narrative approach to telling the story of the students and families that are impacted by the instructional decisions in their classroom(s). Students and their families may tell an advanced story of their journey to the U.S. and the impact that their past has on education and the educational system. At the same time, the results presented here provide first-steps guidance for teachers who need actionable information to better teach their students.

As a result of this study, several themes emerged, and our findings can be used to help researchers to better prepare both pre-service and in-service teachers to meet the needs of their students. These repeated themes are as follows: (a) authentic teacher–family relationships are key; (b) visual/hands-on learning and the use of technology enhance student achievement; (c) student work must be completed during the school day in classrooms; (d) teachers’ purposeful use of parallel language is critical for learning; (e) rigor can be maintained, although quantity is often adjusted; and (f) targeted ESL/cultural training for pre-service and newly hired teachers was positively influential.

The participants in this study consistently reported that the relationships that teachers build with their students help students to feel welcomed in the classroom and positively impact student outcomes. In much the same way, ELL students seem to benefit from a teachers’ use of visual/hands-on learning and the use of technology. This is because technology seems to ease communication barriers and help students with word association. ELL students also reportedly benefit when work is completed in school, with little to no homework sent home. As students progress in grades and when homework is required, students benefited from having a firm understanding of the material and being better able to complete their work independently. Moreover, participants enthusiastically described the benefits that teachers obtain when using parallel language in their teaching. This reportedly benefits ELL students and all students in the classroom.

The underlying idea here is that when students know key subject vocabulary terms, additional terms may be added upon a strong foundation of existing knowledge. Additionally, there are benefits to students when teachers apply equal rigor and communicate high learning outcomes for all students. Although ELL students often require a lower quantity of problems due to the complexity of language conversion, these students benefit from being held to the same high standard as all other students in the classroom [25]. Participants further described their firm belief that new teachers (both recent graduates and teachers hired in a district with ELL students) would benefit greatly if they receive English as a second language (ESL) and cultural training. This training might help teachers to learn key cultural distinctions and be better able to determine the most effective ways to meet the needs of their students.

The results of this study point the community toward a justification and motivation for performing additional research in this domain. Additional insights into the nature of how teachers teach Karen students and how Karen students engage in learning could provide important avenues that could increase the success of Karen students, not just in South Dakota but across the Western hemisphere. Most of the teachers in this study serve primary and early secondary students. As a result, we gained little insight into the educational needs of upper secondary students. Similarly, this study did not differentiate between Karen students who just recently arrived in the U.S. and those that have immigrated after a period of time living elsewhere in the U.S. Moreover, it is unclear from this study precisely which teacher educator professional development programs are best placed to have the most immediate effect on improving education for Karen students, given that little research
is performed at the pre-service teacher preparation level. What we still do not know is what is the most efficient way to help teachers who suddenly encounter Karen students in their classroom get up to speed and provide high-quality instruction with limited interference with their other teaching duties. In total, these results serve as a call to action for the ELL scholarly community to better understand how teachers can more quickly adapt their instruction to benefit Karen students from a variety of research angles—both quantitative and interpretive.

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