# Parental Involvement with Children's Schooling: Exploring the Experiences of Hmong Parents in Charter Schools

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## Abstract

Parental involvement is well-documented in the literature. Although research suggests a strong positive association between parental involvement and children's educational outcomes, few studies have examined parental involvement at home with children who attend charter schools, especially with small immigrant groups such as the Hmong. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how Hmong parents of students in charter schools were involved in their children's education at home and what barriers they faced. This study included 23 Hmong parents (9 fathers, 15 mothers) of elementary school-aged children enrolled in three Hmong-focused charter schools in Minnesota. The results showed several themes related to barriers for at-home school involvement, including work schedules, literacy barriers, lack of spousal support, and multiple children at home. Despite these barriers, Hmong parents also indicated that they sacrificed for their children's education by taking on multiple jobs, created and maintained regular family routines to monitor children's education, and connected children to appropriate resources for homework help, including older siblings. Implications for school administrators and teachers who work with Hmong parents, especially Hmong parents who have children enrolled in charter schools, are also discussed.

Key Words: parental involvement, parenting practices, charter schools, Hmong Americans, family routines, homework help, barriers, literacy, support

## Introduction

Understanding parental involvement in immigrant families is timely, given the growth of the immigrant population, especially children of immigrants, in the United States (Cohn, 2015). According to a 2022 report, there are approximately 84.8 million immigrants and their U.S.-born children living in the U.S. (Esterline & Batalova, 2022). It is projected that by 2065 the immigrant population, including their U.S.-born children, will rise to approximately 36% (Lopez et al., 2015). Immigrants, particularly involuntary immigrants, are likely to be poor and live in low-income neighborhoods (Carroll, 2021; Hernandez et al., 2009; Pfeifer et al., 2012). Although low-income immigrant parents are less likely to be involved at the school level in activities such as volunteering in the classroom or parent–teacher conferences, immigrant parents are involved in children's learning in a variety of ways that may not always be recognized by schools (Turney & Kao, 2009). Empirical evidence, including Jeynes meta-analyses (2010, 2011), suggest that parental involvement at home best predicts student success (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001). However, most of the parental involvement research tends to focus on White and other racial/ethnic minority families (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Pearce, 2006), families from other international countries (Ashraf, 2019; Gan & Bilige, 2019), and other immigrant populations whose children are in traditional public schools (Antony-Newman, 2019; Cun, 2020). Few studies have examined parental involvement at home with children who attend charter schools, especially with small immigrant groups such as the Hmong (Lamborn & Moua, 2008; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple & Cavanaugh, 2013).

Investigating Hmong parental involvement is important since the Hmong are involuntary immigrants who came to the U.S. as political refugees (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). As part of the resettlement, many Hmong chose Minnesota as their destination (McNall et al., 1994) because of its reputation for job opportunities and quality education for children (Pha, 2019). Today, Minnesota is home to the second largest Hmong population in the U.S. (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2011). The Hmong population in Minnesota is young and has one of the largest family sizes. For example, the median age of the Hmong population is 25 compared to 38 for Minnesotans (Pew Research Center, 2021), and family size is 5.4 compared to 2.5 for Minnesotan households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

In recent years, Hmong parents were deeply concerned about the quality of the traditional public schools and the lack of heritage language and culture in the curriculum (Adler, 2004; Thao, 2003; William, 2018). As such, beginning in the 2000s, Hmong educators began to open public charter schools as

an alternative school choice for Hmong parents (Pha, 2019; Williams, 2018). Currently, there are a handful of charter schools that focus on Hmong culture and language (Lor, 2021). However, little is known about parents who have children in charter schools in general and Hmong in particular. Therefore, we seek to understand the following research questions: What challenges do parents face at home as they try to support their children's education? How do parents get involved in their children's schooling at home? Understanding home-based parental involvement is important since Hmong parental involvement tends to occur more frequently outside of school (Juang & Meschke, 2017; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple et al., 2010). Like other Asian American parents (Chao, 2000; Sy et al., 2007), Hmong parents tend to engage in structural involvement instead of managerial involvement (Chao, 2000). According to Chao, structural involvement focuses on the day-to-day involvement outside of school that supports children's learning and development, compared to the traditional managerial involvement where parents are expected to be involved in school activities, events, and children's direct academic learning. To better understand Hmong parents' structural involvement, we adopted Grolnick and Slowiaczek's (1994) definition of parent involvement to guide our analysis, which refers to "the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain" (p. 238). This is similar to Epstein's (1995) first and fourth types of parental involvement wherein parents are responsible for setting a home environment that supports children's learning, monitoring children's activities, and helping children with homework. We believed this definition and types of parental involvement allow us to focus on how Hmong parents "choose to devote their time and energies" (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994, p. 238) at home to be involved in their children's education.

## Backgrounds of Charter Schools Focusing on Hmong Language and Culture in Minnesota

Today, there are 7,500 charter schools and campuses across 44 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam, with nearly 3.3 million students enrolled, with the number of charter schools increasing every year (David & Hesla, 2018). Minnesota became home to the first charter school when City Academy was opened in 1992 (Bailey & Cooper, 2009). In Minnesota, there are 164 charter schools, and 65% of these charter schools are in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) metropolitan area. Currently, there are approximately 56,000 students enrolled in charter schools. Since 2000, more than 10 charter schools that focus on Hmong language and culture [hereafter referred to as Hmong charter schools] have been authorized in Minnesota, enrolling over 7,000 Asian, mostly (90.47%) Hmong, students (Minnesota Department of

Education, n.d.). Most Hmong charter schools are in the seven-county metro area where 97% of the Hmong in Minnesota live (Bailey & Cooper, 2009; Pfeifer et al., 2012). St. Paul has the most Hmong charter schools, and every year they attract a sizable number of Hmong students from traditional public schools (Dernbach, 2022). Yet, there is a dearth of studies focusing on Hmong parents with children in charter schools.

## Challenges of Parental Involvement in Children's Schooling at Home

Despite the value charter schools place on parental involvement, many low-income, immigrant parents continue to encounter challenges in being involved in their children's education (Englund et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Studies with immigrant parents found that English language competency plays an important role in their ability to help with their children's school-related work at home (Ashraf, 2019; Crozier & Davies, 2006; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Hmong parents, especially the first-generation immigrants, also lack knowledge of Western education and face language barriers due to their limited formal education prior to the resettlement (Adler, 2004; Yang, 2008). Studies have consistently shown that parents who lack English fluency tend to be less involved (Aung & Yu, 2007; Pho, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Specifically, Mueller and colleagues (1996) showed that Hmong parents tend to face significant English language barriers and inflexible work schedules. As such, they were less likely to get involved with their children's homework, especially after their children transitioned to the middle and high school grades. Indeed, most adolescents reported that they tend to rely on their siblings for homework help and other educational support at home (Hirayama & Hirayama, 1988; Lee & Green, 2008).

Ngo (2017) reviewed the literature on Southeast Asians, including Hmong, and found that financial hardship was one of the major challenges parents faced as they tried to support their children's education. Other studies also found that low-income parents, like the Hmong, continue to struggle to get involved due to their work commitments (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Smith et al., 2011) and large family size (Stright et al., 2009). For example, Turney and Kao (2009) investigated parental involvement using the ECLS-K (NCES, 2001) dataset and found minority immigrant parents faced significantly more barriers to school involvement compared to White parents, possibly because Hmong and other poor immigrant parents are more likely to face financial hardship, inflexible work schedules, and other cultural barriers (Antony-Newman, 2019; Aung & Yu, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2017; Grant & Wong, 2004; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Pho, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006).

## Parents' Roles and Strategies Used to Be Involved in Children's Education at Home

Despite language and cultural barriers, immigration status, and low-income backgrounds, research also suggests that immigrant parents tend to view education as a way out of poverty; therefore, they are likely to hold high educational aspirations for their children (Ceballo et al., 2014; Garcia & de Guzman, 2020). Although they may be viewed as less involved in school activities, evidence suggests that immigrant parents, especially Asian American parents, are actively involved in their children's education in different ways at home (Li, 2006), such as monitoring children's activities at home (Lee & Green, 2008), controlling children's screen time (Sy et al., 2007), and providing private tutoring or other additional courses to support children's learning (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Despite their levels of involvement at home, immigrant parents continue to be viewed as less involved, especially when it comes to school-based involvement such as attending parent–teacher conferences or volunteering at school (Crosnoe, 2010; Ji & Koblinksy, 2009; Snell, 2018).

Hmong parents are not the exception to this negative perception, given their language barriers and a history of invisibility (Adler, 2004; Thao, 2003). For example, 75% of school staff in Adler's (2004) study did not think that Hmong parents could support their children's education at home. Yet, studies with Hmong parents and children continue to point to the opposite. Supple et al.'s (2010) study on Hmong college students' perceptions of their parents' parenting using focus groups found several parental involvement strategies parents used to motivate students' schooling, including "giving money or other rewards for good grades, threatening punishment for poor grades, and checking grades" (p. 21). Furthermore, they found that Hmong parents tend to communicate their love to their children through sacrifices they make to give their children a better life compared to their own. Juang and Meschke (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 30 Hmong American young adults and found that their parents were constantly talking to them about school-related subjects and exerting a high level of restrictions on their non-school activities at home. Lee and Green (2008) interviewed 10 Hmong families (adolescent, father, and mother) of higher achiever and low achiever groups and found that both adolescents and parents reported that parents were actively involved in their adolescents' lives by providing ongoing monitoring and controlling children's whereabouts and friends. Xiong and Lee (2005) surveyed over 300 Hmong parents with at least one child who is under the age of 5 and found that 45% to 49% of Hmong parents reported being involved with their children in various tasks, ranging from playing with their children to working on literacy-related tasks to watching television in the same room.

Despite the emerging research on Hmong parental involvement at home, there are still a few gaps in the literature. First, most studies on parental involvement behaviors at home included reports from adolescents and young adults without first-hand accounts from parents (Juang & Meschke, 2017; Supple et al., 2010). Second, studies that included parents either focused on the early childhood years (Xiong & Lee, 2005) or those with adolescent children (Lee & Green, 2008). Focusing on students in the later years of elementary school is of particular interest because development during middle childhood (ages 7–11) years is more strongly associated with long-term school success than development during other life stages (Duncan et al., 2007), and parents are more involved in children's schooling during the elementary years, compared to the middle and high school years (Dearing et al., 2006; Lee & Green, 2008). Lastly, most parental involvement studies have focused on parents and/or children in traditional public schools (Juang & Meschke, 2017; Lee, 2007; Supple et al., 2010). To date, there is a dearth of published studies investigating parents who put their children in Hmong charter schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the challenges Hmong parents of children attending Hmong charter schools faced and identify common at-home involvement behaviors and strategies used by parents to help with their children's education.

## Methods

### Recruitment

Participants were recruited from three Hmong charter schools in Minnesota where their children participated in the Hmong Children's Longitudinal Study which involved over 200 upper elementary students that focused on Hmong culture and language (Xiong et al., 2021). Specifically, the first author met with each charter school administrator to draft and sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) about the study. The first author is of Hmong descent and is bicultural and bilingual in Hmong and English. He has over 20 years of experience working in the Hmong community in Minnesota, especially with Hmong families and children (Xiong et al., 2001; Xiong et al., 2021). Once the MOU was signed, the first author worked with each school administrator to draft an invitation letter in English and Hmong to send home, asking for parents' participation in the study. The bilingual letter was sent to 153 Hmong and non-Hmong parents of fifth, sixth, and seventh graders in the Hmong Children's Longitudinal Study during the spring of 2019. Thirty-four parents (31 Hmong and 3 non-Hmong; 22% response rate) expressed an interest to be in the study, and 25 Hmong parents agreed to be interviewed. The other nine participants refused to participate due to scheduling conflicts or after learning more about the purpose of the study.

Of the 25 participants in the study, there were two participants whose spouses also joined in during the interview. The first spouse of one of the participants (Bao's husband, a pseudonym as are all names below, created to protect the identity of the participants) joined the interview after the first 15 minutes; thus, we were not able to collect his demographic information, and he was excluded from the original count of 25 participants. The spouse of another participant (Chertong) decided to participate in the interview with his wife from the beginning, so we were able to collect his demographic information (see Table 1), and he was included in the overall count. However, we decided to treat all spousal transcripts as one unit of analysis, since both spouses lived in the same household and shared the same children. Additionally, we also decided to remove one participant who refused to continue the interview after learning more about the interviewer. Thus, we were left with a total of 23 participant responses, including the two spouses' narratives as one unit of analysis each.

## Data Collection

To ensure quality data were collected, two experienced community members who are bilingual and bicultural in Hmong were hired and trained to conduct the interviews with the first author. Furthermore, the two bilingual and bicultural interviewers were required to observe the first two interviews conducted by the first author, who has more than 20 years of experience in qualitative interviews with Hmong parents, to ensure all interview protocols were followed. Prior to each interview, each interviewer took about five to ten minutes to explain the consent process, answer questions, and acquire written consent from participants before proceeding to the interview. The semi-structured interview—which included questions on the participants' background information and description of their activities, family rules, and challenges to parental involvement—was conducted in Hmong by each interviewer. Interview questions were adopted from the Hmong Children's Longitudinal Study (Xiong et al., 2001), as well as from previous research with Hmong families (Xiong et al., 2008), to capture the diversity of views on Hmong parental involvement behaviors at home. Specific parental behaviors at home were also borrowed from Epstein's (1995) first and fourth types of parental involvement. Sample questions included: What are your typical family activities and routines on a daily basis? Who is usually involved in these activities and routines? Why or why not? Do you have rules in your family? Who is enforcing these rules and how? How do you feel when it comes to helping your children learn in general and homework in particular? Do you have anyone else who can also help your children do their homework? If so, who and how?

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

| Name | Family Structure | Age | Age Arrived | Year Arrived | Sex | Education | Employment | Marital Status | # of Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bao | Nuclear | 35 | 21 | 2005 | Female | No formal ed. | Assembly | Married | 4 |
| Der | Single parent | 40 | 17 | 1995 | Female | HS Diploma | Assembly | Divorced | 6 |
| Ia | Nuclear | 30 | U.S. Born | | Female | BA | Nurse/ Supervising PCA | Married | 3 |
| Kongmeng | Nuclear | 36 | 15 | 2005 | Male | Some college | IT | Married | 6 |
| Ka | Blended | 50 | 15 | 1984 | Female | Some college | Assembly and Self-employed | Married | 5 |
| Kalia | Single parent | 41 | 10 | 1988 | Female | BA | Human Service | Divorced | 4 |
| Wahoua | Blended | 47 | 19 | 1990 | Male | GED | Unemployed | Remarried | 6 |
| Kia | Blended | 39 | 11 | 1989 | Female | BA | Self-employed | Remarried | 3 |
| Chertong (couple) | Blended | 38 | U.S. Born | 1980 (Family) | Male | MBA | Self-employed | Remarried | 6 |
| Dia (couple) | Blended | 35 | U.S. Born | 1979 (Family) | Female | BA | Self-employed | Remarried | 6 |
| Chuepeng | Nuclear | 49 | 19 | 1990 | Male | BA | Human service and Self-employed | Married | 5 |
| May | Nuclear | 33 | 19 | 2005 | Female | No formal ed. | Unemployed | Married | 5 |
| Mee | Single parent | 32 | 20 | 2006 | Female | No formal ed. | Assembly | Divorced | 7 |
| Ong | Nuclear | 41 | 5 | 1984 | Female | BA | Human service and Self-employed | Married | 8 |
| Wakai | Blended | 52 | 13 | 1980 | Male | Some college | Machinist | Remarried | 9 |
| Pahoua | Single parent | 48 | 22 | 1993 | Male | HS Diploma | Technician | Divorced | 7 |
| See | Single parent | 52 | 15 | 1983 | Female | BA | Media and Self-employed | Widowed | 5 |
| Song | Single parent | 38 | 25 | 2005 | Female | No formal ed. | Assembly | Divorced | 3 |
| Tria | Nuclear | 33 | U.S. Born | Unsure | Female | Some college | Healthcare | Married | 6 |
| True | Nuclear | 26 | 14 | 2005 | Female | HS Diploma | Manufacture | Married | 3 |
| Va | Nuclear | | 16 | 1988 | Female | HS | Unemployed | Married | 7 |
| Chiaying | Nuclear | 45 | 35 | 2004 | Male | No formal ed. | Assembly | Widowed, remarried | 8 |
| Xue | Blended | 40 | 30 | 2011 | Female | No formal ed. | PCA | Remarried | 11 |
| Jouacho | Nuclear | 44 | 32 | 2004 | Male | No formal ed. | Contractor and Driver | Married | 6 |

All interviews were conducted one-on-one, and they took place between February and June of 2019. Ten interviews were completed remotely by phone due to scheduling issues, while the other 15 interviews were carried out in-person at the participants' homes or children's school conference rooms. All interviews lasted for about an hour (range, 48–115 minutes, mean of 74 minutes, with a standard deviation of 17 minutes), except for one interview where the participant decided to stop the interview after learning that s/he knew the interviewer, and all were audiorecorded for later analysis. Despite the different modes used to conduct the interviews, it did not appear to impact the length or substance of the interviews when looking across transcripts. To thank them for their participation, all participants were compensated with $20 in cash.

## Sample Characteristics

There was a total of 23 participants included in the analysis for this study, since we treated each set of two-couple data as a single unit of analysis. As such, there were a total of 16 mothers and 8 fathers, with ages ranging from 26 to 52 (M = 40.45, SD = 7.23; note that we included the second spouse's demographic data here). Of participants 20 were foreign-born, and four, including the second spouse, were U.S.-born. Of the foreign-born, 15 of the participants came before 2004, and nine arrived after 2004. Note that those who arrived in the U.S. after 2004 are part of the last migration wave of the Hmong in America from the temple called Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand (Grigoleit, 2006), and are the recent sponsored spouses of U.S. Hmong citizens or permanent legal residents. Most of the participants were either married or remarried at the time of the study ($n$ = 17) and had a high school education or lower ($n$ = 11). For example, seven participants only had a few fragmented years of adult education or vocational training in the U.S. (See Table 1). All names used in the article are pseudonyms; however, all other demographic information was based on self-reports from the participants.

## Data Analysis

Prior to the analysis, a team of seven bilingual and bicultural Hmong-descent persons (five advanced undergraduate family social science students, two community members who worked in social services) were trained to translate and transcribe five of the audiorecorded interviews for coding training purposes. Analysis involved listening to the actual audiorecorded interviews, except for these four interviews (May, Mee, Wakai, and See; Table 1). These four transcripts, along with the other 19 recorded audios, were assigned to a team of seven coders to code based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures. For reliability purposes, two sub-teams (2 undergraduate and 1

graduate student) were assigned to code the same two randomly selected cases for each research question. Team members used two translated transcripts and listened to the audiorecorded interviews to create initial codes. Initial codes and meaning units developed based on an interpretive open coding procedure from each team member were compared and discussed to ensure all team members agreed on the coding. Then the initial codes were used to develop a tentative codebook for each research question. The first author served as an internal auditor to check the initial codes from the codebook against the original transcripts to ensure the codes captured what participants were sharing (Hill et al., 2005). Next, each team member was assigned to code three transcripts using the codebook as a guide and recorded all codes on an Excel sheet. Since the definitions and meanings for the codes in the codebook were further developed during this process, some of the code names were borrowed from the relevant literature, while others were developed based on the texts. Finally, codes that shared the same meanings were grouped into larger themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Rigor

Data collection and data analysis were based on a team approach (Hill et al., 2005); thus, data triangulation was highly valued. All interviews were conducted by three trained interviewers, and all transcriptions and translations were completed by a team of seven trained graduate and undergraduate students in addition to the first author who served as the auditor. Additionally, the team engaged in peer debriefing throughout the analysis when codes, subthemes, and themes were discussed prior to finalization. We believe this team approach allowed us to faithfully represent the participants' voices well (Speziale & Carpenter, 2011).

## Results

### Challenges of Parental Involvement in Children's Education

Analysis of the transcripts revealed four themes that highlighted the challenges Hmong parents faced with involvement as they tried to involve in their children's schooling: *living in a hurried life; "I don't know how to help my children": Barriers to homework assistance; lack of help from spouses or ex-spouses*; and *having multiple children at home*. Although the themes are presented in the order of frequency of occurrence from most frequent to least, not all themes are presented uniformly due to the limitation and unevenness of the data.

*Living in a Hurried Life*

Interview data suggest that being a Hmong parent is not easy. We found that parents in this study had to juggle many demands in addition to parenting their children. Our analyses found two challenges under this theme: inflexible work schedules and family obligations. Sixteen participants (67% of the participants and 50% of their spouses or ex-spouses) were employed in nonstandard work, usually involved in manufacturing and self-employed jobs, and had inflexible work schedules. Nonstandard work refers to jobs that require employees to work during the evenings, nights, and weekends or jobs that occur outside the regular working hours of 8:00 am and 6:00 pm (Li et al., 2014). For example, during our interview, both Bao and her husband told us the reality of their inflexible work schedules and their desire to be involved in their children's schooling. Bao's husband, who decided to quit his job to care for his children and parents, said, "If I keep coming home early, the manager may take notice, and it won't look good for me. I could possibly lose my job." Similarly, Ka, a mother in a blended family of five children, also told us the same: "The two older children, I have a lot of time to spend with them because during that time period I was in school, but later on when I started to work, I didn't really have time to spend with the younger children."

In addition to the inflexible work schedules, four participants (17%) also worked a second job or had a side business to make ends meet. As such, these parents told us that they were extremely overscheduled and rarely had time for their family. Ong, a college educated, second-generation mother of eight children, felt that her family does not have enough time together. She said, "Life is very hurried; mom doesn't get to see the dad, and dad doesn't get to see the mom....Our children have their own schedules, and we have our own. There is no time for them [children]." Bao, a mother who came to the U.S. in the mid-2000s, described how busy she is at home as a mother of four this way:

> Ah, my schedule…I work from 6:00 am to 2:30 pm. Then, I come home to pick up my kids, and at 7:00 or 8:00 pm I have my own business—cleaning people's houses.…Yes, from Monday through Friday, I do this all the time.…My husband; he has his own business as well during the day.…In the morning, he takes care of my children to go to school. Then, during lunch, he has a chicken farm, then he goes there to watch his chickens for a bit. Then at 9 o'clock, he takes my older child to work, too.

Outside of their inflexible work schedules and other part-time jobs, all participants also talked about their thick networks of families (*kwv tij*) and relatives (*neej tsa*) in their community (Xiong et al., 2013), who they interacted with on a regular basis. Thus, going out to assist other family members and/or

relatives during the weekends was a common theme across the interviews. The following quotations illustrate how participants frequently mentioned this:

> We have lots of relatives. Some have more relatives than others, so we go join them. There's a gathering almost every weekend. Although we don't have much ourselves.…If our relatives have things going on, we go and help them, which is almost every weekend. (Bao's husband, a father of four children who came to the U.S. in the mid-2000s)

Similarly, Kalia, a college-educated, single mother of four children, told us this:

> My parents live in [City A], and all my brothers live in [City B], while my oldest sister lives in [City C; these are next to each other].…I got together with my parents about once or twice a month. I also attended big family gatherings and [cared for my mom] if [she] needed me to do something for her.

### *"I Don't Know How to Help My Children": Barriers to Homework Assistance*

Our second theme involves barriers participants encountered as they attempted to assist their children's day-to-day homework. Parents who did not have a college education (52%) stated that they lacked the English language and literacy to help their children, especially when it comes to homework. Mee, a single mother who came to the U.S. in the mid-2000s without any formal education, said: "I am illiterate in English, so I don't know.…If it is a story in Hmong, then I can read it to them. But, if it is in English, then I don't know how to read it to them." Other parents also shared Mee's sentiment and told us that they could only help with their children's schoolwork when they were still in first and second grades. Once their children transitioned to third grade or higher, the homework became too complicated and difficult; therefore, they could no longer support their children. Der, a single mother with only a high school education told us this: "If it's about English or reading, then I don't know how to help them. If it's about helping them, then I can only help with first and second grade. Starting third and fourth grades, their homework is hard for me." Kalia, a college graduate, summed it up this way: "As their mom, it's been a long time since I've been in school, so sometimes if they ask me for help, I don't know anything anymore."

#### *Lack of Help from Spouses*

Seven parents (30%), especially mothers, talked about the challenge of having to do everything at home without the support of their spouses or ex-spouses. They told our interviewers that their partners tended to take on the traditional masculine role (Thao, 2020) and refused to take on some of the parenting responsibilities at home, including cooking, taking children to appointments, and attending parent–teacher conferences. Ka, a mother in her second mar-

riage who sponsored her husband from Laos, stated that "most of the time, my husband doesn't say much about my children. My husband is around, but he's the one who is working, so he doesn't take care of them much." Der, a divorced mother of six children, went further by telling us this: "Everything is done all by myself; my ex-husband when he still lived with us, he didn't attend conferences or take my youngest son to his appointments. If I don't cook, the kids don't get to eat dinner."

On the other hand, when we spoke to the fathers who participated in our study (35%), they told us that one of the reasons why they tended not to get involved in children's lives was due to the hurried life and language barriers. They espoused that they were the family's providers, usually assigned to take care of their aging parents, and mainly responsible for the involvement with relatives in various cultural and spiritual activities. Kongmeng, who came to the U.S. recently from Laos, said, "I don't really read/teach them [the children], only my wife. My wife is fluent in English compared to me. At times, since I'm not fluent in English, my children would question me and not understand me, so my wife teaches and helps them." Bao's husband, who came to the U.S. in the mid-2000s, summed it up this way:

> We, men, don't really attend parent–teacher conferences. That is because we have to take care of our elders and have to work. If my wife is off work and can attend, she will be the one to go. It's not that I'm refusing to go, but it's because my wife comes back in time from work to go.

### *Having Multiple Children at Home*

In addition to the above challenges, parents in this study also expressed that having several children at home (M = 5.75, SD = 2.09, ranging from 3–11 children per household), especially infants and toddlers in the household (57%), constituted a barrier to engaging in their older children's education. They believe that infants and toddlers need a lot of attention since they are still young and dependent on the constant care of their parents. Having multiple children at home tended to be distracting when it came to providing homework assistance to elementary age children. Jouacho, a father who came to the U.S. in the mid-2000s without any formal education, said: "I don't have time [to take my kids from home to school activities]….We have our small child (three-year-old son) who cries a lot at home and does not want to go places, so it's very difficult." Ong, a mother of eight children, including two toddlers at home (three-year-old son and one-year-old son), also shared that, although she felt confident to help with her children's homework, "My only problem is that there are a few kids [in the house], so I cannot help them all, especially when the homework is hard."

## Hmong Parental Involvement at Home

Parents' involvement with children's schooling at home refers to the interaction between parents and their children that focuses on children's schooling (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Based on this definition, four themes emerged from the analysis: *sacrificing for children*, *establishing and enforcing a regular family routine*, *connecting children to resources*, and *advocating for children*. Themes were presented by starting with the most frequently mentioned.

### *Sacrificing for Children*

All participants (100%) expressed that they deeply valued their children's education during the interview. Thus, it was not surprising to find that most parents talked about sacrificing their personal convenience, aspirations, and goals for their children, especially for their children's education. For example, 30% of parents mentioned that they had to quit their job, reduce the number of hours at work, or give up their second job to be home with their children. Bao, a mother of four children whose husband was a stay-at-home dad at the time of the study, stated:

> I told my husband that since we're not making too much or too little [income], he should quit his work.…This way, our children will get more help, receive more attention and support from their father. Right now, my husband quits his job and is now a stay-at-home dad.

Bao's husband, who also participated in the interview, concurred by telling us:

> I'd rather devote some time to my children.…The most important thing is to know that I am going to be a good father for my children and create a goal for my children in the future. Even though I am not educated, my children know that they have a good father.

Similarly, Ka, a mother of five children, shared her experience during the interview. She said:

> He [husband] didn't go to school and went directly to work in a company for a bit. Then, we thought that working in a company was too hard for us since no one helped us to take care of our kids. That's when we came up with the idea to buy a business. Then, we bought this business here, so he [husband] could take care of the kids.

Other parents (22%) said they had to stop going to school, either to improve their English or pursue a college education, to look for a job in order to support their children. A few parents (13%) mentioned that they had to stop their manufacturing jobs so they could start a small business, since small businesses allowed more flexible hours to be with their children.

*Creating and Reinforcing Regular Family Routines*

Establishing and enforcing regular family routines included three subthemes: enforcing regular homework hours and bedtime, limiting the use of technology, and getting the family to do things together. First, enforcing regular homework hours and bedtime is a subtheme that was mentioned by most parents (87%) during the interview. Given the limited time parents have with their children, parents wanted to ensure children know what is expected of them at home. For example, most participants (74%) shared that their regular schedule tended to include supper, homework time, shower and self-care, and bedtime. Kongmeng, who came to the U.S. as an international student, said:

> When I arrive home, I help my children with homework. We then eat dinner, take a shower, and I tell them to go to bed early. I will clean the house later.…When my children don't have homework, we sometimes ask them to do certain tasks such as vacuuming, brooming, stacking the shoes, and cleaning the bathroom.

We also found that some parents were less strict, while other parents tended to be more structured as illustrated by See, a single mother with a college education who works in the education field:

> During the weekdays, I go to work and come home to cook dinner for them. They do their homework, then by 8:00 pm they have to go to bed. On Fridays, we have a family night, and on the weekends, we try to do something together as a family. We play games, go out to eat, and see movies. I don't allow my children to play video or online games. They can only play on Friday night and Saturday. They can't play on Sunday because I want them to rest their mind before they go to school on the next day. During the weekdays, they have to go to sleep by 8:00 pm, and on the weekends they have to go to sleep by 10:00 pm. Every night, they have to charge their phones in my room. I'm very strict because you never know, they might get up in the middle of the night and play with their phones. I want to make sure they get plenty of sleep before the next day.

Our analysis also showed that these participants were determined to make a difference in their children's lives at home by being disciplined and persistent to provide them the structure needed to academically succeed. Song, a divorced mother with no formal education who came to the U.S. as a spouse, said, "To be honest, as parents, if we let them have their ways, then they won't be motivated to focus on school."

The second subtheme under family routines that emerged from our analysis focused on *the use of technology at home*. Many parents (65%) talked about es-

tablishing and enforcing rules at home to control the use of technology at home such as tablets, cell phones, video games, and television. For example, Kalia, a single mother with a college education, told us her experience as follows:

> In this era, our children use a lot of technology, so we have to set limits for them. For example, during the weekdays, they have school, so when they get home, they must do their homework first. So, they are given a few hours to be on their technology. But, after that they must be in bed by a certain time. On the weekends, they can do whatever they like but just make sure they have to do their laundry, clean their rooms, and help with the household chores.

Ka, a mother of five children aged 6 to 17 years old, also said that she must tell her daughter every day that when she is done with her homework, she must return the tablet back to be put away. In the morning before she goes to work, Ka would leave the tablet on the dining table for her daughter. To Ka and her husband, "it is good to have limits," because without limits "children may not want to focus on education." Some parents decided not to buy any TV or cell phone for their children, while other parents tried to limit the screen time as illustrated in the following:

> Song, a mother of three children aged 5 to 13 years old, said: "They [children] don't have a TV or anything to watch. They just do their homework…and they say that they are bored, but I didn't buy one for them because…they won't be motivated to focus on school."
>
> Kongmeng, a father of six children aged 4 to 12 years old, stated: "We don't allow any of these devices [phone, video games] until they come home from school on Friday, to let them touch these devices.…If no one listens, then I'll take them to go stay with their grandparents."
>
> Tria, a U.S.-born mother with six children ages ranging from 1 to 15 years old, shared the same sentiment: "When her [15 year old daughter] grades are poor, we take her phone away, and I think her phone is a big distraction, so then my husband and I, we took her phone away. So, she knows that if she doesn't keep up with her grades, her phone will be taken away."

The third subtheme focused on *getting the family to do things together.* According to the participants (39%), one of the mechanisms used to control children's behavior was to get the whole family to have at least one meal together per day and/or go out to do something together. Sharing family meals, for example, allowed the family to see each other and check on each other's activities. Bao, a mother of four children aged 11 to 18 years old, said, "For

my family, we have dinner together every night. If it's the weekend, everyone eats breakfast together. We talk, laugh, and tell one another our stories." Ka, a mother of five, concurred:

> For family dinners, my children do eat with me every night, because I don't let them eat in the living room. So even if they don't want to eat, they have to sit at the dining table…whether they like the food or not. I don't care. I still expect them to sit at the dining table.

Other parents focused on other activities that could bring the whole family together, as stated by Kalia, a single mother of four children aged 12 to 22 years old:

> Our family, we do activities together, sometimes we play games, we go walking…when I do yard work outside, they come help me. If I ask them to help me, they do help. All my children are pretty much the same, and they all help.

***Connecting Children to Resources***

Connecting children to resources included linking younger children in elementary school to get help from their older siblings who are either in high school or college to help with their homework, surfing on the Internet to find resources to help children complete their homework, taking children to the libraries, and putting children into extracurricular activities (Epstein, 1995). Based on our analysis, we found that about half of the parents (57%), especially those who have children in high school or college, tended to ask their older children to help their younger children when homework becomes difficult. Kalia, a single mother who has two children in college, told us the following:

> When I started to work, I didn't really have much time to spend with the younger children…I suggested that they go ask their sisters to help them.…The older sisters took on the responsibility to help the younger siblings, and if the boys knew that I was busy then they would go ask their sisters to read to them, because during that time the two sisters were in high school and the boys were younger, just so that everything is not way too much on me or on them…so we, as a family, try to make everything work as a family.

Ia, a U.S.-born, married mother with a college education, said she used the Internet to help her figure out homework brought home by her children, especially assignments that are difficult to complete as illustrated below:

> When I don't know or remember [how to work on the homework assignment] because it's been a while, I go find the solution because I use

> the computer most of the time. When there is something I don't know, I Google and listen to someone to figure it out.

Kongmeng, a father who came with a college degree from Laos, also agreed:

> When we don't know the answer, we would search Google to see the steps in order to help my children with their assignments. I am not an educated person from here [U.S.], so watching a 20-minute video from YouTube helps clarify the confusions of the problem.

### *Advocating for Children*

In addition to the day-to-day involvement at home with their children, participants in this study (43%) also talked constantly about their advocacy role, particularly about the decision to switch schools for their children. Advocacy refers to parents who can speak or act on behalf of their children (Wolfensberger, 1977). Despite their challenges to get involved at their children's school, they were actively seeking better opportunities for their children, including moving children to a better, safer school. For example, Wahoua, a father of six young adult children from a previous marriage and four elementary children from his current relationship, stated that:

> Since I put my older kids [young adult children] in public schools, there were many different kinds of kids attending there. So, they kept having problems. When the problems got bigger, they had fights and arguments…so I looked at how our Hmong charter schools [had] more Hmong kids and the administrators are Hmong, and they still have the rules that our Hmong people have, and they watch our kids attentively, so I like that.

Ia, a U.S.-born, college educated mother of three children, agreed and told us:

> Before they [my children] attended charter school, they were in a public school in School [X], but I felt like their education expectation was below standards…I knew that my children wouldn't succeed there. When they came home, their homework and assignments that they needed help with were below their age…so I decided to move them to a charter school [School A].

Other participants (30%) also wanted their children to be in a place where they could feel a sense of belonging where their culture and language is valued and promoted, in addition to providing safety and academic rigor. Kia, a mother of three children who used to work in the education field, said:

> When they're at School A, it looks like they come to see other Hmong students, and they feel like they're in the same group, same race so it

> makes them feel more confident in whatever they do; they don't shy away from trying so that makes them feel confident and have a higher self-esteem.

Bao, a mother without any formal education, summed up this way: "Since he's [her 16 year old son] gotten to School A, he's not in as much trouble and is able to learn, read, and write better."

## Discussion

Understanding parental involvement in immigrant families, especially Hmong families with children in charter schools, is timely given the rising popularity of charter schools (David & Hesla, 2018; Dernbach, 2022). Parents in this study are among the many who chose to send their children to Hmong charter schools (Bailey & Cooper, 2009; Lor, 2021). Although the reasons behind parents' choice was not explicitly explored in this study, we found that they faced multiple challenges as they tried to balance various roles in their lives, including living in a hurried life, barriers to homework assistance, lacking spousal support, and having multiple children at home. For example, we found that most of the participants (67%) are employed in nonstandard work schedules. Research shows that nonstandard work has become more common in today's economy, and parents who have limited education and/or are part of an ethnic minority community are more at risk to be employed in such jobs (Castillo et al., 2020; Li et al., 2014). Furthermore, we also found that 81% of the participants and 48% of the participants' spouses are employed in either manufacturing or self-employed jobs that are demanding without flexibility. This may be one of the reasons why Hmong parents are less likely to get involved in children's schooling at school (Xiong et al., 2019) as suggested by other studies with low-income parents in different racial/ethnic groups (Antony-Newman, 2019; Aung & Yu, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2017; Grant & Wong, 2004; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Pho, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006).

In addition to their inflexible, nonstandard work schedules, parents in our study also must care for their multiple children at home, especially infants and toddlers, sometimes by themselves due to divorce and/or the lack of spousal support, while trying to meet their family obligations with their in-laws and other extended families. Although these findings are similar to what others have found when investigating low-income parents (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Smith et al., 2011; Stright et al., 2009), they suggest that Hmong in this study have moved beyond refugee-related barriers such as language and cultural barriers (Adler, 2004; Yang, 2008) to structural barriers. Structural barriers require different approaches to engage parents in children's education, and future studies

should include a larger sample size drawing from both traditional public schools, as well as charter schools, to determine the generalizability of this finding.

Interestingly, we also found that parents who have a high school diploma or have limited exposure to the U.S.'s formal education tend to struggle with helping their children's day-to-day homework. This is not surprising since many of the parents in this subgroup stated that they lacked the English language and literacy to help their children complete their homework. Studies with immigrant parents suggest that English language competency plays an important role in their ability to help their children's school-related work at home (Ashraf, 2019; Aung & Yu, 2007; Pho, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Despite their hurried lives and lack of appropriate literacy skills, our findings suggest that parents still play an active role in their children's schooling at home. First, we learned that many parents in this study sacrifice their jobs, give up their side businesses, or work in different shifts to make time for their children, while other parents try to improve their English, pursue a college education, or look for a job to support their children. Although sacrificing for children has been a major theme in the immigrant literature (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010; Chen et al., 2014), these specific behaviors have not been documented in earlier studies focusing on Hmong parental involvement. This is likely, in part, because earlier studies included only adolescents in the sample (Supple et al., 2010; Thao, 2020), focused only on parent–adolescent issues or relationships (Lee & Green, 2008; Supple & Cavanaugh, 2013; Xiong et al., 2013), and/or investigated only the challenges parents face (Adler, 2004; Arcan et al., 2017; Hones, 1999) without examining how Hmong parents are involved in their children's schooling at home.

We also learned that parents in this study use the little time they have with their children to set a climate at home with regular family routines, including enforcing regular homework hours and bedtime, monitoring and controlling the use of technology at home, and getting the family to spend more time together in activities such as sharing meals, playing cards, and/or going out to dine or walk together. This active involvement at home has been found consistently with Asian American parents despite their lack of involvement at school (Lee & Green, 2008; Li, 2006; Sy et al., 2007). However, unlike other Asian American parents, Hmong parents, especially those who came to the U.S. as adults without the opportunity to learn English and enroll in higher institutions, still need assistance to support their children's homework at home. Our data suggest that these parents knew very little about online resources to assist their children, with the few exceptions noted under Results. Instead, they tend to mention their older children as the only source of support for their younger children's homework. This finding is consistent with earlier studies with

Hmong parents in the 2000s (Adler, 2004; Thao, 2003), since less educated parents in our study tend to come from the last wave of refugees from Thailand (Grigoleit, 2006) and/or were sponsored from Laos and Thailand by their U.S. citizen spouses. Conversely, we found that parents with a college education are more likely to talk about connecting their children to libraries and using online resources to help their children's homework when they could not help their children. This is not surprising, since earlier studies suggest that parents with higher education tend to be more willing to engage in their children's schooling and display higher expectations of their children (An & Yang, 2018; Gan & Bilige, 2019).

### Implications for Practice

When school administrators and teachers think of getting parents to be involved in children's education, they usually think of creating a variety of spaces at school for parents to be a part of, such as parent–teacher associations, school governance (e.g., site councils), holiday events (e.g., Halloween party), or classroom activities (e.g., reading or chaperone; Crosnoe, 2010; Ji & Koblinksy, 2009; Poza et al., 2014; Snell, 2018). This study shows that Hmong families are extremely busy and diverse. Some parents, especially those who came here recently or without a college education, are still limited with certain knowledge and skills to successfully help their children at home, while other parents who have been in the U.S. for over 17 years and have a college education tend to face different issues such as work schedules, divorce, or family obligations. Thus, it is imperative that schools think outside the box by providing the necessary resources and support for parents to be successful in their role as their children's first teachers at home. As Boonk et al. (2018) and Stacer and Perrucci (2013) suggest, parental involvement needs to go beyond what parents do at school to include parent–child discussions and involvement at home and in the community. Additionally, instead of asking busy parents with multiple children at home to come out to be actively involved in school-sponsored activities, schools should find more innovative ways to get parents involved in various school-related activities using Zoom, phone conferencing, or other technologies, especially technologies that schools provide for each child to use. These technologies are accessible and can be assisted by the children if parents do not know how to operate them. Additionally, schools should be more innovative in involving parents in their children's schooling at home and creating afterschool programs and/or online tutoring programs to support children's learning outside of the classroom, especially after second and third grades, when school subjects become more complicated and difficult for parents to assist their children. These innovations are more attuned to how Hmong and other Asian American parents

devote their limited time to invest in children's education (Chao, 2000; Juang & Meschke, 2017; Lee & Green, 2008; Supple et al., 2010; Sy et al., 2007).

Hmong charter schools have an opportunity to support Hmong parents by either doing away with homework, since some evidence suggests that it does not improve students' academic performance in general (Patall et al., 2008), or by educating and coaching Hmong parents about their curricula at school, especially those who have low literacy skills, to check on, communicate about, and monitor children's homework at home (Walker et al., 2005). Studies show that parents who participated in homework help programs tend to enhance their children's homework grade, as well as their overall grade point average (Callahan et al., 1998; Van Voorhis, 2003, cited in Patall et al., 2008). Similarly, schools should also provide more online resources for parents to use to support their children's homework at home, since many of these parents tend to have multiple children, including prekindergarteners, while holding additional jobs to make ends meet at home. Studies suggest that parents who utilize online resources are more likely to improve decision making about children's conditions, as well as increasing parenting self-confidence and understanding of child development (Na & Chia, 2008; Nicholl et al., 2017).

Due to the collaborative nature of the study, findings and recommendations in this article will be shared with school administrators and staff, as well as with the parents at the three charter schools at their various family engagement events and activities, to encourage more conversations about innovative family engagement approaches and parental involvement activities at home. For example, our data as well as other research (Jeynes, 2010, 2011) suggest that parents continue to be involved in their children's education at home despite their daily challenges. As part of the conversation, school administrators, staff, and teachers should be more aware of parents' efforts at home and find innovative ways to strengthen what parents are already doing well.

## Limitations

Despite these implications, this study has some limitations. First, the convenience sample of the 23 parents from three Hmong-focused charter schools is relatively small. Thus, their stories may not be representative of other Hmong parents in traditional public schools, nor may they be transferrable to other parents in Hmong-focused charter schools, including those parents who have children in the three charter schools that participated in this study. Moreover, although the analysis was based on a team approach, we did not compare data from the two types of interviews (phone vs. face-to-face). It's possible that this could have biased our findings such that those who were in person may be more likely to share different or additional information compared to phone

interviews. Additional biases could have also been introduced through having multiple interviewers despite all undergoing similar training, as every person's interviewing style and presence may be unique. Lastly, as the primary purpose of our article was focused on at-home parental involvement, we do not know much about school parental involvement, although we do highlight how such involvement at home can impede at-school parental involvement. Thus, future studies should explore the relationship between the different types of parental involvement with Hmong parents who have children at charter schools.

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