Home-School Relations and the Construction of Racial and Ethnic Identity of Hmong Elementary Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Hmong parents and professional staff at one elementary school perceive home-school relations and how they construct racial and ethnic identities of Hmong children. The study was conducted at a Midwestern elementary school where the Hmong student population is over 50% and where five Hmong staff members are employed (3 teachers, 2 aide/translators).

Findings indicate differing opinions among parents and school staff in the areas of understanding Hmong culture, multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity, Hmong students "model minority" or "at risk" educationally and linguistically, the role parents play in school involvement, and the construction of race and ethnicity of Hmong students. Neither of two typical Asian stereotypes was attributed to Hmong students, and the prevailing perspective of the ethnic groups was that of "foreigner." Conflicts with work schedules and language barriers are common constraints to parent involvement in the classrooms. Hmong parents are deeply concerned about their children's education and expect the school staff to be accountable for student achievement. Like some other Asian American groups, parent participation is seen as a division of labor with complimentary responsibilities between home and school.

Key Words: parent involvement, early childhood education, Hmong education, race and ethnicity, Asian American families

Introduction

When we hear the slogan "leave no child behind" we tend to think about compensatory programs such as Head Start or "At Risk" kindergartens. These models assume that achievement levels and knowledge base of mainstream America are the norms. In order to succeed, those that do not "fit in" need guidance to adjust, accommodate, or assimilate into the dominate culture. Many European and Asian immigrants "overcame" language barriers and became "Americanized" over several generations. These are the success stories reported in the 1960s and 70s that painted Asian American families as "model minorities." Often the sociopolitical contexts of their experiences in America were ignored as meritocracy became the goal. But for many Asian ethnic groups, these stereotypes do not reflect their reality or lives in American society.

The Hmong are a Southeastern Asian refugee group with a politically unique history of settlement and relocation in the United States. After the Vietnam War, they were given refugee status due to their support of U.S. troops in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Paoze Thao (1999) describes the Hmong's difficulty adapting to cultural change (using an alternate spelling, "Mong"):

> By coming from a predominantly rural, preliterate background with few transferable marketable skills, the Mong had difficulties in adjustment to a new culture. The adjustment problems resulted in massive secondary migration to various states, particularly the Central Valley of California. The problems of the Mong tend to center around the lack of knowledge and access to jobs in order to achieve self-economic sufficiency, the need for family reunification, the federal policy on service cuts, the unequal distribution of services in various states, the horrible phenomenon of "Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome" (SUDS), the struggle for reestablishment of self-identity, and the vocational adjustment. (p. 82)

The level of poverty for Southeast Asians has been higher and the level of parental education and literacy lower than other education groups (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1994; Lo, 2001; Thao, 1999). Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton (1990) discuss how schooling for refugee children is often complicated by a life of hardship. Some characteristics mentioned include: (1) poverty and isolation, (2) cultural and linguistic differences, (3) lack of appreciation for home culture, and (4) lack of self-esteem (pp. 16-17). This can lead to late academic socialization and the discovery of negative racial/ethnic stereotypes. But with sensitivity, cultural awareness, support, and willingness to work with the families, school personnel can help build a positive bicultural identity.

Few studies have been conducted on Asian American families and their relationship with elementary schools. In fact, most school studies on Asian

Americans tend to focus primarily on academic achievement (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1994; Lee, 1996; Pang 2001; Pang & Cheng, 1998; Stevenson, 1992; Stevenson & Chen, 1993). This may result from the typical school curriculum that addresses academic self-concept but pays little attention to non-academic identities such as social self-concept, emotional self-concept, and physical self-concept. In this study, priority is given to the family, community, and cultural context of Hmong children as it relates to school adjustment and self-identity. It attempts to uncover racial and ethnic identities appropriated by Hmong students and ascribed by non-Hmong school personnel. One exception is Thao's (2003) study which investigated how home and school factors affected Mong elementary students. Although parents had high expectations for their students, some student experiences were negative resulting from a mismatch between home and school cultures and misconceptions of teachers sometimes leading to inappropriate labeling. Hmong in the U.S. have experienced some of the same interpersonal discrimination as other racial and ethnic minorities, plus attitudes about nativism and English proficiency (Hein, 2000). Like other Asian Americans, they face attitudes of "otherness" or being constructed as "foreign" (Wu, 2002).

The School Setting

Platteville Elementary (pseudonym) is a science magnet school in a lower middle class neighborhood and is part of the public school system of a major Midwestern city. Students are bused in from the entire metropolitan area and over 50% of the student population is Southeast Asian, primarily Hmong. The staff includes five Hmong professionals (3 teachers and 2 aid/translators) and a Vietnamese teacher. The school also houses special education programs for disabled students (autism, behavioral problems, occupational and speech therapy), but their staff members and parents were not included in the study.

School wide programs include: ELL (English language learners) who receive instruction from ESL (English as a second language) staff, Reading Recovery, Language Academy, SEM (school enrichment model), Basic Skills Program, Title One program, and full-day kindergarten. Professional staff is comprised of 53 classroom and resource teachers, 2 administrators (principal and vice principal), a counselor, a social worker, a nurse, a librarian, a parent educator, a curriculum specialist, a technology specialist, and two aid/translators, as well as non-professional support staff.

Student enrollment was approximately 560, varying over the two years of the research study. Parent newsletters were printed in English, and a separate newsletter from the Title I program was translated into Hmong. During the

first year of the study a full-time counselor worked with individual and small groups of children. Some group sessions included children from different races and ethnicities, while others were all Hmong; however, all the children in a group came from the same grade and homeroom teacher. Session topics focused on student behavior, interpersonal communication, family issues, and discrimination.

A part-time parent educator worked with the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) of mostly European American parents and the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) of Hmong parents. Before the PTO came into existence, a few Hmong parents attended PTA meetings with a translator sitting among them. The parent educator coordinated school wide programs such as the "Breakfast with Parents" mornings and the "Child-Reads" program to encourage parent-child literacy activities. One "Child-Reads" program was conducted in Hmong and sponsored by the research grant. In addition, children's books on Hmong and Asian American children were purchased and made available to faculty and parents through the library. The parent educator served as a resource and facilitator for all parents and an advocate for minority families. Her goal was to keep Hmong parents informed of school activities and to encourage some to participate in district-wide workshops.

Study Design

Focusing on the parent-school relationship, this study investigated how school personnel accommodate Hmong children in their classes and how they build curriculum with cultural sensitivity. It examined how parents and staff construct the racial and ethnic identities of these children individually or as a group. I use a postmodern-feminist perspective (Heckman, 1990; Nicholson, 1990) and a conversational interview methodology (Oakley, 1981) in order to give this minority group voice. I also draw from racial and ethnic identity development theory (Sheets & Hollins, 1999) and from children's ethnic socialization theory (Phinney & Rotherdam, 1987).

Research questions addressed issues such as how well school personnel understand Hmong culture, how well Hmong parents understand their roles in working with schools, and how well school policies and practices meet the needs of Hmong students and their families. The questions investigated the importance and construction of racial/ethnic identity of Hmong students and the factors that enhance and/or impede positive home-school relations.

Academic staff at Platteville Elementary school were sent surveys, first including open-ended questions, then questions in a Likert scale format. Twenty-four staff members (out of 65 professional staff) responded. Originally,

an open-ended format was designed to set the foundation for individual interviews, but only two staff members took the time to respond. The second Likert format for staff increased the number to 24, which was still very low. In discussing this with the school principal I found that most staff members felt inundated with paperwork for the school district and simply did not have time. It was easier for them to speak with me as I spent time in the school. A few also felt that a study on just one ethnic group was not representative of their school (over 50% of the school population was Southeast Asian, primarily Hmong). The parent survey had open-ended questions with space for fill-in answers that could be written and returned. Out of 106 parents surveyed, 37 responded. In some cases, the Hmong research assistant made phone calls and documented verbal responses.

I made 5 trips to visit the research site, staying 3-4 full days to observe in the school and 2 additional days to conduct interviews during each visit. Interviews with the staff were held in the school either during prep time or after school. Follow-up interviews were conducted with consenting staff via e-mail or phone conversations.

A Hmong parent research assistant was hired to contact families and distribute surveys. Since she was also the Hmong PTO President, she helped document parent-school meetings such as PTO meetings, Child Reads programs, and Hmong Food and Culture Fairs. In addition, school administrators, the school parent educator, a Hmong parent liaison to the school district, and several other Hmong community members (including school counselors) were consulted. Finally, documentation from school programs and policies for Hmong parents was collected by the parent educator and researcher.

Study Findings

Parent and Staff Survey Data

In comparing across parent and staff surveys, I have combined data into four major categories: (1) adjustment to society, (2) identity development, (3) home-school relations, and (4) school policies and practices.

Adjustment to Society

In the area of adjustment to society, 65% of the parents provided positive responses to their adjustment in the Hmong community in general, although there seemed to be some confusion about the question. The families were spread out into the larger metropolitan community, rather than living in one ethnic neighborhood, because the school was a magnet school drawing

students from a large area. Therefore, the Hmong "community" was spread out across various neighborhoods. Parents did, though, have unanimous positive responses to their children's adjustment in school.

Question	Positive	OK	Negative	Other	Percent
PQ.1. How has your adjustment been to the Hmong community here?	19	0	5	13-no answer or inappropriate response	65% positive
PQ. 2. How have your children adjusted to the school?	37	0	0	0	100%

Note: PQ=Parent Question

Parents expressed mixed concern about loss of language and culture, perhaps resulting from the knowledge that, as refugees, return to Laos was generally unattainable.

Question	Yes	No	Don't Know/ Other
PQ.7. Do you feel that you are losing your language and culture by living here?	19	14	4
PQ.10. Do you worry about your children becoming too "Americanized"?	25	10	1
PQ.12. Do you and your children feel accepted in U.S. society?	23	9	6

Staff felt that Hmong children should assimilate into American schools and had very positive views of Hmong children's adjustment to school. Staff respondents may have been unclear about the definition of assimilation as opposed to acculturation, wherein ethnic group identity remains while adjusting to the dominant culture.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.1. Hmong children should be assimilated into American schools.	0	0	5	10	5
SQ.20. The Hmong children in our school have difficulty adjusting to American schools.	1	13	4	2	0
SQ.18. Hmong parents are concerned about their children becoming too Americanized.	0	1	7	11	1

Note: SQ-Staff Question

Identity Development

In the area of identity development, I first asked about the dominant language used in the home. Most spoke primarily Hmong at home (86%) while only one family spoke no English.

Question	Hmong Only	Hmong and English	English and Hmong
PQ.5. What language does your child speak at home? Is English allowed?	1	31	5

The staff was generally positive about the use of Hmong first language by students and the importance of learning standard English.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.2. Bilingual education is critical for the academic success of Hmong students.	0	0	0	3	17
SQ.16. "English Only" is the best way for children to succeed in American schools.	4	8	6	2	0

Parent responses to teaching about race and ethnicity provided mixed responses. When the translator asked this question she was allowed to indicate that race referred to "Asian-ness" while ethnicity referred to being Hmong. Parents were not asked on the survey how they would teach their children, since that would be addressed later during individual interviews.

Question	Yes	No	Don't Know
PQ.13. Do you teach your children about race and ethnicity?	22	9	6

Staff views on race and ethnicity were positive. Further discussion of how this was to be accomplished was addressed through interviews, but few concrete ideas emerged.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.12. I can help my Hmong students develop their racial and ethnic identity.	0	3	5	9	3
SQ.13. My own race and ethnicity are important to me.	0	1	2	13	4

In one area, knowledge of Hmong culture, there seemed to be conflicting views between parents and staff. Two comments from parents contextualized the situation: "I think the school staff are too busy with school work, I (they) have no time to learn our culture, I think they know little," and "Not very much, but hope they will understand in the future."

Question	Positive	Some	Negative	Don't Know
PQ.6. How much does the school staff know about the Hmong culture?	3	11	2	21

The parent question about traditions was very confusing and may have been misleading since examples of Shaman and New Years were suggested.

Question	Shaman	New Years	Birth of Child	Other Celebrations
PQ.8. Which of the Hmong traditions are important to your family?	25	13	3	11--weddings, spirits, religion, clothing/culture, family bonding, honoring elders, 4th of July

In contrast to parental views, staff felt that they knew a lot about Hmong culture.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.3. I am knowledgeable about Hmong refugee history and culture.	1	0	3	15	1
SQ.17. I am knowledgeable about a variety of Asian American groups.	1	7	5	6	1
SQ.21. Hmong childrearing conflicts with American school expectations.	1	9	6	4	0

Parents and staff were asked questions about the categories of "model minority" and "at risk" and whether they believed Hmong children were labeled as such. Most parents were unfamiliar with both terms and were not able to give opinions about them. Staff, on the other hand, indicated mixed responses, being careful to not classify their Hmong students. Some indicated that home language, in this case Hmong, should not be taught in the classroom, a position consistent with ELL (English language learners) programs rather than bilingual education programs, where native language as well as standard English is used for instruction. Question 10 on the colorblind perspective had more positive but mixed responses. This may have been due to the fact that the wording of the question situated it within assessment.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.24. Hmong children face discrimination and stereotyping in school.	1	5	5	9	0
SQ.25. It is problematic for students and teachers to speak Hmong in the school setting.	1	12	3	3	1
SQ.4. The "model minority" stereotype is applicable to most Hmong children in our school.	6	0	9	5	0
SQ.9. The Hmong students in our school are primarily low/"at risk" educationally	3	4	8	5	0
SQ.10. It is important to remain color-blind and minimize race in eduational assessment.	1	5	2	7	5
SQ.11. Most Hmong children readily socialize with all children in their classes.	0	8	7	4	1

Home-School Relations

In the area of home-school communication, 62% of the Hmong parents felt very welcome in their child's school. They attended all parent-teacher conferences and felt that the school was providing a strong educational program for their children. In terms of their children's learning, 65% of the parents had positive responses.

Question	Positive	OK	Negative	Other	Percent
PQ. 4. How welcome do your feel in your child's school?	23	8	3	3 — I haven't been in my child's school.	62%
PQ.3. How well are your children learning in school?	24	5	3	5	65%

Parent involvement of Hmong centered mostly on parent-teacher conferences (100% attendance rate reported by the school principal) and some attended the Hmong Parent Teacher Organization.

Language barriers appear to be the biggest reason stated for not being able to help children with homework. In these cases, siblings often take on the role of mentor.

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
PQ.11. How involved are you with the school?	22—PTO & Conferences	14	1
PQ.9. Do you feel that you can help your children with their school work?	25	12—language barrier	0

Staff felt that they were comfortable visiting with families in person or by phone, and they felt free to communicate with parents (usually with translators) in most cases. They were less confident than parents on whether parents could help their children with schoolwork at home. Their views on parent involvement indicated mixed responses.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.5. Speaking directly with Hmong parents is the most effective way to communicate	0	3	3	6	8
SQ.7. Hmong parents support their children's education by teaching them at home.	1	8	6	5	0
SQ.8. Hmong parents do not attend school activities because they feel alienated.	0	4	8	7	1
SQ.14. I would feel comfortable interacting with Asian American families in their communities.	0	2	3	12	3
SQ.15. Without translators it is difficult to communitate with Hmong parents.	0	2	3	8	7

School Policies and Practices

Staff members believed that school policies and multicultural education curriculum support their Hmong students. A high percentage of Hmong students in the school population were seen as positive, but staff felt that more could be done to serve Hmong families.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SQ.6. Our school policies support Hmong families.	0	1	4	13	2
SQ.19. We provide a multicultural curriculum in our school.	0	4	1	12	3
23. The high percentage of Hmong in the student body lowers the school standards.	4	6	7	3	0
22. The school can do more to bring Hmong and other parents together.	0	1	2	15	2

Parents acknowledged the support they receive from the school and offered a variety of suggestions on how the school could better help families. The main areas for improvement included the ELL program, general education programs, assistance with their children's behavior, better relations with teachers, and continuation of existing programs.

Question	ELL	Edu-cation	Behavior	Parent-Teacher Relations	Continue Programs	Don't Know	Total
PQ.14.How can the school better help you and your family?	5	7	5	4	5	11	37

Finally, when asked what Hmong parents wished for the future for their children, their answers were as follows: 26-college, 19-jobs, 11-family, 12-wealth, 16-success, 2-health, and 2-a good future. Other comments include: "live to be 100 years old," "do whatever they want," "be a good person," "be best he can be," "have goals," "have hope," and "have a better life."

Parent Question 14: How can the school better help you and your family?

Category	Responses
1. English language and literature	-Help my children to help us and read English -The school can just help them by making them speak English at school -Providing more programs that benefit student who's learning English as a second language + better staff
2. Education	-The school can try they're best in teaching my children what they should learn at their age -Educate and push our children into the right path -I want the school to better teach my children
3. Behavior	-Teach students to respect others and elders -When there is a problem in school involving kids, teachers need to make sure it is fair -They can teach about not being racist
4. Parent-teacher relations	-I would like the school to be close to the parents and children so we can stay connected -School can keep me up to date about everything -Learn our culture more and do not look at our culture or practices differently what you practice
5. Continue programs	-Just keep doing what they are doing -I think the school is doing well -To me, school is already done a good job to teach my kids
6. Negative viewpoints	-To me I think the school staff are too busy with school work I (they) have no time to learn our culture, I think they know little -No, not very much, but hope they will understand it in the future

Interview Data

Hmong Staff Interviews

I had the opportunity to interview a Hmong counselor and a Hmong administrator in the school district, as well as the five Hmong staff members. This provided an "insiders" view of Hmong children in the school setting. While the participants were careful to be supportive of their staff and school, they did provide some culturally important insight on the problems Hmong families face in U.S. society and schools. I interviewed the male participant in the school and the female participants both in school and during a social group gathering of only women. Respecting traditional gender role segregation in Hmong culture, it was suggested that I hire a Hmong male research assistant to interview the fathers and a female assistant to interview the mothers. But my female research assistant felt that interviewing parents together and conducting phone interviews with either parent would be acceptable. In her words, "Many of these parents are pretty modern and don't follow that tradition so much anymore."

One community participant described how pressure on Hmong community leaders to gain solutions for their concerns at the higher policy making levels are met with dismay when little can be done due to structural and political constraints. He was a school district administrator, so any issue regarding education was brought to him. In his words: "They expect me to deliver, and I can't always do that because of the administrative structure. They (clan leaders) think I have more power than I do, and so they expect results for every problem." Some clan leaders were not aware of the bureaucracy within American institutions.

The Hmong staff shared a lot of cultural information and each member had a personal story of how he/she came to his/her position in the school system. They consistently stressed the importance of setting high expectations for their students regardless of language competency. "I had to work hard to get my degree," said one Hmong teacher, "and I want my students to work hard and aim high, too." Some teachers spoke Hmong as an instructional strategy for clarity when necessary, but all felt that their Hmong students needed to become fluent in English. "Sometimes they don't understand ideas in English, so I try to explain in Hmong," said another teacher.

The highlight of Hmong parent participation in school was the cultural festival held every year in which the children perform traditional dances and their mothers prepare traditional food. This is because the Hmong culture is perhaps one of the most traditional of the Asian American groups and is based

on a clan system of family responsibility. Due to the clan system, many of the children in the school were related to each other, either by birth or family marriage. "We Hmong don't assimilate," one Hmong teacher explained; she noted that biculturalism was expected, thus retaining Hmong culture.

The relationship between Hmong staff and parents is particularly delicate, and several mentioned that there are times when they prefer not to serve as a translator. They live within a Hmong cultural context, recognize the sociopolitical issues facing their community and families, and cannot always act as advocates for particular families. One participant shared that there were other professionals (a Hmong nurse, in this case) who preferred to work in a school with a high Hispanic population, rather than Southeast Asian. The nurse's ability to enforce school policy on child abuse was easier when not facing her own people's cultural difference regarding discipline.

Hmong staff raised some interesting perceptions regarding parents' ability to help their children with schoolwork. Staff believed that the parents had been encouraged to help their children at home by classroom and ELL teachers and therefore parents considered this to be appropriate "American" behavior sanctioned by the school. In addition, staff believed that monitoring schoolwork was more pervasive than indicated by the survey. Most Hmong parents monitor their children's schoolwork, but do not necessarily help with assignments. In the words of one participant, "Many of the parents do not understand the American educational system, but they do trust that the teachers know what they are doing." They did not seek assistance on academic issues from the staff, expect to have input regarding the educational program, and would not directly challenge the curriculum or teaching. If their children were doing well (usually with the assistance of the ELL classes), Hmong parents left the teaching to the school staff.

Non-Hmong Staff Interviews

Interviews with non-Hmong staff included the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, school nurse, parent educator, and several teachers. Many of the teachers commented that when Hmong parents came to conferences they were primarily concerned about their child's behavior. Teachers, on the other hand, were ready with academic assessments, which the parents listened to but were not as concerned about. Good school behavior (paying attention, working hard) in school leads to learning, therefore attendance and obedience are valued by Hmong parents. They were pleased with positive reports on academic assessments but rarely questioned the quality of programs or curriculum. If there were educational problems, siblings were expected to assist as much as they could, and other adults in the extended family and clan were

solicited for help. In general, there was agreement that schoolwork was taken seriously and achievement in school was expected by Hmong parents. The disposition of "doing your best" (or gambare in Japanese terms) is valued by most Asian and Asian American families (Adler, 1998).

Most European American staff felt that the school was providing Hmong cultural programs and a multicultural curriculum. In contrast, some ELL staff and all of the Hmong teachers felt that in most classrooms staff introduced cultural concepts infrequently, in isolation, and subject to individual teachers' interests and priorities. One non-Hmong classroom teacher described her viewpoints on cultural diversity and the colorblind perspective with great insight:

> For the greatest educational benefit, I feel it is imperative for all students' backgrounds/cultures to be recognized and celebrated. This validates who the students are internally and opens them up to the possibilities of the world outside of themselves. I struggle with what a "colorblind" perspective is. Is this Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of recognizing people by the content of their characters vs. the color of their skin—or is it ignoring cultural backgrounds and lumping everyone into a homogeneous sameness? I feel that we all need to be seen for who[m] we are—and this includes our cultures and ethnicity. The differences between us need to be celebrated—not tolerated or ignored. Not everyone at this school agrees with that perspective, but I think a lot do (Adler, 2003).

A few staff members felt that the school curriculum should be colorblind and skill-oriented. "They (the Hmong students) need to learn English as quickly as possible and try to understand American cultural ways," said one participant. Reflecting upon which staff members chose to participate in the study and those who did not, I feel that this point of view was much more pervasive than the findings indicated.

Data from the interviews and staff survey were collected simultaneously. Analysis was ongoing, and sometimes issues presented in one form informed and altered the inquiry process. For example, the confusion regarding the "model minority" stereotype that emerged from the survey and interviews gave me the opportunity to clarify perceptions and definitions. This conversation led to other observations. As one non-Hmong participant described it:

> The "Model Minority" stereotype is not necessarily a valid assumption in [this area] when applied to the South East Asian population. There has been a great deal of media coverage of gang related violence and murder…regarding the Hmong population, so many people have a stereotype of the Hmong as violent gangsters. Also, when the Hmong first

> arrived, many of them received welfare. So they are also seen as illiterate welfare recipients. Parts of both are true, as is the fact that their culture does teach respect for elders. So, it has been my experience that some students are passive and quiet in class and try very hard. You can also identify some students who have gang affiliations, and their behaviors follow suit. And students are often poor—although I have seen a rapid rise in outward appearances of higher incomes: improved clothing, availability of money for book orders, etc. (Adler, 2003).

Perhaps the biggest constraint to Hmong parent involvement is language differences. Many of these families have migrated several times to be with their clans and to have security and opportunities for employment. Generally, Hmong was spoken at home by parents, and children communicated in English. The aid/translators hired by the school district served as liaisons to the community and regularly translated notes and newsletters into the Hmong language.

I recall observing one European American teacher attempting to communicate with a Hmong parent on the phone. She finally asked a translator for assistance but later commented to me (the researcher) that given a simple statement or question to communicate, the aid/translator would talk for quite a while in Hmong. The teacher was unsure if her message was being passed on. When I asked the aide about this, she indicated that direct, verbatim translations are not always possible in Hmong. She was not chatting or having a social conversation with the parent. I found all of the Hmong employees in this school to be professional and knowledgeable. But they were aware that the sociopolitical context of the school was based on a European American curriculum, and the school was a place where Southeast Asians were considered a "foreign" group, with linguistic and cultural differences.

Attempts were made by the parent educator to encourage Hmong parents to become active within the school and even in district-wide programs. "I'm trying to get Mrs. Yang to go with me to this district workshop on helping children with reading," she commented. Encouraging participation and leadership was her goal, while immediate family needs seemed to be more important to most Hmong parents. Within the school a "Child Reads" program for parent-child interaction with books was held with some success. Hmong school staff served as interpreters, and classroom teachers encouraged participation.

Hmong Parent Interviews

I was only able to conduct two interviews with Hmong parents who spoke English. In an interview with one of the mothers, who was actively involved with the school, the issue of fair treatment of Hmong children regarding

behavior issues appeared to be a problem for her and for other parents. She expressed a concern that due to language facility and differences in styles of communicating (they tend not to complain to the teacher or negotiate in peer interactions), Hmong children were misunderstood by teachers and as a result sometimes treated unfairly. "It was about a video game that my son was accused of taking from another kid's book bag," she explained. "The teacher didn't listen to my son at all. He had one just like it. I guess she (the teacher) thought we couldn't afford one," she pondered. Apparently there had been Hmong parents who changed schools because they felt that particular teachers didn't take the time or make the effort to get their child's point of view. They felt that their children were treated unfairly and had been labeled as problem students.

At the beginning of the study, concern was expressed at a PTO meeting by one Hmong parent that giving information about their community to a stranger (researcher) could be perilous and suggested that the parents be cautious or not participate. When I asked the Hmong PTO president about this attitude she pointed out that in Laos the school is considered an "official" and authoritative entity, and since many families were receiving public assistance the perception was that what they say might affect their payments. Skepticism about the relationship between cooperation with the researcher and the school as an "official" agency was a legitimate concern to them.

Perhaps this difference in worldview and language between non-Hmong school staff and Hmong parents is reflected in the instituting of two parent organizations. On a school wide basis, there was a PTA (parent teacher association), of primarily European American families, and a separate PTO (parent teacher organization) of Hmong parents. Although Hmong parents had attended the PTA previously with a translator, they felt uncomfortable, isolated, and were unfamiliar with Robert's Rules of Order. "We felt out of place and didn't always know what was going on," said one parent; "we didn't know what to vote for." The Hmong PTO, on the other hand, was run in a more culturally familiar collaborative style based upon consensus and hierarchical patterns of leadership. With gender hierarchy, younger women, (mothers or single teachers), would not openly express their opinions to elders (usually males) who ran clan meetings. Gender issues in Hmong culture could be further investigated in another study.

Discussion

This section will briefly discuss several issues that emerged from the study: (1) the implications of dual parent-teacher organizations, (2) the stereotypes of "model minority" and "at risk" as they apply to Hmong, (3) multicultural

curriculum as it meets the needs of Hmong students, and (4) gender issues within the Hmong culture.

The model of double parent organizations is rather unique and reflects, I believe, the administration's commitment to the empowerment of all parents. Addressing linguistic and cultural differences, the school principal and staff were respectful of Hmong language and relational styles. Although staff members, except the parent educator, rarely attended Hmong PTO meetings, they supported the parent's right to convene in their preferred way. It was unclear, though, how information was shared with parents of the European American PTA. Perhaps there were just two separate lines of communication to the school administration.

The reluctance of participants not to categorize their Hmong students indicated a positive view of this ethnic group. Hmong students were generally not referred to as educationally "at risk," although many Hmong families were (or had been) on some sort of public assistance. They were also not readily referred to as "model minority" as other Asian American ethnic groups have been stereotyped. And surprisingly, some staff members were unfamiliar with the term and source of the "model minority myth" (Lee, 1996; Wu, 2002). I was told that in past years, district-wide multicultural education workshops were provided, but when funding was cut these programs disappeared. A few staff members used the term "at risk" only in relation to their Hmong students being linguistically "behind" their grade level classmates, but they also believed that these students would progress academically as soon as they learned the language. As a result they relied heavily on the assistance of the ELL teachers.

Except for the Hmong teachers and some ELL staff, racial and ethnic identity development (Hollings & Sheets, 1999) and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) had not been addressed by most of the staff. Based upon the few opinions expressed about the issue of being "color-blind," race was not considered a factor in Hmong student adjustment or academic progress. Hmong ethnic differences were often seen through a "foreign" or "other" non-western lens, highlighting exotic traditions such as shamans, bride kidnapping, coining, and strict gender role separation (rather than gender equity). Curricular focus was on teaching a "foreign" culture through the festivals and food fairs, but not in regard to culturally relevant pedagogy. It appeared that staff felt that Hmong student's home culture did not interfere with their learning in school, therefore adjustments in teaching style or materials was not necessary. This was also evident in the lack of interest in resource materials about the Hmong provided through the study grant. This was especially disappointing for the parent educator, the school librarian, and the researcher.

Finally, in Hmong culture, strong traditional gender role differentiation is practiced which includes women marrying at a young age, rearing children, and dropping out of school early. Education is considered more important for Hmong males, yet more Hmong females tend to continue on with their education, some attending college. These young women face huge intergenerational conflict with their families while also trying to negotiate dominant cultural expectations for women (Lee, 2001). One Hmong teacher shared her extended family's concern that she was "older," unmarried, and had a profession as a teacher. Fortunately, her parents, particularly her father, were aware of mainstream norms for American women and did not pressure her to adopt traditional ways. This is, in my opinion, a clear indication of the transformation (not assimilation) of Hmong American culture across generations. As ethnic groups acculturate, they create and adopt their own interpretations of mainstream culture and maintain their own beliefs and worldview at the same time. Thus, they pass on to their children a "transformed" version of Hmong American culture.

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