

Continuing the promise: Recruiting and preparing Hmong-American educators for Central Wisconsin

By

**Leslie McClain-Ruelle, PhD
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point**

and

**Kao Xiong
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

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Abstract

The state of Wisconsin, and in the broader context, the middle states of the United States experienced a large influx of Hmong families starting in the early 1980's and into the 1990's. With this influx a large number of young, Southeast Asian children entered the PK-12 classrooms, often with the support of bilingual aides. While many of the children flourished within this newer context, they were mostly guided in their classrooms by white, Anglo educators. Although these educators work to meet the needs of all children, there were few to no Hmong educators working with these same children in the PK-12 setting. At the same time, a number of Hmong young adults were serving as bilingual aides in these classrooms. Project Forward, a federally funded Title VII grant, has worked to create a shift in these roles, preparing Hmong college students to become educators in the PK-12 settings. In 1999, Central Wisconsin enrolled approximately 3,200 Hmong children in the PK-12 schools; at the same time, Central Wisconsin employed merely seven Hmong teachers in the classrooms. The goal of the grant program described in this paper is to prepare teachers of Southeast Asian background for early childhood, elementary, secondary and K-12 classrooms. The Central Wisconsin grant has supported a total of 35 Southeast Asian students in their pursuit of teaching careers. Fulfilling the goal of preparing teachers who can serve as role models for Southeast Asian children in our schools has met with successes and struggles. This article presents consideration of the central factors affecting recruitment, retention and preparation of Hmong pre-service teachers in Central Wisconsin. The article includes a brief historical examination of the immigration of the Hmong population into the United States, a consideration of the Hmong culture as it affects recruitment and retention of pre-service teachers and evidence related to successes and struggles experienced by Project Forward students in the teacher preparation programs at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Background

Brief History of the Hmong

An ethnic group living in the highlands of Laos, the Hmong were farmers leading relatively quiet lives until their involvement in the postcolonial Indochina war (Lee; Yang, 1993; Lo, 2001; Thao, 1999). During the Vietnam War, thousands of Hmong men and boys were

secretly recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to serve as soldiers for the American army (Yang, 1993). In exchange for Hmong aid during the war, the United States gave them food, weapons, and medical supplies. In addition, the U.S. officials gave the Hmong people their verbal assurance that the Hmong would be taken care of if the United States did not win the war. When the United States left Saigon in 1975, ending their involvement in Vietnam, the Hmong were left to fend for themselves. Thousands of Hmong fled to Thailand fearing for their lives. Groups of Hmong families traveled during the darkest hours of the night until they reached the Mekong River. The Mekong River was the only way to steal into Thailand. Despite this, many managed to find their way across the Mekong River to safety in Thailand.

Life in the Refugee Camps.

Thailand had set up refugee camps in Ban Vinai and Chiang Kham to accommodate the high numbers of Hmong refugees. The camps were close to the Thai/Lao border and the majority of the Hmong were relocated in the Ban Vinai camp. The conditions in the refugee camps were harsh (Lo, 2001). Many Hmong refugees were treated abysmally by the Thai guards. There were countless acts of terror committed against these refugees on a daily basis. There was no adequate schooling for the Hmong children in the refugee camps and students were not required to attend school (Yang, 1993). It cost money to attend school and many of the Hmong refugees did not have the money to spare to send their children to the schools. It was not until late 1975 that the United States gave asylum to those Hmong individuals who could show a direct correlation to those Hmong who had served the American army (Yang, 1993; Thao, 1999). When this occurred, they were sent to Phanat Nikhom, a transitional training camp, to learn about life in America (Lo, 2001). The United States had established a requirement for Hmong refugees that they spend six months learning English before being allowed to come to the United States.

Hmong Population

According to the 2000 Census, the enumerated population of the Hmong in the United States is 169,428. The highest concentrations of Hmong residents are in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The enumerated Hmong population in Wisconsin is 33,791. Despite these

statistics, many community advocates disagree with the Census reports. According to community estimates, a more accurate population statistic for the United States is 283,239 and for Wisconsin, the population of Hmong is 50,000 (Hmong National Development). Advocates argue that the misrepresentation of statistics is mainly due to the language barrier which has prevented thousands of Hmong families from completing the Census forms. Despite efforts by local Hmong organizations to assist families in completing these forms, thousands across the nation did not complete them. According to the 2000 US Census, the total Hmong population in Central Wisconsin (Wausau, Stevens Point, Wisconsin Rapids) is 5,621. Local community advocates and leaders dispute those statistics. Their estimates of the Hmong population are approximately 7,400 in Central Wisconsin.

According to the statistics compiled by Pfeifer (2003), director of the Hmong Resource Center Library in Saint Paul, the age group with the highest concentration of Hmong is 0 to 18 with over 55% of the Hmong population under the age of 18 nationally. In Wisconsin, the population of Hmong individuals under 18 is 57.1%; compared to the total Wisconsin population age 18 and under of 25.5 %.

Cultural Transitions and Education

In considering the Project Forward students' experiences in the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point teacher preparation program, it is important to realize the significant cultural transitions faced by the Hmong families that have resettled in Central Wisconsin. Researchers and scholars have described the Hmong culture as rural, clan-based, preliterate and traditional and have stressed the difference between this way of life and the mainstream American culture. In describing the Hmong, one U.S. policy analyst wrote, "This country has rarely, if ever welcomed a group of immigrants so culturally distant from the native and social economic mainstream" (Fass, 1991, p.1). Timm (1994) found that there was a relationship between the age of her respondents and their perceptions of American and Hmong values. The older the respondent, the stronger their viewpoints were in maintaining their traditional Hmong values and traditions as they were in Laos. As Timm (1994) points out, ignorance of American cultural values has

confused the Hmong and ignorance of Hmong cultural values has confused mainstream Americans.

Research has shown that family participation is an essential factor in improving a students' educational performance (Teheran & White, 1988; Sileo & Orater, 1998; & Met Life, 1998, cited in Mathews, 2000, p. 101). The Hmong are a clan-based society for whom the sustainability of family is a primary concern. In the Hmong language, the word tsev means home and refers not only to geographical location, but also to relationships with the extended family (Miyares, 1997, cited in Watson, 2001, p. 305). The Hmong have a strong sense of family that is shown through the clan system. The eighteen clans give Hmong individuals their identity, and a sense of who they are. Although parents and elders may not be able to academically support their children in their pursuit for education, clan and familial support is very strong. If the individual child performs well academically, it is viewed as a reflection of the parents and the clan system's good upbringing of the individual. However, should a child not succeed; it is a sign of bad face that perhaps the parents were not supportive enough.

The educational system provides one avenue for bridging cultural differences. Within the educational system, teacher understanding of learning styles and cognitive styles of Hmong students assists in bridging cultural differences. Timm, Chiang and Finn have examined Hmong socialization and suggest that by using cooperative peer groups and teaching strategies that fit with traditional Hmong procedures, as well as strategies that help students find their way in American society, teachers may enable them to become truly bicultural and more empowered to live in both cultural worlds (1998).

Staffing classrooms with Hmong certified teachers is a positive step toward educating both cultures. Mathews (2000) has described predominant cultural patterns of South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans, including communication styles, family relationships, social interaction and behavior and family expectations of success. Timm (1994) describes Hmong parents' attitudes toward education. Hmong parents reported that they believe getting a good education is the way for their children to attain personal success and a good life. Traditional

values, however, influenced their views about home/school relationships, expectations of teachers and children's after school activities. Hmong teachers inherently understand these patterns.

Lee (1997) and Timm (1994) have examined gender roles in the Hmong culture. Timm describes the clan structure with clearly delineated gender roles. Lee found that Hmong American college women understand that Hmong culture is in the process of significant change and these women see themselves as central agents of that change. She notes that “ despite evidence of cultural transformation that encourages school persistence, Hmong women still face cultural barriers to the pursuit of higher education demonstrating that cultural transformation is not a smooth process, but is fraught with tension and struggle” (p.825).

Preparing Southeast Asian Teachers

The Project Forward initiative suggests consideration of transition factors faced by diverse populations, in particular transition factors for Hmong-Americans in preparing to enter the teaching profession. The Project considers recruitment and retention of Hmong pre-service educators, many of whom have immigrated as young children, bringing with them experiences that are riveting and a cultural background with strong traditions and expectations. Although a few of the participants were born in the United States, many of these pre-service educators have moved from a society with strictly an oral tradition, into this society, which demands proficiency in reading and writing. These cultural shifts, along with significant expectations for gender roles and responsibilities, make their scholastic efforts both remarkable and often difficult. In addition it is important to note that these participants are preparing for teacher licensure in a context of heightened expectations for success in teacher preparation programs along with competitive admission policies. Collaborative efforts with participating districts and the area two-year college campus, have eased the transitions into the university setting and from the university into the teaching profession. This article provides preliminary work in the examination of successes and struggles of Hmong pre-service educators participating in Project Forward based upon findings from three surveys and individual structured interviews. Additionally, while these findings offer insights, they also suggest questions for further research.

Research Methods

Over a period of three years, 2000 to 2003, three surveys were administered to the students enrolled in teacher preparation programs and participating in the Project Forward Grant. The first survey, administered in spring 2001, gathered demographic information regarding the Project Forward participants and their contexts. Categories in this survey included demographic information, family values of education, barriers to education, perspectives on education, cultural influences on education, and the benefits of Project Forward's efforts. The second survey taken in the academic year 2001-2002, inquired about the informants' perceptions of their experiences at the university including general observations, campus experiences, classroom and faculty-related experiences, challenges, campus involvement and peer interactions. The third survey, taken in the academic year 2002-2003, inquired about participants' intentions related to teaching including questions about their academic and teaching experiences.

The surveys were followed by one-on-one interviews of a sampling of participants in the grant program. These surveys and interviews align with characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998); following their rationale for choosing qualitative methods that support the nature of the problem. In this project the research provides a foundation for further research through inquiries of participants to describe characteristics of their background, their perceptions and their intentions. Conclusions and further questions follow Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory in that these were drawn from survey findings rather than presupposed (1998).

Demographic Survey Findings

Findings from the demographic survey indicated the average age of the participants in the program was 24 with the ages ranging from 17 to 34. Eighty-five percent of the participants were female and all were of Hmong heritage. Seventy-three percent were married, and 11% were single. Of the 23 who were currently or had been married, all but two had children, with the number of children ranging from one to five. At the time of this demographic survey, the average

years spent living in the United States was 18 years, with the range of 10 to 26 years. Seventy-three percent of the participants were working, with 42% working 30 or more hours per week.

In summary, from this data we find our population predominantly female and working many hours a week, while also taking care of family and children at home. This data is consistent with the research conducted by Lee (1997) examining Hmong women's pursuit of higher education. Additionally the demographic survey included questions about the level of education and values of the participants' families. Twelve participants did not know the highest grade their father completed and four indicated their fathers never attended school. Fifteen participants did not know the highest grade their mother completed and eight indicated that their mothers never attended school. Nine indicated that both parents could read and write English and 12 indicated that only their father could read and write English. Seven participants indicated that both their parents were fluent in English and 8 indicated that only their fathers were fluent in English. Eight indicated that neither was fluent in English. When asked to rate the importance of education to their family 73% of the participants indicated very important, 27% indicated important, no one indicated not important.

Respondents indicated that their families offer them emotional and financial support while they are attending college. Many noted that their spouses or their families watched the children while they attended classes. One informant stated: "Yes, they always tell me it's important for me to go to college so I can have a good job." "They always want us to make better persons of ourselves. ...life is hard without an education." These words typify the participants' views related to family support. When asked specifically about their family's views related to their career choice of teaching, respondents indicated that their families provided a high level of support. "They think that an ability to teach is great because I can return to the community and be a role model for the community and help those unable to help themselves." When asked who had assisted them in completing their education, respondents identified their parents, family, friends, teachers, counselors and advisors as being supportive.

Barriers to the Pursuit of Education

Many of the respondents indicated that childcare and family obligations had been the biggest barriers to their pursuit of education. Earlier studies have shown that early marriages have prevented many Hmong females from attaining their degrees (Goldstein, 1985; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Walker-Moffat, 1995 as cited in Lee, 1997). It is important to note that the overwhelming numbers of Project Forward students are married females. In examining survey responses, many did not view early marriage as a barrier to their pursuit of their education. Although many noted that it was harder being a student in addition to other responsibilities (i.e. household chores, expectations of a daughter-in-law, a mother, a wife). "One of the problems for me is trying to support my children and myself while going to school. I find this to be a problem for me because it is very difficult to be a full time mother, a full time student and a full time worker."

Regarding specific cultural barriers, several indicated that they face conflicts related to women's roles. "Having to battle with my parents about participating in college activities instead of coming home to cook and babysit." "My in laws and my husband's male friends don't support educated women. They have made that clear in their conversations. But that is what pushed me harder. I would like them to see that I can be educated and culturally aware." "A cultural barrier I encountered while attending college is my spouse's view of women going to college and having equal opportunity as men."

Perspectives on Education

Participants were asked what motivated them to go to college. The majority of the participants indicate they "want to be something as well as the first in the family to complete college." Another identified self-respect and self-worth as reasons for attending college. In response to why they want to become teachers, respondents indicated they like being around children, they want to make a difference, and they want to provide the same help to others as they have received from their teachers. The qualities they believe ideal teachers to possess included

patience, love for teaching, kindness, loyalty, honesty, intelligence, flexibility, open-mindedness, creativity, respect, and bilingual language ability.

Cultural Influence on Education

Respondents were asked to name the three most important values in the Hmong Culture. The most frequently identified values were the family, the culture and respect for elders. When asked how the Hmong culture views education, respondents indicated that it is viewed as very important, and characterized it as “a doorway to success,” “something we should all strive for in order to better our lives.” But they also couched education in relation to other priorities. “Education is not the first priority (usually). Family is always supposed to be first.” “[There is] little support for educated women.” “[The culture] doesn’t support educated women” In response to the probing question “What are some of your culture’s educational views/norms that do not exist in the western culture?” responses included: “Back in Laos girls are not allowed to have education because they can’t afford it. Only few have education.” “Women don’t usually go to college and become teachers.” (Similar responses were given by several respondents.) “When you are educated, it’s for your whole family not just for your own self.” “Only men can be teachers – men are smarter.” “Study hard, punishment for not knowing the answer; harsh reaction to failure, must succeed.”

Academic Experience Survey

The second survey was administered toward the end of the participants’ second year in Project Forward in spring 2002. This survey was administered to determine the students’ levels of satisfaction with their academic experience. In general the responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with everything from the campus climate, to interactions with professors and support they have received. Of the nineteen respondents, 89% rated their overall experience with the professors as good to excellent, 10% indicated fair. On the average, respondents indicated they study between two and three hours a day, with the range from one to seven hours a day. When asked about the major challenges they face as students, most indicated “getting everything done” and “having enough time to do homework well.” Respondents were asked about their

involvement in campus activities. Based upon the demographic survey, it is predictable that participants have little time for campus organizations and activities. Several, however, did indicate they have been involved with HaSEEAC, the campus Hmong and Southeast Asian America Club. The findings from the second survey indicated that the Project Forward participants were focused on their education, doing well in their courses and had little time for traditional extracurricular campus activity. Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the campus climate, the instructional climate and the educational experience.

Academic and Teaching Experience Survey

The third survey, administered during the Project Forward participants' third year in the program, 2002-2003, invited participants to identify their goals and views related to their future careers as teachers. The 13 participants responding to this survey had completed a portion of their Professional Education Program coursework. As participants were asked to identify their goals for teaching, their responses varied and included such goals as "to be able to reach out to students and help them learn;" "To integrate diversity and understanding of cultures within schools;" and "To learn along with my students." "One can never stop learning; to be informative, fun and creative." When asked if they had an opportunity to integrate their cultural values into their teaching they indicated yes, "...by teaching specific lessons on Hmong dance and culture." One respondent indicated "I really haven't integrated my own cultural values into my assignments but I've really tried to use my own personal experience in class whether to help explain something or use it as an example." Their biggest challenges included disciplining students, working with students with special needs and getting the students to comprehend the material. When asked about the greatest strength they bring to their classrooms, participants indicated their experiences and background, their organizational skills and their ability to know the students.

Structured Interviews

The last portion of the three-year study involved structured interviews as a follow up to the Academic and Teaching Experience Survey. The researcher selected five students out of the

35 students in the Project Forward Program to interview in-depth about their academic program and teaching experiences. The five students were selected because they were upper class students (junior, senior, or graduate students) and they had been engaged in teaching in the schools in some capacity.

The interviews revealed a general consensus that there is a lack of knowledge about the Hmong community among current teachers, which prevents them from effectively helping Hmong students. One respondent stated, "From my teaching experiences and working with other teachers, I notice that some teachers don't know how to help the Hmong students. Then they don't have the information about where to find things to help their students."

Most of the Project Forward students have had positive experiences with teaching; however, a few have had less positive experiences. One interviewee told of trying to incorporate her values into the classroom, only leading the non-Hmong students to ridicule the Hmong students. She felt that her supervising teacher's inclusion of her Hmong cultural values was superficial (i.e. Hmong food and Hmong dancers). She felt that the teacher had done a poor job of incorporating the Hmong students into the activity in a meaningful manner.

Four of the five interviewees felt that their greatest strength in the classroom was their background and culture. One interviewee said, "Because we have such a diverse school; probably about one-fourth of the school is Hmong. One of my strengths is that I can speak two languages...understanding two different cultures and so... I understand where they are coming from, whereas, a lot of the teachers there don't."

Two of the students interviewed spoke about the racism and discrimination that they encountered in their teaching experiences. Not solely racism from parents of students in their classes, but also from the teachers themselves. One interviewee said, "I'm different. If an Anglo couple comes to see me, I'm different. They look at a white teacher and then question my ability to teach their child." The other student said, "When you go into a classroom, you are different than the teacher and since teachers don't know about the Hmong students, me and my culture, they tend to look at you as if they are superior. You are as educated as they are. You are able to

do the work that they do, but since you are different, they tend to have you do small things.” The remaining three interviewees did not mention this in their interview responses.

General Observations

The Demographic Survey supports many of the current descriptions of transitional issues faced by Hmong Americans. The data is compelling, in the identification of the incredible level of family obligations that many of the participants face, in the identification of potential sources of cultural dissonance many of the participants face and in the identification of the strong value and hope that is placed in the educational system by the Hmong culture.

The Academic Experience Survey suggests that participants are quite satisfied with their educational experience. The results underline the time constraints that Project Forward participants face while also reminding us that they are not typical college students. These participants understand the primary focus of their education to be that of seeking their college degree and gaining their teaching licenses. Their ability to experience the full range of opportunities as a part of college life is limited mostly to participation in the Hmong student club.

The Teaching Experience Survey indicated that all of the participants possessed solid goals and expectations related to their teaching careers. Their goals are goals that would undoubtedly be shared by the broader population of students enrolled in the Professional Education Programs. Additionally their concerns regarding their classroom teaching experience are also indicative of all students seeking teaching certification, that is they want to be able to manage their classrooms, meet the needs of all students and help all of the students understand the material. It is of interest that when asked if they have been able to include their cultural values in their teaching, the respondents mostly indicated yes through specific topical presentations. This question deserves further consideration through structured interviews and classroom observations. It would be informative to examine the values identified in earlier surveys (respect for elders, the family and the Hmong culture) and witness the many ways these three values are infused throughout their instruction.

The Structured Interviews indicated that students greatly value a strong cultural influence in their classroom. The overwhelming number of students wanted to incorporate some type of Hmong artifacts into their classroom when they begin to teach. In addition, some of the students indicate that maintaining their bilingualism is important to their identity as a teacher. Two respondents who experienced some type of discrimination in the classroom arrived in the United States already in their teens; whereas, the other interviewees arrived as toddlers.

Conclusion

This article describes successes and struggles of the Hmong pre-service educators enrolled at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and supported by Project Forward, a federally funded Title VII grant. These students have experienced high levels of success in their university studies and report strong satisfaction with their advising, their professors, their courses and their program of study.

The majority of the participants in Project Forward were female. Through an initial survey of the participants, it was learned that many of the participants were married with children. These participants were working to juggle their culture's expectations related to marriage and family while equipping themselves with a college education. Throughout our study, the majority of the participants reported that the culture does not typically support the female having a higher education than the male in a marriage relationship. For this reason, we have been sensitive to this potential cultural clash that females in the Project may be experiencing.

Finally, results from a third survey have indicated that participants are using traditional opportunities to weave cultural information into their practicum and student teaching experiences. This work raises new questions for consideration as students graduate from Project Forward and become teachers in Central Wisconsin including:

- What are the effects of Hmong American teachers on the performance of Hmong American students in their classrooms?
- In what ways does the cultural heritage of the Hmong American teacher demonstrate itself in the classroom?

- In what ways can Hmong American teachers mentor their non-Hmong educators in methods for understanding learning styles of Southeast Asian children?

The efforts of Project Forward have worked to create a shift in the present roles of Hmong Americans in educational settings by preparing Hmong American certified teachers for schools in Central Wisconsin. As of May 2005, through the support of the Project Forward grant and additional state funds, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point will have graduated 21 pre-service teachers and 7 graduate students with 25 currently serving as teachers in their own classrooms. These teachers are serving as professional role models, carrying a fundamental understanding of their own cultural heritage and language, for new generations of Hmong American children in Central Wisconsin.

This discussion of Project Forward contributes to the larger body of literature related to Hmong immigrant transitions and educational attainment. These findings expand on Timm's (1994) examination of perceptions of American and Hmong values and related cross-cultural confusion. The work of Project Forward looks squarely at the values within the Hmong community regarding educational attainment and gender roles and the reality faced in these transitional times of mergings into the American culture. Both Lee (1997) and Timm (1994) have examined clearly delineated gender roles within the Hmong clan system. The findings of Project Forward indicate that the women within this project are, in many cases, carrying out traditional female roles while at the same time serving as central agents of change for both the Hmong and the American culture. These women are earning college degrees, teacher certification and teaching positions, often surpassing the educational level of their spouses, while maintaining family, extended family and clan-level responsibilities. They have faced the reality of cultural dissonance and have walked the balance beam in serving as front line agents of change to both their own community as well as to the broader educational community.

Others have discussed the essential nature of familial support and cooperation in sustaining and improving students' educational performance and presented the cultural view of the Hmong clan system that individual success or failure is a direct reflection of the parental and

clan system's upbringing (Teheran & White, 1988). The success of the Project Forward students and program contribute to the larger knowledge base by providing the potential for widespread good will, cultural transitions and positive perceptions in the Hmong and broader educational community.

About the Authors: Dr. Leslie McClain-Ruelle serves as Head of the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. She is a professor of Reading and also serves as Director of Project Forward.

Kao Xiong served for three years as Coordinator of Project Forward in the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He is currently a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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