

The Transition of Wat Tham Krabok Hmong Children to Saint Paul Public Schools: Perspectives of Teachers, Principals, and Hmong Parents

By

**Bic Ngo
Martha Bigelow
Kyla L. Wahlstrom
University of Minnesota**

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Abstract

In 2004, with the closing of the last Hmong refugee camp, Wat Tham Krabok, the latest group of Hmong refugees resettled to the US. To facilitate the language transition of approximately 1,000 school-aged newcomer Hmong children, the Saint Paul Public Schools, developed and established Transitional Language Centers. In this article, we examine the experiences and perspectives of principals, teachers and educational assistants who worked with newcomer Hmong children in the newly-established Transitional Language Centers and well-established Language Academy programs. We also elucidate the experiences of Hmong parents with the schools that served their children. Our research offers insights into the important work of the Transitional Language Centers as well as the need to better support newcomer Hmong parents.

Introduction

Nearly thirty years ago, the first Hmong refugees arrived in the United States from Laos in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Chan, 1994; Long, 1993). Successive waves of refugees in the late-70s, mid-80s, and mid-90s have resulted in a Hmong population of 169,428 the majority residing in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Wisconsin (US Census Bureau, 2000). Since the arrival of Hmong

refugees to the United States, researchers have documented the adaptation and transition of Hmong youth and families to US schools and society.

Research on the education of Hmong students in the US has almost exclusively focused on the education of Hmong high school and college students (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This growing body of literature highlights the myriad challenges Hmong students and families face in their pursuit of education (Ngo, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Issues such as truancy, delinquency, and high dropout rates are salient factors in the experiences of Hmong American students (Faderman, 1998; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Walker-Moffat, 1995). To account for these difficulties, numerous researchers point to the role of cultural differences in learning styles of Hmong students and the practices of schools (Timm, Chiang & Finn, 1998; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990; Walker-Moffat, 1995). Other researchers point to the ways in which Hmong students' educational opportunities and experiences are adversely affected by racism and poverty (DePauw, 2006; Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2002). Yet others have highlighted the significance of gender roles and expectations in the educational achievement of Hmong girls and boys (Donnelly, 1994; Goldstein, 1985; Lee 1997, 2001; Ngo, 2000, 2002).

In addition to illustrating the experiences of Hmong American students, a growing number of researchers have begun to explore Hmong parents' experiences and roles in their children's education. The work of these researchers reveal that Hmong parents' limited English language proficiency and lack of knowledge about schooling in the US are major barriers to their engagement with their children's education (Adler, 2004; Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2000). Consequently, the negotiation of school and decisions about education are made by Hmong students on their own, or with the help of older siblings and friends

(Ngo, 2000; Teranishi, 2004). Moreover, researchers have argued that in limited English proficient families, youth have become decision makers and culture in information brokers (Faderman, 1998). This difference in acculturation between Hmong adults and youth created role reversals within Hmong families, giving rise to tensions and conflict between Hmong parents and children (Faderman, 1998; Thao, 1999; Walker-Moffat, 1995).

In 2004, with the closing of the last Hmong refugee camp, Wat Tham Krabok, the latest group of 15,000 Hmong refugees resettled to the US¹ (Grigoleit, 2004; Hang, et al., 2004). Approximately 5,000 of these refugees came to St. Paul, Minnesota (Hang et al., 2004; Saint Paul Public Schools, 2004). To prepare for the arrival of the refugees, then St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly formed an assessment team of city, county and community experts to travel to Wat Tham Krabok (Hang et al., 2004). The assessment report from this work highlighted recommendations ranging from educational, social service, to physical and mental health needs of the newcomer Hmong population. The refugees of Wat Tham Krabok were particularly unique in that 52% of the residents were 14 years old or younger, and less than half of these children had access to formal schooling (Hang et al., 2004). Additionally, the assessment showed that the educational opportunities for Hmong adults in the camp were extremely limited (Hang et al., 2004).

For St. Paul educators the large number of young children at Wat Tham Krabok raised questions about the capacity of current English Language Learner (ELL) programs to meet the specific language and educational needs of such a large refugee group. In anticipation of the arrival of approximately 1,000 school-age children to the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), district personnel worked with Hmong community members to

¹ See Grigoleit (2006) for further information on the closing of Wat Tham Krabok.

develop an intensive language program to specifically meet the needs newcomer Hmong students and families. This commitment to serving Wat Tham Krabok refugees resulted in the establishment of Transitional Language Centers (TLCs). The primary goal of the TLCs was to facilitate the prompt transition of K-6 Hmong newcomer students to mainstream schools and programs (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2004). The TLCs were designed to be short-term, intensive language programs offering bilingual instruction in Hmong and English to meet the particular needs of Wat Tham Krabok refugee children. All TLC staff received “additional training in ELL strategies, Hmong culture, and refugee issues” (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2004).

During the 2004-2005 academic year SPPS established TLCs in four elementary schools². Each TLC had five classrooms and a capacity for 125 students. Once the newcomer students arrived in St. Paul, they took initial language assessment tests at the district’s Student Placement Center. Hmong newcomer families were then able to choose between a TLC program and a regular school program. While the district encouraged parents to enroll their children in a TLC, not all families chose this option. Some enrolled their children in other K-6 schools with Language Academy (LA) or other types of ELL programs.

In this article, we explicate the similarities and differences between the Transitional Language Centers and Language Academies that served newcomer Hmong children and families. We examine the experiences and perspectives of principals, teachers and educational assistants who worked with newcomer Hmong children in the TLC and LA programs, and elucidate the experiences of Hmong parents with the schools

² One program for older newcomer students was established in an academy for middle and high school students.

that served their children. We suggest that TLCs were better able to provide an environment of comfort that encouraged learning and smoothed the transition to mainstream classrooms. However, data from the Hmong parents showed that their experience with their children's transition to school in the US were similar across the two programs. Our research will extend the current knowledge base on the education of Hmong elementary school children, and provide much-needed research on the experiences of Hmong parents with US schools.

Methodology

In spring 2005, SPPS approached the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota to conduct a study to explore the effectiveness of the TLC programs³. In particular, district personnel wanted to compare the work of the TLCs with that of the LAs in meeting the needs of newcomer Hmong students.

The specially designed TLCs were different from the established LAS in significant ways. The TLC classrooms had an ESL teacher as well as a grade-level elementary teacher and one or both teachers were bilingual. All of the students in the TLC classes were Hmong newcomers and they often knew each other or were related. There was no pull-out instruction and the classes were multi-age and multi-grade. In the LA programs, the Hmong newcomers were integrated into grade-level classes with other immigrant children, native- or near native English speakers. Pull-out services using ESL teachers and Educational Assistants were sometimes used to teach basic literacy and

³ This study was possible with the financial support of the St. Paul Public Schools. District staff that we worked with were genuinely interested in learning about how the TLCs met the educational and adjustment needs of the children from the Wat Tham Krabok. The district provided us with much assistance with our study, including providing transportation for the parents to attend the focus groups.

numeracy skills, but bilingual staff members were not always available, or staff were not bilingual in Hmong. Sometimes there were LA classes with only one Hmong newcomer and other times there were a few children in the LA class. The LA model was distinguished from other classrooms with ELLs of higher proficiency levels by the fact that they had more access to an ESL teacher. Specifically, the ESL teacher they worked with was responsible for 27 ELLs compared to 55 for children who were more advanced in their English language skills. As a model for teaching newcomer second language learners, the TLCs were intended to provide curriculum and instruction beyond the customary LA model. The TLCs were tailored to the needs of the Hmong newcomers and followed a transitional bilingual model that began instruction primarily in Hmong and throughout the year increased the amount of English spoken until most of the instruction was in English. The language of instruction in the LA classrooms was English unless a Hmong speaking EA happened to be assigned to classes with Hmong newcomers.

Our evaluation specifically sought to compare the newly created TLC programs with established LA programs. We designed this multi-part study to explore three primary questions: 1) What are educators' and parents' perceptions of the TLC and LA programs' capacity to meet the needs of elementary Hmong newcomers?; 2) What, if any, are the differences between the programs in terms of students' language learning achievement?; and 3) If there are differences, are the differences sufficient to warrant the extra costs associated with TLCs?

We included three of the four Transitional Language Centers and two Language Academies in our study. Primary data for the study included individual interviews with

teachers, educational assistants (EAs), principals, and newcomer Hmong parents from the TLCs and LAs⁴. In addition, we collected student language proficiency test data from the *Test of Emerging Academic English (TEAE)* and the *Minnesota Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (MN SOLOM)*. In this article, we will focus on the qualitative perspectives from the interview data to explore issues and experiences that test scores are unable to reveal⁵.

The teachers we interviewed were grade level teachers, ELL teachers, and educational assistants from three TLC and two LA sites. Many participants were bilingual Hmong. Participants were selected from a list provided by the District which indicated a) the staff member's role in the program (ESL teacher, grade level teacher or EA), b) whether or not they were bilingual in Hmong, c) what license(s) they held, and d) how many years they had been teaching. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol which allowed for follow up questions. The principals who participated in the study included the three TLC principals and one LA principal. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each. The interview questions focused on effective leadership actions in dealing with school change. The newcomer Hmong parents were recruited from a list of all parents with children in TLC or LA programs. The parents were interviewed in focus groups facilitated by a Hmong bilingual focus group moderator who was not affiliated with the school district. In addition to the moderator, a Hmong bilingual note taker attended each of the focus groups to monitor the audio taping equipment and to note pauses, facial expressions and other interactions the tape recorder could not capture (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This bilingual moderator was

⁴ Due to a variety of logistical constraints we were not able to include classroom observations in the study.

⁵ For a discussion of the test data, see Bigelow, et al., 2005.

not affiliated with the school district. Each of the focus group interviews took place in the evening at a Hmong social service agency familiar to the Hmong parents. They lasted approximately 1.5 hours and included on average eight parents in each group.

The interviews were all audiotaped and then transcribed. We then coded the data using software designed specifically to organize qualitative data. In our coding and analysis, we organized the data by ideas. These ideas provided the major topics and themes for deeper analysis and for the write-up of the study (Wolcott, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Perspectives of Teaching Staff and Principals

The teaching staff members in both programs were all very pleased to have the opportunity to welcome the Hmong children from Watt Tham Krabok into their classrooms. They all actively sought out information about the children with regard to prior schooling and Hmong or Thai literacy skills. The teaching staff in both programs were knowledgeable about working with English language learners, especially those from limited formal schooling backgrounds. Most had been involved with the Hmong community for several years. They were aware of the conditions at Wat Tham Krabok, and the challenges refugee students face. Although all of the teachers were clearly well-qualified to work with the Hmong newcomers, programmatic differences in the programs resulted in significant challenges regarding educational engagement of students. In this section, we examine the perspectives of TLC and LA program teachers, educational assistants, and principals on their work with newcomer Hmong students and families. We highlight themes related to 1) language and learning; 2) culture in the curriculum; and 3) children in the programs.

Language and Learning: The Impact of Bilingual Instruction

The difference in native language support between the TLCs and LAs is a key difference that had implications for the kind of teaching and learning that took place in the programs. While the TLCs were structured to provide bilingual support, this was not a working assumption in the LAs. In fact, LA staff reported that it was assumed that most of the newcomer students would enroll in the TLC programs. As one LA teacher commented, “They literally just kind of dropped out of the sky...I mean we pulled it together in just a matter of a week or two.” Together, the lack of bilingual support staff and preparation for newcomer Hmong students created situations in the LAs where teachers were generally unable to tailor the curriculum or instruction to the needs of the Hmong newcomers. According to some teachers, some of the other LA students had to make up for this gap. One teacher said that a bilingual Hmong child in her classroom did so much interpreting that the teacher felt she should be paid for her work. Another LA teacher articulated her frustration with the lack of bilingual staff in this way: “I was really frustrated when the Hmong kids came. I was happy to have them, but for the longest time we had no interpreter.” On the other hand, when there was bilingual staff available for generous portions of the day in a LA, the staff was much more confident that students were making progress with language and content learning.

In general, the response of the LAs to the lack of bilingual support staff included the slow hiring of bilingual educational assistants and the implementation of language pull-out services. Teachers report that the pull-out services taught newcomer students “survival English” as well as basic literacy skills. One LA principal believed that these procedures were especially helpful “instead of just putting them right in the mix of

schooling because they struggle with both trying to figure out their environment and then also trying to learn.” She recognized that “it’s just almost impossible to learn” when the children are placed in LA classes without these pull-out services. However, this principal went on to say that she believed the inclusion model they used did “provide a lot of support to all the students in the class,” not just the Hmong newcomers, and that it was a “rich environment” for learning. She thought it would be much harder to be in a class made up entirely of newcomers. As we reveal in our section on children’s response to the programs, this perception may be incorrect.

Although native language support in LA classrooms was irregular, one teacher noted that when Hmong staff members were present, children would engage in the classroom activities more. He observed that when Hmong staff would talk with the children about the camp, or show pictures from the Hmong news, the children “would just talk up a blue streak,” something that is possible to do only in the native language, given the students’ low level of English proficiency. Not only did the students talk more when given an opportunity to interact with a Hmong adult, but native language support helped learning as well. For example, a teacher at a LA school noted that it would be good to do higher level questions and research with a big project, but that this was only possible with native language support. According to the teacher, educational assistants “are excellent at like conveying concepts in Hmong and kids ask questions.”

In contrast, the TLCs did not use pull-out services with the Hmong newcomers. One TLC teacher empathized with the teachers in the LA settings because they have “one kid so far [behind] that he or she doesn’t know anything that’s going on when the teacher has the responsibility with the other 20 children.” The same TLC teacher pointed out that

the LA Hmong newcomers “would just be lost without support with the language... support with the ELL teacher or bilingual support.” There were many instances of TLC principals and teachers showing a great deal of pride in the TLCs as well as excitement about the opportunity to work in one. TLC staff often cited their school’s many years of experience with immigrant children and families. One principal noted that while other principals said they had to “get used to” immigrant children and families, her perspective was different:

I would always say, “Send them to us.” That’s the reputation we have and we were the first to step forward. We wanted to lead and voted as a staff. Ninety-two percent voted that we wanted those children to come to our school and we went after them as far as recruiting the same way Mayor Kelly did.

Our research revealed that the effect of bilingual support for the newcomer students was dramatic for both the TLC and LA programs. Multiple TLC teaching staff members mentioned bilingual support as the feature of the program that was particularly good for the Hmong newcomers because “they’re very smart kids . . . you know...but, the only thing is, they lack the language.” One educational assistant said that the native language helped the children “feel confidence that even though they don’t understand...we can explain to them in their own language and help them.” This educational assistant went on to say that when “they have their own language, they learn better or they’re quicker in another language.” A TLC teacher said the children’s native language was “respected by using it . . . being able to use it . . . being able to speak freely in it and ask questions in it.”

Across the two programs, when Hmong was used, it was used in the oral (i.e., speaking and listening) modes⁶. When the Hmong was used, it was used to instruct, to explain and to clarify. Teachers in both the TLC and LA programs reported the concern that they had few bilingual materials, especially beginning-level materials for developing literacy in English. TLC teachers told us that they supplemented the reading curriculum by making their own materials (e.g., pictures linking to words). A couple of LA teachers voiced the concern that district materials that would have helped their Hmong newcomers did not find their way to the schools. One TLC principal noted the need for additional materials such as listening centers, vocabulary cards, picture cards, and digital cameras to support language learning.

Although the majority of the TLC teaching staff supported the use of Hmong in the classroom, disagreements existed about the “bilingual” nature of the instruction and when teachers should transition to English-only instruction. Over the course of the academic year, Hmong instruction was supposed to be reduced as a way to prepare the newcomers for the following year when bilingual support would not be guaranteed. Some TLC teachers believed that students would learn English even if they used only Hmong:

I think we could have done the whole year in Hmong and it probably . . . they would have been speaking English even if we didn't say “Let's speak English” they would have been speaking English. Everything they're learning in Hmong is helping them.

The principal at this TLC also noted that there was a big difference between the amount of Hmong that was spoken at the beginning of the year and the end of the year. She said

⁶ In a few TLC classrooms with older students who had some prior schooling, written Hmong was used periodically.

that the children could “virtually function with very little Hmong” by the end of the year, but that Hmong was still used when teaching key concepts.

Other teachers felt differently, and questioned the continued use of Hmong over the course of the entire year. One TLC teacher expressed her frustration with her Hmong speaking colleague, another TLC teacher, who continued to use Hmong for basic instructions and interactions through the end of the school year. A TLC teacher commented that their program was “bilingual-ish” but she was uncertain exactly how and when to use Hmong in ways that reflected best practices. She said, “I don’t know about the bilingual piece.” According to this teacher, she would have liked more training “in terms of what really is best.” We suggest that these comments point to the lack of consistency in both the TLC and LA programs with regard to the use of Hmong language in teaching the Hmong newcomers.

Integrating Language and Academic Content Learning

An important part of any program designed to teach content through a new language and vice versa is the degree to which this task is carefully planned. When we asked staff members how they integrated language and content learning, the TLC teachers were typically the most articulate in their response. They described numerous things they did that seemed to develop English language skills. One teacher explained how she was trying to integrate writing and the language of Mathematics, noting that she was “always thinking about how to get the language in there and how to express it.” Another TLC teacher expressed great concern for students who were going into fourth grade because they were working with the first grade Mathematics curriculum. She knew they needed more English language skills to be successful with the fourth grade

Mathematics curriculum. Another TLC teacher told us that he “kind of lives and dies” for his thematic teaching of language. When he worked with his newcomer students on a specific unit, he provided numerous books and activities on the topic to develop language skills needed to learn and apply the content.

On the other hand, some teachers were perplexed about the question of how language and content instructional aims were integrated. This was revealed in this statement made by a TLC teacher, when asked about how the curriculum accounts for language and content learning: “first I’ll have to think about what that means. Do I have a system for content learning . . . and what was it?” After some delay, she said, “Ah . . . yea . . . hopefully I do that all day long (laughter).” She believed that this “happens more naturally than you would think.” This vagueness reflects the lack of a structure or articulation of how content and language aims were aligned. We suggest that these comments point to the lack of consistency in both the TLC and LA programs with regard to the use of Hmong language in teaching the Hmong newcomers. Overall, there were few procedures in place for *systematically* teaching and monitoring language development through content learning⁷.

Culture in the Curriculum

The work of researchers on the effective teaching of immigrant students and other students of color (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll & Gonzalez, 2003) has revealed the importance of integrating students’ background, interests, and everyday lives—culture—into classroom curriculum and instruction. This “culturally relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or “culturally responsive” (Gay, 2000) approach to teaching

⁷ We were not able to include classroom observations in our study. We may have been able to see examples of how this was occurring in individual classrooms.

situates culture as dynamic and students and families as having “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 2003) as central to pedagogical practices that engage students. Our research revealed that both the TLC and LA programs struggled with integrating newcomer Hmong students’ culture into curriculum and instruction.

Teachers from both the TLCs and LAs had difficulty integrating culture in their classrooms, pointing out that they were focusing on the transition into a US school culture and academics—“the American way of teaching.” However, we found that the ways that the LA and TLC programs were able to bring in aspects of Hmong students’ lives and experiences were markedly different. The descriptions of culture integration in the LAs were mostly surface level, addressing food, holidays, dress, cultural artifacts, traditional customs, setting a table in the US. In contrast, we found that the TLCs were more successful at making teaching and learning relevant to students’ lives.

For example, one TLC teacher explained that not only was the Hmong language used, but the lived experiences of the children were elicited and honored on a daily basis. Another TLC teacher shared that in a thematic unit on houses, the class built American, Hmong, Thai and traditional Native American houses and discussed similarities and differences. In a math lesson, Hmong culture was included in a class activity when the group made a Venn Diagram about having a baby in Thailand and in the US. The teacher said:

[T]hat [activity] was revealing to them because some of the things they didn’t understand about having a baby here where the mother takes six weeks off and then goes back to work. In Laos there are certain rituals and customs that they have to go through.

In addition, students' camp experiences became part of the curriculum in numerous TLC classrooms. One teacher invited the students to bring possessions to school that they had from the camp or from home and talk about their memories of the camp. Another class did a unit on chickens. The teacher said that "they've all had chicken experiences and rooster experiences and they talked a lot about those experiences." In another class lesson, the students drew a map of the refugee camp, including where they lived and where their friends lived and the geographical features of the camp. This activity led to students telling each other about places in the camp with ghosts. Remarking on this activity, the teacher noted that "many of our kids have had tragic, tragic lives." She shared "without batting an eye" a student told the class that "one day a student woke up and looked out the window and someone was hanging from a tree outside his window."

Our research suggests that the TLCs found more ways to include the Hmong newcomers' prior experience into the curriculum. However, this is to be expected because the class consisted entirely of Hmong children. Although possible, it is much more difficult to achieve the depth of integration of children's culture and prior experiences when the class has only one or two Hmong children and the rest of the class consists of many immigrant, migrant or refugee children in addition to a wealth of diverse US-born children.

Children in the Programs

One oft-cited problem with newcomer programs is that they isolate the children from peers who have been in the country longer or who were born in the host country (Harklau, 1994; Garcia, 2005). Indeed, a strength of the LA program was that it brought

Hmong newcomers into contact with other school peers immediately. Their classes were composed of children from a wide range of backgrounds. Our research with LA teachers revealed that they strongly believed that classrooms that include students from diverse backgrounds were the best type of programming for newcomers. However, in the LA settings, with newcomer students as the single or one of few students in the class, it was a challenge to engage the newcomer(s) (both socially and academically) without native language support. We found that the children's experiences told a different story, revealing the value of TLC settings comprised of only Hmong newcomer students.

One way in which we saw differences between TLC and LA programs was in the depth of staff members' knowledge and understanding of their students. While staff from both programs told about the challenges newcomers faced in their transition to the US, those from the TLCs, particularly the EAs, had many more details about the struggles of specific children. They revealed that they paid close attention to individual children in the classes by sharing stories about students' social isolation, unfamiliarity with food, and suspected learning disabilities. All of the TLC teachers were able to tell us lengthy and detailed stories about individual children. The LA staff who did not speak Hmong were also concerned about the children, but their stories lacked details and depth. They noted that the Hmong newcomers were "in shock" but were not able to tell about the child's specific worries, stressors or their eventual transition.

Especially poignant was one TLC principal's story about how she was absolutely "against the idea of having separate classes at the beginning of the year because the LA model is a mainstream model." The principal told us that she agreed with the rationale of "focusing our resources" and "saving the whole school from a huge revolving door." Yet,

when she began to see and hear about the trauma the kids had experienced, she came to believe that the TLC approach “was really the right thing to do . . . because it allowed the children a sheltered . . . you know . . . emotionally safe place while they learned . . . a new, totally new social experience. And so . . . that was correct.”

Another difference between the way TLC and LA teaching staff described their Hmong newcomer students involved students’ personalities and behavior in the their classrooms. While both programs mentioned the initial adjustment challenges, the TLC teaching staff repeatedly described the children as bright and vivacious. Examples of their characterizations of the children include:

- “They learn quickly and are willing to do just about anything for you.”
- “I’ve had an amazing year. These kids are very respectful. They respect others, adults, themselves.”
- “I’m surprised at how fast and well they have adapted . . . You will never be able to tell that they were newcomers.”
- “They love to learn new things. They love to share and they . . . love me . . . they love the teacher who is also in there with me.”
- “They ask for homework. A lot of them ask if they can sleep over at school.”
- “Well . . . they’re incredible. That’s the single word that I can use to describe them.
- “They’re so vivacious . . . funny . . . in many ways typical kids.”

In contrast, the staff at the LA sites were described newcomer students quite differently, often emphasizing students’ shyness and fearfulness. For example:

- “Very shy . . . very reserved . . . real frightened . . . real afraid.”

- “They seemed more . . . a little just overall . . . a little more hesitant . . . a little less willing to take risks. I didn’t notice many kids who were initially kind of outgoing.”
- “I mean . . . they’re terrified of a ton of things and bewildered.”
- “A stress on me was the fact that they were so anxious and stressed . . . because they had no idea what was going on here.”
- “One little girl [interacted with peers] but the other two did not. They were still kind of loners.”
- When one teacher brought a Hmong student back to visit the class, the lone newcomer “was so relieved. Her face just lit up because they knew each other from the Thai camp.”
- “They don’t feel comfortable or they don’t have much confidence. Then they are just kind of learning from the inside and not talking.”

The exception we found was at one LA site, where there was consistent and abundant involvement by the Hmong educational assistants. Teachers at this site described their Hmong newcomers as “Similar to the students – just any child at that age” and “They like to play and they like to talk with their friends . . . and (laughing) they’re...enthusiastic about trying things out and using new materials.” Significantly, these descriptions seem to echo those of the TLC sites. One explanation for this may be the existence of plentiful support from Hmong educational assistants at this particular LA setting.

While the TLCs were able to foster close-knit, warm, family-like classrooms, they struggled with ways to meaningfully bring the newcomers into contact with other

children in the school. The students “generally have lunch together . . . recess . . . but usually our kids hung out and stay with their own class and not really. . . . play with other kids.” Another TLC teacher remarked:

There should have been some forethought in how to have our students interact with the other kids this year because really there was no time during the day that they were ever with the other children. We kept hearing during the orientations, “Oh, they’ll be out in the playground and they’ll be in the lunchroom. Well of course they were but they weren’t together. They would never have naturally gone and hung out with those kids. It just naturally would not have happened. And it didn’t happen.

Recognizing this as an issue, some TLC teachers organized activities to bring students together. These activities included establishing a reading buddies program in which the newcomers went to a higher grade for tutoring, singing activities for the Hmong New Year, and going to the zoo. The fact that there were Hmong children throughout the school facilitated activities such as these in the TLC schools. Obstacles to doing more of these types of activities were pressures of testing, not having a co-teacher, and pressures to do as much “catch up” with the children as possible to prepare them for the following year.

Without question, we believe that all the educators who had the opportunity to work with newcomer students in both the TLC and LA programs were deeply committed to their success, those in the TLCs had many advantages of a separate newcomer program. The main advantage of the TLCs was the presence of bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals and the fact that the classes were made up entirely of Hmong

newcomers. These deliberately-chosen programmatic features resulted in teachers having the opportunity to engage children in ways that leveraged their native languages and prior experiences as the children made the transition to a new language and learning environment.

Perspectives of Parents

Parents' views about their children's schooling experiences are an important aspect to the evaluation of any educational program. Our focus group research with newcomer Hmong parents revealed that they were clearly appreciative of the language instruction provided by both the TLC and LA programs. Without exception, the parents depended on the advice and suggestions of relatives, friends and district staff in making decisions about the enrollment of their children in particular schools. Parents commented on the convenience of the schools to their homes as well as the presence of Hmong teachers as the primary reasons for choosing to enroll their children in TLCs or LAs. Their comments also conveyed an appreciation of the efforts teachers made to communicate with them. They liked that teachers sent home papers as well as made telephone calls. Several parents especially appreciated that they were able to schedule appointments with teachers. For the parents, these actions indicated to them that school teachers and staff respected them. As one TLC parent commented, "Here they have respect for us and for our children."

In addition to appreciation of the work of teachers, the parents from both programs also expressed pride and happiness in seeing members of the Hmong community as teachers, staff and leaders in the schools. As one LA parent put it, "We are quite pleased to see our Hmong people as teachers, translators, and many holding higher

levels of position.” At the same time, other parents wanted to see Hmong leaders to do more. A parent from the other LA indicated, “There are quite a few Hmong teachers and Hmong professional people at many of these schools. They may have done this already but we like to see them pull their strength together and find ways to help our Hmong children succeed at a higher level.” While the overall reaction of the Hmong parents was positive and infused with gratitude, we suggest that our findings point to subtle and distressing issues that pervade parents’ thoughts about being refugees in the United States. In this section, we highlight issues related to 1) Hmong parents’ inexperience with formal schooling; 2) how we currently conceptualize parent involvement; and 3) Hmong parents’ faith in the work of teachers and schools.

The Impact of Parents’ Inexperience with Formal Schooling

Similar to other Hmong refugee populations (Donnelly, 1994; Long, 1993; Walker-Moffat, 1995), the adults of Wat Tham Krabok had exceptionally limited education and experiences with the formal structures of schools (Hang et al., 2004; Xiong, 2005). Adults were not literate in any language, including Hmong (Xiong, 2005). Our research revealed that this inexperience with the schools and education had implications for parents’ expectations of and interactions with schools and teachers. Although the newcomer Hmong parents expressed general appreciation for the work of teachers and school staff, they also expressed a general skepticism about US educational structures that implicitly questions the system. At one level, parents wonder if teachers are telling them everything about their children’s education and they question teachers’ niceties. For example, some TLC parents told us: “All the teachers have been trained to talk nice to the parents and sometime we wonder if our children are really learning okay

at school,” “Are the teachers telling us everything?” and “Maybe our children are nice but how much have they learned and are they really learning at the level they are supposed to be learning?”

The concern about what grades mean in terms of their children’s success was repeatedly raised in an LA focus group. One parent commented: “We really want to know the facts on the academic part.” Another parent wanted more clarification on the meanings of grades on report cards:

They do give us report cards and we really don’t know how to read them. They only do ABC’s and what does it mean? We don’t know how to interpret them. I have talked to the Hmong teachers a couple times but they said the same thing. They can’t really give us a better reason why.

This concern about not really knowing how well their children are doing was reiterated by the parents from the other LA site. Consider, for example, the remarks of one of the parents:

I would like to know how well they are doing. Is this child ahead of the class or behind? Whenever we go to the conferences they always say that he or she is doing well. But sometimes I see that they are struggling and not doing well. So I would like to know where exactly they rank. For example, in Laos and in Thailand they rank by percent if they rank at 60% and up meaning they are at the passing grade. But if they are under 50% meaning they fail. This is exactly what we want to know.

Similarly, another parent from the other LA group wanted more explicit information.

I have three children in this school. There were times the teacher told me that he/she needs to improve certain things. But most of the time the teacher says they are doing well. I know my kids well and I also can tell who's doing well and who's not. I would like to see this be done every month. I would also like to know who's the one on the top and who's the one on the bottom. This will help us know where our kids are at.

To help with the problem of not being sure of their children's progress, one parent suggested testing and meeting monthly. "We believe testing and meeting monthly will help monitor the progress much better."

Additionally, parents questioned the structure of grade placement in the US. As expressed by one parent:

The school system here in the U.S., they have based it on your child's age and not on how much they know. Also on the documents the child's age might not even be right because there is no way to know for sure. Our kids also know nothing and have been put into schools with kids that were in school since they were born. I don't understand it much, but this doesn't seem right to me.

This concern that their children are "behind" manifested in suggestions that schools and teachers focused on "core" matters. According to a TLC parent,

For our new Hmong kids that have just arrived, we want the school to focus more on the main core classes like Reading, English, and Math. Also to limit sport activities and play time. We don't mind them and we're not asking the school to discontinue these activities but as of now these kids have a lot to catch up and once they are at the right level they can go back to their regular schedule.

This understanding that their children are behind was also expressed in terms of decreasing the “playing” in schools: “I want the schools to focus more on the important things like reading and writing and cut down on the playing. We are new and we have to catch up.” Additionally, parents with family members with children in other schools compared the amount of homework and equated homework with learning more:

Some of my other family member’s kids go to a [LA school] and they seem to give out more homework over there compared to [our TLC school]. The kids are in the same grade but they seem to get more. I want to know why and also I would like [our TLC school] to give more so that they can learn more and keep them busy.

Moreover, parents did not understand some of the particulars of their children’s education. For example, although teachers were attentive about sending home letters and notes—written in both English and Hmong—to provide parents with information, parents often could not read the information. A parent from a TLC group commented: “In these letters they are written in Hmong and English, also a couple languages, too, but it’s just that we can’t read these letters.” Many of the parents told us that they called relatives to help with the information: “We call our relatives to read and explain to us.” Further, even when parents talk to teachers during conferences, their inexperience with education is a barrier to understanding the details of their children’s education. “At the conference they talked a lot about our children’s’ school work each day, each week, or every quarter but we still don’t understand the whole thing. It’s probably that we are not educated to understand.” Indeed, parents’ inexperience with schools resulted in a belief that if their children are going to school, things must be okay. As one parent remarked: “We really

don't know but it must be good if they are going to school and we believe that they are doing well."

The Need to Rethink "Parent Involvement"

Our study reveals that the inclusion and involvement of new Hmong parents in their children's education is superficial at best. Except for going to parent-teacher conferences (when transportation is provided or available), they are not able to engage meaningfully in their children's education. As the next section will illustrate, the parents in our study conveyed a great sense of helplessness about their ability to assist with their children's education. A perceived major obstacle to parents' involvement was their lack of knowledge about the mechanisms of schools and education in the US. As observed by one parent from an LA group, many of the parents had no prior formal education: "Some of us have never gone to a formal school and know very little about the education system. It was hard to for us to make that decision." A parent from a TLC echoed this sentiment in a cogent remark: "We don't know the education system in this country well enough to know to tell what the right thing is and what the wrong thing is." Indeed, as another parent articulated, because they have had no experiences with schools themselves, they really do not know what to expect: "We don't know how many programs total this school has for our children. Many of us have never gone to school and we don't know the school system well enough to know what a school should have." Not knowing the school system not only means not knowing what to expect, but also not knowing what questions to ask. A parent from a TLC remarked, "Later when we are able to speak more English and had better understanding of the school system. I am sure we'll have more questions and know what to ask."

Parents in all of the focus groups were painfully aware that they lacked knowledge about US schools and the implications this had for their children's education. A parent from an LA made this insightful comment connecting parent support with children's educational success: "Our kids' future life depends on us too, to provide them good training, teach them and support them to get there. With that we need to educate ourselves in order to give them the right encouraging and support they need." Recognizing that they lack knowledge about the practices and structures of the schools in the US, the parents inquired about classes to teach parents about how schools work: "Do these schools have classes for parents to learn more about the school system in this country?" Another parent said, "We adults have now turned into kids." Yet another parent said, "What can I do to help my kids with my limited skills?"

Implicitly, the TLC and LA programs may both be sending the same message to parents—that they cannot help in their children's education. When the parents were asked if they have volunteered in their children's schools or classrooms, the response from all of the sites was that no one had asked them to volunteer. The parents expressed that they do not have knowledge or skills that would be useful in the classroom. One parent commented, "We don't know what kind of help the school want from us the parents." Another said, "We don't write and speak any English. How can we help? We can probably help set up and clean up after an event like New Year's or any other event that does not require English." However, all of the parents responded that they would like to volunteer if asked. For instance, one parent said, "If they call us and ask for help we are willing to go but they have not yet. Also we do not have transportation so we might not be able to help."

Helplessness, Hope and Faith

As mentioned previously, the newcomer Hmong parents in both TLC and LA programs felt powerless to help themselves and their children negotiate US schools and society. They were dependent on the goodwill and knowledge of relatives, friends and school staff for decisions pertaining to the education of their children. The overriding sentiment of parents in all of the focus groups was that of helplessness. Many parents articulated this helplessness in terms of “worthlessness.” For example, a parent from an LA said, “Sometimes I feel I am worthless because I can’t really help any of my kids, instead they are the one that helps me.” Likewise, a parent from the other LA group said, “Right now we can’t even support for ourselves, when the time comes for paying for higher education, we don’t know how much we are able to support them.”

The focus group findings also reveal that parents have a tremendous amount of hope and faith in U.S. schools and institutions. They talked about their past suffering, and how they have hope for better lives for their children. Examples of their sentiments include:

- “We have lived our lives already and some of us are over the point of no return and we have nothing to look forward to. The only hope is for our children to finish school and have a successful life. This is the priority for us older parents.”
- “We are those people that have no country, we move from place to place for the last 40 to 50 years. We never had the chance to go to school and also came to the United States. When we are old we don’t have any of the ability and skills to help our kids. Right now we put 100% on the teacher to educate our children.”

One result of this intense feeling of long-suffering and finally having hope in the US is a sentiment of gratitude. Parents were grateful for all of the assistance and that their children are able to simply go to school. As parents from a TLC group expressed (with widespread agreement from the rest of the group): “We were happy that the school accepted our children and happy that they are receiving an education.” Parents from an LA group had similar feelings: “We are very thankful to have come to this country and to have all the Hmong and the non-Hmong teachers help our children.”

Furthermore, our research with the newcomer Hmong parents revealed a general faith in the system. The parents believed that the schools and teachers will do their best to teach their children how to be successful in our society. Their lack of knowledge of how things work was allayed by sentiments of faith in the educational system. As a parent from an LA put it, “We don’t really know, but we have faith in the teachers and that our children will receive good education. We are very happy for them to be in school.” Parents from a TLC similarly shared, “We don't know what the school does to protect our children but we put our faith on them to help our children stay on the right path.” This faith that schools will “protect” their children and help them “stay on the right path” was voiced in terms of their belief and understanding of the roles of teachers as parents. As a TLC parent put it: “I wish that the teachers can look after our kids and make sure that they are with the right crowd.” In a telling remark, a parent from an LA said, “There isn’t a thing that we don’t like. They teach and help our children to be smart. We consider they are parents to our children so we have no complaints at all.”

However, our research also indicates that parents’ gratitude and faith in teachers may prevent them from raising questions and making demands that are not uncommon

among parents from mainstream, middle-class society. We suggest that feelings of gratitude may have masked problems that parents should have raised to school teachers and staff. For example, one parent from a TLC group wanted to attend a child's conference but did not have transportation. The parent refrained from asking for transportation because of fear of being a burden: "I always wanted to attend but I have no way to get there and by telling them it's like I put an extra burden on them." Significantly, the issues that newcomer Hmong parents may perceive as "an extra burden" for teachers may very well have great impact on the quality and outcome of their children's education.

Conclusion

Our research with the Transitional Language Center and Language Academy programs revealed that the TLC program model had clear advantages over the LA model. In large part, this was due to the bilingual support afforded children and their families in the TLCs. Although isolation of the newcomer Hmong children was a major concern, we found that the advantages of the TLCs make them necessary and valuable for the transition of newcomer children. The most compelling evidence in support of the TLCs was revealed in the descriptions of the children by teachers that highlighted their energy and engagement in the classes. This was corroborated by similar data from one LA that was able to provide consistent bilingual support to their newcomer Hmong students.

While the TLC and LA programs differed in the instructional and affective support that they were able to provide newcomer students, the programs were remarkably similar in the impact they had on the newcomer Hmong parents. While the presence of bilingual staff in the programs helped to comfort the parents, both the TLC and LA

programs failed to take into account parents' limited experience with formal schooling (Ngo, 2000, 2006; Xiong and Lee, 2005). Planning for the educational transition of children from Wat Tham Krabok did not include considerations of ways to transition Hmong parents to the procedures and expectations for parents in US schools. It was taken for granted that Hmong parents would have the background necessary to help their children negotiate the educational system in the US. Our work with Hmong parents points to the need to redefine parental involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Lopez et al., 2001) and to make explicit the values and practices of schools.

We want to emphasize that the creation of the Transitional Language Centers by the Saint Paul Public Schools to serve Hmong children from Wat Tham Krabok speaks to the desire of the district to address the needs of newcomer families. In planning for newcomer students, the district provided financial support for curriculum development, the hiring of twice the number of teachers as other programs, and the training of the new staff. District personnel and teaching staff members were wholly committed to the success of the Transitional Language Centers. Although our research indicates gaps in the planning process related to curriculum, assessment, and parental involvement, we argue that our findings support continuing endeavors like the TLCs. Meeting the needs of children and families from refugee, immigrant and migrant backgrounds is a complex process that requires not only one-time programmatic attempts, but ongoing efforts that will allow for improvement.

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