

Hmong Male Youth and School Choice in a Neoliberal Era

By

Kari Smalkoski

Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 19(1), 27 Pages

Abstract

This article critically examines the peer violence and social isolation that Hmong male youth encounter in a predominately white and affluent suburban middle school. It addresses the ways racialization impacts Hmong boys' experiences with peers and how bullying narratives mask these conflicts. The research draws on a different set of questions about Hmong youths' educational achievement to analyze, disrupting the belief that first generation Hmong male youths' primary challenges in schools are learning English, assimilation, and shyness. I analyze the ways male youth respond to these narratives by creating their own forms of capital through the cultural practice of soccer where they create protective spaces that involve alternative masculinities and built-in peer support networks that create pathways to higher education.

Key Words: Hmong male youth, bullying, peer violence, racialization, school choice

Acknowledgements: With appreciation to the co-editors of this special edition, Dr. Pao Lee Vue, and the anonymous reviewers for feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

Introduction

Minnesota has one of the most profound K-12 educational achievements gaps in the U.S. Students of color living in poverty, including Hmong Americans, have some of the lowest standardized test scores compared to white students (of all socioeconomic levels) in Minnesota than in any other state (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013-14). Between 2000-2010, the Hmong population grew 40% between 2000-2010 and is projected to have even more growth between 2010-2020, particularly amongst individuals under the age of 18 (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011). This is significant in the Twin Cities context as it is home to the largest urban Hmong population in the U.S. In the St. Paul Public Schools, for example, Asian American students, the majority of whom are Hmong,

comprise the largest racial demographic at 33% (followed by African Americans at 30%).

Hmong families' poverty rates are slightly higher than African Americans (one in four Hmong live below the poverty line – 26% total, the majority of whom are children) according to the 2010 U.S. Census.¹ The Hmong are often, as Vue (2012) argues, “racialized like Asian Americans, but stratified like poor African-Americans” (p. 13).

Several studies confirm that immigrant males' lag behind immigrant females across racial and ethnic groups in educational achievement in the U.S. (Cammarota, 2004; Lopez, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Waters, 1996). The reasons for this vary from the ways boys and girls relate differently with their parents to how they are perceived and treated differently in K-12 schools. Lee's (2005) book, *Up against whiteness: Race, school, and immigrant youth*, detailed how high school teachers' perceptions of Hmong American boys' differed widely based on the racialized and gendered stereotypes they held about them. These stereotypes were explored outside of school in Vue's (2012) book, *Assimilation and the gendered color line: Hmong case studies of hip-hop and import racing* where he documented the ways Hmong male youth and men's cultural practices were tied to masculinity and race.

These studies are vital to underscore because they illuminate the complex experiences of Hmong youth that achievement data alone does not tell. In addition, they provide analysis of the impact that the intersections of race, gender, and social class have on educational attainment in the Hmong community. As I began my own research with Hmong youth in 2009, I set out to understand the stories behind achievement data and was struck that every Hmong male I talked with between the ages of 12-22 had experienced various forms of peer violence in schools that

¹ According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Asian Americans (in aggregate) have low poverty rates at 11% (whites are at 10%) and the highest levels of educational attainment, particularly in obtaining a college degree or higher (49% - whites are at 31%). However, the Hmong often get lumped together with all Asian Americans, which presents an inaccurate picture of their socioeconomic and educational status.

had impacted their educational trajectories. In addition, none of these males had shared their experiences with teachers or staff at their schools, nor did they confide in their parents. In this article, I examine Hmong males' experiences with violence and social isolation in a suburban middle school. I interrogate the belief that first generation Hmong male students' primary challenges in schools are learning English, assimilation, and shyness. Instead, I ask: how are Hmong youth racialized and gendered in schools and how does this impact their educational trajectories?

Background

The line spoken by a female Hmong character in the 2008 Hollywood produced film *Gran Torino*, "the girls go to school, the boys go to jail," is an example of a generalized belief about Hmong youth that needs unpacking. As Xiong (2012) explains, there was a large gap between Hmong male and female educational attainment for over three decades, however, with each decade, more females' have obtained high school diplomas and college degrees. In fact, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, Hmong females not only caught up to males, but surpassed them in college degree attainment by four percentage points. Although Hmong females still lag behind males in earning a high school diploma (by approximately six percentage points), Xiong (2012) argues that if the trend continues that Hmong females' high school drop out rates decline and their college degree attainment increases, they will have caught up to males by 2020 in average educational attainment.

These data provide crucial information about educational advancement in the Hmong community; however, it is imperative to understand the lived experiences behind these data. Although Hmong females may very well surpass males by 2020 in average educational attainment, this did not occur overnight nor is it simply due to their higher motivation,

aspirations, and/or hard work compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the Hmong community's educational achievement overall is one of the lowest of all Asian American ethnic groups. In 2010, only 61% of the population had obtained a high school diploma and 14% a college degree or higher.² Even so, many teachers who work with Hmong students and even those in the Hmong community believe that Hmong females have acquired higher levels of educational attainment compared to males for well over the last decade or so (Lee, 2005; Yang & Pfeifer, 2004; Vang, 2004). I argue that Hmong males' experiences with peer violence is a major factor in their disengagement from school due to ongoing conflict and trauma they endure that is rarely reported and goes largely unnoticed.

Although statistics on bullying and Asian American students are growing and becoming more widely available, these data do not give an accurate picture of what is occurring in schools. For example, although it appears that Asian American students are bullied at fairly low rates (17%), a recent White House initiative on bullying in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities (http://sites.ed.gov/aapi/files/2015/02/AAPI-Bullying-Prevention-Task-Force-Report-2014-2016_R051516C_1.pdf) found that out of 5.4 million students who reported being bullied at school during the 2012-13 school year, Asian Americans had the lowest rates of reporting to school officials and parents than any other racial group (only 9.2%).

There are also major limitations in data collection and interpretation as many Asian American students are reluctant to report their experiences and their responses are not often disaggregated by ethnicity or gender. According to Tran and Okazaki (2012), Asian American middle school boys are less likely to report being bullied when asked how often they were

² In comparison, by 2010, 90% of whites in the U.S. obtained a high school diploma and 31% obtained a college degree or higher; 81% of African Americans obtained a high school diploma and 18% obtained a college degree or higher.

bullied in a specific timeframe, but frequently report being bullied when asked how often peers have physically and/or emotionally hurt them using a specific behavior. Maffini (2016) found that although many students feel unsafe in school, Southeast Asian males experience feeling less physically safe at higher rates. According to AAPI Data (2014), a project at the University of California, Riverside, 71% of Hmong students consider bullying a very serious problem compared to only 19% of Chinese American students and 46% of Filipinos (the Asian American average is 37%).

In May 2015, I was interviewed by attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice about my study, which was included in the White House initiative on bullying in AAPI communities. This national report explains that the majority of Asian American youth have experienced various levels of bullying in schools, but the types of bullying and frequency vary depending on gender and ethnicity. Bullying is a significant problem that affects Asian American students but is often overlooked or not taken seriously by school officials. Furthermore, many teachers and staff believe that newly arrived immigrant students not only experience a lower prevalence of bullying, but that it tends to be a phenomenon that affects the second generation rather than the first because they have been in the U.S. for longer periods of time (Almeida, et al. 2011).

Methodology

Data from this article draws from a larger study that I conducted with first generation Hmong youth (Smalkoski, 2014). A central aim of the research was to analyze the ways that Hmong male youth are racialized and experience racism in U.S. schools, which has had a major impact on their everyday lives and experiences in the U.S. Throughout the analysis, I examined youths' individual experiences within larger structural forces, processes, and institutions. Utilizing community-engaged research practices and ethnographic fieldwork, three years of data

were collected between 2009-2011 and 2012-2013 with 64 middle school to college aged Hmong youth residing in the U.S. The majority of these youth were born and raised in Wat Tham Krabok (WTK), a Buddhist monastery in central Thailand, where their families lived for over a decade in what was considered the largest unofficial refugee camp in Thailand. These youth are part of the 15,000 WTK Hmong who resettled in various Hmong enclaves in the U.S. between 2003-2006. Because youth were born and/or raised in WTK and many attended schools in Thailand, they have distinct experiences that differ from Hmong Americans who arrived to the U.S. in earlier waves of migration.

Fieldwork was conducted in Hmong youths' neighborhoods in North Minneapolis³, a Twin Cities suburb, and in central and Northern Thailand. The primary means of data collection were focus groups, participant observation, and informal conversations with over 64 Hmong youth as well as 1:1 detailed interviews with four males and one female. Extensive field notes were taken and utilized in the analysis. Fieldwork took place primarily in youths' schools, neighborhoods, homes, soccer fields, and various community spaces as well as in Hmong villages in Northern Thailand. In addition, I conducted interviews with community organizers, Hmong cultural insiders, Hmong community leaders, Thai monks at Wat Tham Krabok, teachers and administrators at suburban and urban public schools, and with three sets of Hmong parents, but my primary objective was to illuminate Hmong male youths' experiences and perspectives. The research was informed by my work as a former teacher in an urban public high school as well as almost two decades of community engagement and teaching with Hmong youth in

³ Between 2011-15, North Minneapolis' population was 49% African American, 19% white, and 15% Asian, the majority of whom are Hmong. There is a high concentration of poverty in certain neighborhoods on the Northside as 53% of households earn less than \$35K a year. It is a historically underserved and disenfranchised area of Minneapolis; all of the Hmong students who participated in CIY lived in these neighborhoods.

secondary and higher education settings in the Twin Cities.⁴ My primary focus was the perspectives of youth instead of relying on the interpretations of their experiences from adults – a more common practice in research.

I analyzed data from the individual perspectives of youth, parents, cultural insiders, neighborhood organizers, as well as teachers and school officials. Ethnographic field researchers often select core themes by giving priority to topics where extensive amounts of data have been collected that reflect recurrent or underlying patterns of activities in the field site(s) and give priority to what seems significant to their participants (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Understanding this, I focused on coding consistently throughout the data analysis process. I also wrote numerous analytic memos to myself (well over 100) about the emerging themes and patterns in codes. This allowed me to take specific field notes and explore their theoretical implications in more depth before the data analysis stage. Although I used the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, I did not rely on it solely.

Findings

Nearly all of the Hmong youth in my study participated in a school choice program called Choice is Yours (CIY).⁵ Although school choice programs look good in theory, the academic achievement of students who participate in them do not always produce high results. In addition, lawmakers rarely focus on what happens to students' socially when they participate in these programs or the ways they produce racial integration or segregation. My research took place in a

⁴ A detailed explanation of the research context, participants, and data collection and analysis is included in my book manuscript, forthcoming.

⁵ CIY is the result of a 2000 settlement after the Minneapolis NAACP sued the state of Minnesota alleging that Minneapolis Public Schools students (MPS) were being denied an adequate education. Through CIY, MPS students who qualify for free and reduced lunch can apply to enroll in nine different suburban public school districts in the Twin Cities. Students also receive school bus transportation. For more detailed information on CIY, read Neil Kraus' (2013) book, *Majoritarian cities: Policy making and inequality in urban politics*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

predominately white, high achieving suburban middle school that promoted multiculturalism, but produced racial segregation.

By 2013, when the study was nearing completion, the majority of WTK Hmong parents in Minneapolis were sending their children either to suburban schools through CIY or to Hmong charter schools in Minneapolis. Their reasons for doing this were the following: 1) Their children had experienced daily verbal and physical harassment by non-Hmong peers in MPS schools that were never addressed by teachers or school administration; 2) Their children were placed in sheltered ELL classes with teachers who had no credentials or licensing in ELL and were allowed to speak Hmong all day; 3) Their children could not enroll in mainstream content courses, nor were they exposed to non-ELL teachers or non-Hmong peers and therefore were not acquiring any new academic skills, let alone English skills; and 4) Families who lived within two miles from schools were excluded from bus transportation. All of the Hmong parents I interviewed said the ultimate goal for their children was to have them admitted to college and that this required fluent English skills and “good grades”. As newly arrived immigrants, the majority who had never received formal education in Laos or Thailand, they put their trust in teachers and school administrators to fully educate their children.

Two community organizers, Teng⁶, a second generation Hmong American man, and Mark, a white man, were instrumental in not only educating Hmong parents about CIY and helping them fill out application materials, but became their advocates in every school and district they enrolled their children in. Mark described Hmong parents’ decisions to partake in school choice options (CIY, Hmong charter schools) as a result of being pushed out of MPS; however, Hmong parents (and Teng) described their decision making as more of a complicated

⁶All names are pseudonyms. Some details have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

process of being both pushed out and opting out of MPS. Most importantly, Hmong parents exercised agency in their decision making process; although they did not believe they could advocate for their children as newly arrived immigrants, it was a priority for them to make sure their children were receiving “the best” education possible that would lead to higher education.

In 2007, the first Hmong student, Kong, was accepted into the CIY program and bussed from his predominately African American neighborhood to a suburban middle school in a predominately white and historically middle to upper class suburb. At the time, all of his CIY peers were African American. The principal and teachers at Suburban Middle School (SMS) discussed Kong’s first year with them as “wonderful” regardless of the fact that he was the first Hmong student to ever attend the school and could not communicate in English. As information about the positive experiences that Kong was having at SMS circulated amongst WTK Hmong parents, more applied and were accepted into CIY. By 2013, Hmong students represented the majority of CIY students at SMS.⁷ In ethnographic tradition, what follows is a discussion of findings that engages with pertinent literature and its theoretical implications.

Totally Awesome Girls and ‘Forever Foreigner’ Boys

Early on in the study, before I even began talking with Hmong youth, Mark and Teng referred to the Hmong girls at SMS in 2009 as the Totally Awesome Girls (TAG). They attributed this to girls’ higher motivation and educational aspirations compared to their brothers and male cousins. Teachers had similar beliefs about girls, describing every Hmong girl in their classes as “motivated”, “engaged”, “organized”, “respectful”, and “hard-working.” Many of them also attributed girls’ motivation to Hmong culture. Although the majority of teachers were

⁷ The Hmong youth in my study attended various schools in this suburban district, but the study focused on SMS. Mark and Teng highlighted SMS as an excellent environment for Hmong students who they claimed, for the first time since arriving in the U.S., were having positive educational experiences with teachers and a principal that was doing outreach to Hmong families. The principal supported the research study and encouraged data collection.

white, female, had never worked with Hmong students prior to Kong in 2007, nor had any knowledge of Hmong history, culture, or the reasons for Hmong migration to the U.S., they attributed girls' work ethic to Hmong culture noting that education is highly valued by their parents and community.

As teachers invested heavily in model minority stereotypes to describe Hmong girls, they discussed Hmong boys as model minority failures. Each teacher I spoke to described boys as having less literacy skills in English and being less articulate. They noted that boys had heavier accents than girls, that they were "slow" academically as well as socially, and that the majority of boys were disengaged and unmotivated. Teachers noted that Hmong boys spent much of their time with their heads resting on their desks or quietly drawing. When I asked teachers what strategies they used to engage boys, a few of them admitted little to nothing as Hmong boys were easy to ignore. One teacher said she didn't think Hmong boys understood how to have relationships with teachers.

The "forever foreigner" stereotype, coined by Mia Tuan (1988), was used overwhelmingly by teachers to describe Hmong boys. This foreigner status is connected inexorably to refugees; it is the "ideological blackening" that Ong (2003) contrasts to the "whitening" of more "assimilate-able" Asian Americans, or in the case of SMS, Hmong girls. The forever foreigner representation is also a casualty of the model minority myth. The ways teachers compared Hmong girls' successes and Hmong boys' failures gave insights into the highly gendered, neoliberal beliefs they held about these youth. Hmong boys failed at living up to the requirements of the model minority and to their "Hmong culture"; they were perceived by teachers to have a "moral shortcoming due to their own individual failure" which separated them from "the American norm, thereby reinforcing their foreigner status" (Park, 2008, p. 136).

The model minority narrative that teachers used to explain Hmong culture was so strongly applied to Hmong girls, they missed the deeper reasons why Hmong boys were struggling both academically and socially. Instead, they blamed boys' problems on behavioral issues such as a lack of motivation or personality issues like "shyness", which they believed were individual choices. Although it could be interpreted that Hmong girls had an academic advantage at SMS, I argue that the neoliberalism ascribed to them factored into perceptions of girls doing much better than they actually were.⁸ Absent from teachers' explanations about Hmong girls' abilities was the high academic achievement necessary for honors, advanced placement, or international baccalaureate programs in high school that are a track to higher education. Moreover, although it may seem that teachers viewed Hmong girls favorably, they never compared them to high achieving white girls at SMS. Hmong girls' positive attributes were always described as a form of their "ongoing cultural distinctiveness", a tenant of the model minority myth (Kim, 1999). The fact is that all Hmong girls struggled academically at SMS, but the drastically different beliefs teachers held about girls vs. boys based on gender and race made all Hmong students' struggles invisible.

Hmong Male Youth and Peer Violence

"The black kids are always trying to mess with me", Chai, a 14-year old told me in the summer of 2009. "Why?" I asked. "Because they think I know Kung Fu." Responses like this were common from Hmong boys as they discussed being called *chink* and *gook* on a daily basis at SMS as if these racist epithets were their actual names. Although most Hmong girls

⁸ An analysis of standardized test scores and grades at SMS between 2007-2011 showed that the majority of Hmong girls performed slightly higher than boys in science, math, and reading. However, the majority of Hmong students at SMS were girls between 2008-2011; their test scores and grades were not drastically higher than boys in any subject, and *all* Hmong students' test scores and grades were below average at SMS.

experienced some form of peer violence at public schools in Minneapolis, the majority never experienced it at SMS. However, all Hmong boys experienced forms of peer violence and racist name-calling in all of the schools they had attended in the U.S. Chai discussed the ways that African American peers “messed with” him and his friends “in life, and in school, and in the bus,” at SMS, but that it was only in the hidden space of the boys’ locker room that he fought back because he knew he would not get caught in what was an unmonitored space. Chai discussed how African American boys punched him “hard” in the chest in the locker room on a regular basis. It wasn’t until he punched one of the boys back and then ran out of the locker room that the attacks subsided. Even so, he never told an adult about what had happened to him.⁹

Kong, the first Hmong student to attend SMS, recalls the nearly 60-minute bus ride to school each morning for an entire year in 2007. None of the students would let him sit next to them, so Kong stood near the front door to the bus, holding on to bus seats to keep his balance. The bus driver never said anything and ignored Kong. Besides the fact that it was a safety violation as the bus took a freeway to get to school each morning, Kong didn’t think there was anything anyone could do about it and didn’t tell anyone at school or at home about what was happening to him. Teng said what bothered him most was that Hmong boys were willing to accept these experiences as just a part of their everyday schooling. He relayed a response by another Hmong boy who had been punched repeatedly by an African American peer one morning on the bus ride to school, “But it’s okay because I was wearing a big jacket so it didn’t hurt as much.” All of the teachers I spoke to as well as the principal and assistant principal at SMS said they were unaware of any violence or racist name-calling that Hmong boys

⁹ In general, there is a higher prevalence of peer violence, bullying, and harassment in middle schools compared to high schools (Bettencourt and Farrell, 2013); student involvement as victim, perpetrator, or both peaks during this time (Pellegrini, 2002).

experienced. When I discussed the results of my study with the principal after she had retired, she said regretfully, “How could I have missed this?”

Although certain forms of peer violence were an everyday experience for Hmong boys at SMS, unusually violent incidents or prolonged physical fighting was less common. When it occurred, it was sometimes abhorrently violent and required medical attention that Hmong boys never sought because they did not want to tell their parents what had happened, concerned that their parents would hold them responsible or that they would burden them. In one such instance in December 2012, nine Hmong boys, in eighth grade, were followed out the school doors by six African American boys in seventh grade shouting racist names at them, telling them to “Get out of here, *Chinks!*”

Hmong boys rarely responded when their African American peers, many who were also CIY students, hurled racist remarks at them, but this time one of the Hmong boys yelled back, telling them to leave him and his friends alone. One of the Hmong boys involved in the fight told me that he and his friends snapped – “we just couldn’t take it again and again.” In response, one of the African American boys grabbed this particular Hmong boy and threw him face first on top of a parked car behind the school busses that were lined up at the curb at the end of the school day. All 15 boys began fighting until several older boys at the neighboring high school sprinted down the street screaming and began throwing African American boys off of Hmong boys, many of whom were their younger brothers.

In accordance with the school district’s zero tolerance policy on fighting, the assistant principal at SMS suspended all 15 students involved. After they served their week-long suspensions, they were required to attend diversity meetings with the assistant principal and the school district’s diversity officer. At the first meeting, the assistant principal told the reticent

Hmong and African American boys that it “hurts Hmong people when other people think they’re Chinese.” He then told them to shake hands “like men”, introduce themselves, and talk about their hobbies outside of school.

As a few of the boys reluctantly made small talk, the assistant principal told them that they had more in common than they realized and they should focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. He said these differences were creating conflict based on simple misunderstandings and teasing about a group’s culture. The diversity officer made a point to tell the boys, none of whom lived in the suburb where SMS is located, that this district has “the very best schools in the state” and that they should remember this if they are ever tempted to fight again as it is a privilege to attend SMS. Not only did both administrators miss the opportunity to address the systematic peer violence that Hmong boys were experiencing at SMS, they made all of the boys responsible for what had happened. When Teng learned about the suspensions and required meetings, he met with the assistant principal and told him that by placing blame on Hmong boys and suspending them, he was preventing them from ever going to him or any other adult at SMS in the future. The assistant principal responded that he was simply following the school district’s zero tolerance policy on fighting, which he appreciated at times such as these because it allowed him to “stay neutral”.

After the required diversity meetings and the holiday break, boys’ “conflicts” seemed to quiet down until the spring of 2013. In a meeting with a new principal at the school,¹⁰ not supportive of the CIY program, she voiced her concerns about the escalation of violence she had witnessed between African American and Hmong boys. She described how recently a “large group” of Hmong boys had shown up to school wearing black. The Hmong boys went into one

¹⁰ The principal who was supportive of the CIY program retired in 2012.

of the boys' bathrooms together and disappeared for "a long time". Two male teachers observed this and went into the bathroom to intervene.

The principal would not give details about what ensued, but said they were planning to fight African American boys later that afternoon and that she held them all accountable for their actions. What she said disturbed her most were the "eerie silence and stares" that Hmong boys gave her when she met with them as a group, reminding them of the district's policies on fighting and that if they were suspended twice, they would be expelled from SMS permanently. The African American boys, she said, were vocal, loud, and angry, but Hmong boys just sat and stared at her in silence, which she found "unsettling." She said repeatedly that she believed they were in the process of forming a gang at SMS.

Hmong boys in my study repeatedly told me that they were not in gangs, nor forming a gang; they just wanted to be left alone. They also knew that by sticking together in a large group outside of classes minimized their risk of getting singled out and physically assaulted. Teng laughed when I talked with him about the principal's observations about Hmong boys' gang formation at SMS. "Oh, hell no!" he yelled, "most of these kids are just hiding in their little shell and hoping that they don't get punched as they're walking to the bus." Teng and I both agreed that the principal was met with silence by Hmong boys, not because they were menacing, soon-to-be gang bangers, but because they were worried about saying anything given their former schooling experiences in Thailand and in Minneapolis and that they were following their parents wishes to respect authority.

Lee (2005), Rios (2011), and Vue (2012) have all documented the ways that poor, male youth of color are labeled deviant even if they have never carried out delinquent activities, nor are members of gangs. In fact, many male youth of color are truant or not attending school as a

response to feeling inadequate and/or believing that education will never lead to greater social mobility for themselves or their families. Lee and Vue, who have studied Hmong youth specifically, found that what happens to Hmong male youth *in* schools is often what makes them resistant to schooling. In my study, Hmong boys at SMS fell through the cracks daily because of the racialized and gendered beliefs that teachers and administrators held about them. Because they were easy to ignore, as some teachers admitted, the everyday experiences they had with peer violence and racist name-calling were never addressed and affected their attitudes about schooling. Ultimately, Hmong boys at SMS were “deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection” (Cacho, 2012, p. 5).

Soccer as Resistance and Persistence

When Hmong youth began being bussed to SMS, Mark told the principals and athletic directors at the middle and high schools to purchase more soccer jerseys because Hmong boys would not only try out for the schools’ soccer teams, but would become starting players. To his dismay, none of the Hmong boys tried out. Hmong boys knew their parents would not be able to afford organized school sports let alone any extracurricular activities or enrichment programs associated with SMS, which is one of the reasons why they didn’t try out.

The other reason is that they had no interest in interacting with white male peers who occupied the upper strata of the school. This had nothing to do with feeling ostracized, intimidated, or inferior to white male students at SMS, nor did they question their athletic abilities in comparison; they simply had no interest in spending time with them. The majority of white boys, in turn, made no attempts to get to know Hmong boys in or outside of school. With the exception of SMS’s physical education teacher who saw Hmong boys’ playing sports, many teachers made assumptions that boys’ absence in participation was due to their lack of athletic

ability based on racialized masculinity stereotypes about Asian American males. Many Hmong boys enjoyed participating in sports, but they gravitated towards the neighborhood soccer leagues in North Minneapolis, run by Mark and coached by Teng and other second generation Hmong American men.¹¹

Playing neighborhood league soccer allowed Hmong boys to create their own spaces and to perform their own cultural practices in their neighborhoods, on their terms. In these spaces, boys were empowered social actors who produced agency and resistance through cultural practices with peers, resisting the abject positions in which they were often situated. I sometimes played soccer with them and recognized the outstanding athletic ability and skills that several boys possessed¹². Neighborhood league soccer gave Hmong boys' opportunities to actively defy narratives about their often racialized, abjected bodies. Through soccer they worked out, kicked out, and played out feelings of anger, fear, mistrust, resentment, and dismay that they felt in school. As we ran together on the soccer field or hung out together in the park, boys opened up telling me about the violence they were experiencing, hopes and dreams they had for their futures, how much they loved art and music, what they wished would change in their schools, and how much they enjoyed playing soccer and badminton.

Conclusion and Discussion

On October 19, 2016, I was called as an expert witness to testify on behalf of the defense in the sentencing hearing of Dylan Yang, a Hmong American boy from Wausau, Wisconsin, who was found guilty of "first-degree reckless homicide" for stabbing another boy in 2015. Dylan

¹¹ Fees, equipment, and uniforms were paid for and provided by the Tony Sanneh Foundation (<http://www.thesannehfoundation.org/>).

¹² In Thailand, where several boys grew up playing soccer, it was uncommon for females to share the soccer field with males; however, boys broke this cultural norm with me because although I'm Asian American, I'm not Hmong and I think even more importantly because I know how to play soccer.

was 15 at the time of the crime and the boy he stabbed, Isaiah Powell, who later died in a Wausau hospital, was 13. Dylan was tried as an adult, found guilty, and spent over 600 days in solitary confinement in an adult jail as he awaited sentencing. By the time I met and interviewed Dylan while he was being held in solitary, he was 16.¹³

Although Dylan was not a participant in my research study, his case is worthy of discussion as he experienced much of the same peer violence, racist name-calling, and social isolation in school. Based on my findings and the growing data on Asian American students' high rates of bullying and low rates of reporting, I argued in court that Dylan was in full protection mode in an altercation with a group of non-Hmong boys (mostly Latino and African American) who he believed were going to shoot and kill him and his best friend, on the front lawn of his home. As I listened to testimony from Dylan's former teachers at the public middle school he attended, it became clear that none of them had known Dylan. Like the first generation Hmong boys in my study, they described Dylan, a third generation Hmong American, as a quiet, shy boy who drew throughout the day and often had his head on his desk.

They did not know that Dylan had been bullied systematically and violently since he had begun his schooling in kindergarten in their district. Instead of attempting to connect with him or reach out to him and his parents, they tracked him into remedial coursework at their school believing that he had academic deficiencies. They had no idea how he spent his time outside of school or what his interests were, including the break-dancing group he was an active part of with Hmong male peers called, *Stylist Shadows Crew*. Like soccer for the Hmong boys in my

¹³ For more detailed information about Dylan Yang and this case, read Pao Lee Vue, Louisa Schein, and Bee Vang's (2016) article, Comparative Racialization and Unequal Justice in the Era of Black Lives Matter: The Dylan Yang Case, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 17, 1-21.

study, the break dancing group was a positive influence in Dylan's life that offered him important peer relationships and motivated him to persist in school.

The judge in Dylan's hearing sentenced him to thirty years, 13 of which will be spent in prison and 17 under probation. After the hearing, I had dinner with a group of Hmong men in their late thirties and early forties who shared their own experiences of violence and harassment that began immediately when they arrived to the U.S. and/or began school. They had all accepted it as "just the way it is" and as a rite of passage to their American citizenship. There have been many conversations like these in living rooms and at kitchen tables in Hmong homes that span almost four decades in the U.S., yet little has changed for Hmong boys and young men.

Rethinking Practice and Policy in Schools: "Bullying as social inequality"

Like most schools, SMS has a policy that prohibits bullying, citing the safety of all of their students as a top priority. The assistant principal insisted that teasing and hurt feelings were the reasons behind the December 2012 altercation that led to the suspension of 15 Hmong and African American boys. Not surprisingly, the required diversity meetings he made the boys attend never actually explored the deeper reasons that led up to the incident nor was an action plan formed moving forward. Instead, school officials were adamant that Hmong boys needed to learn how to handle teasing in more effective ways. By making all the boys responsible for creating individualized conflicts with one another, SMS was able to uphold their status quo of academic excellence without working through the larger systemic issues in their school that were producing these conflicts.

SMS believed they were a neutral institution rather than a cultural site where an existing social order and hierarchy is reproduced (Giroux, 1983). Teachers and staff failed to consider meaningful practices that would integrate Hmong and African American students into the

mainstream whiteness of their school. They were unable to recognize their own behaviors, which reinforced inequality and promoted segregation amongst Hmong and African American students and these students of color with white students. Too often schools treat conflict as if it is generated and self-imposed by youth. The zero tolerance policies school officials practiced produced racial formation and positioned racial groups. This positioning was regularly played out in unmonitored areas of schools and busses between Hmong and African American boys.

Understanding the deeper reasons why African American boys regularly harassed, hurled racist remarks, and physically injured Hmong boys is beyond the scope of this article. African American students racial and gendered injuries in U.S. schools have a vast and arduous history compared to Hmong students and differ widely based on a number of factors including the ways they have historically been perceived and treated. Violence between Hmong and African American boys did not simply migrate with them from inner city schools to suburban schools through a school choice program. Believing this only exacerbates the belief that poor African Americans are in a perpetual cycle of poverty and violence that they reproduce and enact on Hmong refugees who are in a constant state of being victimized, which only perpetuates their refugee status.

Pascoe (2014-15) argues that in order to move beyond this simplicity, we must think of “bullying as social inequality”. Analyzed in this way, bullying is “not necessarily about one pathological individual or group targeting another, less powerful individual or group, but rather as an interactional reproduction of structural inequalities that socializes young people into accepting social inequality” (p. 3). This is not to minimize or justify the interactions that took place between Hmong and African American boys, but to stop using bullying in schools as a buzzword and catch-all that frames bad behavior and avoids the more complicated ways “in

which these interactions are a central part of a gendered, classed, raced, sexualized and embodied socialization process that supports and reproduces varied lines of inequality” (Pascoe, 2014-15, p. 4). In addition, punitive school policies such as zero-tolerance succeed only in pushing students’ out of school. As of 2016, nine St. Paul Public Schools are piloting restorative justice practices at their schools to deal with conflict between students more effectively rather than punishing students with suspensions. It is too early to tell how effective these practices will be long-term, but some schools are already reporting positive results

<https://www.spps.org/Page/30839>).

Advancing Research and Practice

The opportunities that *quality* out-of-school programs offer working-class and poor boys of color can impact and influence their future educational trajectories tremendously. Neighborhood league soccer was never just about soccer for Hmong boys; it served as an important tool for many of them to graduate from high school and matriculate to college. Free tutoring sessions, ACT Prep, and college admissions tours and meetings were built into the intensive out-of school programming that Mark and Teng created and sustained over time. If boys found themselves in trouble at school, it was often Mark or Teng who interfaced with school administrators, not boys’ parents. When the state of Minnesota planned to cut bus funding for the CIY program, Mark and Teng brought Hmong youth to the Minnesota State Capitol to talk to lawmakers. The guidance and mentorship that Mark, Teng, and other Hmong American men provided outside of school had a major impact on Hmong boys as the majority of them have now graduated from high school and matriculated to two and four year colleges. No doubt, the ongoing peer support that boys created on and off the soccer field with one another gave them

protective spaces where they embodied forms of resistance, away from school, which was also instrumental in their educational persistence.

Although neighborhood league soccer was instrumental in Hmong boys' positive educational outcomes, it was not the sole reason for their ability to persist.¹⁴ No matter how effective out-of-school enrichment may be, it cannot be viewed as the only pathway for future educational and career success. If this were the case, many more youth of color living in poverty would be headed to college and/or securing steady employment. We cannot let educators in K-12 schools off the hook simply because out-of-school enrichment and adult male mentorship has proven to be effective for many male youth of color. There is important work for educators to do in the educational advancement of Hmong youth, but they cannot do it alone. Similarly, the Hmong community has important work to do, but it is not their sole responsibility either. Moreover, the challenges Hmong boys experienced at SMS did not vanish while they were involved in soccer and several boys are attempting to come to terms with trauma they experienced in school. For example, Kong, the first student to attend SMS, pursued therapy in high school and continues to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder as a college student. More research is needed that explores the short and long term effects of peer violence on Hmong Americans. Hmong leaders, parents, and educators perspectives continue to be important, but more research is needed that illuminates youths' point of view; most importantly, adults must take their perspectives seriously and create action plans. These action plans, with youths' input, have the potential to shape policy and create systematic changes in institutions such as schools.

From the moment they began their schooling, many individuals and institutions failed Dylan Yang and the Hmong male youth participants in my study. In America, it is common to

¹⁴ In my book manuscript, I analyze these additional reasons in detail. I also discuss the reasons why many Hmong girls at SMS did not matriculate to college.

hear that meritocracy exists for everyone no matter who they are or where they come from. However, if we keep telling kids they can succeed if they just work hard, than we need to invest in creating cultures in schools that make it actually possible. If we do not seek to understand the deeper and more complicated reasons why Hmong students have lower educational outcomes, no long-term changes will ever occur. As the Hmong community grows and more children enroll in K-12 schools, the need for more research that takes into account the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and social class are needed more than ever. However, the most important thing we can do, starting now, is to simply reach out to Hmong male youth and *listen* to what they have to tell us. We need to understand their experiences, challenges, and sources of support before we can begin to adequately assist them.

References Cited

- Almeida, J., Johnson, R.M., McNamara, M., & Gupta, J. (2011). Peer violence perpetration among urban adolescents: Dispelling the myth of the violent immigration. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 26(13), 2658-80.
- Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center. (2011). *A Community of contrasts: Asian American in the United States, 2011*. Washington, DC: Asian American Center for Advancing Justice.
- Bettencourt, A.F. & Farrell, A.D. (2013). Individual and contextual factors associated with patterns of aggression and peer victimization during middle school. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 42, 285-302.
- Cacho, L.M. (2012). *Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cammarota, J. (2004). The gendered and racialized pathways of Latina and Latino youth: Different struggles, different resistances in the urban context. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 35(1), 53-74.
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I., & Shaw, L.L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. London: Routledge.
- Kim, J.K. (1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & Society*, 27(1), 105-138.
- Lee, S.J. (2005). *Up against whiteness: Race, school, and immigrant youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lopez, N. (2003). *Hopeful girls, troubled boys: Race and gender disparity in urban education*.
New York, NY: Routledge.

Maffini, C.S. 2016. "Feeling Unsafe at School: Southeast Asian American Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences of School Safety." *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 11(1):1-14.

Ong, A. (2003). *Buddha is hiding: Refugees, citizenship, the new America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Park, L.S.H. (2008). Continuing significance of the model minority myth: The second generation. *Social Justice*, 35(2), 134-144.

Pascoe, C.J. (2014-2015). Bullying as social inequality. *The Enemy*, 1(1), 1-7.
[\(http://theenemyreader.org/bullying-as-social-inequality/\)](http://theenemyreader.org/bullying-as-social-inequality/).

Pellegrini, A.D. (2002). Bullying victimization, and sexual harassment during the transition to middle school. *Educational Psychologist*, 37, 151-163.

Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*.
New York: Russell Sage foundation.

Rios, V.M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of black and Latino boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Smalkoski, K. (2014). *Performing Masculinities: The Impact of Racialization, Space, and Cultural Practices on Hmong Immigrant Youth*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

Suarez-Orozco, C., & Baolian Qin-Hilliard, D. (2004). Immigrant boys' experiences in U.S. schools. In N. Way & J. Y. Chu (Eds.), *Adolescent boys: Exploring diverse cultures of boyhood* (pp. 295-316). New York: New York University Press.

Tran, N. & Okazaki, S. (2012). Bullying & Victimization and Asian American Students.

American Psychological Association. (<http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/asian-american/bullying-and-victimization.pdf>).

Tuan, M. (1998). *Forever foreigners or honorary whites?: The Asian ethnic experience today*.

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Vang, H. (2004). Hmong American women's educational attainment: Implications for Hmong American women and men. In Hmong National Development Inc. & Hmong Cultural and Resource Center (Eds.), *Hmong 2000 Census publication: Data & Analysis* (pp. 23-25).

Washington, DC: Hmong National Development, Inc.

Vue, P. L. (2012). *Assimilation and the gendered color line: Hmong case studies of hip-hop and import racing*. El Paso, Texas: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.

Waters, M. (1996). The intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity in identity development of Caribbean American teens. In Leadbeater, B. J. R. and Way, N. (Eds.). *Urban Girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (65-84). NY: New York University Press.

Xiong, Y.S. (2012). Hmong Americans' educational attainment: Recent changes and remaining challenges. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 13(2), 1-18.

Yang, K., & Pfeifer, M. (2004). Profile of Hmong educational attainment. In Hmong National Development Inc. & Hmong Cultural and Resource Center (Eds.), *Hmong 2000 Census publication: Data & Analysis* (pp. 21-22). Washington, DC: Hmong National

Development, Inc.



Dr. Kari Smalkoski is a researcher in the department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her research and teaching focus on masculinity, educational inequality, school choice, and youth sports. She writes extensively about Hmong students' experience in schools; her research findings are included in a 2014-16 AAPI Bullying Prevention Task force Report, a White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Her current book project, *American Dream Disrupted: Rewriting Narratives on Hmong Youth, Masculinity, and Violence*, examines the ways that Hmong boys experience schooling through a school choice program. Dr. Smalkoski currently co-leads a new initiative, in partnership with urban public middle schools in the Twin Cities, called Minnesota Youth Story Squad (z.umn.edu/MYSS).