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The Hmong Literacy Project: Parents Working to Preserve the Past and Ensure the Future

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For some adults, the development of literacy may be a practical matter of economic advancement or survival. For others, it may be a matter of broader concerns such as preservation of a culture and helping to brighten the future of their children.

The Hmong Literacy Project, funded by the National Institute for Literacy, encompassed all of these concerns. It was established at an elementary school in Fresno, California to teach first language literacy skills to adult Hmong parents and then to continue with instruction in English language and literacy. The following is a description of the implementation and some of the results of the project. Following a discussion of the rationales for the project, information gathered from parents, children, teachers, and others will be presented and discussed to provide glimpses into the efforts of members of one minority group to preserve a language and culture and to become more involved in their children's futures.

Background and Rationale for the Project

The Hmong Literacy Project was established to address problems and needs of adults, and by extension their children, in the Hmong community in Fresno, California. Fresno County has the largest Hmong population in the U.S., with over 40,000 members. At the elementary school in which the project was established, 1151 students are enrolled in preschool through sixth grade, of whom 51.1% are Southeast Asian, with Hmong speakers by far comprising the majority of this group. Hmong has been a written language for only about thirty years; therefore, most of the children come from preliterate homes. Further, many Hmong children and most adults are not literate in English; 96% of the school's Hmong student population are currently classified as limited English proficient (LEP). On average, the Hmong children at the school and district-wide score significantly below the mean on academic achievement tests and are at a substantial risk for not completing school (Sanchez, 1992). Classroom assessments indicate that Hmong

students are also scoring below average on their academic tasks relative to their peers in the regular classrooms.

Plans for a new literacy project were initiated by the Hmong parents. They wanted a school-site-centered program where they could increase their first language literacy skills and second language skills through content that was relevant to their needs. Several Hmong parents approached the principal of the school and inquired about the establishment of literacy classes for Hmong parents at the school site. The primary motivations of the parents were that they wanted to be able to write down their oral histories before they are lost, they wanted to acquire English language and literacy skills, and they wanted to help their families.

The project aimed toward first helping Hmong adults develop first language literacy skills as a precursor to the study of English language and literacy skills. In programs sponsored by social service agencies for adult Hmong refugees to learn English, there has been a notable lack of success in this effort although some Hmong adults have been attending such programs for as many as five years. People involved in the project believed that the lack of success in English literacy acquisition for this population was directly related to the nonexistent or marginal first language literacy and the lack of relevant content. There is a fair amount of support for this belief. Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kross, and Kuehn (1990) found that development of second language literacy skills depended on several factors, including first language literacy and educational experience in both languages. Downing, Hendricks, Mason, and Olney (1984) argue that a major part of the problem that Hmong adults face in learning English is a lack of first language literacy as well as the absence of formal schooling experience. Atkinson (1988) states that the reason that learners without literacy skills may lose interest in some English as a Second Language (ESL) programs is that students cannot keep up in ESL classes due to difficulties in coping with learning both a second language and literacy skills at the same time.

The project staff also believed that participant choice would contribute to the effectiveness of the program. In his review of family literacy projects, Ranard (1989) concludes that adult literacy instruction is particularly effective when it is based on relevant content. For preliterate adults, the content should, whenever possible, begin within a culturally familiar context. Further, he states that effectiveness appears to be directly related to involving the students in the development of the curriculum and taking into account what they say they want and need to learn.

The development of first language literacy skills to aid in the development of second language literacy, participant choice, and relevant content were major considerations in the design of the project. Other main considerations, however, were the motivations and goals of the parents themselves.

Parents' Goals for the Project

Hmong parents requested instruction in Hmong literacy skills because it is relevant to a perceived need in their community the preservation of their culture. Initially, when parents immigrated, they were concerned that their children learn to speak and function in English in order to survive and succeed here, but currently community members have an even greater concern that children are losing the Hmong language, are not developing Hmong literacy skills, do not understand the Hmong heritage, and therefore will not be able to pass on this knowledge to their descendants. Many Hmong adults do not want their oral traditions and histories lost or forgotten when they die. Weinstein-Shr (1990) points out that for refugee parents this issue is often exacerbated because of the children's increased exposure to American customs and language and because of the children's peer pressures to assimilate quickly, thereby devaluing their home culture. The children, therefore, often are not receptive or interested in learning or remembering this cultural information,

and the parents feel the pressure to record it.

In many Hmong families in Fresno, an increasing rift has developed between Hmong parents and the culture and values they represent, on the one hand, and Hmong children and their values on the other. Alienated not only by Asian culture but also by American society, Hmong and other Southeast Asian youth in Fresno are increasingly turning to gangs. During the past decade, gang membership has increased by about 500%, especially among the young adolescent Hmong males. According to the Fresno Police Department, the number of Southeast Asian gangs has increased dramatically during the last 5 years to over 30 Southeast Asian gangs and over 1,000 members (Chiem, 1994). The alienation of Hmong youth has greatly aggravated the Hmong family emotional climate and negatively affected the academic behavior of family members.

In expressing their desire for first as well as second language literacy instruction, Hmong parents stated their need to gain these skills to be able to help their children academically and to narrow the disturbing rifts between the adult and child generations. When parents attend literacy classes a systematic transfer of knowledge about literacy occurs within families, and this can be a source of strength for both parties (Auerbach, 1989). In Weinstein-Shr's (1990) experience, emerging adult literacy acts as a catalyst for bridging generational divisions that have developed. When children are shown the value of their home heritage this further eases the burden. Chall and Snow (1982) emphasize that the development of parental literacy greatly increases their willingness to advocate for their children at the school. Chall and Snow suggest that this advocacy shapes teachers' perceptions, which in turn influences the achievement of their children.

For these reasons, a major aim of the project was to provide encouragement for Hmong adults to be involved in their children's education. Teachers and staff in the school district have already been supporting and encouraging the involvement of parents for some time by trying to include LEP family members in existing school functions, translating notices from the school into home languages, and opening parent meetings in Hmong, Lao, and Spanish before any English is spoken. Parent meetings include multiple translations and are well attended. The project staff hoped to strengthen ties between the Hmong community and the schools. Providing literacy instruction at the school itself would help more parents become familiar with their children's school. The development of first and second language literacy skills as well as the development of the Hmong Parents Newsletter, one of the components of the Hmong literacy project, would increase communication between the school and community, thus leading to increased parent participation. Also, the project staff expected that the development of adult first and second language literacy skills could have a positive effect on children's literacy development. Herrell (in press) concluded that modeling of reading and writing by parents in the home establishes a connection between home and school culture and serves to reduce generational polarization. Auerbach (1989) emphasizes that "on the most basic level, just by developing their own literacy parents contribute to family literacy....As parents contribute to the development of the home language and culture they build the foundation for their children's academic achievement" (p. 178).

The project staff had several research aims as well. Though most of the qualitative research conducted during this project was concerned with Hmong learning strategies and behaviors (See Kang, Kuehn, & Herrell, 1994), research in the project was also concerned with motivation and family literacy. We wanted to find out if the motivations of preserving Hmong culture and helping their children, expressed by parents who initially requested instruction in Hmong literacy skills and by Hmong refugees elsewhere (Weinstein-Shr, 1990), were shared by parents who attended classes in the project. We also wanted to investigate whether parental participation in the project had any effect on home literacy and parents' involvement in their children's education.

Project Design and Implementation

The Hmong Literacy Project was established to address the concerns and support the aspirations mentioned above. Classes in the Hmong Literacy Project began in January 1993 and continued until January 1994. Classes were offered five days a week and were expanded to two hours per class at the request of participants and teachers. Enrollment was open, and over 180 parents attended classes with varying regularity. About 50 participants attended every week until the summer school vacations, with many attending more than one class per week. A few attended all the classes offered.

A flyer announcing the need for teachers on the project was distributed through the elementary school and a community -based resource center that served the Southeast Asian refugee community. Parents were given flyers and asked to give them to anyone they knew who might be interested in the positions. The qualifications for the teaching positions were that teachers must be native speakers of Hmong and be skilled in reading and writing Hmong and English. No teaching credential or training was required. After the applications were received approximately thirty applicants were interviewed by a committee of parents, community leaders, and project staff. Seven teachers, two female and five male, were selected to teach the classes. One male was selected to serve as teacher coordinator. Project staff had hoped to have an equal gender mix, but fewer women interviewed for the positions.

All of the teachers selected had had some prior experience teaching, generally in the refugee camps in Asia. Only the Teacher Coordinator had had formal training in the U.S. as a teacher, and he was the first Hmong in California to become certified as a public school teacher. His role was to help the other teachers prepare lessons or materials when needed and to conduct interviews and testing of parents. He was the only one of the eight selected who had a postsecondary degree. Two other teachers were enrolled in college classes while they were teaching, and one subsequently has begun teaching elementary school in a nearby county. Two teachers worked in public schools as primary language translators or teacher's aides, one worked in the county education office, and two worked for the Department of Social Services. The teachers ranged in age from 26 to 48 years old, with the mean age of 34. Two teachers were proficient with computers and organized and produced the parent newsletter. These two were younger than most of the other teachers (both age 27) and were also involved in the production of a Hmong language television program on a local public access channel. They were thus known by the community before they became involved in the project. The teacher coordinator was also known by the present community through newspaper articles when he became the first Hmong teacher credentialed in the state of California.

The project was originally designed to teach Hmong literacy for one year and then begin instruction in English language and literacy development, with expectations that students could transfer first language literacy skills to the learning of English literacy. Due to lack of sufficient funding to continue instruction beyond one year, English classes were begun early on a reduced schedule in September 1993 and continued until January 1994. Efforts to seek sources for funding of the project continue.

Hmong parents were the major source of information in decisions concerning the first language literacy curriculum and later the second language literacy curriculum. Following the Freireian approach, students were in control of the program content, and requests for curricular materials, community activities, and a newsletter were facilitated. Changes in the original program were made to adjust to the literacy needs and interests of the students. The project staff and teachers made every effort to ensure that the content of the program was relevant to Hmong adult needs and interests.

Besides instruction in first and second language literacy, several other activities during the Hmong Literacy Project were designed to increase communication and integration within the community and to help parents with skills that would be useful to themselves and that they could share with their children. Parents and teachers wrote, typed, edited, and produced a newsletter, the Hmong Parents' Newsletter, which was distributed to all the parents at the school and to the surrounding community. Hmong teachers and parent participants arranged visits from community leaders such as the Fresno mayoral candidates, city council members, and the chief of police. Parents also participated in exchanges of letters and photos with another National Institute for Literacy project in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Finally, math and computer literacy, which parents wanted to develop for practical reasons as well as to teach their children, were incorporated into the project.

Research Methods

Data concerning issues and motivations related to those discussed at the beginning of this paper were collected through interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted among as many of the parents as possible. In addition, twelve parent participants, nine female and three male, ranging in age from 30 to 50, were interviewed extensively because they had attended almost every class throughout the project. Since this motivation could be reflected in the curricular decisions and other actions that the parents were involved in, extensive observation of the classes was done throughout the project by both researchers and teachers. We observed two classes per week for a period of sixteen weeks, then conducted an intensive observation of classes four days per week for eight weeks.

Because much of the research on emergent literacy in young children emphasizes the importance of parent modeling on children's perceptions of the importance of literacy, information about the Hmong children's perceptions of their parents in relation to literacy activity was desired. Before the Hmong classes were begun in January, 1993, all Hmong children at the elementary school ($n=467$) were interviewed and participated in a Q-Sort activity in which they were asked to identify pictures related to activities in which they had seen their mother, father, and teacher participate. The Q-Sort activity included seventeen watercolor pictures depicting unisex people engaged in a variety of activities, one activity per card. The activities included some which involved reading and writing, for example a person reading a newspaper, a person writing a check at the grocery store, or a person reading a book to a young child. Some of the activities were nonliteracy related such as a person gardening or painting a house.

Hmong college students were hired and trained to do the Q-Sort activity with the children. The children were asked which language, Hmong or English, they preferred to use for the activity. The children were shown each of the pictures three times. The first time the children were shown the set of pictures, they were asked, "Does your mother do this?" The second time through the set, the children were asked to identify the pictures showing things their father did, and the third time, things their teacher did. After the sorting activity the children were asked questions about who read to them at home and who read any mail that came to their house. The Q-Sort and interview activities were pilot tested, and interrater reliability was established.

In addition to baseline data, information about whether or not the children's perceptions would change as their parents attended literacy classes was important. At the conclusion of the literacy project, the Q-Sort activity and interviews were later conducted with the children of parents who attended Hmong classes regularly and with a randomly selected sample of children whose parents had not attended classes. These interviews were compared with the interviews conducted prior to the start of the Hmong classes. In addition, the regular teachers at the elementary school were surveyed periodically throughout the year to determine what, if any, feedback they were receiving from the children and parents involved.

Findings

Motivation for developing literacy skills

Information from interviewees as to their motivations for wanting to become literate in Hmong reflects concerns of parents who initially requested literacy classes and echoes reports by Weinstein-Shr (1990) regarding motivations and fears of Hmong populations elsewhere in the United States. Though Hmong parents wanted to be able to read and write letters to friends and relatives and also to be able to read Hmong newspapers, the main reasons that most of the parents gave for attending the classes were the preservation of their culture and the desire to teach their children. The words of three parents exemplify the general feeling:

We must learn and keep Hmong literacy before our culture disappears. It's very important to teach our children how to read, write, and speak Hmong so that we have a way of preserving our culture. We want to write down beautiful stories about our culture, things that happen in our country, in Hmong, for our children. We want to preserve our culture in written language. I want to write down what it was like in my country so we can leave our children something about our culture, like folktales, stories, history. If we don't write them down, they will disappear when our generation dies, and our children won't remember them.

The focus of many parents' expressions was that if concerned Hmong people do not write down everything about their culture, including stories, folktales, what it was like in the home country, tradition, and history, that it will all die out with the current generation. Parents feel that by learning to write Hmong, they are the ones who can make a difference. They feel that English is inadequate for expressions of their history and culture.

This concern was reflected in what students chose to read or write about. Folktales and stories were commonly chosen reading material. Students expressed a high interest level in writing about their own experiences, with many students writing about their lives in Asia and about escaping from the Communists. Writing assignments mainly reflected concerns with preserving culture and history, since topics were left up to the students. Many said that their experiences and "deep inner feelings" can't be interpreted the same way in English. A common statement was that now there was no excuse for being illiterate in Hmong and that it was up to them to maintain their language and culture.

All the students who were interviewed said there was a need for Hmong children to learn Hmong language and literacy. Most of the students who regularly attended classes, particularly the women, expressed the desire to teach their children how to read and write in Hmong. Two women expressed the opinion that learning Hmong was a way of getting some authority back, that now they could show their children that they were able to read and write. Some parents told interviewers that they felt they had authority when telling children about the past. A number of parents, particularly mothers, said that telling children to study carried much more weight if they themselves were studying and learning how to read and write. For example, one father said if he brought his son to computer class and showed him that he was studying computers, then maybe his son would listen to him more when he told his son to go to school and study hard. The father said that it was not enough to just tell his children to study, he had to set an example.

Parents consistently stated the desire to get involved with their children's education and to know what their children are doing in school. This was one of the reasons that parents reported they wanted to learn English language and literacy. Teachers also reported that parents continually talked about problems they were

having with their children and of the frustration of not being able to help their children with homework due to their lack of knowledge of English language, literacy, and schooling practices. Some parents said they wanted to learn math for practical reasons and to help their children learn math.

This concern of parents with helping their children develop language and math literacy was observed in the classroom as well. Though the classes were originally planned and designed for adults, both men and women began bringing their children to learn. What started as a trickle soon became a flood as almost every class was filled with both adults and children. By July, men and women began asking teachers if they could have another Hmong teacher within the classroom to teach the children attending the course.

Children and their parents, mostly mothers, were often observed working together in the classroom. Children often had reading skills in English and were sometimes quicker to develop Hmong literacy skills than their parents. On many occasions children were observed helping their parents with reading while parents were often observed teaching children Hmong words in the texts that their children did not know and correcting their children's oral language skills.

Effects on home literacy

According to information from parents and teachers, such occasions of cooperative study also occurred in the home. Teachers reported that writing assignments often contained the handwriting of more than one person. When interviewed, some of the mothers described their work on homework assignments at home as cooperative events, with their husbands and sometimes their children joining in. Some of the husbands could not attend classes but studied with their wives at night when the wives did their homework. Some parents reported that their children would sometimes become curious and join in. Other times parents requested help from their children as a way of getting them to join in. As many parents chose to write about their culture or experiences in their homeland, these events became contexts for parents to share such information and experiences with their children. Parents reported using these events to teach Hmong language to their children as opportunities within these contexts arose.

Information from the Q-Sort activity and interviews with children also indicated increased opportunities for children to be exposed to literacy events in the home, more opportunities to study with their parents, and increased interest of the children to develop Hmong literacy. The initial Q-Sort activity revealed that the children saw little reading and writing activity in their homes. When the children were read to, the readers were usually older siblings. When mail came to the house, the reading of the mail was usually a family project with older siblings reading the English mail and someone outside the immediate family, usually a friend or relative, reading any Hmong mail.

The results of the second Q-Sort activity and interviews showed increased interactions with literacy events in the homes of the parents who were attending classes and little or no change in the homes of nonattendees. In addition, the children of attendees either expressed a desire to read and write Hmong themselves or talked more about learning to read and write in Hmong themselves and being able to read letters from friends and family in Thailand, or in the United States than did the children of nonattendees.

Other activities noted by children of attendees included those in Table 1. The sample sizes for these questions were 23 children of attendees and 24 children of nonattendees.

Although the samples were small for the postclass interview, the contrasts in their responses show that the literacy events in the homes of attendees changed during the course of the Hmong Adult Literacy Project

classes at the elementary school. The children of attendees were experiencing more literacy events in the home and were more interested in learning to read and write in Hmong. The interactions between parents and children in the homes of attendees were more likely to include reading and writing events.

Interviews with the teachers of Hmong children at the elementary school also revealed that the children frequently mentioned that their parents were learning to read and write Hmong and that they, too, were learning Hmong reading and writing. When asked to make a list of the children who had shared such information, the teachers listed 37 different children of attendees and no children of nonattendees. Two third grade teachers reported that children were not only telling them such information, but that children were also observed proudly telling other children that their parents were learning to read and write in Hmong. The principal of the elementary school also reported his impressions that some of the children seemed to be proud of their parents' participation in the project.

Table 1. Comparison of children's responses to literacy activity questions by parent attendance

Literacy activity	Preclass Interviews	Postclass Interviews
Parents read Hmong Newspaper * Children of Attendees	8%	48%
* Children of Nonattendees	8	8
Child involved in shared homework activities * Children of Attendees	0	17
* Children of Nonattendees	0	14
Parents attempting to teach the Hmong alphabet to the child * Children of Attendees	0	0
* Children of Nonattendees	0	34
Child mentioned a desire to learn to read or write Hmong * Children of Attendees	0	47
* Children of Nonattendees	0	4

Effect on parental participation in school activities

The teachers also noted that parents attending the Hmong literacy classes were more likely to attend parent conferences than were the parents who did not attend classes. The teachers attributed this to increased self-esteem, more interest in school, or both, on the part of these parents. In an interview, the principal reported an increase in parents' participation in school related matters and events during the time the project was in operation. He commented that channels of communication were now more direct, as more and more parents could read the announcements sent out from the school into the community in the Hmong language and tell others about school matters and events. When asked about this, Hmong teachers told interviewers that

parents often brought in brochures and announcements from school to the classroom and checked their understanding of the text with the teachers. Some students were even observed using school notices as practice reading material in class. The teachers reported that some parents seemed proud of being able to read the announcements, notices, and brochures, without having to depend upon other friends or relatives to read the notices for them. Also, teachers reported that some parents said they felt they knew more about their children's education and what was going on in their children's classrooms, not only from information sent out by the school that they could now read but also from their experiences attending classes in the Hmong literacy project. Their participation in the project made opportunities for parents to experience first hand what it was like to learn and study in a formal educational setting in the United States and to gain an idea of the kind of educational experiences their children were going through.

Discussion of the Findings

What was clearly evident throughout the project was the determination of many Hmong parents to become more involved in their children's education both within and outside the home. It appears their efforts had some positive effects on their children, such as an increase in literacy activities in the home, an increased interest in Hmong literacy on the part of the children of attendees, and increased attendance at parent conferences, meetings with parents, and school events. These factors have been shown to relate positively to school achievement in children. Due to the short duration of the project, conclusions must remain tentative.

First language literacy events, both in the classroom and at home, often brought parents and children together to develop first language literacy skills and showed also the potential to provide contexts for parents to help children further learn Hmong language and culture. Such events can add to the efforts of parents to influence the directions that their children's lives are taking.

Both the efforts to help children develop Hmong language and literacy skills as well as parents' efforts to develop English language and literacy skills can serve the purpose of helping to reestablish lines of communication within the family. This is extremely important. According to Wong Fillmore (1990), communication between parents and children may become strained and limited as children develop fluency in a second language and begin to lose competence in their first language while parents are still struggling to learn the second language. As the means of communication are lost, parents are less able to "socialize their children in the values, beliefs, and practices that are important to the family and community" (p.6), potentially leading to a situation in which closeness, family unity, and the access children have to what their parents can teach them is lost.

Experiences and information from this project underscore the importance of parents' role and choice in their own and their children's education. Allowing parents to make choices concerning the curriculum not only made the content relevant but helped the parents perform an important task of recording and adding to their own history and culture. Successful projects value the experiences of the parents and incorporate into their curriculum opportunities for it to be discussed and recorded (Auerbach, 1989; Nickse, 1990; Ranard, 1989; Weinstein-Shr, 1990). This point should be considered in parent participation and adult education programs. It certainly was true in this project.

Educators need to do what they can to encourage parent participation in their children's education. Part of this effort can be to value and appreciate the cultural backgrounds of children and to assist parents in helping children realize that their parents' knowledge, experiences, and culture are valued. Parents "build the foundation for their children's academic achievement, positive self-concept, and appreciation for their multicultural heritage. By valuing and building on parents' strengths, the status of those strengths is

enhanced" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 178). Helping parents gain more status and value (for themselves and their culture) in the eyes of their children and providing more opportunities for parents to get involved in their children's education may help to reduce the risk and amount of alienation and associated problems that some minority children face.

Hmong parents in this project strive to help their children develop first and second language and literacy so they can better communicate their values and culture, orally as well as through the written word. Parents' efforts to learn literacy skills in order to preserve and maintain Hmong culture, along with their determination to get more involved in their children's education, can be seen as fitting with the total context of working to ensure their children's futures.

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