

A PERSONAL TALE OF SELF-REFLECTION BY A HMONG
ENGLISH TEACHER FORMING A HIGH SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP CLUB TO ENHANCE HMONG
ADOLESCENTS IN THEIR SEARCH FOR
PERSONAL IDENTITY

A Project

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Education

Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners Option

by

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Spring 2010

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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to my parents, Chou Teng Moua and Ma Yang
Moua, for your love and encouragement to seek higher
education, and for crossing the ocean to help me
reach my full potential.*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the opportunity I had with many amazing people who inspired me to continue my leadership through the process of educating others, reaching out, and helping me find my way to create the person I am today.

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For my Moua and Hamilton families, that without your endless love and support, I probably would not have made it this far. I am so grateful to have each and every one of you in my life. I love you all.

I am also grateful to have worked with many of my wonderful students who have helped me to grow in my professional career. You are the reasons I chose this project.

Thank you God. With you, everything is possible. I give it all to you!

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and
lean not on your own understanding, in all
your ways acknowledge him and he will
make your path straight.”
Proverbs 3: 5-6*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Publication Rights	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Abstract.....	ix
CHAPTER	
I. Introduction	1
Problem.....	4
Statement of Purpose.....	5
Definition of Terms	5
Limitations/Delimitations.....	7
Condensed Introduction to the Review of the Literature	7
Proposed Methodology and/or Approach.....	8
II. Review of the Literature	10
Adolescent Identity.....	10
Hmong Adolescents.....	17
The History of the Hmong People.....	23
After-School Programs and Clubs.....	27
Student Leaders with a Focus on Self-Reflection	30
III. Organization of Project.....	33
Materials	33
Introduction	33

CHAPTER	PAGE
IV. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	36
Summary.....	36
Conclusions	37
Recommendations	38
References	41
Appendices	
A. Handbook: Creating an After-School Leadership Club	47
B. Personal Tale of Self-Reflection	72

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this project is to create a handbook by creating a high school leadership club for Hmong students, to enhance their search for personal identity as they relate it to my own personal tale of self-reflection. In order to create my own personal tale and a leadership club to enhance Hmong adolescents, a background knowledge base had to be established in the review of literature. This background knowledge base consisted of adolescent identity, Hmong adolescents, Hmong culture, after-school programs and clubs, and leadership with a focus on self-reflection. Each section in

Chapter II of this project amplifies the need for understanding oneself through family involvement, relationships, cultural loss, language loss, etc, for the search of personal identity.

Through the background knowledge base established in the review of literature, the creation of my self-reflection was able to take form. The reflection is about growing up in two worlds; the Hmong world and the American world. The book is the self-reflection of my search for personal identity and is used to help enhance Hmong adolescents in understanding their search for personal identity. The book is titled, *Washed Away —Story of a First Generation Hmong Woman in America*, and is recommended by the author to use in secondary levels to understand what it is to be Hmong living in two worlds, revolving around the themes of language loss, biculturalism, acculturation, assimilation, and simply finding out who we truly are.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a young girl, I saw myself different from others—my skin color, the way I spoke with an accent, and the Hmong rules I often had to obey at home that none of my friends had to obey; together served to show me that I was somewhat different than the others in my class. For many years, I resisted being Hmong or chose not to associate with my home culture at all. It wasn't until college that I grew to acknowledge my heritage—Hmong American. I grew up speaking Hmong and doing everything I knew according to the Hmong customs. However, because I was born in this country (first generation), and in order to succeed in life, it meant that I needed to learn English and fit into the American culture. Growing up in this culture was different because my parents had no formal education to teach me to read and write Hmong, so I struggled in school and let go of my Hmong culture in order to be proficient in the new dominant culture.

The scale to balance and keep my Hmong roots could not outweigh my new world in this American society. I began to disown my Hmong heritage and started fading and not associating with my Hmong roots. Many people who I often meet and become good friends with could not identify me as Hmong, but rather Chinese or Japanese. When I asked why I didn't look Hmong, I got the feeling from each of them in their description of Hmong people as poor, unsuccessful, and generally in a negative connotation. Of all Asian people, Hmong people had the lowest educational status and lowest percentages in

academic areas. I was embarrassed because I was associated with that group and I did not want people to judge me from statistics because I wanted to go far in life and achieve. I was on the honor roll growing up and to be identified with people from very low status was shameful to me.

Whenever asked what country I was from, I said the U.S. I have found that many other Hmong students go through the same steps as I have, and some do not want to turn back and learn about their own culture. Part of what the new society did to many of us is that it also labeled the Hmong in many ways. Throughout my life, I was considered “white-washed,” meaning I did everything white American people did rather than be me—Hmong. It was not until college that I met a few Hmong friends who were leaders in the Chico community and they opened my eyes to what I did not understand about the Hmong people. Through books I read and lectures I heard of our people, I understood the concepts of why the Hmong people were here in the United States, and what we did in our ancestral country and for this country. Bit by bit, I started to understand why the Hmong people were scoring so low in education. We were the newest immigrants and I found that each new Asian race that arrived in the U.S. always started off below and expanded to the top. Eventually, I found myself. I learned how to read, write, and speak Hmong and started claiming my identity as Hmong American. Before Hmong people started arriving here in the U.S., little was known about us Hmong people. We were kept as a secret known as the Secret War. For those who know the Hmong people, know us as heroes to the United States.

A goal for me as an educator is to help others see who they are without having to lose anything, that is, the culture, language, tradition, religion, and finding their place

as Hmong Americans. As an educator, it is important for students to become critical about the information (explicit or implicit) gained at school. This will be done through creating a handbook for forming an after-school Hmong leadership club that focuses on adolescent identity and their role in this world.

The number of Hmong people living in the United States has risen quickly since 1975. California has the largest Hmong population. In 2004, 200 families from Thailand were sent to Butte County. In several cities and counties in California, such as Butte County, the Hmong comprise the second largest language minority group behind the Spanish (Young, 1999). There are many Hmong students who are proficient in English, yet very many who are still limited in English in Butte County, California. Despite the obvious language needs of Hmong students, there is a desperate scarcity of biliterate and bicultural Hmong teachers.

More Hmong students are becoming more Americanized, and the Hmong language is fading away with each new generation. As Hmong children grow up to be adolescents, they become more assimilated in the dominant culture leaving behind their Hmong roots. One's personal identity may not be an issue as a child but it begins to grow as they become adults and interrupts relations with parents and relatives because of the language loss. Although some may claim they know who and what they are, some still struggle to find who they are while battling their lives in two cultures and some refusing to practice and appreciate their culture.

The literature shown in Chapter II reveals strong relationships between culture and language loss of the newer immigrant generation, but little is known about the relationship between Hmong adolescents and their personal identity. Hmong people tend

to become interested in different opportunities the world has to offer them when a Hmong person has gone through the process of failures and successes. The focus of this research is on Hmong adolescents, because they play a large role in keeping the Hmong roots alive for many generations to come and understanding who they are as individuals.

Problem

The Hmong population is increasing. More Hmong students are becoming more Americanized, and are losing their abilities to speak, read, and write in Hmong. Although the numbers of Hmong people in professional fields are beginning to rise, so has the process of becoming linguistically assimilated into the English-speaking world of the school and society. Hmong adolescents face difficult times when pressure is put on them by families to decide who they will become, what directions their lives will take, and what cultures they will carry on to the next generation. Our Hmong students today are in need of role models that can help them in their search for personal identity—that is, learning to be Hmong and succeed in the world and to critically examine the world. We also need to teach students to ask critical questions regarding the message they receive through schooling. The hidden curriculum pushes values that only benefit the dominant culture. In order to reach out to most Hmong students, an after-school leadership club needs to be created that focuses on identifying Hmong Americans and the roles that they play in the world. With that, the Hmong students can bridge their knowledge and use their leadership skills to embrace the future by reaching out and simply keeping their Hmong roots. Today, there is still a low percentage of Hmong teachers and Hmong students who are proficient in their first language and many who still hold onto old

beliefs that their identity is to carry out the old norms of what males and females are born to do (Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association, 2010). Although there tends to be a loss of culture formatives in some cases, there is also the perception that one can never be more than what he/she is born to be. This leads to the struggle of identity that defines the person's place in this world.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to create a handbook that will include a personal tale of self-reflection and the prescribed steps to create a high school leadership club for Hmong students. This will enhance students as they search for their personal identity. It is expected that they will be able to relate their experiences with my own personal tale of self-reflection.

Definition of Terms

Acculturation

Process when one cultural group begins to incorporate one or more cultural traits from another group (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006).

Adolescent(s)

The age group (time period) of men and women between ages 12-21 becoming adults.

Assimilation

When one cultural group takes the traits of another cultural group, leaving behind their original roots (Ovando et al., 2006).

Biculturalism

Having two cultures.

Hmong

People who migrated to the United States due to the Vietnam War. It is debated that Hmong may mean free, however, there is no concrete evidence to support that it does. Hmong people are a group of minorities like many others who came from Asia.

Identity

Who you are; the state of being oneself. There are different kinds of identity: “national identity, social identity, cultural/racial identity, class identity, familial identity, gender, and sexual identity, etc.” These are formed beyond our control and “out of these we form our personal (sense of) identity” (“Immigrants and Cultural Identity,” n.d., “What is Identity,” para. 2-3).

Language Loss

When one no longer speaks his/her first language.

Miao (Meo)

A term given to call the Hmong people from the Chinese meaning “barbarians” (Quincy, 1995).

Self-Reflection

When we can look at ourselves and examine who, what, where, when, and why we have become what we are.

Limitations/Delimitations

Limitations

The self-reflection will be created from my own life experiences of growing up as a Hmong American in this country. The life experiences have the potential for a biased view.

Delimitations

The delimitations in this project are: focusing on one personal tale of self-reflection gearing toward Hmong adolescents. The focus on self-reflection limits the readers to only one view of living life in the Hmong culture. The reflection is focus for students at the secondary level.

Condensed Introduction to the Review of the Literature

In order to produce a self-reflection that will enhance Hmong adolescents in their search for personal identity, the current knowledge base dealing with this subject must be investigated.

Like many minorities who come to America looking for hope and opportunities, many are often faced with the reality of hardships, acculturations, assimilations, and culture and language loss. The children grow up wanting to blend in with the new culture and often leave their traditional values and beliefs to accustom themselves into what the new world provides for them. As they get into their teens and adulthood, the values and customs of their culture have often dematerialized. For some, letting go of their old traditional beliefs and cultural values may not be complicated,

while very few maintain to keep their cultural roots alive. Many struggle to understand who they are while trying to blend both cultures into one.

Hmong people are examples of immigrants who come to the new world hoping to embrace and empower their family legacy by following their traditions and culture. Often, many of these older and traditional Hmong folks find that their children have already lost the language and have adapted themselves into the new world. The children, often during adolescent years, find themselves confused, abandoned, and feeling lost because their parents do not understand the pressure and expectations put on them from both cultures.

Hmong immigrants are like the story of countless American immigrants and native children and adults who have lost their ethnic languages in the process of becoming linguistically assimilated into the English-speaking world of school and society. The timing and the conditions under which newcomers come into contact with the ways of the American culture can profoundly affect the retention and their primary cultures, as well as the development of the new dominant culture.

Proposed Methodology and/or Approach

In order to produce a self-reflection handbook that will guide teachers or advisors in creating a Hmong leadership club focusing on adolescent identity, the current knowledge base dealing with this subject must be explored. The knowledge base will consist of an historical overview on adolescent identity, Hmong adolescents, Hmong culture, after-school programs and clubs, and leadership with a focus on self-reflection.

Students of any culture who have experienced the surrounding themes of biculturalism can understand and relate to the self-reflection and the manual guide. The self-reflection will also allow for opportunities to discuss and debate different aspects of adolescent identity and cultural norms and formalities. It will be used to help all students enhance their understanding by identifying where they stand in their own world and who they are as individuals.

The handbook will also include a personal self-reflection from a Hmong English teacher who experienced living in two cultures to find her identity in the world. The handbook will be primarily used for high school Hmong adolescents. The handbook is the self-reflection of the Hmong English teacher, which is titled, *Washed Away—Story of a First Generation Hmong Woman in America*. The key purpose is to enhance Hmong adolescents in their search for personal identity.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Adolescent Identity

As children, we quickly grow to learn how to identify our personal needs, imitate others, understand what hurts us, what makes us laugh, and begin to develop our senses of belonging to the inside and outside worlds. From childhood to teenage years, we begin to construct our own behavior through the experiences we encounter in our everyday lives as they become instruments in shaping who we are and who we will become.

Our lives are filled by the many different emotional and social events that contribute to the way we feel and act. The ways we respond to those events are based partly on the challenges and support we receive while growing up. The developmental tasks involved in the social and emotional development of children and teenagers, which continue into adulthood, can be explained by Erikson's eight stages of development.

In Erikson's first stage, *Trust vs. Mistrust*, the child, in his infancy years, believes that his environment will provide him the basic things to meet his needs. During toddlerhood, *Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt*, the child learns about his own self-control and begins to feel regret and sorrow when misusing his own free will. In the early childhood stage, *Initiative vs. Guilt*, the child learns to explore his surroundings and feel responsible for his own wrongdoings. During middle childhood years, the child learns to

view himself with others within his age group. This stage is known as *Accomplishment/ Industry vs. Inferiority* (Huitt, 2008).

When the child becomes an adolescent, he begins to search for himself by having relationships/connections with people to help define his identity. This stage is the *Identity vs. Role Confusion*. As a young adult, he learns to make long-term commitments to relationships, known as the *Intimacy vs. Isolation* stage. During middle adulthood, *Generativity vs. Stagnation*, he prepares himself to guide the next generation. As he older, he begins to develop the “sense of acceptance of life as it [is] lived and the importance of the people and relationships that [they] developed over [their] lifespan” (Huitt, 2008). This stage is called the *Ego Integrity vs. Despair*.

As we look at Erikson’s adolescence stage, *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, this is a time when the individual explores his identity by fitting in with others through comparing his own abilities, goals, possibilities, etc, to fit in with others. Adolescence is a growing stage when children establish their own uniqueness of attachment and aversion, to simply endure who they truly are. This period is considered to begin somewhere between ages 12 and 14, and ends at 19 or 20. Josselson (1994) argues that “the process of identity formation requires sufficient personality structuralization and management of internal conflict for the individual to be able to attempt joining the self to a larger self” (p. 14). During adolescence, young people find themselves facing obstacles, challenges, successes, and competition, which opens their eyes to the larger social world. It is also the time one finds his self-identity, a “process of claiming membership in the social world, standing for something, being known for who one is” (Josselson, 1994, p. 12). With an increase in age, there is an increased likelihood of exploration to define who

they are as individuals. Family, status, gender, relationships, race, and ethnicity are key contributors to adolescent identity.

Family plays a role in identity. As children progress to different age groups, so do their bodies and minds. They begin to question, revise, and even reject any childhood identifications that they may encounter within the family. As children grow, they begin to search for roles and values reflecting their unique skills, abilities, and personal preferences. Overturf and Downs (2003) describe how “social science research has demonstrated that parental involvement affects adolescent behavior, primarily through monitoring behavior on the part of parents” (p. 2). Family members can shape a child’s identity as the/she grows, whether it is a positive or negative experience.

However, to Borus and Wyche (1994) conclude that:

Adolescents who enjoy a secure sense of attachment to parents have a safe foundation from which to explore and sample life alternatives and make self-chosen commitments to life directions. Conversely, adolescents who do not possess a secure sense of attachment to parents are less likely to face the risks that inevitably go hand-in-hand with exploration and commitment. Families in which there are secure parent-adolescent attachment relations provide the emotional support necessary for meaningful identity exploration and commitment. (p. 32)

According to Suzanne Bartle-Haring (1997), she illustrates that family promotes or inhibits the individual individuation, which in turn, promotes or inhibits the person’s identity. When there is parental acceptance or rejection, the affective quality of the family context influences his or her willingness to explore and make commitments to various life alternatives. They begin to view their lives and find their status within their family function or outside of the box with others.

According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, “status” is defined as the placement of someone or something in relation to others (“Status,” 2009). In families,

depending on your status, whether you are the head of the house or the youngest, you have a role to carry. The status you hold as a child, depending on how the family system works, oftentimes carries on in the child's lifetime to stay as his placement identity, unless he is able to accept and be open to new statuses. Those new statuses may be positive or negative depending on if he/she is willing to accept his/her placement. James Marcia (1994) dramatizes the role of status in adolescent identity in four categories:

1. The identity achievement group—those who made identity commitments after a period of exploration.
2. The foreclosure group—those who made identity commitments without a period of exploration, foreclosing possibility by bringing along unquestioned childhood ascriptions.
3. The moratorium group—those in a period of crisis or exploration in an effort to discover values or goals that fit them.
4. The identity diffusion group—those without identity commitments who were making no effort to explore or create them. (p. 75)

With time, as a group, young people move out of the uncommitted or committed statuses and make choices of their own through greater self-understanding and greater knowledge about the possibilities society has to offer them. Through their encounters with others, they discover new relationships and feelings and begin to explore their inner self.

The inner self is usually found when people make connections or have relationships with others. Relationships with others through intimacy, friendship, or rivalry, can affect a person's self-discovery. Further stressed in Erickson's stage of *Intimacy vs. Isolation*, is the time when the child becomes an adult and learns to give and receive love and develop kinship with others. Oftentimes, one of the people in the group, couple, or family, breaks away or is too hard-hearted where "they want the intimacy of belonging but concurrently resist the potential to get lost in their relationships, to become too much what the other wants/thinks" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 86). In time, the

person will grow to hold grudges or will forgive and love those who have wronged or have been there for them. Being in a relationship allows growth by learning from mistakes, whether the relationships were inferior or not, to change and make it better or worse for themselves and those around them. Many times, adolescents struggle with their self-image of belonging or are shocked by what others say about who they date, what they wear, or their sexual orientation.

Many young adults and adolescents struggle with their sexual orientation before they can classify themselves as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, transgender, etc. The theory of whether people are born lesbian/gay or whether they choose to be lesbian/gay is still a debatable issue, whether it is biologically genetic or just a choice. Troiden's model of homosexuality (1989) illustrates the four stages of lesbians and gays—of what they go through before realizing their sexual orientation. In Stage one, known as *Sensitization*, occurs before puberty where the person oftentimes finds himself different from others. The person begins to develop negative images from the teasing or humiliation received from others. In stage two, *Confusion*, Troiden (1989) describes how the person begins to recognize feelings and behaviors of homosexuals and confuses himself or herself with identity development. Troiden's (1989) study found that homosexuals adapt to one of the following mechanisms to cope with identity confusion:

1. Denial: One continues to deny feelings and impulses.
2. Avoidance: One is aware of homosexual impulses and feelings and avoids situations in which these must be confronted.
3. Repair: One attempts to fix one's individual make-up and become heterosexual in behavior, if not in fact.
4. Acceptance: The individual has the option to "accept" his or her impulses as a part of who he or she is. ("Stage 2," para. 2)

Although many still struggle with their identity and adjustments to new lifestyles such as intimacy, they often find themselves more involved in helping others than themselves.

When is the time to come out of the shell? Troiden's stage three, *Identity Assumption*, is the time when the person comes out of his/her shell and adopts new commitment to experiment with adult roles. Stage four, *Commitment*, is the time when they accept their sexuality and are involved with same-sex relationships. There is an increase in self-satisfaction and happiness, and one begins to flaunt their lifestyles and identities to the outside world. Even at this point when they are accepting their self-image and identity, the acts of unwelcome intrusive behaviors from media and anti-homosexuality are still cohesive to their identity as it was in the earlier stages.

Like lesbian and gay individuals, adolescent minority groups also face problems in regards to their ethnicity, color, and culture. Many minority individuals go through phases of acculturation. Acculturation is a process whereby one cultural group begins to incorporate one or more cultural traits from another group. The other phase is assimilation, which refers to when one cultural group takes the traits of another cultural group, leaving behind their original roots (Ovando et al., 2006). Most of these individuals, at whatever age, must travel through the stages of cultural adaptation.

Adapting to a new world is not always easy. In the initial stage, the individual is excited to discover new elements in their life. As they enter the uprooting stage, they realize that there are differences between the new world and theirs and begin to have cultural shock. They begin to assimilate or acculturate to the new world by adjusting to what is comfortable for them, unaware of what may lead to culture split or successful acculturation.

Not only is coming to a new world a big change for minority individuals, but their ethnicity and how it plays a role in their lives. Individuals from an ethnic group different than the dominant one, will experience how their culture affects the way others perceive them and shapes their attitudes, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior throughout life. According to Borus and Wyche (1994), “ethnicity not only shapes an individual’s values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, and feelings, but also influences how others respond to the individual” (p. 63). The adolescent years are hard for those who are of another ethnicity because of pressures put on them by family members to meet their expectations. The adolescent’s ethnicity is a central feature that determines the boundaries for the individual and its fundamental differences from the rest of the group. For instance, a European and a Chinese-American may have different views on education and family status. Their ethnicity becomes a focus for them in terms of identity search. Borus and Wyche (1994) concluded that in this time they “must recognize their feelings toward their ethnic heritage, choose the intensity of ethnic identification, and acknowledge the salience of ethnicity in structuring their lives” (p. 63). Besides cultural influences, gender is another indicator for adolescent identity.

Whether male or female, a specific role is put on the individual. For instance, the oldest male in an Asian family is responsible for providing emotional support for the mother and siblings and uphold family honor. An Asian female is responsible for taking care of the children and household chores and honoring her husband or males in the family. If a female rejects her role, she is culturally linked to stress and becomes an outcast to the family and ethnic community. The influence of gender depends on the adolescent’s level of acculturation and the level of the parents. If parents are traditional,

then their children are likely to face challenges between their ethnic culture and the dominant culture. If parents are more acculturated, most likely there will be language and loss of culture for their children and the adolescent years are more focused on family, friends, and relationships to build identity than ethnicity.

Positive role models within the minority community at home, work, and school is crucial for individuals to sustain a long, healthy lifestyle and identity. Young people must first confront the challenges of what the world has to offer them before finding their place in the larger world. Adolescent identity is a process and product of what each individual must go through to be able to ascertain who they are and how they belong in this world.

Hmong Adolescents

The adolescent period for a Hmong individual is a complicated time for those living in the United States. Most Hmong parents are still very traditional bringing in the hardship for their children. In Laos, the parent-adolescent relationship wasn't a factor since most girls and boys were married by the age of 12 or 14 and were expected to learn their gender roles from each parent. Oftentimes, many lacked out on the adolescent stage of human development.

Most of the Hmong teenagers and Hmong adolescents in the United States are more acculturated and integrated in the mainstream culture (Emery, 2002). They can adapt faster to the new culture than their parents. Hmong adolescents are torn between two different cultures and are likely to "experience serious problems as a result of tension with their parents and elders" (Xiong, 2002, p. 11). However, there is still a concern and

struggle between Hmong adolescents trying to keep their Hmong roots alive and being accepted into the Hmong community, as well as the mainstream culture. For some, it is too late and the language and culture is lost.

It can be noted that first generations of each culture, like the Hmong, are experiencing cultural loss. Researchers have shown that there is a strong relationship between culture and language loss of newer immigrant generations (Baker, 1996). The consequences of losing a primary language affects the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development, as well as creates depression and sadness for parents because the dominant language has taken over the family and makes it hard for parents to communicate with their own children. What language the family speaks and the language the child experiences in the community influences the child's ability to pick up different languages outside the family (Baker, 1996). In the Hmong culture, parents expect their children to know exact words when interpreting, and oftentimes when they do not know, are criticized for being too dumb for even going to school and not comprehending both languages. Many parents do not understand what is happening to them as they see their families fall apart and many Hmong adolescents suffer from the impact of cultural stress of fitting between two cultures (Xiong, 2002).

One of the struggles that Hmong adolescents face is the gender roles they have within the family structure. The gender roles for Hmong individuals differ from those living in the U.S. with those from Thailand. Having a big family and more sons is valued and gains prestige. The Thai Hmong males are the head of the household, and if the father is deceased, the uncle from the father's side becomes the authoritative figure. Men are considered more valuable than women because of the ability to bring labor to the

family through marriage. They are also the ones in charge of chopping wood, hunting, farming, and are able to go to school. The Thai Hmong females are the nurturers of the family and more likely to practice herbal medicine. Their role is to do household chores, sew, farm, and at times are denied schooling since their top priority is to stay home and to help their parents before they marry off. The first menstrual cycle of the girl indicates womanhood and she ready to be married and reproduce. The marriage arrangement can take forms in marriage by kidnapping (where the guy just takes the girl), forced by parents, and engagement by both sides of parents.

The gender roles for Hmong adolescents living in the U.S. are quite similar to Thai Hmong, however, there are still some differences. Again, males are still head of the household, but women are more accepted in providing for the family outside of the home. There is less pressure for a woman to get married at a younger age and reproduce. The women are freer and encouraged to attend school and find a job, and are often more motivated than Hmong males to continue in their education because of the stigma placed upon females and the opportunity to do more than what it used to be. Older Hmong men and women who do not speak the mainstream language feel helpless because of the lack of education that they do not have to get them good job skills to provide income for their family. They often depend on their children or relatives to help them who are acculturated into the dominant culture.

The impacts of cultural stress among Hmong adolescents have created some rise in school dropouts, violence, death, early marriages, and assimilation. According to the Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association (2010), more Hmong adolescents are dropping out of high school because of the pressure and the lack of parents to help

with their children's schoolwork. Hmong male adolescents are taught to be manly and tough, so asking teachers for help is thought to be a sign of weakness and/or simply that they have never been taught to ask for help. Giving up in school and working to make money is a better option to take than to be faced with humiliation and guilt for not doing the assignment. Sometimes, watching their parents live on welfare and other government assistant encourages them not to go to school or work, without realizing what education has to offer for them, and the hardships of being on welfare in the long run. When a Hmong female adolescent drops out of school, most of the time it is the difficulty of school that she cannot handle, or family issues that arise (like taking care of her parents or small siblings) and prevents her from going to school so she can take care of the family. In the Hmong culture, family comes first no matter what the situation.

With cultural expectations and traditional risk factors with Hmong adolescents, violence is the other way to approach their family and society's demanding curriculum. Hmong youth are exposed to new encounters of assimilations that oftentimes they have difficulties associating between their personality and cultural identity. Many Hmong youth need the tools and skills to help them function in the society at large. For those who do not seek help and advice from others are considered to be "at-risk" because of the risk factors

...living in severely disadvantage economic conditions, experiencing discrimination and prejudice, living in a community surrounded by violence, gang activity, and pressure for gang involvement, experiencing high rates of physical abuse in the home, high rates of school truancy, school incompleteness, and poor academic performance, social and cultural barriers that lead to a lack of nurturing and support for the young people's social parents or other adults in their lives, lack of opportunity for participation in structured/supervised recreational and social activities, and in a number of cases, the negative impact of a depressed parent. (Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association, 2010)

Some Hmong kids feel they do not fit in with their culture and the mainstream culture and look for something that they feel they belong in such as gangs. Kids join gangs for many different reasons. Some want to feel accepted and belong to someone/something, for excitement in getting away with committing criminal acts, to earn money by as selling drugs, robbing cars/houses, peer pressure, protection, and socialization (San Antonio Police Department Youth Crime Service Unit, n.d.). The number of Hmong gangs and their level of criminal activities have increased over the years. Some of this violence includes “homicides, gang rapes, prostitution, home invasions, burglaries, auto thefts, and, most recently, the sale and distribution of illicit drugs” (Straka, 2003, p. 1). As violence increases, so has the number of younger Hmong teens joining in at an earlier age.

The Hmong adolescent stage is difficult for Hmong parents to understand. Hmong parents believe it is not as complicated as it seems because they have gone through the same things. They do not realize the differences in living conditions and standards between Laos and the United States. Emery (2004) concluded,

Since the Hmong are a group-oriented, “shame” culture, parents avoid asking for help when their children skip school, get into trouble, or become involved with a gang. The Hmong believe that if you ask for help, you'll lose “face” (personal honor), because you're admitting that you cannot control your own family. This position creates barriers between the Hmong community and the schools, police, social services, and other agencies. (p. 1)

Parents play a crucial role in many Hmong adolescents' lives. Oftentimes they determine what their child will grow up to be either like them or someone completely opposite of who they are.

As Hmong adolescents continue to fit in and as they see no achievement in what they are establishing, the other escape to avoid all of life's circumstances is death itself. Suicide among the Hmong community can be attributed to historical, cultural and social factors. Hmong adolescents are among the first generation to be raised in America and tend to struggle to balance their American lifestyle with Hmong traditions. Many Hmong parents want their children to grow to follow and respect their Hmong culture and many teens and adolescents feel they are lost. One Hmong girl stated, "in many respects, they [their parents] have raised us as they were raised, but at the same time, they have pushed us toward a life they have never known. They do not understand that there is a gap between two very different cultures" (Ellis, 2002, p. 2). Many feel the older generation does not understand, then they become very depressed and commit suicide.

Another way to escape from all the pressure from their parents is to marry. The Hmong culture poses many unique attributes and cultural beliefs. Hmong adolescents become depressed when they have to adapt to certain beliefs such as marriage. Some Hmong girls marry at age 16, either by choice or from an arranged or forced marriage. These early marriages force the individual to assume adult roles at a very young age. Many get married to escape the pressure their parents put on them that when they marry into a Hmong family, the beliefs of marriage and gender roles still continue. When a Hmong male marries, he becomes the head of his household and is relied upon to make wise decisions.

Most likely, in the next few generation, the Hmong language and culture will be lost. Many Hmong adolescents are assimilating to the new culture and oftentimes do not care about their Hmong roots. It is not the Hmong culture that will make them

successful in life, but the belief that the new culture of learning just English and being accepted into the new culture that will. It is up to the Hmong leaders and parents to encourage and educate their children about the Hmong culture. As Hmong adolescents acculturate and assimilate into the mainstream culture, so will the loss of their Hmong heritage and identity that defines who, what, and where they come from.

The History of the Hmong People

Hmong immigrants are like the story of countless American immigrants and native children and adults who have dropped all of their possessions in their native land to come to America due to war. Who are the Hmong people? In the late 19th century, Hmong people fled from China to escape subordination. The Chinese took over their land and killed their king, Cha Xiong Meng (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). The Hmong lost the war against China and took over their province. The Hmong people are a tribal group who migrated to the mountains of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, and Southern China after they lost the war. They lived in the mountaintops throughout the countries. The Hmong people resettled in those areas and lived there for approximately 150-200 years. It is estimated that the majority of Hmong people lived in China (Pfaff, 1995).

Hmong was the name the people chose to represent them. It was translated to mean “free people.” There have been debates that “Hmong” does not mean free and was given to them because they wanted to be free and not be under control (Thao, 2000). With that, Thao (2000) argued that wanting something and meaning something are two different things; therefore, it does not mean “free.” In China, the Hmong people were

called Miao (Meo), known as “barbarians.” The Chinese viewed the Hmong people very differently. They described the Hmong people in two types: the raw and the cooked (Quincy, 1995). The raw groups were the ones who did not accept Chinese customs and the cooked groups were the ones who assimilated into Chinese customs. The raw group had light skin and European features. Some had red and blond hair as well as blue eyes. Although little is known about what happened to these people, it is foretold that the Hmong people with European traits were often singled out and killed by the Chinese. “In legends of old China told by Laotian Hmong, the distant ancestors of the Hmong are depicted as “white,” with pale skin and light hair. This was before the Chinese crushed a major Hmong uprising and ordered mass executions” (Quincy, 1995, p. 18).

The Hmong people had no formal education. They had no written language. It wasn't until Father F.M Savina, a missionary, came to spread the word of God to the Hmong in Laos and was delighted by saving their souls in the Holy Spirit. He committed himself to learning about their culture and developed a Romanized Hmong script. This was the very first time Hmong people had any written language. In 1959, a man named Shong Lue Yang developed a Pahawh Hmong alphabet.

Shong Lue Yang believed that the alphabet was revealed to him by God, a belief shared by many among the Hmong. Shong Lue Yang and his followers worked incessantly to improve and disseminate his alphabet, and to bring about a revival of Hmong culture. In 1971 he was assassinated by government troops who were worried about his increasing influence. (Ager, 2009, Origin, para. 2-3)

Although there are two sets of Hmong writing styles, the Roman alphabet is the one commonly used.

During the Vietnam War, the CIA recruited the Hmong people as a “secret army.” The army remained a secret to avoid the 1962 Geneva Accords, which “prohibited

foreign intervention in Laos” (Pfaff, 1995, p. 29). General Vang Pao was the general who led the Hmong people by protecting communists from spreading to Southeast Asia. With General Vang Pao’s experience working with Touby Lyfoung, (another Hmong leader who fought for Laos to remain free from communism and fought against the French) recruited the Hmong to fight communism. This war was also like the American Civil War for the Hmong people. The Hmong were given the opportunity to fight for or against communism. More Hmong supported communism. Those who fought against communism were with General Vang Pao. In time of war, brothers killed each other. In exchange for fighting in the war with the Americans, the U.S. would grant the Hmong a place to live since they had no country and if they did not fight, the communists would take over their land. The United States promised the Hmong arms and supplies and

...that in victory or defeat, the Americans would take care of them. This promise committed by the Americans did not constitute a formal treaty and was never written down, yet years later, it would be recalled by countless Hmong who fled Laos as a result of war. (Pfaff, 1995, p. 39)

The Hmong people were recruited also for the skills they had to live and survive in the jungle. The Hmong soldiers were to help rescue American pilots as well as block all supplies headed down on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

When the war ended in 1975, more than 100,000 Hmong came to the U.S. basically as forced political refugees (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong soldiers and civilians died during this war. Once the Americans left, it was fear of revenge from the communists that many Hmong people moved on by foot, crossing the Mekong River to Thailand or by paying Laos and Thai boatman to sail them across, lying to the cross patrol borders, or others airlifted to Lung Tieng, while the others remained still fighting

the communists. Those who remained fighting were in the jungle and today are considered domestic terrorists in Laos. They are the misfortunate ones who are still hunted down and brutally killed to this day.

From 1975 to 1992, more than 100,000 Hmong crossed into Thailand through the Mekong River (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong drowned as they tried to swim across while others paid to be sailed across. Some were killed along the river while trying to escape a few years later when the communists found out how the Hmong were escaping. Many babies and children were fed opium to prevent the communists from finding them. Often, many babies and children overdosed and died. During the escape from communism in Laos and in the refugee camps, Hmong people experienced atrocities such as drowning in the Mekong River, rape, being cheated by border patrols in terms of money, murder, etc. As families disappeared, died and were separated from one another, “Hmong men had commonly taken more than one wife, especially during the war when they adopted wives and children of slain brothers.....” to be with family is to be happy, to be without family is to be lost” (Pfaff, 1995, p. 62). Still 200,000 Hmong remained in Laos.

In 1975, when the Hmong came to the U.S., they had no preparation for American life. Many of them were sponsored by church organizations, and later recruited families from the Thai camps (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). Those who sponsored the Hmong helped them find housing, food, clothing, etc. As Hmong adapted to the U.S., they found it hard and their children were torn between preserving their culture and assimilating to the new mainstream culture. Many children were encouraged

by Hmong parents to speak and learn only English so that they could be successful and survive in the new world, not knowing the cause it could bring in cultural loss.

After-School Programs and Clubs

A good quality after-school program is linked to the significant gains in student achievement. Many schools offer after school programs primarily to raise standardized scores, opportunities for students to join clubs and socialize with other, and have access to centers, sports, organizations, tutoring, and academic support. According to Vandell, Reisner, and Pierce (2007), argued that “high-quality after school programs are linked to significant gains in standardized test scores and work habits as well as reductions in behavioral problems among disadvantaged students” (p. 1). Everyone can make good choices and have healthy lifestyles if given the opportunity.

After-school programs and clubs are ways to promote academic, personal, social and recreational development for all students at all different levels. It is estimated that seven million kids are unsupervised after school, increasing the risk for students to commit vacuous outcomes and negative behaviors (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). It is reported that having an after school program decreases misconduct, gains in work habits, and social skills with peers for students actively involved in after school programs. Oftentimes during the adolescent stages, many students experience and/or go through behavioral problems, such as drug use, and have no feelings of confidence, self-esteem, or/and self-confidence.

Durlak and Weissberg (2007) emphasized the importance for development and how,

Young people benefit when they spend time engaged in structured pursuits that offer opportunities for positive interactions with adults and peers, encouraged them to contribute and take initiative and contain challenging and engaging tasks that help them develop and apply new skills and personal talent (p. 5).

It is also important to offer opportunities for students to suggest clubs and activities and take part in designing the program. Students, as well as parents and staff members, should collaborate together to increase visibility for the school.

Working together is key. Parents are also players in making after school successful for students. Having an after-school program can help parents who work long hours the chance to relax and pick their students later in the day. Parents can also volunteer in after-school programs to enforce the bond between their children and their school. By doing this, they become connected and closer to their children's lives. Research has shown that parents engaged and involved in their children's lives, are most likely going to see growth and success in their children because they played a role in their child's life (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005). Some after-school programs offer family nights and even parent-education night. These can be English courses to help parents of English students learn how to speak English and skills to help them motivate their children in school.

Besides parents, teachers and other school staff members should also work with the community in creating a program that works for the school and the students. Students' needs and interests should be met and clubs should be available to promote self-confidence and self-esteem. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2005) extended their research on the goals of after-school programs. They indicated: "One goal of the after-school program is to actively engage students—to get

them moving while they learn, whether through sports activities or through cultural programs such as dance” (p. 1). Oftentimes after-school programs host many special events for parents and outsiders as well. Schools should allow outsiders to come and join the activities. This is so parents, students, and staff members of the school are connected to the larger realm of the community.

After-school programs have been invested ideally to show results in school scores, participation, attendance, and achievement. Many programs offer competitions with other school, and field trips for students to continue their learning even after school is out. This is to “create a culture of respect at the school, respect for students’ abilities, for the school grounds, for what teachers taught, and for what everyone might accomplish together” (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005, p. 33). One goal of the after-school program is to actively engage students—to get them moving while they learn, whether through sports activities or through cultural programs such as dance (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005).

A strong after-school program offers many opportunities for students. It needs to involve having a strong community that supports the school as well as encouraging family involvement. Programs need to meet the needs of students and complement students’ learning. These programs should tie in with youth development and personal growth. Teachers should be well-trained and be able to handle management and provide safety for all students (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005). After-school programs are designed to help all students have access to working toward achievement, performance, behavior, to benefit them in discovering who they are and the possibilities of what they can become in the future.

Student Leaders with a Focus on Self-Reflection

Leaders are people who can reflect on their own accomplishments and failures and learn about other ways to influence their decisions in striving for success. They work with different people and groups to plan, share, make, and carry out resolutions. Leaders build trust with one another; they influence, motivate, and help others realize their true potential. Leaders must have the capacity to lead others. Dudley Woodland (1994) identified leadership as “serving and empowering people, [building] trust, facilitating cooperation, and explaining the significance of the individual’s role in the common purpose” (p. 96). Leaders are people who come in all different flavors ready to make an impact on student achievement, focus on new directions and set goals. They join groups and oftentimes a group “counts itself successfully in the degree to which it succeeds in attracting a large number of members” (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 192).

Student leaders usually join clubs and organizations because they have a strong desire to make a difference on their school campus and community. Staff and faculty members need to create opportunities for students to learn about leadership to enhance leadership development. Students then become interested in developing leadership skills to promote and contribute to a specific cause. Sacerdote and Best (2003) pointed out that:

Student leadership development is the process of involving students in meaningful ways both in and beyond the classroom. It is providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their talents, skills, and interests while continuing to develop new skills—giving ownership of the program they attend (p. 3).

When students are exposed to the different opportunities to enhance their leadership skills, it deepens their understanding of civilization, allowing them to test their own

notion of leadership. Students are able to self-reflect on their talents, abilities, and knowledge of what they have done and want to accomplish in the future.

When student leaders reflect on their achievements and failures, they realize the potentials they have for battling obstacles and meeting challenges. Oftentimes, when leaders view themselves, they develop a sense of belonging and understanding their true selves. Viewing the self is one of the most important things in the world for an individual to do. It opens up the person and helps them understand who they are, what they like, dislike, and feel about themselves and others (Rosenberg, 1965). It is the self-reflection piece that helps the individual to acknowledge their self-esteem and self-confidence.

As human beings—we possess the heartfelt desire to know ourselves and find meaning in our lives. And we have the capacity to do so. We may be the only creatures in the universe who can reflect on ourselves. We can observe our own thoughts and feelings and recall the actions and events of the past as if observing ourselves in a mirror. The capacity for self-reflection holds the key to our freedom, while at the same time, residing in the roots of our own suffering. (The To Do Institute, n.d.)

If student leaders are able to see their unsuccessful achievements and progress and grow by it, they will succeed in accomplishing that failure. Being a leader has a long-term impact on student leaders experiencing life situations, encountering obstacles and challenges and overcoming it all. The goal of leaders is to reflect on themselves, and make a change for the better, so that they can go into the world and be leaders in their school, family, and community.

Every generation needs leaders. When students move on and see how the world evolves around them, they are often likely to embrace the change and balance humanistic values. Leaders are not just heroes but are built for reaching out to others. “They will remember that to be a leader means, especially, having the opportunity to

make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who permit it” (Woodland, 1994, p. 96). Student leaders want to be leaders because they see something or have experienced something they want to change. When students realize who and what they are at any moment and how they want to be, that is when they have become leaders.

CHAPTER III

ORGANIZATION OF PROJECT

Materials

Chapter III provides an overview of the contents of the appendix. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first is an introduction on how to start a Hmong leadership club followed by the personal tale of self-reflection. The last section includes an accompanied advisor's guide for using the personal tale of self-reflection.

Introduction

As immigrants continue to assimilate to this country, their language and culture are at risk to being lost, if they do not find a way to keep it alive. The Hmong people are an example of many who have lost their land and have immigrated to the U.S. seeking promises and hope for the future. Unfortunately, for some, they have already become too Americanized and have left their heritage behind because of the pressures of wanting to fit in and be successful in this country. As the numbers of immigrants increase, there is more need for Hmong clubs to be created and promoted through the outstanding leadership of Hmong individuals to educate the community about their heritage, by reaching out to the next generation. Many Hmong adolescents are often not in a position to see themselves worthy of higher education and are struggling to balance their daily lives and their culture at the same time.

As the Hmong population increased in California, many found themselves in the company of gangs, of working at a job or farm, failing in school, losing their Hmong heritage, or simply having nowhere to go and nothing to do. The need to belong to their community, school, home, or work, was a necessity the author felt Hmong students could experience by finding their identities through opportunities that a Hmong club could offer, such as good role models, communication, cultural awareness, and leadership.

This need for cultural awareness and greater leadership within the Hmong community led to the creation of this project—to a tale of self-reflection entitled “Washed Away,” intended to help Hmong adolescents in their search for their personal identity. In order to produce a handbook that will guide teachers or advisors to create a Hmong leadership club that focuses on adolescent identity, the current knowledge base was obtained from the review of literature. The knowledge base consisted of an historical overview of adolescent identity, Hmong adolescents, Hmong culture, after-school programs and clubs, and leadership with a focus on self-reflection.

The first guide is a handbook for those who will be the club advisors for the Hmong club. It is a guide to understanding the Hmong people and of what their culture consists. The handbook contains information about how to create an after-school club. The task of selecting, implementing, and instructing lies in the hands of many people. Teachers, parents, advisors, and guardians, are examples of those who provide opportunities for children to see themselves and reflect and grow from experiences. They must be patient, love and take care of these children who are less fortunate and provide opportunities for them to grow.

The purpose of forming a leadership club is to promote the search for personal identity among the Hmong adolescents before they go out into the world and reach out to others to promote cultural awareness and leadership skills to the community. They first need to know who they are and what roles they play in this world. This project was developed for that reason. The handbook will also include a personal tale of self-reflection, “Washed Away,” from a Hmong English teacher who experienced living in two cultures while trying to find how she fit into this world. The book will be primarily used for high school Hmong adolescents. The main purpose is to encourage Hmong adolescents to find their identities.

Along with the handbook and the tale of self-reflection, there follows a few activities that can help the club advisor to associate the tale with each student’s life. The lessons were developed to offer a variety of cultural experiences, and identity issues and resolutions used to fit within that population. The activities can be taken out of sequence and presented by themselves or be combined with other lessons in the handbook and/or used as an example to lead into a broader discussion that the students might need to discuss as a group. It is recommended that each activity be adapted to fit the needs of all individuals and be left to the discretion of the club advisor. Therefore, it is important that the club advisor know his or her audience and their needs and takes the activities to expand them, in a way that will help students to identify for themselves. The activities included are intended to serve as examples of leadership and personal identity.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The goal of this project is to create a handbook that will include a personal tale of self-reflection and the prescribed steps to create a high school leadership club for Hmong students. This will help students as they search for their personal identity. It is the hope of the author that the students will be able to connect and identify with the author's lifestyle, and to use their skills to live harmoniously within their community. This project is designed for teachers, club advisors, researchers, and any adult with a passion to work with Hmong students to find their identity and what roles each plays in this world, to helping them find and understand their true being, to establish leadership skills, to use those skills to become role models in the community, and to examine and pass down their cultural roots to future generations.

In this project, several approaches were established to understand adolescent identity. The review of literature indicates that most immigrants who come to this country hope to embrace and empower their family legacy by following their traditions and culture but, instead, find that their children have already lost the language and have adapted themselves to the new world. Children, often during adolescent years, find themselves confused, abandoned, and feeling lost because their parents do not understand

the pressures and expectations put on them by both cultures. Some children experience cultural and language loss and are unable to develop skills to communicate with their elders. Therefore, they struggle to fit in, because they know they don't quite belong in the new culture and yet, their family's traditional ways do not work for them either. They struggle to find their role at home, in their culture, and the outside world.

The primary purpose of the handbook and the self-reflection tale is to provide Hmong students a chance to understand their heritage while balancing two cultures and for anyone interested in learning the effects of the American society on immigrants and how the Hmong language and culture can be lost. Through self-reflection and the activities provided in the appendix, students are able to search for their true identity, by relating their experiences with the tale of self-reflection. In order to begin a leadership club, it is important that students know who they are and find their place in the world before carrying out the role to become leaders in this world.

Conclusions

Hmong students go through many obstacles in life. Some deal with having few opportunities to learn and practice their culture and language, for there are few trained Hmong professionals who can teach these children. Hmong parents are often illiterate and do not understand the world in which their children live. As much as they want their children to succeed and make themselves worthy in the family and society, parents may often force their children to learn both languages, and when they are unsuccessful in either one, parents and the child feel they have failed. Children who are

growing up and trying to find their way in the world often struggle to please both their family and the rest of society.

A Hmong leadership club is a way to help Hmong students embrace their culture and use their skills to educate the younger Hmong generation so the culture will remain intact for many generations to come. Many Hmong students do not know how to read, write, or the history of their culture, and are interested to learn, but opportunities for them to learn are rare. Some Hmong students want to be leaders but without knowing their own identity, and being fluent in their language, they have no means to help the Hmong population. By presenting meaningful ways of creating a Hmong leadership club and understanding Hmong children and their parents, they will be able to learn the importance of their culture without having to lose anything through the self-reflection tale.

Recommendations

Many Hmong students are losing their ability to read, speak, and write in the Hmong language. Due to the demands of this society, many have acculturated into the American culture, leaving behind their Hmong roots. Because many Hmong parents are illiterate in the Hmong languages, they are also unable to teach their children. Therefore, many grow up with pressure from both cultures. To help these students sustain their language and heritage, an after-school leadership club will be established to help Hmong adolescents in their search of their identity.

As many Hmong are losing their first language, some suffer from a loss of identity—trying to balance both cultures, and trying to understand their sense of

belonging. To help Hmong students with their primary language, it is important to provide challenging opportunities for them and to critically examine themselves as Hmong Americans while embracing their Hmong heritage. With this, they can examine how they are viewed by the dominant culture, how they view themselves, and how they can use their leadership skills to reach out to the younger Hmong generation.

It is very important that the directors of the club understand the background of their target audience and start with the history of their background. Most students can tap into their knowledge of what they know and do not know so that directors can establish a lesson built on identity.

- It is recommended that the self-reflection tale and activities be used at the high school level for they are the future leaders of the next generation.
- It is recommended that the directors use the self-reflectional tale as a starting point to aid Hmong adolescents in search of their identity before building on their leadership skills.
- It is recommended that the activities and self-reflection tale be used in classes like health, English Language Development (ELD), where identity and culture play a role. The tale and activities may be used as samples and starters for topics that may deal with identity, culture, assimilation, acculturation, etc.
- Any teacher, parent, adult, interested in starting a Hmong club should have the passion to work with Hmong students and have some background knowledge of the culture.
- It is recommended for researchers studying the Hmong and/or identities, be able to study the effects of the Hmong club and the impacts of the students using a

pre/post identity rubric, and see if there is any correlation to cultural loss, language loss, etc over a time period.

- Any researchers should also be able to analyze the impact on student motivation and how an after-school club can enhance students in the Hmong community to continue bridging out their Hmong heritage.
- Researchers can also study how after-school clubs motivate students to become leaders in the future (this can be a study of students over a period of time to see if they are leaders in the future).
- Any teacher, parent, or adult helping these students to embrace their Hmong identity should understand that the club is student-driven and should help with community outreach when necessary (e.g., provide resources where the language can be taught academically so that students will not lose their primary language and sense of belonging or find out about events where students can get involved).
- The directors should reach out to the Hmong parents to ensure that parents are continuously aware of the current activities and events held in the club. Directors should also make sure that communication whether written or not, be in Hmong and in English.

This researcher recommends that teachers, parents, and adults interested in creating an after-school leadership club consider the tale as an example of a Hmong female living in the United States and the biases that it may contain. Each Hmong student may or may not have the same relationship as the author in *Washed Away*, but he/she can still distinguish with the needs of language loss, identification, acculturation, assimilation, and simply, being true to oneself.

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APPENDIX A

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong Students



By

Ellen Moua Hamilton

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



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Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Table of Contents

Target

Hmong StudentsPage 51

The Hmong HistoryPage 52

Hmong ParentsPage 55

Facts about Program

Area to servePage 57

Data on Students ServedPage 58

Types of Activities OfferedPage 59

Hours OperatedPage 60

Goals and Mission of Program

Purpose.....Page 61

Goals for having an After-School ProgramPage 62

Funding.....Page 63

DirectorsPage 64

Outreach

Collaboration.....Page 65

Management & Evaluation.....Page 66

Using Self-ReflectionPage 68

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Target: Hmong Students

Before starting an after-school club, it is always important to conduct research about the targeted group in an effort to understand background history, language, needs, and ways to integrate an effective program into the school or outside in the community.

Hmong Students are like many countless immigrants who come to America hoping for change and for a better future. Since most of their parents are illiterate in Hmong and English, these students are always looking for challenges to help them meet the demanding needs of this society and be leaders for their family, culture, and community. An increasing number of Hmong students are becoming more Americanized, and are losing their abilities to speak, read, and write in Hmong. Although the numbers of Hmong people in professional fields are beginning to rise, so has the process of becoming linguistically assimilated into the English-speaking world of the school and society.

After-school programs for Hmong students are ways for them to unite with other members in their culture and share insights with one another. Hmong students need to be challenged to use their leadership skills to embrace their culture for future Hmong generations to come. There is a need for Hmong leaders in areas with high Hmong populations. The culture and language is slowly disappearing. Therefore, in order to keep a culture alive and recruit more leaders in the community, Hmong students are the perfect group for reaching out to their Hmong community and educating others about their culture.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



The Hmong History

Who are the Hmong people? Hmong immigrants are like the story of countless American immigrants and native children and adults who have dropped all of their possessions in their native land to come to America due to war. In the late 19th century, Hmong people fled from China to escape subordination. The Chinese took over their land and killed their king, Cha Xiong Meng (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). The Hmong lost the war against China and took over their province. The Hmong people are a tribal group who migrated to the mountains of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, and Southern China after they lost the war. They lived in the mountaintops throughout those countries. The Hmong people resettled in those areas and lived there for approximately 150-200 years. It is estimated that the majority of Hmong people lived in China (Pfaff, 1995).

"Hmong" was the name the people chose. It was translated to mean "free people." There have been debates that "Hmong" does not mean free and was given to them because they wanted to be a free and not be under control (Thao, 2000). With that, Thao (2000) argued that wanting something and meaning something are two different things; therefore, it does not mean "free." In China, the Hmong people were called Miao (Meo), known as "barbarians." The Chinese viewed the Hmong people very differently. They described the Hmong people in two types: the raw and the cooked (Quincy, 1988). The raw groups were the ones who did not accept Chinese customs and the cooked groups were the ones who assimilated into Chinese customs. The raw group had light skin and European features. Some had red and blond hair as well as blue eyes. Although little is known about what happened to these people, it is foretold that the Hmong people with European traits were often singled out and killed by the Chinese. "In legends of old China told by Laotian Hmong, the distant ancestors of the Hmong are depicted as 'white,' with pale skin and light hair. This was before the Chinese crushed a major Hmong uprising and ordered mass executions" (Quincy, 1988, p. 18).

The Hmong people had no formal education. They had no written language. It wasn't until Father F.M Savina, a missionary, came to spread the word of God to the Hmong in Laos and was delighted by saving their souls in the Holy Spirit. He committed himself to learning about their culture and developed a Romanized

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Hmong script. This was the very first time Hmong people had any written language. In 1959, a man named Shong Lue Yang developed a Pahawh Hmong alphabet.

Shong Lue Yang believed that the alphabet was revealed to him by God, a belief shared by many among the Hmong. Shong Lue Yang and his followers worked incessantly to improve and disseminate his alphabet, and to bring about a revival of Hmong culture. In 1971 he was assassinated by government troops who were worried about his increasing influence. (Omniglot, 2009, p. 1)

Although there are two sets of Hmong writing styles, the Roman alphabet is the one most commonly used.

During the Vietnam War, the CIA recruited the Hmong people for a "secret army." The army remained a secret to avoid the 1962 Geneva Accords, which "prohibited foreign intervention in Laos" ((Pfaff, 1995, p. 29). General Vang Pao led the Hmong people by protecting communists from spreading to Southeast Asia. With General Vang Pao's experience working with Touby Lyfoung (another Hmong leader who fought for Laos to remain free from communism and fought against the French) the Hmong were recruited to fight communism. This war was also like the American Civil War for the Hmong people. The Hmong were given the opportunity to fight for or against communism. More Hmong supported communism. Those who fought against communism were with General Vang Pao. In time of war, brothers killed each other. In exchange for fighting in the war with the Americans, the U.S. would grant the Hmong a place to live since they had no country and if they did not fight, the communists would take over their land. The United States promised the Hmong arms and supplies and

...that in victory or defeat, the Americans would take care of them. This promise committed by the Americans did not constitute a formal treaty and was never written down, yet years later, it would be recalled by countless Hmong who fled Laos as a result of war. (Pfaff, 1995, p. 39)

The Hmong people were recruited also for their survival skills to live in the jungle. The Hmong soldiers were assigned to help rescue American pilots as well as block all supplies headed down on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



When the war ended in 1975, more than 100,000 Hmong came to the U.S. basically as forced political refugees (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong soldiers and civilians died during this war. Once the Americans left, it was feared that the communists would act in revenge so many Hmong people fled on foot crossing the Mekong River to Thailand. Many paid Laos and Thai boatman to sail them across, lied to the border patrols, or others were airlifted to Lung Tieng, while many remained to fight the communists. Those who remained to fight were in the jungle and today are considered domestic terrorists in Laos. They are the misfortunate ones who are still hunted down and brutally killed.

From 1975 to 1992, more than 100,000 Hmong crossed into Thailand through the Mekong River (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong drowned as they tried to swim. Some were killed along the river while trying to escape a few years later when the communists found out how the Hmong were escaping. Many babies and children were fed opium to prevent the communists from finding them. Often, babies and children overdosed and died. During the escape from communism in Laos and in the refugee camps, Hmong people experienced atrocities such as drowning in the Mekong River, rape, murder, being cheated by border patrols in terms of money, etc. As families disappeared, died and were separated from one another,

Hmong men had commonly taken more than one wife, especially during the war when they adopted wives and children of slain brothers...“to be with family is to be happy, to be without family is to be lost.” (Pfaff, 1995, p. 62)

Still, 200,000 Hmong remained in Laos. In 1975, when the Hmong came to the U.S., they had no preparation for American life. Many of them were sponsored by church organizations and later recruited families from the Thai camps (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). Those who sponsored the Hmong helped them find housing, food, clothing, etc. As Hmong adapted to the U.S., they found it hard and their children were torn between preserving their culture and assimilating to the new mainstream culture. Many children were encouraged by Hmong parents to speak and learn only English so that they could be successful and survive in the new world, not knowing it could bring about cultural loss.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Hmong Parents

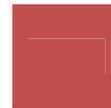
Many Hmong parents are illiterate in Hmong and English, therefore, they are constantly encouraging their children to achieve high goals. Some parents believe that because they are unable to help their child with schoolwork, they do not attend parent conferences, back to school nights, or open houses, because they feel they would not understand what is going on. There are probably no translators available for them, or simply they do not know how to help their child in certain areas. What parents need to understand is that they play a major role in their child's life just by encouraging them in school, and participating in school events whether that's watching them play a sport or by asking what they did in school. Parents need to be doing these things.

Getting parental involvement is typically hard but is possible to first get the parents awareness of what is happening at school before proceeding on with a program. That can be achieved through sending letters (Hmong and English) home, making phone calls (getting a translator to make calls), or setting appointments to meet with them face-to-face. It is always important to have a translator and daycare available for them, or in most cases, have them bring the children along.

To involve parents, it is important that a meeting takes place for all parents of those students interested in the club. It is highly recommended that in order for Hmong parents to be more involved, they must see some growth or proof. Oftentimes, proof means having Hmong leaders in the community come to be guest speakers in encouraging them to be part of their child's life. This allows the parents to want their child to be like the Hmong role models being presented.

Parents want the best for their children but at times are unaware of the meetings. This can be due to a poor connection between the child and parent. Some parents do not believe their child when the child is telling them they are actually staying after school. Often, parents will not let their child stay after school because they assume their child is lying. Therefore, it is important to let parents be aware of club meetings. Some students do not want their parents' involvement, while others take advantage of the system and tell their parents they have things at school and the parents allow them to do it (thinking their child is at school when he/she may not be at school). Remember, that since most parents cannot read or write, they tell their children to translate for them, some may tell their parents to

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



sign permission slips or papers based only on their child's information. For instance, a Hmong boy is ditching school and the school calls home to tell his parents. The child finds an excuse for why he ditched, tells the parent to sign the form when the form is really a lie about him being sick or having a dentist appointment so that he doesn't receive the consequences. Parents cannot read what the child is writing, so it is important to take note of this and to double check with parent's permission if involving their child.

Hmong parents are supporters in their child's life and would like to be more involved. It is our responsibility, as well as theirs, to make sure that we do the best for our children and communicate effectively so that we can understand one another. If we want to see progress and support, beginning at home is key.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Facts about Program: Area(s) to serve

It is important to decide on an organization's name, along with a logo, that will demonstrate its purpose in the community. Contact information is important, so finding a place where the activities or meetings can be held, is crucial. Depending on the size of the group, it is better to find a location that can house double the number of students so that when activities are held, families and guests can participate. Bigger rooms make room for students to spread out and engage in more activities with one another, but smaller rooms give advantages for smaller things.

A school is a perfect place for an after-school club. Students can meet in a teacher's classroom (with consent) and use the outdoors for activities. There, no driving from one destination to another can take place after-school. If it is a school club, the students are already there.

If a location is needed that is not provided at school, there are more obligations to think about such as transportation (not all students drive and some parents are unavailable), room reservation fees, etc. Some parents are more reluctant to send their child to another place. Often parents do not have time to send or retrieve their child from another community center. Therefore, a school site is the best place for holding an after-school leadership club for Hmong students.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Facts about Program: Data on Students Served

The population of Hmong students can vary from school to school depending on where the majority of them live. A club should have at least five members, however, the club would be stronger and more approvable by Hmong parents if the membership is greater. Before starting an after-school club, it is important to take all interested members since anyone has the potential to be a leader; It is up to them to use their potential skills. Not all students may be serious about the club and is the responsibility of the club to set boundaries and rules to decide where they want to go as a whole group and what kind of goals they all want to set together.

Information on your students is also crucial. Some students may want to join the after-school clubs because they are leaders and want to take charge. Others are compelled by peer pressure or how they may benefit. It's also important to know if your students are in sports or what grades they are getting in all their classes. This can explain the absences and help the coordinator prepare for the right time to have club meetings.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Facts about Program: Types of Activities Offered

There are many activities that can take place and be offered. With Hmong students, it is always important to know about their culture and background since many enjoy sharing their heritage with other people. One way is through potlucks. Potlucks can be held where students bring different dishes to share with one another, or shows. Hmong girls love to show their Hmong dancing skills. The leadership club should be based first on exploring who they are, their identity, background, and family history. We cannot assume that all students can do this. A leadership club is based on building things/interests/resources that students have in common, what they do or do not know and their background knowledge. These are indicators to define the needs of the students and what direction the club will take to expand their skills to become leaders in the world.

Once students explore who they are and appreciate one another, a spirit of teamwork may arise. Then begin to build on leadership roles outside of the community by volunteering, given donations, having car washes, all supporting the theme/goal that the club has agreed for the year or to support the club. Training of directors must be performed by personnel before assigning similar positions to student leaders.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Facts about Program: Hours Operated

After-school clubs should be held immediately after school. This is usually after 3pm. It will be up to the coordinator to decide how long the meeting should last. Most meetings are an hour, unless preparing for big events when it can last two or more hours. It is important for teachers to start and end on time and be the last to leave in order to ensure all students have been picked up.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Goals and Mission of Program: Purpose

Club's Goals: A purpose and a mission statement must be developed. For instance, there must be a reason why this club will benefit the students. If the club's first step was to be about leadership and identity, then an example would be:

We need to teach students to ask critical questions regarding the message they receive through schooling. The hidden curriculum pushes values that only benefit the dominant culture. In order to reach out to most Hmong students, an after-school leadership club needs to be created that focuses on identifying Hmong Americans and the roles that they play in the world. With that, the Hmong students can bridge their knowledge and use their leadership skills to embrace the future by reaching out and simply keeping their Hmong roots. Today, there is still a low percentage of Hmong teachers and Hmong students who are proficient in their first language and many who still hold onto old beliefs that their identity is to carry out the old norms of what males and females are born to do (Hmong Cultural Center, 2008). Although there tends to be a loss of culture formatives in some cases, there is also the perception that one can never be more than what he/she is born to be. This leads to the struggle of identity that defines the person's place in this world.

Once the club has taken place, it is important for the director to work with students to identify the goals and mission statement for the year. Each year, new goals will be set. The most important component is that it be inspired by the students. The point is to help students to become leaders. The first step would always involve the coordinator and his or her purpose for reaching out and then the club should be student driven. This can be based on electing officers who would be responsible for directing the rest of the club members as the coordinator facilitates and makes sure all students are working together.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Goals and Mission of Program: Goals for having an After-School Program

After-school goals should be consistent and continually enforced. The hardest part may be to find goals that everyone agrees with and can be established.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Goals and Mission of Program: Funding

If it is an after-school program, funding is not always necessary unless it requires paid employees. Directors are usually teachers at the school site and they would volunteer their time to work with the students at least once a week (or whenever meetings are held). Funding should be used to buy materials for students, but in this case, funding is not necessary.

Students will learn how to raise money. Part of being a leader is learning to work together and organizing fundraisers for a cause. This can be done by raising money for the end of the year trip or helping another organization.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Goals and Mission of Program: Director(s)

Fostering a successful club is not an easy task. Not all students will find the club appealing unless it benefits and entertains them. As long as there is a teacher who facilitates the club as director, then the club can start. The club can have more than one director, including teachers but also student leaders, friends, and other volunteers. Any directors should join the club because they want to train future leaders and have a passion for it. The first priority is to define the vision and goals of the club. It is important that the directors demonstrate that the club is operating in a professional manner. There must be rules and restrictions, as well as rewards. How will these students benefit?

As director, it is also important for him/her to get consent from school officials before starting a club. Directors are responsible for working with students so that not all responsibilities rely on the director. The director is the person who delegates all responsibilities and makes sure students are meeting the needs, the goals, and mission of the club.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Outreach: Collaboration

Collaboration is key for building bridges across the community. It is what brings people together to build and sustain a strong club/organization. Collaboration should first take place between directors and student leaders, and then within the entire club, and then bridge out to the school and community. It is important that student leaders be able to effectively spread the message to the community and be able to express ideas, missions, goals, and resources that are available to the club. Students need to be able to think strategically and inclusively and help each other build confidence in a team-building environment. Students should also be courteous when taking stands in voicing their opinions in the club with one another or ideas of the group, while operating the program effectively.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Outreach: Management and Evaluation

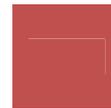
Here are a few questions to ask yourself?

- What do I want to do? What is the purpose of my involvement?
First, figure out what you want the club to accomplish.
- How should I set it up?
Figure out with the students where the club plans on going and set up mission statements and check to see if students support the objectives. If the club does object, the club needs to change it, if no one does, then it needs to be communicated to everyone involved.
- How does this look?
The club is viewed by what others see of it. Therefore, rules must be set.

Management is a form of both art and science. "It is the art of making people more effective than they would have been without you. The science is how you do that. There are four basic pillars: Plan, organize, direct, and monitor" (Reh, 2010, p. 1). Without a plan, the club can fall apart. Figure out the goals: the best way to get there, resources, strengths, weaknesses, target group, etc. Once the plan is set then it needs to be organized. Is the club prepared to follow the plan? Are the directors trained? Are the people involved motivated? Where? If this can be established then, it is time to direct. Direct involves telling students what they need to do. Give them the plan and talk about where you want to go from start to finish. Then make it happen. Monitoring is important. It's important to keep an eye on thing and make sure everything is going according to the plan. If it is not going according to plan, directors must step in and adjust the plan. "Problems will come up. When something is out of sync, you need to a plan to fix, organize the resources to make it work, direct the people who will make it happen, and continue to monitor the effect of the change" (Reh, 2010, p. 2).

The management team first needs to get approval from the school administration and then define the goals and mission for the club. The club needs to interest or benefit students (e.g. club that focuses first on identity and learning

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



about Hmong culture), Hmong language (reading and writing) and focus on leadership. That way, students are maintaining their first language or learning their language while at the same time using their skills to reach out to the Hmong community.

Having student recruit other members to join the club, as well as designating each student leadership roles may let students know they have a commitment to this club and the club is organized to delegate tasks. A leadership club should allow students to reflect and progress on their achievements and failures and collaborate in ways to improve the club as well as themselves.

It is important for the students and directors to determine at the beginning of the year their leadership skills, and re-evaluate those skills at the end of the school year. Reflecting throughout the year helps students, as well as directors, be successful in meeting goals, monitoring changes among behaviors of group members, successful/effective and ineffective activities, weaknesses, strengths, and accomplishments. This helps student understand the moralities of the group and ways to improve. This evaluation helps students gain strength as a unit and may foster a stronger club.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



Self-Reflection

The Self-reflection story, *Washed Away— Story of a First Generation Hmong Woman in America*, by Ellen Hamilton, is the story of the author's experience growing up in America, being Hmong, and trying to meet the expectations of the American culture. It is the story of cultural assimilation, forgetting about her cultural roots, finding hope, and understanding her identity as a Hmong American.

Ellen realized that more Hmong students were losing the culture and language and were unable to describe the significance of their origin. Hmong adolescents face difficult times when pressure is put on them by families to decide who they will become, what directions their lives will take, and what cultures they will carry on to the next generation. Our Hmong students today are in need of role models that can help them in their search for personal identity—that is, learning to be Hmong and succeeding in the world and being able to critically examine the world.

A goal as an educator is to help others see who they are without having to lose anything; That is, the culture, language, tradition, religion, and finding their place as Hmong-Americans. It is important for students to become critical about the information (explicit or implicit) gained at school.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



When club is established, director should begin with:

- An identity survey
 1. What is the significance of your name?
 2. Describe yourself.
 3. What do you know about the Hmong people?
 4. Can you speak, read, and write in Hmong?
 5. What is significant about being Hmong?
 6. What are some Hmong rules?
 7. Are you proud to be Hmong?
 8. Have you experienced a time where it was difficult to place yourself in one culture versus another?
 9. Have you ever been judged because you are Hmong? If so, how?
 10. What more do you want to know about the Hmong people, culture, tradition, religion, etc?
- Go over the identity survey and start writing things on the board, separating each question or response. This process should help to learn more about each person's cultural roots. Talk about the Hmong culture. Have students share their experiences. Show video clips regarding Hmong history.
- Ask students to keep a journal or log. Take another club day to read the story. Only read the sections of "Growing Up in America."
 1. Have students take notes and write down questions or insights they have.
 2. Have students share what they have written.

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



- Another day to read the story. Only read the sections of "Health Care Access "
 1. Have students take notes and write down questions or insights they have.
 2. Have students share their thoughts (some might share some of their related experiences with the author).
- Another day to read the story. Only read the sections of "Breaking the Rules "

(Repeat same steps)
- Another day to read the story. Only read the sections of "Failures "

(Repeat same steps)
- Another day to read the story. Only read the sections of "Successes "
 1. Have students take notes and write down questions or insights they have.
 2. Have students share their thoughts (some might share some of their related experiences with the author).
 3. As director, how can they use this story to relate with themselves? How does identity play in with this story? What are similarities and differences between them and the author?
 4. What can we do with each other to embrace the Hmong culture and who we are?
 5. What are some leadership skills that we have embraced at home, at school, and outside?

Creating a High School Leadership Club for Hmong



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APPENDIX B

Washed Away Story of a First Generation Hmong Woman in America



By Ellen Moua Hamilton

Dedication:

Lord, with you, Anything is Possible

For the Hmong People

*For my Parents (Chou Teng Moua & Ma Yang Moua) who told me to never forget
who I am*

*My family, friends, students, and my husband, who supported me through
everything*

Table of Contents

History of the Hmong People 76

Growing Up in America

My Family 80

Schooling 81

Poverty 85

Health Care Access

Translation 89

Religion 91

Breaking the Rules

Males vs. Females 93

Name Calling 96

Curfew 97

Dating 98

My Failures

Parents’ Dreams 100

Interracial Marriage 100

My Successes

Who am I? 104

History of the Hmong people:

Who are the Hmong people? Hmong immigrants are like the story of countless American immigrants and native children and adults who left everything behind to escape the aftermath of war to come to America. In the late 19th century, Hmong people fled from China to escape subordination. The Chinese took over their land and killed their king, Cha Xiong Meng (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). The Hmong lost the war against China and took over their province. The Hmong people are a tribal group who migrated to the mountains of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, and Southern China after they lost the war. They lived in the mountaintops throughout those countries. The Hmong people resettled in those areas and lived there for 150-200 years. It is estimated that the majority of Hmong people lived in China (Pfaff, 1995).

“Hmong” was the name the people chose. It was translated to mean “free people.” There have been debates that “Hmong” does not mean free and was given to them because they wanted to be a free and not be under control (Thao, 2000). With that, Thao (2000) argued that wanting and meaning something are two different things. “Hmong” does not mean “free.” In China, the Hmong people were called Miao (Meo), known as “barbarians.” The Chinese viewed the Hmong people very differently. They described the Hmong people in two types: the raw and the cooked (Quincy, 1988). The raw groups were the ones who did not accept Chinese customs and the cooked groups were the ones who assimilated into Chinese customs. The raw group had light skin and European features. Some had red or blond hair and blue eyes. Although little is known about what

happened to these people, it is foretold that the Hmong people with European traits were often singled out and killed by the Chinese. “In legends of old China told by Laotian Hmong, the distant ancestors of the Hmong are depicted as ‘white,’ with pale skin and light hair. This was before the Chinese crushed a major Hmong uprising and ordered mass executions” (Quincy, 1988, p. 18).

The Hmong people had no formal education. They had no written language. Until Father F.M Savina, a missionary, came to spread the word of God to the Hmong in Laos that he committed himself to learning about their culture and developed a Romanized Hmong script. This was the very first time the Hmong people had any written language. In 1959, a man named Shong Lue Yang developed a Pahawh Hmong alphabet.

Shong Lue Yang believed that the alphabet was revealed to him by God, a belief shared by many of the Hmong. Shong Lue Yang and his followers worked incessantly to improve and disseminate his alphabet and to bring about a revival of Hmong culture. In 1971, he was assassinated by government troops who were worried about his increasing influence. (Omniglot, 2009, p. 1)

Although there are two sets of Hmong writing styles, the Roman alphabet is the one commonly used.

During the Vietnam War, the CIA recruited the Hmong people as a “secret army.” The army remained a secret to avoid the 1962 Geneva Accords, which “prohibited foreign intervention in Laos” ((Pfaff, 1995, p. 29). General Vang Pao was the man responsible for protecting the Hmong people from the spread of Communism to

Southeast Asia. With General Vang Pao's experience working with Touby Lyfoung, (another Hmong leader who fought for Laos to remain free from communism and fought against the French) recruited the Hmong to fight communism. This war was also like the American Civil War for the Hmong people. The Hmong were given the opportunity to fight for or against communism. More Hmong supported communism. Those who fought against communism were with General Vang Pao. In time of war, brothers killed each other. In exchange for fighting in the war with the Americans, the U.S. would grant the Hmong a place to live since they had no country and if they did not fight, the communists would take over their land. The United States promised the Hmong arms and supplies and ...that in victory or defeat, the Americans would take care of them. This promise by the Americans did not constitute a formal treaty and was never written down, yet years later, it would be recalled by countless Hmong who fled Laos as a result of war. (Pfaff, 1995, p. 39)

The Hmong people were recruited also for the skills they had to live and survive in the jungle. The Hmong soldiers were to help rescue American pilots as well as block all supplies headed down on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

When the war ended in 1975, more than 100,000 Hmong came to the U.S. basically as forced political refugees (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong soldiers and civilians died during this war. Once the Americans left, it was fear of revenge from the communists that many Hmong people moved on by foot, crossing the Mekong River to Thailand or by paying Laos and Thai boatman to sail them across, lying to the border

patrols, or others airlifted to Lung Tieng, while the others remained to fight the communists. Those who remained to fight were in the jungle and today are considered domestic terrorists in Laos. They are the misfortunate ones who are still today hunted down and brutally killed.

From 1975 to 1992, more than 100,000 Hmong crossed into Thailand through the Mekong River (Pfaff, 1995). Many Hmong drowned as they tried to swim across while others paid to be sailed across. Some were killed along the river while trying to escape a few years later when the communists found out how the Hmong were escaping. Many babies and children were fed opium to prevent the communists from finding them. As a result, many overdosed and died. During the escape from communism in Laos and in the refugee camps, many of the Hmong people experienced atrocities such as drowning in the Mekong River, rape, murder, being cheated by the border patrol in terms of money, etc. As families disappeared, died and were separated from one another,

Hmong men had commonly taken more than one wife, especially during the war when they adopted wives and children of slain brothers.....”to be with family is to be happy, to be without family is to be lost.” (Pfaff, 1995, p. 62)

Still 200,000 Hmong remained in Laos.

In 1975, when the Hmong came to the U.S., they had no preparation for American life. Many of them were sponsored by church organizations and later recruited families from the Thai camps (Moua, personal communication, June 1, 2009). Those who sponsored the Hmong helped them find housing, food, clothing, etc. As the Hmong

adapted to the U.S., they found it hard and their children were torn between preserving their culture and assimilating to the new mainstream culture. Many children were encouraged by Hmong parents to speak and learn only English so that they could be successful and survive in the new world, not knowing the loss of Hmong culture it would cause.

Growing up in America:

My Family

My name is Ellen Moua (Hamilton). I entered the world on Wednesday, October 19, 1983. I was the ninth child, and the last daughter of my parents. I have four brothers and five-sisters— one infant sister passed away in Laos. My parents came to the U.S. in 1978 with my siblings, Chee, Vue, Youa, Chao, and Mao. During the Vietnam War, my family was recruited by my uncle and arrived and lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

After living in Pennsylvania for 16 months, my sister Shing was born and my family moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. There, my sister Jane was born. After a year in Wisconsin, my family moved to Merced, California. There, I was born along with my baby brother Tony. I have no memories of Merced, but in six years later, my family moved to Oroville, California. I am not as close to my older siblings simply because some of them are about 10 years older than I am and there was such a large gap of years before the rest of us were born. My oldest sister Chee, had her oldest son, Jamie in 1980, and although he is older than me, I am his aunt. This is a typical occurrence in the Hmong culture. My older siblings had a different life from those of us born in America and the ones born here in the U.S. are closer to each other and vice versa with those born in Laos.

I don't know what my older siblings had to experience having been raised in the Hmong culture, escaping and surviving the Vietnam War, and then coming here to America. I know their childhoods were extremely different from mine. I got a chance to hear from my brother Vue about how hard it was for him to grow up in America and his life in Laos. He told me that during the war, he could never forget the sounds of bombs, and the dead bodies lying around. He remembers a head rolling down to where he was as he tried to hide from falling bombs. I couldn't imagine experiencing what they went through. I know they had a harder time than those of us born in the U.S., and I thank my older siblings for helping my parents provide better opportunities for us who are younger.

Schooling

My earliest memories are of school. I started kindergarten, but I was held back for another year because I wasn't grasping the English language. I was shy and never participated in class. Because my parents had no formal education to read or write in Hmong, I had to rely on my siblings and myself to learn how to read, write, and speak in Hmong and English.

When I was held back in kindergarten, I felt really ashamed. I thought I was the dumbest child ever. I did everything I could in class and still I did not pass. I remember my parents telling me I was stupid for not passing kindergarten. In our culture, name-calling, and cussing is a typical behavior. Parents call their kids names in order to discipline them. We know it is wrong to call our children names, but I attribute their behavior to a lack of education. Other children, as well as my siblings made fun of me.

When we moved to Chico from Oroville, I started kindergarten for the second time. As a little girl, I enjoyed school. I rode the bus to Rosedale Elementary School; however, Rosedale was at maximum enrollment, so I was sent to Sierra View Elementary. My typical kindergarten class started at 8 o'clock, with a snack break, a lunch break, and was finished by noon. I was jealous of other students. I used to steal their books and their lunches. My parents never packed a lunch for me because when school ended for me at noon, I rode the bus to Rosedale Elementary, where I was supposed to get lunch. My parents couldn't afford to provide lunch for me. Ten of us lived in a 4-bedroom apartment house, relied on government assistance. I would occasionally lie to my teacher that I needed a restroom break when actually, I went to steal snacks and books from my classmates' cubbies. I was jealous of my classmates and wanted to have books and learn to read. It was hard to watch other kids eat their food in their colorful lunch boxes while I sat down with nothing. I was just a kid and didn't know any better. When I asked my parents to pack a lunch for me, I knew their answer would be: "We have no money and you already have free lunch at Rosedale Elementary School."

One day at school, I was caught stealing my friend's cookies. The teacher made me apologize to her and I did. I never stole another cookie from her and she offered to share her cookies with me. Kindergarten class focused a lot on coloring and tracing, but I wanted to learn how to read and write.

Sometimes when I was sent to Rosedale Elementary School to eat my free hot lunch, I would wait for my parents to pick me up and sometimes, they would forget. Most of the time, I didn't eat my food and would take it home when my parents came for me. That was because I always saved the main course for my little brother, Tony, and I would eat the fruits and drink the milk. I saved my burrito or taco and cookie for my brother. Even though I wanted to eat it so badly, I gave it to him. As a little girl, I honestly don't know why I gave it to him. I know that my parents constantly reminded us to love each other and I guess that was my way of showing him my love. Sometimes I watched him eat it like he'd never eaten one before. Often, he would come with my parents to pick me up and wait for his treat from his big sister.

When my parents didn't arrive, I would cry. The yard duty personnel would take me to the office where they would talk to me or have me color while I waited for my parents. I would cry because I thought they have forgotten about me.

My parents had a small farm shared with other church members. They were always at the farm and couldn't always pick me up so I rode to Rosedale because it was closer to my house. I used to make up a lot of stories. I rode the bus every day with a girl named Sarah, and, as we passed by this beautiful white house on the Esplanade, I would tell her that it was my house. She believed me. Every day, I would play the girl who lived in the white house on Esplanade, which had a big pool, and I was serious about it. I enjoyed making up stories about my wonderful life simply because it was my dream to be accepted by my peers.

I went to Neal Dow Elementary School for first, second, and third grades. I was known as the best drawer in first grade. One day while I was in second grade, my teacher, Mrs. O'Connell, took me to her house for dinner. I thought it was the nicest thing to give me an opportunity to experience what dinner was like in a home with a dining table. I had such a huge family that we could never fit everyone at the table, so everyone ate at their own time or sat in the living room. In school, I was in speech and ESL (English as a Second Language) to build my English skills. However, I was out of ESL when I was the third grade. I was considered proficient in English. A new school, called Emma Wilson Elementary was built after I passed third grade.

We actually lived closer to Emma Wilson but my brother and I weren't accepted to attend. My older brother George took my little brother and me to apply at the new school. We were so excited because our friends from Neal Dow would be going there. Unfortunately, they didn't accept us, because they claimed they had no services to help us. My brother explained to them that we were bilingual and proficient but they still wouldn't take us. My little brother and I were out of ELD and still they made assumptions about us. Was it because we were of a different color or race? I remember being asked by my friends at school if I was going to attend there. I told them no and didn't understand why. That summer, I cried because I knew I would never see my friends again. I was starting to understand the meaning of prejudice.

I attended Rosedale Elementary School for fourth grade and enjoyed it. I was on the honor roll and learned how to be the fastest reader in class. I was glad I wasn't

accepted at the other school. Why would I want to go there? After all, they rejected us. I made new friends and eventually my parents found another rental house. We moved to a five-bedroom house and I went to Hooker Oak School. I loved Hooker Oak and my teacher Linda Metzger. I was an honor student and learned so much. I always wanted to learn and improve my English. My teacher was very supportive of me. I guess that's why I wanted to be a teacher.

I had a 4.0 G.P.A in junior high but it fell to 3.5 in high school. High school was okay. I was in the Butte College Connection Program during my senior year where I went to Butte College and took classes. I earned college credits and was a year ahead in school. Schooling has always been a positive experience for me. I believe without the education and the wonderful people surrounding me, I may not have made it to where I am today.

Poverty

Who knows what poverty is when you're growing up. My family lived on government assistance all their lives. When my parents came to the United States, they had no confidence that they would be able to succeed in this world; therefore, they put pressure on us children. Growing up, I never understood the term "poor." I was happy and felt I had everything I needed until I started going to school and saw how unfortunate I was by observing my classmates and what they had. I started understanding how little I had and was ashamed of being poor. So I made up stories about my parents being teachers and how wealthy we were. Of course, the teachers knew the truth, and allowed me to continue telling these tales of saying it is okay to be poor.

All through high school, whenever asked how many brothers and sisters I had, I lied and said I had two older sisters and a younger brother. Ashamed of the family size and being on welfare and MediCal, when asked about my parent's occupation, I would say my parents were farmers and owned a rice field. Although my parents were farmers, that was the only occupation they knew because agriculture and farming was their traditional way of living. However, my parents didn't own a farm. We lived on government assistance and farming was another way of providing food for us. We used to sell produce at the Farmer's Market in town. After school, we had to help our parents wash vegetables and get them ready for Saturday's market. It was a nightmare washing carrots and scrubbing them to make them shine. The whole family would be out in the parking area of our apartments washing vegetables. It was such hard work for my parents and us children.

In all the homes we lived in, we always qualified for Section 8 housing, a program that subsidizes those who afford to pay the full rent. Many times, the homes were projects or were located in a ghetto area of town. My family has always been good at taking care of homes but we were often rejected because we were on Section 8. Finding a decent place in the city with Section 8 was rare. I never invited friends over to my house growing up because our house was small and crowded. I was often invited to my friends' houses but was never allowed to go to them. My parents were always afraid someone might molest or kidnaped us. When we were invited to friends' birthday

parties, we never went because we didn't have money to buy presents. I longed for the day when I could go to one.

During the holidays, especially Christmas, my parents received donations from the Jesus Center, and as kids, it meant so much to receive gifts from people. Sometimes, presents were never enough for all of us kids, and we were forced to share each others' gifts. I remember one time at school one of my friends had a Cabbage Patch doll, and I asked her how she got it. She told me that one day she sat down under their family Christmas tree and asked Santa for a Cabbage Patch doll, and it arrived on Christmas day. She told me to do the same and I did. I never received that Cabbage Patch Doll. I was angry at Santa Claus. I was only seven years old.

That following Christmas was probably the most memorable one. My family could not afford a Christmas tree so my sisters and I got some butcher paper from school and my sister-in-law, Eme, helped us created a paper Christmas tree. We drew pictures, cut them out and stuck them on the paper Christmas tree. We all decided that we would buy everyone a Christmas present with the money our parents gave us for helping at the Farmer's Market. Although we didn't have much, there was a Korean gift shop that had all the gifts for little money. I brought everyone a Christmas present that year and received one from each of my sisters and sister-in-law. That year, I understood what Christmas was all about— the gift of giving and being happy wherever you are with the people you love.

When growing up, McDonald's was probably my favorite fast food restaurant. It was a treat to go to McDonald's and receive the kid's meal and the awesome toy it came along with. As a child, once in a long time, we got to go to McDonald's and would give a dollar to my older siblings to buy us each a Big Mac. My parents didn't speak English so my older siblings would help us younger ones. It was such a treat and very exciting to our whole family to have a chance to eat out.

Everything that my older sisters got, I wanted too. I always used to copy my sisters. When my parents bought them some Hmong Chinese clothes, I wanted them too. Even though we had no money, I would cry and whine about it until I got whatever it was. What a pain I was! When my sisters got anything because they were older than me, I whined about it. My parents used to tell me, "One day, you'll have your chance," but for me, my chance was right there at that time. My parents bought each of my sisters a bike one year and I was to share with them. For once, I didn't mind. I had to learn I couldn't always get what I wanted.

One day, I saw a boy roller skating around the street and I told my parents I wanted roller skates. My parents said we had no money, and for the first time, I cried and cried and told myself that when I grew up, I would never be poor. A week later, I remember shopping at a thrift store. For my family, the Goodwill, Salvation Army, and trash digging for furniture and clothes was a treat. It was the excitement about getting new things. We used to find all kinds of glass and bottles and recycled them for money. It

was also the excitement of getting money after turning in our cans. It didn't matter if it was only 50 cents, it was exciting.

That week, I went to the thrift store near our house and saw a pair of roller skates. They were five dollars and were women's size eight. I was only size 4 and was in fourth grade at the time. I bought the skates with my farmer's market money and rushed home to try them on. All week I would learn how to skate as I carried a long stick to help me from falling. Then when I got a chance to watch ice-skating on television, I pretended I was one of them. Using my imagination, I pretended I was a world-class ice princess or Miss Universe. It was always a dream. Without those dreams, I wouldn't have had anything to believe in. Not all dreams come true, but it was for many of them that have helped me to make some of them happen.

Healthcare Access

Translation

Going to the hospital with my parents was always difficult. We always went to clinics or hospitals where they treated us differently because we were on MediCal. I didn't like going because we were discriminated against because MediCal did not cover some things, or we had to wait for hours while everyone else was helped before us. I went to the dentist for the first time in junior high and discovered I had terrible teeth and the cavities to prove it. I was able to get prescription glasses in the eighth grade, and discovered I was near-sighted.

Some older Hmong people are naïve or in denial of their symptoms and often wait until their symptoms get worse before getting medical attention. When translating a

medical problem for our parents or relatives, we have to be careful about cultural taboos that doctors are unaware of. When I was nine years old, I had to translate for my aunt about getting a papsmear. Of course, that was extremely difficult for the doctors and me. I was just a child, and could not understand what they were telling me because of the language barrier and lack of understanding medical terminology. At that time, I had a feeling they were talking about my auntie's private parts because of their gestures. In my culture, I had to be careful how I translated it because it could end up calling her a bad name by accident. It was extremely difficult because I was limited in Hmong and English. I struggled. Instead, I was criticized by my parents, at how poor my translation was.

Certain words are not available in Hmong and one word might take an entire paragraph to describe and translate. It is like giving the definition of what it means. I was losing the Hmong language and learning English at the same time, which made it much more difficult to translate. My parents used to yell at us about how dumb we were for going to school and not being able to comprehend anything. What was the point of going to school? Our parents could not understand how hard it was for us, because they didn't have to do it. When I confronted my parents with this, they shot back at me about how hard it had been for them to get me to where I was. I understood where they were coming from, but it was their lack of education and my education that taught me it was wrong for them to call me dumb.

Religion

Hmong people practice a spiritual calling, known as “shamanism.” According to the Every Culture.com (2010),

The Hmong otherworld is closely modeled on the Chinese otherworld, which represents an inversion of the classical Chinese bureaucracy. In former times, it is believed, humans and spirits could meet and talk with one another. Now that the material world of light and the spiritual world of darkness have become separated, particular techniques of communication with the otherworld are required. These techniques form the basis of Hmong religion, and are divided into domestic worship and shamanism.

I am a Christian. I was raised in Christianity. My maternal grandfather converted to Christianity and made sure his children continued to practice the religion. My father had no living parents, so when he married my mom, he became a Christian.

When I was younger, I often dreamt about my fairytale prince and how wonderful it would be to be in love forever. As a married woman now, I can see how I was trying to fill that empty hole of loneliness with love and other things. I tried to find an explanation for my loneliness and sometimes just avoided it by thinking life was useless.

Growing up, we never missed church on Sunday. Going to church meant getting to play on the playground and getting free candies. I remember one day at church, our Sunday school teacher gave us each a piece of candy before we went outside to play. One

of the girls left her candy on the table and while no one was looking, I took it and I ate it. Boy, was it good!

It was time to come back inside our room after our break, and suddenly we heard a girl crying, “Someone took my candy.” Our Sunday school teacher asked if anyone knew where it was. No one knew that I took it, and I didn’t say a word. I watched the girl cry and our Sunday school teacher gave her another piece to quiet her down. I sat down in my seat and the candy that I had stolen suddenly didn’t taste so good. I knew stealing was something wrong against God and I knew I had to be forgiven for it. My parents told me that God was always watching us and he knew our every move. I felt guilty and embarrassed and I knew what I had to do.

When our class was over, I went to my Sunday school teacher and told her I took the girl’s candy. She asked me why I didn’t say anything. I explained everything to her. She told me to apologize but first I had to pray and ask God for forgiveness and for Him to save me. So I did—not understanding its full meaning.

As I grew into my teenage years, I was still attending church and Christian camps. I began to understand what that earlier prayer meant. I believed what the Bible said that God had always loved me and sent his only son, Jesus, to pay for all my sins and to die for me. Jesus was willing to die so I could be forgiven and have life!

I now understood the real meaning of love. Oh, how He loves me! I was falling in love with Him. It was that time that I had found my Prince of Peace and I told God I was willing to give my life to follow and serve Him. I asked God to use me and He

allowed me to be part of the worship team at church. I also asked Him to use me for His kingdom.

I started participating in lots of church activities. I really liked and enjoyed my friends in this church. Later, my parents moved to a different church and I chose to attend less often. Years went by. I got married and began teaching at the local high school. I was still very aware of God in my heart and would read my Bible at home, but I knew I needed to get back to church more regularly for my personal growth and to encourage others. Two of my students were excited about their relationship with God and told me about their church. And would you believe this? A woman sitting in the hot tub at the sports club invited me to her church, which was the same church mentioned by the students!

So one day I visited this church and it felt like home. I am back into a closer and more wonderful relationship with God as I attend Bible studies and let God use me to encourage others. When I was younger, God planted in my heart the first seeds of spiritual life, but He has remained faithful to help that seed grow. God's love has filled my heart and He is my Prince of Peace. Best of all, I will live with him in heaven forever and ever!

Breaking the Rules

Male vs. Female

One of the struggles that Hmong adolescents have is the gender roles they have within the family structure. The gender roles for Hmong individuals living in the U.S. differ from those in Thailand. Having a big family, and more sons, is valued and gains

prestige for the family. The Thai Hmong males are the head of the household, and if the father is deceased, the uncle from the father's side becomes the authoritative figure. Men are considered more valuable than women because of the ability to bring labor to the family. They are also the ones who chop the wood, hunt, farm, and are allowed to attend school. The Thai Hmong females are the nurturers of the family and more likely to practice herbal medicine. Their role is to take care of the household, sew, farm, and sometimes they are denied schooling, since their top priority is to stay home to help their parents before they marry. The first menstrual cycle of the girl indicates womanhood and she is ready to be married and have children. Marriage can take different forms such as by kidnapping (where the guy just takes the girl), forced by parents, and through an engagement by both sets of parents.

The gender roles for Hmong adolescents living in the U.S. are quite similar to Thai Hmongs, however, there are still some differences. Again, males are still head of the household, but women are more accepted in providing for the family outside of the home. There is less pressure for a woman to get married at a younger age and to have children. The women have more freedom and are encouraged to attend school and find a job. They are often more motivated than Hmong males to continue in their education because of the stigma placed upon females and the opportunities offered to women in American Society. Older Hmong men and women who do not speak English feel helpless because of the lack of education, necessary to achieve the good job skills to provide income for their

family. They often depend on their children or relatives who are acculturated into the American culture to help them.

My sisters and I were forced to get up at 6 a.m. in the morning to help my parents cook and clean while my brothers slept. We were always expected to learn the roles of the Hmong females so that we would be marriageable. As we got older and became more acculturated, we started breaking our family rules. We would sleep in until we felt like it, and were called “lazy, awful daughters,” from my mother who felt she had failed in training us. In reality, the boys in our family were free to do whatever they wanted to do.

Hmong parties involved watching all the men eat first while the women and children ate last. When we hopped in the line with our fathers or with the men, we were showing others that our parents did not teach us proper manners, so we waited until the men were finished.

My parents were so strict with us girls that sometimes we lied that we were going to a school event in order to go out to dinner with our friends or to school dances. Dancing in our family was prohibited. Our lies were created in order to explore the real world that we were prohibited from experiencing because we were females. I don't think it was until I was 21 and in college when my parents decided to accept that I was changing and allowed me to stay out late. Even before I was married, I had to call home and be questioned about my reasons for coming home. Sometimes when I was out late studying, I was lectured for being late and my parents assumed I was out with guys. Our traditions, still based on pride, were that if one of the children became pregnant, the

parents would lose face and that was so much worse than trying to understand the children's needs. I have never blamed my parents for their strict ways with us. I thank them for what they did because I understand that they are from another generation. Even if they were educated, it would be hard for them to understand the ways of our lives because they only understand life from their perspective.

Name Calling

Many traditional Hmong family call their children awful names such as “dumb, ugly, etc,” or compares their children to other children and why their children are not like the other children. They say that their children cannot be as good as the others, because of how the parents' own experiences have influenced them. In the Hmong culture, it is okay for our parents to call us names but definitely not vice versa. We respect our elders. Our parents were not taught that name-calling was wrong, but rather word disciplinary action to change a child's behavior. For many of us with traditional parents, we know it didn't change our behavior but, rather, inhibited our behavior. Parents generally will not call their child a name when guests are present, but will take their lectures elsewhere to enforce discipline. Often, when a child has disobeyed or rebelled against their parents, the parents say whatever is on their mind to the child.

When our parents call us the female dog in Hmong, it doesn't sound as harsh as it does in English. To be honest, if these kids were brought up being called that from their parents, it's almost as if the word has no hurtful meaning. It's mostly what we all say when we are angry at our children, although we wouldn't call our children that to their

face because we know how hurtful it is. For example, when I was younger, my mom used to compare me with other children and said why I couldn't be smart like them. Of course that hurt my feelings, but that's what my parent's intent was: to hurt me so I would change for the better. Did I change? Of course not, it's just their way of disciplining us. I confronted my mother and father when I was older to ask why they called me names and their response was simply, because they loved me. It is their way of showing how much they love us by disciplining us to be better people. I hope not to call my children names like my parents did, but I realize that my parents and I grew up under different circumstances. Although I am educated, I understand their manner of discipline and their perspective of why they did what they did and how I can make it better for my children. I'm not saying my parents didn't raise me right, but their way of disciplining us, with name-calling, is one I hope not to use with my children.

Curfew

One of the hardest things for me growing up was being restricted from going certain places. As mentioned earlier, I sometimes lied to my parents about doing school stuff as a way to experience what the real world was all about. When I was younger, my curfew had always been 5p.m, even during school events. Sometimes, I had to have proof from teachers to show my parents that I was doing something academic. Males have no curfew; only when they are very young. As I got older, I realized some Hmong parents were more accepting and lenient of their children's desire to accept the American culture.

Dating

In my family, the girls always kept their dating a secret from our parents. For the boys, it was always okay for them to date. My sisters and I did not date until we were in high school. When we dated, our parents automatically assumed the guy was probably going to be the one we marry because that's what Hmong girls are brought up to do: be wonderful spouses and baby factories. Fortunately, we sisters had a different plan for that. We all dated different people for different reasons to find the right person. Our mother was always asking questions about who we dated and would usually put our guy down. She always had something to say about the guy we were dating and then she would tell my dad and he would get into it and force us not to see them.

Parental pressure and threats of separating the couples are probably why so many Hmong couples get married at such a young age. My sisters and I all knew we wanted to finish school before we got married and three of us did just that.

My oldest sister was forced to marry her husband a long time ago, and they seem happy. I know parents always think they know what is best for their children but it's not always true. One time my parents forced my other sister to marry this doctor. Like many typical parents who dream about having a doctor in the family, my parents pressured her. My sister was very brave and simply said no. She didn't care what my parents thought and that hurt my parents' feelings. They thought it was simply because my sister did not love them, but, in fact, it was simply that she did not love the doctor. My sister had a boyfriend at that time when she was pressured to marry this doctor and she continued to

see her boyfriend. My parents did the same thing with my other sister and with me. When my parents saw how they could not force any of us marry someone of their choice, they simply let this arranged marriage idea go and allowed us to choose our partners.

When my husband and I were dating, my parents had a hard time accepting us being together. My husband is Caucasian. It was New Year's Eve 2006 and Joshua and I came to my home while I was still living with my parents. Joshua usually slept downstairs and I slept upstairs in my bed; however, that night I don't know how it happened, but the next morning my dad found Joshua sleeping in my bed. Nothing happened, but my dad didn't speak to me. When he tried to, I was afraid he would yell at me so I took off when he came after me. All he wanted to do was talk to me. I will never forget the look on his face as I drove off. I was afraid and yet I knew I hurt him so badly. I will never forget the sad face as he watched his baby girl run off. When I came home, he didn't speak to me because I was such a hard-headed person. He spoke to my brother, Vue, and asked him to speak to me. My dad trusted me so much and he didn't think I would let Joshua into my bed. I knew that my dad knew we did nothing, it was just that you don't bring any guy to your room and sleep with them. I explained that I didn't even know he was there because we had been at a long New Year's Eve party and were both exhausted. I knew that Joshua and I loved each other and we would be together. We knew we had to fix what we did wrong and that was by getting married. No one forced us to get married, and we knew we wanted to be together. We both wanted to get married and

knew we were each other's soul mate. We were both graduating from college and decided it was the right time.

My Failures?

My Parents' Dream

We were often reminded by our parents of the opportunities available to us in this country and how we had a better life than they did. Our parents always encouraged us to continue to strive for excellence. Their way of serving us was to make sure that we had a house over our heads and food to eat. I felt like a failure growing by not living the life they wanted me to live in. They wanted the dreams they didn't realize for themselves to come true for us. As I got older, my parents realized that I may not choose the career they wanted for me and they have accepted me anyway because they realized we have to live our own lives to find out who we are. I know I didn't fail them and I know they are proud of me in so many ways.

Interracial Marriage

I never would have thought I would marry a Caucasian man. I thought I would marry a Hmong man. I dated a few Hmong guys. They all turned out to be wrong for me. My older brother, Chao, was married to a Caucasian woman and they had a baby. Right after my niece, Leah, was born, they were divorced. When I met my husband, Joshua, we were really good friends. We met at the Teriyaki House. He used to come there all the time and we started hanging out. He was a friend I could turn to when I had boyfriend problems. The funny thing is, I wasn't initially attracted to him.

Three years later, when we were both 22, Joshua and I decided to take our friendship to a higher level. It was very difficult for my parents to accept Joshua as my boyfriend rather than just my friend, because they were afraid he would divorce too. My parents were against an interracial marriage and wanted me to find a Hmong man because, in the Hmong culture, when the man and the woman have disagreements and want a divorce, the relatives from both sides will try to keep them together. Divorce was known to be ugly and if you were a divorcee, the chance of getting married again into the Hmong tribe was rare.

Our culture also has a dowry that the man's family must pay for when he marries the woman. It's her bride price. It was really hard for Joshua to understand the culture but he put all his heart and soul into trying to prove to my parents that he was suitable for me. Even after convincing Joshua we shouldn't be together, he stood his ground to prove his love was true. Joshua worked long hours, and so did I, to come up with the dowry price, which was \$5,000. We were both college students at that time. Typically because I was the youngest girl, my dowry price would have been \$7000 or more.

At times, it was very hard to explain to Joshua about my family history. It was hard for me to tell him that I grew up in a poor family. I was afraid that Joshua and his family would not want to marry me because we were poor and my family had lived on government assistance for years. I was embarrassed to tell Joshua the truth about my family and what my parents did for a living. When I met his wonderful parents, and they asked what my parents did for a living, I would say they had retired from farming. Part of

it was true. We lived in an apartment at the time when Joshua and I were dating, and it was always hard for me to explain my family culture and where I came from. Even with his background, being from a middle-class family, I was accepted for who I was and where I came from.

When my parents saw that Joshua and I were serious, they finally accepted him. We had three weddings. The first was on February 2, 2007, a Hmong ceremony where he paid my bride price and both sets of parents met for the first time. Then on June 30th 2007, we had our civil ceremony. A year later on June 14, 2008, we finally had our wedding with our friends and family. This was the only wedding where everyone came together.

I can never forget the awful stress for planning my last wedding. Every time I think about my father at my wedding, I still cry about it. In the American culture, the father and bride are supposed to have a father and daughter dance at the wedding reception. Joshua and his mother were planning on dancing and dancing in my culture was prohibited. If my father and I didn't dance, it seemed quite awkward. That whole year while I planned my wedding, I constantly asked my father to dance with me at the wedding and he constantly said "no." What he did not know was how much it meant to me. He didn't know it crushed my heart every time he said no. I explained it was traditional in the American culture and that if he danced with me, it was also a sign he was accepting Joshua and his culture. I even asked my older siblings to convince my father and he still said no.

On the day of our wedding, I surprised my father. Our DJ announced it was the father and daughter dance and I grabbed my father hands and I said, “Dad, it’s time for you and me to dance.” I knew my dad would not say no in front of our guest. As he followed me to the dance floor, I placed his hands where they should be and we started dancing to the song, “Cinderella,” by Steven Curtis Chapman. I immediately started crying as my father and I started dancing. He danced with me...his little girl. I was the last daughter to get marry in the family, and the first and last he ever danced with. He made me smile and suddenly that once broken heart was healed.

Ever since I have been married, my parents seem to love Joshua more and more. I think that’s because in the American culture, they’re always hugging each other, unlike in our culture, and my parents see how much he loves them. Sometimes, even after long hours of being with my parents, I think they love him more than me and that doesn’t bother me at all. His parents and family are amazing, and they have always been accepting since the first time Joshua and I were friends. I know how hard interracial marriages can be, but if both people love each other with all their hearts, they can make it work.

My Successes

As a child, I struggled in school but was able to develop the abilities to keep up with my peers. During my childhood, I was either on the honor roll or keeping up my good grades. I was able to finish high school, go to college for four years and received

two bachelor degrees—one in Arts and one in Science (thanks to all the winter intercession and summer school that I never missed).

I graduated from college at the age of 22 and when I turned 23, I got married, started my teaching career, and bought my first house. I also just bought my second home. I have no children yet, but anything is possible. I am an English Language Development teacher at a wonderful school with annoying yet splendid, children. Due to my background in being an English learner, I feel I can relate to my students and help them find their true self.

My dream has always been to be able to write about my life so that others can understand a little more about me, and the lives of other Hmong children. I believe being mixed into two different cultures, having a different religion from my culture's, being poor, being called names, having strict parents, have led me to grow strong and be who I am today. Without those experiences, I don't think I would have understood the world or myself. I don't regret anything. Everything has a purpose and has brought me to where I am today.

Who am I?

I am a Hmong American woman, who is also a Christian. I am a teacher. I am completely obsessive and compulsive about being clean, a Type A person, who loves to save money, someone who speaks her mind fiercely, yet is very apologetic, and loves and cares for others. I am someone who dislikes my emotional self. I am always trying to

become a better person and to build my self-esteem. I am someone who is devoted to my family, my friends, and my work.

As a child, I lied to fit in and be accepted into this world. The world that I did not understand showed me that in order to be accepted, I needed to be wealthy, happy, and truthful. I didn't learn or appreciate the true meaning of these words until I grew up. I don't regret any of my life experiences. They only taught me to be a better person. I learned that it is okay to be who I am.

I am like many countless immigrants who endure every minute in search and hopes of a better future. I found myself in later years and denied my true being because I didn't understand my culture or appreciate and accept its history.

I am proud to be Hmong. I no longer feel washed away, but instead, buoyant by who I am and what I have to offer this world. I am proud to finally be able to tell my life story and not hide what is in my heart. Whether "Hmong" really means "free" or not, it doesn't matter. Therefore, I am free!

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