

Learning More about Hmong Students

By Christopher Thao Vang

Today's classroom is a rainbow of cultures, traditions, and languages. The culture of students and their parents has significant impact on how students perform academically. I am very excited to present some information about the Hmong culture that will help K-12 teachers understand their Hmong students and provide them with very best education.

Brief History of Hmong

The ethnic roots of the Hmong are in northern China, near Siberia. The Hmong lived in China for a few thousand years before migrating a few hundred years ago to Southeast Asia in search of freedom and economic opportunity. The Hmong are known as freedom fighters and hard working individuals.

After the fall of Laos to the communism in 1975, the Hmong people once again emigrated to the west for safe haven. Today, Hmong can be found in China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, France, Australia, Canada, and the United

States. Of the 7.2 million Hmong, 250,000 live in the U.S. In the U.S., California has the second largest Hmong population (approximately 38,000), and Minnesota has the largest (approximately 42,000).

Hmong Family Traditions and Customs

Hmong like to live close to one another in areas where relatives and in-laws are within easy reach. The extended family is of major importance in everyday life. Connections to family and clan are extremely important. Divorce is a severe disruption of the ties between two families and two clans and is therefore very uncommon.

Unmarried children, regardless of age for females, live with their parents until they form new families. To a Hmong child, "family," means great grandparents, grandparents, parents, siblings, in-laws, relatives, clans, and community. Multigenerational homes are common among the Hmong in America because of socio-economic difficulties, especially for uneducated parents who have unstable incomes and limited resources.

Life events in the Hmong culture are times for families to gather. Occasions such as engagement and wedding

are major events. At every family event, all parties are welcome to participate. A Hmong proverb says, "Only the house is crowded; the people are not." This means that the home is open to all family members. Schools need to be aware of the importance of family ties to their Hmong students. When events such as graduations, picnics, social gatherings, and reception dinners exclude some relatives because of limited capacity, Hmong students and parents do not understand.

In the event of death, Hmong have elaborate mourning customs and rituals. All funeral and graveside services are reserved for immediate family members, clan leaders, and elders. Family members of the deceased may wear black costumes with red cloth bands wrapped around the head to signify a loss in the family. Most family members are depressed. The funeral may take a few days, the exact time depending on the family's economic status and the mourning may continue for a few weeks. Hmong children will miss at least two weeks of school to pay respect to the deceased, especially in the event of a parent's death.

In some cases, family reorganization will take place immediately following the death of a parent in order to help family members cope with the loss. Traditionally, the surviving female

*Christopher Thao Vang is
an assistant professor
in the Department of Teacher Education
of the College of Education
at California State University, Stanislaus,
Turlock, California.*

parent often marries a close relative right away. On the contrary, the surviving male parent can marry a new wife of other clans. Today, however, the living parent has the option to remain single or to find a mate outside the family circle.

In the Hmong culture, there is no hugging, kissing, or direct eye contact in public. Eye contact may be construed as an insult or a sign of disrespect. Male and female Hmong differ in the ways they greet one another. Hmong men greet one another warmly with handshakes. Hmong women, however, are culturally reserved and shy. They greet one another with warm and friendly words. They are not prohibited from shaking hands, but traditionally they do not take a man's hand because the Hmong want to avoid any possibility of infidelity. Most Hmong customs regarding contact between males and females are well preserved and intact today.

However, the Hmong have learned new customs from other cultures. Today Hmong males and females shake hands with their peers and other Americans. Older Hmong may still feel that a Hmong woman who shakes hands or hugs others is breaking an important tradition. Therefore, teachers should be cautious when making contact with Hmong parents. Mothers may not be ready for a handshake or a hug. Fathers may greet teachers with warm handshakes and introduce themselves as "mister."

Hmong males are considered the breadwinners and the leaders in the community. As in any patriarchal society, a father has primary power and authority to run the family, and he makes most of the decisions for all family members (Vang, 1999). Women are highly valued in the family circle, but customarily, mothers yield to fathers in making decisions for their children and the family. Teachers should encourage mothers to take part in some of the decision making because they have rights and responsibilities related to their children. However, in some families, the mothers may be the breadwinners and are in charge of family social welfare since the fathers may have low socio-economic status.

In most Hmong families, the father is the contact person for the family. Teachers should ask to speak with the father when contacting parents at home to discuss a child's education or schedule a parent/teacher conference. Most of the time, the father is busy helping relatives or handling community responsibilities,

and he may not be able to attend school activities. The mother is likely to be the one to be at the parent/teacher conference or school activity. The father may come without the mother if the mother is busy with family responsibilities. Teachers should encourage both parents to attend parent/teacher conferences. They may need to provide Hmong paraprofessionals to translate for non-English speaking Hmong parents.

Most Hmong parents are very protective of their children and show a great deal of concern for their education and social welfare. Boys and girls have different domestic chores: girls do dishes and clean the house; boys cut wood, mow the lawn, and repair the house. Female students generally must abide by family curfews and they are expected to be home right after school. Male students are not bound by the same curfews, but they usually are expected to be home right after school also.

Teachers should ask for parental permission if a student is to stay after school for extra academic activities. Otherwise, parents see their coming home late as an indication of loitering at school without a purposeful activity or possible gang involvement. In order to advocate for their academic needs, teachers may need to help Hmong students build trust with their parents by educating parents about school programs and activities.

Most Hmong are gracious and congenial. Hospitality and visiting are central to everyday life, and showing love, concern, care, compassion, and understanding are crucial. Spending time with others is highly respected.

Hmong view time differently from other Americans. Most other Americans expect promptness, but for Hmong, time is not an issue. They feel that accomplishing a task is more important than conserving time. A Hmong proverb says, "If you come, then you are not in a hurry; if you are in a hurry, then you would not come." The meaning is simply that everyone should be patient.

Today, music and folk dancing are parts of festive celebrations. Hmong youth enjoy both traditional songs and Western singing. Family gatherings are times for celebrating happiness, success, and family blessings. Food and drinks are always the central of these events. The height of living is in sharing food, drink, and family blessings with one another.

According to tradition, Hmong are gracious hosts and never neglect to feed

guests in their homes. As newcomers, Hmong are learning the new culture and are delighted when people of other cultures give them attention and respect. They are also eager to extend their hospitality and compassion to their new friends.

Hmong Dialects

In the past Hmong had several dialects such as White Hmong, Green Hmong, Blue Hmong, Black Hmong, northern accent, and southern accent. These dialects were spoken by distinctive groups of Hmong people in different parts of the world. However, today the two major dialects of Hmong spoken in Southeast Asia and in the West are White Hmong and Blue Hmong. The terms "White Hmong and Blue Hmong" refer to linguistic dialects, not the colors of skin.

Most Hmong people somewhat look alike in physical characteristics, but their spoken dialects could differentiate them as a White Hmong or Blue Hmong. In the old days, Hmong elders differentiated Hmong ethnic groups by recognizing the colors of their traditional costumes (clothes) as a representative symbol of a spoken dialect. The term "White Hmong" represents a derivative symbol of the white skirt costumes wore by a Hmong group and the term "Blue Hmong" represents the blue skirt costumes wore by another Hmong group. Other Hmong dialects have become extinct and endanger since the White Hmong and Blue Hmong are the dominant dialects and are spoken by most contemporary Hmong people.

Both White and Blue Hmong dialects are spoken favorably and equally; however, most people prefer to use White Hmong as a means of communication because of its simplicity, as compared to Blue Hmong's tones, intonations, pronunciations, inflections, and written styles. Remember that this does not imply that White Hmong is better than Blue Hmong; it is just a public perception of the majority.

Though the dialects are different, culturally Hmong have many things in common such as ancestor worship, believing in animism, practicing shamanism, funeral services, and marriage customs. When using a Hmong paraprofessional to interpret for Hmong parents and Hmong students, schoolteachers should consider having a match dialect because White Hmong students and White Hmong parents may not com-

pletely understand Blue Hmong, or perhaps Blue Hmong students and Blue Hmong parents may not completely understand White Hmong.

Ironically, the interpreter may be linguistically fluent in neither White Hmong nor Blue Hmong. To convey the information correctly, teachers should ask Hmong students and Hmong parents about their ethnic dialect spoken at home in order to use appropriate paraprofessionals for interpreting and translation.

Most schools have made a simple mistake by listing a Hmong student's home language as "Hmong." Actually, the home language should be listed as White Hmong or Blue Hmong; this is extremely crucial for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Hmong students since oral language assessment in primary language plays a vital role in academic placement. In addition, today, the White Hmong and Blue Hmong still share most cultural values but may have different belief systems.

Hmong Religions and Holidays

The two major religions in the Hmong community are ancestor worship and Christianity. The majority of Hmong still believe in animism and ancestor worship, and the rest believe in Christianity. The major holiday for people of both religions is the Hmong New Year, which is celebrated from December 26th to January 1st. The New Year celebration represents Hmong pride, freedom, romance, civilization, solidarity, and dignity.

The first few days of the New Year's celebration are set aside, or reserved, as a special time. During this reservation period, Hmong children are often admonished by adults not to spend money because during this time all animal products and family property must be marked for ownership. Departed souls and spirits are welcomed home to stay with the family. All families are busy welcoming guests from all over the world, and families remain together to enjoy the family blessings. Children come home to help parents prepare meals for entertaining relatives.

The New Year's celebration is unique and the most important event for every Hmong. According to tradition, all Hmong must wear their newest and most valuable costumes and jewelry, not to show off, but to demonstrate pride in the family and the Hmong culture.

Hmong also celebrate American

holidays: birthdays, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Independence Day, and Christmas. Hmong children are caught between two cultures. Some are Americanized; others are traditional. Teachers should be aware that cross-cultural education is extremely important for Hmong Children, and the classroom curriculum should foster positive attitudes toward all people.

Hmong Attitudes Toward Education

The U.S. Hmong immigrants have a great respect for public education as a means to a better life and socio-economic stability. In fact, most Hmong high school students are more concerned about future stability than present life situations (Vang, 2000). Like other minorities, Hmong value education because many have experienced mistreatment and lack of opportunity. Teachers should be aware that almost all Hmong adults grew up bilingual and speak two or more languages despite their limited amount of schooling.

First-generation Hmong immigrants usually prefer to speak Hmong in the home, but they may not read or write Hmong since few were able to attend school prior to coming to the U.S. Today a small number of Hmong adults are able to read and write comfortably in the majority language; most are still struggling to learn English. Teachers should know that many Hmong immigrants are not able to communicate easily with school staff because they lack sufficient English skills. Schools need to have Hmong paraprofessionals available for interpreting.

Hmong parents respect teachers highly as authority figures. However, some have had bad experiences with teachers who punished them while they were students in other countries. They may think that a parent/teacher conference is a disciplinary action. Teachers need to communicate clearly with parents that the conference is focused on the academic needs and success of the student. Parents need to understand that the purpose of the meeting is to provide meaningful information about their child's academic performance in order to enhance the child's learning experience.

Teachers may or may not see some differences between first- and second-generation Hmong immigrants. Although the Hmong have been living in the U.S. for at least 27 years, Western education

is still relatively new to most Hmong families because of its intricacies. This suggests that teachers, parents, and school staff should work together as a three-way support system to prevent students from dropping out of school.

Assessing Hmong Students

Teachers and paraprofessionals should pay close attention when assessing Hmong students for classification or placement in language programs. As mentioned earlier, a Hmong student may speak White Hmong or Blue Hmong; school personnel need to specify the dialect spoken at home in order to correctly assess the child's primary language proficiency.

Hmong paraprofessionals should consider having a match dialect during the assessment process. Students should be assessed carefully without making assumptions based on perceptions that Hmong students lack ability because of schooling experience. Placement based on perceived ability is an incorrect assessment. Many Hmong students were born in the U.S. and have been exposed to the English language prior to kindergarten. New arrivals could have enrolled in temporary education programs in the refugee camps in Thailand prior to coming to the U.S. This suggests that these students may not have mastered English, but they probably have acquired some basic academic skills. Tracking them in one particular designation for a long time could be a lack of appropriate assessment since most Hmong children were assessed orally and visually.

Both foreign-born and native-born Hmong parents may still lack English skills; however, some younger Hmong parents were very americanized and speak English fluently. Some of today's younger Hmong parents were raised in the U.S. Teachers should be aware that some Hmong children were fluent in English prior to enrolling in kindergarten because some educated Hmong parents could send their children to nursery school.

Teachers and bilingual paraprofessionals should treat each student individually because they come from different home settings. In other words, Hmong children are as socio-economically diverse as other students in the educational system. Assessing their academic needs should not be a visual calculation based on the color of skin, eye, and hair.

Hmong Views on Bilingual Education

Lee and Shin (1996) found that most Hmong parents support bilingual education because they feel it results in greater development of knowledge and it facilitates the learning of various subjects. Hmong parents tend to favor bilingual immersion programs versus pullout programs and two-way immersion programs. In their experiences in other countries, they found that children immersed in another language learn that language rapidly. They feel that most children will swim rather than sink when immersed in an English-speaking classroom because they will acquire language skills faster than those in a two-way immersion model.

However, the U.S. bilingual education programs are quite different from bilingual programs in other countries, like in Japan, Canada, Thailand, and France. Hmong parents also realize that the goal of bilingual education programs is to enable a bilingual student to become English proficient; therefore, they want their children to learn English. Nevertheless, many Hmong adults fear that their children will lose their Hmong language and heritage when they are acculturated into the mainstream culture.

Knowing the Differences of Cultures

Today's teachers are working in a pluralistic society. Every teacher and every student in the classroom comes from a distinct culture and tradition. Each brings traditions, belief systems, and customs to the school environment. Minority students comprise the fastest growing segment in the educational system. No doubt that teachers have a difficult profession, since they have to work with a diverse student population

and deal with human behavior. At the same time, teachers may not speak other languages and do not understand all cultures; however, teaching is a profession that provides great benefits to society.

Schools and teachers have traditionally been the gateway to the mainstream culture. Teachers should know that children are not born with a culture and that culture is manifested in a variety of ways. Children learn their cultures as they live. The list below compares the values of two different types of cultures that affect the parent-child relationship. Teachers should consider these differences when teaching students from different ethnic backgrounds. Understanding and respecting the values of different cultures will help children and their parents in the acculturation process (see table below featuring Eastern and Western views).

Like other minority students, Hmong children in America are in an adaptation and conflict process. Some Hmong students are very skillful and have very little problem learning English, and others struggle to learn and are tempted to drop out. It is difficult to generalize why some are successful and others are not. However, it is clear that language and culture play a significant role in how these students fare in school.

Lessow-Hurley (2000) observed that language is inextricably bound with culture and cultural factors are important influences on educational outcomes for all students. Keep in mind that teachers and parents are both accountable for a child's academic success because success requires quality instruction, sensible academic standards, meaningful assessment, and parental support.

Characteristics of Hmong Students

Hmong students may have complex academic problems similar to those of other minority students in the American educational system, and is therefore, understanding their special needs could have significant impact on improving academic performance. Here are some tips for teachers who are working with struggling Hmong students:

1. Hmong students have a tendency not to ask for help and are likely to not voice academic problems because they feel that teachers, as authority figures, should not be bothered. They also feel that their actions could be considered intrusive and disrespectful. Asking for help can be humiliating.

2. Most Hmong students are culturally reserved and sometimes appear to be passive-obedient and compliant. They just wanted to go along with the flow because they are shy and want to show respect to others.

3. Some Hmong students isolate themselves socially and academically from other student groups. It is important that Hmong students learn how to develop dependent and independent study skills needed for academic success.

4. Some Hmong students may deny they have difficulties in school because they do not like making mistakes; failure brings shame and humiliation to their families. Hmong students should know that mistakes and failure are part of a learning process. These inadequacies may easily depress feelings and put Hmong students in a fight-or-flight mindset.

5. Some Hmong students may appear academically competent but may not be competent cognitively or may be poorly prepared (Vang, 2000). Oral proficiency in English may not be sufficient for academic success.

6. Many Hmong students lack academic background and academic support at home since most parents are illiterate in English and in Hmong. Students may feel helpless and hopeless, and school may become unimportant to them. Academic barriers can lead to school drop out.

7. Some Hmong students are unmotivated toward school activities because they do not have support boosting their efforts and self-esteem. They do not see themselves as heroes, but loners.

Eastern View

1. Primacy of relationship (extension)
2. Authoritarian orientation (controls)
3. Extended family structure
4. Emphasis on maturity
5. Interdependence (status in group)
6. Compliance (no contempt)
7. Conformity (emulation)
8. Cooperation
9. Harmony
10. Security

Western View

1. Primacy of individual
2. Democratic orientation
3. Nuclear family structure
4. Emphasis on youth
5. Independence
6. Assertiveness
7. Non-conformity
8. Competition (based on ability)
9. Conflict
10. Freedom

(Adopted from: *The Psycho educational Model* (Chinese cultural section) by SERN, California, 1985, and planning for Diversity, Vicente & Associates, C. 1990)

8. Many Hmong students struggle in English, math, science, and social studies classes because they lack study skills, language capabilities, and academic support. Their reluctance to articulate these problems to teachers could be due to that teachers will consider them less intelligent (Vang, 1999).

9. Many Hmong students rarely express their feelings, thoughts, opinions, and concerns in class because they have learned not to question adults and authority figures.

10. Only a few Hmong students are assertive enough to advocate for their needs; however, many of them are silent students and sit in the back of the class. Silent students often fall through the cracks, failing to acquire academic skills.

What Teachers Can Do To Help Hmong Students

In Hmong culture, parents think of a teacher as an authority figure that understands student needs, knows what would help students learn to excel academically, and understands how to teach students to become a productive individual. Here are some tips for teachers who wish to help Hmong students succeed:

1. Teachers should encourage Hmong students to ask questions in class or allow them the opportunity to have an individual conference with the teacher after class to go over schoolwork.

2. Teachers should check for understanding and allow wait-time for questions and clarification prior to testing. Academic-engaged time is extremely important for learning.

3. Teachers should blend Hmong students with other students to help

them acquire English skills and should also use cooperative learning strategy to help them excel academically.

4. Teachers may coach Hmong students with praises, explaining that mistakes and failure are part of a learning process.

5. Teachers should pay close attention to students' reading comprehension and writing skills when assessing them, avoiding perceived ability.

6. Teachers should try to hook Hmong students up with academic resources on site to assist them in coping with academic barriers and personal stress as early as possible.

7. Teachers should mentor Hmong students, guiding them through the critical period of their education. Teachers should also try to get parents and friends involved as much as possible.

8. Teachers should provide a window of opportunity for working with struggling Hmong students and should use instructional approaches that accommodate different learning and thinking styles to meet all their students' needs.

9. Teachers should be aware that Hmong students may be a bit slower in responding to a question or trying to make a point and should encourage them to speak up and share their perspectives in class.

10. Teachers should pay close attention to at-risk Hmong students or low achievers and should reach out to silent students and those who sit in the back of the class.

As all teachers are aware, education is a growth process that involves the mind, body, and relationships with people and the surrounding environment. A different ethnic background

should not be a barrier to equal opportunity, quality education, equity of instruction, and academic success. Language and cultural factors may play a role in how Hmong students fare in school, but to help them excel these factors must not be allowed to disguise academic needs and potential.

This article rekindles my past experience as being a Hmong student in the American educational system. Fifteen years ago, I was a high school Hmong student. My teachers helped me through the darkest moments of my education. Teachers are the candles that light the way for their students to become academically successful. I owe my teachers every bit of my education and want to thank them all for their professional dedication, their concern for their students, and their ability to foster growth in their students. Without them I would not be who I am today.

References

- Lee, B., & Shin, F. (1996, spring). Hmong parents' perceptions of bilingual education. *CAAPAE Newsletter*, 10-15.
- Lessow-Hurley, J. (2000). *The foundation of dual language instruction*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Smalley, W.A., Vang, C. K., & Yang, G. Y. (1999). *Mother of Writing: The origin and development of a Hmong Messianic Script*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- SERN, "Chinese culture," *The Psycho-educational Model*, California, 1985.
- Vang, A.T. (1999). Hmong American students: Challenges and opportunities. *Asian American Education*. London, UK: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Vang, C.T. (2000). Histories and academic profiles of Hmong secondary students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis and California State University, Fresno.
- Vincente & Associate (1990). *Planning for Diversity*. Davis, CA.

