

# Hmong Teachers

## Life Experiences and Teaching Perspectives

*Pao Lor*

### Introduction

There have been many areas researched relating to minority teachers and their teaching experience. For example, minority teacher recruitment (Bachler, et al, 2003; Futrell, 1999; Villegas & Davis, 2007), the status of minority teachers (Assessment of Diversity, 2004), the impact minority teachers have on student achievement (Dilworth & Ardila-Rey, 2004), and how standardized testing impacts pre-service minority teacher retention and attrition (Brown, 2005) have been studied. Alternative certification processes for minority teachers have also been examined (Dieker, 2003; Peterson, 2009; Shen, 1998). Additionally, life experiences of minority teachers (Foster, 1990) and how their life experiences can impact student achievement and school climate have been considered as well (Ayalon, 2004; Brand, 2004; Eubanks, 1999).

One of the emerging groups of ethnic minority teachers within the broader Asian and Pacific Islander category that has not been thoroughly looked at is the Hmong. In the last three decades, the number of Hmong teachers in the United States has steadily increased. An excellent example that reflects this change is the number of Hmong teachers currently practicing in the state of Wisconsin.

Since the 1980s, when the Hmong began settling in Wisconsin, the number of Hmong teachers has grown from one teacher in the early 1980s to over one hundred in 2006 (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008). This trend is consistent with national statistics reported on minority teachers. There was an increase from 8.9% in 1987-88 to 16.3% in 2003-2004 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004).

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Being relatively new to the teaching landscape, there are few studies conducted to date on Hmong teachers. Those conducted have focused primarily on the pre-service phase, federally-funded teacher training, and the retention and attrition of Hmong pre-service teachers (McClain-Ruelle & Xiong, 2005; Rochon, Root, Rudawski, & Taylor, 2003). This previous research has not addressed practicing Hmong teachers or documented their life and teaching experiences. Therefore, this exploratory study looks at the life experiences and teaching practices of five Hmong teachers practicing in Wisconsin.

### Background of Hmong Teachers

The Hmong, a tribal group from Laos, came to the U.S. in the 1970s, as refugees from the Vietnam War. The ancestors of Hmong Americans are believed to have left China in the late 1800s and then settled in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma (Yang, 2009). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Hmong were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to aide in the fight against communism in Southeast Asia, specifically the Secret War of Laos (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). Their mission was covert and clandestine, which involved rescuing American pilots and sabotaging the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

After the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam and Southeast Asian in 1975, many Hmong were left behind in difficult situations. Many fled Laos to refugee camps in Thailand, eventually relocating to third countries such as the U.S., Australia, France, and Germany. Most Hmong Americans reside in Minnesota, California, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina.

Over recent decades, Hmong Americans have made substantial progress in education, employment, and other areas of development (Hmong Census, 2003). Initially, the transition was challenging. It included overcoming cultural, language,

and racial differences, all of which lead to generational clashes, lack of academic achievement, and increases in violence and criminal activities among Hmong youths. Since then, steady improvements have been made in education, business, politics, and cultural adjustments and settlements. One area of change has been the increase in the number of Hmong educators in many communities and at various educational levels and grades.

Coming from a preliterate society in Southeast Asia, formal education is a new experience for many Hmong. The first formal school was established in a Hmong village in 1939 and the first Hmong high school class graduated in 1942. In 1972, the first Hmong earned his doctorate in France. With the increase in educational opportunities, many Hmong became teachers in Laos and in refugee camps in Thailand during the 1970 to 1990 period.

Teacher preparation in Laos involves different requirements than in the U.S. According to Yang (personal communication, March 2009) the pre-1975 teacher training of Laos was very basic and included:

- ◆ Two year post-Junior High School pedagogical training. Graduates of this level will be teachers of K-3.
- ◆ Four year post-Junior High School pedagogical training. Graduates of this level will be teachers of grades 4 to 6.
- ◆ Six year post-Junior High School or Two Year post-High School pedagogical training. Graduates of this level will be teachers of grades 7 to 12.

Because Laos is a former French colony, its educational system is similar to that of France. The pre-1975 K-12 school involves a 6-5-3 system. Its teaching delivery is basically in a lecture format, relying on rote memorization and heavily based on textbooks with very little discussion and hands-on practice (Yang).

The pattern of Hmong joining the teaching profession continued after they

arrived and settled in the U.S., but to become a teacher in the U.S. posed challenges. Foremost, the U.S. educational system is different, and teaching preparation programs require vastly different standards and rigor. To earn a teaching license in the state of Wisconsin, a person needs to complete several phases:

1. A teacher candidate must be admitted to an accredited education program by passing several professional tests including PRAXIS I and II;
2. The candidate must complete a prescribed educational program including the latest P.I. 34 regulations;
3. The candidate must successfully complete student teaching, and;
4. The candidate is then awarded a teaching license from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

The total population of teachers in Wisconsin is almost 60,000 (Department of Public Instruction, 2008). Table 1 shows the number of Wisconsin teachers, aggregated by race. Asian and Pacific Islander teachers have historically been the smallest group, reaching a high number of 365 in 2008. Of those 365 Asian teachers, approximately 100 are Hmong (Department of Public Instruction, 2006), constituting about 27% of the Asian and Pacific Islander category.

Table 2 shows a specific breakdown of the 89 Hmong practicing teachers during the 2006-2007 academic school year. Some notable characteristics included:

**Table 1: Teaching Ethnicity in Wisconsin**

	Asian, Pacific Islander			Black, not Hispanic			Hispanic		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
2002	180.84	69.41	250.25	1,199.82	435.25	1,635.07	424.75	164.64	589.39
2003	202.88	76.4	279.28	1,313.30	468.5	1,781.80	453.88	183.4	637.28
2004	223.74	81.16	304.9	1,177.04	413.12	1,590.16	464.76	177.93	642.69
2005	240.67	72.2	312.87	1,164.63	397.03	1,561.66	486.96	190.62	677.58
2006	243.57	81.3	324.87	1,053.22	367.28	1,420.5	499.62	189.42	689.04
2007	260.07	80.02	340.09	1,023.22	352.44	1,375.66	509.95	189.59	699.54
2008	279.39	85.81	365.2	991.17	348.01	1,339.18	525.22	186.22	711.44

Source: Department of Public Instruction, 2008

- ◆ 24 school districts with Hmong teachers, the largest being Milwaukee.
- ◆ The most experienced Hmong teacher has 26 years of service.
- ◆ The highest paid Hmong teacher is paid \$59,799.
- ◆ The lowest paid Hmong teacher is paid \$29,058.
- ◆ The largest number of licensures are in elementary (35) and English as a second language (36), and most Hmong teachers (61) teach at the elementary level.

In addition to the 61 elementary teachers, Hmong teachers were also distributed across various grade levels, including 16 middle schools, 18 high schools, and eight in other categories. The other categories included chartered schools or academies.

**Research Methods**

For this study, I gathered the statistics on Hmong teachers from two databases

kept by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) using the 18 Hmong clan surnames (Chang/Cha, Chue, Cheng, Fang, Hang, Her, Khang, Khue, Kong, Lee/Ly, Lor/Lo, Moua, Pha, Thao/Thor, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang). The two databases include the 2006-2007 Wisconsin employed teachers database and teacher licensing database from the DPI's website. The 2006-2007 teacher database lists teacher names, districts taught in, school(s) taught at, licensed areas, salaries, and percentage of employment. The teacher licensing database lists names, date(s) of their licensing application(s), birth date, and status of their licensed teaching area(s) including expiration date and licensing code. The initial list of 89 Hmong teachers pulled from the teacher database was then checked against the licensing database to ensure accuracy.

Eighty-nine practicing Hmong teachers were invited to be study participants. Each was sent an invitational letter, biographical data form, human subject form, sample interviewing questions, and a self-addressed and stamped return envelop. Five teachers responded and agreed to be participants. This sample included four females and one male.

I utilized an open history approach to interview the five teachers. The sites for the interviews included school and home. During the interviews, I asked the participants about their childhood, their family and community life, their schooling experiences at all levels, and their current teaching experiences. The participants received the interview questions ahead of the scheduled meeting. The same guiding questions were used for all participants. Each interview lasted between two to three hours. During the interviews I took field notes. After each interview, I summarized what each participant had shared and asked the participant if I had accurately captured what had been said.

I summarized and transcribed the field notes the following day in order to pre-

**Table 2: Characteristics of Hmong Teachers 2006-2007 Academic Year**

Gender	Degrees	Teaching Experience	Salaries	Licensures	Grade levels	No. of districts
37 males	58 bachelor's	26 years most experience	59,799 highest	36 ESL 35 elementary (all grades)	61 elementary	24
52 females	31 masters	1 year least experience	29,058 lowest	5 Art 4 physical education 3 mathematics 2 English 2 general science 1 social studies 1 tech education	16 middle school	
		5.26 average	42,541 average	1 FCE 1 French 1 geography	18 high schools	
				1 gifted and talented 1 bio/life science 1 LD	8 others	

vent any loss of nuance and potential rich data that could have been missing in the field notes. If there were any discrepancies or clarifications that were needed in the data I contacted the relevant participant. Descriptive data and emerging themes were captured and solidified after each interview. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, breadth in data was the focus, not depth.

### Findings

#### *Life Experiences of Hmong Teachers*

Four of the participants are married with children. One is engaged. All of the participants teach in school districts throughout Wisconsin, with various student and community demographics represented. One teaches in the largest school district while the others teach in midsize and smaller school districts. The schools in which they teach vary in size and levels. Two teach at the elementary level, two teach at the high school level, and one teaches at the junior high level. They hold bilingual, English language learners, and English licensures. The students they teach include Caucasians, Hmong, Hispanics, African-Americans, and other non-English speakers.

Outside of their teaching assignments, the teachers are also involved with such activities as the theatre program, staff diversity activities, and involvement in district initiatives. Two of the participants hold graduate degrees and school administrative licenses. One is currently in graduate school and two have graduate school in their future plans. Outside of their professional responsibilities they have hobbies and interests that include advocating for social causes as well as activities that include reading, knitting, and dancing. One enjoys aquariums, cars, and detailing. Another's activities include participating in and organizing community events.

Two of the participants interviewed were born in Laos, one in Thailand, and two in the U.S. The three born in Laos or Thailand came to the U.S. and started elementary school at different grades. One came directly to Wisconsin, while one went first to Oklahoma, and the other first to Illinois. The latter two relocated to Wisconsin while they were still in elementary school. Of the two born in the U.S., one was born in Philadelphia and the other in Michigan. Both came to Wisconsin before they started school. They all state they relocated to Wisconsin to be with family.

All of the participants were educated in Wisconsin from elementary school through post-secondary. They describe their educational experiences as diverse and expansive. All started school not speaking English, with Hmong being their first spoken language. All began school in English as a second language programs. Several stayed in those programs until middle school, while one participant requested to be taken out of the program after third grade.

#### *Similar School Experiences*

The participants shared that they all had similar elementary school experiences. They remembered having "a lot of fun" learning, socializing, and coming to and leaving school. One participant highlighted the lunch his mom packed for him; explaining how different it was from the other children's lunches. Several pointed out the positive influence some of their elementary school teachers had on them. One shared how one teacher opened her world and imagination to the richness of literature and stories. Another stressed the importance of how one of the teachers incorporated "Hmong" experience into the lessons, thus providing much-needed cultural and psychological reinforcement.

As the participants moved on to middle or junior high schools, they said that different factors and influences began to creep into their lives, both personally and academically. Things were different from their elementary years. Many commented on how their biological and social developments began to change. They started noticing the various social groups being formed, the difference in academic instructions and expectations, and the loss of friendships from the elementary school years. They began to be more aware of their hygiene, their appearances, and their emotions.

For one of these participants, it was a "frightening" time, with so many new people, a large school, many classes, many teachers, and struggling in English class—not familiar with "words cited, title page, and typing." Most did not participate in co-curricular activities due to home chores and responsibilities. Besides, co-curricular activities were not familiar to them. One participant did report playing soccer during the eighth grade.

All of the participants described having profound high school experiences, which can be characterized as both constructive and destructive.

- ◆ Two participants were married and had children.

- ◆ One dropped out of high school.

◆ One participant became engrossed in behavior characterized as destructive, such as school truancy, gangs, classroom disruptions, and poor academic achievement. These destructive activities were not only happening at school but in the community as well. Somehow, throughout all of this, the participant managed to graduate. "Barely," as shared by the participant, he doesn't know how he did it.

◆ One started working during her sophomore year in high school and continued throughout graduation. Surprisingly, this did not impact her academics or home chores and responsibilities which were expected of her as the oldest daughter. She said she knew what she needed to do and managed her time well.

◆ One participant was "committed to my [his] high school"—school activities included Southeast Asian Student Club and a program to prepare underrepresented students for post secondary education. The participant's involvement helped with preparation for college, such as taking the ACT and filling out financial application, improving academics with tutoring, and developing communication skills through social events.

When asked about their high school teachers, many mentioned that they don't remember having any high school teachers who were influential in their academic and social experiences. One participant briefly mentioned a teacher who spoke a few Hmong words and phrases, but she didn't find that to be significant. It was only an experience she "remembered."

#### *College Years*

Even with this varied array of life and school experiences, all of the participants were able to attend college. Each of their parents had minimal formal education, thus all were first generation college students.

◆ One participant, after dropping out of high school, got divorced. She remarried, had additional children, and didn't return to school until many years later. First she had to earn her High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) before heading on to college to earn her undergraduate and graduate degrees. She decided to pursue a teaching degree despite negative experiences as a school paraprofessional.

◆ Another participant who raised a family while in high school first took the technical college route and then headed to a four year campus to earn her graduate and undergraduate degrees.

◆ Another participant who also took the technical college route said the options were either this or join the working world, and he was not ready for the latter. Additionally, during recruitment, the staff at the technical college helped him out greatly by assisting him in applying and reassuring him that there would be support. He states that his experience at the technical college was positive. He explains how, after two years, the caring and dedicated technical college staff helped him move on to a four-year campus.

◆ The other two participants took more traditional routes to college. They were single and attended college directly after high school graduation.

Once in college, Education was one of the many career choices that were available but it was not the only one. Other career choices included such occupations as nursing, computer science, business, or being a fire fighter, lawyer, electrician, or attending medical school.

Their final decisions to focus on and pursue a career in education were based two key factors of support. First, there were educational programs designed for underrepresented teachers that offered financial support. Secondly was the support of teachers and parents. For three of the participants, there were programs designed to help minority students to become teachers that ultimately drew them to the profession. For one participant, there was the teacher who showed her the wonderment of the literary world. And for the others it was the participation of parents, specifically a father in one case, who spoke about the importance of education.

### Life Experiences

All participants noted that their strong intrinsic value for education, motivation, high expectations, family support, and a keen sense of wanting to or needing to achieve something great in their lives were contributing factors in their decision. These qualities, traits, or characteristics were shaped by their life experiences. As shared by the participants, these life experiences included the hardships and social conditions they experienced and lived through, including, for example, the cultural perceptions and expectations of being a Hmong woman.

Historically, at a young age Hmong females are expected to do home chores and take care of other siblings; they are not expected to become professionals or have higher education aspirations. They are faced with the expected cultural norms

of getting married while still young, having children, balancing education and personal responsibilities, while also battling through these experiences to make a reasonable living.

To rise above these challenges, one participant shared that it was necessary to see life beyond social circles and possible gang activities that can stem from a low self-esteem and lack of confidence in cultural identity. More importantly, it was a capacity for introspection and retrospection, not only about his life, but also about the life of his parents and family that helped him. As he commented, he was greatly influenced by his family's experiences. Knowing his parents had minimal formal education, had worked harsh labor jobs but had the courage, sacrifice, and strength to leave their homeland and establish a new life in a new country was very meaningful to him. It represented that there had been too much commitment on their part for him to continue to live a destructive way of life.

### Academic Achievement

In terms of academic achievement, all five shared a common college experience. They each completed an accredited education program consisting of several phases and requirements that needed to be passed. Each education program sets its own standards and credentials for admission, while the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction requires a cumulative grade point average of 2.75 upon completion of an education program

First, as part of the admission requirements, each participant needed to pass the PRAXIS I. This test covers basic skills in mathematics, reading, and writing. They all had to take PRAXIS II as well due to changes in 2004 in state licensing requirements. PRAXIS II covers the content area that the student plans to teach.

Second, each participant needed to complete the education course work, including creating a professional portfolio highlighting and documenting their knowledge, dispositions, and performance on each of the Ten Wisconsin Teaching Standards. One participant was an exception, having graduating before these 2004 teaching requirements were in effect.

The capstone of completing a teaching program is the final phase of student teaching. Depending on the levels and certification areas, each participant needed to complete nine weeks at either the high school, middle school, or elementary school

level and finish with a cumulative grade point average of 2.75

### Teaching Practices and Philosophies

In this study the most experienced teacher of the five had fifteen years of experience. The least experienced had three years. Like most teachers, the teaching philosophy of Hmong teachers is drawn from their life and educational experiences and professional context. Thus, they see teaching as encompassing the following characteristics:

- ◆ An avenue to advance social justice and equity;
- ◆ An opportunity to reshape students' dreams and hopes;
- ◆ An evolving process that involves assessing student needs. This includes designing and delivering programs and services intended to address and meet those needs, with continued evaluation and assessment of student needs;
- ◆ An opportunity and responsibility to serve as a positive role model; and
- ◆ An opportunity for cultural understanding and advancement.

Regarding teaching practices, Hmong teachers see their teaching revolving around multiple phases, which include:

- ◆ Observing, assessing, and evaluating student needs (both individually and collectively);
- ◆ The design and implementation of lesson plans, services, and programs to address and meet those needs;
- ◆ The observation, assessment, and evaluation of lesson plans, services, and programs;
- ◆ Making necessary changes, modifications, and adjustments to refine these teaching plans; and
- ◆ Finally, starting the process over again.

### Overcoming Challenges

As the first of their family to be in the teaching profession, these study participants found the first several years of teaching were both challenging and rewarding. Areas they found to be challenging included student management, student motivation, meeting parents, working with other colleagues, and relating to school administration. Several commented that student management almost drove them out of the profession.

One participant shared how she used

to argue with students during the first three to five years of her teaching and that it almost cost her the job. She has since changed her student management philosophy, simplifying the rules. Now she states it revolves around just one primary rule: "no fighting and respect [only]."

Another shared the struggles of teaching students from diverse backgrounds and learning abilities. Student management approaches required special attention for each ethnic group and individual. It took the first two years of teaching for this participant to become more comfortable.

Others spoke of the challenge of a lack of student motivation. Since the Hmong themselves were self-motivators, there is a noted tendency to become impatient with students who seem to have no reasons to be school. One participant found this to be a great learning opportunity, encouraging students to see a different light in going to school, whereas one participant found it to be discouraging even going to work sometimes.

They also shared that many of the parents they work with come from low socioeconomic status and diverse backgrounds and have minimal formal education, as well as minimal knowledge of the educational system and how it works. This leads to misunderstandings, communication problems, and mixed feelings between parents and the school. The participants feel it is their responsibility to bridge this communication and cultural gap; they believe both parents and students need to know their responsibilities and expectations for effective learning to occur.

Finally, they found that working with their colleagues and administration can be stressful because, at times, these colleagues don't have the training and experience to work with various ethnic groups. Yet in this context, the Hmong teachers still have to learn to balance personal and professional responsibilities; they have to work with students, administrators, and parents regarding student management and discipline; they have to make changes in lesson plans as the curriculum requires new information; and they have to be observant of existing and new teaching approaches and strategies to enhance student performance, all within the context of the school and community climate and culture.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, these findings reveal a snapshot of Hmong teachers in Wisconsin. They share what teaching means to

them, reflect on their journey to become a teacher, and offer what they aspire to do as teachers. Teaching for Hmong teachers is more than simply coming to work, teaching the day's lesson, and going home.

In many aspects, their teaching practice is a composite of certain key elements from humanistic, social, behavioral, and cognitive teaching approaches. Ultimately, it is a personal and professional commitment to advance the profession, address social and cultural inequities, and inspire student learning and achievement beyond the classroom.

### Note

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