

# A SCHOOL LEADER'S GUIDE TO IMPROVING THE ACHIEVEMENT, ASSIMILATION, AND INVOLVEMENT OF MONTAGNARD CHILDREN\*

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## Abstract

Following an illustrious introduction to the Montagnards and their plight and flight to the United States, this study explores the education, assimilation, and future development of Montagnard students into American schools. A guide for school leaders is presented within this study to assist the Montagnard students in overcoming obstacles and achieving success in school. The successful implementation of this school leader's guide to improving the achievement, assimilation, and involvement of Montagnard children presented in this study is contingent upon the school leaders' understanding of the unique Montagnard culture and other conditions as identified within this study.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

The Montagnards were perhaps our bravest and most loyal ally in the Vietnam War. There is no account of the countless American lives they saved and for this we owe them a debt of lasting gratitude. Montagnard was the appellation given to these people by the French and it merely means “mountain people.” The French Colonial Regime used this term to describe several groups of indigenous people that they encountered in the mountains of the central highlands of Vietnam. They also used it to describe all the mountain people they met throughout Indochina which sometimes leads to confusion (Michaud, 2000). These inhabitants of

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the central highlands were roughly similar to our early Native American population. Their arrival in the area largely predates the Vietnamese who moved from China centuries later. They were considered tribal or loincloth people and their history is one of enduring discrimination at the hands of the Vietnamese majority. Many Vietnamese referred to them as Mois or savages. Even today there still exists an element of ill-feeling between these two groups of recent immigrants (Pang, 1990).

In the past, they often lived communally as an extended family in a style similar to the Iroquois longhouses in America. In marriage, the man joins the woman's family, adopts her name, and moves to the bride's village. However, they are a patriarchal society similar to other Asian cultures. Some people today find the term Montagnard to be a pejorative so the term Dega people is also used. However, Dega is roughly similar to mountain people in the Rhade language and is not universally used. None of the Montagnards I have encountered object to the term and they look upon it with pride distinguishing them from other Southeast Asian students. In fact, it is a term that Helen Evans first heard in 1985 when the first Montagnards finally arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Helen Evans is a missionary who served from 1951-1974 with the Koho people in Vietnam near Da Lat. She has witnessed a lot in her years of Christian work including the death of several friends who were captured and murdered by the Viet Cong during the 1968 Tet Offensive (Hefley, 1974). She was on leave and scheduled to return to Vietnam when Saigon fell in 1975. She is still a focal point of the Montagnard Community in Charlotte and these first religious services were held in her house before the Montagnard Christian Church was built near West Mecklenburg High School. She has spent the vast part of her life with these people and has a deep admiration and love for them. She leads a Spartan religious life and is devoted to assisting them. She has helped educate me and fill in the missing gaps and memories of the past. She and a village elder, K'Sang Bonyo, have assisted in presentations regarding their Vietnam experiences at school. The latter spent 17 years fighting the Communists including the last ten in the jungle. He also serves as a go-between with our students and their families because he speaks English, Koho, Rhade, M'Nong, and Jarai.

The Montagnards experienced a long and arduous journey to get to North Carolina. When Saigon fell they were left behind and immediately treated with discrimination by the Vietnamese. Many had to flee into the bush to escape imprisonment, sterilization, torture, and death. They were not only despised for supporting the United States war effort but also for the Christian beliefs. The first groups of freedom fighters had to fight their way across Vietnam to Cambodia where they then had to battle the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot on their way to sanctuary in Thailand. It was there in 1985, that Doi's letter (one of the elders) finally reached Don Scott who had worked with them in Vietnam. Other Americans, including Helen, had long feared either that they were dead or their lives would be imperiled if they attempted correspondence. Don Scott immediately flew to Thailand and met them at the Site II refugee camp. Upon returning home, he initiated the long process to bring them to their new home in North Carolina. In his efforts, he received the support of the United States Special Forces (Green Berets) who had served with them, the Catholic Church, Jewish Relief, and the Christian Missionary Alliance Church (Case & Taylor, 2005).

One of the issues that delayed the Montagnard emigration to the United States was their insistence that they not be split up. Other refugee groups, most notably the Hmongs, had been divided so as not to put a strain on the resources of their new communities

(Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 1997). Finally, after a great deal of maneuvering, these freedom fighters were moved to a processing center in the Philippines. From there, the first 200 Montagnards came to North Carolina and consisted of mostly men, but a few young women. All were soldiers, but they could not return to Vietnam nor did they know what had happened to their families. They were settled in Charlotte, Raleigh, and Greensboro where they would have the support of the church, and be in the proximity of Ft. Bragg which is home to the United States Special Forces and a significant retired military population who still offer their support and long time friendship. Due to its centrality, they continue to meet in Greensboro for all their significant festivals and events. The Special Forces have purchased land in Asheboro, constructed a park, and are starting a museum replete with a longhouse experience and gardens where the Montagnards, or "Yards" as GI's referred to them affectionately, can feel at home and hold their War Remembrance Day in May.

After the first influx of Montagnard refugees in 1986, there was increasing pressure on the Vietnamese government to allow emigration for various people who wanted to leave. The ODP (Orderly Departure Program) was created between the United States and Vietnam. Amerasians, who were the offspring of liaisons between GI's and Vietnamese and thus persona non grata in their homeland, were the first priority. The second priority was to bring to the United States those individuals and their families who had worked with our forces during the Vietnam War. France also helped in settling Vietnamese refugees who were mostly members of the Roman Catholic faith. After a great deal of pressure from Veterans groups, others were allowed to emigrate including the Montagnards of 1992-1996 and 2002. The latter group had fled to Cambodia after a period of political unrest and included mostly M'Nongs who lived close to that border. Today some family members are able to get out on an individual basis if one's family can go through the arduous process of set forth by bureaucracy to claim them.

The Vietnamese Communist government has never held the various ethnic groups including Montagnards in high esteem. On the one hand, they promised to continue regional autonomy to placate their desires, but they continued the Chinese Communist mode, adapted from the Soviet Union, of repopulation and squeezing them from their traditional homelands. They considered them to be at the lowest stage of economic and social development and very primitive. In order to break their hold on their homelands and reach the superior level of the coastal Vietnamese, lowlanders were relocated to the highlands, education was either denied them or made too expensive, Christianity was repressed, and in extreme cases imprisonment, torture, and sterilization was utilized (Dowdy, 1964). Bad habits need to be broken and adherence to doctrine and conformity to Communist thinking was necessary. The tribal people gradually became minorities in their own land and continued to have worsening situations with the new leadership where they lived (Michaud, 2000). This steady growth of ill will caused the newest arrivals (2002), that only had vague knowledge and a tenuous connection with the United States, to flee their homes in Vietnam in search of freedom (Timko, 2002). To this group, the United States was an elusive dream and a concept as much as a place. Most of the newest immigrants had little connection to the war and could not even locate the United States on a map. The only memory to some of them was that we had abandoned their country in 1975 (Timko, 2002).

The Montagnards in our school represent several different tribes, had differing arrival circumstances (three main arrival groups – 1986, 1992-1996, and 2002), and do not necessarily speak the same language. Most of their parents do not speak English, so communication with them on behalf of their children is difficult. In order to reach them about important matters, one would have to send a letter, which they place in high esteem. They then find an elder, priest, or minister to translate the message. However, one drawback to this practice is that for routine matters, Montagnards and other parents of Southeast Asian students look upon correspondence about mundane matters to be a possible sign of incompetence on the part of school officials (Huang, 1993).

One key to understand Southeast Asian students is that these people are vastly different ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. A common mistake of teachers is to paint them with a broad brush (Liu & Li, 1996). It would be roughly the same as expecting Germans, French, Russians, Irish, and English to have a great deal of understanding, similarity, as well as empathy for one another. The one common denominator is that most of these students had fathers, grandfathers, or uncles that fought along side our forces during the Vietnam War. The different languages they speak are a good starting point.

The Vietnamese language is classified as Mon-Khmer and belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages. It is a tonal language with five basic tones that give words that are virtually spelled the same different meanings which causes confusion with improper inflection. Laotian students speak a language similar to Thai that belongs to the Kam-Tai family of languages which is also prevalent in parts of Southwestern China. Hmongs students speak a language of the family, Hmong-Mien, which is also a tonal language utilizing a frequent doubling of vowels (National Geographic, 1999).

The Montagnards are split into two basic language families. The Koho, Bahnar, and M'Nong are from the Mon-Khmer language group, and the Rhade and Jarai languages are from the Malayo-Polynesian language group. Our first students were Koho or Rhade, but the more recent arrivals have included Jarai and M'Nong (2002 group). None of the students at school speak Vietnamese, but most of their parents do. Vietnamese is a tonal language and has no relationship to the Montagnard languages though some words have been borrowed

back and forth. In addition, there are six different Koho dialects depending on what village one is from. In the Sre tribe, males are designated with K and females use Ka. In Vietnam, it was more common to find last names in the larger cities, but in the villages it was unnecessary (similar to Europe prior to the late Middle Ages). In the Rhade or Jarai languages, it is common for females to use the H designation and the males to use Y (pronounced Yee). Newly arriving M'Nongs also use H for females and Y for males, and sometimes Jarai use H for females but do not normally use Y for males. The Vietnamese further muddled the situation by their misunderstanding of Montagnard languages, causing a similar situation faced by immigrants who came to America through Ellis Island (Case & Taylor, 2005).

Another key would be their religious practices. Many of the Southeast Asian students were converts to Christianity which caused them further discrimination. However, some groups, chiefly Laotian students, remain Buddhist and others still retain some elements of animistic beliefs. Spiritual practice further divides them. Although the first group of Montagnards held a special brotherhood by surviving ten years in the bush, they were divided by their allegiance to the Christian Missionary Alliance Church or their practice of Roman Catholicism. Also, Catholic Montagnards in Charlotte rarely go to the recently built Vietnamese Catholic Church where they do not feel especially welcome (Gee, 2004).

#### Getting Personal

In a more personal manner, the primary author recalls characteristics of six Montagnard students he teaches or has become acquainted with at his high school of employment. The first participant, Neo K, is a young man who is nearly 19 and should graduate next year. He was born in Vietnam and came here with his grandparents when he was eight years old. His mother and father remain in Vietnam and he has not seen them since he was eight years old. The Catholic Church sponsored his refugee group in the second wave of Montagnard admissions to the United States in 1996. In a similar fashion to other early Montagnard refugees, his grandfather fought with U.S. forces during the Second Indochina War and was sadly left behind. His grandparents claimed Neo and his brother as sons so they could enjoy a better life here. Neo speaks Koho and English and his grandparents speak Koho which is the language of the home and Vietnamese. Neo had some brief schooling in Vietnam, but he does not remember much of it. He still harbors resentment that he was held back in school here because they felt he was behind. Neo has adjusted relatively well in school and he associates with students of various ethnic groups. Ironically, he has little or no association with the more recent Montagnard groups in school (mostly M'ngong) because he says he cannot understand them. His goal is to graduate and find a job, but he has some interest in community college.

The second participant, Thiu Ka, is a 16 year old Koho and was resettled here by the Catholic Church. She arrived here when she was five years old. Her father fought with the Green Berets during the war. She speaks Koho, English, and Spanish, has adjusted well to high school, and is an honor roll student in her junior year. She belongs to the International Club, will try out for sports next year, and hopes to attend the University of North Carolina at Charlotte or Central Piedmont Community College upon graduation. Her parents speak Koho and Vietnamese and the former is the language at home. She explained that older people in the Montagnard community still retain an animosity towards the Vietnamese due to past discrimination and the Communist takeover. She and the Catholic Koho attend St. Patrick's Catholic Church and though she has been once, they would not go to St. Joseph's Vietnamese Church due to past ill feelings. Teachers must be aware of these historical conflicts and past discrimination in order to better understand differing experiences in the classroom (Pang, 1990). Thiu has assimilated rather well and is more like a typical American teenager.

The third participant, Mat Y, is a 16 year old ninth grader. Contrary to Neo's opinion, this young lad spoke very good English and was extremely gregarious and less reticent than other Montagnards. He is M'ngong and one of the more recent arrivals gaining entry in 2002. He lived in a longhouse in a small village near the Cambodian border and never was able to attend school in Vietnam due to the discriminatory practices of the communist government. His favorite subject is art and he likes to learn new words. He does not like mathematics which belies the commonly held notion that all Asians are "whiz kids" in the subject (Feng, 1994; New York City Task Force, 1989; Pang, 1990; Park, 2000). He said that he would like more help in school and sometimes feels ignored by teachers who think he is doing well. He loves sports, especially soccer and volleyball, and would like to play soccer at the school, but he seemed apprehensive about doing

this Lieu & Li, 1992). His father works and his mother stays at home and works a lot in her garden. He is very interested in cars, is already tinkering with them and would like to be a mechanic someday. He introduced me to his brothers who were in elementary school and they were very engaging young kids who both say they love school. Mat and his family were proud that they were good students (Huang, 1993; Schwartz, 1995; Park, 2000). Mat also offered some sad commentary on several former students in the neighborhood who were forced to drop out of school.

The fourth participant, Djo H, is a senior who sadly was only able to get a certificate of attendance. She is married and due to have a baby any day. There is still a critical shortage of females in the community which is a cause of the early marriages and child birth similarly found in the Hmong communities (Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 1997). She is a Jarai and very shy, probably due to her low level of English skill. She said that she loved mathematics and her health classes. She had no formal schooling in Vietnam, and since her arrival four years ago, has not had much opportunity to catch up. She is a delightful girl, who rather than going back to school, would rather stay at home and raise her family. However, someday she might want to work in a hospital or become a nurse.

The fifth participant, Quy Y is a M'Nong student who recently graduated. He was part of the 2002 group and received only limited schooling in Vietnam. He claims to have only gone to first and second grade. Similar to most teenagers he was ecstatic about graduation. He plans on going to Central Piedmont Community College and later to attend a state university. His friends were very proud of him, because as Mat Y explained, that they have heard college is hard and many of them feel that it is beyond them and only an option for American students. He seems particularly well adjusted and achieved a great deal of education in a short time proving that it is possible to catch up.

The sixth participant, Linh Dagout, is an 18 year old Koho sophomore who is a recent arrival. She is a very shy Catholic student who is believed to be married. However, another trait of these refugees is that they attempt to disguise their personal situation so as not to be embarrassed (Liu & Li, 1996). She is a very conscientious student and a hard worker, but has missed numerous days of school in the past two years probably due to family obligations. She speaks Koho and rudimentary English, and the language of the home is Koho or Vietnamese. Due to her age, it might be difficult to keep her in school until graduation and there is a risk of her dropping out. She is a bright girl, but the ESL teachers are exasperated in their attempts to help her.

From the primary author's observations of the aforementioned participants, extensive studies of the Montagnards and personal experience of living in Vietnam, the authors prepared A School Leader's Guide To Improving the Achievement, Assimilation and Involvement of Montagnard Children. The Guide, intended to be neither exhaustive nor exclusive, hopefully will enhance the skills and strategies of school leaders in promoting the success of their Montagnard students. Furthermore, the Guide presents practical recommendations that may be implemented immediately.

#### The School Leader's Guide

Although research on learning styles can be controversial and inconclusive, educators need to be informed as to how they can best serve the Montagnards. Southeast Asian students come with several disadvantages caused by the catastrophic conditions and events they have experienced. Additionally, many of the post 1975 refugees have received little or no formal education (Carlin, 1979; Park, 2000.). This is particularly true of Montagnard groups due to the discrimination of the Vietnamese Communist Regime. Nevertheless, as noted in interviews with Helen Evans and Linda Campbell (Catholic Refugee Services), Montagnards are great observers, detail oriented, and definitely prefers a visual learning style. This is confirmed in the research of Clara Park and the findings of Leslie Timko during the orientation sessions held in Cambodia for the newly arrived Montagnards of 2002. To them, one of their visual images, to presumably ease their travel angst, was the thought they were flying on a big papaya (Timko, 2002). Their findings clearly show that instruction should incorporate as many visuals as possible (graphic organizers, maps, webs, charts, etc.) in working with these students (Leung, 1982; Park, 2000).

Although she did not include Montagnards in her study, Park's research also found that both Hmong and Vietnamese students showed a higher preference for group learning. In the case of Montagnards this would undoubtedly be true due to their dependence on each other in the most adverse situations imaginable.

The students taught and interviewed by the primary author enjoyed cooperative learning. Helen Evans was particularly clear on the bonding and closeness of the first two refugee groups that she has worked with since their arrival. They also enjoyed learning with hands on activities (Park, 2000). This tactile /kinesthetic approach was confirmed in discussions with Linda Campbell and discussions with the Montagnard students chosen for this paper. All students who participated in this study enjoyed art as most of them saw it as a chance to express themselves. Mat Y continued to talk about his desire to work on cars when he grew up and you could see the excitement in his eyes as he described tinkering with them.

Leslie Timko's documentation of her work, in the orientation sessions for the newest Montagnard arrivals, is significant in order to gain valuable insights of this group. Similar to other Montagnards, this group was tribal and had led sheltered rural lives. The struggle would be to help them gain entry into our technology driven western world. To them, America was a concept or an elusive dream and was a place they could not identify on a map. Most of the Montagnards did not know their date of birth and most had no last names. Few had seen a refrigerator, stove, or toilet, and the concept of bathrooms was baffling to them. They also had no idea of modern transportation. Most had never worked outside of the home or farm. Money and budgeting was an enigma to them and a cause of anxiety. Freedom and privacy were foreign concepts to them (Timko, 2002). Hence, orientation session, instruction, and guidance which most often is taken for granted, would be most beneficial to the success of Montagnards in school.

In the orientation sessions, the Montagnards were very disciplined and took copious notes. They appeared highly motivated, respectful, honest, polite, and happy. These personality traits are common of all the Montagnards in this study. They are resilient, strong and carry with them a history of surviving the most adverse circumstances. They are also very patient compared to most Americans. Timko noted that due to their past communal living arrangements there was a fear of being alone. None of the Montagnards in this study show an understanding of privacy and are seldom seen alone. Instructional activities that capitalize upon these characteristics are advantageous to increasing the achievement of Montagnards.

One of the main things to be avoided in dealing with Montagnards, as well as other Southeast Asian students is the stereotyping that they are all great students, successful, outstanding in mathematics, reticent, docile, and disciplined hard workers. Contrary to widely held beliefs, they have the same range of abilities and issues that other students face. There are some tendencies that they exhibit more than others, but educators need to understand that they face the same issues and difficulties typical of many at-risk students. Most Asian students reflect more on group or family identity, attribute success to luck, and take personal responsibility for failure. Montagnards follow the Asian pattern and emphasize self-discipline, hard work, and respect for authority. Traditional American thinking stresses the individual, personal responsibility for success, and downplays failure as luck or someone else's problem (Fry & Ghosh, 1980). American culture also emphasizes competitiveness, instant gratification, and the pursuit of happiness (Liu & Li, 1992). The Montagnard students valued cooperation and shied away from competition. All of the students in this study said that they desired more help, but they understood that teachers did not have the time to provide it. All were reluctant to ask for assistance.

Teachers need to realize that far from being model students, they are as varied as the other students they teach. Each child needs to be treated on an individual basis. Both Neo and Thiu strongly expressed this desire. Some do not want to get involved in class or participate in conversation and discussions due to their worry over less skill in the language. Some of this relates to their desire for acceptance. Much of it stems from the fact in the United States people are taught to argue, debate, and challenge viewpoints. They are not taught in this manner. They believe in responsibility to the group which can be undermined by individualism and competitiveness (Feng, 1994). Due to their quiet nature, some teachers use this as a justification for not giving them help. Unintentional neglect could lead to other academic difficulties. Teachers sometimes ignore them because they don't cause problems and appear to be doing well (New City Board of Education, 1989). All of the Montagnards wanted extra help and Mat Y craved it. Studies support that most Southeast Asian students find school overwhelming (Feng, 1994; New York Board of Education, 1989). Rather than helping them learn a new skill, we could be undermining their self-confidence and sense of well-being (Treuba & Cheng, 1993).

Montagnard students who have attended school in Vietnam are similar to other Southeast Asian students

and follow a Confucian pattern of respect for elders and authority. Teachers have a high and valued status. They can be confused about the informal nature of teacher and student relations and the informal structure of some classes. It can cause these self-effacing students a great deal of consternation. They tend to need more reinforcement from teachers, a quiet atmosphere, and structure in the classroom. Distress can be caused by too much attention to them either positively or negatively. Those students who received any education in Vietnam were used to rote learning, taking notes, and a highly structured classroom where the teacher was providing all the input (Feng, 1994). Rote memory is prevalent in Asian schools and freedom to discuss their own ideas and opinions are arcane to them. They tend to wait for the teacher to deliver the lesson rather than be an active participant in learning (New York City Board of Education, 1989; Park, 2000; Timko, 2002). Peer tutoring or grouping Southeast Asian students together for their mutual success should be done with caution due to the great differences and possible past conflicts among them (Liu & Li, 1996).

Montagnards tend to internalize problems. With two exceptions (Thiu Ka and Quy Y), the students in this study did not see success for themselves. They indicated and confirmed the research that success was for others though they felt a subtle pressure from family to do well. It would be difficult for teachers to discern internal problems such as pressure and to provide assistance. This also has led to more instances of test anxiety or dealing with failure (Pang, 1990). However, none of the Montagnard students expressed this in their discussions.

Montagnard students want to be accepted, but they do not really understand how to go about it. All of the students, with the exception of Quy Y, desired to not be considered different or unusual. This was a recurring theme with all the Montagnards in this study and was echoed by Linda Campbell and supported by research (Pang, 1990). The lack of participation in school is usually a direct result of their reticence and their lack of understanding of competition. They need to be approached and encouraged to become involved in school activities. Both Mat Y and Neo K were especially confused about playing sports. After explaining the need for soccer players, Mat decided he should try out. The young lads felt insecure about competing because either they would not be good or big enough, or if they were good, then they would show up someone who would then possibly not like them. Lack of participation usually just stems from a lack of encouragement. They wait to be asked and need to feel wanted.

The role of family and the extended family are extremely important in the Montagnard culture. Like other Southeast Asian students, the student's role in family is important for the functioning of all. Fulfilling family needs and responsibilities always trumps the individual (Fernandez, 1988; Nguyen, Huong, & Stollak, 1999). Due to their ability to speak English, and in most cases, more advancement in education, Montagnard youth often must serve as lead negotiators in financial matters, transactions, dealings with authority, and other day to day family arrangements. Their maturity level is high. They often assume the roles which would make them more of an andragogical rather than a pedagogical learner (Knowles, 2005). For example, once a student starts working, they are supposed to provide financial help to the family (Fernandez, 1988). Due to past experiences and obtaining an education beyond most of their parent's, these students, despite their chronological ages, have often assumed adult roles and status (Rachal, 2002).

Communications with parents encounter severe obstacles. Parents view school as having a strong and almost dictatorial control over their children. They do not feel that they have any responsibility for their children's education and are confused about even basic operations of schools (Feng, 1994; New York City Board of Education, 1989). Teachers often can be seen as incompetent in seeking specific help for their student. There is also a misunderstanding of parental roles and the operations of schools and school systems (Schwartz, 1995). Most Montagnards had no familiarity with education which was denied them for so long. Traumatic experiences of the past and the value of privacy leads them to shy away from authority which they view with trepidation and as a *bete noire*. This inhibits them and leads to communication difficulties (Carlin, 1979; Schwartz, 1995). Alternative avenues of communication must be explored. Dealing through an intermediary such as a minister, priest, or village elder can be effective.

With Vietnamese students, and Montagnards in particular, there is usually a stronger domination of children in the home because it was necessary for their collective survival (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Parents normally have no involvement in their children's education. They do not know how to support them because

of no past understanding of the educational process. They are also reticent about expressing needs (Liu & Li, 1996). However, they value education and look upon failure in school as a lack of will power or self-control (Feng, 1994). None of the parents of the six students in this sample had been to school except for the initial registration.

One of the other difficulties with Montagnard families is the prevalence of early marriage. There is a severe shortage of females in the community due to the circumstances of escaping Vietnam. Two of three girls surveyed are probably married and the third lives with an uncle (usually not a common practice) and one is having a baby. They tend to hide their circumstances due to their concerns of privacy and the stigma placed on early marriage in the United States. This concern, voiced by Linda Campbell, is reinforced in the Wisconsin Study of the Hmong population. Early marriage is accepted, can be seen as an escape from parents, or in some cases is arranged. Nevertheless, there is a high value placed on education by Southeast Asian families and many young girls pursue it at a later date (Liu & Li, 1993; Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 1997).

Montagnards, as a group, have experienced many of the same circumstances of earlier Southeast Asian arrivals. However, their conditions have been exacerbated by the fact that they started on the bottom of the social ladder and were adversely influenced by the discrimination of the Vietnamese majority. This was particularly true regarding their lack of educational opportunity. However, they mirror other Southeast Asian families in their desire for their children's success which is a source of enormous pride for the family. Like immigrants of the past, they know academic success can be the key opening doors to a better life (Liu & Li, 1996). The primary responsibility is to the family and it takes precedence over school, especially after school activities. The identity of children is primarily found through the family. This is the opposite of the independent and egalitarian nature of America (Treuba, 1993). There tends to be a fatalistic belief and rigid thinking highly prevalent in Asians with rural backgrounds (Treuba, Cheng, and Ima, 1993). Sadly, some Montagnards still see these opportunities for others, not themselves. Although family pride has been expressed for academic success, Mat Y exemplified many Montagnard students and had a hard time visualizing higher education.

Communication with parents can be a frustrating experience. Usually there is a lack of eye contact and some mistakenly feel a lack of attentiveness on the part of the parent. They also might be overly polite and submissive in meetings. They seem to be always smiling and their smiles don't mean they are always happy. Some of the smiling is due to confusion or embarrassment. One must learn to look for both overt and covert traits and signs. A teacher should engage in a verbal hesitancy and refrain from making spontaneous or critically perceived remarks. In this, Montagnards are very similar to other Southeast Asian cultures. The future potential of the student takes precedence over current accomplishment (Feng, 1994; Huang, 1993; Schwartz, 1995).

Another issue of paramount importance in dealing with families is the sense of time and orientation. Asians tend to stress the past and future rather than the present, which is valued by most Americans. Time is a process where many simultaneous things occur at once rather than dealing with one issue at a time. Patience is a virtue compared to the impatience of most Americans. In contrast to Asian thinking, including the Montagnards, Americans feel they are in control of future events. Asian families tend not to be concerned about the success of their students, but rather look to their potential for continued development. The concept of time and scheduled appointments does not mean as much to Montagnards as it does to most Americans. Montagnards do not move quickly to deal with issues. Like Hmongs, they tend to think that time solves many problems better than humans (Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 1997; Timko, 2002). Timeliness has to be often reinforced as a responsibility (Fernandez, 1988; Timko, 2002). All of the students in school, particularly Linh, have exhibited, at times, a frustrating lack of understanding of the meaning of appointments or schedules.

One of the key challenges in educational leadership is the mis-identification or under identification of ESL/LEP (English as Second Language/Limited English Proficiency) students and their assignment in learning disabled classes. Exacerbating this issue is the refusal of some teachers and administrators to recognize LD (Learning Disabled) students who are also ESL and provide accommodations for them. There is a serious overlapping of issues and challenges involving ESL, language difficulty, and the identification of exceptional



children - especially LD students (Case & Taylor, 2005). There is a serious difficulty in separating language differences from disorders. The lack of exposure to writing systems further increases this problem and leaves them behind (Treuba, 1993). Only Thiu Ka and Quy Y had overcome their writing problems. For Montagnard students, it is an acceptable fact in the community that some children are slower than others, and the need for special services for these students can be mis-interpreted or lost completely. Far worse is that some Southeast Asian families have difficulty accepting help and believe special help and counseling are unnecessary and shameful to the family. As the author has heard on more than one occasion regarding learning disabilities, "Does she have a learning problem or disability?" The answer, "No, she stupid, but she OK."

A dilemma exists and a special understanding is needed to assist these students in placement in the best educational setting possible. Dr. Joseph Riggs, a long time ESL teacher who has worked with Montagnards in Charlotte and Vietnam, clearly spelled out the issue echoing an earlier research paper of Brian Leung. There is a clear dichotomy between inappropriately placing students in EC programs due to lack of educational progress and not placing them because lack of progress is felt to be the result of poor English or lack of cultural skills. According to Dr. Riggs, "Special Education Intervention Teams will not do it, do not understand it, and do not realize that you cannot measure progress readily as in the case with other students." If educational progress continues to suffer, observations can be valuable. How does the child get along in sports or games? How does he handle simple routines (Leung, 1982)? Dr Riggs lamented in an illustrative tale of a young student who could not fathom how to walk across the street.

Many school districts have started to employ individuals with a special knowledge of the various cultural characteristics of their students. In some Southeast Asian communities it is common for the people to have a spokesman. For example, Laotians call them gatekeepers. (Leung, 1982). In the case of the Montagnards, elders often serve as the go between to attend to their needs. In New York, due to the large number of Asian students (7.3% at the time), a special task force was convened to address the problems facing them. However, in some school districts with a smaller number of Asian students, these matters are often placed on the backburner. For Montagnard students and their parents, their unfamiliarity with available resources would be especially critical and the need for a point of contact vital.

Another issue of paramount importance is assisting parents of ESL students to achieve a sound quality education for their children (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005). Often parents of these students have no idea of the education process in the United States. Their difficulty is more extreme due to their lack of understanding of English. At West Mecklenburg High School, most of the Southeast Asian students' parents do not speak English. None of the Montagnard students in this report had parents who spoke English. The language of the home was Koho, M'Nong, or Jarai. Although the parents spoke Vietnamese, none of the children were fluent in it. Communication is a big problem with them and for important matters the students or a tribal elder must be the go between. Thus, parents would have a great deal of difficulty making informed decisions about their children without outside help.

There is a massive shortage of teachers certified to teach LEP students and less than 20% of LEP teachers are certified (Li & Zhang, 2004). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) leaves schools no alternative but to provide all educational remedies to help every child attain success in school. Although NCLB calls for qualified teachers in every classroom, the demand far outstrips the supply in critical areas like mathematics and science. In other areas, like EC (Exceptional Children) and ESL teachers, it is already a problem of crisis proportions. One statistic from the National Center for Educational Statistics is revealing. In 2002, only 12.5% of those teachers serving ESL students had more than eight hours of training in the previous three years (Li & Zhang, 2004).

Another critical issue facing administrators and teachers is accountability. NCLB includes ESL students in state accountability systems and requires their development in English to be assessed yearly. After two years, their scores count in the high stakes testing and will only be provided in English. This does a disservice to the students and schools alike, could be problematic, and lead to a lack of providing the necessary services for the best interests of the children. All the Montagnard students referred to friends or family members who had left school early. This is another dilemma for many schools because there is a vast variety in the value other countries and people place on education. In 1974, the Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* outlined

some of the measures to avoid discrimination in education utilizing bi-lingual education. However, with so few speakers of the language, bilingual help would be impossible. In the case of Montagnards, exacerbating this issue was the discrimination by the Vietnamese which added to the unavailability of education. This broad range of educational opportunity means that the student's chronological and educational age seldom matches.

Furthermore, a problem in the Montagnard community would be the continued assistance with issues of assimilation. Typical of Southeast Asian students, Montagnards are unlikely to seek help with psychological issues such as depression, mental health problems or guilt issues. (Rosser-Hogan, 1990). Emotional or psychological problems are difficult to discern in Southeast Asian students. Additionally, students with substance abuse problems can escape detection. Revealing problems or feelings to a counselor are extremely difficult due to the idea that these are private concerns in the student's culture. Southeast Asian students, including Montagnards, tend to underutilize guidance counselors in school because they sometimes have a misunderstanding of their role in helping them academically. The catastrophic past of their families, the parent's inability to understand English, and the idea that psychological problems are private concerns all would interfere with the seeking out of help for these students (Rosser-Hogan, 1990; Gee, 2004). Research indicates that these students would have the same prevalence of psychological issues as other students, but they tend not to be identified or utilize the services available (Gee, 2004).

Southeast Asian students look upon the openness required in counseling as an invasion of privacy or a personal or family weakness. Most do not like to talk about themselves. Although the males in this study talk a bit about themselves, the females were extremely reserved. Discussing one's feelings is an anathema to them. Traditional counseling usually does not meet the needs of these students who are extremely reticent about talking about themselves. For example, all of the students in this study desired more help, but were reluctant to ask for it. They all were waiting for the teacher to come to them. For counseling needs, added to their shyness would be a sense of shame or letting down the family for desiring emotional support. Thus counselors must have to take into account the entire family when confronted with problems or situations involving Montagnard youth (Fernandez, 1988). Five of the students in this sample had close family members in Vietnam. One, Neo K, had not seen his parents since he was eight. Thiu Ka had not seen several of her siblings since the age of five. Only Mat K had his entire family here. These situations could contribute to loneliness, sadness, and depression. This was only detected in Neo who had a strong desire to see his family again.

In addition to the strategies already mentioned, a focus on successful programs and processes across America provide meaningful guidance for school leaders. Practices in New York, which has had a great deal of experience dealing with numerous ethnic groups' children, are worth emulating. A task force was created in New York to explore the issues and seek solutions. They created advocacy groups and a parental involvement coalition. They held workshops for teachers, administrators, and parents. Despite very few Asian role models in education, they have shown signs of success with achievement and lowering problems such as truancy, drop-out rates, and psychological problems (New York City Board of Education, 1989).

Wisconsin's approaches in serving the needs of the Hmong population are worth emulating. Despite taking a generation, real progress has been made within that community. Like the previous immigrant experience, officials and authority are looked upon with suspicion by the current population. Montagnards had to be instructed in their orientation sessions not to fear the police or authorities (Timko, 2002). Educators need to visit the homes of parents and bring the parents to school. Educators need to invite them personally and help them understand American educational practices and possibly help serve their own literacy needs.

Regardless of the size of the community, support is needed at the district level. A sine qua non would be advocacy at the highest administrative level. There needs to be a trained administrator at the highest level responsible for the Montagnard and other Asian ethnic groups. Rumbaut and Nguyen have developed questionnaires and used them to judge adaptation to culture and education by Southeast Asian communities. These could be valuable for future use (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Nguyen, 1999). Specially trained family and guidance counselors would be valuable in helping serve their language and cultural needs. Valerie Pang said, "You cannot have equal education opportunity when their educational experience is shaped by inaccurate information and naïve beliefs."

With appropriate instruction it takes about two years for ESL students to become proficient in English (Li & Zhang, 2004). One of the methods utilized throughout the country and here in Charlotte is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). This program is strongly researched based and not another add-on program, but rather an umbrella program to ensure effective teaching practices (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). The approach of SIOP is somewhat similar to the inclusion model for exceptional children found in many school systems. In academic classes there would be a content teacher and an ESL teacher, and it is intended that they function in a similar manner as do teachers in the inclusion model. The intent is to get a head start in learning the vocabulary found in academic English. The purpose for the teachers is to mesh language and content together in one curriculum (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). SIOP appears to be successful with the newer Montagnard students.

North Carolina Statute §115C-105.41 calls for students who are at risk for failure to have Personal Education Plans (PEP's). This is a strategy that could offer significant help to LEP students including Montagnards. Local school districts are required to identify students and provide them with a plan for academic improvement. A progressive step would be the inclusion of all these students in the PEP program. Another step in the right direction would be to find mentors for these students who could serve in a similar counselor/advisory capacity similar to the case managers for EC students. This would be time consuming but it would assist in the evaluation of children and help ensure their educational progress. For some children, detailed observations and deep narrative information are vital to improve their prospects for success.

#### A Final Word or Two

A concrete and consistent policy is needed for these students so they don't slip through the cracks and get left behind again. Educational leaders need to invest the time and energy to further understand these students and their needs, and not just keep assuming that they are alright or high achievers because they are quiet and cause little in the way of real problems in school. Montagnards have a certain equanimity and serenity about them perhaps due to their strong faith, family bonds, or resilience to the trials they have had to endure. Educators can not mistake this for complacency. The students in this study all have asked for the help of their teachers. Mat Y did not want to disturb his teachers. Educators need to take the extra step and reach out to them. They have all the characteristics of the classic underdog, but fortunately, they have a solid support system with family, the church, and others as anchors. School leaders need to work diligently to promote the success of the Montagnards. Getting to know these wonderful students would be its own reward. To know them is to love them.

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