



# Exploring the Dynamics of Hmong Parental Involvement in Education



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## Overview

- ☛ **Educational Value:** Hmong Americans view public education as one of the best things about life in America. Hmong parents have high educational aspirations for their children and adopt a strong appreciation for schooling as a means for social mobility. Many Hmong families do not know how to effectively work the complex system to achieve high academic success. They possess the ambition and aspiration, yet do not have the means to accomplish them.
- ☛ **Parental Involvement:** Central to this study is the concept of parental involvement which educators believe to be essential for student academic success (Epstein 1985; Domina 2005) and is one of the family background factors most associated with school achievement. Not only are parents involved in schools but also in teaching and learning activities at home. Some research suggests that parental involvement differs by race, ethnicity, and social class (Lareau 1987). Very few studies have previously examined Hmong families and their interaction with the school system.
- ☛ This study explores Hmong parental beliefs regarding education and identifies ways in which siblings, kin, and school aides assist in Hmong education. The findings of this study increase our understanding of different cultural views regarding education held by Hmong parents and school personnel, and they explain some of the obstacles and hardships that Hmong families experience in the educational system.

## Guiding Research Questions

- ☛ How are parents involved in the educational process of their children?
- ☛ What barriers deter them from fully engaging in their children's schooling?
- ☛ How often do Hmong parents participate in school activities or take an interest in their children's education?
- ☛ In what ways are Hmong parents educating their children?

## Qualitative Methods & Sample

- ☛ IRB approved face-to-face interviews (conducted in Hmong, audio recorded and transcribed into English)
- ☛ Field notes from monthly home visits and interviews with the Adult Literacy Center
- ☛ Of the families observed, five families in two mid-sized cities in WI participated in the interviews
- ☛ Participants in City 1 have been in the United States for less than 9 years, while participants in City 2 have arrived more than 20 years



Students at a Minnesota school learn about Hmong culture while viewing their reading skills.



A Hmong teacher in a Minnesota elementary school answers with her students during reading time.

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## Selected Results

### Limited English Skills

- ☛ "Yes, I do help them with their homework, but I feel I'm not that much of help to them when it comes to reading, so I make my children read to me; but my husband and I can help them with math. We understand math better." – Mrs. B
- ☛ "If I knew how to speak English, I would help my children to my heart's content, but I don't so I just lecture and urge them to study." – Mrs. C



An ESL teacher in a North Carolina school talks about the Hmong New Year to a group of students.

### Knowledge of the American Public School System

- ☛ "We don't know what kinds of things teachers are already teaching them." – Mr. B
- ☛ "I think they [children's schools] do a good job, but only because my children don't complain. I have no clue what my children are doing in school. The teachers don't call and I don't ask." – Mrs. D

### Reliance on Elder Siblings, Kin, and Bilingual Aides

- ☛ "We know it's a burden going to other people for assistance, but our children need help and we can't help them, so we must go to my brother's children for help because they are older." – Mr. E
- ☛ "I take my children to school early some mornings so that the Hmong aide at school can help them with homework they didn't know how to complete the night before." – Mrs. C
- ☛ "I don't know how to read in English that well so they [the children] rely on their older siblings." – Mrs. A



A Hmong mother plays a book with her son.

### Education Outside of School

- ☛ "Us Hmong do not "play" with our kids in this fashion. It seems so silly speaking and playing along with small children like this. We are so busy, we do not have time to allow them to play along when we cook or do chores around the house. We just want to complete them quickly." – Mrs. F
- ☛ "They [teachers] think we're stupid or ignorant because we don't engage in activities that the school wants us to with our children, either at home or at school. We do have fun with our children, but in our own way and with our own time." – Mrs. G



An elementary school teacher spends reading time with Hmong children.

### Parent's Educational Expectations

- ☛ "We want them to know everything, but I don't know if the teachers can teach them that... We send them to school because we want them to be intelligent to get good jobs... to become doctors and lawyers... We want them to be able to help the Hmong community." – Mr. E
- ☛ "[We send them to school] just so they can understand and speak English to help my husband and me." – Mrs. A

## Discussion

- ☛ Hmong families do experience some of the same barriers to parental involvement that other minorities face in the United States; however, we encountered several interesting findings.
- ☛ The lack of English proficiency is the biggest obstacle participants face when interacting with schools as well as their children. All participants reveal the difficulty of communicating with their children who speak mainly English in the house while knowing or understanding little or no Hmong.
- ☛ Parents strongly believe education is the job of schools and teachers because they feel unable or limited in their ability to assist. They do not themselves lack the desire to be involved; rather they are not able to engage.
- ☛ Hmong parents' definition of parental involvement may be different than that of educators and policy makers. Parental involvement to them means providing for their family. Hmong parents work to provide housing, clothing, and food for their children allowing them the opportunity to attend school and focus on their school work; thus involvement is more physical than emotional. This mismatch between schools and Hmong families over the definition of parental involvement may be why Hmong parents are hesitant and reluctant to assimilate and learn about the rules, regulations, and policies of the public school system.
- ☛ Siblings, kin, and bilingual aides play a significant role in Hmong students' education. Hmong parents' lack of knowledge of the school system contributes to their reliance on external networks as support for their children. As they have not experienced formal educational institutions, these parents do not have the advantage of prior experiences to relate to their children or understand what their children are undertaking.
- ☛ Most participants hold lower educational expectations for their children. This may be due to the fact that they are recent immigrants and simply want their children to learn basic skills in order to help establish the family in the U.S., or that the children are too young to show potential to become professionals yet.
- ☛ School districts should be more flexible to meet the needs of Hmong parents through the creation of bi-lingual newsletters, more family friendly school policies, offer a variety of activities to encourage engagement and participation, and the development of community-wide educational programs for Hmong parents to gain knowledge of the school system.
- ☛ Further exploration needs to be done on this subject using a larger sample size and additional school districts, and should address schools' and teachers' attitudes toward Hmong parents and parental involvement. The effectiveness of bi-lingual newspapers and school aides should also be examined in relation to parental involvement.

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