Hmong-American Students Still Face Multiple Challenges in Public Schools

By Christopher T. Vang

Although much research has been done on bilingual students from a variety of backgrounds, little research has been done specifically on the needs of K-12 Hmong students. Hmong students are refugees and children of refugees who immigrated to the United States since 1975, leaving their home country of Laos. California public schools have approximately 36,000 K-12 Hmong-American students. Of that number, 85% are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and 15% are identified as Fluent English Proficient (FEP) students. In some schools, 80% of Hmong-American students in grades K-6 are LEP students.

Hmong students comprise the third largest LEP group in California's public schools, with Vietnamese students the second largest group and Hispanic pupils the largest. Today, Hmong-American students still face a variety of challenges in public schools. This article examines research that provides some insights into the factors that affect academic success and/or failure of Hmong-American students.

School's Perceptions of Hmong Students' Academic Needs

When Hmong students first arrived in America, they lacked academic background, English skills, and learning styles needed for school success. Public schools faced a multitude of problems with Hmong students because no appropriate placement or instructional methods were in place to meet their overall academic needs. School personnel perceived Hmong students' academic achievement as poor, felt Hmong students were not college material, and identified language deficiency as their biggest handicap in school (Golstein, 1985).

Initially, the American educational system identified Hmong children as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and placed them in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Even if a school offers academic programs to integrate Hmong students into the mainstream of the school, many Hmong students remain socially and academically segregated from mainstream students, and the teaching methodology appears to be capricious. At that time, few Hmong bilingual teachers were available.

Hmong students were placed in classes based on an expectation that they would not successfully attend college, despite students' individual desires for higher education. Public school administrators also felt it was very important for Hmong students to receive their high school diplomas to enable them to enter the workforce, since they would not be college bound. Subsequently, public school officials wanted to place Hmong students in classes in which they would fulfill only minimum graduation requirements (Golstein, 1985).

The situation has changed very little since Hmong children first entered American schools. Today as then, few Hmong bilingual teachers are available. Hmong students still lack academic language and language skills, putting them at a disadvantage in the traditional American classroom. Hmong students may have a difficult time keeping up with the school material.

On the other hand, public schools often overlook Hmong students because they are culturally reserved. In most cases, teachers would assume that they understand and are working hard. The truth is that they do not receive the necessary assistance they need to survive academically (Lee, 2001). Their English deficiencies still contributes to low scholastic achievement, low test scores, and insufficient credits.

Most U.S. Hmong parents are concerned about their children's education, but many of them are refugees who have not had any formal education and lack the educational background to provide necessary support at home. Some parents are still locked into the old belief system that school personnel have sole authority over their children's public education. Yang (1982) observed that, "just as a tree torn from its roots and re-planted cannot survive, so the child cannot truly blossom without the ability to relate to its sources, to its origin." Modern education and schooling are still relatively new to most U.S. Hmong refugees. Public schools continue to place them in ESL, English Language Development (ELD), Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), and other language programs.

Some feel that bilingual programs, such as these, are a safe place for Hmong students in the large and intimidating school; however, others feel that grouping students based on perceived ability is too dangerous and placing students in groups may result in a form of school segregation based on socioeconomic status and cultural factors. It is very important that teachers and schools perceive students objectively, regardless of cultural, ethnic, racial, social

Christopher T. Vang is an assistant professor of education at California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, California.

class, or religious differences, in order to accommodate different learning styles.

Socio-cultural Factors Inhibit School Progress

Researchers have defined at-risk students as those who are typically limited in English proficiency, financially poor, of an ethnic minority, economically disadvantaged, and underachieving (Siu, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Wright, 1997). Generally, Hmong students fit the at-risk definition because culture, language, socio-economic status, immigrant status, and environment limit their ability to perform in school. Siu (1996) found that at-risk students lacked adequate academic competencies, failed to develop academic skills, and were under-prepared for school. These characteristics are prevalent in Hmong students.

Hmong students, most of whom come from a disadvantaged home environment and a culturally unique background, are among the poorest students, poorer than other immigrant and refugee students in the American educational system are (Siu, 1996; Vang, 1999; Vang, 2001). Yang (1995) described Hmong students as living in poverty and isolation, lacking privacy in overcrowded dwellings, lacking healthcare services, vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment, neglected or malnourished, and emotionally unstable. Ima and Rumbaut (1989) found that socio-economic status and the level of poverty of the family affected the academic achievement of Hmong children. The academic problems of LEP students are not due entirely to difficulties with English. LEP students frequently suffer from the effects of poverty, mobility, and the limited capacity of their parents to support their success in school (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Wehlry and Nelson (1987) noted that refugee students socialize almost exclusively among themselves as they progress from elementary school to high school. Generally, Hmong students who are alienated tend to have a negative self-perception and see themselves as different from mainstream students. It is possible that the lower socio-economic status of Hmong students is a factor that leads to alienation and a greater separation from language-majority students and host nation natives. Heath (1982) saw the difference between the cultural background of the teacher and that of some or all of the students in the classroom as a problem. Heath said that the absence of cultural congruence affected instruction because teachers tend to assume that culturally different students in their classes would respond to language routines and the use of language in building knowledge, skills, and dispositions just as other children did.

Moreover, Keller, Deneen, and Magallan (1991) found that the interplay of culture and language in cognitive performance somewhat influenced second language learners' academic achievement and language acquisition. For instance, LEP students processed test information more slowly in a second language than native-speaker students. This slow speed could be the result of the LEP students' lack of a full understanding of the given instructions or content.

Cultural mismatches sometimes create conflicting environments that lead to inferior educational instruction for minorities and discrimination in the classroom. Importantly, many Hmong-America students entered American schools preliterate and without school experiences. They have spoken language fluency in one language but have little or no academic language or experience with a school system or expository text in their first language. For them, use of culturally unfamiliar materials may have an adverse effect on their academic performance.

Hvitfeldt (1982) described the learning process of Hmong students as follows:

> Achievement as the result of cooperative group activity is . . . very much in line with Hmong social life outside the classroom. Cooking, gardening, shopping, fishing, car repair and many other daily activities are carried out by the Hmong in small groups rather than individually. Group activity appears to result in a high degree of achievement, perhaps because the Hmong exhibit greater self-confidence when working together. (p. 127)

A study on discontinuity and continuity between community and school found that students' home experiences were not included in the school's curriculum and/or classroom activities. The discontinuity between home and school hindered students from sharing ideas and/or developing new language skills. In contrast, continuity allows students to negotiate and share decision-making because both teachers and students are part of the decision-making process (Delgado-Gaitain, 1987).

Delgado-Gaitain (1987) noted another cultural problem for language-minority students in school. Classroom tasks normally "demand students to think mostly in abstract, linear ways, and often in English," which is difficult for students who are limited in English proficiency (p. 358). In reality, students must have multifaceted knowledge (cognitive, physical, emotional, and social competence) to perform academic tasks.

Lee (2001) and Ogbu (1993 observed that Hmong students have acquired a myth of education, called "folk theory of success," that links to social mobility. Both Hmong parents and students strongly believe that education is the key to doors, and perhaps it will help ascend the socioeconomic ladder of American society. And most Hmong students dream of going to college to pursue higher education regardless of their current social status.

Family Structure and Composition Affect Schooling

Ima and Rumbaut (1989) found that family structure, disciplinary methods, family composition, and the size of families were related to low academic achievement of refugee children. Parenting styles have a strong influence on academic achievement, affecting the development of autonomy and maturity levels in children (Hess, 2000; Rumberger, 1991). An authoritative parenting style is the most conducive to academic success because it cultivates better social attitudes and behaviors through mutual agreement (Hess, 2000).

In Asian-American families, approximately 82% of children are under the age of 18 and are living in two-parent households. A higher percentage of families live at or below the poverty level than in White and African-American families (Siu, 1996). Yang (1995) reported that the average Hmong-American family size is six, as compared to an average size of 12 in the older, traditional Hmong family.

Siu (1993) reported that the following family factors contribute to academic success: (a) demonstration of support, interest, and encouragement toward children's education; (b) placement of high value on education, success, respect for the instructors, and motivation to learn; and (c) a strong work ethic, positive role models, and authoritative parenting. Similarly, other researchers found that refugee children experienced academic success because of hard work, discipline, parental pressure to maintain family pride and honor, and family expectations (Abramson & Lindberg,

1985). Furthermore, the most successful families appeared to be those that retained their own traditions and values (Caplan, Choy, &Whitmore, 1992).

Family size does not seem to be a deterrent to academic achievement for Hmong students and other language-minority students; however, it is for students from most other cultures (Abramson & Lindberg, 1985; Caplan et al., 1992). Perhaps this is because the cultural values of work and education are strong in Hmong families.

However, family obligations remain as a critical issue among Hmong families. Although Hmong students rarely complain about domestic chores, family responsibilities and obligations do somewhat affect school grades and interfere with their educational pursuits. In the family circle, parental authority is culturally and socially preserved according to the partrilinear and patriarchal systems. As Portes and Rumbaut (1996) explained:

> Parental authority is maintained in those admittedly rare instance where little acculturation takes place in either generation. More commonly, that authority is preserved where sufficient resources exist to guide second-generation acculturation. These resources are of two kinds: first, parental education, allowing the first generation to keep up with their children's learning and to monitor its course; second, ethnic bonds, creating incentives for youth to comply with community norms and to combine them with American cultural patterns. (p. 241)

Moreover, intergenerational conflict between Hmong parents and students includes strict curfew, being traditional versus being Americanized, parental expectations, gender role, early marriage, courtship, and gang affiliation. It is apparent that Hmong parents are culturally stagnant and are not acculturating at the same rate as their children. The drastic changes in children lead to role reversal within the family circle. Sometimes these kinds of changes bring more intergenerational tension between parents and children such as losing control, family separation, humiliation, and social embarrassment. A recent study indicated that Hmong parents are willing to make paradoxical compromises to help their children cope with cultural norms and American values in order to maintain certain parental authority (Lee, 2001).

Social Inequity and Gender Roles Prohibit Access to Education

Despite family responsibilities and obligations, Hmong parents have changed quite a bit and are encouraging their daughters to pursue higher education. But in most cases, they would like their daughters to attend a college near home.

MacCorrquodale (1998) reported that most Mexican-American parents have traditional beliefs and cultural practices regarding gender roles. Similarly, Vang (1999) observed that the roles of Hmong women and men in the traditional society are extremely important to the family system. He added that the patriarchal structure of the family plays a significant role in terms of how Hmong women and men are viewed in their society. Hmong men are considered to be the heads of households. On the other hand, Hmong women are expected through marriage to become homemakers and mothers (Vang, 1999).

In the U.S., most Hmong women are still not expected to be economic producers for the family. They remain close to the home to provide childcare and domestic support (Vang, 1999). As Vang observed, "Men become involved in the outer or public sphere, which brings them social prestige and power. Women are involved in the inner or home sphere, which is giving them less prestige and power" (p. 223). Some young Hmong-American girls have difficulty dealing with both Hmong and American cultures, which differ on gender role expectations. Vang (1999) described the conflict as follows:

> If they are unable to complete their high school due to early marriage and pregnancy, they may find themselves in poverty. If they will eventually acculturate to American society, the traditional division of labor in the home will erode. If Hmong girls are expected to do household chores and duties and work outside the home, the traditional division of labor will be a major problem among Hmongs in the future. (pp. 223-224)

The gender inequity negatively impacts Hmong women academically and socially. Some Hmong parents may not totally support their daughters' college education for fear that the daughters may be "too old" to marry after earning a college degree (Vang, 1999). Traditionally, many young Hmong girls also fear this for themselves. However, U.S.-born Hmong girls do challenge the traditional concepts and seek college education and employment outside the traditional female roles (Park, 1998). Lee (2001) wrote that female Hmong students are more likely to participate in after school tutorial programs and work exceptionally hard to become academically successful students. Exclusively, according to Lee, the students with the highest education aspiration and the highest academic levels of achievement are female Hmong students.

As Vang (1999) observed, Hmong girls will eventually break away from the traditional female roles to advance their economic opportunities in this country. But still, only a very few female Hmong high school graduates (approximately 5%) continue to pursue their higher education as compared to the number of male Hmong high school graduates (12%). Overall, approximately one-third of Hmong-American educators are women; this is a strong indication that Hmong women are considering education as the key to economic stability as well as the key to achieve social status in the community. Perhaps, education could also be one of the only ways for Hmong women to gain respect inside and outside the home.

Hmong Parents' Education Correlates with Support System at Home

Generally, parents' educational backgrounds are related to their children's academic success. Students whose parents are illiterate in English or their primary language are more likely to be underachievers in school. For Hmong immigrants, Ima and Rumbaut (1989) found that parents' educational backgrounds, their pre-arrival education from refugee camps or native countries, and their perceptions of the American educational system played roles in their children's academic achievement. A large number of Hmong parents are unable to provide necessary academic support at home. Vang (2001) asserted that some Hmong children are left to fend for themselves in school since there is no support system at home.

Reder (1982) conducted a survey of educational attainment of Hmong adults and found that 73% had never attended public schools in Laos, 12% had one to three years of school, 7% had four to six years, 5% had seven to eight years, and approximately 3% had nine or more years. This means that approximately 10% of Hmong adults had elementary or secondary school education prior to immigrating to America.

Yang (1993) reported that Hmong people were 90% illiterate in some regions of Laos. Those who lived in high mountain areas had the highest illiteracy rate and those who lived in urban regions had the lowest. Siu (1996) found that only 8% of Hmong refugees had had school experience and were literate in either Hmong or Lao prior to their arrival in America.

A cross-sectional survey on the bilingualism of Hmong families with school-age children found that 37% of men and 83% of women reported no formal education in their native country (Reder, 1985). This study found that one-fourth of men and 37% of women were illiterate in Hmong or Lao. Furthermore, Reder (1982) found that 92% of Hmong women had no formal education, as compared to 46% of men. Of the individuals who had had some education in Laos, 82% were illiterate in Lao and 70% were illiterate in Hmong.

Another study reported that Hmong refugees who landed in America were about 75% illiterate with no educational background (Ranard, 1988). This finding supports those of other studies that showed that Hmong refugees had little or no formal education in Laos or anywhere else, including the refugee camps in Thailand, prior to their resettlement in America. Most studies concluded that Hmong refugees must face many new challenges in America due to a lack of basic skills and formal education. Lee (1993) found that nearly half of his Hmong refugee sample had no educational background. Some researchers concluded that the absence of an educational background hindered the assimilation process as well as the acquisition of a second language (Ranard, 1988; Reder, 1982).

Another study also showed that Hmong parents lack school experience, have language barriers, and thus are unlikely to participate in school events (Golstein, 1985). Hmong parents often naively presume school will provide their children with employment skills necessary for entering the labor force and the academic and cultural skills necessary for survival in American society. They find reality harsh when their children cannot enter colleges or find employment after high school. In some cases, Hmong parents do not seem to understand the differences in academic challenges for their foreign-born and their native-born children (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA).

Today, approximately 30% of middle-aged Hmong parents have some kind of formal education. Some young parents were raised in America and went through the American educational system. In the next 20 years, two out of every three Hmong parents will have a formal education at least through grade eight.

Parents' Socioeconomic Status Impacts Children's Education

According to the 2000 census, the poverty rate among Hmong Americans dropped from 67% to 38% in a 10-year period. However, the poverty rate varies from state to state and city to city. Due to language barriers and lack of education, a large number of Hmong adults throughout California still face a higher unemployment rate (60%) than the rates of other recent immigrant groups: Vietnamese (30%), Laotian (43%), and Cambodian (55%) (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA).

Pulaski (1994) reported that at one point approximately two-thirds of Hmong refugees in California were welfare recipients. But the number dropped significantly in 1999 as a result of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. It appears that many Hmong families have left California to seek employment in other states. In the Central Valley, some Hmong parents became self-employed, many as small farmers. In contrast, Ranard (1988) reported that some Hmong communities in America had an employment rate as high as 80%. In Fresno, the Hmong employment rate in 1999 was 35% as compared to 20% in the previous years (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA).

As noted by Yang (1995), many Hmong in Fresno are employed as fast food servers, assembly line workers, small farmers, business entrepreneurs, engineers, teachers, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists, dentists, medical doctors, college instructors, and medical interpreters. But many working families remain financially poor because of large family size and low wages. In some cases, they cannot get out of the welfare system. Less educated parents are unable to secure long-term employment to stay off welfare. Hmong parents are concerned about their inability to provide financial support for their children's education and feel that their level of family poverty directly impacts their children's future (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA). Nevertheless, Hmong-American families are leaning toward self-sufficiency by entering the business world to become entrepreneurs and small business owners. In California, many Hmong families have become small farmers.

Difference between American Born and Foreign Born Hmong Students

A recent study found Hmong students in two distinct groups: the first generation, considered to be traditional or old-fashioned students or foreign-born students; the second-generation, considered to be Americanized or American born students (Lee, 2001). A large number of Hmong children were born overseas and emigrated to the U.S. In 1996, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that approximately 52% of Asian-American students were U.S.-born and 48% were foreign-born; three out of four came from bilingual homes. Foreign-born students were twice as likely as U.S.-born students to be identified as at-risk for school failure.

Typically, those in the at-risk category were foreign-born students who came from non-English language backgrounds, lived at or below the poverty level, went to urban schools, and entered the U.S. in their late teens. These individuals were over-represented in the under-educated group. Foreign-born Asian-American students who came from poor families were 1.6 times more likely to be under-educated than those from more advantaged homes (Siu, 1996).

For instance, Hess (2000) pointed out that foreign-born Latino students were far more likely than their at-risk peers to under-achieve in school, having a failure rate of 43% as compared to 24% for second-generation Latinos. The second-generation Latinos were "presumed to be English proficient" (p. 268). Hmong students who were born in the U.S. already have some mastery of English and the American culture, but Hmong LEP students from immigrant and refugee families usually do not possess these skills and knowledge. They need to learn these from others.

In 1989, the *Hmong California Times* reported that approximately 80% of the Hmong students in the American public schools were born in other countries: Thailand, Laos, Philippines, and France ("Hmong Children in American Public Schools," 1989). However, Vang (1992) reported that the proportion of foreign-born Hmong Americans dropped to approximately 60% in the early 1990s, when more Hmong students born in America enrolled in public schools than a few years earlier.

At the present time, approximately 50% of K-12 Hmong students in California are foreign-born but were raised mostly in America. In the next 10 years, there will be more native-born Hmong students in public schools. And perhaps Hmong will become their second language.

Americanized Hmong children seem to have more complex problems in school than traditional Hmong children (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA). However, studies indicated that Hmong students born in America appear to fare better in school because they are familiar with the English language structure and have been exposed to academics at an early age (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference; Vang, 1999).

Despite all obstacles, Lee (2001) indicated that the external and internal forces play an important part of Hmong students' academic success or failure. The internal forces may include the lack of motivation, primary language deficiency, insufficient academic ability, and slow acculturation. On the other hand, the external forces may include the lack of support system at home, being newcomers, lack of learning experience, inadequate preparation, peer pressure, the level of family poverty, and capricious academic pedagogy.

Hmong Primary Language Literacy Predicts Second Language Acquisition

The Hmong language was first written in 1952, when French and American missionaries used the Roman alphabet to formalize a written Hmong language (McGinn, 1989). The Hmong people came from the northern regions of China, so their language is a Sino-Tibetan dialect. Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, and Yang (1988) observed that the Hmong language has eight different tones, two of which may be considered variants of the same tone phoneme.

Native language literacy level influences refugee students' cognitive development in second-language acquisition (Morrow, 1989). Robson (1982) found that among Hmong youth acquiring English as a second language, those who could read their native Hmong did better than those who could not. Robson suggested that being able to read the Hmong language helped students learn a second language. Robson compared those without an educational background who could read Hmong to those with an educational background who could read it and found very little difference between the two groups.

Reder (1982) reported that those who could not read the Hmong language made less progress than those who were literate. These studies strongly imply that educational background is a predictor in ESL acquisition for Hmong students. These findings support the premise that primary language literacy plays a role in second language acquisition.

Moreover, Reder (1982) studied newly arrived Hmong refugee children and found that the process of acquiring English was a slow one. The ability to read a primary language was a key factor in school performance and secondary language acquisition. This finding supports Robson's conclusion that Hmong students who had proficiency in their primary language acquired English more easily. Cummins (1991) studied the process of second language acquisition and first language attrition among minority students and found that fluency in the primary language strongly related to the development of a second language. Again, these studies suggest that literacy and competency in the native language facilitates the acquisition of English.

McGinn (1989) studied the native language literacy of Hmong adolescents in California and found that nearly half had a minimum ability to read and write Hmong. This means that a large number of Hmong adolescents were illiterate in their native tongue while they were attending American public schools.

Weslander and Stephany (1983) found that approximately 63% of Hmong students could not read their first language as compared to 30% of Vietnamese students. Vang (1999) observed that many Hmong students were proficient in neither their native language nor English and approximately 85% of elementary and secondary Hmong students were illiterate in Hmong. However, Sonsalla (1984) found that neither districts nor schools had explored the role of Hmong literacy as it relates to student progress.

Although other educators believe that primary language literacy and age at the time of arrival in America are important factors in second language acquisition (Ima & Rumbaut, 1989; Weslander & Stephany, 1983), the primary language literacy in Hmong is absent in most Hmong children since there is no learning of Hmong dialect in formalized setting. Most American born Hmong students are currently using Hmonglish, the mix of Hmong and English, as a form of communication with parents at home. Sometimes this new dialect leads parents and children to more complicated issues such as disagreement, misunderstanding, and intergenerational conflicts.

Effect of Age Is Critical in Second Language Learning

Researchers have found that age is a factor in learning a second language (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Lenneberg, 1967). Ima and Rumbaut (1989) reported that age at the time of arrival is a key factor that predicts how well Hmong children acquire English and perform in school. It is generally assumed that children learn a second language more easily than adults do.

Lenneberg (1967) proposed that a second language was best learned in the critical period between the age of 2 years and the onset of puberty. He stated that the ability to learn languages is debilitated by the completion of a process of lateralization in the brain, during which each side of the brain develops its own specialized functions.

Children who learn their second language before puberty do, in fact, acquire native-like pronunciation, unlike adults, who usually speak a second language with an accent. Similarly, Bialystok and Hakuta (1994) felt that younger was indeed better, and children acquiring a second language might not be considered typical second language learners at all if they learn the second language before the age of five or so years.

Furthermore, Collier (1987) found that children between the ages of 8 and 12 years acquired a second language faster than did children between the ages of four and seven. This could be related to cognitive maturity and first-language development and competence. In some cases, children past the age of 12 seemed to slow down in learning a second language, probably because the demands made of them in school were beyond the level of language that they could bring to bear on the learning process.

Hernandez (1994) cautioned that the interference factor could cause some effects in the order of acquisition of specific aspects of language such as learning the phonological process. Moreover, Hernandez noted that transfer from the first language does not help second language acquisition when the primary language is a completely different language from the language being learned, without any similarities in phonological forms. This explains why Hmong LEP students cannot transfer Hmong vocabulary cognates to English. They can, however, transfer the basic skills learned in their first language development.

As Lessow-Hurley (2000) stated, "Using first language knowledge and skills may produce errors that resemble interference, but which are in fact evidence of a creative cognitive strategy for solving the new language puzzle" (p. 45). This suggests that academic background facilitates second language acquisition.

Year of Hmong Family's Entry to the U. S. Plays a Role in School Achievement

Hmong refugees are part of the second wave of immigration from Southeast Asia. The first wave was mostly from Vietnam prior to 1975. When the Hmong came to the U.S., they were in a transitional process called "adaptation and conflict" (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA). Warfare, refugee status, and poor health disrupted Hmong students' schooling (Bliatout et al., 1988; Siu, 1996; Vang, 1999). The year of the family's entry to the U. S. is an indicator of the length of time a student has been living in the U.S. and how long that student has been enrolled in the American educational system.

Length of time living in America plays a key role in how students perform in the American public schools. Caplan (1985) found that after three years in the U.S. some refugee children did extremely well in public schools. Walker (1988) suggested that, since Hmong students came to this country with very little or no school experience, the longer they stayed in the U.S., the better they would perform in school.

Similarly, Yang (1995) and Weslander and Stephany (1983) found length of time residing in the U.S. to be an important factor influencing educational performance of Southeast Asian students, including Hmong students. These authors suggested that the longer Hmong students reside in the U.S., the better they perform in school.

However, the majority of Hmong students have been living in the U.S. for quite some time and are still not doing well in school. Many have poor language skills (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills—BICS), helpful only for survival. They still lack academic language needed to perform academic tasks (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency—CALP). Ima and Rumbaut (1988) reported that Hmong students' academic skills remained very poor throughout grades K-12.

These researchers suggested that the majority of Hmong-American students are unlikely to succeed beyond secondary school. One of the issues that many K-8 Hmong students born in America are still facing in school is their inability read, write, and understand English proficiently regardless of the length of time residing in the US. And perhaps this issue will remain unsolved in the next several years, unless public schools implement an intervention program specifically designed to help Hmong students in the earlier grades.

Hmong Students' Academic Success Is Emerging

Academic success for Hmong students has been defined as achieving high grades and high grade point averages (GPA), attaining high scores on standardized achievement tests, and graduating on time (Caplan et al., 1992; Ima & Rumbaut, 1989; Purdham, 1988; Wheeler, Schroeder, & Tafoya, 1982). By these measures, academic achievement among Hmong secondary students in America is lower than achievement in grades K-8.

The academic achievement of Hmong students appears to be declining more steeply in secondary school than in primary school. Yang (1995) reported that the average GPA of Hmong students, on a four-point scale, declined from 9th grade to 12th grade. The average GPA of Hmong 9th graders is 3.75; of tenth graders, 3.07; of eleventh graders, 2.96; and of 12th graders, 3.05.

O'Reilly (1998) observed that whereas U.S. Hmong students have excelled academically at different times, their academic performance changes dramatically as they go through the process of assimilation and integration. The author noted that at one time Hmong students refused to settle for any grade lower than an "A."

Now, however, Hmong secondary students are failing at a higher rate than the rest of the student body. O'Reilly listed several academic problems among Hmong students: (a) poor attendance or truancy, (b) failing grades, (c) poor behaviors, (d) credit deficiencies, (e) violation of school rules, (f) extensive disciplinary records, (g) suspensions, and (h) adjudications.

Furthermore, Hmong secondary students also face a new set of values when entering the mainstream culture. In some communities, the academic trends among Hmong children differ from those of the first generation that came to America 28 years ago. Hmong children become more Americanized every day, adopting many behaviors of mainstream American youth. Some Hmong children have undergone rapid changes in their lifestyles, social and economic development, and educational status.

These drastic changes sometimes lead to academic failure and culture clashes inside the family. As mentioned earlier, Hmong children are perceived to be the first generation students who are considered to be traditional and are referred to as good kids and/or the second generation students who are considered to be Americanized and are referred to as bad kids in the Hmong community. Lee (2001) suggested that the academic success of Hmong students comes from the practice of accommodation and acculturation without assimilation, which is the result of both cultural transformation and cultural preservation.

Vang (2001) noted how a Hmong secondary student successfully graduated from high school as follows:

> This student shared his story of fulfillment in life. He wanted to fulfill his father's dream. His family had been on public assistance ever since the first day they arrived in America in 1980. They were still poor and lived in an overcrowded dwelling. He shared a room with his four brothers. He believed college education is the key to a better economic opportunity in America. His goal is to have a better life. He said, "My dad told everyone to earn good education to have a better life.... My dad means we should not live in the past life... 'Cause today's action is tomorrow's success." He quoted a Hmong proverb, "Tomorrow is longer than yesterday and I believe in it. I need to prepare for my future. I have seen my present life situation... and I need a better one. To have one is to get college education." (p. 74)

Furthermore, successful Hmong students have one of seven characteristics: (a) a mutual relationship with their parents; (b) the ability to discuss educational situations with parents who listen to their stories; (c) parents who advise and guide them; (d) a goal and a plan for their immediate future after graduating from high school; (e) access to resources such as technology, teachers/counselors, extra activities, school programs, and role models; (f) coping skills for dealing with academic, social, and economic problems; and (g) positive self-esteem (O'Reilly, 1998). Perhaps these characteristics could be used as indicators of the potential academic success or failure of U.S. Hmong students. They certainly demonstrate that family, language, culture, and environment all play roles in how Hmong students perform in school.

Abramson and Lindberg (1985) found that Hmong students in grades K-12 in California have socio-emotional traits that facilitate learning and school adjustment, grasping academic concepts, and making cross-cultural adjustments. However, these students require more instruction in the oral and written language of the host culture. Similarly, Reder (1985) found that Hmong adolescents have a great level of educational need because they lack language ability and study skills. Students who demonstrate deficiencies and/or differences in language, behaviors, or emotional competencies are at-risk of school failure (Hess, 2000).

Despite all obstacles, Hmong Americans have had some success since they first arrived in the U.S. More than 173 Hmong Americans have earned doctoral degrees in different educational disciplines, and several thousands have received master's degrees in various professional fields. In 2000, more than 10,000 Hmong Americans earned their undergraduate degrees and another several thousands are currently enrolled in public higher education institutions throughout the U.S. (Hmong Issues 2000 Conference, Fresno, CA).

In addition, several Hmong American professors are working at various colleges and universities across the nation. Many Hmong Americans are also employed as part-time instructors at the college level. And many Hmong-American students are valedictorians and recipients of distinguished honor awards.

School Dropout Rate among Hmong Students Is Still Low Overall

Hmong students are still exhibiting serious adjustment problems and have complex issues in education because their academic skills are far below grade level (Ima & Rumbaut, 1989; O'Reilly, 1998; Siu, 1996; Vang, 1999). One of these problems is low scholastic achievement. This is important because poor academic achievement is the most common predictor of school failure (O'Reilly, 1998). The poor academic achievement of Hmong students constitutes a crisis in high schools as well as in the community (O'Reilly, 1998).

There is conflicting information regarding school dropout among U.S. Hmong students. Some studies suggest that Hmong students have a low dropout rate as compared to other immigrant and refugee students, and other studies report high dropout rates among both male and female Hmong students in high school.

Generally, immigrant and refugee children are at highest risk of dropping out in their first year of schooling because this is normally a difficult time with tremendous emotional stress. If they lack support at home, these students are even more likely to drift away from school. Olsen (1988) reported that the national dropout rate for Filipinos in 1988 was 46%, for Pacific Islanders 17%, for Latinos 14%, for Cambodians 14%, for Vietnamese 11%, for Hmong and other Southeast-Asian sub-groups (Lao, Mien, Yao, and Lahu) 5%, and for Whites 10%.

In a narrower study, Reder (1982) found in 1982 that male Hmong adolescents had a 60% dropout rate, whereas the dropout rate for female Hmong adolescents was 95%. The discrepancy between this finding and later research can be explained by the fact that Hmong teenagers were getting married in high school in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Many male Hmong teenagers left school to find employment following marriage and the majority of married Hmong teenage girls did not return to school after marriage.

The reduction of teen pregnancy and teenage marriage increased the high school enrollment rate for both male and female Hmong students in the late 1980s (Vang, 1992). A majority of female Hmong adolescents still get married during high school (Golstein, 1985; Vang, 1992). Vang (2001) documented how a Hmong secondary student dropped out of school as follows:

> This student shared her story of disappointment. She was married at the age of fifteen and a half. She had no clue about having a family or being a married person. In Hmong culture, she had many roles and responsibilities at home. Her husband dropped out to look for a job. Things were difficult for her when she conceived her first child. She said, "All of sudden, things are falling apart on me." She added, "My mind is at home while my body is some place else. Sometimes I do not know what I am doing in school." She said, "I cannot blame anyone for my own mistakes after I have refused to listen to my parents. I should endure my own regret." She was disappointed over her own failure. She also said, "No girl should go through what I have gone through in life. It is terrible and painful for young people. Listen to your parents if you are stuck with a problem or ask your teacher for directions. Don't try it the wrong way." (p. 69)

Statistically, the reduction in adolescent pregnancy and marriage is still insufficient to prevent female Hmong students from leaving high schools. Vang also found that 95% of Hmong secondary students graduate on time. However, this study concluded that only 10% to 15% of Hmong high school graduates are qualified to enter public universities because they still lack the academic skills needed for success. As Lee (2001) observed, " The school success or failure of first generation and second generation Hmong students does not hinge on any one thing, but rather on a marriage of both external and internal forces" (p. 526).

Future Trend of Hmong Students' Education Seems Promising

Vang (2001) found that the academic skills of Hmong-American students remain superficial and these students are far from achieving their academic goals. Generally, Hmong students are often perceived and stereotyped by the public as either high achieving "model minorities" or "low achieving delinquents." The academic trend for Hmong students appears to be cloudy and unforeseeable because most of them are poorly prepared in grade schools. Hmong-American adults must help the children of their communities.

Hmong-American students need more positive role models to guide them through and beyond the American traditional education system. Moreover, public schools should have a big part in helping Hmong students succeed. Schools should try to make Hmong students full citizens by showing some understanding and respect toward their culture and academic levels of difficulties they are facing in school and at home as they are trying to straddle the gulf between their culture and the larger American society, introducing academic curricula that reflects their history, and providing a sense of inclusion in the school community at large (Lee, 2001).

Hmong students should take the academic opportunities that are available to them seriously and decisively. These opportunities are golden dreams and promises that Hmong students should consider taking advantage of to help them enter the mainstream culture in America. As one researcher reported, "U.S. Hmong secondary students learned that schooling did not necessarily lead to social acceptance into American society, but they continued to believe that it holds the key to economic success" (Golstein, 1985, p. 276).

Hmong-American students need not ponder what is best for them at the present time; instead they need to ponder what they can do in the present that will matter in the future. As Vang (2001) noted, successful Hmong students tend to think more about the future than their present situations. Hmong college students are more focused on long-term career than short-term one because they have learned from past experience that long-term career gives more stability. As noted in Vang (2001), a Hmong high school student revealed his dream and opportunity as follows:

> This student shared his story of a dream of a better opportunity in America. He came from France about eight years ago. He said, "Hmong had limited opportunities in France, as compared to this country, but America can give you the opportunity after high school, not French." He added, "In France, you have to be one of the best students. Not in America. Here you can choose a future goal. I like this kind of freedom." His dream is to become a businessman. He said, " Motivation is the key and long-term goal is for future stability. Short-term goal is for today and long-term goal is for tomorrow. It is good to have both, but concentrate on the best goal." He added, "As refugee, Hmong students need to have a long-term plan, like a social security plan. I have seen people work so hard for little money and other people work so little for a lot of money. This is some thing they ought to think about their careers. We cannot continue to be the working poor.... The poor people become poorer every day and the rich people become richer every day." (pp. 75-76)

Hmong students need to understand and appreciate the sacrifices and the aspirations of their parents and find ways to achieve the goals their parents have for them. Otherwise, they will lack the motivation to do the hard work necessary to pursue the American dream, including taking advantage of every academic opportunity. Many capable Hmong students have left schools due to personal reasons such as earlier marriage, odd jobs, credit debts, family obligations, and social temptations. These impediments are preventable if Hmong students receive assistance earlier enough.

Most problems are not dealt with in a timely manner. And in most cases, parents and public schools fail to detect them until it is too late. Hmong parents should get involved in their children's public education if they would like to see their children achieve at a higher rate. Whether Hmong parents are culturally bound to certain beliefs and cultural norms or not, they should think outside the box to advocate educational equality for their children. Keep in mind that once parents neglect their children's education, so do public schools.

Parents and public schools have responsibilities and legal obligations to make sure that each child receives quality education. The power to make a difference in a child's education usually lies in the hands of parents. Today's action is tomorrow's success. It is time for Hmong-American students to think seriously and creatively about ways to improve their self-esteem, to succeed in school, and to attain their academic and life goals.

References

Abramson, S., & Lindberg, G. (1985, March). Achievement of Southeast Asian students and its relation to school resources program. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL.

August, D., & Hakuta, K. (1997). *Improving schooling for language-minority children: A research agenda*. Davis, CA: Author.

Bialystok, E., & Hakuta, K. (1994). *In other words: The science and psychology of second language acquisition*. New York: Basic Books.

Bliatout, B. T., Downing, B. T., Lewis, J., & Yang, D. (1988). *Handbook for teaching Hmong-speaking students*. Folsom, CA: Folsom Cordova Unified School District.

Caplan, N. (1985). *Working toward self-sufficiency*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University, Ann Arbor Institute for Social Research. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 263253)

Caplan, N., Choy, M., & Whitmore, J. (1992, February). Indo-Chinese refugee families and academic achievement. *Scientific American*, 35-42.

Collier, V. P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4(3), 21-30

Cummins, J. (1991). The development of bilingual proficiency from home to school: A longitudinal study of Portuguese-speaking children. *Journal of Education, 173*(2), 342-345.

Delgado-Gaitain, C. (1987). Traditions and transitions in the learning process of Mexican children: An ethnographic view. In *Interpretive ethnography ofeEducation: At home and abroad*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Golstein, B. L. (1985). Schooling for cultural transition: Hmong girls and boys in American high schools. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Heath, S. B. (1982). Questioning at home and at school: A comparative study. In G. Spindler (Ed.), *Doing the ethnography of schooling* (pp. 234-236). New York: Macmillan

Hernandez, R. D. (1994, Winter). Reducing bias in the assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse populations. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 14*, 269-300.

Hess, R. S. (2000). Dropping out among Mexican American youth: Reviewing the literature through an ecological perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk, 5*(3), 367-289.

Hmong children in American public schools. (1989). *Hmong California Times*, p. A5.

Hvitfeldt, C. (1982). Learning language and literacy: A microethnographic study of Hmong classroom behavior. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Ima, K., & Rumbaut, R. (1988). *The adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee youth: A comparative study.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Ima, K., & Rumbaut, R. G. (1989, June). Southeast Asian refugees in American schools: A comparison of fluent-English-proficient and limited-English-proficient students. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 60-75.

Keller, G., Deneen, J., & Magallan, R., (1991). *Assessment and curriculum: Hispanics in higher education.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Lee. J. S. (2001). More than "Model Minorities" or "Delinquents": A look at Hmong American high school students. *Harvard Educational Review, 71*(3), Fall.

Lee,V. W. (1993). Low literacy immigrant students pose new challenges. *New Voices, 3*(1), 1-3.

Lenneberg, E. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Lessow-Hurley, J. (2000). *The foundations of dual language instruction*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

MacCorrquodale, P. (1998). *Mexican-American women and mathematics: Participation, aspiration, and achievement*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Elrbaum Associates.

Martin, G. (1991). Family, gender, and social policy. In L. Kramer (Ed.), *The sociology of gender* (pp. 320-345). New York: St. Martin's Press.

McGinn, F. (1989). Hmong literacy among adolescents and the use of Hmong literacy during resettlement. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California.

Morrow, R. D. (1989). Southeast Asian child-rearing practices: Implications for child and youth care workers. *Child and Youth Care Quarterly, 18*(4), 273-288.

National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (1996). *A comparison of high school dropout rates in 1982 and 1992.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement.

Ogbu, J. U. (1993). Variability in minority school performance: A problem in search

of an explanation. In E. Jacob & C. Jordon (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspective* (pp. 83-107). Norwood. NJ: Ablex.

Olsen, L. (1988). *Immigrant students and the California public schools: Crossing the schoolhouse border.* San Francisco: California Tomorrow.

O'Reilly, T. (1998). An investigation of Hmong students' academic success. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

Park, C. (1998). A comparative study of educational and occupational aspirations: Southeast Asian and Anglo students. Paper presented at the annual conference of American Educational Research Association, April, San Diego, CA.

Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. (1996). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (2nd Ed.) Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Pulaski, A. (1994). Welfare reliance among Hmong spread to next generation. *The Fresno Bee*, Sec. A, pp. 1 & 15.

Purham, L. (1988). *Teaching English limited proficient children: PREP-preparing refugees for elementary programs*. Bataan, Philippines: World Relief Philippine Refugee Processing Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services, no. ED 342206)

Ranard, D. A. (1988, November). *The Hmong in America* (1).

Reder, S. (1982). A Hmong community's acquisition of English. *The Hmong in the West.* Minneapolis, MN: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota.

Reder, S. (1985). *The Hmong resettlement study.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Robson, B. (1982). Hmong literacy, formal education and their effects on performing in an ESL class. *The Hmong in the West*. Minneapolis, MN: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota.

Rumberger, R. W. (1991). Chicano dropouts: A review of research and policy issues. In R. R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (pp. 64-89). New York: Falmer.

Siu, S. F. (1993). Taking no chances: Profile of a Chinese-American family's support for school success. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA.

Siu, S. F. (1996). *The review of literature on Asian-American students at-risk*. CRESPAR Language minority studies.

Sonsalla, D. (1984). A comparative case study of secondary school programs for Hmong refugee students in the Minneapolis and St. Paul schools. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota.

U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Institute for the Education of At-Risk Students. (1998). *Facts about limited English proficient students*. Washington, DC: Author.

Vang, C. T. (2001). Histories and academic profiles of successful and unsuccessful Hmong secondary students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis and California State University, Fresno.

Vang, A. T. (1999). Hmong-American students: Challenges and opportunities. *Asian-American Education.* Stamford, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Wehlry, B., & Nelson, W. (1987). The assimilation and acculturation of Indo-Chinese refugees into Illinois schools. Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University, Department of Counselor Education and College Student Personnel. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. 278741)

Weslander, D., & Stephany, G. V. (1983). Evaluation of English as a second language program for Southeast Asian students. *TESOL Quarterly, 17*, 473-480.

Wheeler, G., Schroeder, A. B., & Tafoya, C. (1982). *Evaluation of a dual bilingual program: English-Spanish and English-Southeast Asian languages.* Clovis, NM: Clovis Public Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. 233651)

Wright, R. (1997). A study of the academic language of college-bound at-risk secondary students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, University of California, Davis/California State University, Fresno.

Yang, D. (1982). Why did Hmong leave Laos? In B. T. Downing & D. P. Onley (Eds.), *The Hmong in the West*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

Yang, D. (1993). Hmong at the turning point. In J.L. Blake (Ed.), *Hmong at the Turning Point* (pp. 230-240). Minneapolis, MN: World Bridge Associate.

Yang, K. (1995). The Hmong in Fresno: A study of Hmong welfare participation and self-sufficiency. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, University of California, Davis/ California State University, Fresno.