

THE MISSING VOICE OF HMONG PARENTS: STUDYING SUPPORTS AND  
OBSTACLES TO PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis  
of NALEE MOUA find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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THE MISSING VOICE OF HMONG PARENTS: STUDYING SUPPORTS AND  
OBSTACLES TO PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

Abstract

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Parental involvement continues to be a topic of interest among many teachers and school administrators. The purpose of this thesis is to gain an in-depth understanding of the Hmong community and the obstacles and barriers that may hinder their involvement in their child's education as well as the support they may have received that helped increase their involvement. I provide this information to teachers and school administrators so they can become more aware of the reasoning behind the increase or decrease of Hmong parental involvement

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, my father, my six siblings, my uncle and my sister in law and two beautiful nieces who provided continuous support throughout my two year journey.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The topic of parental involvement is of interest throughout the education system in the United States as well as around the world. Parents play a huge role in the success or failure of their children in education. Positive outcomes are seen when parents are more involved in their child's education. Hill and Taylor (2004) mention that "parental involvement promotes positive academic experiences for children and has positive effects on parents' self-development and parenting skills" (p. 161). Karim (2010) notes that studies have also shown that when parents assert themselves and are involved in their children`s education, children achieve at higher levels. Parental involvement also has a long-lasting effect on children especially when parents work directly with their child during the learning process (Karim, 2010).

Considering that English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest and largest growing student population in the United States in the past twenty years, understanding parental involvement is necessary for better understanding of how children may succeed in school (Arias & Campbell, 2008). Supple and Small (2009) mention that by 2050, "Americans of European descent will no longer constitute a statistical majority of the U.S population" (p. 1214). This is due to the increase of immigrants from Asia and Latin America as well as the increase in the reproduction rates of current immigrants in the U.S. Therefore, it is important to be able to meet the needs of these students as well as assist their families in helping parents to become more involved if they are not already doing so.

The issue revolving around parental involvement is the continuous assumption that minority parents are not as involved as their English speaking counterparts typically of European

descent. However, that may not be the case. Obstacles and barriers need to be considered and examined when evaluating how involved a minority parent is or is not. It is important to let the parents know what the expectations are for parental involvement in the U.S. For example, Turney and Kao (2010) emphasize the importance of letting parents know what they are expected to do in terms of involvement. This is because minority or immigrant parents may simply not be aware that they are expected to be involved in the school aspect of their child's education. Larocque, Kleiman and Darling (2011) argue that "parents want the best for their children; however, they are sometimes not able to articulate this value on the basis of their cultural mores or norms" (p. 117).

In order to close the gap, especially in the Hmong community, it would be beneficial for teachers to become more familiar with their students' culture and traditions because this will enhance their ability to create a friendlier environment for their students and create better communication with parents to promote parental involvement (Breiseth, Robertson, & Lafond, 2011). Therefore, the focus of this research will be to examine the Hmong community through the lenses of Hmong parents.

### **Research Questions**

The central research is to find out what are the obstacles and barriers Hmong parents face in terms of parental involvement. What are the obstacles and barriers Hmong parents face in terms of parental involvement? The second research question is what are the supports Hmong parents receive from the teachers and the schools in regards to parental involvement?

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Parental involvement has gained attention in recent years due to the positive impact it has on a child's education. This is partly because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act which reauthorized "the [1965] Elementary and Secondary Education Act, [...] originally enacted in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty" (Rudalevige, 2003, p. 63). NCLB was created to close the education gap. Schools receiving Title I funding must ensure that students are able to meet the standards by providing support and assistance (Epstein, 2005). Every year, Title I provides almost \$12 billion to schools so they can support the education of their students especially those who may be disadvantaged (Rudalevige, 2003). NCLB has different clauses that schools should focus on and one of those clauses revolves around parental involvement. Epstein (2005) mentions that NCLB emphasizes parental involvement and identifies it as a crucial component to improving many aspects of the educational system. The aim is to ensure that parental involvement is enhanced through school requirements to provide professional development and training for parents and educators in order to create strong relationships within the community (Epstein, 2005).

With the implementation of NCLB, the importance of having a strong relationship and communication with the parents was again in focus. Larocque et al. (2011) stressed that schools need the support of their students' families and communities because they cannot and do not have the ability to educate every single child by themselves. Therefore, it is important to build a positive relationship with the student and their families and communities because each of them plays a crucial role in the success and achievement of their students. In other words, the parents,

the teachers, the school administration, and the community, among others, must be able to understand the roles of each group and be able to adjust accordingly (Larocque et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, many wrong assumptions are made due to lack of communication and misunderstandings among stakeholders such as educators, caregivers, and the school administration. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) found that teachers frequently interpret the lack of attendance and visibility of parents as disinterest. The authors argue that this perspective lacks consideration of the obstacles that may be preventing parents from becoming involved. The interpretation is based off of what the teachers can see and cannot see. They do not realize obstacles preventing parents from becoming visible in the school setting include language and cultural barriers, to name a few. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) noted that due to the fact that some parents do not speak English, many teachers assume the parents do not care about their child's education, especially if the child does not make any progress in school. Larocque et al. (2011) also found that teachers admit that sometimes they do not know how to effectively communicate with parents and guide them in becoming more involved in the child's education because the teachers have had little to no training in interacting with parents. However, this then leads to the discussion of what is considered as parental involvement?

### **Parental involvement**

Parental involvement has been defined in many different ways within research. In order to understand why the level of parental involvement for minority parents is considered low, one has to be able to decipher the difference between parental involvement and parental engagement. Lee (2007) defines parental involvement as "those who are involved in the day-to-day activities of their children's education, including their academic learning" (p. 181). Lee and Bowen (2006) mention that some teachers define parental involvement as activities indicating parental

involvement at school, such as volunteering at the school, going to parent-teacher conferences, and attending events in which the student is involved, such as a band performance. Aguiano (2004) defines parental involvement as “an umbrella term for different types of activities that depict the involvement of parents in nonacademic and academic activities that may contribute to their children's educational success” (p. 62).

Furthermore, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) define parental involvement as “the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain;” and they also break it down into three different components: behavior involvement, personal involvement and cognitive-intellectual involvement (p. 238). The behavior involvement aspect has to do with parents attending school events and showing support for their child. For example, this could include school activities such as participating in the annual open house or volunteering time in the classroom. The importance of this aspect is so that the parent can model the importance of school and hope their child follows suit as well as let the teachers realize how dedicated the parents are (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). The personal involvement aspect has an emphasis on parents being knowledgeable about their child’s school and the subjects and materials that are being taught in school. For instance, if a child is currently working on a geography unit in class, it would be beneficial if the parents knew this information so they would be able to relate when their child returns from school. Last, the cognitive-intellectual aspect “refers to exposing the child to intellectually stimulating activities, such as reading with the child” (Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005, p. 101).

Like Grolnick and Slowiaczek, Epstein and Salinas (2004), also break down parental involvement. However, they break theirs down into six different components: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the

community. These types of involvements are necessary in order to improve the partnership and communication between schools and parents. First of all, the parenting component emphasizes providing the parents with the necessary resources and support to help with their child's development both on and off school settings. For example, this measure, especially the support aspect, would help the school to understand the cultures and background of their students if they are aware of what the student needs in order to be successful. As the school continues to learn about their students, they are also providing assistance to the families, which build trust with the families. Next, the communicating aspect is to create a strong sense of communication between the parents and the school. This means teachers should do their best to give continuous updates about their students' progress as well as provide the parents with information about what is happening in school. Third, the volunteering aspect has to do with the recruitment process of parent volunteers and to provide them with an opportunity to become more active in the school setting. This also includes the unification of parents and teachers to support the students. Fourth, the learning at home aspect has to do with providing interactive opportunities for parents to become involved in their child's academic learning at home. For instance, this includes having the teachers provide homework that may enable students to actively engage with their parents and have discussions on various topics. Fifth, the decision making aspect is to encourage parents to participate in the decision making process at school through different mediums such as the parent-teacher association (PTA). Last, the collaborating with the community aspect is to provide resources and services to the various students, families and school communities. This provides the opportunity for the community, itself, to give back to other people in the community.

In contrast to this more optimistic view of parental involvement in school, Breiseth et al. (2011) provides a critical analysis of parental involvement, suggesting that “the ideas and energy

[that] come from the schools and government mandates [in which] schools try to ‘sell’ their ideas to [the] parents” (p. 6). This means that it would be the school’s responsibility to inform the parents about various agendas. For example, if the school wanted to have a cultural night, they would notify the parents and try to make it interesting so the parents would attend the event. Also, it is important to understand that certain standards or definitions that the school may have about parental involvement may not necessarily have the same interpretation to parents, especially minority parents. Thus, it is crucial to make parents aware of what is expected of them and how parental involvement is defined at their child’s school.

Examples of parental involvement include: parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at the school, attending school events and more. Other activities include communicating with the school and making sure they, the parents, are informed of what is happening at the school and their child's classroom. Involvement at home consists of helping their child with homework and having conversations with their child about their day at school and what they learned. Encouraging their child to read at home is also important and demonstrates parental involvement. These types of involvement show that parental involvement is not always measurable through activities and participation at school, especially if teachers are unable to see the act of involvement at home. In other words, parents may be involved in many other ways, especially at home even if they are not showing the kind of involvement that teachers value at school, such as attending a school event. Involvement defined in this way is different from what authors in the field refer to as parental *engagement*.

### **Parental engagement**

Parental engagement begins with the parents. Parental involvement is one type of engagement that is highly valued by schools; however, minority parents who are engaged with

their children's education cannot always participate in the same ways as other parents due to language, cultural and or financial barriers. Breiseth et al. (2011) define parental engagement as the ideas which are "elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships" (p. 6). This means that the parents are the ones contributing to event planning. This also gives parents the opportunity to voice their needs and priorities in order to help their child succeed in school as well as build their relationship with the school. Compared to parental involvement, school administrators do the listening and provide the extra support to the parents instead of the parents being the listeners. Ferlazzo (2011) argues that the purpose of parental engagement is to gain more partners and to strengthen the relationship between the parents and the school. This becomes more effective because it requires the school to listen to the parents and make accommodations for them. Although the school may be doing the listening, there are still obstacles and barriers that need to be considered.

### **Obstacles and barriers**

No doubt parents want to be involved in their child's education, but they are limited due to many cultural barriers and obstacles. Keeping the background in mind, there are many factors one should consider when speaking of parental involvement and why many parents are or are not involved in their child's education. There are many reasons parents may be reluctant to take part in their child's education, from school events to helping out with homework. The different obstacles include the feeling of being valued, prior school experiences, socioeconomic status, language barriers, cultural differences and more. Alternatively, they simply are not aware that they should be highly involved in their child's education.

First of all, many parents mentioned that they felt their participation in their child's education was not valued by the teachers and administrators (Anguiano, 2004). Many minority

parents' contributions go unnoticed by general education teachers and school administrators because the teachers are not present to see the contribution. Contributions such as encouraging their children to read at home or to do their homework as well as attending afterschool events, go unnoticed by the teachers because they are not there. Some parents are unable to attend events during school hours, however, they continue to show support for their children by attending afterschool events such as sports events, demonstrating their parental involvement. Larocque et al. (2011) state that parents who feel more valued and a part of the community will be more involved in their child's education compared to those parents who do not feel welcomed and valued. Aside from feeling welcomed, a parent's previous school experience may have an effect on how active they are in their child's education. For instance, "cultural differences may [...] impede the school relationships [one] wish[es] to achieve, if parents' prior experiences with schools were minimal or if their school experiences emphasized separate, autonomous roles for home and school" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008, p. 194). Hill and Taylor (2004) reiterated this point by mentioning that the more positive the parent's school experience was, the more it would likely increase the parent's interaction and comfort level with the school.

Next, a family's socioeconomic status (SES) may be problematic in terms of time commitment and being able to spend time with their children. Hill and Taylor (2004) found that "parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face many more barriers to involvement, including nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems, and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods (p. 162). Larocque et al. (2011) also recap the same obstacles by mentioning how minority parent counterparts have a more stable employment and flexible schedule which allow them to be more involved in their child's education. Because of

the nature of the jobs of minority parents, their ability to show the school that they are involved is limited since they are not available during school hours.

Larocque et al. (2011) found that minority parents' "efforts to advocate for their children lead to frustration because they are unable to participate in school conferences and activities" (p. 116). This appears as though they are not dedicated and do not want to participate in their child's education. Also, "impoverished families are less likely to be involved in schooling [compared to] wealthier families, and schools in impoverished communities are less likely to promote parental school involvement than schools in wealthier communities" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 163-164).

On the other hand, Driessen, Smit and Slegers (2005) mentioned that parents with a high SES were found to have created "a more school supportive child-rearing environment" (p. 513). Lee and Bowen (2006) also emphasize how parents from a lower socioeconomic status may view education and how that affects the expectations they have for their children. Parents who have a high SES are also more prepared "to follow the progress of their children and help their children with their homework" compared to families of low SES (Driessen et al., 2005, p. 513). Because they are more advanced in their SES, they are able to provide materialistic items for their children while parents with low SES cannot. This can affect the self-esteem of the parents as well as limit their ability to become more involved in their child's education, particularly if there are more demands in their child's homework assignment. Studies showed that less privileged parents, in terms of SES, are less confident when it comes to interacting with the school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). They feel they do not have the resources to help their child exceed to the fullest extent. Lee and Bowen (2006) emphasized how parents from a lower SES may view education and that affects the expectations they have for their children. It is also important to note that "poverty exerts direct effects on parents' mental health and self-perceptions through increased

stress resulting from the struggle to make ends meet. Poverty also has indirect effects on children's early school outcomes because its adverse effects on parents are in turn associated with lower parental involvement in school" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 162).

Furthermore, Lee (2007) mentioned the need of many “low-income immigrant and refugee families, [whose] parents relied on their children to serve as interpreters and translators” in order for them to participate in school events (p. 181). Panferov (2010) found in her study with ELL parents that “children often quickly surpass their parents’ proficiencies in the new language and, as a result, are called upon to interpret for family issues that they might not normally have ever been exposed to because of their young age” (p. 110). This is an issue because young children will not be able to fully interpret everything that is being communicated to them because there may be unfamiliar vocabulary. If parents are unable to communicate with teachers, it discourages them to participate in school events and/or meeting with parent groups and administrators. Children should also not be used as interpreters because it would upset “the balance and authority in the parent-child relationship” (Larocque et al., 2011, p. 119). The schools should be the ones providing the interpreters and providing the families with access to interpretation/translation services when needed. Moreover, parents who had little to no schooling are reluctant to participate in school events because they are unaware of the social settings in the schools. They are also less confident when it comes to communicating with the school staff because they are unfamiliar with the system (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Next, there is a lack of effort from schools and their administration for various reasons to communicate with parents. The notion of *Funds of Knowledge* is beneficial to understanding why it is so important for school teachers and administrators to connect with their communities. According to Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992), the *Funds of Knowledge* is a positive

representation of "households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, potential utility for classroom instruction" (p. 134). By doing so, it will help teachers to see beyond stereotypes. There are many circumstances that teachers do not know and are not aware of regarding their students and their families (Moll et al., 1992). This is important because the teacher is the bridge, the connection "between the students' world, theirs and their family's funds of knowledge, and the classroom experience" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 136). An example of bridging the families and the schools together is to have cultural events. Teachers give the students and their families an opportunity to share their culture with the school, such as having class potlucks, in which students bring authentic food from their culture. Alternatively, teachers organize cultural nights where they are able to demonstrate some of their cultural dances or artwork. It not only teaches the general public about cultural differences and similarities, it also provides them an opportunity to view what makes this specific culture unique. The sharing process will enlarge the perspectives of teachers, school administrators and the public. Teachers will be able to learn about their students holistically and be able to make accommodations for these students. They will be able to gain an understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds. This then gives "educators [the opportunity to] explore with individual children and parents how these resources might be developed and expanded in classroom interactions" (Cummins, 2001, p. 653).

When schools are open minded to new cultures and languages, they demonstrate what is known in the literature as a cultural *reciprocity* practice (LaRocque et al., 2011). ELLs and their parents are adapting to the environment and customs in the United States, learning a new language and living life the "American way." Teachers should give back to the students and families by taking the time to understand their cultural practices and customs. Teachers do not have to practice these themselves, but it would be to their benefit to be knowledgeable about

these areas. This idea is based on the "confianza" assumption, which represents mutual trust (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). This leads to the establishment of good, long-lasting relationships. It provides students, parents and the school with opportunities to actively participate in activities together. Most importantly, it provides the teacher background about why students or parents may act or behave the way they do, breaking the notion that parents do not want to participate in their child's school.

There has been much research conducted on different ethnic groups such as the Chinese community, the African American community and the Chicano/Latino community. However, there has been a lack of research on the Hmong community. In the following section I synthesize literature on parental involvement in Hmong communities. I follow up on this literature synthesis with a proposal to conduct a qualitative study on parental involvement in school among Hmong families.

### **Parental involvement in Hmong communities**

First of all, Hmong people are referred to as the free people. Many Hmong people came to the United States to find a place they can call home. They want to find a place where freedom exists and a place where people are treated equally under the Constitution of the United States. Hmong people are refugees, not immigrants, who seek to find a safe haven (Huffcutt, 2010). They are in search for a homeland where they know their children will be able to grow up safely and have freedom and rights as well as obtain a good education.

Because the history of the Hmong people has yet to be fully studied, due to the limitations of historical records and information, there are many different interpretations from scholars about the exact origin of the Hmong people. One theory suggests that the Hmong people are a minority group from northern China, near Siberia (Huffcutt, 2010), and "their language is a

Sino-Tibetan dialect” (Vang, 2005). Chinese scholars, on the other hand, believe the Hmong, who are considered a sub-group of the Miao ethnic group by the Chinese, lived along the Yellow River, or the Huang He area in Central China around 3000 B.C. (Yang, 2003, as cited in Yang, K.Y, 1996). If this information is accurate, Hmong people would have lived in China for 5,000 years (Yang, 2003). They may even be “aborigines of central China (as cited in Tapp, 1989), and [they could have been] the first settlers of the basin of the Yellow River” (Yang, 2003, as cited in Yang, D., 1993). Although there is no exact number, the Hmong people have lived in northern China for several thousand years. It was only a few hundred years ago when they began to migrate to southeast China in hopes of finding economic opportunities and freedom (Vang, 2003). Various literatures have agreed that Hmong people were oppressed and lived in turmoil (Crevier, 2002 as cited in Thao, 1999). “The Chinese discriminated fiercely toward the Hmong people and drove them out of China into the northern regions of Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Like China, these countries were neither welcoming nor peaceful” (Crevier, 2002). Furthermore, the Hmong people did not have their own writing system. It was not until 1952 “when French and American missionaries used the Roman alphabet to formalize a written Hmong language” (Vang, 2005, as cited in McGinn, 1989). It was through Chinese documentation and written history that scholars were able to try and validate a place of origin for the Hmong people (Huffcutt, 2010).

Despite the fact that surrounding countries have not been welcoming of the Hmong people, for reasons out of their control, they have persevered with life and done the best they could with what they had. In recent history, the lives of the Hmong people have been even more deeply affected. From 1961 to 1975 the Secret War in Laos, part of the Vietnam War, took place. Backed by the CIA the Hmong people were led by General Vang Pao. After the U.S military

pulled out of Vietnam in 1974, “the Pathet Lao gained control of Laos and began a bloody campaign to exterminate the Hmong in retribution for their support of both the Royal Lao and the United States. The jungles were sprayed with deadly chemicals called “yellow rain”, and the Pathet Lao bombed Hmong villages, murdered residents of all ages, and deported some people to “reeducation camps,” or places where the Hmong were forced into adapting the lifestyles and beliefs of communism (Crevier, 2002, as cited in Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

Because of this, Hmong people sought refuge in many countries and fought for their lives. Many of them did not survive as they tried to escape from this terror. According to the 2010 census, California currently houses 91,224 Hmong people (2010, Census). The state of Minnesota has a Hmong population of 66,181 while Wisconsin has 49,240 Hmong people (2010 Census).

When specifically speaking of the Hmong community in education, Hmong parents are aware that their children may be at risk for dropping out of school because many of the parents have a low SES and cannot provide extra necessary items for their children. According to Vang (2003), “Hmong students fit the at-risk definition because culture, language, socio-economic status, immigrant status, and environment limit their ability to perform in school” (p. 28). Parents understand the difficulties their children face and can only do so much to make sure they are doing well in school. Although they want to help, they are unable to provide support because many of the parents are refugees with no formal education (Vang, 2005). They are fluent in the Hmong language, but they may not be literate in it. Once again, Funds of Knowledge is a helpful framework from which to understand the relationship between schools on the one hand and Hmong parents and their children on the other. If teachers are unaware of this factor that hinders

the success of their students, it will be difficult to establish the much needed relationship with the parents.

It is also important to note Hmong people lived in the mountainous areas where it is harder for access and opportunity. About 90% of the Hmong people in these mountainous villages cannot read or write, recalling the fact that Hmong people did not have a writing system until recent history (Vang, 2005). Parents value education and they know how important it is for their children. Because they were not given the opportunity to go to school, if the parents have money, they send their children to the city to learn, with hopes of them returning home and improving their quality of living and community. When it comes to immigrant parents in the US, Vang (2005) also mentioned that “some parents are still locked into the old belief system that school personnel have sole authority over their children’s public education” (p. 27). Because this was the way it was back in Laos, Thailand, China and other countries where Hmong people are currently residing in, many of the traditional Hmong parents think this is the case here. Due to their thought process, Vang (2005) mentioned that “Hmong parents are culturally [static] and are not acculturating at the same rate as their children” (p. 29).

Lee and Green (2008) interviewed two groups of Hmong families looking for comparisons of parental involvement in high and low achievement rates of high school seniors. Group A had children with at least a 3.4 GPA and group B had children with at least a 2.0. Group B mentioned that in Laos and Thailand, “there were more restrictions and less freedom in the school environment; therefore, the parents and the teachers were able to control the students better, enabling more children to be successful in education as compared to the United States” (Lee & Green, 2008, p. 15). Ngo & Lee (2007) mentioned that schools expect parents to be involved as much as they can, but “Hmong parents view education to be the primary

responsibility of the schools” (p. 429). Therefore, they leave it to the teachers and the schools to make sure the students are doing well.

It is important to note that although Hmong parents cannot support their children as much as they would want to, both the parents and students believe that education is the key to success, especially considering the majority of Hmong students come from disadvantaged families. Hmong parents have language barriers and lack school experience, and this is one of the factors that keeps them from participating in school events (Vang, 2005). Hmong parents understand the essentials of having a good education because it is part of survival. Like many immigrant parents, “Hmong parents face linguistic and cultural barriers [and this keeps them from being involved] in their children's education” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 426).

Lee and Green (2008) found that parents with lower education, who have recently immigrated to the United States, have a higher value for education. However, this comes from parents who have been living in the United States longer, and those who have received more education. Students with parents who were not able to help as much “depended heavily on their siblings for educational support as compared to their parents” (Lee & Green, 2008, p. 5).

First generation Hmong immigrant parents use different approaches to educating their children compared to the second generation (which are first generation Hmong American children). The first generation Hmong immigrant parents are more traditional on their views, as the second generation Hmong Americans are more acculturated. They still practice the Hmong culture, but they are more aware of the current trends and practices in the U.S. Their view on parental involvement and how they support their children will be different due to the environment each group grew up in.

The literature on education and the Hmong delineates two distinct groups: the first generation group and the second generation group. The first generation group consists of first generation Hmong immigrants – the parents. The second generation group consists of second generation Hmong American individuals who were first-born in the U.S. Lee (2001) goes even further and breaks down the second generation group into another category. The 1.5 second generation group consists of children who were born in Asia and then immigrated at a younger age and raised in the U.S. The 1.5 second generation is often still perceived as more traditional compared to those who were American born (Lee, 2001). Vang (2004-2005) references Lee's (2001) 1.5 generation group and emphasizes how the traditional students are perceived as the good students while the latter are considered as the bad students. This unfortunate distinction between “good” and “bad” can only be addressed by first understanding how to better support Hmong parents and the obstacles they face.

### **Support for ELL parents**

In order to provide students and their families with support, teachers and school administrators would need to set aside some of their time. In other words, schools should have an acculturation mindset in order to provide resources and support to the students to their fullest extent. Getting to know ELL families helps build an important relationship based on trust, which in turn can pave the way to student success. It will also provide opportunities for the staff to see just how deeply ELL parents care about their children’s education (Breiseth et al., 2011). In order to do that, teachers need to realize the different cultural lenses through which each parent is looking and how this lens affects their view on the educational system as well as their child’s education (Breiseth et al., 2011). Aside from cultural and language circumstances, some parents also mentioned the lack of communication from the school ranging from late notices to no

notices at all. As a result, the parents felt they did not have enough time to be present and participate in the school events. Situations like this can be fixed in a matter of time. It will be difficult for the school to change their lens and the way they view specific situations. However, if small steps are taken towards this issue, it would be more beneficial to the school.

In many instances, the teacher has been identified as the key to bringing the parents and the school together (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). A great way to increase parental involvement is for the school to provide more opportunities for the parents. For example, “if parent involvement is a school priority, then resources can be provided for increasing home-school communication” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013, p. 194). Examples of this could involve the translation of school newsletters and activities in the students’ native language. This will keep parents updated and make them feel more like they belong. Past studies of parental involvement in other ethnic groups have shown that when parents are “highly involved in their children’s education, the children are more likely to graduate, earn a higher GPA” and continue to pursue a higher education (Lee & Green, 2008, p. 3).

One of the key missing components in the literature on educating Hmong children is the perspective of Hmong parents, both first and second generation Hmong people. The following study addresses the experiences of Hmong parents in an attempt to understand some of the barriers and obstacles, or support they may have faced, or were given. This study also seeks to document through Hmong parents’ eyes the extraordinary time and effort Hmong parents put into becoming involved in their child’s education.

Therefore, in order to collect rich data on Hmong parental involvement, I approached this research using Joyce L. Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence theory in which the theory suggests that the three entities of family, community and the school play a crucial role in

education. Epstein elaborates the importance of this teamwork by mentioning that “the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families” (2010, p. 81). This mindset is important because students should not be seen as a separate entity from their families. Families, especially the parents, play an important role in helping their children, students, to advance in their education. Epstein (2010) reiterates that when all three entities become one and develop strong partnerships, the community is formed around the students and this then helps with the development of students in education. It provides more resources and opportunities to help the students become successful. With this theory in mind, I was able to look at it from the perspective in which all three entities mentioned must work together in order to help their children, their students, become successful in their education in the long run. The literature shows that high parental involvement when children are still young has a great impact on children’s future education. As children grow up and become more independent, the amount of parental involvement decreases. Therefore, it is beneficial to make sure that parental involvement is at its highest peak during the K-12 time frame.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH AND DESIGN METHODS**

In order to fully understand how Hmong parents feel about parental involvement and the obstacles, or support, which may have prevented, or encouraged them to be more or less involved, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. Through interviews, I was able to observe the participants' body language as well as how they responded to the questions. As Opendakker (2006) mentioned, "social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language etc. of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question" (p. 2). The purpose of the study is to inform teachers and school administrators of potential obstacles and observed supports that affected parental involvement in regards to first generation Hmong immigrants and second generation Hmong American parents. Through this research I seek to learn of the obstacles and barriers Hmong parents face when engaging in their children's education in the US. In addition, I was interested in learning of the encouragements and support they have been offered from teachers and school administrators. It is important to give Hmong parents the opportunity to tell their stories.

#### **Participants**

The research focused on Hmong parents in Washington State, mainly in the Spokane area with some participants from the Seattle/Tacoma area. The first group consists of first generation Hmong immigrant parents. The second group consists of second generation Hmong American parents, which are the children of the first generation Hmong immigrants, who were born in the United States or raised here since they were toddlers. It is important to note that there are two distinct groups in which children of first generation Hmong immigrants are categorized. The 1.5

second generation group consists of children who were born in Asia, the immigrant toddlers, compared to children who were born and raised in the United States of America. There may be a discrepancy between the two subgroups in the second generation group; therefore, it is beneficial to be inclusive of all groups in order to provide a more rich data collection.

Voluntary participants were selected through Hmong parent and student leaders in Spokane, who also have connections to Hmong parent and student leaders in the Seattle-Tacoma area. The Hmong parent and student leaders of those who attend church identified parents who wanted to participate in the research. On the other hand, Hmong parent and student leaders in the traditional, Shamanistic community identified parents who also wanted to participate. Through this list, the participants were chosen. It is important to note that many Hmong people like to categorize themselves depending on which religion they follow. Therefore, the inclusion of both Christian and Shaman Hmong parents provided me with a more holistic collection of data.

Because it is a qualitative study, there were no exact numbers of participants expected. I interviewed as many voluntary participants as I could. The interviews were conducted late December 2014 to early January 2015 and consisted of both English interviews and Hmong interviews. Interview questions for the latter were translated into Hmong. The study consisted of six interviews with eight participants. The participants included Hmong parents from the age range of 21 to 55 years of age, who resided in Spokane, WA or the Seattle, WA area. There was a total of three second generation Hmong parents, two 1.5 generation Hmong parents and three first generation Hmong parents interviewed. The participants had at the least one child and up to seven children, ranging from 2 months to 34 years of age.

Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to an hour. The second generation parents had shorter interviews compared to first generation parents who had longer interviews, due to the

different circumstances each group experienced. There were also differences in the level of maturity and reflection in the interview because some parents are currently parenting while the older generation parents were more focused on experience. However, this contrast provided rich information about how first generation and second generation Hmong parents view parental involvement.

It is also relevant to note that Hmong families tend to have larger families compared to their European counterparts. Participant CY is a single mother with a six year-old child in first grade and comes from a family of eleven. Participant MM, who comes from a family of six, is a fulltime student with three young children, two are in primary school and one is a couple of months old. Participant PM's husband is in the army and this military family has two children, one is four years old and the other is four months old. Her husband comes from a family of nine and she comes from a family of ten. Participants PSM and NPSM have five children, two in high school, one in middle school and two in elementary school. They both also come from a large family. Participant X and C have seven children and both participants come from a family of six or more. Last, NVX has four children and she comes from a large family as well.

### **Apparatus and Materials**

Equipment used for the research included audio recorders to record the responses of the participants during the interviews. Copies of the interview questions were made available to the participants to preview before the interview process began. Paper and pencil were used to take notes and help with the observation process. The audio recordings provide the participants' responses, but audio does not reveal the body language of the participants. Participant actions and body language play a huge role in determining what message he or she is trying to relay. Thus, the observation notes help in making connections to the audio and provide more

information to make better conclusions. Hmong dictionaries were also used in order to correctly and closely define the English words used in the interviews, for better explanation when the participants did not understand, especially for first generation Hmong parents, since the Hmong language does not have equivalent words for every English word.

## **Procedure**

Participants were informed that the purpose of the interviews was to learn of obstacles they experienced or are currently experiencing in regards to parental involvement in their child's schooling as well as support they received in order to become more active in their child's education. In order to collect rich data and further my studies, interviews were conducted in a quiet location, and only the participants were present to avoid bias. Participants were comfortable with individual interviews; thus, I did not organize focus groups, as I had originally planned. In the end, I felt that focus groups had a greater potential for making participants uncomfortable.

The interviews were semi-structured and this allowed the participants more freedom to tell their stories so their voices could be heard. To be able to understand the many reasons behind why Hmong parents may or may not be as involved in their children's education, it is important to give them the opportunity to explain their logic and experiences. The purpose is to provide parents with the opportunity to talk about the barriers and obstacles that may have been keeping parents from being active in their children's education or the different ways in which the schools supported their efforts to become involved.

Because first generation Hmong parents needed to have the interview questions translated into Hmong, I acquired the assistance of a family friend, who is proficient in the English language and the Hmong language, and who agreed to help at no charge. The Hmong language

has different words with multiple meanings, and in many instances, the Hmong language simply does not have a word that correlates to the English term. Specific words translate better than other words, and because my knowledge of Hmong is limited to only certain contexts (and vocabulary), it was critical to have someone who is proficient in both languages to help revise my translations of the questions. This also allowed me to go deeper into my research.

### **Observer's Paradox**

Because I am Hmong, it was possible the participants acted differently around me compared to other observers of a different race. This might have influenced the data I collect because the participants may want to tailor their answers to what I, the interviewer, might want to hear. However, there is also a possibility that they were more truthful and spoke more about this topic because I am Hmong. They may have been more comfortable having an interviewer who understands the Hmong language and was able to communicate with them effectively if they were unable to explain their answer in English. I find this especially relevant for first generation Hmong immigrant parents because they may have limited knowledge of the English language because they are older.

In regards to the selected participants, I only interviewed Hmong parents, caregivers. The reason I choose to focus on Hmong caregivers is because the literature has indicated reasons and background as to why many teachers believe minority parents are either involved or uninvolved in their child's education. Furthermore, other minority groups have been studied and there are many research studies which indicate the obstacles and support these parents may be experiencing. This research is missing for the Hmong community; thus, the current project will begin to fill this gap. Understanding that parents from different ethnic backgrounds experience different obstacles and support, it would be beneficial to have research on the Hmong

community. It is important for teachers to be aware of these obstacles or support Hmong parents experience so they will be able to make accommodations and understand the actions of Hmong parents. Therefore, Hmong caregivers will be my emphasis in this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS

For this research, I used the inductive analysis method to code transcripts of the interviews. The notes I took during the interviews were also taken into consideration such as hand gestures or movements especially when it came to personal stories. Through the inductive analysis approach, each interview was closely analyzed and the statements were categorized into reoccurring themes. The themes found in this research were similar to the themes found in past literature on parental involvement in minority children's education. For example, as Lee (2001) mentioned, "Hmong parents lack educational backgrounds and English language skills to participate in the school or to help their children with homework," and this relates specifically to first generation Hmong parents as found in the interviews for this study (p. 181).

First of all, participants were asked if there were barriers that prevented them from participating in their child's school as well as if they received support from the school; and there were many different answers ranging from language barriers to time commitment to some support. The most common themes that came across all the interviews, in regards to the obstacles and barriers Hmong parents face, included (1) language barriers, (2) cultural differences (teachers are supposed to be in charge), (3) time commitment (due to various obstacles such as socioeconomic status) and (4) confusion (in terms of what is considered as parental involvement and what is expected of them as parents). I take up each of these themes in the following section. These themes are similar to findings in previous research; however, these are the voices of the Hmong parents, who are often marginalized.

## **Language barriers**

Throughout all the interviews, participants either identified language barriers or saw their parents facing language barriers. First generation participants, more so compared to other parents, alluded to how language is one of the main barriers preventing them from becoming active in their child's school. The keyword is their child's school not their child's education. In regards to school events, one participant mentioned:

Because I cannot speak English that well, it is my obstacle. I want to go to the many events; however it is frustrating at times because I go, but I don't understand everything. I also want my children to have fun, but sometimes I have to ask them to interpret what the people are saying (C, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

This demonstrates how Hmong parents want to go to school events and be as active as their counterparts; however, the language barrier prevents them from making that commitment. As Participant C mentioned, when they attend events, they want to have fun. They want their children to have fun as well, but instead they are interpreting for their parents. This also brings up the concern of having young children interpret when they, too, are still in the process of learning. Although X and C's children were all born in the United States, it does not mean they fully comprehend everything that is being said. Furthermore, X mentioned how his children would speak Hmong at home then speak English at school. This was the same for all the children of other participants as well, with an exception of one participant's family where her children were learning Hmong, English and Mandarin at the same time. With the constant shifts in language, due to the different environments, it may be a struggle for students who are learning English at school but are conversing in their native language at home. With this, it is crucial to

find interpreters for those parents who may need them instead of allowing their young children to take over that task. It is not the child's job, and they should not be responsible for it. The teacher and school administrators should be providing interpreters for parents who may require the assistance of one.

In regards to interpreters, participants were also asked if they were provided with an interpreter during parent-teacher conferences, and/or if they were asked if they needed the assistance of one. The majority of the participants answered that they were not asked if they needed an interpreter or not. Those with little to no English knowledge mentioned how they had to rely on their children because there were no interpreters present. As Lee (2007) and Panferov (2010) found in their specific research, it was the same in the Hmong community as the parents would depend on their children for interpretation.

Also, in connection to this, parents who were fluent in English did mention how they felt they were treated differently compared to those who were not. They felt that because they are fluent, or have a high proficiency level, in the English language, they were shown more respect compared to other Hmong parents. This can especially be seen through interactions between the teachers and administrators towards the parents who had limited English. It sends out a negative message to parents who are not able to communicate with teachers and school administrators themselves. Ultimately, this hinders the relationship between the parents and the school.

### **Cultural Differences**

A second barrier, or reoccurring theme from the various interviews, showed that parents were conflicted around who is responsible for making sure that their children are learning successfully. NPS mentioned how she has heard many other parents talk about how it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure the children are taught well. They, too, wonder why they as

parents are required to do so much when it is not their responsibility to teach the actual content and material when they are not specialists in those fields of education. It is exhausting for parents. As Ngo & Lee (2007) alluded to in past research, Hmong parents feel their child's education is the sole responsibility of the teacher because they do not have the ability to become academic teachers when their resources are limited. One participant mentioned:

From my personal experience, what I see is that Hmong parents, they really care about their children's education. Okay. They try to be supportive and they're like okay study hard, get good grades, get A's, go to college. But they don't have the skills that they need to actually help that child. It's just like I can tell you, do your homework, but I can't sit down and help you figure out how to do this fraction. I don't have the skills. I never went to school, you know, that kind of thing. So. How can the parent, who doesn't have that education educate the child further (NPSM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

Parents, like NPSM, can only do so much with their limited knowledge; therefore, they depend heavily on the teachers to help their child with academics. They see and are very aware that teachers have the ability and the power to help their children succeed. In this unfamiliar academic world, the parents have no control over what their children are learning in school. Therefore, when it comes to the topics the parents are unfamiliar with, they rely on the teachers. As NPSM also stated:

[There are] cultural differences. We can yell at our kids, "get out a book, do your homework." But we can't actually sit down with them and tell them, "hey you don't know what this word means, I can tell you what it means. You don't know how to figure out this math problem, I can help you figure it out." We can't

physically do that. We don't have the skills (NPSM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

The interviews also showed how Hmong parents believe it is a good sign not to receive a call from the school. They have the mindset that when the school calls, their child is doing something bad or something is wrong, because when they do hear from the school, it tends to be negative. This mindset was present for participants from all three groups, and they may not even have noticed they were viewing this aspect in a negative way. While analyzing the different responses on how their child's teachers and schools contact them about their child's education, it showed the parents were happy if they did not receive a call. Some parents even joked that it was a good sign and laughed it off saying that since they did not hear from the teachers, it must be a good sign that their child is doing well in school. Parents just do not want to hear back from the school, in reference to phone calls.

In order to change this mindset, and to strengthen this mode of communication, more positive phone calls should be made from the teachers and the schools. If Hmong parents only receive phone calls when something bad is happening to their children at school, it shapes their perception of these phone calls in a negative light. For example, when students, specifically in middle school and high school, are marked down as absent, when in fact they were actually in class, parents receive an automated phone call stating that their child missed this class during this period. One participant, who attended class every day from elementary to college, except for when doctor's appointments could only be scheduled during the day, shared a story and mentioned how these automated messages about absences, or when a child was sick and needed to go home, were the only phone calls they would receive from the school. She was marked as absent a couple times when she was actually in class and her parents did not take the call too

well because they expected their children to attend class and go to school every day. These phone calls were negative in a sense because it had to do with illness or when students allegedly skipped class. Therefore, if more positive phone calls such as congratulating a student for their perfect attendance in the semester/trimester/quarter, especially in elementary school, were made to the parents, instead of simply sending a certificate home, parents would be able to see the positivity in phone calls from the schools.

Phone calls are important when it comes to communicating with parents. However, when it is used to convey negative information or events, parents begin to assume that all calls from the school will be that way. The only way to change the perception of these participants is to communicate more positive news through phone calls. For one, it will demonstrate that the teacher is taking the time to call the parents because they care about the student. It ties back to the cultural reciprocity practice. If teachers knew Hmong parents felt this way about phone calls, the number of positive phone calls could be increased to demonstrate the importance of phone calls as a communication method.

### **Time Commitment**

Another issue hindering the appearance and involvement of Hmong parents at school related events, aside from the language barrier, is time. All the participants mentioned how work and school schedules were preventing them from attending school events, especially during the day time. One participant mentioned:

For me, my main obstacle is being a full time worker. I am the provider for the family and need to make a living in order to provide for my family. I go to work before my children leave for school and come back home after my children get home (X, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

While participant X is at work, his wife C, who cannot speak English as well, is a stay-at-home mother who does as much as she can for her children. When time is permitted and depending on which grade level her child is in, C would volunteer at her children's school by being a chaperone during class field trips. She would also attend her children's extracurricular activities after school, as her children are all athletes. Although she may not be able to attend as many school activities during the day, she still makes time to go support her children. X and C are parents of seven children. The first five children are a year apart. The sixth child is two years younger than the fifth child and the last child is four years younger than the sixth child. With differences in the ages, it is hard for C to volunteer as much as she would like. For instance, when her oldest child was in kindergarten, she had two children in preschool and taking care of two toddlers at home. Her hands were full as a full time mother and a full time housewife.

In regards to finding childcare to free more time for the parents, Among parents prefer to leave their children with other family members, such as the grandparents, and if their grandparents, mother and father, were deceased, there was no other option because everyone else was either busy or had their own children to take care of. X and C's parents passed away before they immigrated to the U.S; therefore, they only had themselves to depend on considering that their family members were living in other states.

Although the teachers and the school administrators were not present and could not see her involvement, C was able to attend some events and the coaches and other supporting staff members did see her. As Gonzales-DeHass, Willems and Holbein (2005) mentioned,

[if] parental involvement was measured as participating in parent-teacher conferences and/or interactions, participating in school activities and/or functions, engaging in activities at home including but not limited to homework, engaging in

students' extracurricular activities, assisting in the selection of student's course, keeping abreast of student's academic progress, reaction to student's academic grades, imparting parental values (attitudes about the importance of effort and academic success), or the level of parental control and/or autonomy support offered in the home environment (p.108).

How do school and school administrators come to the conclusion that Hmong parents and other minority parents are not as involved in their child's education? Participant C demonstrated that her actions were indeed as close to the definition of "parental involvement" as any. Another participant, who is a full time worker and a part time online student mentioned:

One of the challenges is probably time. We work full time and the children spend so much time on their homework as well. [...] It's hard to find time to do everything because they also have too much homework" (PSM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

All the participants were either full time workers and or full time students. Some are juggling the task of being full time parents as well as full time students. However, are these circumstances even considered when parents are being evaluated on how often they are involved in terms of parental involvement?

This goes back to Anguiano's (2004) argument that many of the parent's contributions go unnoticed. Hmong parents are making sure their students are on track and completing tasks that are necessary in order for them to progress in their education at home. However, because the majority of the parents are not present during school events and activities, educators forget about the many contributions that are being made at home. This goes back to the concept of Funds of Knowledge and how important it is to connect activities from school with activities from home

and vice versa. The knowledge and skills students are learning at home can become beneficial and enhance skills that students are learning and using at school. If teachers are aware of the activities happening in their students' homes, they would be able to connect it with the lesson plan and activities at school. With this understanding, teachers have the ability to make the lesson more powerful, understandable and fun for the students if they are able to relate the lessons to their students.

Time commitment is also connected to a family's SES as well. As Hill and Taylor (2004) stated in a previous research, SES affects the ability and time management of parents. As many of the Hmong parents had alluded to, many of them are full time workers while others are full time students. X was the sole breadwinner for his family for 17 years until he fell ill. Now, his wife C is the sole breadwinner for their family. In this day and time, it is difficult to only have one parent working and supporting seven children as well. During these times, the sole breadwinner takes care of everything. Before, X took care of the rent, electricity, phone bill, car payments, insurance and much more. Now, C is doing that. However, due to her limited English, the best job she could obtain was as a laundry worker at a hotel and now a janitor, jobs that minority counterparts do not want. CY is a single mother who works as a gardener and makes a living by selling her organic vegetables at farmer's markets. NPS is a librarian and her husband is also a fulltime worker. MM works at her school campus while she is a full time student and a full time mother. NVX is also a full time worker. The majority of these jobs do not offer flexible schedules, and workers are expected to be present every day for a fixed, full-time schedule.

Lee and Bowen (2006) also mention that "some working-class or low-income parents may be less able to visit the school for conferences, volunteering, or other activities as a result of inflexible work schedules, lack of child care or lack of transportation" (p. 198). This also ties

back to Hill and Taylor's (2004) research about how SES is problematic because of work schedules, transportation and more. If parents are to provide the basic needs for their families, they need to have a stable job. Considering that Hmong parents are parents of color, refugees and have multiple barriers, much of their attention needs to be devoted to making a living to support their family. Once again, Hmong people are considered as refugees not immigrants.

Hmong parents, like any other parents, have to take into consideration the tasks that must be completed first. Their child's education is extremely important; however, there are many other daily tasks that need to be considered. In order for the child to be able to go to school, they must be provided a home, food and other necessities in order to survive. The only way their parents can provide them with this is by working. Many of these parents have to make sacrifices in order to ensure their child is obtaining a good education and at times, it means to work at places where other people would prefer not to work. For example, Participant C mentioned how her current work place is not as flexible compared to other people's workplace. She does not have vacation or benefits, and it is difficult for her to ask for days off. She shared a personal story that she almost got fired because she requested some time off to see her sister who was in hospice and shortly passed thereafter. Therefore, it is not that the parents do not want to participate; it is because they cannot due to the inflexibility and strict rules at work. As Larocque et al. (2011) mentioned, parents become frustrated because they cannot participate in their child's education although they want to. In the end, they are penalized and marked down as not involved in their child's school because of unforeseen circumstances that are not considered.

### **What are school expectations for parental involvement?**

While coding the transcripts and looking for themes, and even during the interview session, this theme of confusion came up across several participants. How is the school able to

determine whether or not a parent is involved in their child's education if the parents are not informed of what is expected from them? Participant MM alluded to this:

My parents may not have been involved at school as much, but that does not mean they were not involved at home. This then goes back to the definition of parental involvement and if minority parents even know what it means or what is expected of them (MM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

This is crucial in order to understand Hmong parents and minority parents who may not show up to school events or volunteer as much. Because school administrators and teachers do not see a parent as often as they want to, it does not justify the assumption that minority parents are not active and involved in their child's education. They are, indeed, doing all that they can to the best of their ability, as found through the interviews. If Hmong parents and minority parents are expected to come to school events more often, then schools need to inform them. Schools need to give them information on what is expected from them. In relation to a previous study conducted by Lee (2007), parents of Hmong American students were at a disadvantage when it came to parental involvement because parents are not aware of what is expected of them; therefore, they do not respond the way teachers would expect them to.

Another participant, NPSM, stated:

My dad had the knowledge up to the seventh grade and knew how to read and how to write in English. So when I started middle school, he backed off. "From here on you're on your own because I cannot help you any further" (NPSM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

This example demonstrates how parents will help their child to the best of their ability. In NPSM's case, after the seventh grade her father could not help her anymore because he did not

understand the information. Although he may have stopped helping her when it comes to the actual homework and assignments, it does not mean that he stopped being involved as a parent. NPSM also mentions that her father never stopped supporting the children even though he could not help academically. He still made sure they did their homework, read and complete other tasks like a parent should do. As Lee and Bowen (2006) mention, a parent's educational background, especially if the parent has a low educational attainment, may limit the ability of the parents when it comes to helping their children with school work. But then again, what are parents expected to do when it comes to helping their child in education and being involved? Does it mean to sit down with their children and make sure they read and do their homework? If so, Hmong parents are already completing their tasks and roles.

This goes back to Turney and Kao (2010) emphasizing how important it is to let parents know what is expected of them. Breiseth et al. (2011) mentioned how parental engagement is highly valued by the schools. However, as Warne, Hong, Rubin and Uy (2009) stated, "most urban schools fail to engage families broadly and deeply around the education of their children" (p. 2210). Schools want parents to be engaged and collaborate with them, however if parents are feeling uncomfortable at their child's school, how is this possible? It goes back to whether or not the schools are doing their part and encouraging parents to become involved. How are they reaching out to the parents to make them more comfortable? Parents who are not comfortable will not be voicing their opinions and letting the schools know. The Hmong parent-participants in this study had brilliant ideas that could help the school improve many aspects of their current structure. However, because Hmong parents feel uncomfortable and are not asked about ways to help with improvements they feel it is not their place to make suggestions. If these Hmong participants were not interviewed for this research, they may have not mentioned the ideas for

improvement in the school or the barriers and or support they were and currently are facing.

Although this may improve the relationship between the parents and the school, there has to be a starting point because one decision and one move affect what follows.

### **Mixed Feelings of Comfort**

In regards to the parent teacher organization / parent teacher association (PTO / PTA), all the participants have mentioned that they do not feel comfortable at these events. One participant mentioned:

The parent-teacher events and stuff, I always feel like I wouldn't belong or like what's the point of like getting involved [...] because when I look at the PTO groups, it's majority uhm, White women, mothers. [...] I never saw any diversity there (MM, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

If PTO groups are mainly consisting of parents of European descent, with little to no diversity, it lacks encouragement from the school. One of Epstein and Salinas (2004) components of successful parental involvement is to encourage parents to attend PTO, PTA's; however, minority parents may not be encouraged to attend as much as their counterparts. The purpose of wanting to attract parents to these meetings is to have their voices heard because they have an opinion when it comes to their child's education. Participants mentioned how they would receive newsletters about the meetings but were not directly encouraged to attend. The question then becomes, are minority parents aware of the PTO's and do they feel welcomed to join?

Lee and Bowen (2006) alluded to McNeal's (1999) study that found PTO, PTA's support systems were beneficial; however, it catered to and had more of an effect among European American students from high SES families compared to minority students from single-parent families and students from low SES families. Among parents want to become involved and try to

do as much as they can while facing obstacles in all directions. However, if the school is unable to make the parents feel welcomed, it hinders the relationship between the school, the community and the families, in which all are beneficial to help students succeed to the fullest extent.

Even though many Hmong parents did not feel comfortable at their child's school, as a whole, there were different aspects in which Hmong parents felt comfortable at their child's school. Many of the participants mentioned how, at the elementary school level, the staff was very welcoming and it made them feel comfortable. One participant stated:

They make you feel welcomed over there so I'm not too worried. [...] The principal makes you feel really comfortable. [...] He tries to engage in a conversation when he sees you standing outside, and he actually knows my daughter (CY, personal communication, December 28, 2014).

This demonstrates how a mere greeting has the ability to make an individual feel welcomed and valued. This goes for all parents and not just minority parents. Parents felt more comfortable while their children were in elementary school because the children only had one teacher a year. This gave them the time to become more familiar and more comfortable with the teacher compared to middle school and high school where their children had multiple teachers. This aspect of their child's education made them feel a part of their child's education.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

All the barriers found through this research are connected in one way or another. One barrier leads to another barrier. For example, the availability of time is affected by work or school schedules and this then leads to determining a family's SES. This study confirmed a previous study indicating that "Hmong parents lack school experience, have language barriers, and thus are unlikely to participate in school events" (Vang, 2005, p. 30 as cited in Golstein, 1985). Although the parents want to contribute and be visible in the school setting, they are unable to do so.

My research suggests that in order to work successfully with the Hmong community and increase parental involvement, it would be beneficial to inform the parents of what is expected of them. Above all, the teachers and the schools must understand the barriers that may prevent Hmong parents from helping their children to the fullest extent. For example, some of the participants in this research did receive an education; therefore, they are able to help their children. However, with first generation Hmong parents, the story may be different. More can be expected from parents who are proficient in the English language; however, there should also be expectations that are toned down for parents who have language barriers. Even if the first generation parents cannot read to their children, they could be instructed to make sure their children read for 30 minutes. Or, the parents could be instructed to take other measures such as spend time with the children while they are working on their homework. Hmong parents may already be doing this at home and more. Therefore, if the school expects the parents to be

involved in different ways, the school needs to make it clear what they consider as parental involvement. It is also important to understand that Hmong parents are actively involved in their child's education regardless if they do not show up as much to school events as their European counterparts. This study goes back to Joyce Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence in which each partnership, the parents, the school and the community plays a huge role in the success or failure of children. If all three groups come together and make the learning process fun and easy for the students, it will result in positive outcomes. This means that the teachers and the schools need to do a better job at communicating with the parents and ensuring that they are being supported to the fullest extent. For examples, although the task may be tedious, teachers and schools could and should make more attempts to communicate with parents orally instead of sending home flyers every week or every month. Parents who are proficient in the English language will have the ability to read the flyer and understand the events that will be happening during the week or the month. However, parents who cannot speak English and have a language barrier will not be able to understand what is going on. If flyers and notices were provided in the native language of their students, it could be beneficial provided parent's literacy skills are sufficient. Therefore, if teachers speak to all parents and give them an opportunity to ask questions or give suggestions, it will help to strengthen the relationship between the two entities. Once the school and the families begin to work together, the community then becomes involved and this develops a stronger relationship between the three entities. This will also bring the community together and hopefully provide a place where parents will be able to express themselves. When families have the assistance of their community members, their voices are heard more loudly and clearly compared to if it is just one voice. With the cooperation of the schools, parents and the community, it provides the necessary and supportive environment for

students in order for them to become successful. Hence, there has to be a positive mindset and a positive attitude in order to help students to the fullest extent regardless of race and ethnicity.

Therefore, what does this tell us about marginalized populations? Because research is focused on the larger minority groups, smaller minority groups such as the Hmong people are often overlooked. This information is generalized to include smaller minority groups, when it may not be prevalent in their case.

With all the obstacles and barriers overwhelmingly more compared to support, it makes an eye-opening statement to teachers and school administrators. The following obstacles could have been dealt with in a good manner instead of making assumptions that Hmong and minority parents are not as active compared to their European counterparts. If school administrators and teachers are more knowledgeable about their students and can be more understanding, it makes the whole relationship and communication between the school and the families even better. However, due to this lack of communication, people are being branded as not good parents because they cannot appear to events that are school related compared to their counterparts.

After spending many hours with the participants, I heard in their voices the urgency for change. They understand that not everything can be changed, however, they want the teachers to know that they are doing their best at home to help their child. They want the teachers to know that although they are unable to make it to the school events and volunteer as much in their child's school, it does not mean that they do not care about their child and their education. They are doing the best they can as parents and supporting their children to the best of their ability, even if it is verbally encouraging their children to do well. They want the teachers to know that there are many obstacles they have to overcome in order to become more visible in the school environment. This is the only way the relationship and communication between the schools and

the families will be able to strengthen. There are more approaches that need to be taken in order to make sure this relationship can work and move towards a more positive note; however, it is going to take some more time and commitment in order to improve it.

Further research that could be conducted on this topic includes broadening the research area into Hmong families across the United States. It would be beneficial to expand the data and be able to obtain more missing voices of Hmong parents who may have thought about their experiences differently. Because the Hmong population in Spokane and Seattle are not as big compared to other cities and states, the different environments have different effects. Parents in larger cities could be facing different circumstances compared to those in smaller cities and less Hmong populated areas. It is also important to know that areas with more Hmong people have more resources compared to smaller cities. Therefore, the interaction between the schools and the parents may be different compared to other areas.

Another suggestion could be to segregate the two generations and focus on each one respectively. First generation Hmong refugees will have more obstacles and need more support compared to second generation Hmong parents because they have more barriers they have to face. Once again, language is a huge barrier for them. This is a reason why many Hmong people chose to congregate into same the cities or states. They yearn for the much needed support as they make their transition to a new environment. Second generation Hmong Americans, on the other hand, are fluent in the English language. They, too, have obstacles; however, they have the ability to communicate with the general public. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore both groups and learn if the obstacles and support for both groups are more similar or different. After separate research has been conducted, the information can be used to compare and contrast the different obstacles and support for both groups.

As Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) emphasized, the “reality of [the] current anti-immigrant sentiment and English-only policies makes access to school sites more difficult than ever for many parents” (p. 16). Therefore, in order to provide resources and access for Hmong parents and all minority parents, more steps need to be taken in order to ensure equality for all parents. All parents want to see their children succeed and if they are not provided with the resources, it becomes difficult for them.

I also want to see better communication between the schools and the families. I want to know what steps the schools are taking in order to be inclusive and make sure all parents are provided with the same opportunity to be involved in their child’s education in the school setting. The promotion of communication is important as well as understanding the various obstacles parents are facing. When both parties come to an understanding and understands the obstacles hindering parental involvement, it becomes beneficial to both sides.

With my next research, there is a possibility of continuing on with the topic of Hmong parental involvement and expanding it to more states and more participants. Another research area of interest involves the research of Hmong folklore and how it can be used to educate teachers, schools, doctors and other professions about Hmong students and the Hmong population.

### **Limitation**

In this research, there were several limitations, however, the most notable one is the act of generalization. This analysis cannot be generalized for all Hmong parents because there were a limited number of participants. Some parents may also feel that their school is doing a wonderful job and they do not have any obstacles and barriers. This depends on the location of the participants as well as their English language proficiency. Therefore, the information cannot

be generalized. Another limitation is probably the presence of the interviewer. Because I was the one conducting interviews, it could have made participants nervous and not disclose as much information, considering this is personal information. Therefore, if there could be a method to help interviewees relax and not be so nervous, there would be more in depth information.

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## Appendix A

\*\* Disclaimer: Questions will be toned down for first generation parents in order for them to fully understand the question. Due to the language barrier, questions listed below will go through different phases and will not be directly interpreted the way it is asked. This is because the Hmong language has different words with multiple meanings; and in many instances, the Hmong language simply does not have a word that correlates to the English term.

- How knowledgeable are you in terms of knowing your parental rights and responsibilities towards your child's education?
- How do you define parental involvement?
- How many children do you have and what are their ages? Are they attending school?
- How comfortable do you feel at your child's school?
  - Have you felt welcomed and comfortable to ask the school or your child's teacher questions? Why or why not?
  - Do you have suggestions for the school and how they can make more parents comfortable?
- What are ways that you are involved in your child's school?
  - In the past year, have you volunteered at your child's school?
    - Can you elaborate on your experience?
- What are ways that your child's school promotes communication with parents?
  - Are there barriers that prevent you from communicating or participating in your child's school? What are they? What can be done to improve this opportunity?

- How does the school communicate with you regarding your child's progress?
  - Has anyone (teachers, school administrators) made an effort to reach out and talk to you?
- How do you perceive your overall experiences at parent-teacher conferences (if you attend them)?
  - If you do not attend them, what is the reason for it?
    - During parent-teacher conferences did you ask for the assistance of an interpreter?
    - Were you given an opportunity to ask for an interpreter? If so, did the school provide you with one?
- What are some things you do at home to support your child's education? (i.e.: encourage your child to read etc.).
- What are some of the resources you would like your child's school to provide so you are able to help your child?