Hmong High School Students’ Perceptions and Motivations Toward Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and motivations toward higher education among Hmong high school students. Six Hmong high school students (juniors and seniors) in Sacramento, California participated in this study by completing an interview questionnaire containing open-ended questions regarding the students’ home and cultural environments, current academics, opinions about higher education and motivations about education. The results of this study could better assist teachers, educators, and the community in general in understanding the Hmong student population and factors that contribute to their success.

The Hmong have lived in the United States now for approximately 35 years since they started arriving in 1975. Prior to their journey to this country, many were illiterate and had little or no education for several reasons (Lo 2006). One of the major reasons was because the Laotian government did not set up schools in geographical regions where the Hmong and other minority groups resided. Another reason was because families could not afford to send their children to school. For wealthier families who were able to afford education, they mainly sent one child to school, preferably a boy. It was believed that sons would bring wealth and take over the family name, while daughters would not because they would get married and contribute wealth and investment to the husband’s family (Thao 1996).

During the Cold War era, Hmong children were not the only group who lacked education, as their parents also lacked education. Because the Hmong lived in the mountainous areas of Lao, education served a limited purpose in their agricultural environment. Everyone from the villages took part in farming responsibilities. However, after the Hmongs’ resettlement in the United States, some Hmong parents were able to obtain some level of education. For example, they learned how to speak, read and write English. While some parents attended adult school and learned English, many did not
and relied on their children to translate documents and be interpreters of English (Podeschi and Xiong 1990).

In the past three decades, many Hmong students in the United States graduated from high school and continued with higher education, while others chose not to follow this path due to various reasons. Among the high school graduates, more and more of them are pursuing higher degrees at the master and doctoral levels. The population of Hmong enrolled in universities and city colleges is also increasing (U.S. Census Bureau Community Survey 2008).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the views of Hmong high school students toward higher education and its surrounding factors. In analyzing these views, the researcher hopes to discover the perceptions and beliefs that exist among Hmong high school students. By discovering these perceptions, it is anticipated that the results will better assist teachers, educators and the American community in understanding this phenomenon within the Hmong student population in America. Lastly, the researcher anticipates that the findings from this study will lead to other studies that may be conducted to further understand and serve this population.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following questions: What do Hmong high school students think about education beyond high school and what is their understanding of pursuing it? Do they know how to utilize their high school campus resources to find out about attending college? What are their inspirations and aspirations about higher education, if they have any? Are family and friends a major influential contribution to their studies? What, if anything, are they doing in high school to prepare themselves for college? Overall, this study hopes to find the perceptions and motivations of Hmong high school students toward higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout high school, students are exposed to the opportunities for higher education. College counselors and administrators visit high schools to reach out to potential enrollees. However, some students have little exposure while some are more informed about their options after graduation. Lo (2006) examined four variables, including culture, parents, friends, and college accessibility, to assess Hmong high school students’ decisions to pursue higher education. In Lo’s study, only three out of four variables had positive influences: culture, parents and college accessibility. The results do not
necessarily reflect the individual’s perspectives about higher education and there are other variables that need to be examined.

In order to understand the Hmong students and their perceptions about higher education, their identity as Hmong must also be understood. The following discussion will provide an insight about the Hmong, including a snapshot about their history, resettlement in the United States and a brief overview of their culture, including their education, language, and social structure. In addition, Hmong motivation in education will be examined.

Who Are the Hmong?

Though there are between five and eight million Hmong worldwide, relatively few Americans know much about the Hmong people. It is only in the United States and in Canada after 1975 that the name Hmong existed in the literature and was being used the way the Hmong prefer. In other countries, the connotative names “Meo” and “Miao,” which literally translate to mean barbarian, cat (the meow sound from a cat), rice shoot, or dirty people, continue to be used by government officials as well as lay people. The Hmong are among one of the newest refugee groups to the U.S; they began arriving in the U.S in the mid-1970s after the fall of Saigon and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia in 1975 (Hamilton-Merritt 1995). The Hmong were strong allies to the United States during the Vietnam War, even while facing political persecution and genocide as a result of their involvement with the Central Intelligence Agency (Hamilton-Merritt 1995).

The U.S. Census Bureau Community Survey (2008) enumerated the increase of the Hmong in the U.S. from 186,310 in 2000 to 206,738 in 2008. Demographically, the Hmong are a relatively young population (median age = 19.7) compared to 36.7 years of age for the entire U.S. population. An average Hmong household consists of 5.47 members compared to 2.61 members per household for the overall U.S. population. Nationally, in 2000, the per capita income for Hmong was $10,837 versus $26,668 for the U.S. as a whole. More than 25% of the Hmong have incomes below the poverty level, versus 13.0% of the U.S. overall population. Finally, 92.7% of the Hmong speak languages other than English in the home with 44% speaking English “less than very well” compared to 19.7% of the U.S. population as a whole who speak languages other than English in the home, with only 8.7% speaking English “less than very well” (Pfeifer and Lee 2004).

This information indicates several factors for the Hmong population. Since the Hmong are a relatively young population with a per capita income of $10,837, this could mean that they may have not obtained higher education to earn the median income of the U.S. In addition, many are living below
poverty level and speak very little English; this could indicate that they lack education (Pfeifer and Lee 2004).

Cultural Background
The Hmong culture is a combination of several variables such as social structure, cultural practices, traditions and customs, religion, economics, education, language and clothing. The most relevant variables to the topic of motivation and higher education are social structure, social economics status, resettlement in the U.S., language, education, and motivation, which are discussed in detail next.

Social Structure
The Hmong social structure is a patrilineal clan system (Thao 2004). There are roughly 18 clan surnames, depending on the scholar discussing the topic. The common surnames are Chang, Cheng, Chue, Fang, Hang, Her, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee, Lor, Moua, Pha, Thao, Vue, Xiong, Vang and Yang (Thao 2004). Normally, the father’s clan name is passed down and identifies a person’s family. During marriage, the wife takes on the husband’s name and forms her new identity. Each clan has a leader and the leader plays various roles, such as settling disputes, making important decisions, representing his communities and other roles involving leadership (Thao 2004).

Within the social structure, there are gender roles that are learned and taught from birth. Since the Hmongs’ lifestyle in Lao is based on farming and agriculture, the man is more involved in the public issues outside the house, whereas the woman is more involved within the home and taking care of the children (Vang 1999). This structure gives the man social standing and power to make decisions for his family since he is the breadwinner and performs most of the physical work of labor. Lo (2006) states that, “a Hmong woman’s purpose in life is to serve her husband and his family. She is to be a dutiful wife and not question her husband’s judgment” (13). Even within the family, sons are given more privileges and freedom than daughters. Daughters are taught to cook, clean and perform domestic chores in preparation to become good housewives. Sons are expected to carry on the family name and traditions and are, therefore, given more privileges.

Social Economic Status
The traditional Hmong economy is reflected in their agricultural lifestyle in Lao (Yang 1993). They rely solely on food crops for survival such as rice, corn, cucumber, squash, pumpkin, cabbage, beans, soybeans, potatoes and fruit. Rice is an important production in the Hmong economy (Lee and Khang 1988). It is also the major source of nutrients in the Hmong diet and it is included in every meal. Everyone in the family contributes to the cultivation of the crop for
faster and better efficiency. The two most important non-food crops are hemp (a soft durable fiber) and the opium poppy, which is grown for trade; both crops are great sources of cash (Yang 1993).

In addition to the Hmong’s occupations in agriculture, livestock is also important in their traditional economy (Yang 1993). Livestock is not only used for food consumption, it is also used for ritual sacrifices as part of their spiritual ceremonies and for hauling loads of crops. Types of livestock include swine, cattle, water buffalo, horses, goats and chickens (Yang 1993). Since the traditional Hmong society practices an agricultural lifestyle, formal education is not essential to survival.

Resettlement in the United States
Due to the aftermath of and the harsh living conditions under the Vietnam War, the Hmong first fled to Thailand for refuge, then to the United States in May 1975 (Thao 1999, 57). The second wave arrived in the U.S. in the early to mid-1980s and the third wave in the early to mid-1990s. The Hmong who arrived during the first wave were more educated and comfortable with the western culture. The following wave of Hmong immigrants was less educated and illiterate in the English language. They were scattered throughout the United States; however, the majority resided in California, a state that continued to be populated with refugees throughout the 1990s (Miyares 1998). Many Hmong experienced the process of “acculturation,” which is the learning of cultural patterns of a dominant culture (Hutchison 2008).

Refugees were expected to learn a new language and become accustomed to technologies that they had never known. The skills they learned from their homeland were useless in America’s job market; therefore, they had to learn new skills to support themselves and their families.

Language
The Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system of the Hmong language was developed in the early 1950s by three missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance: Linwood G. Barney, William A. Smalley, and Father Yves Bertrais, a French Catholic priest (Thao 1999). Before the written Hmong language was developed, the Hmong people relied on oral language to pass down stories, traditions and practices from generation to generation.

Education
The traditional Hmong society in Lao did not have any form of educational system. They were considered minorities in Laos. According to Yang (1993), the illiteracy rate even today is estimated at more than 99% in certain mountain regions of Laos because the government designed an educational system that excluded opportunities to its minorities. For example, the
Hmong students had to learn and study in the Lao language. Not only were educational opportunities limited, but Hmong families who could afford to send a child to school did so by sending only their sons. Additionally, because of the interruptions of wars, even families wealthy enough to send a son to school had little chance to obtain education (Podeschi and Xiong 1990).

A recent study in Stockton, California has shown that Hmong high school students value higher education (Lo 2006). The students are aware of their parents’ emotional support and want to succeed in school. The Hmong culture also places a high value on education because of the suffering the Hmong have experienced; many Hmong believe that education will bring them up the social ladder (Lo 2006). One concern is that these students are only slightly exposed to information about how to obtain higher education (Lo 2006).

Motivation

Motivation is an important quality that students hold. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) define “motivation” as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (5). Each individual has some goals in mind that he/she is trying to achieve. To achieve these goals, the individual has to also maintain motivation. Motivation also requires a physical and or mental activity such as planning (Pintrich and Schunk 2002). Motivated students show interest in their studies, focus on tasks and perform well. Unmotivated students are the opposite: they do not perform as well and show little or no interests in their studies. Therefore, motivation affects students’ success in school and can be a determination of whether they will prosper academically or not.

There are two types of motivation that can be identified. “Intrinsic motivation” is the motivation students have to “engage in an activity for its own sake” (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 245). People engage in activities because they enjoy doing so and the reward they receive is solely based on participating in the activity. On the other hand, “extrinsic motivation” is motivation to engage in an activity for external rewards (Pintrich and Schunk 2002, 245). Some external rewards can be money, grades, and prizes that motivate people to achieve and engage in activities.

In past decades, the literature indicated that, compared to other refugees and immigrants before them, the Hmong are doing remarkably well, especially in their social, political, and educational attainment. Only 35 years after arriving in the U.S., there are Hmong lawyers, doctors, professors, legislative leaders, nurses, teachers, and entrepreneurs. It is speculated that in a few more decades, the Hmong should be able to catch up with their Asian American counterparts, mainly Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean Americans. This research attempts to uncover some of the perceptions and motivations towards higher education among Hmong high school students.
METHODOLOGY

The participants selected for this study were Hmong high school students in the Sacramento City Unified School District, ages 16- to 18-years old. There were two females and four males. These students are in the 11th and 12th grades. To be eligible for this study, the high school students must have been enrolled at a local high school. The students were contacted personally through friends and acquaintances of the researcher and her family. The collection procedure was based on snowball sampling rather than random sampling because it is difficult and time consuming to get human subjects protection approval by the school district and California State University, Sacramento.

The method of in-depth interview was used to gather information about the participants. The questions were open-ended to gain a better understanding of how each participant felt about higher education. The researcher asked several closed-ended questions about the participants’ gender, age and class status. Participants were interviewed for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The students’ responses were typed by the researcher during the interview. A questionnaire was developed to help guide the researcher when interviewing the participants. The researcher developed approximately 50 questions that were then categorized by culture and home environment, by perception about education and college and by students’ academics and motivation.

The data analysis was begun by compiling and submitting the questionnaire, consent forms and the application to the Human Subject Committee of the Social Work Department at California State University, Sacramento for approval. Once the committee approved the research study as having no risk to participants, the researcher began contacting local high school principals for permission to interview Hmong high school students who were juniors and seniors. Once permission was granted, the researcher started recruiting Hmong students. Many were conveniently recruited as participants for this exploratory research project. Once the participants were selected and agreed to participate, they were given informed consent forms to sign (or for their parents to sign if they were not yet 18 years old). Due to complications such as the Hmong high school students’ unwillingness to fully participate in the interview process, the researcher decided to focus on recruiting Hmong students from the one local high school that she knew well. The researcher was then able to recruit six students who were acquaintances of the researcher’s friends and family.

The interviews were conducted in the privacy of either the participants’ homes or the researcher’s home. The consent form was again explained in
detail at the start of the interview. All responses from the participants were typed due to the students’ non-consent to be voice recorded. The responses were evaluated based on the categories of the questionnaire. The researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ responses was entirely subjective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions and motivations of Hmong high school students’ attitudes toward higher education. Variables such as their current academic performances, home life and personal values were explored in depth during the interviews. The interview questionnaire included questions about how participants perceived the importance of their current education and their future in higher education.

Participant Demographics

The researcher interviewed a total of six Hmong high school students between the ages of 16- and 18-years old. All students attended a local high school in the city of Sacramento. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants. There were four male Hmong students; two juniors and two seniors. There were also two female Hmong students, a junior and a senior. Table 1 shows participants demographics.

<table>
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<th>Names</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tr>
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Table 1. Participant demographics

Home/Cultural Influences

Students were asked about their home life and cultural influences. All students were born in Sacramento, California. They all primarily speak English at school and Hmong at home (Jin, Brian, Dana and Nancy), except for two students (Nate and Ben) who primarily speak English at home and school. The students can moderately read and write the Hmong language. All participants reside with their family members, ranging from three to ten people living in the home. The girls have similar responsibilities and house chores, such as helping out their mother in the home with cooking and cleaning. Two of the boys (Ben and Brian) also mentioned helping their mother. On the other hand, the two other boys (Jin and Nate) did not mention any house chores, but referred to their responsibilities as chores.
requested by their parents. The girls reported that they receive different treatment than their brothers. For example, their brothers have more freedom and fewer expectations to do chores. The male students also recognize this trend because they too believe that they receive more freedom compared to their sisters. Their parents are more lenient on them when they stay out late at night and when they do not do their household chores.

**Students’ Academic Performance**

All students claimed that their academic progress currently stable. They are all receiving good grades, and very few (only Nate and Brian) mentioned that they have received Cs. All students except Nate are preparing themselves for college; Nate plans to work for a year after high school before he attends college. Three students (Jin, Dana and Nancy) are taking classes beyond the high school graduation requirement to better prepare themselves for college, while the other three students are not. Some students devote their time to either a little or a lot of after-school activities and studying (Nancy, Dana, Ben and Jin), while the other students spend their afternoons with friends and doing leisure activities.

Developing a strong study habit is a positive indicator that students will most likely succeed in school. However, five out of the six students study very little and only do so when there are upcoming exams. Ben, on the other hand, has developed a very strong study habit and studies even when there are no exams. When the students were asked about how they usually feel when they are in school, they responded that they are usually tired, sleepy, or bored. Two students did mention that first period starts at 7:30 a.m., so this early start time may be the cause of their negative reactions. Not one student responded with a positive reaction about the times when they are in school.

**The Importance of Education**

All students agreed that education is very important. They all related education to the success of their futures; they indicated that, with education, they will be able to obtain better jobs and opportunities. They also agree that education is very important to their parents. Nancy mentioned that, “it’s very important knowing that they came from a country with not many opportunities and, for that reason, they want us to get the education we need so that our future will be better than theirs.” An interesting point that Nate talked about was that his parents view education as something no longer needed, but for the youth, education is viewed as a necessity.

The top priority for these Hmong high school students concerning their education is to achieve good grades. They also emphasized the concept of graduating from high school and continuing on with their education. They
are aware that by achieving good grades, it is more likely that the colleges they apply to will accept them.

**Higher Education**
The Hmong high school students all responded that they want to attend college. Five students (Jin, Dana, Nancy, Brian and Ben) plan to enroll in college right after high school graduation, while Nate plans to work for one year to start a saving before he enrolls in college. Each student has at least one college in mind; some of the colleges mentioned included California Polytechnic State University, American River College, Brigham Young University, California State University, Sacramento, and University of California, Davis. Four out of six students have visited college campuses, while two have not.

When the students were asked if they had any exposure to higher education, they responded that they had been exposed by school counselors and teachers, friends and family members, and school clubs and extracurricular activities. Ben and Nate have been exposed to higher education and leadership activities through a local club, while Dana and Nancy gained insights about higher education through their high school’s scholarships club. The students also knew many people who were in college or who were college graduates.

The students also reported a strong sense of emotional support from their friends and families. Although the parents of five of the students (Jin, Nancy, Dana, Ben, and Nate) lack formal education, the students report that their parents are still very supportive of their goals in education. Since financial support is more difficult to obtain to attend college due to their parents’ limited income, the students feel that they would have to seek part-time employment to support themselves.

Overall, the senior students know about the application process to college, while the juniors have a modest awareness of the application process. Jin mentioned that, “basically it’s admitting your grades, letters of recommendations and an essay about yourself.” Brian said that he does not know much about the process, but he knows where to go and ask for help. Dana said that she knows to apply online because that is what her sister told her.

Lastly, on the topic of higher education, students were asked if they have any recommendations to help Hmong students get more exposure to higher education. Two students recommend that other Hmong students join school clubs and participate in workshops and events to deepen their knowledge and awareness about college. One student also suggested visiting school counselors. In general, these students recommended that others take the
personal initiative to find out more information about college. Jin mentioned that “they can’t just sit and wait for something to happen. They have to be self-encouraging and do the research themselves too.”

Motivation
The students’ motivation comes from within their immediate family, friends, and their future goals. For Dana, her motivation in education comes from her parents. She sees that her parents have struggled to provide the family with the best that they can offer. In return, she wants to give back to her family through her achieving higher education. Dana’s mother constantly reminds her that, since Hmong people in Laos never had any educational opportunities, she should stay determined to obtain a higher education.

Another extrinsic motivating factor the Hmong high school students have is the outcome of what higher education has to offer. Jin is motivated by wealth and knowledge, and believes that through higher education he will be able to achieve his dreams. He believes that he will have a better and secured financial future. Brian, Ben and Nate are motivated by outside sources to achieve higher education. They want to be able to financially provide for their parents, themselves and their future families. The students are aware of what higher education has to offer them in the long run.

Another extrinsic motivating factor is the letter grades that the students receive. They are all aware that, with good grades, they will have a higher chance of attending their college of choice. In addition, the students believe that performing well in high school will better prepare them for college courses. It is also rewarding when they see their letter grades because they understand how important these grades are.

LIMITATIONS
The limitations of this study included the use of a snowball sampling due to time constraints. Participants were recruited from one local high school and had good academic standing. They were also acquaintances of the researcher and her family. Another limitation was that the researcher is Hmong and if it was not for the researcher’s background, the results might have been different.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Using a random sample size of participants is suggested for a future study. Recruiting participants from different high schools would expand this study, compared to conducting interviews from only one high school. In addition,
using a different strategy to recruit students with different academic standings would result in different findings.

CONCLUSION

To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to explore the views of Hmong high school students’ regarding their perceptions and motivations towards higher education. Students were asked about their home environments, current academic progress, future goals and motivations.

The participants live with many family members, with anywhere from three to ten people living in the home. They have family and friends who are attending college and who have already graduated from college. Even with their awareness of education and what it takes to obtain education, the participants still follow their expected roles at home, such as the Hmong female students who are expected to complete household chores, while their brothers are allowed to focus on other tasks.

All of the participants agreed that education is very important to their future, family, career and personal goals. They all plan to attend college either immediately following high school graduation or one year from graduation. Four participants have visited several college campuses, while two have not. They all have in mind which college they want to attend. In addition to their value of education, they are setting their priorities according to their achievement of higher education. All of the participants want to achieve good grades for college entrance requirements, which shows a form of motivation in high school. For example, participants study on a regular basis, attend class and complete homework assignments. Four out of six students are involved in some type of extracurricular activity that expose them to and encourage them to attend college.

Participants were found to show self-motivation. They mentioned several topics about their futures, such as their future families, parents, career, and financial stability. The topic mentioned the most during the interviews was that family and giving back are the most significant motivators. Family leads the students to want to achieve higher education. The students understand the struggles their parents had to face with the lack of education. These factors motivate the students to achieve good grades and perform well in school in order to attend college.

This study also revealed that there are resources available to students. It is only a matter of self-motivation and determination for the Hmong high school students to involve themselves in activities that would better their understanding and knowledge of higher education.
REFERENCES


