The Connecting Hmong Perspectives Project: Cultural Proficiency, School-Community Relations, and Hmong Parental Involvement at Wolverine Elementary in Anchorage, Alaska

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study superimposes how Hmong parents and teachers/administrators at an elementary school in Anchorage, Alaska perceive the educational framework for Hmong students and families. The inquiry was conducted during the fall of 2009 using interviews with 18 Anchorage School District (ASD) staff members at Wolverine Elementary, and a series of three focus group sessions with Hmong parents, conducted in Hmong and translated to English.

The findings indicate a clear lack of communication between the Hmong community and the school, and the accompanying struggle to involve and inform Hmong parents. Conflicts with work schedules and familial obligations, language barriers, lack of experience with formal education on behalf of Hmong parents, lack of cultural proficiency in the ASD, as well as Hmong parents’ unfamiliarity with the procedures of the schools, were identified as significant factors. Differing levels of commitment regarding the inclusion of Hmong culture and history in the curriculum also emerged. Furthermore, the ongoing effort to boost English language proficiency (ELP) in the community was highlighted, as well as the ability of a homogeneous staff to support and relate to a decidedly heterogeneous student body.
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INTRODUCTION

Kia stood on the tarmac as a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty enveloped her. Heat waves radiated from the blacktop as she strained to make out the mountains on the distant horizon, but all that came back was distortion. She sat down on her haunches and grabbed the hand of her son, Pao, with her eye remaining fixed on the craggy peaks — on her home. She questioned if they would ever be back. Thoughts of family, of peace and war, and a persistent sense of helplessness ran thorough her mind. She turned away from Pao, now the man of the family at age seven, and wiped a tear from her cheek. “OK! Time to go,” a voice yelled from the front wheel of the cargo plane. She gathered her few possessions, gripped Pao’s hand ever tighter, and stepped into line as she looked over her shoulder one last time. She wondered if their souls would ever be able to find their way across an ocean to their home in northern Laos. Turning her back on the familiar outline on the horizon, she took her first step onto the plane and towards her unfamiliar future. The year was 1978.

Kia Yang is a Hmong (Hmoob) woman living in Anchorage, Alaska. When she was 18 and living in northern Laos with her husband, he along with nearly all able-bodied men in their village was recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to combat a Laotian Communist faction, the Pathet Lao, as part of a covert expansion of the Vietnam War along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Mote, 2004; Faderman, 1998). Kia’s husband failed to return home, as did about one-third of the Laotian Hmong population over the course of the conflict, and one half of all the males over 15 (Faderman, 1998, p. 7).

After the war ended, she escaped with her only remaining child and spent three years at Ban Vinai in northern Thailand – a United Nations “relocation” camp erected for refugees fleeing their home country, targeted as “pests” and “parasites” as part of a systematic attempt to “eradicate the Meo minority completely” after the Americans withdrew in 1975 (Faderman, 1998, p. 7; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). Kia now gazes at a different skyline – the Chugach. Her journey mirrors that of so many others who make up a vibrant and growing Hmong community in Anchorage. It is one of survival, perseverance, adaptation and change, and is an American story that is both inspiring and important to hear.

The Hmong community in Anchorage has grown significantly over the past decade – in numbers as well as prominence – adding a distinct thread to the cultural fabric of Alaska’s largest, and most diverse city. The first arrivals set their roots on Independence Day in

1 “Meo” is another word for “Hmong” that is considered to be a pejorative by Laotian Hmong as it carries undertones of slavery and contempt dating back to their relationship with the Chinese government.
1998, and by 2000 the municipal population had grown to around 300, with some families being placed directly from refugee camps, and relatives from other states eager to reunite with loved ones (Clan leader, personal communication, November 17, 2007; United States Census Bureau, 2000). Alaska has continued to attract more and more Hmong-Americans who come in search of a mountainous environment reminiscent of northern Laos, for economic opportunity, and to join an established population. Clan leaders and school officials estimate that the Anchorage community now includes 4,000-5,000 members, or around 500 families (Clan leader, personal communication, November 17, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Recent U.S. Census Bureau figures, including the American Community Survey (ACS) from 2006, erroneously fail to recognize Hmong representation in Alaska, pointing to obvious sampling flaws and the need for a demonstrative 2010 census. Reported municipal population numbers from community leaders and ASD administrators would place them easily in the top ten largest Hmong population centers in the United States. In addition to establishing a population trend, a number of socioeconomic indicators are important to understand as well, to which discussions of education and schooling, parental involvement, and cultural proficiency should be inseparably linked. Nationwide results from the ACS provide some relative figures that are useful for comparative purposes. Some of the most relevant indicators for Hmong-Americans (compared to national averages) include:

- Median family income: $42,875 ($58,526)
- Percentage speaking a language other than English at home: 94.2% (19.7%)
- High school graduate or higher: 60.3% (84.1%)
- Average household size: 5.36 persons (2.61) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008)

In Anchorage schools, 22% of students receiving services from the English Language Learners (ELL) program are Hmong, a two-fold increase in less than five years (Appendix A). Despite the advances being made by the community, Hmong families remain largely detached from the school culture, and there are clear rifts that ultimately stem from two divergent worldviews – each with its own cultural protocols, patterns of interaction, conceptions of social organization and conflict resolution, and perceptions of education –
occupying an educational framework that traditionally operates on Euro-American values and practices.

These statistics are included not as explanations for any aspect of this study, but rather as a starting point in collective conversations about the Anchorage Hmong community. Put plainly, Hmong-Americans experience higher rates of poverty and linguistic isolation, are less familiar with formal education, and possess larger families when compared to national averages.

The reality of increasing Hmong enrollment in the Anchorage School District (ASD) is mirrored by an overall, conspicuous diversification of the student body in our city’s schools. Since 1976, those students classified as “ethnically diverse” have increased from 13% to over 50%, and there are 95 languages spoken by students in the district (Office of the Superintendent, 2008).

This increase in the minority student body has not been accompanied by a similar shift in minority teachers – 90% of ASD educators are of White European heritage, and are now in the position of creating, implementing and maintaining an educational framework for a majority of students to whom they possess no intrinsic linguistic or cultural connection (Anchorage School District, 2009).

The Connecting Hmong Perspectives Project is a collaborative action research endeavor conducted at Wolverine Elementary (name changed) in east Anchorage. It is based on Hmong parents’ perceptions of their relationship with the schools and their child’s education, superimposed over those of ASD staff. In doing so, this acts to confront a main
area of concern in this relationship – systemic miscommunication. In part, the purpose of this project is to identify and make available the multiple and overlapping realities as experienced by Hmong families in Anchorage, including Hmong perspectives and perceptions, Hmong cultural values and attitudes, with a clear focus on areas which are seen as significant in Hmong terms.

My hope as a researcher is to promote these conversations as a foundation from which adaptations to the educational scheme for Hmong students and families is approached, ensuring that the Hmong community is not solely on the receiving end of new policies and programs, but is actively and genuinely present in the creation, implementation, and maintenance of any reforms. Given that the ASD mission is to “educate all students for success in life,” and as a believer in the power and significance of such words, this project is also an effort to bring attention to the multiple, converging and diverging ideas of “success” that exist in our city’s schools and diverse communities.

The impetus for this effort comes from my combined experiences as a former employee of the ASD, as a volunteer in Southeast Asia, and as a believer in the ideal of multicultural education policy and reform that resonates with the realities experienced by this particular minority community, and the teachers that serve them. As a research effort that places its focus on action over theory, this is meant to be an open critique of our collective ability to create equal opportunity in education, highlighting specific cross-cultural issues as perceived by Hmong parents and Wolverine Elementary staff.

A series of information-collecting interviews with ASD employees and Hmong clan leaders/parents during the 2007-2008 school year identified a series of preliminary issues, challenges, and concerns in the relationship between the schools and the community. Wolverine Elementary was chosen because of its representation of these initial topics, its significant and expanding Hmong student population (30%), and its willingness to approach the obvious challenges with a keen focus on involving the Hmong community directly and sincerely. The single most pervasive preliminary concern that was identified is an obvious, clearly expressed lack of communication – a concern mentioned by all those invested in this relationship, and the catalyst for many of the perceived problems. In acknowledgement of
this fact, and before any discussion of reform can take place, my hope is that this project will be able to engage the ASD and Wolverine Hmong community from a position of mutual understanding.

*Who Are the Hmong?*

The Hmong (rhymes with “kong”) are an Asian ethnic group indigenous to southern China, though their precise origins have proven difficult to trace. It is known, however, that they have farmed the fertile banks of the Yellow River (Huang He) for at least 5,000 years (Lee, 2005; Faderman, 1998, p. 1). Starting in the late 18\(^{th}\) century, a significant number of families began to move south in response to repressive economic and cultural reforms imposed by the Qing Chinese, into Indochina – what are today the mountainous regions of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Lee, G.Y., 2005; Lee, X.W., 2009). They lived and farmed there for over a century before being recruited as capable warriors in several armed conflicts in the region. During World War II Hmong were enlisted by the French to fight against Japanese occupation, and from 1947 – 1953 against the Viet Minh, a communist faction fighting French colonial rule (Lee, 2005; Faderman, 1998, p. 4; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

During the Vietnam War, the Hmong were recruited and employed by the CIA to disrupt supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to aid downed American planes, and as fighter pilots (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). They were praised as loyal partners with an intimate connection to the mountains – fighters willing to “hang on and fight another day, time and time again” (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. 9). When Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, the promise given to Hmong warriors by the CIA – that they would be provided for – was broken, and the newly formed communist government systematically targeted them as enemies of the state (Mote, 2004). Prison labor camps were erected in order to “reeducate” those who had been instrumental in the fight against them, and Hmong villages were burned to the ground. A mass and hasty exodus of more than 150,000 people commenced toward the Mekong River – the natural border with Thailand – where several squalid United Nations refugee camps were subsequently erected.
From the mid 1970s until the late 1990s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled the majority of these displaced peoples in several countries throughout the world, including Australia, France, and Canada, though the United States accepted the bulk of them. Here, they encountered a truly foreign environment and were forced to learn the demands and expectations of American life at an accelerated pace. In long-overdue recognition of their duty and sacrifice, House Resolution 371 relieved Hmong warriors from demonstrating English language proficiency or knowledge of civics as part of the naturalization process (Congressional Budget Office, 1998).

Despite being American war veterans, they were described crudely as “savages,” or “from the stone age,” when their language, social organization, and cultural practices came in contact with government bureaucracies, the education and medical systems, immigration and naturalization, and child protective services (Mote, 2004; Faderman, 1998; Fadiman, 1997). What was once reaffirming and valid instantly became despicable, even illegal in the American context. The challenges were many, but were met in stride. Some of the Hmong families in Anchorage were placed directly from UN camps, while others have made their way north from other states, such as Minnesota and California, where the largest Hmong communities in the United States continue to grow. A brief review of documentation on Hmong history is undertaken in the literature review section.

**Nomenclature**

There are some important distinctions to be made with regards to nomenclature, as the term “Hmong” means different things to different groups of people. Hmong have their own terminology for subcultural distinctions, "White" (Hmong Der) and "Green" (Mong Leng) being the names of the two largest groups in Anchorage (Lee, 1995; Clan leader, personal communication, November 17, 2007). Some scholars and Hmong leaders have expressed concern with lumping all subgroups into the singular “Hmong” term because it marginalizes and devalues identifying solely as Hmong Der or Mong Leng, and would prefer both terms to be included (Hmong/Mong). Despite roughly equal representation of both groups in the United States, research and translated materials have tended to favor the Hmong Der. Anthropologist Dr. Gary Yia Lee, who is Hmong Der, cites that the use of the term
“Hmong” over the past 30 years in the United States implies the inclusion of all subgroups (Lee, 2005).

Furthermore, in China, they are still referred to as “Meo/Miao,” though this term is considered by many Laotian Hmong to be extremely derogatory as it implies slavery and contempt (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Faderman, 1998, p. 7). I recognize the importance of these distinctions, and for the purposes of this project, I will employ the term “Hmong” as inclusive of all subgroups represented in Anchorage schools.

**Hmong Worldview**

Hmong American cosmology varies widely from region to region, and from clan to clan. While differences are apparent, Hmong practices and rituals serve to accomplish one or more of these objectives:

- To maintain spiritual health and harmony within the individual and family;
- To remember ancestors and deceased members of the family through various offerings;
- To ensure continuity of the person and soul, from one generation to the next and from one life to the other (Her, 2005, p. 3).

The traditional Hmong worldview segments the universe – the most encompassing of all spaces – into three, interconnected realms: “Sau Ntuj” (sky or upper realm), “Nplaj Teb” (earth), and “Dlaab Teb” (spirit world) (Her, 2005, p. 5). What links these realms together is the cycle of the human soul – the earth, spirit, and upper realms represent life, death and renewal, respectively, and mark the transition of the soul from one realm to the next (Her, 2005, p. 5). Hmong scholar Vincent Her elaborates on the cycle of the human soul:

“A soul can exist inside or outside of the body. It would leave the corpse upon death, re-animate the new human form at birth and reside in it for the duration of the life of a person. During that time, it is ideal for the soul to remain within the body. If it should become forcibly separated from it, the result is an undesirable state known as ‘poob plig’ (soul loss).

Some Hmong Americans hold that each person has at least three souls; others say there might be more. A soul is thought of as mobile and could
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potentially become multilocal, especially upon death. Of the three souls, for example, one is expected to journey to the ancestors; one to remain on the family altar as an ancestral guardian; and one at the grave” (2005).

While promoting understanding of Hmong-American cosmology remains vital, it is equally important not to generalize, and to appreciate the fact that Hmong-Americans draw on beliefs that stretch across many boundaries. That being said, many of the emergent problems that have become apparent in the relationship between the Anchorage Hmong community and the ASD can be traced to the manner in which Hmong beliefs and practices interact with the Western worldview. The educational framework in Anchorage was conceived, and continues to be maintained by a White European majority that possesses culturally specific modes of communication, conceptions of parental involvement and child rearing, modes of knowledge production, and ideas of success, however they often do not correspond to the diversity that exists in the schools.

One aspect of this divergence that is germane to this project is how Hmong social organization interacts with that of people from White European heritage, and the bureaucratic institutions they subsequently have constructed.

Clan Structure

The Hmong are assuredly group oriented, and would be classified as “collectivistic,” in opposition to a more “individualistic” American culture (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003, p. 47). While Western culture tends to encourage personal autonomy and independence, Hmong children learn at an early age that in standing together they are stronger – that the survival of the individual is inseparably linked to the survival of the group. In this sense, group/family interdependence trumps independence. When asked to estimate the population of the Anchorage Hmong community, invariably the response is given in families instead of individuals.

Clan structure serves to distinguish kin from non-kin, unites them into organized kinship groups, while also dividing them along “mutually exclusive patrilineal lines” (Lee, 1995). Persons of the same clan or sub clan without any known blood links refer to each other as
"kwv tij," or relatives in the broader sense of the term. Based on the various surnames found in Thailand and Laos, Hmong lineage is broken into roughly 18 clans with various spellings, 12 of which are currently represented in Anchorage: Chang/Cha, Cheng, Chue, Fang, Her/Heu, Hang, Khang, Kong, Lee/Ly, Kue, Lor/Lo, Moua, Pha, Thao, Vang, Vue/Vu, Xiong/Song, Yang (Lee, 1995).

The clan system “proscribes marriage between persons of the same clan. It helps a person to identify the groups with which he or she can count on for closer ties and support, despite the fact that the bond of mutual obligations will not be as strong as that between members of a lineage” (Lee, 1995). Each clan within each community is led by a patriarchal “clan leader,” who is commonly a well-respected and knowledgeable elder. Clan leaders are looked to for guidance, healing, conflict resolution, and are revered as culture bearers. The centrality of elders in Hmong culture is effectively elucidated by a popular Hmong proverb - *Tangled hair, use a comb to unsnarl it; complicated dispute, use an elder to solve it* (Mote, 2004, p. 115).

An understanding of the clan structure, including Hmong protocols for internal consensus building and conflict resolution, will prove to be essential in working towards a culturally appropriate, reciprocal relationship between the schools and community.

For the purposes of this project, I have changed the names of all participants to protect their identities, as per the consent agreements between myself and Hmong parents, and ASD staff. Additionally, I have chosen to employ only first names – in recognition of the social and cultural significance of the clan name, to which any change would unnecessarily affect how the community interprets the results.

*What Is The “Issue?”*

As no research or concerted, unified effort has been undertaken to generate a mutually forged school culture with the Hmong community, I don’t view the array of concerns and challenges as problems, but rather opportunities to highlight and validate the manner in which the Hmong community relates to and experiences education. During the 2007-2008 academic year, members of the Hmong community, and ASD staff at several schools raised concerns, challenges, and perceptions of the issues to me in a series of information collecting
interviews. These interviews were used as the basis in choosing a site to conduct the study. A synthesis of these initial concerns are listed here:

Perceptions of Anchorage school district staff:

- **Formidable communication gap**
  
  The language barrier, and problems communicating with parents, was the most oft-repeated concern from ASD staff during the initial series of interviews. They expressed the prevalence of this challenge in the classroom, with students who speak Hmong at home and English at school, and in trying to keep non-English proficient parents informed and involved in school activities. Efforts to involve parents in English language courses were said to have experienced only limited success.

- **Unresponsive parents**
  
  Difficulty promoting parental involvement with Hmong households was another common concern for ASD staff during the initial interviews. The procedures in place for informing and involving parents were seen to be generally ineffective in their current form for Hmong parents.

- **Lack of interpreters**
  
  Hmong-speaking ASD employees are, by and large, seen as extremely valuable cultural brokers from the perspective of the ASD. Consequently, they are exceedingly busy and face many pressures from the schools and from their community to bridge a decidedly wide cultural gap.

- **Lack of cultural understanding**
  
  Most interviewees expressed that their cultural and historical understanding of the Hmong community is deficient. Likewise, many teachers expressed that Hmong parents lack understanding of American culture, and have been “reluctant to assimilate.” Cultural sensitivity training is conducted through the English Language Learners Department in combination with in-house exercises in the schools.

Perceptions of Hmong Community Members:

- **Lack of cultural understanding amongst ASD staff**
  
  The perception of many Hmong community members is that ASD teachers do not understand Hmong culture and history. Consequently, parents often opt to seek out only Hmong ASD employees, and many parents have detached from trying to actively participate in school events and procedures.

- **Uncoordinated bilingual education programs**
The manner in which bilingual education is administered has caused some problems with Hmong community members. Lack of coordination is said to have caused excessive absenteeism when Hmong students were indeed in school.

- **Lack of Hmong culture and history in the curriculum**

  As has been undertaken by schools in states with significant Hmong populations, many parents wish to see Hmong history and culture as part of the curriculum in schools with many Hmong students.

- **Difficulty in communicating with the school**

  Communication is an issue for everyone in this relationship. Bilingual Hmong students, sometimes as young as twelve, often act as informal liaisons for letters sent home in English or Hmong, during parent-teacher conferences, and in resolving disputes despite efforts within the ASD to halt the practice.

**The Connecting Hmong Perspectives Project**

Connecting Hmong Perspectives is an in depth, qualitative snapshot of the relationship between the ASD and the Hmong community based on the perceptions of ASD staff and Hmong parents at Wolverine Elementary. This was accomplished through open-ended interviews with 18 teachers, and a set of “directed conversations” with three groups of Hmong parents, conducted by a Hmong moderator and translated to English. The interviews and conversations were intentionally given a broad scope so that participants were able to explore and express what was important to them. A comprehensive outline of these approaches is undertaken in the methodology section. The overarching goal of the project is to link the perspectives of Hmong parents with those of ASD staff in affirming that the Hmong community should not be required to conform to the institutional/social norms set by the schools, and to promote their involvement in decision making processes that stand to directly affect their continued participation and sense of ownership in the institution.

As facilitator of this project, I recognize disconnects between the ASD and Anchorage Hmong community in their modes of communication and interaction, understanding of Hmong language and culture, and in conceptions of “success” and parental involvement, but this project is not a forum for labeling differences, but rather one to bring attention to the fact that communication, culture, success, parental involvement and knowledge construction are not singular concepts. As a student, researcher, former ASD employee, and someone with a deep respect for the Anchorage Hmong community, I am heavily influenced by the
need to create a culturally responsive educational institution that strives to serve all of our
city’s students and communities equally. A “culturally responsive” institution considers the
following:

The administration of a decentralized, loosely-coupled system with strong participatory
decision-making requires a well-developed sensitivity to variations in individual and group
communication and interaction patterns, and a repertoire of skills for organizing peoples
diverse talents, interests and efforts so that they fuse into a coherent collective endeavor. The
administrator in such a situation functions less as an authority figure and more as a
facilitator, coordinator and mediator, leading by example and consensus rather than by
decree (Barnhardt, 1987).

A commitment to “cultural proficiency” is outlined on the ASD website and, in part, it calls
for the recognition, respect for, and use of student identities and backgrounds to create
“optimal learning” (Anchorage School District, 2000). This signifies the need for rigorous
involvement with minority communities, striving to engage parents in school governance
with a focus on family strengths in these collaborations (ASD, 2000). Furthermore, this is a
commitment that promotes reshaping the curriculum to match the background of the
students, “culturally sensitive” teachers who translate the culture of their students into
instruction, and a staff that participates in an “ongoing dialogue with students, families and
community members on issues important to them” (ASD, 2000).

My goal in this effort is to initiate a genuine commitment to these policies, to move beyond a
mere toleration of difference within the ASD, and for educational reform affecting the
Hmong community to be fueled by the desires and perspectives of the Hmong community.
A folktale collected in 1924 by Francois Marie Savina, the French missionary, reports that when the Hmong lived in the primordial northern homeland where the days and nights were six months long, they were once involved in a land dispute with some neighboring tribes. Their king resolved it as follows. Each tribe would select an envoy who would walk as far as he could during the six months between sunset to sunrise, returning to the king’s golden palace at the end of his journey. All the territory be covered would belong to his tribe. If one of the envoys failed to reach the palace, his tribe would be commanded to live wherever he stood at the moment the sun rose. At daybreak, the Hmong envoy was standing on a high pinnacle, and this is why, ever since then, the Hmong have always lived in the mountains, where they are first to see the sun rise and the last to see it set (Tapp, Michaud, Culas, & Lee, 2004, p. 117).

A review of pertinent literature for this project unifies a wide array of materials that draws from the contributions of many. I have organized applicable research, studies and writings thematically, though they all fall under the umbrella of “multicultural education” – that which broadly aims to promote equity for students and families from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups. A review of historical documentation of the Hmong and their journey to the United States is undertaken as well. The themes are organized as follows: multicultural / citizenship education; parental involvement / cross-cultural partnerships in education; and culturally responsive institutions.

It is important to note that the literature that I have explored for this project, and the theoretical frameworks under which it is conceptualized, are only employed as a means of mapping the key issues, and do not to serve as a litmus test against which the results of the study are solely judged. The important questions, as well as the answers, are to be gleaned from the context.

Hmong History
There are extensive writings on the Hmong diaspora that highlight several salient events in their history – the migration from China into northern Indochina, their involvement in armed conflicts alongside the French and Americans in combating regional development of communism, life in refugee camps and their ensuing exodus from Southeast Asia to various countries around the world, and ongoing adaptations to life in new countries and environments.
Evidence of Hmong prehistory comes from many sources, with differing theories emerging as to where origins can be attributed. Folk tales and myths allude to Siberia, Mesopotamia, and China as possible beginnings, and varying creation stories remain prevalent in different areas of the world (Livo & Cha, 1991; Lee, 2007). Lee (2007) uses DNA as well as linguistic cues to track 5,000 years of Hmong history along the banks of the Yellow River (Huang He) in southern China, where roughly 3-4 million Hmong remain today.

In response to oppressive reforms and militaristic pressure from the Qing Chinese, a significant migration of Hmong-Miao occurred during 18th and 19th centuries from southern China to northern Indochina (what is today Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar), of which there is extensive historical evidence (Lee, 2005; Tapp, et al., 2004; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). Here, they were slash and burn agriculturalists, growing rice, wheat, millet, beans, corn, squash, and other crops (Lee, X.W., 2009, p. 27). Symonds’ (2004) ethnographic study of gender and the cycle of life in a Hmong village offers a detailed account of Laotian Hmong culture and cosmology, with specific orientation toward the historical and changing face of gender norms and social organization.

Sources documenting Hmong war experiences in Indochina are perhaps the most plentiful, which is not surprising considering that those who constructed the Romanized Popular Alphabet (Hmong RPA) in 1953 – Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries – were so invested in the conflicts. During World War II, Hmong fought alongside the French in combating Japanese occupation, and during the 1940s and 1950s against the anti-French Viet-Minh (Tapp, et al., 2004; Lee, 2005; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). Particularly relevant to an understanding of the Anchorage Hmong community is their involvement in the Vietnam War. Hamilton-Merritt (1993), a war correspondent who covered the conflict, amasses an in-depth account of American and Hmong involvement in a theater of the war that was long kept a secret from the American public. Her book, “Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos,” covers not only troop movements and tactical debriefings, but the immense cost paid by the Laotian Hmong, including convincing documentation of the use of chemical warfare against them (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).
Additionally, several personal narratives by Hmong authors document horrors of war, the harrowing exodus to Thailand, life in refugee camps, and struggles inherent in being placed in very foreign environments. Considering that the war in Laos was a clandestine undertaking, one shielded from the eyes of the American public, these stories assign a face and sense of validation to a section of Hmong and American history that was denied for so long. The personal accounts speak to the moral imperative to both recognize and validate Hmong culture and history in the school setting, because it is goes beyond Hmong history in becoming American history.

Among the most notable of these chronicles is “I Begin My Life All Over,” in which Faderman and Xiong (1998) assemble a collection of oral histories stretching from war experiences to adjustments to life in new countries. “The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down,” by Fadiman (1997) is perhaps the most well known, which details the clash of newly arrived Hmong immigrants with the United States health care system in Merced, California. Another account, “The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir,” by Yang (2008), provides depth and emotion to the immense strain placed on Laotian Hmong families during and after the war in an evocative, longitudinal narrative.

It is said that when two cultures meet, both are changed, and writing on Hmong-American culture continues to gain breadth and depth. Yia Lee (2005) evaluates an array of issues with regards to the hybridization of Hmong and American culture in Minnesota, California, and other growing communities. X.W. Lee’s (2009) useful documentation of Hmong history and culture in relation to the Western educational framework is particularly helpful in gaining an appreciation and understanding of Hmong participation in bureaucratic and institutional spaces within the United States.

**Multicultural / Citizenship Education**

The overarching goal of “citizenship education” is to create responsible, active, and informed citizens who possess an allegiance to the nation-state. Banks (2008) breaks down historical and existing conceptions into three main categories – assimilationist, universal, and multicultural (p. 129). The assimilationist framework requires individuals from different groups to give up their home and community cultures and languages to attain inclusion and
to participate effectively in national civic culture (Banks, 2008, p. 129). This has traditionally dominated educational policy decisions.

On the other hand, Banks interprets a universal conception of citizenship education to equate to a transcendence of particularity and difference – an educational framework that is effectively “race blind” (2008, p. 129). The ideal, he posits, is the multicultural conception – that which “recognizes and legitimizes” the right and need of citizens to preserve commitments both to their ethnic and cultural communities and to the national civic culture (Banks, 2008, p. 130). This allows for the balance between cultural, national, and global identifications in understanding the ways in which knowledge is constructed, becoming knowledge producers, and participating in civic action to create a more humane nation and world (Banks, 2008, p. 130).

In expanding these concepts, we appreciate that research and theory on “multicultural education” has forever mirrored and reacted to major social/historical movements and events – the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, and later Hilda Taba on “intergroup education,” desegregation and the civil rights/ethnic studies movements, the immigration reform act of 1965, and more recently in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001 (Banks, 2003). This research has served to both promote and limit the fundamental rights of minority communities in education. Likewise, Banks (2003) continues to be on the forefront of research in this area, and he defines the dimensions of multicultural education as content integration, knowledge construction processes, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (p. 4). The aspects of his framework directly relevant to this project are discussed here.

“Content integration” represents the extent to which teachers utilize the cultural background of their students to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline (Banks, 2003, p. 4). This alone has constituted multicultural education reform in many areas over the years, and remains central, though most would argue only in combination with other changes. Control over the curriculum, and changes to it, has long been an important aspect of educational reform in Alaska, most notably for Alaska Natives. Kawagley (1998) argues that students who sit in a classroom in Akiak are
taught the same, static lessons as those in Atlanta that have “assumed that grasshoppers, turtles, cows, and sidewalks were part of every child’s daily life.” (p. 10). Furthermore, he has written extensively on the value of a curriculum that is of and by the Native communities in the state, with a keen focus on “place-based” initiatives.

Several studies have pointed to a conspicuous lack of Hmong culture and history in the curriculum of American public schools with high Hmong enrollment. Ngo, Bigelow, and Wahlstrom (2007) noted only a “superficial” integration of Hmong culture into the curriculum – food, holidays, dress, and cultural artifacts – in a study of the transition of Wat Tham Krabok (a “relocation” camp for refugees in Thailand) children to Saint Paul, Minnesota Public Schools (p. 26). Furthermore, Adler (2004), in a qualitative study examining how Hmong parents and professional staff perceive home-school relations, found that parents and staff held conflicting views on whether there was adequate inclusion of Hmong culture in the curriculum (p. 64).

Inclusion of content, however, continues to be utilized by those in power as a means of appeasing or pacifying minority communities. More genuine reforms in the name of multicultural education take into account the second dimension that Banks discusses – “knowledge construction processes.” This is an important aspect of the framework as it taps into the “implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline,” or within an ethnic group, in understanding how knowledge is constructed within it (Banks, 2003, p. 4). Likewise, an effective tool used by dominant cultural groups in influencing power relations with minorities, in that the use of social practices, forms, and structures produced in schools to generate, process, and disseminate knowledge effectively socialize them into Eurocentric ways of life – what Agbo (2007) labels “cultural invasion” (p. 2).

In this vein, Carol Barnhardt’s (n.d.) examination of Athabaskan teaching styles versus non-Athabaskan teaching styles with Alaska Native students focuses on the rhythm and tempo of teacher discourse with students, and its implications in affecting knowledge production. In the Anchorage context, this alludes to the importance of employing educators that match the background of their students – an ASD school board goal – and in breaking the monopoly
on teaching styles and training models within the American school system to mirror the
diverse ways in which students construct knowledge. As Ascher (1991) suggests, “each
culture establishes its own spatial temporal conventions,” depending on what is important to
them (p. 18). Professional development of minority staff is often sidestepped or neglected –
a significant factor in maintaining hegemony over how the school operates, and how
knowledge is both constructed and produced within it. In recognizing the relative deficiency
of Hmong teachers and administrators in California public schools, Thao (2000) urged a
commitment to Hmong professional development based on his statewide study of high
schools.

A third dimension of multicultural education that is relevant for this project is the act of
creating an empowering school culture and social structure. This is the process of
restructuring the culture and organization of the school to ensure educational equality and
cultural empowerment of all students (Banks, 2003, p. 6). Ray Barnhardt’s (n.d.) framework
for “culturally responsive institutions for minority people” aligns with this aim, and is
elemental in assessing “cultural proficiency” in the Anchorage School District. It is
discussed in more detail later in this literature review. Barnhardt (1987) has also written
extensively on behalf of the Maori in New Zealand, and his examinations of inequitable
power distributions, the relativity of value decisions in the planning process, and the
importance of weighing those decisions and policy formation against their likely social
consequences, are useful comparisons in assessing the relationship between the ASD and the
Hmong community.

While Banks’ mapping of the dimensions of multicultural education is helpful in framing the
issues on a macro level, the work of John Ogbu (2008) focuses specifically on explaining
academic performance of minority students, and in contextualizing their minority status.
Ogbu’s (2008) minority typology distinguishes between voluntary, involuntary, and
autonomous minorities, and provides an interesting conceptualization of the Hmong, and
their approaches to schooling based on cultural context, and historical experiences (p. 11).
The Hmong, however, do not fit squarely into his rubric, but rather display characteristics
that stretch across his distinctions. Involuntary minorities, those who did not choose their
minority status but rather, as in the case of the Hmong, were propelled into it through
forced migration, tend to have an oppositional approach to education according to Ogbu, and maintain self-affirming norms and values that establish boundaries between themselves and the majority group (p. 11).

In assessing minority student achievement, his cultural-ecological model seeks to explore the dynamic interaction between “system forces,” and “community forces” – those attributed to the institution itself, as opposed to the dominant patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in the domain of education that are found in the community (Foster, 2004). According to Ogbu, community forces include the prevalence of the minority “folk theory” of education as the main means of social advancement in the United States (Foster, 2004, p. 371). On research with the Hmong, an adherence to this theory was noted by Vang (2005) in an assessment of the challenges faced by Hmong students in California public schools (p. 28).

In the field of student performance, Yang (2004) and Vang (2005) have both conducted studies that point to the prevalence of the Asian “model minority” myth with Hmong students. Yang notes that while over 25% of Asian Americans held a B.A. in 2000, only 5.9% of Hmong had achieved an equivalent degree (p. 127). He observes some of the sources of their educational struggles to be limited English language skills, discrimination, systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers, and widespread feelings of alienation from mainstream school (Yang, 2004). Likewise, Vang found that 85% of the 36,000 K-12 Hmong students in California public schools are limited English proficient (LEP), and that discontinuity between the home and school cultures was a major factor in low academic performance (p. 29).

**Parental Involvement / Cross Cultural Partnerships**

Children who perform well in the classroom and on standardized tests tend to have families that are actively involved in their education (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Lee, 2009). There is considerable research in support of parental involvement as a more powerful determining factor in student performance than family structure, socioeconomic status, or characteristics such as race, parent education, family size, and age of the child (Hidalgo, Siu & Epstein, 2003, p. 632). Being one of four areas of emphasis in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is surely to remain in the forefront of education reform (U.S. Department of
Notwithstanding, research also points to the lack of congruity between how the school defines parental involvement in comparison with parents from diverse backgrounds.

Hidalgo, Siu, and Epstein’s (2003) longitudinal, cross-cultural ethnographic study on parental influences on children’s school success found differences in parents’ and teachers’ conceptions of parental involvement, and a lack of agreement among teachers in the same school and between teachers and parents about what constitutes “success” (p. 637). As a corollary, in a national study of Chinese parental involvement in American schools, Wang (2008) found that greater participation – frequent exchanges with teachers on children’s behaviors, homework monitoring, active volunteering, and so on – did not necessarily facilitate more academic success in children, but did help parents acculturate and become more invested partners in the school culture.

Schools often define what constitutes parental involvement, and lament any inability to reach it – Minami and Ovando (2003) note the differences that exist in how different cultures care for, socialize, and educate young children. Based on an examination of language issues in multicultural contexts, they call for modifications to classroom discourse patterns, interactional patterns, and participation structures to meet the needs of linguistic minority students who will soon outnumber monolingual English speakers in the United States (Minami & Ovando, 2003, p. 568).

How parental involvement is conceptualized, and according to whose values it is organized is often overlooked, as posited by Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) in their Bridging Cultures Project. Citing a “lack of mutuality in the bargain,” they found parental involvement to be important to the extent that it results in teachers’ increased understanding of the families and communities children come from, parents’ increased understanding of how schools operate, and opportunities for a “mutually-forged” school culture (Trumbull, et al., 2003, p. 66). Likewise, Daniel-White (2002) illustrated that traditional parental involvement programs in the United States base their models on typical, White middle class values and practices in her study of Costa Rican families in New England. This served to both denigrate the efforts these families made to educate their children, and discounted their
innate cultural strengths.

Research on Hmong parental involvement in education is limited, but seems to coalesce around highlighting their struggles to reach the singular idea of involvement set by American schools. Particularly relevant to this project is X.W. Lee’s (2009) study on the elementary and middle school principal’s role in the involvement of “Mong” parents in their children’s education. A study conducted in California, she identified the lack of staff training, inexperience and lack of knowledge about the American educational system on behalf of Hmong parents, and language differences to be the most visible obstacles to involving parents (pg. 80). Ngo, Bigelow, and Wahlstrom (2003) found that while Hmong parents held a high regard and faith in the school system, their understanding and “sense of ownership” in it was deficient. This particular study found involvement to be superficial, and on the terms of the school, with parents who had little to no experience with formal education.

A study by Lee and Green (2008) assessed Hmong parental involvement characteristics of high and low achieving High School seniors. They found that involvement loosely corresponded to higher graduation rates, GPA, and postsecondary education attendance (Lee & Green, p. 10). Adler (2004) found that most Hmong parents (65%) felt comfortable at the school, but differences existed in expectations with regards to involvement between parents and teachers/administrators. The schools framed involvement as attendance at parent-teacher conferences, but Hmong parents still expressed concern and helplessness in understanding school procedures (Adler, 2004, p. 64). In a study of how Hmong parents perceive their children’s education in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Thao (2000) found that three factors were most influential – years of residency in the United States, English language proficiency, and employment status (p. 100).

In addressing the blanket concept of “successful” students – which is the expressed, overarching goal of the ASD – Her and Buley-Meissner (2006) explore the notion of an “achieved,” modern Hmong-American, and give credence to an acceptance of “success” as intimately tied to the manner in which students construct knowledge (p. 21). They argue that the linking of “kev txawj” and “kev ntse” (book knowledge and social interrelationship)
is central in evaluating the depths of understanding a Hmong person has achieved (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006, p. 21). In distinguishing three separate but equal realms of knowledge, they approach a holistic, truly Hmong concept of “success” – “paub,” awareness of day-to-day routines; “txawj,” applied expertise or know how; and “ntse,” formal education and cultural dexterity (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006, p. 22). A person with these qualities is seen as the pinnacle of success – well rounded and multidimensional, able to move “back and forth from one realm of his or her social world to another with ease” (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006, p. 21).

**Culturally Responsive Institutions**

In line with what Banks calls “creating an empowering school culture and social structure,” Barnhardt (2007) assembles institutional characteristics that can be particularly instrumental in creating a culturally responsive organization. His framework includes *participatory decision-making*, a *decentralized authority structure*, a *distributive communication system*, and a *loosely coupled organizational framework* (2007, p. 2). In this, there is a recognition that cultural bias can exist not only on an individual level, but in the “very structure of the institution as well” (Barnhardt, 2007, p. 1).

“Participatory decision-making” aims to ensure that all those invested in a particular institution, whether as consumers or producers of services, has an opportunity to influence the manner in which it operates (Barnhardt, 2007, p. 1). As Barnhardt states, “to develop a sense of institutional ownership, (Native) people must feel they are a part of the action and are a party to decision-making from top to bottom, beginning to end. They must be on the delivery end of institutional services, not just on the receiving end” (1987, p. 2).

In acknowledgement of the historical trend against minority participation in policy formation and education reform, Lindsey, Robbins, and Terrell (2003) outline a “cultural proficiency” typology in which the “presumption of entitlement” was seen as a major barrier, accompanied by an “unawareness of the need to adapt” on the part of traditionally Euro-American school administrations (p. 277).
With this in mind, realizing a “decentralized authority structure” is particularly important when confronting a bureaucratic, yet diversely populated system such as the ASD. Barnhardt (2007) posits that “the larger the system and the more distant the decision-making is from the clientele, the greater the demand for conformity to institutional norms” (p. 3). This supports the work of Metge (2007) on ethnic group relations in New Zealand. She encourages a reevaluation of school organization in reconsidering the “relative power and responsibilities vested in principal, staff, and school board” members (p. 11). Anders’ (n.d.) article, “Everybody Run Farragut” illustrates the power inherent in a reorganization of the distribution of power within an urban high school in creating a more equitable and cohesive school culture.

A “distributive communication system” simply calls for multimodal, culturally appropriate avenues of interaction. In increasingly diverse environments such as the ASD, this means providing varied opportunities and avenues for people to participate in school procedures, and in the development of changes to them. As Metge (2007) states, “every culture has its own patterns of discussion and decision making,” which behooves institutions to align with the modes of communication and interaction that are normative to its respective members (p. 17). Likewise, Kamerling (1998) noted the importance of capitalizing on appropriate means of communication so that families are made to be active participants in their child’s education – as is seen in his educational video, “Heart of the Country.”

Barnhardt’s (2007) final component of a culturally responsive institution states that an institutional environment in a state of constant flux and reorganization, with a diverse cultural composition needs to maintain a “loosely coupled organizational framework.” This promotes flexibility and adaptation between the various components, such as how it communicates with its participants, how decisions are made, and the protocols for resolving conflicts (p. 4).

The Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (1998), which is endorsed by, among many others, the Alaska State Board of Education, Alaska Federation of Natives, the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, and the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, rest firmly in line with Barnhardt’s framework. In part, these guidelines call for the promotion of
extensive community and parental interaction, a complimentary relationship across knowledge produced from diverse knowledge systems, high involvement of staff who are of the same cultural background as the students, and the implementation of a “decentralized decision-making structure that allows the educational system to evolve in response to the conditions in the communities being served” (Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, 1998).
METHODOLOGY

So the parents never had an opportunity to go to school and know the ABC’s, and they came to states here and all they did was give a fingerprint to get in. They don’t know how to sign their names until they came, so there’s a gap there and they will always benefit from somebody being there with their language, knowing and understanding and explaining what is going to happen. So the first step would be me, or any of the Hmong families, any of the Hmong workers, you and the teachers – everybody being together in one solution (Shoua, personal communication, November 19, 2007).

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The goal of the Connecting Hmong Perspectives Project is to investigate perceptions held by Hmong parents and Anchorage School District (ASD) staff at Wolverine Elementary on a broad set of issues relating to the educational scheme for Hmong students and families. In superimposing these two sets of perceptions, my hope is to highlight just where all those invested in this relationship converge and diverge on how the challenges, concerns, and conceptions of reform are framed.

The research question for the project is:

What are the perceptions held by Hmong parents and Wolverine Elementary staff regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of school policies, programs, and curricula for Hmong students and families?

“Participatory” Research and “Empowerment”

Community-based “participatory” research is a qualitative methodology that values individual relationships and purports a commitment to social change, all as a means to “empower” communities (St. Denis, 1992). Before discussing any research design, it is important to first engage these terms out of respect for the role that social science research has forever played in manipulating power relations with indigenous and marginalized peoples worldwide. Considering that the very idea of research, and the knowledge system under which its framework, intent, and applications have been constructed is tied to “Western” science, it is imperative that I perform my roles in conducting “outsider” research under constant reflection, and with pointed perspective on research as an instrument of power, empowerment, and disempowerment.

Defining research as “participatory” is an increasingly popular distinction, especially when it involves First Nations, or minority communities. Hall (1979) defines “participatory research,” in part, as that which cultivates “full participation of the community” (p. 407).
My contention, however, is that this bears the assumption that collaboration exists beginning with, perhaps most importantly, the conception of the project, and identifying it as a beneficial endeavor. In reality, it was I who conceived the idea for this inquiry in recognition of expressed challenges and concerns from both sides of the relationship. Moreover, “full participation” implies involvement of a community in total, or that those who are involved are able to represent the realities of the entire group – within which exist power relations, interests, and needs that will remain outside of my own understanding. Likewise, Mosse (2001) calls for scrutiny of “local knowledge” produced by participatory methods based on examples of need ultimately being shaped by “local perceptions of what the agency in question could legitimately and realistically” provide (p. 8).

What’s more, the issue of “empowerment” as the expressed goal of this type of inquiry is problematic. Given the relativity of the term – with regards to cultural beliefs, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. – it shall not be within my mandate to determine what empowerment means to the Hmong community, or if it has been accomplished. Cooke and Kothari (2001) challenge the espousal of empowerment as the expressed goal of participatory research, because it assumes an intimate knowledge of power relations within the given community (p. 14). Action research that claims to produce empowerment is precarious as this too often involves the idea that power can be ‘given’ to the marginalized by the privileged – an act that merely reinforces existing power structures. And so, for the purposes of this project, empowerment – defined as the ability of the Hmong community to shape the character of its own participation in the educational institution – has to be constructed through their own praxis rather than given, and it may be the process of doing so that is empowering.

I have done my best to work in close collaboration with the Anchorage Hmong community at every step, through an openness of my procedures in conducting the study, with a respect for and involvement of clan and community leadership, in remaining flexible and adaptive in approach, by holding my interpretations in abeyance, and in sharing the responsibility to analyze and apply the results. It is surely true that the findings will highlight multiple realities in the relationship between the ASD and Hmong community, and ultimately “empowerment” will be found by those who design the tools used in approaching subsequent changes to the educational framework for Hmong families.
For these reasons, I have chosen to label this effort a collaborative action research project. In doing so, I recognize that empowerment is not a destination, but an incremental, perpetual process, and that the power to solve a problem does not reside in my interpretations, but with the participants of this study. No approach or action taken in the design, implementation, and interpretation of this project was carried out without the input of Hmong community members. It does not stand as a representation of the views held by the community in its entirety, but as those of a portion in confronting challenges and concerns that are perhaps shared by the whole.

A Review of Methodology-Related Literature

In facilitating this project, I was heavily influenced by collaborative/community-based projects, action research, and indigenous research protocols. Considering this, it is important to perform a succinct review of literature of relevant sources that were particularly influential, and to discuss how they relate to the approaches I have taken.

Linda Smith’s (1999) writings on research and indigenous peoples note the importance of research in the colonization process, because it entails a distinction on behalf of the researcher as to what is “legitimate knowledge” (p. 173). This denotes not just the importance of contextualizing my “outsider” status, but of the very idea and philosophies of research, including the “different sets of beliefs which underlie the research process” (Smith, 1999, p. 173).

Smith urges any researcher, most especially an “outsider,” to first consider these questions:

Who defined the research problem?
For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?
What knowledge will the community gain from this study?
What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?
What are some likely positive outcomes from this study?
What are some possible negative outcomes?
How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?
To whom is the researcher accountable?
What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher? (Smith, 1999, p. 173).

More importantly, Smith questions the fundamental belief that individual researchers have an inherent right to knowledge and truth, or will have the capacity to define it should it be
“discovered” (p. 173). In adherence to this, the idea of “empowerment” is outside of my own capabilities in research with the Anchorage Hmong community, effectively shifting my responsibility toward a genuine collaboration with the participants of the study in analyzing, interpreting, and applying the results. In this sense, I have not sought to engage in what Smith calls “crisis research” (1999, p. 174), or what Tuck calls “damage-centered” (2009) research – that which portrays communities as broken/helpless, or depicts their participation in “Western” institutions as that of the victim – but rather to more adequately represent the multitude of realities and perceptions of all those involved, and likewise to highlight the diverse ways in which they garner a sense of communal strength and construct knowledge.

Smith’s set of initial research questions served not only as a useful starting point in my inquiry, but also as a constant reminder. They were regularly referenced throughout the project, in combination with the set of “ten principles of research” outlined by David Smith (Gilmore & McDermott, 2006, p. 4). Noted to be “deceptively simple,” Smith encourages researchers to, in part, start with no preconceived notions about what’s happening and what this means to participants; not view participants as subjects but as co-learners with the investigator, each using the other to reach shared and ever-deepening understandings; take as primary importance relationships rather than relata; assume that patterned behavior reflects the presence of underlying power relations; and that ultimately the power to solve their problems, or even to determine what they are, rests with the participants in an activity (Gilmore & McDermott, 2006, p. 4).

Delgado Gaitan (1993) takes on the issue of research as a means of empowerment, citing the need to remain vigilant of how we perceive our role in the communities we study, because it greatly impacts the nature of the research we conduct (p. 390). “Empowerment” is defined as an “ongoing, intentional process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and collective participation. Through this process, people become aware of their social conditions and strengths: they determine their choices and goals, and thus unveil their potential to act on their own behalf” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993, p. 208).

I would argue that the construction of this kind of knowledge – becoming aware of social conditions and strengths, and the accompanying potential to confront them – has to be
mirrored by a critique of how knowledge is constructed within the dominant cultural tradition or institution, and that the opportunity to define one’s own reality on one’s own terms is the most empowering act of all. In employing the term, Delgado-Gaitan posits that learning takes place “across cultures, primarily in the home or in sociocultural units in which individuals are socialized” (p. 208). Furthermore, that learning is “ideally purposive,” and should ultimately be directed to the “enhancement of cultural values” (p. 209).

Lastly, the work of St. Denis (1992) on community partnerships has influenced my approaches in this project, specifically with respect to upholding a vigilance of my position of control in the research process in affecting whether the results are beneficial or detrimental to all those involved. In addition to what I eluded to above – that construction of knowledge on the terms of Hmong participants is only important in combination with a critical analysis of how knowledge is produced within the ASD – St. Denis contends that social science research must make commitments to “critiquing the status quo” in building a more just society (p. 55). She advocates for a greater focus on human relationships, and points to the fact that how the researcher is perceived by the target community is “directly related to issues of power and control” (p. 56). This entails a respect for community leadership, a willingness to maintain openness to confrontation, and an increased pressure to work from other people’s definition of the situation (St. Denis, 1992).

The Process

The methods employed during this project were not conceived beforehand and implemented accordingly, but rather I chose to “make the road by walking,” as Myles Horton once advised (Horton & Freire, 1990). In doing so, I aimed to let the context shape my approaches, remaining wary of teleologically working towards an outcome. My combined experiences as an ASD employee who worked closely with a Hmong student and family, and as a volunteer in Laos and Thailand during the fall of 2006 working on Hmong literacy projects, has brought many of the issues highlighted by this project into my consciousness, though only from my decidedly biased perspective as a representative of the ASD and cultural outsider. I gained an appreciation for the realities that we, as a special education classroom, encountered in trying to reach out and relate to a particular family, but what I didn’t know was how the Hmong community perceived the relationship with the schools.
My intention was to facilitate a project that not only tapped into how Anchorage Hmong families perceived the educational framework in the city, but would place them in the position to represent their own interests, and to pursue change based on the knowledge they constructed. My hope was, and has consistently been, to “bridge the gap between the concrete and the abstract” in promoting an endeavor that favors action over theory – action that emerged from the context (St. Denis, 1992, p. 59).

My initial task was to broaden my grasp of the relationship, and to engage people on how to best implement a project that could be of some use to all those involved. During the 2007-2008 school year, I conducted a series of information collecting interviews with ASD staff and Hmong community leaders in order to frame the issues beyond my own experiences. In doing so, I met with a number of principals, clan leaders, and ASD employees in east Anchorage to discuss their own perspectives on the relationship between the schools and the Hmong community, and to explore the possibility of working on a project that would bring parents and clan leaders to the table in a genuine way. As noted in the introduction, a series of preliminary issues was identified.

Wolverine Elementary

In the course of these initial interviews I met Shoua, the ASD Hmong language and cultural liaison, along with a prominent clan leader who represented the families of students at Wolverine Elementary. This was the first of many conversations in which we shared thoughts, experiences, and stories that covered a wide range of issues relating to the Hmong community in Anchorage, the various conceptions and constructions of a Hmong American identity, and what she identified as the main obstacles to pursuing an inquiry such as this.

Shoua struck me as a charismatic Hmong woman who could relate to the educational, cultural, and socioeconomic realities of her community, and likewise to the experiences of non-Hmong teachers within the schools. But perhaps more importantly, was the obvious love and commitment she had for the Hmong families, and I was encouraged by her diligence despite a hectic schedule. Through no small effort, and with critical deliberation we ultimately devised a way in which we felt Hmong parents would feel comfortable to share
their own perspectives, including concerns and points of contention that they may not otherwise share with school administrators.

Subsequently I met with Jane, principal of Wolverine Elementary, and her statements indicated a number of things that ultimately convinced us that this was the right environment to explore a project with the Hmong community. Firstly, it was her recognition that miscommunication was at the heart of the issue. Jane admitted the difficulties in keeping parents informed, striving to ensure that the school is approachable, and in fostering a sense of community – continuity between the home and school environments. It was her overall willingness to approach an inquiry in acknowledgement of the fact that the Hmong community may construct knowledge, communicate, resolve disputes, and relate to education differently from the ASD, in combination with the presence of Shoua as a valued co-researcher that distinguished Wolverine Elementary as an ideal environment for the project.

**Research Design**

Wolverine Elementary is situated in east Anchorage, and enrolls 380 children (School principal, personal communication, September 28, 2009). With 100% of its families living below the poverty line, it’s a Title 1 school that serves a diverse population – 90% of it’s students are classified as “ethnically diverse,” with a staff that is 97% White (School principal, personal communication, September 28, 2009). Nearly 1/3 of the students are Hmong (29.5%), 105 out of 112 receiving direct services from the English Language Learners Department (School principal, personal communication, September 28, 2009).

Participants in the project were required to either be an ASD employee at Wolverine Elementary, or a Hmong parent of a student enrolled there. Names were kept confidential, aliases given for any subsequent writings, and all data generated during the course of the inquiry was saved on a password-protected laptop. In combination with baseline quantitative data accessed from the ASD website and through the English Language Learners Department – enrollment numbers, student performance figures, ethnicity reports, and school responsiveness surveys – the project utilized two approaches in accessing the perspectives and perceptions of Wolverine Elementary staff and Hmong parents: a total of
18 open-ended narratives with staff, and a series of 3 focus group sessions, or “directed conversations” with Hmong parents, two of which were audio recorded.

**Interviews**

In approaching data collection, I thought that my identities and how participants perceived them was an important factor to keep in mind. I was comfortable speaking with ASD staff at the school, and felt that my identification as someone of White European heritage in a school with 97% White staff, as a former ASD employee, and as someone whose first language was English meant I would be able to access the opinions and experiences of teachers and administrators effectively through an interview process. In doing so, I would be able to glean details and encourage the sharing of stories that would otherwise be inaccessible through a survey.

In a staff meeting on September 11, 2009, I framed the project, and made my case for why we felt it would be beneficial. During this meeting, I also encouraged staff members to start thinking about the relationship between the school and the Hmong community, specifically any challenges and concerns they might have encountered, and suggestions/ideas for reform.

While I had an initial set of topics that I was curious about based on the list I had generated from the information collecting interviews, my commitment was to have an open discussion with each participant during which I acted more as facilitator than interviewer. I started each interview with an oral consent agreement (Appendix B). The expressed purpose of these conversations was to allow them to pursue what they saw as the most salient issues, including specific challenges, poignant stories, and how they perceived the Hmong community’s relationship to education. Each interview ended with a discussion of reform – what changes/interventions would you promote if given the opportunity? During the interviews, I took notes that were subsequently converted to digital form.

**Focus Groups**

In considering the idea of utilizing focus groups with the Hmong community, I knew that they would only be effective if done appropriately, and in cooperation with Shoua, Jane, and clan leaders. With this in mind, a number of variables were identified – who would act as
moderator? In what language should they be conducted? How would participants be recruited and informed of the project? What should the discussion topics be? How would the results be disseminated to participants?

In choosing this particular methodology, I was buoyed by several successful examples of focus groups with Hmong communities in a number of studies. In a statewide study of perceptions of hospice and end-of-life needs of Hmong communities in Minnesota, Greene (2005) organized focus groups along gender and generational lines in accessing input from medical patients who were otherwise prohibited from voicing their concerns in an appropriate manner. Likewise, Mason-Chagil (2005) employed focus groups in a study of physical health and exercise habits among urban Hmong in Minnesota. A particularly useful model is a study conducted by Xiong and Detzner (2005) on shifting Hmong parental roles in Minnesota. Due to a perceived lack of reading and writing skills, and the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, “key informants” were utilized to facilitate the conversations. Key informants were required to have a job working with Southeast Asian families, be fluent in English and their native tongue, be respectful, and were required to complete facilitator training.

In addition to the precedent set by existing studies, my justification for pursuing a series of “directed conversations” with Hmong parents stemmed from a number of additional considerations. Having an appreciation for how consensus is built collectively within the community through the practice of sib tham, talking together, I was convinced that a group setting would be the best approach. I was wary, however, of injecting my inherent bias into the situation, either through my presence during the conversations or in the interpretation of them. In conversations with Shoua, she supported this notion, and together we decided that she would moderate the sessions alone so that parents would be able to speak in Hmong, English or “Hmonglish,” and that the conversations would be audio recorded, translated, and transcribed. A third focus group was conducted, though not audio recorded, giving those particular participants an opportunity to discuss their concerns “off the record.”

If parents were able to speak as a group, they would be able to pursue their own interests in a language, dialogue, tempo, and rhythm that would otherwise be corrupted should I be
present. I wanted Shoua to be the face of the project since she had the trust of the Wolverine Hmong community – we made this choice, but I also acknowledged that placing one person in this position could possibly influence the results, depending on how she is perceived by participants, and within her own community. As required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), she underwent CITI training in order to act as a moderator/co-researcher in working with human subjects.

Remaining cognizant of how my role of researcher could ultimately affect the results, and with the idea that the perception of the project was intimately tied to issues of power and control, the task of recruiting parents was a crucial one. I thought that first impressions would be important in gaining trust, and stifling fear of the unknown. Our goal was to hold three separate sessions with 5-8 participants each, so we needed a total of 15-24 parents willing to take part. Shoua and I both decided that the approval of clan leaders representing Wolverine Elementary parents was central to the aims and philosophy of the project. In doing so, we would be able to get their input, and culturally sanction the effort for prospective participants. She explained the project to the clan leaders, and they subsequently filtered the message down through the community with their endorsement. Only after this was accomplished did recruitment begin.

Parents were notified of the project further through face-to-face contact with Shoua at the school, where she regularly meets and interacts with community members. Those willing to take part were added to a master list, and once our recruitment goal was met, she began the process of negotiating busy schedules, alleviating questions and concerns, and further explaining the goals of the project. Each session was scheduled with reverence for the subgroup’s responsibilities and time constraints. In doing so, we were able to reach our recruitment goal while garnering support of community leadership and parents.

We felt that it would be best to hold the sessions at the school, as no other appropriate location was available and there were no objections from parents. Oral consent was administered due to the lack of Hmong or English literacy on behalf of many of the parents (Appendix C). A list of topics and questions was arranged, but only to serve as lead-ins to conversations that would allow parents to discuss what they identified as important and
relevant. Securing answers to the questions was not as important as fostering and capturing a conversation amongst Hmong parents. Shoua took notes during the process in order to document behaviors and impressions that otherwise would not be captured on tape. A list of the questions is provided here:

What values are important to you?
What does your child need to accomplish in order to be successful?
What do you think the ASD needs to learn about Hmong language, history, and culture?
How would you improve the ways in which you communicate, and are involved with the school?
If you could change one aspect of your child’s education, what would it be?
What do you feel is your role in your child’s education?
Please discuss how your child learns best
Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

The audio data from the focus groups was translated and transcribed by Shoua, though not without consideration for how this might ultimately reshape the message of the parents. By framing language as a “conceptual scheme” through which reality is constructed, I recognize that the Hmong transcriptions and English translations are mutually exclusive – they will not be mirrors of each other (Maclean, 2007, p. 785). In this sense language acts simultaneously as a barrier and a bridge between the Hmong community and the ASD. Shoua’s participation in the translation is important because she is able to take into account the cultural and contextual importance of the conversations in Hmong, and attempt to embody them most accurately in English.

Her task was to translate not only the words, but also to represent what has no direct translation – an act of creation as well as conversion. While translating is an important aspect of the research process, it should not be a single event, but an ongoing and dynamic process central to any subsequent education reform.

Analysis and Distribution

In ensuring a commitment to what I theorized true “empowerment” to be, all focus group and interview data will be provided to Shoua, Jane, and clan leaders representing the parents. The findings of this project shall represent an amalgamation of their interpretations and my own. On my end, focus group and interview data was coded for themes in order to identify those topics and areas that generated the most attention from all participants. As excerpts are amassed into these categories, it begins to shed light on those areas that garnered the
most attention from the all participants. Salient quotations were arranged around these emergent themes in order to best represent their character and importance from the perspective of ASD staff and Hmong parents. The example below characterizes the manner in which data was coded and grouped, using an excerpt from one of the focus group sessions with Hmong parents:

What I would like for the schools to do is, have the teachers provide more strict lectures to our children in regards to learning, so that they can maintain what is being taught. Our Hmong children achieve less because we come from a different country, and it will take time for them to learn the new language. Also, we as parents have no knowledge of what the new [education] system is so, in that purpose, we wish for our children to be successful in what they do; as parents we can’t learn from each other, but from our children, assuming that teachers build good relationships with our children, teaching them that each individual is equal. [This includes] when the child is young, and as the child grows older. That child may play important roles in our life, having the opportunities of being an important person such as a president. There are many Hmong children but almost everyone is not the same. Some may want to learn and some may not want to learn in school, but my wish for teachers is for them to do what they can. Those teachers should provide homework each time; some days there will be homework and some days there isn’t any, in which case my child will be homework free.

The distribution of the findings will be the final, though perhaps most critical step in the research process. Making every effort to ensure that the final product reaches Hmong parents and clan leaders in an appropriate manner will not be taken lightly. A synthesis of the results, highlighting the areas that ASD staff members and Hmong parents deemed most important, will be produced for distribution in English to ASD staff at Wolverine Elementary, interested teachers and administrators at other locations, and to superintendent Carol Comeau. A copy will also be translated into Hmong for distribution to parents and clan leaders, in combination with an audio recorded reading of the findings to accommodate those who may not be able to read in English or Hmong.
INTERVIEW RESULTS

Interviews commenced on September 14, 2009 and concluded on September 25, 2009. In total, 18 Wolverine Elementary staff members volunteered to participate, including 16 classroom teachers, the principal, and the Anchorage School District (ASD) Hmong language and cultural liaison. Participants ranged in their experience at the school from 1 to 29 years. Conversations lasted from 15 to 90 minutes in length, and took place during school hours or directly after, depending on the schedule of each interviewee.

Data was coded for themes, highlighting areas that generated the most discussion amongst the staff. The themes that emerged from these data are: parental involvement, socioeconomics, pedagogies, the idea of success, “cultural proficiency,” gender, student behavior, student performance, and training/recruitment. Some themes generated considerably more discussion than others, so these topics are supplemented with excerpts from interviews in order to represent them more fully.

Parental Involvement

Any mention of challenges, successes, or ideas for involving Hmong parents in school activities and/or procedures was grouped into the parental involvement category. This generated the most discussion of any topic area, and was at least mentioned by every interviewee. Much of the discussion focused largely on perceived difficulties in keeping families well informed and active in their children’s education, stemming mainly from reported inabilities to maintain direct lines of communication.

According to the staff at Wolverine Elementary, communication through varied means is hampered by the lack of English language proficiency, and literacy in any language on behalf of Hmong parents. As a result, normative modes of communicating with the home environment – phone calls, newsletters and permission slips, oral communications, conferences, and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings – are hindered by the language barrier, and rendered largely ineffective. In addition to struggles in maintaining open communication, staff interview data points to the conceptualization of what constitutes parental involvement to include participation at open houses, special events, meetings, and parental assistance with schoolwork at home.
All 18 interviewees mentioned concerns in communicating openly with parents – here are some excerpts that point to these issues, specifically the widespread practice of utilizing younger members of the family to stand in as informal liaisons:

I was involved with registration this year, which was interesting. The Hmong students are always there interpreting for the parents, and I know the parents can understand a lot but aren’t able to respond. It makes you wonder if the kids are filtering the translation to their own benefit. And in the PTA, participation is next to nothing. Honestly, there is much less involvement compared to my experience working at Inlet View, where students are on the college track (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 21, 2009).

I wish parents were more comfortable in the conferences; you know, to be able to share their concerns more freely. They have a sibling there all the time translating, which is awkward and uncomfortable because they are talking about their own family, and sometimes that can be embarrassing. It’s hard to get real feedback (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 18, 2009).

When I call home, parents just can’t understand me – In the PTA meetings there is usually a young translator there, a sibling usually, so we have that covered. I just don’t have enough opportunity to talk to parents. Bad weather cancelled some of the parent-teacher conferences last year, so I only met with some parents once all year (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 18, 2009).

Teachers are not using the students as liaisons like they should be. I know this is problematic in many ways, but it’s the best way to communicate right now (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

In response to perceived difficulties confronting the language barrier, many teachers, including 9 of the 18 interviewees in this project, questioned why Hmong parents are reluctant to learn English, and if anything could be done to promote more participation in adult education classes:

I would say that communication is the number one issue, in many aspects. Written items are often translated, but I really wonder if they are understood. I wonder, you know, if the parents want to learn to read in English or Hmong, or both. I know, in the past, that some forms and notices sent home were seen as rude or cold. And with oral communication, we do the best we can I guess (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 24, 2009).

And for parents, learning English, a lot of them just don’t want to do it. They think they are too old to learn, and that it’s their child’s responsibility to take care of them in old age (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 24, 2009).
There has to be a balance between English and Hmong, you know? We need to find ways to encourage learning English – but you know, sometimes you just have to realize that hey, you’re here now, it’s time to learn English (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 15, 2009).

A big problem here is that the parents don’t speak English, and aren’t really equipped to help. I would like to know how much they value learning English – would they be interested in English classes? Does learning English equate to success? (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 15, 2009).

We really need to make better connections with Hmong parents. I wonder – are there other programs that have had success with this group that we could learn from? I think there are two other important issues – identifying parents who need extra help, teaching them how to parent, and getting them to learn English. Parents haven’t made enough effort to learn English (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 16, 2009).

Shoua discussed successful adult English language classes held during the previous year in which she served as a teacher’s aid. The classes were conducted through the English Language Learners (ELL) Department, and she reported that parents were very willing to participate, but were also exceedingly busy with family and employment responsibilities. In total, 27 out of 30 completed the particular program, with three people dropping out because of work-related time constraints.

In combination with lack of language proficiency, some of the staff members at Wolverine feel that parents are not able to help their children with schoolwork at home for a number of other reasons – primarily due to their lack of a formal, classroom education. Likewise, some also recognize the socioeconomic realities that Hmong parents face in Anchorage.

I just feel like the parents are not well informed. They really do make sure their kids are respectful, but I also feel like they aren’t able to help very much with their homework. So I think it’s usually the older kids in the family that help with homework and notices sent home (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 21, 2009).

I just wonder, you know, if parents understand their role at home with homework and stuff. What we really need is a full time interpreter and translator, so we are able to translate items we send home, and to limit how much is filtered through the kids (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 22, 2009).
I get the feeling that we don’t have a lot to connect with. These parents don’t have a lot of experience with this style of education (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 22, 2009).

Furthermore, some teachers mentioned special events that were organized in order to get to know Hmong parents better. Family and multicultural nights, as well as a back to school picnic were touted for their ability to bring parents to the school in a non-threatening atmosphere, and for familiarizing staff members with cultural practices and traditional cuisine they would not otherwise be exposed to. Similarly, the “Wolverine Walk” that is held at the beginning of the school year places teachers out in the community, meeting Hmong parents at their homes. Several teachers felt this was a good way to establish a more complete picture of their students, and to get to know parents on a different level. Here are some of their comments:

We made an effort last year to organize more activities, like the multicultural night – it was very well attended by staff and parents. I think it helped to break down barriers and preconceived notions that everyone had (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 23, 2009).

Some of these special events really were nice. The family night would be better if parents could even choose the theme. We also had this multicultural night and potluck that everyone enjoyed – it was well attended. We had, you know, ethnic foods and there were presentations like dances and readings and things – it was really nice….sometimes I want to ask parents about their job, time commitments and things, and I don’t want to offend them, but it really helps to have the bigger picture (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

Despite many perceived challenges, several teachers mentioned that parents are very “trusting” and “compliant” in the way they interact with the school. These comments encapsulate many of the expressed concerns revolving around Hmong parental involvement at Wolverine:

I send newsletters home and tell my students that they need to explain it to their parents. I even ask for parent volunteers, but none reply. What can I do? Honestly, I don’t even call Hmong parents to be chaperones on field trips anymore. And when I call home they are very reluctant to talk, and I end up talking to the older sister like she was the parent. They do put a lot of trust in us, though. I mean they are giving us their kids lock, stock, and barrel, but it’s hard to get them involved. I tell them, you know, you can come sit in the classroom and watch – that is parental involvement! (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 17, 2009).
They will always thank me and be very respectful, saying ‘you are doing a great job,’ but they must have concerns we don’t know about. Maybe they don’t feel comfortable to share, or are afraid to, I don’t know. Some of them feel like it’s the school’s responsibility to fix their kids (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 25, 2009).

Interviews with Shoua and a first grade teacher, who are both Hmong and employed at Wolverine, highlighted some dimensions of parental involvement that they experience from both perspectives in this relationship:

I don’t see a lot of that, parental involvement. I think a lot of the parents see it as the teacher’s job, not theirs, and they don’t really see their role in the same way as teachers do. A lot of them don’t want to seem rude, so they don’t really speak about concerns they may have. They are really aware, some of them, that these teachers are powerful people…the newer arrivals especially tend not to voice concerns as much—they’re much more timid. A lot of times they are overwhelmed with the whole school system. I mean they were mostly farmers in Laos, and in the schools there, whatever the teacher says, goes (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 18, 2009).

The parents are not always comfortable with the school, and sometimes they feel like no one is available to speak to them. They also feel like they are not really able to help with homework, but they really want their children to succeed. A lot of this is because they are still affected by their experiences in Laos, with war and with education there. It was much different (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 23, 2009).

Socioeconomics

Commentary that alluded to or focused on the employment status of parents, or lack of resources available to Hmong students at home was grouped in the “socioeconomics” category. The area within this theme that generated the most discussion was attempts made on behalf of teachers to coordinate with parents who have little time to meet at the school, or help their children with schoolwork. Some teachers felt that parents were not able to be more active in their child’s education because of demanding work schedules that force them to “prioritize their time.”

Jane mentioned that, first and foremost, she makes sure students have “adequate food and clothing, as well as a safe living space.” Three teachers expressed concern for the learning environment at home, and two interviewees made reference to difficulties in securing money for field trips, and the availability of appropriate reading material at home.
Pedagogies

Specific references to teaching methodologies in approaching Hmong students were grouped into the “pedagogies” theme. The bulk of the discussion focused specifically on methods to bolster English language proficiency, which is seen as linked directly to student achievement. A new English Language Development (ELD) program that was outlined this year at Wolverine also produced several comments from teachers. Some salient excerpts are included here:

There should really be more than 30 minutes of bilingual education every day. And honestly, grouping [Hmong students] together doesn’t seem to be what’s best for them, as far as learning English is concerned — they just end up speaking to each other in Hmong (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 16, 2009).

I really hope the new concentration on English will help boost the adequate yearly progress (AYP) reports, but I just wonder if it will be enough. Personally, I would like to see more emphasis on practicing dialogue (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 22, 2009).

I would like to work specifically on annunciation — I think this would be beneficial. It comes down to differences in the alphabets, ours and theirs, sounds, and grammar — like the writing and meaning of simple words, like road versus rope (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 16, 2009).

In our interview, Jane made reference to the various efforts being made on behalf of the school to attempt to secure English language proficiency in Hmong students – some which were unsuccessful. The Alaska Learning Lab, which is a computer-aided language development program, was said to have been a “disaster” with Hmong students. She theorized that it was not interactive enough, and that there needs to be more of a focus on visual and oral components. Furthermore, she posited that it would be “ideal” to have students learning English alongside their parents, but also acknowledged the logistical hurdles in doing so. In combination with the existing newcomer center for monolingual students, she would like to see an intermediate center developed and hosted at Wolverine as well.

Jane also elaborated on the ELD program. This would include two ELD staff members who pull students out for 90 minutes of English instruction, supplemented by 30 minutes of
instruction by all staff members every day. Jane says that the program focuses on vocabulary, and will measure success based on pre and post assessments.

Success
The idea of successful students – the ultimate goal of the ASD – generated little discussion, but is framed by the staff as a function of academic performance. Shoua’s comments on what it means to be successful in the Hmong community adopts a broader vision in comparison to the school’s conception:

To me, you know, I think success is family, a good education, and a good job – all three. But education is number one. In the late 1990s in California, parents didn’t emphasize education as a means to success as much, but the longer they are here, the more focus there is on school. That’s the way to advance in America (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 17, 2009).

“Cultural Proficiency”
Under this theme, I grouped all comments that related to cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions either in reference to that of the Hmong community, American culture, or the interaction of the two. Most teachers acknowledged that they “could learn more” about Hmong culture, and many said they have come to know what they do from interactions with parents, reading books like “The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down,” and/or from talking to Shoua. According to Jane, cultural sensitivity training is handled through ELL, and supplemented by in-house exercises.

Most interviewees felt that learning more about Hmong culture would be helpful in “engaging” and “connecting” with students in ways they are not currently able to. This set of comments shows that teachers are admittedly deficient in their ability to relate to the cultural and historical background of the Hmong community:

Honestly, I know nothing about their culture. They do odd things – odd to me, you know? I want to understand them better, because we need to be street smart about the Hmong community, beyond what you can learn in a book or class. Like mannerisms and things. It’s great to have Shoua to teach us about the culture. Like not looking in the eye, things like that. I want to understand more, because I don’t want to insult them (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 24, 2009).

I really haven’t read much about their culture and history. I asked Shoua if there were any examples of Hmong songs I could use in my class, but there is very little available compared to European songs. I would like to find some cultural material to use, and I wish I could
understand the culture, but there are only so many hours in the day (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 17, 2009).

I think we could all benefit from a Hmong 101 class. It wouldn’t hurt to have some cultural sensitivity training here, like how their culture relates to the school and the school culture. All we really get is the oddities of the culture, and the ideas people come up with around here are cliché, and a little ethnocentric. I mean multicultural night used to be “foreign night” (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 16, 2009).

I should know more. I read that book, “The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down,” but there is a lot I don’t know. I know about those bracelets they wear, and I have been exposed to dances they do, but the parents aren’t very willing to explain it to me further. I think maybe they don’t have an organized religion as such (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 25, 2009).

While many teachers relayed their need to learn more about Hmong culture, some also expressed that Hmong parents have not learned enough about American culture, and felt that they needed to make more of an effort to “assimilate,” and learn English:

To cling to a culture after 20 years, and not be more assimilated is unacceptable. I don’t think the parents have made enough effort to learn English. If you truly want your kids to be successful, you have to figure out how to assimilate (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 21, 2009).

I just wonder – what do they consider American? Do they even know what they want for their children? They really haven’t assimilated like other groups in the ASD – they’re very clannish. A lot of them come from Minnesota and California, and stick together instead of branching out. We had a big influx last year – I blame that on the PFD. I wonder if they want to be American (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 21, 2009).

There’s probably some countercultural elements that need to be overcome. America allows people the freedom to retain aspects of the old world, but people do have a responsibility to assimilate. The school district is making an effort to hire minority teachers, but is that really our job? I mean, we can’t cater to everyone (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 18, 2009).

Again, Shoua and a Hmong teacher at the school made some comments in reference to Hmong culture and history, specifically the importance of language, that are useful in contextualizing issues of cultural proficiency with the rest of the staff:

The ASD has done a lot to reach out to the Hmong community. Teachers wonder if things they do are offensive to parents, so they ask me about the culture. One teacher wanted to give a student some clothes, but some parents wouldn’t want to receive these kinds
of gifts...Hmong culture, language, and history is very important to these parents. Many of them wish lessons could be taught in school, because they don’t have enough time at home. There’s very much a sense that language is who we are (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 22, 2009).

Ten years ago, Hmong were very misunderstood in Anchorage, but now it’s better. Some students feel ashamed of not being able to speak English very well, and for being different, you know? The language is very important, though – knowing Hmong and English both. My father made me learn English, and focus on English, so now I can’t read or write in Hmong, and to speak it, that is going away too (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 23, 2009).

Gender
Discussion of gender differences within the Hmong community, including any comments that alluded to perceived disparities in the way Hmong boys and girls are treated within their own cultural framework, or how they acted differently in the classroom, was included under this theme. There was not a single unifying idea, and individual teachers expressed differing experiences with Hmong students based on their gender. Some reported that boys tended to be more quiet and girls more outgoing, though most of those who mentioned it noticed boys to be more boisterous than girls. A couple interviewees noted that they thought it was inappropriate for young Hmong girls to come to school with makeup on.

A few teachers touched on their concern for the pressures put on Hmong girls by their community, and wondered what was expected of the boys. Three teachers in particular felt that there are differing expectations, typified by Natalie’s comments centering on how she feels boys are cherished, and seem to “get off easy.” She wanted the Hmong community to understand that boys and girls are equal when they come to school, and expressed frustration with attempts to motivate the boys in particular.

Based on her experiences working at Crossroads, an ASD school for pregnant teens, Gail commented that the Hmong community’s desire for their children to get an education seems to be in conflict with the pressure to have a family, often starting at a young age. In a similar vein, Jane shared a story about a young girl who was an exceptional student with “a lot of academic promise,” but ended up getting pregnant and now works at JC Penny. She wondered if she was limited by her culture, and felt conflicted about how to best promote cultural sensitivity.
Having experienced some of these gender issues as a teenager in Anchorage, this Hmong teacher’s comments are a useful backdrop in comparison to what non-Hmong teachers discussed:

>You know the girls face many pressures not felt by the boys – the pressure to marry but not just hang out with boys, and in keeping the family together. Boys are more loud and have more freedom. They can stay out late, and manage themselves… so we have to behave differently as girls – I have been fighting with my parents about how unfair it is since I was 15 years old (Wolverine Elementary teacher, personal communication, September 23, 2009).

**Student Behavior**

The student behavior theme generated little discussion, but includes any reference to the prevailing attitudes of, and/or discipline problems involving Hmong children at Wolverine. Most teachers used words such as “reserved,” “quiet,” “respectful,” “cooperative,” “shy,” and “hard-working” when describing Hmong students. Any discipline problems mentioned in the interviews were said to be minor, and were resolved quickly.

**Student Performance**

Under this topic area, all discussion regarding Hmong students’ academic achievement is included. Overall, there seems to be a lack of uniformity about Hmong students’ performance in school, with some teachers noting that they are among the higher achievers, and others linking low grades and test scores to a lack of English proficiency. Catherine and Jessie felt that those students who were in the educational system since kindergarten were far better off than those who enrolled later.

**Training/Recruitment**

“Training and recruitment” includes any discussion of training with regards to cultural proficiency, and the hiring of Hmong educators and tutors. Interviewees often mentioned the need for more interpreters, those who are able to bridge the cultural gap like Shoua and Khou. Likewise, some teachers mentioned that more “cultural sensitivity” training would probably be a good idea, and Lisa felt that any effort such as this needed to be experiential rather than classroom based.
FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Focus group sessions with Hmong parents were held on September 9, October 3, and December 3, 2009. They varied from 30 minutes to 90 minutes in length, and were held at Wolverine Elementary. A total of 15 parents participated in the project. Shoua translated audio files of each session, and likewise, translations were coded according to emergent themes.

Seven themes were gleaned from the focus group translations, including student performance/behavior, communication/language, Hmong culture/history/traditions, pedagogies, parental involvement, socioeconomics, and education/success. Those themes that generated the most discussion amongst parents are supplemented with salient excerpts from the focus groups.

**Student performance/behavior**

Comments from parents concerning their child’s academic performance and behavior in the school or home settings were grouped into this category. This theme generated only limited discussion as a specific category, however some parents focused on the perceived shyness of Hmong students in comparison to their friends at school, and the embarrassment of being a limited English proficient student. One parent’s comments sum up the main topic of conversation under this category:

> I would like for the teachers to understand that our children are very shy, and would not necessarily show them how much they already know. So, having the teacher express or talk with the child about shyness would be most important. By doing this, the teacher could tell the student that being shy is not something that would be accepted in higher learning, because you as a child would want to go the extra mile to achieve your goals. It’s like the goal is there, but you just don’t want the challenge, so you fail because of your shyness. I see that all Hmong children who are fairly new to the states struggle with this shyness; they are embarrassed when the other kids laugh at them for pronouncing the word wrong. So the laughing would make the child more scared to express their learning when the other students laugh at their abilities (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

Other comments in this theme were brief and in passing, however there was also mention of the difficulties students face as refugees/immigrants who want to succeed in the academic setting. Furthermore, a couple parents relayed their support for teachers to administer any punishment they saw fit for students who behaved poorly in school, aligning with another
finding of this project that points to parental compliance in the pedagogical decisions made by teachers.

Communication and Language

Any reference to issues and concerns communicating with school employees, or comments addressing the importance of retaining/learning a language, were organized under this theme. This was perhaps the most popular topic of conversation amongst Hmong parents. Within the category, comments focused on the difficulties communicating with the school, understanding ASD procedures, and the vital importance of learning English while maintaining the Hmong language. The following parent’s comments speak to the substantial importance in cultivating English language proficiency amongst Hmong children, without letting go of the “native language”:

Whatever it is, you as a parent must speak your native language to your children so that the language would not be lost. When the children are at a young age, they are learning both languages. Once they reach age ten, then the language they will speak to you the most is English. So those that are adaptive to both languages would speak fluently in their native tongue, and English. Those children who are in the United States, who start [their education] from head start at a young age, you would think they couldn’t even speak English well. But they do speak it well; they just are shy. For me, I know this is because some of my children were born in the states, and the younger they [start to] learn, the better they are at speaking English (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

My thoughts are that I would like the teacher to talk more, teach the [English] language more often, and show how the mouth and tongue would move when trying to say the word. This should be a constant in every hour of the day, including teaching the child to read and write more often, because most of them do well, but most of them prefer to play or daydream. When my child comes home, I don’t see that improvement; my child has been in school for so long but I have not heard him speak or understand the [English] language yet. So, teaching the child to read and write, with less playtime, then they may learn faster and improvements will be seen. The leaders/government should see this as a stress to our children; they should support us in the area of our child’s learning disabilities (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

Other comments highlight the importance of maintaining Hmong language proficiency within the community, and the sense of “honor” that comes from being validated in doing so. Furthermore, Shoua’s comment that “language is who we are” typifies the importance that both the pursuit and maintenance of language holds within the community. These two
comments from Hmong parents hint at a desire for acceptance of their linguistic tradition within the educational system, and concurrently, to maintain it for the younger generation:

In the process of learning about our Hmong language, I remember that missionaries took their time to come and teach us the Hmong language, and that is how our language was written. The Hmong language is now shown in the Internet all over the world. There is our ancient Hmong language, which has now been found, but learning our ancient Hmong language would be hard because some of us do not know of it all. The Spanish language has been recognized all over the world; this shows how much respect that the Spanish language [has received], and that it has been given much honor. So I would like something like this to happen to all languages, including ours. We are the people who the government must accept in being here in the states, and because of our status, we can never return to our country because of our past history. Our language must be spoken, must be used in the educational system (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

The majority of the Hmong in this country are older folks who do not even know the English language. For the Hmong language, there are only a few that know how to read it, therefore what I would like for the schools to do is offer to teach our Hmong children our language along with the history of our culture, along with theirs. In this effort, then our children would not forget about our traditions, language, and history (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

While many of the parents noted the importance of children being exposed to Hmong at home while learning English in school, several also mentioned how difficult it can be to communicate directly with the school. As a result, some feel that their participation in school events and procedures is unproductive:

It is hard for us parents to communicate with the teachers if we do not know the language. Even if we showed up for the family night or parent teacher conference, it would be hard because we don't even understand what is being said. Most parents [wonder] when they tried to be involved, with the loss of communication, if it was worth the teacher's time to have them there. The most important thing is having the children learn; this will be the best method of communication. Once the child knows the language, the parents will feel [comfortable] to communicate through their children (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

Some parents theorized on how the school could best communicate with Hmong parents, including this parent who preferred to have direct contact with the school in order to monitor their child’s ongoing progress:

Well, in regards to communication and working with the parents and teachers, what’s best is being called by a Hmong staff member so that the communication, what is being said, is understood. Like letting me know that my child is not understanding what is being taught, and that the teachers feel that there should be more of a support system in place for my
child, including that the child is struggling through the classes, like reading class, math class, etc. What’s important is having the Hmong staff call the parent (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

**Hmong culture/history/traditions**

Those discussions regarding Hmong culture, history, and traditions were grouped under this theme. Many parents mentioned that they would like for ASD staff to cultivate a broader understanding of Hmong history and culture, especially considering the sacrifices the Hmong have made on behalf of the United States. These comments speak to this desire:

*We as parents would like for the teachers, or any other leaders, to know more about the Hmong people; to go into a deeper search of the history. Back in the old country education was not taken so seriously, and we have much to talk about the survival of our Hmong people* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

*I would like for teachers to learn about our traditions. I would like them to know about how we live, how peaceful we were in the old country; also, the way we survived and what was brought upon us. This I would like them to research more about, including that our people have done much for the United States* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

Furthermore, several parents noted their desire to see Hmong history and culture taught in the school, a notion backed by Shoua and clan leaders. These comments from parents highlight an issue that has not been discussed at length by the ASD, in part because of the lack of a forum to do so:

*What I would like for the teachers do is take what they learn from research [of Hmong history and culture], and teach it to our children. Not just our Hmong children, but to the many other children who do not know who we are. In this way, some of our Hmong children who are still young will know about our traditions* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

*This question is important. I would like the schools to know more about the culture, to know the traditions, and that this be taught in schools so that the United States would know more about our people* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

*In regards to what parents would like to have taught in the school system; our language and history is important for all of us, and our children* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

In the focus group session that was not recorded, discussions regarding Hmong
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history and culture in the curriculum dominated the discussions. Drawing on their experiences in California, Minnesota, and other states, parents expressed their eagerness to gain the kind of acceptance that inclusion in the curriculum can provide.

Pedagogies

Those comments from parents referring to specific teaching styles and approaches were placed under this category. Suggestions and comments indicated considerable diversity, and were based on personal experiences with education in Anchorage schools. These comments show the desire on behalf of Hmong parents to challenge their children in the educational setting, and to be informed regarding their progress. Furthermore, comments such as these should indicate to the ASD that Hmong parents have suggestions and concerns that often go unheard:

When the child is at school, I rely on the teachers to do their best to have the child learn better, and not having the child cause any harm to anyone, because sometimes we are not aware of what is going on the schools; the teachers and principal should have that in mind (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

What I would like for the schools to do is have the teachers provide more strict lectures to our children in regards to learning, so that they can maintain what is being taught (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

I would like for the teachers to provide more homework lessons, and provide incentives for those students who read more than others. This would also show students those who are most motivated in reading, and they would want to be like the other student in order to receive a prize (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

The teacher should recognize the student’s abilities. The student’s [achievements should] get recognized just like my other two children who are in middle school, such as an honor roll or such. I know that my two older children who were in school back when they were young, they did not have much homework, and that there wasn’t that much motivation for them, so they struggled a lot. I knew they really wanted to learn, and speaking the English language was difficult, but they spoke it well. Now, they can read it clearly, but writing it out can be hard for them sometimes (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

Parental involvement

Discussions of efforts to maintain active involvement in their child’s education are included in this theme. Many parents commented on their struggles to remain involved due to the
perceived language barrier, limited experience with the procedures and expectations of western-style education, and little to no background in formal education. Many feel that they are not able to help their child with homework because of this lack of education, and it is clear that learning and becoming educated is promoted as the principal means to success in the United States.

*We as parents have no knowledge of what the new [education] system is, so in that purpose we wish for our children to be successful in what they do; as parents we can’t learn from each other, but from our children, assuming that teachers build good relationships with our children, teaching them that each individual is equal. [This includes] when the child is young, and as the child grows older (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).*

*In regards to parents not being able to read and understand the English language, most often parents can’t help with homework. So, as much as a child would like to learn and know what it is that they are being asked to do, without any knowledge of education, the parent can’t do anything in support of homework. So if the schools can really help provide more support for our children that would be most helpful (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).*

Other parents offer reasons as to why they have trouble becoming involved in school events. Wolverine parents stopped well short of blaming the school or teachers for issues and concerns raised during the focus groups, as this comment shows:

*If I was not able to attend [a school event], maybe it is because I may be busy and could not come during that time. If there were free time, I think parents should take the time to come in and talk with the teachers about the child’s everyday expectations, and the teacher’s expectations for the parents. If you as a parent do not take the time to come in to talk to the teachers, but then something goes wrong with your child’s progress, you should not complain to the teacher that it was their mistake. For me, if I don’t come and talk to them, and the problem has already passed, I would not complain that it was the teacher’s [fault]. The problem would be with myself, because I did not take the time to come and meet with the teachers (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).*

Several Hmong parents also spoke about familial obligations, and employment responsibilities. Input about these factors will help the community educate the ASD on their socioeconomic realities, which is essential knowledge in designing and implementing policies and programs that seek to involve parents in education:

*To me it is important for teachers to communicate with parents with regards to these important events, because I know that with working two jobs, it would be harder for me to attend, but if anything like this could happen during the weekends I would know that I*
could be there 100% of the time for any event. And of course the other parent would be able to attend, if there was someone to baby-sit the younger siblings. Either way, there must be communication between the school and home, assuming that involvement comes from both sides (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

While much of the discussion within this theme focused on perceived deficiencies in educational background and understanding, some parents eluded to things they do/would like done in order to promote success in education. Some of the dialogue paints a picture of parents who wish to become more involved, and surely more informed:

I would also like for someone to contact us parents to let us know that our son or daughter has achieved something important for the day, so that we can be excited and feel that motivation to be involved. In this way, we know that our children are doing well, and parents would like to come in more often to talk to the student’s teacher. When parents ask questions, they should ask what the teacher expects their child to do at that level, including what support we can do at home for our child (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

The respect for adults and teachers instilled in Hmong children is quite evident as well, as a subset of the respect awarded to the educational institution on behalf of the community:

For me as a parent, I like to speak to my children with positive words. If there is anything that my child has said that is not welcome in the schools, is important for me to know. A punishment would never be too much for my child if she or he had said something that was not to be said in the schools. I would rather have my children be disciplined by the teachers so that they understand the rules, and [to learn] that it is not appropriate to say [certain things] in school or at home. This is important; that I do my part as well when I know that something like this has occurred. The teacher should always write to me or call me to inform me that [something] has happened, so I can address it with my child at home. I would rather have the teachers do their part at school, and the parents [do their] part at home (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

Parents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are in tune with how their child learns best, and the potential for them to become active partners in education is apparent is comments such as this:

I see that when my child is learning best is when you as the parent support the child as the best you can at home, clarify things so that the child understands, make time to take the child to see things, and to build that strong relationship with the child, making learning fun when the child and parent learn together (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).
Several Hmong parents also made comments outlining their commitment to the relative authority of the school in deciding how and what to teach their children. Parents used expressions such as “they know what is best,” and “what is being taught is important – I don’t want to change that.”

**Socioeconomics**

Any reference to the Hmong community’s socioeconomic status in the city, including any perceived difficulties providing for their families, was grouped under this theme. While this was not discussed often in the focus groups, one parent provided a highly reflective opinion that was shared by others:

Our Hmong people have many children, most often from four to five and up, and so for those who have many [children] like us, we would like for the government to help our children in school the best they can...all my children are almost getting to finish high school and college, but there are still other families whose children are in need of support. So what I think and would like to say is that, I wish the government including state and federal, would come in support of providing school supplies to the schools. When our children start attending school when we are low income, and we don’t have that much money, for a family with ten kids there are ten challenges; providing food and shelter isn’t enough for our Hmong. Most often they are shy to go out and find free food; it is another challenge and embarrassment. So [I wish] the government could help with this so that parents do not [pay] out of pocket trying to provide enough school supplies for their children. This will hurt those families who have many children in schools, including those that go to college (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

Other parents commented on the demands to provide new clothing to their children, and feared they would be labeled as unfit parents if they were unable to do so.

**Education and success**

Discussions amongst parents that focused on the belief that education is the principal means to success in the United States were grouped under this category. This theme, likewise, generated much discussion. The comments below indicate the value placed on getting an education within the Hmong community, and how it is tied to garnering respect and honor in the United States:

The most important thing in life is education, learning what is being taught, listening to others, and respecting those that respect you. In conflicts with anyone, if you don’t like to learn or listen, then your name will be known as one who is not being responsible. This is most important for parents; to be the role model in the home, and in this manner children
learn from home what they see their parents do and say, and this will help them learn better in school, and have a much more positive approach in respect of others. Also that this might help children to be successful in honor and respect (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

My thoughts are that, for every culture, everyone should be educated in order to know. For this reason, education is important in order to be successful; because, if you don’t take the time to learn, then you won’t be as successful, and you would have less knowledge than anyone that has taken themselves to a higher level in education (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

Also, we as parents have no knowledge of what the new [education] system is, so in that purpose we wish for our children to be successful in what they do; as parents we can’t learn from each other, but from our children, assuming that teachers build good relationships with our children, teaching them that each individual is equal. [This includes] when the child is young, and as the child grows older. That child may play important roles in our life, having the opportunities of being an important person such as a president. There are many Hmong children but almost everyone is not the same (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

If you don’t take the time to educate yourself with the language and the wordings, then it would be hard for you to know what to do when it comes down to completing forms that could come from anywhere, as well as trying to apply for a job. There are applications that would need to be completed before you can be asked to work, so it is important that education be taken seriously to be successful (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

The discussions amongst Wolverine Hmong parents that centered on education as it relates to success depict a community that is committed to the learning process, one that values and pursues knowledge, and promotes the potential that education possesses to further the well being of the community.

For me, I like learning. When I came to this country I already had many children, but I was young; there was no one to care for my children, and I did not have any parents at that time. That is why I did not have the chance to go to school. The most important thing in life is education; anyone who is smart will be successful at life (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, September 9, 2009).

[I hope] that the government will see children’s education as one of the most important priorities on their table. I would like to see more Hmong teachers to help with teaching the children, because we are fairly new to the country that we are still learning. With the help of teachers teaching our children, we look towards our children’s success to support us in the future (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

For me, what I would like to see is continued education, to support the child’s abilities, to motivate and provide positive feedback for the child. [Also, to] learn the child’s weaknesses,
and give strength to the child to [dream of] being someone, such as a doctor (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).
DISCUSSION

My hope is that the results of this project are processed, interpreted, and discussed from an array of viewpoints. It is the lack of these types of conversations that has held the educational status of Hmong students and families in Anchorage in a static position—unchanging despite the acknowledged need to promote Hmong cultural values, social and interactional patterns, and professional development. As was stated in the introduction, my belief is that this dialogue ought to be an open critique of our collective ability as a community to provide equal opportunity to all families who enroll in our educational institution. Wolverine Elementary, by all accounts, is a welcoming and supportive environment, but the issues that emerged in this project are ones typical in several schools in the ASD, especially on the east side of the city, and rather than taking a wide-angle approach, I have chosen to zoom in on a somewhat-typical relationship between the ASD and Hmong community as a means to discuss district-wide issues.

Considering the diversification of the school district, and in the name of growing schools that represent and reflect the manner in which their families communicate, construct meaning, and endure through a sense of identity, it becomes an absolute must that we discuss how our educational framework is organized and delivered, and who has a stake in the creation, implementation, and maintenance of new programs and policies. In order to begin, it is important to first revisit the question that served as the focus of the project:

What are the perceptions held by Hmong parents and Wolverine Elementary staff regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of school policies, programs, and curricula for Hmong students and families?

What is clear from the findings is that, within the interrelationships between the Hmong community and the ASD at Wolverine Elementary, there is much diversity in opinion, what is deemed most important, and how certain aspects of the educational scheme for Hmong students could be reformed. With this diversity of opinion in mind, it becomes clear that the most salient word in the research question is *perception*. This, however, does not negate the fact that participants coalesced around certain themes, and by overlaying these perceptions we learn just where areas of importance converge and diverge.

*Language and Communication*

The most conspicuous finding of this inquiry is that communication is lacking. All participants, including educators, administrators, and Hmong parents, converge in
acknowledging this concern, and I can support their experiences with those of my own as an ASD employee. Communication and language affects all aspects of the educational experience for Hmong students and their families, as well as the teachers that serve them. This is true in considering day to day school-home correspondence (such as notices, permission slips, etc.), how it relates directly to parental involvement, how the school interacts with and solves conflicts with the community, the relative success/failure to develop English language proficiency (ELP) amongst students as well as parents, and in trying to teach one language without killing the other.

What seems clear is the need to concurrently promote ELP for students and parents, and for these efforts to take into direct account the specific needs of the community with regards to socioeconomic status, transportation, time constraints, and obligations at home. Wolverine Elementary has taken specific steps to confront a relative lack of ELP amongst Hmong students, however the commonplace lack of proficiency in English amongst parents not only precludes their intensive participation in education, but also serves to undermine familial power structures. In this sense, education currently serves to both enhance and fracture the status of the Hmong community. Students learn English in school while becoming socialized to American values and practices, and in turn, this places them in a position of power when it comes to communicating with the school.

Teachers note the common practice of corresponding with siblings “as if they were the parent,” and wonder if information is filtered before it reaches the head of the household. They are less likely, then, to talk directly to Hmong parents regarding their child’s education, typified by one participant’s observation that she had only met with her parents on one occasion over the course of a school year, or another who commented that he no longer seeks out the help of Hmong parents for field trips and school events. Put plainly, the lack of dialogue between teachers and parents is the chief concern.

Hmong parents, likewise, express helplessness in understanding the procedures and policies of the educational system, and desire to have up to date information regarding their child’s progress, though they often feel unequipped to confront this concern. As a result of impaired communication, they tend to seek out Hmong employees (who still remain few in
the ASD) when in need of assistance, while promoting their child’s success and proficiency in English as an avenue to confronting their lack of understanding in these procedures, as is clear is this statement from a parent:

*The most important thing is having the children learn; this will be the best method of communication. Once the child knows the language, the parents will feel [comfortable] to communicate through their children* (Wolverine Hmong parent, focus group session, December 3, 2009).

Adults in the Hmong community have shown their desire and willingness to participate and succeed in learning English, however large families, lack of transportation, and demanding work schedules often prevent many from taking part. Success in these types of programs could serve to improve not only communication with the school, but also their ability to adequately assert their parental guidelines for their children, and in obtaining higher-paying jobs. This fact is not lost on parents, and efforts need to come from a position that understands their lived realities.

Wolverine Elementary enrolls an increasingly diverse student population, with a staff that is decidedly homogeneous. Several teachers made comments that it remains the Hmong community’s “responsibility” to learn English, which implies that they are either uninterested or, as commented by one teacher, that they have not tried hard enough to do so. This sentiment persists within the ASD to a certain degree – that, since other minority communities have proven able to learn and adapt to the English language using currently available programs, than the Hmong community must try harder. Access to opportunity cannot be delivered uniformly.

**Parental Involvement**

ASD staff and Hmong parents also converge in expressing that the involvement of Hmong parents in their child’s education is difficult when considering the language barrier, cultural differences, and a lack of experience within the community with formal education. For some teachers these factors are framed as deficiencies, having not been successful involving Hmong parents in the same manner that other minority parents have become involved. Teachers wish Hmong parents were “more comfortable,” and often wonder if they “understand their role.” These comments and others like them place Hmong parents in a
position of fault, problematizing their involvement, and relaying the assumption that they may need help in understanding how things are done. Furthermore, this attitude places the parents in a powerless position, subverting their inherent strengths as a community.

I am of the opinion that education consists of more than schooling, and there is little attention given to a student’s education once out of school. I agree that the challenges are real, but it must also be noted that the American educational system operates on a somewhat narrowly defined idea of parental involvement, one based on Euro-American values and practices. The Hmong community possesses strengths that have not been called upon in the educational setting, with parents instead having to attempt to conform to and understand a system that remains foreign. Lack of educational background should not be the determining factor in parental involvement, nor should a language barrier. Research supports that parents need to be essential partners in school governance (Hidalgo, Siu & Epstein, 2003, p. 632), and the lack of involvement of Hmong parents is a call for the broadening of a somewhat myopic vision of parental involvement forwarded by the ASD, as means to work towards a mutually forged school culture.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) maintains standards for parental involvement, and they include:

- Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- Responsible parenting is promoted and supported.
- Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- Parents are welcomed as volunteers in the schools.
- Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect their children/families.
- Parents, school, and community collaborate in order to enhance student learning, strengthen families, and improve schools (Ferrara, 2009, p. 126).

This project found that, although teachers and Hmong parents report parental compliance and trust with regards to the educational institution, there still exist frustrations on both sides concerning the involvement of Hmong parents. In comparison to the involvement of other communities, and to the standards outlined above, the engagement of Hmong parents in a “meaningful” way has yet to be accomplished. Teachers express the ease in involving
White parents at other schools, where “students are on the college track,” which is surely a direct result of similarities in language, culture, social structure, and interactional patterns.

Hmong parents expressed a sense of helplessness in stating that they are unable to communicate directly with the school, have “no knowledge” of the educational system, and “can’t help with homework.” Perhaps because of these self perceptions, and surely a result of latent memories of a more strict educational framework in Laos, many parents award teachers considerable control over their child’s education, concerning themselves with more immediate parenting concerns. This is not to say that they do not want to become more active, and efforts to involve parents must take into account their historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts.

Due to the historical arc of the Hmong community, specifically the lack of educational experience on behalf of parents, involvement needs to begin with finding ways to communicate regarding their child’s on-going progress, the shifting expectations of parents and teachers, and to settle on a forum that allows parents to voice their opinion on a regular basis. If we believe that parents will remain the primary educators of children, than their voices must be heard.

Hmong parents, as is clear from the focus groups, are highly invested in the promotion of education as the means to success, and this should be understood amongst some teachers who wonder if education is valued in the community. Involvement can be reworked in a number of ways, and some ideas include regular group meetings with a translator to replace one-on-one meetings, an adapted Hmong-specific PTA, through the promotion and commitment to adult education classes, and by taking genuine steps to foster understanding of Hmong social organization and consensus building protocols. These are conversations and ideas that need to be discussed amongst all those involved. Concerning the importance of connecting the home and school environments, this quote from Lagemann touches on some of the issues in the Hmong community, and signifies the importance of involving Hmong parents in education:

*The public school too often separates the child from his parents and widens that old gulf between fathers and sons which is never so cruel and so wide as it is between the immigrants who come to this country and their children who have gone to public school and feel that*
they have learned it all...Can we not say, perhaps, that the schools ought to do more to connect these children with the best things of the past, to make them realize something of the beauty and charm of the language, the history, and the traditions which their parents represent (Hones & Cha, 1999, p. 42).

**Culture and “Cultural Proficiency”**

Perhaps the most striking divergence noticed in this project was how participants related to the idea of culture and cultural differences. Teachers almost universally expressed their lack of knowledge of Hmong history, culture, and traditions, while Hmong parents commonly stated their desire to see these elements taught formally in school. Alongside the obvious importance the Wolverine Hmong community places on education as a means to success, is their desire to assert and express their cultural identity as Hmong-Americans.

Teachers made comments that they “know nothing about their culture,” and furthermore, that they “should know more.” Some went further, and expressed that they felt it was “unacceptable” for the Hmong community to “cling to” their culture after 20 years in the country, and wondered if they “want to be American.” This, of course, implies that they are not yet American, but rather are in the process of becoming. Another teacher said that they had a “responsibility to assimilate,” and felt it wasn’t the school district’s job to cater to everyone.

These comments, though not the norm, come from a position of cultural dominance, and underline deep concerns with our ability to provide equal opportunity in education with such a homogeneous school district staff – concerns that reach far beyond language barriers. These opinions place the Hmong community permanently in the position of “foreigner,” as opposed to “minority” – perpetually in the process of adjusting to a new country, and precluding it from being theirs to claim. The implication inherent in some of these opinions is that conformity to the dominant culture, including the manner in which it has organized the educational institution, is required of all immigrants.

At the heart of this project and discussion are cultural differences, the organization and delivery of the educational institution in relation to these differences, and how to best serve a diverse student body. Cultural proficiency is a buzzword that is popular in conversations
about diverse school districts, and there have been myriad rubrics, typologies, and flow charts that have attempted to boil culture down to easily digestible bites. There is often confusion between political correctness and cultural proficiency, and working towards being “proficient” means little if you can’t communicate with and understand someone, language barrier or not. Too often these efforts are relegated to superficial additions to the existing framework, in-service cultural sensitivity trainings, or in the form of new teaching styles. It becomes clear that this concept means different things to different groups of people, and people relate to the very idea of culture is hugely different ways. The ASD website purports a commitment to cultural proficiency through varied means, however whether or not it translates into practice is what we should be most concerned with.

“Cultural proficiency” as a concept in the ASD is administered largely through superficial means – Hmong story cloths adorn the walls of many schools, and multicultural nights build awareness of cultural traditions and ethnic cuisine, yet 90% of the employees are from one background, with a true majority of the students from another. Most often the dominant cultural group establishes the prevalent norms, and while conformity may be valid in situations of cultural homogeneity, it is another matter when diversity itself is the norm. What cultural proficiency means to me, and how it will surely resonate with many, is in reforming those aspects of the educational scheme that are cognitive, rather than material in nature – understanding of social structures and cultural protocols, broadening how parents are involved in the school, or in diversifying the staff through a commitment to professional development, and in making parents active partners in changing the way the school operates. All these factors are a means to forging an educational framework mutually, working to create a sense of ownership rather than alienation.

Trainings that are administered over a two-day in-service in order to teach about the cultural background of any one group sidestep the real issue. These kinds of initiatives are appeasements, teaching about culture when lessons should be taught through it. These trainings are not without value, however they treat culture as if it is something to be overcome rather than embraced as the lens through which students and parents construct knowledge.
In assessing whether the educational institution in Anchorage is organized, delivered, and maintained to most adequately serve the Hmong community, it is useful to revisit Barnhardt’s characteristics of a culturally responsive institution in relation to the findings of this project:

- **Participatory decision-making**
  - Wolverine Hmong parents are not actively and genuinely involved in decisions that stand to (re)form their involvement in the educational institution. In lieu of involvement is conformity as to how the framework has already been organized, and this limits their ability to garner a sense of ownership in how the school operates, to influence what is taught to their children, and to engage in conversations of reform.

- **Decentralized authority structure**
  - The relative size of the ASD, and the pitfalls of bureaucracy work as disadvantages in serving an increasingly diverse student body, as no two communities, or individuals within those communities, are alike. At the level of individual schools, each with compositions of students that vary greatly with regards to racial and ethnic background, a top-down approach to decision-making serves to stifle their strengths as communities. The more involved the Hmong community becomes in the school, and the more personalized the services become, the closer it will resemble their cultural norms and forms of social organization.

- **Distributive communication system**
  - If Hmong parents are to be active partners in education, including the development of changes to existing policies, than they must be able to convey their views in culturally appropriate ways. This requires multiple and diverse modes of communication and participation. Utilizing communication patterns normative to the community will serve to actively involve parents, and in assuring they are well informed.

- **Loosely coupled organizational framework**
  - Ultimately, a main source of the difficulties facing the ASD and Wolverine Elementary in providing equal opportunity for the Hmong community stems from a system of education that is unable to adapt, and
is unaware of the need to do so. The organization of the school, including how it expects parents to become involved, how it communicates with them, how resolutions to conflicts are reached, among other factors, are rigid and prevent the Hmong community from shaping how they engage. Different means should be used to achieve the same ends.

What is perhaps most clear to me in contemplating the results of this project is the need for schools in Anchorage to understand Hmong parents’ complexities, desires, concerns, ideas, and aspirations for their children. There needs to be daily dialogue that is culturally relevant – parents possess stores of knowledge that are not being called upon, and the benefits of involving and engaging with the community from a position of understanding and mutual respect should be considered a moral imperative. Substantive steps should be taken to make changes mutually, working to take the Hmong community’s socioeconomic, cultural, and social realities into account.

There are examples of schools in the United States that have reorganized the delivery and organization of the educational scheme specifically for Hmong students and families. These efforts, such as Phalen Lake Elementary in St. Paul, Minnesota, have experienced widespread support from their communities, and academic performance has improved. Kazoua Kong-Thao, chairwoman of the St. Paul school board, stated succinctly that, “if you know where you came from and are comfortable with where you are, it’s so much easier to see where you’ll be going” (Walsh, 2007). While Anchorage schools enroll a diverse student body, most of the diversity is concentrated in the east. Blanket policies to “accommodate” diversity tend not to take into account the lived realities of individuals, and in specific schools with high Hmong enrollment, there needs to be changes made that take the lessons learned from this project into account.

One of the principal aims of this process was not to establish a forum for labeling differences, but rather to highlight how different groups of people communicate, garner a sense of communal strength, and construct knowledge. More than anything, it is clear that Hmong parents want the very same things for their children that all parents want – a good education, a good job, a family, and to be happy. The task remains, then, to engage with the
community in a manner that signifies respect, that does not operate from a position of dominance, and one that allows changes that affect the Hmong community to be fueled by their own efforts and words. The words of Hmong parents from this effort, rather than displaying a group that has been wronged, indicate a community coming from a position of cultural endurance, hopeful for the future, and who want the very best for their children.

This project establishes a baseline of information that, rather than being used as rationale for subsequent adaptations to the educational framework, ought to stand as the foundation – a starting point. Teachers, administrators, clan leaders, and parents need to establish a forum that brings everyone to the table, and only through these efforts will the school and home environments become reflections of each other, where Hmong voices echo equally as loud.

Kia stood in the back of the auditorium with a smile on her face that radiated throughout her entire body. She peered through the crowd of onlookers as her granddaughter walked across the stage with glee in a blue and gold cap and gown, diploma in hand. She caught the eye of her grandmother and smiled, holding the piece of paper in the air for her to see. Kia’s thoughts darted back and forth from the present to her past, thoughts that both overwhelmed and overjoyed her, and she waved back in approval. Some time later, the two of them walked together outside and stood in the parking lot, looking at the mountains under the cloudless May sky. She hugged her granddaughter, and wiped a tear from her face before it fell to the ground. “Why are you sad?” she asked. “I’m not sad,” Kia replied. “I am proud.”
Appendix A

Hmong Enrollment Increase in the English Language Learners (ELL) Program

![Chart showing ELL Enrollment - Five Year Perspective]

- May-04
- Feb-09

<table>
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<th>Feb-09</th>
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Appendix B

Oral Consent Script for Wolverine Elementary Staff

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. This project aims to identify the perceptions held by Hmong parents and Wolverine Elementary staff regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of school policies, programs, and curricula for Hmong students and families. This interview, along with the results of focus group sessions with Hmong parents, will contribute to my Master’s project as a Cross Cultural studies graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Since you are employed at Wolverine, your experiences and perspectives on working with Hmong students and families is greatly valued. Your insights, combined with those of your colleagues and the results from focus group sessions with Hmong parents, will effectively frame the relationship between the Anchorage school district and the Hmong community in the effort to improve parental involvement and cultural proficiency at Wolverine Elementary.

Please understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to stop the interview at any time. There are no foreseeable risks attached to your participation. Your name will be kept confidential, and the results of the project will be delivered to you. Thank you.
Appendix C
Oral Consent Script for Hmong Parents

Hello everyone. Thank you so much for participating in this conversation on Hmong students and families at Wolverine Elementary. We are here today to discuss your opinions, feelings, and desires for the education of your children. This conversation will contribute to the researcher's Master's degree in Cross Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. We are most interested in your personal experiences, both good and bad, with the school, including suggestions for how to improve the relationship between the Anchorage school district and the Anchorage Hmong community. Generally, the focus for this conversation will be on the understanding of Hmong culture by ASD staff, what specific policies/programs/curricula work well or do not work, and suggestions on ways to confront or change areas of concern. We are interested in your stories, even if they may seem insignificant to you.

Firstly, please understand that your participation in this conversation is voluntary and will be kept private - your real names will not be used in any reports/publications, and you can choose to remove yourself at any time. Second, it is important for you to know that there are no right or wrong answers - we want to know how each of you encounters the school on a daily basis. With a group of ______ parents there are many experiences and opinions represented, and we are interested in exploring as many topics as time will allow. Third, we ask that you speak one at a time so that everyone has the opportunity to share their opinion and be heard clearly on tape. Forth, when you do speak, please identify yourself so that the Hmong translator listening to the tape will know who is talking. You could say, "This is Lee." or "This is Thao speaking." Lastly, we want you to be comfortable sharing good things as well as critical things. We are not here to get specific answers, but to understand your point of view more clearly. The purpose of this conversation is to give Hmong parents the opportunity to openly discuss the education of their children.
WORKS CITED


