HMOOBNESS: HMOOB (HMONG) YOUTH AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF HMOOB LANGUAGE IN A SMALL TOWN IN THE MIDWEST

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Dedication

To the ancestors who continue to guide,.....to those who are currently here for having the strength to carry forth our culture and language,.....and to the future, the seven generations.

"if we can imagine the injustice, then we can imagine its opposite, and we can have justice."

Abstract

For thousands of years, Hmoob culture and traditional knowledge survived by being passed down orally from one generation to the next through sacred ceremonial songs, poetry, gatherings, and folklore. For oral cultures, languages becomes an important vehicles in the passing of one's culture, especially from the Elders to the youth (Thao, 2006). This phenomenological study draws upon Indigenous methodologies and adaptation of grounded theory (Smith, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Kovack, 2010). The research seeks to understand 1) the perceptions of Hmoob youth of their language; 2) the relationship Hmoob youth have to their language, and 3) what they believe are barriers to Hmoob language acquisition. The research found that Hmoob youth cared deeply about their language and culture and believe barriers to language acquisition includes racism, bias curriculum, and the pressures to assimilate and conform. The research also found that Hmoob youth have many questions, and concerns regarding the survival, revitalization, and maintenance of their language. The recommendations are for the Hmoob community, cultural workers, practitioners of Hmoob language and schools.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Problem

Hmoob[1] (Hmong) people are an Indigenous group living throughout southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The Vietnam War, called the "Secret War" in Laos by historians, led to a worldwide Hmoob diaspora, from the Americas to Europe to Australia (Thao, Arguelles, Afterword, and Pennekamp, 2006). Wherever we have made our new homes, what continues to bind us together is our common language and culture. However, geographic distance poses threats to our cultural commonality, impacting our identities in complex ways that threaten our language and culture. While scholars theorize about historical, social, political and cultural factors that impact language and culture transmission, what is less known is what those directly being impacted perceive the to be factors.

There has been little research on language loss in the Hmoob community, and even less focusing on the Hmoob youth perception of it. Past research tells us that Hmoob youth believe that language is an important factor in their identity as Hmoob people. The literature has yet to examine how they are reconstructing their identity and culture through a language lens. By understanding the perspectives of our youth, who are instrumental in maintaining and carrying on our language and culture, we can come to a

[1] I have chosen to use the spelling "Hmoob," pronounced *Hmawng*, in this paper instead of the more common spelling of "Hmong." Hmoob Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) is the most widespread Hmoob writing system and represents the closest dialectic pronunciation of the language. The significance of using the spelling Hmoob instead of Hmong is to reclaim proper language pronunciation.

better understanding of the missing link in the transmission of culture and language to the younger generation.

Background of the Study

Hmoob people are recent refugees to the United States. Studying our social and cultural trajectory in the U.S. within an Indigenous framework is complex and arbitrary, as we are not Indigenous to the U.S. However, our indigeneity is recognized throughout Asia and, as a people, we hold and share many cultural and historical characteristics and struggles with other Indigenous peoples around the world. Grounding our status as Indigenous will help the reader understand the connection that many Indigenous languages have to the survival of oral cultures and, by extension, the survival of its people.

For thousands of years, Hmoob culture and traditional knowledge survived by being passed down orally from one generation to the next through sacred ceremonial songs, poetry, gatherings, and folklore. Presently, for Hmoob people in the United States, our language is endangered due to war, displacement, colonial assimilationist educational systems, globalization, and living amongst dominant cultures that push neoliberal policies as tools of assimilation. The problem is our recent history of war, internment, and forced emigration, which has put our people in survival mode. A direct consequence of this history is that little attention has been given to the marked national trend of assimilation and acculturation. The rapid erosion of our language threatens us as a people, for our language is intricately linked to our identity and our long history of oral traditions. As noted by Ka Va, professor of Hmoob language at California State University of

Sacramento (Va, 2010), within three years of administering pre- and post-tests to his Hmoob students, the fluency rate of his Hmoob students dropped by 23%. Many Elders have expressed that there is no point to the survival of our people if our culture and language do not survive with it. This is a powerful statement, highlighting the sacred relationship of Indigenous languages to the people's culture.

Xiong-Lor ties the loss of culture through language loss in her study of Hmoob people living in California (2015). The author found that, although there is a strong desire within the Hmoob community to maintain their language and culture, this is seen as unrealistic due to the high demands of a capitalistic society. The participants in her study understood that they lacked language and cultural competence, making it impossible to pass it on to the younger generation. The study concludes that the Hmoob community has a strong desire to maintain language and culture and acknowledges that it is in the early stages of endangerment. Her study did not, however, explore the state of Hmoob language endangerment, therefore, she did not make recommendations on how the revitalization or maintenance of Hmoob language would look like.

Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies have shown that, in order for students of color to succeed academically, they need to be well grounded linguistically, culturally, and spiritually in who they are (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). However, the Hmoob community's general perception is that Hmoob language and culture can be set aside, for they are not economically competitive in the world market. For many Hmoob individuals, learning one's language and culture has been reserved for weekends only (Personal

Communication, Moua 2014). Unique to the United States specifically is the allure of the American Dream. In its pursuit, we are unwittingly replacing our culture and values with dominant White culture and values and our language with English. Despite this sacrifice, the vast majority of Hmoob Americans remain among the poorest and most marginalized socioeconomically, with 35% of Hmoob children living below the federal poverty line, triple the rate of the general U.S. population (A Community of Contrast, 2013).

The reality is that Hmoob youth are giving up their culture, language and thousands of years of traditional and oral knowledge in order to survive in a capitalist-driven society by conforming to the standards of the dominant culture (Thao, 2006). For the vast majority, although they value their language, culture and identity, it becomes overwhelming, and they have little choice but to succumb to the dominant culture's economic, social and political standards. In many ways, speaking English and blending well into White culture is synonymous with modernity, success and wealth (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012).

The drive to be "successful" poses a threat to Hmoob language, for there is no room in Western education that allows for Hmoob oral culture to thrive. Our traditional pedagogy cannot compete and often runs contradictory to Western pedagogy, a system that highly values and privileges reading and writing as dominant forms of teaching, learning and evaluating "intelligence." This dramatic shift in pedagogy, simultaneous with a profound decline in transmission rate of traditional Hmoob knowledge, accelerates the rate of language endangerment and the gap in traditional Hmoob knowledge. This adds another complicated layer to the language revitalization movement. There is no room in Western education that allows for Hmoob oral culture to thrive. It is challenging,

if not impossible, for our youth to find an educational system with a curriculum that is reflective of our history, culture and language and places the same values in Hmoob traditional teachings.

Research Question

We know that language is intricately linked to culture. For Hmoob people, language is the first and most important marker in their identity as a Hmoob person (Xiong, 2009). We also know that language is tied heavily to identity formation, ways of being, knowing and seeing the world. Unfortunately, the rate of Hmoob language loss is epidemic in the Hmoob American community. Within a few generations, the vast majority of our children can no longer speak or understand Hmoob (Va, 2010). In some Hmoob families, grandparents are unable to communicate with their grandchildren, foreshadowing Hmoob cultural extinction, for the survival of Hmoob culture is dependent on language. Harrison (2010), a linguist at Swarthmore College and leading spokesman for endangered languages, predicts that if there is no intervention to prevent language loss, Hmoob language, along with thousands of other Indigenous languages, will cease to exist by the end of this century. Currently, in the United States, there is very little effort in Hmoob language revitalization or maintenance.

If language is an important factor in determining identity, how are Hmoob youth reshaping these new identities with limited or no access to learning their language? By using the theoretical framework of Harrison (2010) and Smith (1999) and drawing up the Indigenous theory to frame this phenomenological study, I examine the perceptions about Hmoob language with Hmoob youth in a midwestern community in the United States.

The research seeks to understand 1) the perceptions of Hmoob youth of their language; 2) the relationship Hmoob youth have to their language, and 3) what they believe are barriers to Hmoob language acquisition.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is the important role that language plays in the survival of Indigenous knowledge and its contribution to the "modern" world. According to UNESCO, every two weeks, a language dies. Indigenous people make up 6% of the world's population, speak 90% of the world's languages, yet, only half of these languages are being passed on. Hmoob language is on the world's Endangered Language List, which presents a huge dilemma for Hmoob language and cultural survival. We are also up against technology and pedagogy that do not favor traditional ways of learning. How are our young people going to learn ceremonies that last for days when they are being taught in dominant education systems that does not value traditional ways of learning?

The United Nations has taken a strong stance against language loss via its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in which it states clearly that language loss is a human rights issue. Indigenous people worldwide have argued since contact with the West that the loss of their language and culture equates to the death of their people (McCarty, 2003, Xiong-Lor, 2015, LaDuke, 1999). With language comes the power of different perspectives and interactions with the world. Its extinction represents the extinction of entire belief systems and thousands of years of scientific and sacred knowledge. This leaves Indigenous peoples in the predicament of how to revitalize their languages and cultures as minorities living amongst dominant cultures. By studying the

perceptions of our youth on their language and their thoughts on barriers to Hmoob language acquisition, I hope to inform, support and urge culture workers, educators, and especially the Hmoob community to begin the process of revitalizing our language, culture and maintaining traditional knowledge for future generations.

In the span of 40 years in the United States, the majority of Hmoob youth no longer espouse traditional Hmoob worldviews (Her, 2016). There is a heavy push for them to become doctors and lawyers. For them, assimilation seems inevitable. The link between a strong language and cultural foundation and the wellbeing of an Indigenous community is undeniably strong. Numerous studies have shown a positive correlation between language and cultural loss with suicide, sexual assault, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse across all generations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, Deer, 2016).

Operational Definition of Terms

Assimilation: The process by which the dominant culture pushes the minority culture to take on the traits, values, perspectives, worldviews and language of the dominant culture.

Community: In this paper, community refers to a group of people who share a common language and have shared beliefs, perspectives, and culture.

Dominant Culture: A culture within or alongside which an Indigenous group exists. In this paper, it is referencing White culture and the systems and institutions made by Whites to uphold their culture, values, and beliefs.

Hmoob (Hmong): The Hmoob living in the United States have been classified into two linguistically defined groups. The word Hmoob is the RPA spelling of the English

spelling of Hmong. In the "White" (Hmoob Dawb) dialect, "Hmoob" is spelled "Hmong." In the "Green" Mong Leng (Moob Leeg) dialect it is spelled "Mong."

Hmoobness: A term used by young Hmoob people to describe their spectrum of a collective Hmoob identity, from physical attributes to traditional Hmoob cultural practices. For example, young people's interpretation of Hmoob behaviors, characteristics, practices, language, culture, food, clothing, and worldview, as well as a shared analysis of social and political issues.

Kev Cai Hmoob: A Hmoob term used to describe the rules or protocols in Hmoob culture that one follows when one has an understanding and respect of the Hmoob world. It could also be used to describe a set of prescribed Hmoob traits, practices, knowledge, norms, behaviors, and ways.

Indigenous People: "Indigenous people" is a socially constructed term. Different people/groups/agencies have come up with different terms to describe what or who Indigenous people are. The sources that are gathered and summarized in this paper have broadly defined Indigenous people as the original inhabitants of an area who still practice the traditional ways of their ancestors and have a respected spiritual relationship with their environment. This term is used throughout the paper because, although Hmoob no longer live on the land of their ancestors (due to many conflicts throughout their history), they still maintain close ties to the land of their ancestors through traditional sacred songs that have been part of their culture for thousands of years. Western academic institutions have defined Hmoob people as an ethnic minority tribe. Due to the negative connotations of "ethnic minority tribe," I have chosen to use the words "Indigenous" and "Tribal" interchangeably. This is done for many reasons, but

the most important is to acknowledge the many similarities and struggles with other Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Language Loss: The loss of specific language skills, such as grammar and vocabulary. The loss of ease with the language (McCarty, Romero and Zepeda, 2006).

Language Shift: The process whereby intergenerational continuity of the heritage language is proceeding negatively, with fewer "speakers, readers, writers and even understanders" every generation. Language shift denotes a community-wide process involving the displacement and replacement of the heritage language by a dominant language over a time period (McCarty, Romero and Zepeda, 2006).

Orally transmitted knowledge/Indigenous knowledge: Throughout this paper, these two terms will be used interchangeably. The reason is that orally transmitted knowledge in the context of this study is the basis of Indigenous knowledge. Many Indigenous groups pass down their knowledge orally from one generation to the next. This knowledge is broadly defined to include information that is passed down orally for maintaining and fostering the traditions, survival, histories and culture of a group.

Oral Culture/Oral Tradition: Cultures that do not have a written language and, instead, use oral communication as the main method of transmitting cultural and religious traditions from one generation to the next.

Print Culture: Cultures that have written historical records and a written language and which use writing as the main form of knowledge transmission. In this paper, "print culture" refers to Western culture (Western European liberal traditions in particular).

Racism: A social construct made by White people that each race has certain characteristics or traits, therefore, there is a hierarchy of unearned power and privilege based on skin color.

Western Liberalism: The idea that European knowledge/culture is the only correct lens through which to look at the world, and that it is free from bias because it is based on rational, scientific thought.

White people/Dominant culture: White people and dominant culture will be used interchangeably. It refers to the culture whose religion, values and traditions have become the norm for a society. They are the most powerful or influential and have social and political standing.

Assumptions

Hmoob people are assimilating rapidly, abandoning our culture for a Western model that has little respect for Hmoob ways of knowing, being and seeing the world. With extreme pressures to assimilate, many Hmoob people have given very little thought to the survival of our language, culture and identity as Hmoob Americans. Our Elders, who want to advocate for language and cultural survival, often feel a sense of hopelessness as they combat their own isolation and depression in trying to maintain who they are in an environment that does not value them. Our youth, on the other hand, feel a sense of emptiness, conscious that they are Hmoob without a clear idea of what that identity encompasses.

For Hmoob people, who share with most Indigenous people the experience of colonization, physical removal, and forced assimilation, these assumptions may help the reader better understand the study.

1. War and displacement have had a negative impact on Hmoob culture and language.
2. Western Educational systems have been used as a tool to assimilate Hmoob youth into dominant culture, further marginalizing Hmoob students and negatively impacting their sense of self worth.
3. Globalization, neoliberalism, and capitalism are the driving factors in Indigenous language loss.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

My theoretical and analytical frameworks for the present study are informed by critical theories, traditional teachings of Indigenous peoples, the teachings of my ancestors and the emerging field of Indigenous education. I position myself as a progressive activist for the survival of Indigenous peoples, an advocate for and practitioner of Hmoob language and culture, and a member of my Hmoob community. Following the core research principles of critical Indigenous research methodologies, the findings of this research must benefit my community and give back to it.

I will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to challenge dominant discourse on Western Liberalism and how this is tied to language loss, heavily influencing the Hmoob community perspectives on identity and language acquisition. CRT directly challenges

the master narrative and positions CRT counter stories as legitimate. I use Critical Race Theory, refined through Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit), to deconstruct our views and perspectives on thousands of years of oral knowledge systems and our current understanding and harmful assumptions that have lead to language endangerment and extinction. Tribal Crit looks to the historical experiences of colonization, oppression and forced removal closely and allows for a deeper and richer analysis of language loss.

Author's Context for Research

It is important for me to define myself in relation to the context of this research. There is a tension that emerges between my role as an educator and a researcher, all the academic norms and expectations, and my role as a member of the community I am researching. My experiences as a Hmoob person allow me an insider perspective on why research has been under scrutiny for so long. The term *research* has imperialist connotations. It is suspicious, because it often does not come from within a community for the benefit of that community.

Often, research is carried out by a small group of academics who come into Indigenous communities with their self-proclaimed "objective lenses" to extract knowledge toward the goal of self-promotion within their field of study. Often, there is little respect for the relationships necessary to understand the stories that the people share. Rarely is there anything given in return, nor does the work come back to the community. Most researchers are not responsible to the communities they are studying. They theorize and analyze those already colonized lives, write and sell books, and get teaching appointments. They have, albeit unknowingly, colonized the words that we give

them by assimilating those words to fit neatly into a framework of Western academia.

As a Hmoob person, the historical practice of Western research presents a huge dilemma for me, as we are taught that relationships are everything that hold us together. Whereas Western research often is about detaching the self from the "subject" of study in order to appear more objective, for us, separating ourselves from those whom we study is disrespectful and dishonest. Therefore, throughout the research, I will alternate between first person and third person. This is to clearly break the tradition with formal academic writing and is intended to make visible the complex interplay between my different roles and identities.

My objective in conducting this research is not to advance an academic body of knowledge. Rather, it is a contribution toward honestly addressing the loss of language and culture through a direct critique of education, imperialism, colonization and assimilation experienced by Indigenous people, especially Hmoob folks. My work is political, as the issues of poverty, self-determination, environmental justice, cultural preservation, and language and cultural survival are political issues. Global capitalism and neoliberal imperialism continue to justify the ethnocide of many Indigenous people around the world.

Through this research process, while listening to and hearing our young people speak, I recognized that this research must specifically consider that which impacts them and is imperative to language survival. A critique of colonial, assimilatory models of education and the role they continue to play in the destruction of Indigenous languages emerged as central to the study, for it is in education environments that our young people spend the majority of their lives. The present research, then, is equally a critique on

American education. Lastly, and most importantly, the research is my effort to instill a sense of pride in participating Hmoob students' understanding and knowledge of who they are as Tribal people, to promote Hmoob language and culture, and resistance to colonization.

Summary

Hmoob people have only been in the United States for a little over 40 years. However, we are losing our language and culture at a drastic rate. This study seeks to understand the perceptions of Hmoob youth in a small Midwest town regarding their language and what they believe to be the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition. We know from previous studies that Hmoob language is a strong indicator of positive identity, self esteem and academic success. In identifying Hmoob youth perceptions of language, the barriers to language acquisition and their relationship to their language, the hope is that this study can provide options to minimize the barriers to language acquisition, as well as support language revitalization efforts of Hmoob people here in the United States.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

Hmoob people in the United States are living through profound changes to their culture and identity. It can be argued that the speed at which their culture and identity is changing has been at a rate not witnessed before (Lee, 2009). Whereas Hmoob people have historically been able to withdraw into the hills and mountains wherever their migrations have led them, shying away from contact with outsiders when possible, living freely off the land, doing so has not been an option in America. Perhaps the contrast for Hmoob people in America is the culture and language gap between the Elders and the youth. Many Hmoob youth cannot speak their mother tongue at all, and I would argue that the ones who can do not speak it with ease. As for knowing the traditional songs, rituals, and ceremonies, with the passing of each Elder, our oral knowledge and language are at increasing risk of extinction. To give context to the research question, I have included literature on the Hmoob youth experience. The reader must have an appreciation of Hmoob history and the historical traumas that have shaped, and continue to shape, Hmoob people, particularly Hmoob youth, perceptions on identity and language. I have, therefore, also included a lengthy and in-depth introduction to Hmoob history, tracing their steps from China into Southeast Asia, where their pivotal role in the Vietnam War and their relationship to the U.S. Government lead to their worldwide diaspora. I have also added a section on Hmoob language, literacy and language endangerment to help the reader appreciate the significance of Hmoob language survival as it relates to Hmoob

youth. Finally, a thorough discussion of the literature should address how education in the United States influences youth perceptions of their mother language, for we cannot discuss perceptions of language without a critique of the U.S. education system.

Writers of Hmoob History

African musician and scholar, Kofi Agawu, cautions African scholars of African music to be vigilant when citing research done by European scholars. Agawu argues that European interests and viewpoints on African music, documented and analyzed in European languages and epistemologies for a European audience, are inherently biased and, therefore, not true and meaningful representations of African music (Agawu, 1992, p.256). This literature review must be similarly approached, for the vast majority of literature on Hmoob people have been completed by Western authors for Western audiences.

It has only been within the last couple of decades that Hmoob people have written their own histories. The imposed narratives of non-Hmoob academics have largely defined what Hmoob culture, history and identity are. For example, Moua and Vang (2015) note that, in the last 25 years of published literature on Hmoob American youth, only one in eight authors were of Hmoob descent. The discourse paints Hmoob youth as either model minorities or struggling delinquents, two very juxtaposing conclusions. Moua and Vang argue that this Westernized discourse continues to be the accepted discourse on Hmoob youth in order to maintain the status quo of the dominant group (2015).

Hmoob American writers urge Hmoob people to write their own stories from their perspectives in order to contribute authentic, accurate narratives to the existing work. When Hmoob people do not contribute their histories, Hmoob writers argue, others write their stories for them, and they are in danger of accepting the images others paint of them (Moua, 2000). For example, much of Hmoob history traced back to China comes from Chinese scholars, who reference Hmoob people and other ethnic minorities under the umbrella term "Miao," a name which Hmoob people consider degrading. Unfortunately, the disregard for the unique histories of these ethnic cultures have hindered scholars' attempts to accurately portray Hmoob history. Hmoob and non-Hmoob scholars, who often value the written word over oral histories, have made the mistake of interpreting "Hmoob" and "Miao" as one and the same in trying to fill the missing gaps in Hmoob written history. Subsequently, they blur other ethnic minorities' histories as Hmoob history, and vice versa. There is also that added danger of framing of Hmoob history through the eyes of imperialists, misrepresenting Hmoob history and identity to the vast majority of the world.

Published literature from the West on Hmoob people before the 1970's was mostly that of missionaries, aid workers, journalists and anthropologists who often had agendas and objectives that did not reflect that of Hmoob people. Their publications, written for very specific purposes, offered often-harmful stereotypes and biased descriptions of Hmoob history (DePouw, 2006; Lee, M, 2015). In his dissertation of Hmoob adolescents in California during resettlement in the 1980's, McGinn (1989) states that, aside from a few articles in National Geographic and some human relation files, little of Hmoob literature is published in the West.

Hmoob history, such as has been written thus far, has been based on a colonial framework and racialized hierarchies of cultures (DePouw, 2006). In her dissertation, DePouw concludes that written Hmoob history is incomplete, biased, and racist. The majority of written records have come from colonizers and cultures with writing systems that surrounded them. Hmoob people traditionally do not write their history but have an oral history older than Chinese history, dating back 5,000 years (Quincy, 1995). The first written historical record of Hmoob people by Hmoob individuals is nonexistent prior to contact with the West, for they relied heavily on their memory for their history and ceremonies (Thao, 2006). The first records of Hmoob people appeared in Chinese era texts and continued on into Vietnam and Laos by Western colonial powers. The reports and writings were done with the intent to kill, assimilate, tax or convert Hmoob people to Christianity (Cooper, 1985).

Paul Hillmer (2010), who wrote an oral historical account of Hmoob history through interviews with Hmoob Elders, argues that the oral history of Hmoob people is valuable and far more reliable than Westerners with "modern" minds. He argues that, in the absence of a written language, Hmoob people have been forced to use their memory to track their history, ceremonies, and culture. He supports his claim by suggesting that there is a strong correlation between adrenaline, traumatic events experienced, and memory retention (Hillmer, 2010). Hillmer adds that the history and the intensity of the traumas experienced by Hmoob people would have increases the accuracy of their memory, making their oral histories and culture more accurate and reliable than third party witnesses who write Hmoob history down. The trauma Hillmer writes about is seen throughout Hmoob history. Very early on in their written history, Hmoob people began a

perpetual flight from the Han Chinese to resist oppression, colonization and assimilation. In the 18th century, due to increasing Chinese invasion as well as repression, many wars broke out. Due to their small population, Hmoob people were driven off their land and pushed higher and higher into the mountains (Thao, 2006, Vang, 2009). Today, a large population of Hmoob still reside in the high mountains of southern China.

Lee (2015) writes that China was the homeland of Hmoob people, and this is where Hmoob Elders long to return to. There is a famous Hmoob proverb that states: "Tsis pom dej daj ces siab tsis nqig," which translates to, "If one has not seen the Yellow River, the heart will never be satisfied" (Lee, 2015). Through oral interviews and Hmoob oral histories, as well as the funeral ceremonial songs, which are performed when a traditional Hmoob person passes on, Hmoob people's history is traced back to our ancestral homeland on the Yellow River Basin before we were driven high into the mountains by the Chinese. Lee (2015) notes that this proverb is taught specifically to younger people to help all Hmoob people remember not only the way back to the land of the ancestors but the significance of the role the Yellow River plays in Hmoob lives.

Hmoob History in SouthEast Asia

Hmoob history in Southeast Asia is complicated, therefore, this section will lay out a abbreviated account of the historic relationship between Hmoob people and the U.S. Government that changed the trajectory of Hmoob history. It explicitly highlights the impact this still has on the Hmoob community – Hmoob youth in particular in the United States. To not acknowledge this relationship would be to erase the crimes committed by the U.S. Government against the peoples of Southeast Asia. By not teaching about

Hmoob people in history classes, we deny Hmoob culture as a living, breathing culture in the United States.

After centuries of persecution by the Chinese, Hmoob people decided to leave their homeland. To this day, many Hmoob clans still trace their arrival into Laos, Thailand or Vietnam through their clan's traditional funeral ceremonial songs. Oral histories and funeral ceremonial songs of Hmoob people in the United States contain the history of how Hmoob people came to Laos and, eventually, the U.S. These ceremonies reflect the pain, sorrow and sacrifice they made to leave China (Thao, 2006). The Hmoob people living in the United States first migrated into Laos in the early 19th century, some through Northern Vietnam and others directly from China.

The majority of Hmoob people now in the U.S. first settled in Nong Het, in Xieng Khuang Province, Laos (Lee, 2015). Hmoob people chose to live secluded lives in the steep and remote mountains away from the lowland Lao who found the mountaintops too cold and the terrain too harsh to farm (Quincy, 1995; Lee, M. 2009). When the last wave of Hmoob people from China reached Laos, the French had just begun their colonial rule in Southeast Asia. They imposed a system of heavy taxation and many discriminatory policies against Hmoob people, which led to conflicts between the two until the French figured out that they could appoint Hmoob leaders to negotiate and be the middlemen (Lee, G. 2009, Lee, M. 2015). Thus, the French were able to control and exploit Hmoob people very effectively.

According to Chan (1994), the French had very little interest in developing Laos economically or culturally after they discovered that they could not use the Mekong as a trade route into China. However, they did expand their empire through the opium trade.

They actively promoted opium growth among Hmoob people and other Hill Tribes as a way to alleviate the heavy taxes that they were imposing. Alhough the opium trade has traditionally been blamed on the different Hill Tribes, the ones directly profiting from it was the Chinese, Lao merchants and the French (McCoy, 2003). According to Hmoob Elders, producing opium was a way for them to pay the heavy taxes imposed on them by the French in order to avoid constant warefare.

When the pro-independence faction in Vietnam forced the French out of Indochina in 1954 and declared Vietnam's independence, the United States decided to step in on the deteriorating political scene. The U.S. got involved for various reasons. One was the so-called "Red Scare," the fear that, if communism spread throughout Indochina, the U.S. economy would fall (Lee, 2005). Additionally, the United States believed that if Laos, a weaker, smaller country sandwiched between Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, could fall under communism, then so would all of Asia.

By 1954, the United States was supplying 70% of the cost of the war in Vietnam (Duffy, 2007). The Geneva Accords of 1962, signed by both the United States and North Vietnam, pronounced Laos a neutral country (Thao, 1999). The Accord meant that the people of Laos would determine their own fate as a sovereign country. However, both the U.S. and North Vietnam broke the Geneva Accords by invading Laos. The North Vietnamese sent troops into Laos to fight, and the U.S. recruited Hmoob people to fight on its behalf. According to Hamilton-Merritt (1993), the United States had military personnel in Laos recruiting and illegally training Hmoob soldiers to fight even before the signing of the Geneva Accords.

If the imperialistic Western forces in Southeast Asia learned nothing else about the people they were colonizing, they learned how important group allegiances are. The CIA exploited this knowledge in recruiting Hmoob people by recruiting Vang Pao, a young Hmoob man who first caught the attention of the French and later the CIA for his many successful raids against the North Vietnamese forces. With Vang Pao actively recruiting on its behalf, the plan to establish an Indigenous military force consisting primarily of Hill Tribes, especially Hmoob villagers, who could carry out covert operations against communist forces, was quite successful. In return for their service, Hmoob soldiers were provided a monthly salary and food (McCoy, 2003). Hmoob soldiers had three main objectives:

1. Stop the Vietcong from transporting weapons from North Vietnam to South Vietnam;
2. Rescue American pilots shot down; and
3. Secure the CIA American base in Xieng Khuang (Thao, 1999; Lee, 2005, Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

McCoy (1991) argues that another goal of the CIA Special Forces was to gather intelligence to help with the American cause. In exchange, the U.S. promised that, no matter the outcome of the war, Hmoob people would receive protection. The oral treaty was to ensure their safety and the security of their lands in order for them to continue to live their traditional lives (McCoy, 2003). This is reiterated in numerous books on Hmoob people and, most importantly, through the writings and oral histories of Hmoob soldiers themselves (Lo, Scarseth, Mattison, 1994). But, like so many treaties that have

been made between the United States and other peoples, it was made with no intent to honor.

The U.S. operations in Laos were so secretive that the U.S. involvement in Laos was not declassified until the early 1990's (Baldillo, Mendy, Eng, 2005). But to Hmoob people, the war was no secret. According to Anne Fadiman (1997), between 1968 and 1972, more than two million bombs were dropped on Laos, more than all the bombs dropped in Europe and the Pacific during World War I and World War II combined (p.132). To this day, Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world. Toward the end of the Vietnam War, when morale was low, General Vang Pao and the U.S. relocated Hmoob villages all around Long Cheng to protect the CIA secret base. The logic was that Hmoob people would fight harder to protect their homes and families.

The death rate among Hmoob people was so high that, toward the end of the war, boys as young as ten years of age were recruited to fight. Hmoob soldiers died at a rate ten times that of American soldiers and suffered more death per capita than the Vietnamese soldiers. For the U.S., Hmoob lives were cheap: a Hmoob soldier was paid roughly $2.00 a month compared with his American counterpart, who received between $200.00 and $335.00; (Fadiman, 1997; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). An aid worker, Edgar "Pop" Buell, who helped the CIA organize aide to the villages where Hmoob men were fighting, recalls when he first saw a 10-year-old boy going into war. The boy was a new recruit, and Buell remembered that the boy's gun was taller than him. Later on, when he was returned to base in a body bag, the body bag was too big for a child. Buell remembers the little boy's body to this day and the horror of so many young Hmoob boys who had no choice but to fight because there was no one left to fight for them.

In 1975, when the U.S. withdrew from the war, the fate of Hmoob people was sealed. The U.S. only airlifted 5,000 Hmoob people out of Laos. Most were Vang Pao's high-ranking officers and their families. Thousands were left behind to be slaughtered by the Viet Cong. Once again, Hmoob people had to flee for the safety of the jungles and, ultimately, the refugee camps in Thailand (Lo, Scarseth, Mattison, 1994). Chong Thao Xiong notes that they left behind their homes, ancestors' graves, gardens, and their beloved mountains (Mattison, Lo, Scarseth, 1994). An estimated one-third to one-half of the Hmoob people population in Laos died, the majority of whom were women, children and Elders, from starvation, diseases, and unexploded ordinances (UXOs) (Lo, 2001; Fadiman, 1997).

Thousands of Hmoob people died before ever making it to the refugee camps. The Mekong River, which separates Laos from Thailand, took the lives of many who did not know how to swim. Rafts hastily made with bamboo would often capsize because the safe areas to cross were often deep and treacherous. Many who made it across the border faced the possibility of being forced back by Thai patrol officers (Bruder, 1985). Those who made it to Thailand soon found out that, aside from the silence of bombs and guns, life had simply taken on a different kind of misery.

Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was at the camps to monitor the status of the newly arrived refugees, the Thai, who were in charge of distributing food and monitoring the security of the camp, had no interest in protecting them. The Thai highly disliked Hmoob people from previous historical contact. There were numerous cases of mistreatment, rape, theft and killings perpetrated by the Thai against Hmoob people (Yang, 2008). For example, Thai aide workers

charged with the distribution of food were often accused of sometimes giving only a third of the food rations to families and selling the rest on the black market. This example showcases the corrupted conditions of the camp but pales next to the physical treatment of the refugees. Many Hmoob refugees recalled how some people were beaten to death or beaten and jailed for staying out past curfew or for going outside the borders of the camp to find jobs to supplement food for their families (Cha, 2003).

To Hmoob people, the camp conditions were incredibly foreign given their traditional life in the hills. There was very little work, and most people suffered severe financial deficit. Whereas they had previously roamed free, laboring diligently in the jungles and their fields for food and clothing, the ability to supplement food and clothing for self and family now consisted of sewing *paj ntaub* to sell and working as laborers for the Thai. Whereas traditional life provided a role for every family member, young and old, in the camps, they lay around without purpose, hungrily awaiting the food trucks for their survival. They were now cut off from environments that they were used to. They were also forced to compete over rations of food and water. Xiong (2010) argue that this experience deeply impacted Hmoob culture and kinship ties. The level of poverty and violence was exceptional and, coupled with the death of so many Elders, children and parents, a deep breakdown in the tight-knit social fabric occured. This changed the relationship Hmoob people had to each other and this is exemplified in the new formation of their cultural relationships and ties through their newly colonized identities as refugees. This experience still impacts Hmoob social and cultural development and maintenance.

Resettlement

Through the United Nations, resettlement was secured for Hmoob people. Although the vast majority fought for the United States or were children and spouses of soldiers, U.S. Immigration only accepted 60% of the applicants for refuge in the United States (Bruder, 1985). Many Hmoob families refused to leave the camps in hopes of returning to their mountains in Laos. Indeed, many families remained in the camps for almost two decades, but with the Thai government threatening to close the camps, most families finally gave up hope of ever returning to Laos and began the process of emigration (Lo, 2001).

The last of the UN camps closed in 1996, but a significant number of refugees who refused to leave or were deemed "unfit" for emigration were moved to Wat Tham Krabok in central Thailand (Lee, 2009). This was a temple complex ran by a Buddhist nun and monk who protected Hmoob people. After their sequential deaths, Thailand ordered Hmoob people to be repatriated back to Laos. The bombing of the Twin Towers came as a blessing to the refugees, for the U.S. closed its immigration borders to many Muslim countries in the Middle East due to fear of terrorism, thereby leaving room for the Hmong National Development and the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center to advocate for the reopening of its doors to the refugees (Lee, 2009).

In the U.S., Hmoob people faced widespread discrimination, hatred and prejudice by Americans who were ignorant of the Vietnam War and the role Hmoob people played in the CIA's War in Laos. Many of Hmoob people families who came to the U.S. were not prepared to enter American society and suffered greatly (Xiong, 2009). The vast majority was not literate, had no employment skills, did not speak English, and

had no familiarity with American culture, values and customs (Thao, 1999, Fadiman 1997). Racism and discrimination were rampant and did not make life easy for them. Indeed, many Elders, too frightened and distrustful of Americans, simply stayed inside their homes with the doors locked and shades pulled down.

What makes the Hmoob experience different from those of previous Asian Americans was the fact that many people entered the U.S. unaware of the extent of how difficult adjustment would be. For many Hmoob families, it came down to staying in the camps and dying or emigrating to the West for a chance at survival (Cha, 2003). Their biggest obstacle was, in fact, adjustment to American culture, for it was different from the Hmoob way of life in every way, from kinship ties and community values to religious beliefs and customs. As Walker-Moffat (1995) stated, it was like being dropped on a new planet. Thao (1999) points out that, of all the recent immigrants to the U.S., Hmoob people were the least technologically sophisticated and least formally "educated" (Thao, 1999). As a result, they faced difficult adjustment problems in almost every aspect of their lives in the U.S.

Resettlement for the Hmoob was so traumatic that an unexplained phenomenon known as Nocturnal Death Syndrome (Bruder, 1985) claimed the lives of 19 Hmoob men. The autopsy reports showed that they were all healthy. What caught the attention of Western Medicine was that they were all male, in perfect health and all Hmoob. Anne Fadiman (1997) argued that these individuals, unsure of their spiritual stability in the US, simply became so depressed that they fell asleep and died.

Adapting to life in the U.S. has been difficult for Hmoob people. The last 40 years of refugee camps and U.S. life have put many Hmoob in "survival mode." To give

context, Hmoob Americans have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group in the Midwest and remain among the poorest and most marginalized socioeconomically. Nearly half of the Hmoob population is employed in manufacturing jobs, ranking Hmoob people among the lowest per capita income tiers of any racial or ethnic group in the Midwest ("A Community of Contrasts," 2013).

Resettlement in a Mid-Sized Town in the Midwest

The setting of the present study is a mid-sized Midwest. According to Bruder (1985), there was only one Hmoob person living in this mid-sized town in 1978. By 1983, there were 424 Hmoob. By 1984, when he started his research, there were about 1,200. Bruder's study was one of the earliest studies done on Hmoob people in this mid-sized town. It looked at the basic needs of the newly arrived refugees and found the following major issues:

1) Limited English proficiency. Bruder found that 75% of Hmoob people population wanted to learn English and 86% needed interpreters.
2) Unemployment. Only 5% of the adult population was employed and 99% of the students needed ELL support.
3) Inadequate house. Five households did not have running hot water.
4) Insufficient clothing. Approximately 88% of the households reported that they needed winter clothing.

Bruder's study helped to inform County Human Services and social service agencies of the needs of the newly arrived refugees. In response to his study, the city established a taskforce to provide assistance to them.

To better understand why Hmoob people wanted to resettle in this mid-sized Midwest town, we only need to appreciate the landscape. Hmoob Elders felt that this town was special due to its valleys and high bluffs, which reminded them of their homeland (Mattison, Lo and Scarseth, 1997). Although the first families came to the area due to church sponsorships, during what is commonly referred to as the second migration, when resettled families decided to move to metropolitan areas to build a community, many families decided to stay and were joined by others who wanted to make it home.

This mid-sized Midwest town has a population of 52,000 people, which is considered small-to-medium sized for Midwest standards. The town has been known to its many residents as "God's Country," perhaps for the three rivers that come together. The median household income is $40,340. Roughly 7.2% of the total population speaks a language other than English at home. About 90% of the total population is White. Five percent is Asian, the majority of whom are of Hmoob descent (2014 Census). Although the Hmoob population is relatively small, Hmoob youth make up 11% of the total student population in the school district. This parallels the 2010 Census report, which concluded that 47% of individuals of Hmoob descent is under the age of 17.

Until Hmoob people began settling in this small Midwest town, it was declared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as one the top small cities in America in which to live (Pitsch, 1994). Its population consisted mostly of people of German and Norwegian descent. The 1980 U.S.Census reported that 99.5% were White, making it one of the whitest communities in the United States. In the 1990's, at the peak of Hmoob people resettlement, the poverty rate increased alongside gang activity,

teenage drinking and theft. Many blamed Hmoob people for the increase in violence in their community. Within this time period, the juvenile-delinquency referrals to human services also doubled. The greater community greeted the newcomers with bewilderment and not a small dose of hostility. Racism made their new home unwelcoming. The Elders felt this hostility quite acutely and often refused to leave their houses or even open the shades (Personal Communication, 2010, Mattison). As for the young people, they were more willing to interact with Whites, although their experiences were mostly negative. According to an interview with Pao Vue, many Whites stereotyped them and treated them harshly (Yang, 2008, DePeow 2005). The youth were picked on by Whites who did not understand why they had resettled there. As a result of trying to find protection and belonging, many Hmoob youth joined gangs.

During this time period, the Hmoob community often made headlines in the daily newspaper, which tended to perpetuate negative stereotypes and fan mistrust and fear of the Hmoob community. Headlines often focused around gangs, cultural misunderstandings (especially surrounding medical and spiritual beliefs), sexual and domestic abuse, and the harshness of cultural adjustments. For example, a gang shooting at a local park, which shook the core of the community, was generally viewed as something that only happened in big cities, not in God's country. The White community blamed Hmoob refugees for the increased violence and other perceived negative incidents in the community, such as the rise in teenage pregnancies and the liberal dress codes of the youth. This general misunderstanding is entrenched in the relationship between the two and, unfortunately, has set race relations between them since.

One historical fact worth highlighting in this study is that one of the districts where some of the Hmoob students from this study hail was the first district in the United States to bus students based on socioeconomic status. This was a daring and revolutionary approach to addressing socioeconomic disparities without placing race as the real factor in the divide. The impetus for this bold move was that the district needed to address two major issues that had unexpectedly arisen. It had not anticipated a Hmoob student population boom in its longterm planning nor the socioeconomic inequity that skyrocketed along with it. The disparity was striking, with one elementary school having only 4.9% of its students on free or reduced lunch and another having 68.8% on it. The district was ill-prepared for the huge influx of Hmoob students who brought with them many unique challenges, including limited English proficiency, poverty, displacement, and historical trauma (Chaplin, 2002).

The White community fought integration of Hmoob students into their schools heavily. For example, an effort by an all-White school board to diversify the schools socioeconomically via the busing of Hmoob students into different neighborhoods ended in a recall of the school board along with the Superintendent. The community overwhelmingly did not want their children mixing with Hmoob children. Although the discourse was around busing based on socioeconomic status, the uproar this effort caused belied the negative stereotypes Whites had of the Hmoob community and the strong objection they had to having their children in the same schools as Hmoob children (Chaplin, 2002). The busing effort continued and the school board and Superintendent were eventually reinstated.

Another example of race relations is found in the local newspaper in which an article questioned the rigour of high school classes in preparing high school students for college by pointing out that the ACT score of the district had dropped. The answer from the district was that there were more Hmoob students taking the test, even though there was no proof that more Hmoob students were taking the test than previous years (La Crosse, Tribune 2006).

Outside of educational institutions, the vast majority of Hmoob people also experienced discrimination and hate crimes in their everyday lives. In a survey done by a local Hmoob organization, it found that 95% of Hmoob community members had experienced discrimination in the workforce within the previous year, and 97% stated that they had experienced a hate crime incident at least once in this mid-sized town in the Midwest. To date, there is little interaction between the two communities. Aside from educational institutions, they remain as divided by race and class as they were 40 years ago.

Even after a decade of busing in an effort to blunt the impact of socioeconomic disparities in education, many Hmoob students still are not doing well in school. Truancy, poverty and violence continue to plague the Hmoob community. Moreover, many of its members have begun to echo concerns of language and culture loss (Cerbin, 2007). According to Cerbin, the Hmoob way of life has become secondary, endangering Hmoob language and culture.

Hmoob Youth: Culture, Education and Language Perception

Public education plays a huge role in the socialization, education, assimilation and acculturation of Hmoob youth, shaping their identities and, by extension, the identity of their communities. Vang argues that, more often than not, the education of Hmoob students through the public system results in destructive identity formation and low self-esteem (2012). According to the 2013 Hmong National Development (HND) Report on the state of Hmoob people, only 64% of Hmoob students have a high school diploma. Hmoob students are less likely than African American students to hold a high school degree (State of Hmong American Community, 2013). Bao Vang, the CEO of Hmong National Development, states that, aside from youth are not doing well academically, Hmoob language is disappearing along with Hmoob culture and history. Vang adds that this should be declared as a state of emergency for the Hmoob community. Vang's concerns are similar to that of many Hmoob youth who feel that they are losing their language and culture at a faster rate than previous generations (Lee, 2009).

Stacy Lee (2001) has conducted numerous research with Hmoob high school students in the Midwest and found that generation 1.5 (foreign born and arrived in the US as children) and generation 2.0 (born and raised in the U.S.) believe education is the key to rising on the socioeconomic ladder in American society. The students were aware of language shift, described by McCarty, Romero and Zepeda as a community-wide process involving the displacement and replacement of the heritage language by a dominant language over a time period, whereby intergenerational continuity of the heritage language proceeds negatively, with fewer "speakers, readers, writers and even understanders" every generation. By contrast, these students were not aware of language loss, the attrition of specific language skills, such as knowledge of grammar and

vocabulary, or more general frustration or loss of ease with the language (McCarty, Romero and Zepeda, 2006). This may be due to the fact that most are still living in survival mode (Vang, 2010). Most participants in Lee's (2001) research were still in ELL classes and reported feeling uncomfortable going into mainstream classes. Lee concludes that the students felt socially isolated from mainstream students, were not high achievers, had less than satisfactory grades, and were often truant.

More recent research on Hmoob youth and their association to language done by Vang (2012) shows that race was central to the experience of her participants. Many youth did not care to learn their language due to resentment towards their parents, dissociation from their family, and self-hatred. All her participants felt they had to give up their Hmoob identity and language in order to be successful in dominante society. The participants spoke about the violence they faced within school walls and how this experience silenced and minimized who they were as Hmoob people.

In Vang's research, the participants agreed that the promise of power and prestige in dominant White culture was a big motivator for them to assimilate; however, they were unable to make the connection that the violence they had to go through was part of the initiation into the assimilation that was forced on them. Although it was not stated in the study, readers can conclude that the students justified the violence being done to them as something that was "good" that "pushed" them toward "success." According to them, "ultimately learning how to speak, think and act White was the only path to success" (Vang, 2012, p.85). The present study closely parallels the findings of another similar study done by Terry Yang.

Yang (2005) argues that learning one's native language is essential to students' psychological and educational development. He emphasizes that there are advantages to learning one's native tongue. Even so, he concludes that Hmoob youth, who acknowledge the importance of maintaining Hmoob language, are shifting to English because it is more comfortable for communication. Yang examines Hmoob parents specifically and their perceptions of their children's use of Hmoob. The parents' perceptions were identical to that of the youths'. The parents stressed the importance of maintaining the language to pass on to future generations but felt that being academically successful and mastering Hmoob language and culture were mutually exclusive. One parent in particular spoke about the sadness of losing the language but saw it as something that was inevitable. The parents expressed the many challenges of maintaining languages and felt that these challenges were beyond their control.

Bosher's (1997)study was done almost a decade before Yang's (2005) and foreshadows Yang's by showing that, for students of color to be successful in life and school, they must be well versed in their identity and culture. Culture is critical to their self-esteem, psychological well-being and successful adjustment to new society. Much research shows that Hmoob students have a hard time adjusting to the dominant culture's ways and norms. They are conflicted between what is expected of them in the school and home environment and often unable to fit into either (Her, 2016; Lee, 2002; Hang, 2015).

Nguyen and Brown's (2010) study on Hmoob youth's perceptions of their identity reveals that knowing their language plays an important and large role in their development. Indeed, the youth thought that language was probably the most important signifier of a person's cultural identity. For example, one of the participants shared that

using Hmoob language was “the very essence of her identity” (Nguyen and Brown, 2010, p.856). Nguyen and Brown’s findings support Hmoob youth learning their native language and knowing their culture as success factors in their education. As it translates to best practices in the education system, the authors advocated strongly for the inclusion of Hmoob language and culture in the curriculum.

Another study done on the perceptions of ethnic socialization of Hmoob youth by Moua and Lamborn (2010) provides similar conclusions as Nguyen and Brown (2010). In their study, the youth shared that language was a very important factor in their connection to their identity. The students also felt that a shared history, religion, food, and clothing were important aspects of their sense of what it means to be Hmoob; however, they felt hopeless as to how to maintain language and culture when there is pressure from the dominant culture to conform to its standards.

Thao’s (2009) study expands on the above research and finds that, among Hmoob students, the more academically successful ones were born in the U.S. These same students assimilated faster into White culture and were very individualistic, a trait which is frowned upon in the Hmoob community (Lee, 2015). Although these students were academically successful, they still felt that the values of Hmoob culture, language, tradition, and customs were what helped them to maintain an important sense of their Hmoob identity. Thao’s study is important, for it highlights that although these students were academically successful, they were aware that it was their identity that grounded them and contributed to their success.

A similar study done by Schulze (2003) shows that students felt it was important to be strong in both White dominant culture and Hmoob culture. The students felt that, in

order to be successful, they must know who they are as a Hmoob person as well as understand the White dominant culture that surrounded them. They were not opposed to assimilation but, instead, saw that assimilation was one of the ways to reach their goals and dreams. The youth, however, did not have a clear definition of what Hmoob identity is and its relationship to language maintenance and loss. Like the students in Vang's (2012) study, they shared that assimilation was a choice, not inevitable and enforced through violence.

Previous literature helps us better understand Hmoob youth and how they perceive their Hmoob identity, as well as how they reconstruct their identity through culture, schooling, etc. For the last 40 years, numerous studies were done on Hmoob youth in the U.S.; however, the studies tend to be very binary, either painting the youth as model minorities or delinquents. With that being said, much is written about Hmoob youth, but little asks youth about their own perceptions and relationship to their Hmoob language.

The research that most closely parallels the present study is by Vicky Xiong-Lor (2015), who looked at how speaking, reading and writing is perceived among Hmoob adults and how their perceptions relate to Hmoob language and cultural maintenance. Although the Xiong-Lor study was done with adults and not youth populations, we can infer that the adults' perceptions are similar to youth perceptionsdue to previous research done on both populations on Hmoob identity perception in which language is key in identity formation.

Xiong-Lor concludes that 95% of her participants believed that language was important and worth holding on to. Her findings indicate there is a strong desire within

the Hmoob community to maintain their language and culture. She adds that this desire, however, is seen as unrealistic due to the high demands of a capitalistic society. She purports there is a real fear that the younger generation is not fluent enough in both language and culture to maintain it, making it a challenge to pass on (Xiong-Lor, 2015). Although the Hmoob community in Xiong-Lor's study showed a strong desire to maintain language and culture, as well as a comprehensive understanding that Hmoob language was in the early stages of language endangerment, there was no expression of a real sense of urgency on designing Hmoob language revitalization programs.

Hmoob Language and Literacy

There have been many writing systems made specifically for Hmoob people by non-Hmoob since contact with colonial governments. The most widely used is the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). It is most commonly used by Hmoob people in the United States and was designed by Smalley, Bertrais and Barney (1953), who worked closely and lived amongst Hmoob people through their relatively short history of peace in Laos.

According to William Smalley (1990) there were 14 writing systems designed for Hmoob people of which only 6 are still being used today. They are:

1. RPA
2. Pahawj
3. Chinese Romanized
4. Whitelock Lao-Based System and Whitelock Thai-based system
5. Sayaboury System

6. Hmoob RPA

The RPA uses the 26 Roman Aaphabets and has 17 single consonants, 15 triple consonants, 22 double consonants and 3 quadruple consonants; 6 single vowels, and 7 double vowels,. According to Duffy, this writing system was more attractive to many Hmoob who wanted to read and write because, in comparison to the other writing systems, this script was easier to learn, more accurately represented Hmoob tonal language, and could accurately be written in Green or White Hmoob (Leepreecha, 2001; Xiong-Lor, 2015).

The main reason for its development was to help missionaries christianize and assimilate Hmoob people. Many Hmoob people rejected this attempt however, and it was not until the 1980's that the RPA became popular, because it became essential as a means of transmitting messages and establishing contact within the Hmoob diaspora (Duffy, 2007; Smalley, 1990). Today, RPA is used widely by Hmoob people in the United States, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. However, the majority of Hmoob Elders still rely exclusively on their oral culture and tradition. Traditionally raised Hmoob children are still taught through the oral traditions,sometimes learning to read and write Hmoob only later in life.

According to Duffy (2007), literacy was not an obtainable tool for Hmoob people because of more powerful nations that controlled them or fought with them throughout their history. He suggests that the reason Hmoob people in China never learned to read and write the Chinese language was because it was seen as assimilationist. Being an oral culture with a strong oral tradition, Hmoob people wrote nothing down that is known to the Western world. Some Hmoob scholars argue that there is a system of writing that was

lost through history and was maintained by a secret society of Hmoob linguists (Personal Communication, Lo 2016). This writing system is the *Hmoob Paj Ntaub*. As stated by Lo, *Hmoob Paj Ntaub* was the original writing system of Hmoob people and was stitched into the clothing of Hmoob people by Hmoob women to preserve it. This was done because Hmoob people were banned from learning how to read and write, especially in their own language.

It was not until 1939 that the French, at the insistence of Hmoob leaders, built the first Hmoob school in Nong Het; however, those who attended formal schooling learned to read and write in only French and Lao. At a lecture at the 7th National Hmong Development Conference, Xiong (2011) quoted Dr. Saykao, a Hmoob language and culture activist, regarding the importance of a collective Hmoob identity and language. Dr. Saykao says, "The first and most important prerequisite must be the ability to speak Hmoob." Xiong concluded that "the whole fabric of being Hmoob, linked with culture and the way we are internally and externally, is important that Hmoob people's language survives" (Saykao cited in Xiong, 2011, p.27).

Every dominant culture with which Hmoob people have come into contact has created a written Hmoob text for them. The written text was always created with a purpose other than the survival of Hmoob language and culture. The creation of so many Hmoob writing systems belies the oppressive and toxic relationships between dominant groups and Hmoob people. Even with the creation of the first Hmoob school in Southeast Asia, the languages being taught was not Hmoob. The pattern of dominant languages being taught to Hmoob children with little consideration to the survival of their language

and culture continues and follows the Hmoob diaspora that still threatens Hmoob language and cultural survival.

Language Endangerment

The United Nations predicts that a language dies every two weeks. At this rate, it is estimated that 90% of the world's languages will die by the end of this century, leaving the world with only 100 of the most commonly used languages. The majority of these endangered or extinct languages are Indigenous languages. What is shocking is that Indigenous people make up only 6% of the world's population, yet they speak 90% of the world's languages (McCarty, 2003; Xiong-Lor, 2015). This means that most Indigenous languages will die by the end of this century,and with little historical efforts from dominant governments putting resources into language revitalization and maintenance programs, the UN might have correctly predicted the fate of Indigenous languages.

However, before a language dies, it typically comes into contact with a dominant language. For Hmoob people, it is the dominant languages that encroached into their territory starting with the Chinese pushing them further into isolation and later on bringing them into contact with other dominant cultures such as the Vietnamese, Lao and Thai. For Hmoob people in the United States, it is living amongst a dominant culture who enact policies of assimilation on them. In his study of Hmoob college students in California, Dr. Va (2010) concludes that 92% of his Hmoob students could not speak or write Hmoob and only 8% of his Hmoob students could read simple Hmoob sentences but could not write Hmoob. This study is disconcerting. Within 40 years in the United States, an overwhelming number of Hmoob students cannot speak Hmoob. Hmoob

Elders have every right to be concerned about their language and culture and are correct in their assumption that the rate of language and culture loss in the Hmoob American community is one that has never been witnessed before.

The loss of language stems from forced assimilation into the dominant culture's language and culture. David Harrison (2009), a linguist at Swarthmore College who studies extinct and endangered languages, argues that language extinction and the rapid rate of language loss around the world is a direct result of hundreds of years of colonization of Europeans to control, govern, and proselytize non-Europeans (Harrison, 2008). Harrison adds that the loss of languages is not only a loss of accumulated knowledge of thousands of years, but the loss of genius knowledge systems that surpass the current scientific knowledge recorded by Western science. Harrison also adds that it was not until the early 1980's that linguists noticed that languages were endangered and, therefore, started to concentrate on language revitalization and preservation.

World linguists argue over the different stages in which endangered or threatened languages are categorized into what Wurm (2003) writes as the 5 levels of language endangerment:

1. Partial endangered languages: When children prefer using the dominant language and learn the Indigenous language incorrectly.
2. Endangered languages: When the youngest speakers are young adults and there are very few to no children speakers.
3. Seriously Endangered: When the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age.
4. Terminally Endangered/Moribund: Only a few elderly speakers left

5. Dead Language: When there are no speakers left (p.16).

Hmoob people's long history of colonization, displacement, resettlement and assimilation has culminated into a crisis in which Hmoob language is endangered. Resettlement in the U.S. has brought many challenges for the Hmoob community, the most insurmountable of which is the seemingly inevitable melding into dominant American culture and eventual loss of their identity. Throughout their history, they have always been able to avoid assimilation by fighting or, when things got difficult, retracting into the highlands. However, this has not been a choice in the U.S. The fight for the survival of their culture and language has become increasingly difficult in view of the rapid rate of assimilation and acculturation of their young people, all of which is exacerbated by the passing of each Elder. For Hmoob students, this new challenge is masked in the form of racism and discrimination.

Race and Education

Race remains a significant factor in determining inequity in the U.S. As such, the critique of race can be used as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity. Ladson-Billings (1995) points to the racial disparities in educational and life chances, high school dropout rates, suspension and incarceration rates when all other factors, such as class and gender, are controlled for. She argues that, when we only think of race as strictly an ideological construct, we deny the reality of the impact on people living in a racialized society. Ladson-Billings points out that, fifty years after desegregation, students of color are more segregated today than ever before.

Critical Race Theory holds that the inequalities that exist among people are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Racism is so normalized in U.S. society that it is impossible for privileged individuals to see it. Stewart (2010) states that racist individuals, even well-meaning ones, create racist institutions that both harbor and hide the power of race. White teacher privilege rests on the invisibility of racism and is one of the greatest problems that students of color face in our educational system. Curriculum is built around the needs and desires of the dominant group, which also maintains a racist hierarchy. White teachers, who make up the majority of teachers in the U. S., are typically unaware of their own racism and, therefore, act according to their privileges and biases, further marginalizing students of color.

Lorde (1992) states that U.S. society does not truly discuss race and racism. If and when racism is addressed, it is reserved for a "special" time, and these conversations are often muted and marginalized. Teachers of color are unable to address racism in schools, in part because they are trained in racist systems, and any attempt to do so is seen as a waste of time. Racism, as defined by Lorde, consists of three important points:

1. One group deems itself superior to all others;
2. The group that is superior has the power to carry out the racist behavior, and;
3. Racism benefits the superior group while negatively affecting other racial and/or ethnic groups.

Therefore, racism is about institutional power (Lorde, 1992). The Harvard Civil Rights Project found that overwhelming differential educational attainment by minority students is based on teacher bias, discrimination and White privilege (The Harvard Civil Rights

Project, 2002). Teacher bias and discrimination against students of color is most evident with Native American and African American students.

The Harvard Civil Rights Projecthas not been replicated with Hmoob students but can be extrapolated to their situation, for they struggle against similar stereotypes as their Native and African American counterparts. For example, Lee notes that students of color are often perceived by whom and where as lazy, slow, incapable, passive, withdrawn, dangerous, poor, and linguistically disadvantaged. Their families are judged not to value education, and their perceived failures are simplified to "they just need to try harder" (Lee, 2001). In parallel to their Native and African American counterparts, it is no surprise that the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice found that Hmoob Americans in the state where this research was conducted have one of the lowest educational attainment of rates, paralleling that of Latino Americans and slightly better than Laotian Americans (Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, 2012).

Hmoob people have endured a long history of racist stereotypes that portray them with a similar noble savagery that many Indigenous people experience from their colonial oppressors. Mai Na Lee (1998) writes that Hmoob people are historically viewed as one-dimensional, such as savage and warlike, barbaric and irrational or, in the case of many Western colonizers, ignorant and stone age. She argues that the CIA recruited Hmoob people to fight in the Vietnam in Laos largely based on negative stereotypes from the Chinese and, later, the French. These stereotypes were so powerful that Hmoob people were put in the most dangerous and high causality areas. As a result, an estimated one-third to one-half of the Hmoob people population in Laos died during the Secret War (Lo, 2001; Fadiman, 1997).

Stacy Lee (2001) posits that these stereotypes continue to haunt Hmoob people in the United States. Her research shows that many Western authors write about Hmoob people in an overly romantic manner, often depicting them as poor, backwards people with little or no agency, or desperate and tragic figures. She argues that these simple characterizations of Hmoob people are constructed by outsiders and the political oppressors of Hmoob people to consolidate their power over Hmoob land and sovereignty. She supports Lee's (1998) claim that these same stereotypes of Hmoob people were then passed to Americans in recruiting Hmoob people to fight in the Vietnam War in Laos.

Anne Fadiman (1997) describes the American impressions of Hmoob people with similar sentiments. She reveals that the same stereotypes of Hmoob people become enhanced through the media, healthcare workers and teachers. The media, especially, gravitates to the image of Hmoob people as "stone age" entering the Twentieth Century, shocked at all modern conveniences. It depicts Hmoob people as a slow and illiterate people, mired in superstitions and unwilling to adopt American morals, norms or institutions, including schooling.

Louisa Schein and Va Meng Thoj (2008) explain how the Hollywood movie "Gran Torino" efficiently codifies the popular noble-savage misrepresentations and stereotypes of Hmoob people as perpetual warriors and ferocious killers, hyper-violent, ignorant, superstitious, "fresh off the boat" foreigners in need of help and civilizing. It also stereotypes the gun-toting youth gangster, the clueless, nerdy Asian, the ritualistic Elder, and the mystical shaman. The Hmoob are portrayed as uncivilized "bad Asians" in juxtaposition to the docile, submissive, assimilatory "good Asians." These popular,

violent misrepresentations are apparent in the characters of Chai Vang and Vang Pao. Schein and Thoj also argue that these brutal images of Hmoob people extend back to the Chinese writings as justification for their recruitment during the Vietnam War. The authors state:

> What was a very specific war history, initiated by non-Hmoob, gets converted into a permanent cultural trait, masculinizing all Hmoob as transhistorical figures of peril. Because Hmoob people are not known as anything else, they can come to be collectively apprehended as culturally disposed toward killing and aggression (Schein and Thoj, 2008, p.23).

Such views create one-dimensional caricatures of Hmoob identity. When a people are dehumanized, it becomes easier for its youth to assimilate into the dominant culture. For Hmoob youth, they do not have anything to be proud of when they look at their culture through a Western capitalist lens. Their rich oral culture is juxtoposed against a written one, their stateless condition juxtoposed against Statehood, and their socioeconomic status and educational attainment proclaimed as one the lowest. When Hmoob students look at who they are through the lens of imperialist governments, there is nothing for them to be proud of, and this is especially enforced in their education.

Privilege-based teacher bias is a major part of the problem of language and culture loss. Skiba (2006) argues that teachers are unaware of their own biases and suggests that when teachers lack cultural competency regarding their students, and/or harbor biases against them, no matter how unconscious, misinformed treatment and marginalization of students is inevitable. Kanpol (1994) states that students who are marginalizedact, speak, react and engage in ways different from the dominant culture of

most teachers. Most White teachers not only do not know how to deal with these students but have been taught through years of White privilege that these children are different, slower, and to be feared, the consequence of which is to put them in ELL or special education.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) note that White supremacy is based on the absolute right to exclude. These characteristics of exclusion are the result of institutional racism that is pervasive in Western education: unconscious racial bias; cultural deficit models; lack of understanding of students' cultures; large resource inequalities; ridiculous reliance on IQ and other standardizations; and power differentials between minority students, parents and school officials. U.S. teachers are trained in the deficit model of minority students, thereby continuing institutional racism. For example, in the U.S. education institution, the absolute right to exclude is amply demonstrated in the historic denial of Blacks access to schools, later followed by segregated schools. Today exclusion is demonstrated by White flight and the privatization of schools (DePouw, 2006).

In her study of Western academic research practices, Walker (2003) states that Western paradigms marginalize many Indigenous paradigms because they ignore the established premise that Western science is culturally biased. Smith (1999) similarly argues that there is a globalization of knowledge systems in which the Western one forms the center of legitimate knowledge. The postulation of the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeansbased on inherent characteristics of virtue, rationality, independence and innovation of the European mind, creates a linear hierarchy of cultural knowledge and worldviews in which Western knowledge and education are at the top (Henderson and Battiste, 2000). Western civilization is solely based in Western norms and, because of its

singularly narrow worldview, serves to justify the denigration of Indigenous knowledge as lower in the hierarchy of "valid" knowledge (Struthers and Peden-McAlpine, 2005; Xiong 2009). When Indigenous knowledge is forced to "fit" into a Western context or institution, it loses its original content to patronizing presumptions of Western knowledge as more objective and rigorous (Henderson and Battiste, 2000).

These biases of knowledge and worldview have been institutionalized into scholarship, opinion, minds and laws of the West since the time of the Enlightenment (Henderson and Battiste, 2000). The bias in knowledge and worldview is dangerous precisely because, as the Western ideology of progress becomes normal and universal, it receives less criticism in its legitimization of colonization of other knowledge systems and peoples. Young (1995) gives the example of European colonization of much of the world so "progress" could be achieved and notes that "progress" led directly to the destruction of the Earth's delicate balance of resources. While non-Europeans impact the environment as well, the destruction of the Earth's resources has never been at the scale brought about by Western capitalist imperialism.

Battiste and Henderson (2000) echo the experience of Indigenous peoples in noting that, when Western knowledge and worldview are superimposed as the societal norm, Indigenous worldviews are clouded, and Indigenous people and culture are discriminated against. A consequence is that the racist perceptions of Hmoob people and others held by those with privilege are maintained, and the ability of the privileged to empathize or comprehend the loss of culture and language through assimilation is gravely impaired. Another consequence is the silencing of knowledge, ideologies, cosmologies, politics, economics, and lifeways known to those oppressed peoples that offer

alternatives to issues and concerns that press the global community. That silencing is equally part of the tragic loss. Instead, there is a coup d'etat of White supremacy, where non-White people and cultures are trivialized through food, fun and festivals. Students are traipsed out to sing, dance, read folktales or make foods for White people and to entertain Whites. Race is addressed view the exhibition of the racialized (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In U.S. public education, the alternative model that is employed with regards to "diversity" has unwittingly given rise to a more liberal and better intended, yet still "pernicious," version of the deficit model. Schooling continues to consider subordinated students and cultures in need of "fixing" (Trueba and Bartolome 1997). Hmoob students are added on to school functions for "specialized" modes of instruction, which further propel the equation of difference with deficit through the exotification and marginalization of Hmoob students. Educators often put expectations for diversity on the students of color, who often just want to fit in. Ladson-Billings (1995) explains that this new racialization of "diversity" grew from the need to create a radical new paradigm to ensure justice and reform while Civil Rights gains were "sucked back into the system," allowing the status quo of a White supremacist system to prevail. Additional models, such as the multicultural model, while better, are effectively also assimilationist models.

Ladson-Billings and Tate question the efficacy of multicultural education as a means for obtaining justice for students of color. They argue that the multicultural paradigm is mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Indeed, this use of non-contextual ethnicity and clichéd, limited representations of communities often serves to reinforce the stereotypes

of people while simultaneously uplifting the sense of White racial superiority. This superiority is best illustrated in a breakthrough study done to prove the negative impact of race-based mascots of Native American on Native students by Fryberg (2003). Fryberg demonstrates that Native students immediately experience lowered self-esteem when exposed to stereotypes of themselves. In addition, these same students reported a lowered sense of self-efficacy for their communities. The lowered sense of self-efficacy was true for both their own agency within their community and outside of it. When Native students' self-esteem were lowered, their limited community efficacy resulted in a loss of what Fryberg termed "possible selves" (p.134). Fryberg's study shows that, by contrast, when White students are exposed to racial stereotypes, they actually experience a rise in self-esteem and increased community efficacy (Fryberg, 2006). Her research is significant in that it proves that the expression of stereotypes does cause real discrimination. When applied to the current use of "diversity" and multicultural education as described above, U.S. schools are enhancing discrimination. While the multicultural model does not directly say that students are deficient, it does maintain students of color as the other and marginalizes their language and culture as distinct from that of the culture of the school.

The institutional marginalization of students of color is seen in the highlighting of such cultures through school functions. Add on pieces of non-White culture that are safe (eg. food, games, and festivities) display students and stereotypes of their cultures as interesting sideshow features in an attempt to promote an uncritical unity of students. These innocuous and often trivial parts of a culture might serve to entertain but challenge neither the system nor the stereotypes that maintain it. These superficial attempts to

address diversity in order to eliminate discrimination and racism never address issues faced by Hmoob students and their communities, such as cultural and language survival. There is little discussion of race or social justice, or even issues that Hmoob students face in the school. Instead, non-Whiteness is reinforced as the other, as that which is diverse from the norm, and White culture and "Whiteness" as the norm. Issues of justice, power relations, and differences in perspectives, and needs and rights that arise from power differentiations are never addressed--to the disservice of both White and non-White students (Diniz and Arshad, 1992, 2001).

Stewart (2010) gives a quintessential example of this in his reflection on Hmoob students in the K-12 school district in the small midwest town that is the setting of the present study. Often, the school brings in a Hmoob girls' dance group for "Diversity Day." The girls choreograph Thai style dances wearing stylized Hmoob and Thai outfits. Afterwards, there is no discussion about the dances, how they were learned in the refugee camps in Thailand and have been adapted. These simple dances, solely relegated to the purpose of entertainment, kill any opportunity for nourishment of a true sense of pride in self and in community. In essence, they steal from Hmoob students the opportunity to share their own history and culture in a truly meaningful way.

One of the roles of public education is to help students understand, respect, and value cultural diversity. However, efforts in K-12 schools today to teach about cultural diversity have not made much positive progress. That is to say, everybody is doing it, but almost nobody is doing it with the honesty, legitimacy, and thoroughness that the task requires (Cornelius, 1998). Diversity days in schools depoliticize race and suck the critique of issues of race and racism out of the students' experience by claiming that

culture is relative (Ngo, 2008). If all people are a part of a culture, then no culture is really anything but a collection of food, fun and festivals. These trivial acts provide the illusion of a cultural experience while only really reinforcing feelings of White supremacy.

Fisk (2005) offers a potent analysis of why diversity and "multiculturalism" do not work. Fisk argues that adopting multiculturalism is a way of avoiding a more direct attack on injustice. While people are distracted by fighting for recognition of diversity, neo-liberal interests move forward an unjust, unequal market agenda as a model of growth. Recognition of different racial groups is a move away from an oppressive single norm, but it is not yet equality.

In a society in which cultures are all recognized, the more powerful groups have the advantage of shaping institutions in a way that favor them. Without equality, recognition can only support limited gains. Most importantly, in order to counter inequality, society must move beyond simple recognition to a Marxian equality, meaning that the people must enforce equality where it does not exist and demand full legal enforcement of it.

Chirstensen, (2004), like Fisk, argues that a fundamental change in the system must occur. However, she sees such change as emanating not from Marxian equality, as Frisk states, but from Indigenous values of equity and personal sovereignty that avoid emphasis on culture and identity. When racial diversity is predicated on the inclusion of racialized groups into current neo-liberal policies, systems of injustice will still be policies of conquest and colonialism. Fraser (2004) further points out that such recognition of racialized groups ignores issues of unequal distribution between identities

and the real issue of the economic and political power. She states that with such "inequality, a given group may not have access to the means it needs to be what it sets out to be, that a less powerful group cannot fashion its identity democratically" (p.36). Fryberg makes the strong argument that when confronted with the symbols of this inequality, colonization and inequity discourage people, especially young people, from seeing their communities and identities as valid, dynamic or possessing efficacy (Fryberg, 2006).

Fisk states that "diversity from an institution will only be a gesture towards cultural recognition but will not involve measures that would challenge the sources of economic inequality and keeps the oppressed relatively powerless" (Fisk, 2005, p.56). Cultural recognition does not lead to equality. This view of cultural recognition stays well within the bounds of protecting neoliberal institutions by refusing to advocate for such equality or redistribution of economic and political power, which means that the oppressed groups will take the lead but, unless they win the cooperation of others, inequality and the absence of democracy will remain (Fisk, 2005).

Hmoob Students and Education

The cultural deficit model is a way in which minority cultures and peoples are described as failing to attain acceptable levels of socioeconomic and academic status and having disproportionate academic problems, low-status, low self-esteem, poor motivation, cognitive and linguistic deficiencies, pathologies and failures. As such, society and schools have been unwilling to critique their own role in racism, imperialism and oppression and, instead, have blamed the oppressed for their role in the oppression.

This cultural deficit model dominated initial educational thinking about multiculturalism during the 1960's, and many argue that it continues to affect policy today through the less-obvious language of "at-risk" students (Flores 1993; Sleeter and Grant 2003). Societal representations routinely blame students' "socio academic failure on their culture, language, family values, cycle of poverty, lack of motivation, inclination to violence, and proclivity to unplanned pregnancy (p. 45)". The deficit model has attempted to link poor school and work performance, as well as low self-esteem and motivation amidst minority populations, to problems in their homes, families, and traditions (Trueba and Bartolome, 1997). It is based on a belief that schools are value-free and politically neutral. Again, such a belief reinforces and implies that the Western education system is a normative institution, and that minority students, families, and communities must change to become "normal" (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In its most aggressive form, however, dovetails into a model of genetic deficiency in which minority peoples are depicted as not simply culturally deprived, but as "mentally retarded," "semi-lingual," and "linguistically handicapped" (Flores, 1993, p.38). Historically, the deficit model led to the creation of Indian boarding schools to "civilize the savage Indian" and is still seen in English language learner classrooms today. For students caught in this deficit model of teacher/institutional racism, the only options are to drop out or culturally assimilate (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). Either way, the experience leaves a negative impact on young people's identity, their sense of worth, and their perspectives on their community, culture, and language.

The deficit model negatively affects the educational experiences of many children of color and their communities. More specifically, because Hmoob children

come from a culture with little exposure to literacy and heavy emphasis on oral traditions, it is assumed by educators that literacy is not valued by Hmoob parents and this lack of value is the basis of all literacy problems that Hmoob children encounter. Their oral culture becomes a scapegoat in their slow progress in reading and writing.

Hmoob oral knowledge is often seen as deficient because of the label of pre-literate. As Chamberlin states, people assume that oral traditions are less evolved than print cultures socially, culturally, emotionally, and intellectually (Chamberlin, 2000). In turn, Hmoob youth become embarrassed to learn oral traditions, and the Hmoob community loses valuable members. Hmoob oral culture is rich and deep with a strong philosophical tradition that has been in place for thousands of years (Thao, 2006). Through acts of racism, both institutional and those directed at the individual, are really directed at the entire Hmoob community and are meant to send fear, shame and dissuasion through the community to reinforce White power and privilege and the Hmoob community's powerlessness. Racism more than anything has shifted and changed the discourse of Hmoob language revitalization and maintenance.

Assimilation

Diniz (1992) and Arshad (2001) both describe the role of deficit in relation to an assimilationist model of education. They both argue that difference is seen as deficit in the assimilationist model, and that assimilation to White cultural norms and English language through compensatory programs is the way to fit the individual into the system. The authors write, “Ethnic minorities are a problem. Their customs, religious beliefs, linguistic and cultural traditions, and family structures are alien to our way of life;

difference is seen as a deficit. The goal is "social cohesion" (alternatively termed 'integration') through actual assimilation and cultural re-socialization" (pg. 35).

In contrast, Brayboy (2009) states that power through an Indigenous lens is an expression of sovereignty, self-determination, self-identification, and self-education. Indigenous perspective is rooted in a community's conception of its own needs. Sovereignty is based on the communal rights of a people. When institutions, such as schools, seek to limit the inclusion of the culture and community, they fail to meet the needs of the community and infringe upon the sovereignty of that community to pass on and maintain their identity. They take over the role of the community to transmit their own cultural identity values and knowledge (Freire, 2006). This is the problem of assimilation. Brayboy (2009) argues that there is a dialogical relationship between culture, knowledge and power, and that culture is the basis for knowledge. There is reciprocity between culture, knowledge and power that tie people to a group. Brayboy (2009) says, "Culture reminds a people who they are" (p. 56). Culture is the manifest expression of the community or the nation. Culture is how we understand the world.

Trueba and Bartolome (1997) identify learning as that which occurs when prior knowledge is accessed and linked to new information. Learners call up appropriate knowledge frameworks and integrate the new information in a way that makes sense to them. They argue that teaching towards such a way by acknowledging and using student language and context affirms who the student is and empowers him/her and his/her experience. Assimilation, by contrast, presents a problem with understanding and accessing knowledge. It supplants traditional and culturally-held frameworks with notions acceptable to imposing and maintaining the status quo of the dominant culture.

Western education, teacher training models, and educational institutions, in general, assimilate Indigenous students away from their culture and towards a generic Western framework. The primary aim of U.S. education is to inculcate students with knowledge, values, and norms held as essential to the welfare of society, the consequence of which is to take the individual out of their community, strip them of cultural ties and teach a set standard of knowledge for advancement in industrial society. The goal of such education is to provide the tools by which individuals will transcend their community and status and gain a higher one (Sleeter, 1995). If Indigenous studentsare unfamiliar with the resistance offered by their own communities and cultures due to the effects of assimilation, then assimilation is a foregone conclusion unless educators intervene as advocates for Indigenous students and communities' survival. "If teachers already recognize that getting a job, finding a home, and surviving are not politically neutral activities, then they will understand that teaching is also not a politically neutral undertaking" (Trueba and Bartolome, 1997, p.87). Teachers, indeed all educators, must make every effort to create just classrooms based on culturally responsive models that empower all students rather than simply denying their own bias and ignoring the political nature of education.

Summary

The literature review in this chapter introduced Hmoob people specifically as an Indigenous people from northern Laos who trace their early history to China. Due to generations of war and persecution, many Hmoob fled to Laos, where they resettled and lived in peace for a brief time period before they were recruited to fight in the CIA's Secret War in Laos in the 1960's. When the United States pulled out of Vietnam, they

pulled all their financial support of the war in Laos, leaving thousands of Hmoob to be slaughtered by the Pathet Lao and Viet Cong, for they were seen as traitors to the Communists. One third of Hmoob people in Laos died fighting as U.S. allies. Those that made it to the safety of the refugee camps in Thailand were resettled in many countries in the West.

The literature shows that Hmoob youth echo with sadness the loss of their identity, language, and culture. Their perception of Hmoob language is that it is important, however, it is not essential to their survival in the modern world. The literature shows that, althought they recognize and are saddened at the loss of their language and culture, they see it is something that is inevitable. Hmoob parents share the same perspective and feel hopeless when they think about the fate of Hmoob language and culture. The literature on youth language perception also highlights their resilience and their fight to maintain their culture and language despite the challenges.

In the early 80's, some Hmoob people resettled in the Midwestern town that is the context of the present study. As refugees who entered the U.S. with little knowledge of the West and no literacy skills, adapting to life in the U.S. was difficult. The last 40 years spent in refugee camps and as refugees to the U.S. have put many Hmoob in "survival mode," where they are just trying to get through day by day. To date, Hmoob people are the poorest ethnic and racial group in the Midwest. This trend closely parallels many Hmoob communities across the United States and the world. Presently, in this midwestern town, as in many places where Hmoob resettled, Hmoob culture and language is threatened by dominant cultures that surround them. Hmoob youth, especially, struggle with the challenge of living in two very opposing, contradicting

cultures. Hmoob youth struggle, for they are torn between the traditional teachings and life of their ancestors and the ways of life in dominant U.S. society. Many studies show that Hmoob youth are not doing well in school and argue that it is because of poverty, violence and limited English proficiency.

When framed through the dominant education lens, poverty and violence, among other socioeconomic factors, become the reasons for poor Hmoob youth performance in schools. The role that socioeconomic factors play in how all students perform in schools cannot be easily dismissed. However, it is equally, if not more important, to acknowledge the many studies of Indigenous youth identity highlight the negative consequences of culture and language loss.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction to Methodology

The present study employs a phenomenological design that draws upon Indigenous methodologies. John Creswell (2013) defines a phenomenological design as "the study of the lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon, focusing on what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 76)**.** In designing the study, I made primary use of Hmoob oral tradition and storytelling dialogues in order to stay true to Hmoob kev cai. I drew upon Indigenous theories, research, and pedagogy to establish a strong, culturally appropriate methodology to study the experiences of Hmoob youth regarding Hmoob language and culture. These theories, applicable to the experiences of Hmoob people, were developed by Indigenous and critical scholars and highlight the importance of culturally responsive methodologies. Most important is the inclusion of Hmoob people's voices and oral storytelling as legitimate and authentic evidence and theory.

Intersectionality of Research Theories for Hmoob Youth

The theoretical framework for the study is drawn from Critical Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Tribal Crit, an offshoot of CRT, and Indigenous methodologies. I adopted the principles of these theories to study the perspectives of Hmoob youth, who are instrumental in maintaining the language and culture of their community. The intent of the present study is to bring into clearer focus the challenges to traditional, cultural

transmission of Hmoob language and deconstruct the role that schooling plays in Hmoob youths' perceptions of our language. I applied Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit) as the theoretical lens through which to understand Hmoob youth in a mid-western town and their experiences with Hmoob language and culture, acknowledging that their experiences and identities are in thousands of years of oral knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and the current harmful assumptions and stereotypes that have led to language endangerment and extinction. Woven with the tenets of these two theories, I adapted principles of Indigenous methodology to ground Hmoob epistemology that center Hmoob knowledge, language, and culture.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a strong basis for understanding that Hmoob students cannot fully fit into Western colonial models of education because they are inherently racist. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) outline CRT methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to research that foregrounds race and racism as focal points of the research process. It challenges traditional research paradigms, texts and theories and offers a liberatory or transformative solution to subordination. It focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students and uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, Sociology, History, Humanities and Law to better understand the experiences of students of color (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). There are six tenets of CRT as defined by Dixson and Rousseau (2005):

1. CRT challenges historicism by insisting on a contextual/historical analysis of the law and adopts a stance that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of a group advantage and disadvantage;

2. It is interdisciplinary;
3. It works towards eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression;
4. It recognizes that racism is endemic in American society;
5. It insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
6. It expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.

A fundamental assumption of CRT is that inequalities exist everywhere and is pervasive. It also states that racism is so heavily embedded in society that it has become invisible (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Racism is one of the greatest barriers Hmoob students face in our education system, and CRT will help us analyze and understand the experiences of Hmoob youth better.

CRT as Methodology

Stories play an important role in Critical Race Theory (CRT) methodology. Personal narratives, especially the racialized lived experiences of a racial group, distinguish CRT from other methodologies because it positions stories and counterstories of people color as valid data in order to oppose or challenge the dominant culture's narratives. Ladson-Billings (2005) argues that social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories. Stories, therefore, serve as interpretive structures of our experiences and have the power to affect the oppressor as well as the oppressed in

that, in naming one's own reality through stories, the listener gains valuable support to overcome his or her own dysconscious racism.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) have defined a set of perspective, method, and pedagogy which provide the analytic tools to identify, analyze, and critique structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordination and racism. This framework becomes a strategy for eliminating the role of race, racism, and subordination in education through stories of the oppressed.

The master narrative, as pointed out by Solorzano and Yosso (2002), marginalizes everyone outside of that story. Its purpose is to create racism and to maintain and justify institutions and individuals who benefit from the master narrative, which name the social locations and privileges as natural and normal. Whites, the upper classes, and men benefit from the master narrative and control and maintain the story through historical power and privilege. CRT directly challenges the master narrative and positions CRT counter stories as legitimate.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) outline the following five elements as basic insights, perspectives, methodology, and pedagogy of the CRT framework:

1. The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; critical race theory in education starts from the premise that race and racism, along with classism and gender-bias, are endemic, permanent and central to explaining personal experiences.
2. The challenge to dominant ideology; CRT challenges White privilege as well as traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, race neutrality and equal opportunity.

3. A commitment to social justice; this includes a transformative response to racial, gender and class oppression that leads towards the elimination of racism, sexism and poverty and the empowerment of marginalized peoples.
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge; CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination. This includes storytelling as a methodology.
5. The transdisciplinary perspective; CRT challenges the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and uses knowledge and methodology from multiple fields to guide research.

While these elements are not new, together they challenge existing scholarship by pulling out racism within the academic rhetoric of shared "normative values and neutral social, scientific and educational principles and practice" (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002, p.56). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) categorize the counter stories into three general forms: personal stories or narratives, other people's stories or narratives and composite stories or narratives. Personal stories or narratives recount an individual's experience with oppression. Counter stories through CRT methodology allow those negatively affected by racism and oppression to become empowered participants. For Hmoob youth, the counter narrative has been central to aligning themselves with community members against oppression, for when marginalized people come together to share such stories, they come to understand their shared oppression and can, thereby, work to resolve and confront it.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit)

Tribal Critical Race theory (Tribal Crit) is an offshoot of Critical Race Theory. At first glance, it may make more sense to use Asian Crit (another offshoot of CRT) in talking about Hmoob people. However, AsianCrit looks at issues of language, immigration, and naturalization, as well as the model minority stereotype, as they relate to dominant Asian groups, such as the Japanese and Chinese who have resettled in the United States for generations. AsianCrit also strongly emphasizes the long forgotten history of Asians in the U.S.

The Hmoob experience, however, differs in significant ways from East Asian peoples' experiences. First, we recognize ourselves as a Tribal people with no country, no standardized government, and no one leader (Hamilton-Merrit, 1995). Also, our historical experiences of colonization, oppression, and forced removal more closely parallel those of other Indigenous peoples. While the model minority stereotype is important to our community, opposite effect plagues us, for we are more likely to be targeted for our seeming "deficiencies" and a "stone age" culture and, therefore, set aside for remediation and assimilation by the dominant culture. Finally, like our Indigenous counterparts, we are currently struggling for recognition of the legitimacy of our oral culture and knowledge.

Like many other Indigenous people with whom we share a similar worldview, stories play a large role in developing our way of knowing and traditional oral knowledge, which tie back to language. Traditional knowledge is maintained and passed down through a deep oral tradition that is intricately tied to spiritual traditions. Tribal Crit allows for a deeper and richer analysis of our experience. By accepting our traditional knowledge as legitimate, it recognizes the role of storytelling as a legitimate form of

education and, therefore, helps to maintain that connection to the spiritual through our people's oral tradition.

The objective of Tribal Crit is to conduct research that analyzes the data in ways that are centered around Indigenous ways of knowing. Tribal Crit has a better theoretical lens when talking about the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples because it uses traditions, epistemologies, histories, ideas and philosophies that pertain to Indigenous communities. It is important to focus on Indigenous models of knowing to fully understand our way of understanding the world. When institutions fail to work to understand our ways of knowing, they devalue Indigenous students' presence (Brayboy, 2006). In his development of Tribal Crit, Brayboy discusses the role of stories and personal narratives as not just a foundational part of Tribal Crit, but also to who Indigenous people are (Brayboy, 2006). Western education is based on the categorization of the individual parts of information, while many Indigenous traditions seek to explore the interrelatedness of knowledge through stories. Brayboy (2006) discusses the role of stories in the lives of Native students and finds that, for many of them, the institutions they are in view their stories as quaint and apart from the lived experiences and treat them as such. According to Kovach (2010), the interrelationship between narratives and research within Indigenous frameworks is imperative to an Indigenous methodology. The relationship between the story and knowing cannot be traced to a linear starting time within Indigenous worldviews, and the knowledge to recognize this has been part of Indigenous worldviews since time immemorial (Kovach, 2010, p.95).

For Indigenous communities, making connections between different types and forms of knowledge in order to meet larger, community goals are of great importance. In

academia, there is a disconnect between community stories, personal narratives and theory (Brayboy, 2009). Brayboy adds that stories are important to Indigenous peoples and the lack of focus on them by academia is problematic, for the way Indigenous people come to understand each other is through personal and community experience with the Earth and the spirit world.

CRT emphasizes that racism is a primary tenet of why Indigenous stories, and therefore Indigenous ways of knowing, are not a part of academia. Brayboy adds that, while CRT focuses on racism as endemic to society, Tribal Crit acknowledges the role of racism and emphasizes that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy, 2006). Brayboy outlines nine tenets of Tribal Crit, most of which can be applied to and are essential to the Hmoob American experience:

1. Colonization is endemic to society;
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous people are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain;
3. Indigenous people occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of identity;
4. Indigenous people have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination and self-identification;
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens;
6. Governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous people are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation;

7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups;
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being;
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways, such that scholars must work toward social change.

Brayboy envisions Tribal Crit as a theoretical lens for addressing many issues facing Indigenous communities. Brayboy (2009) highlights some of these issues to include issues of language shift and loss, natural resource management, the lack of students graduating from colleges, the overrepresentation in special education and political struggles based on Indigenous rights.

The only major caveat with Tribal Crit is Brayboy's focus on the legal/political circumstances of American Indians as both racialized beings and legal/political beings. While the legal/political category of sovereign nations does not fit with Hmoob people in America, it does not detract from the benefit of using the theoretical lens of Tribal Crit to examine their circumstances in the U.S. Hmoob people also have a unique relationship with the federal government as refugees. In addition, there is the "oral treaty" between the U.S. CIA and the Hmoob military leadership, specifically General Vang Pao, during the Vietnam war era.

Perhaps the most important tenets of Tribal Crit for understanding Hmoob youth are those which deal with language, culture and knowledge. Tribal Crit problematizes the

concepts of culture, knowledge and power by offering alternative understanding through an Indigenous perspective (Brayboy, 2006). Knowledge helps to convey what it means to belong to a community and, ultimately, a particular nation of people. Tribal Crit emphasizes that "knowledge is power" and that power is the ability to define ourselves, our place in the world, and our traditions. Part of that is the power of sovereignty, the ability to determine a nation's future. Power through an Indigenous lens is an expression of sovereignty-self-determination, self-identification, and self-education are rooted in a community's conception of its needs (Brayboy, 2009).

Indigenous Methodologies

It is imperative to include Indigenous methodologies in this study, for they acknowledge important elements of Hmoob cultural identity. Specifically, Indigenous methodologies align with Indigenous values and ethics, such as community accountability and reciprocity. A central tenet of Indigenous methodology is that the research gives back to the community and, more importantly, does not harm the community (Kovach, 2009, p.48). Although there are many limitations in applying a research framework to Indigenous people, two points should help guide the researcher:

1. Let cultural knowledge guide the research;
2. The results give back to the community in meaningful ways (Kovach, 2010, pg 45).

An important element in Indigenous methodologies is that it provides a home in which Indigenous knowledge can live. Kovach argues that Indigenous knowledge has the power to change Western institutions. She also adds that Indigenous ways of knowing is

internal, personal and experiential. Therefore, Indigenous methodologies informs cultural epistemologies and transforms homogeneity, for it centers Indigenous epistemology, language and culture. Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez have argued that Indigenous knowledge plays a rich and important role in the fight for social justice and justice-related attempts in creating a more equitable world. They further add that Indigenous epistemologies have the power to move people in ways that are unimaginable by the West (Denzin, Lincoln and Smith, 2008).

Smith (1999) agrees and reiterates that Indigenous methodologies are done with cultural protocols, values, beliefs and behaviors as part of the methodology; therefore, the results are given back to the community in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. Smith states that the questions below help guide the researcher. These basic fundamental questions should be asked prior to any research process and not only ones regarding research within Indigenous communities.

1. Whose research is it?
2. Who owns it?
3. Whose interests does it serve?
4. Who will benefit from it?
5. Who has designed its questions and scope?
6. Who will carry out the research?
7. Who will write it up?
8. How will its results be disseminated (Smith, 2009, pg.10).

Smith's questions help guide the research to be done in the most culturally appropriate way, with thoughts to the past, present and future.

Phenomenology as Research

The present study, framed within the tenets of Indigenous methodology and adaptations of Tribal Crit theory, uses a phenomenological research design adapted to hear Hmoob youth speak to their experiences in the United States. Narrative communication is the cornerstone of phenomenological research and, therefore, is highly compatible with studying Indigenous peoples whose cultures revolve around oral traditions. More importantly, it is adaptable and acceptable to Indigenous people and their communities (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Kovach (2010) explains that narrative elements of phenomenology align well with Indigenous methodologies and allows Indigenous researchers to make meaning from stories.

A phenomenological research design is particularly appropriate for Indigenous people because the Indigenous worldview is holistic. The vast majority of Western formal academic research practices are carried out in linear fashion (i.e.statement, evidence, conclusion) and have no room for concepts such as circularity, oneness, and holism, all of which are integral to Indigenous worldviews (Struthers and Peden-McAlpine, 2005; Henderson and Battiste, 2000). As a result, unspoken, significant, and implicit meanings of the experiences of Indigenous people generally pass unrecognized. Phenomenology is specifically focused on lived experience and allows the researcher to look for themes that depict the phenomenon of the everyday lived experience (Struthers and Peden-McAlpine, 2005). The accounts of the lived experience are more accurately depicted through this research process and, for Hmoob people, it is done through this process of *Hmoob kev cai.* Struthers and Peden-McAlpine (2005) state that, in the

research process, the lived experience brings a "metaphysical presence and holistic, intuitive, spiritual and natural way of knowing response to the research context" (p.1266). It is important in oral cultures that a phenomenological research process is utilized because it captures the lived phenomenon of the participants.

Limitations on Critical Race Theory

While CRT is important in fully understanding race and racial oppression in America, I feel it falls short for Hmoob people, because of its insistence upon race as central and its birth from an American legal perspective. While race is a central tenet in White interactions with Indigenous people, for Indigenous people or, perhaps more specifically, for Hmoob people, culture is of paramount importance and central to understanding identity and interactions. It is not that CRT is not accurate. It is spot on for describing racial hierarchy within an American setting. Yet, for Indigenous people, identity is based on cultural competence and community inclusion.

Race is a social construct and, therefore, an outside perspective. Even though it plays a fundamental role in oppression, there is a deliberate attempt by many Indigenous peoples to minimize it in favor of cultural understanding. Indeed, buying into the racial hierarchy is a form of assimilation. By putting race at the forefront, we undercut the centrality of language, culture and spirituality. While it is vital to understand the role of race in White-non-White interaction, stereotypes, and systems of injustice, it is culture and, in particular, spiritual beliefs and perspectives that are vital to the heart of Indigenous understanding.

CRT is a great theory, especially for understanding the power of race and racism in the American context, as well as power and privilege. However, it meets limitations

with Indigenous peoples. While CRT holds race to be a preeminent preoccupation and does a great job dissecting the role of race in maintaining inequitable systems of power in America, it does not focus on that which is most important to Indigenous people: culture, language and relationships. And while it does create opportunities for Indigenous people to challenge the academy and Western worldviews, but it does not build a language cultural survival strategy.

Role of the Researcher

When I say we, I mean the Hmoob community, and I speak specifically from this place. More precisely, I am speaking from the place of a Hmoob woman, mother, daughter, aunt, decolonizer, and language rights activist. I speak from the place of the oppressed and the marginalized, and I am speaking to cultural workers, and advocates, educators, but the people that I am speaking directly to and with are members of my Hmoob community. The men, the clan leaders, have the ability to alter the reality of our young people but refuse to do so in order to their maintain their power and privilege. I wanted to study Hmoob youth in order to understand their perception of their language, their relationship to it and what they believe are the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition. I feel like I have come full circle by doing research with Hmoob youth, for if we know where we come from, we can no longer fear where we need to go.

The process of Western education has led me to study Hmoob youth, language, culture, and identity. As a young Hmoob girl, I knew that there were many injustices that had been done to our people, and because we are a marginalized community, there was little to nothing that we could do about it. I knew that when I grew up, I wanted to give

our young people hope, the kind that I did not have growing up. I knew that I wanted to provide them with tools to understand their reality, so they can reclaim our culture, language and tradition. I was unaware of the extent of barriers that were ahead, as well as the amount of time it would take to learn the systems of the colonizers, what it was doing to our people, and what we were doing to each other as a result of it. It was as though with every degree I got, I still couldn't access institutions to make changes. There are many ways to revitalize our language and culture. I chose Western education as a path because of all the great critical scholars in my life who pushed and encouraged me to take on this path.

What sparked my academic journey was a conversation I overheard from some of our young people at a traditional Hmoob funeral. Hmoob funerals are unique and special in many ways. In essence, a Hmoob funeral is like a living classroom. The young people spoke about how our Elders did not have any knowledge or understanding of the "real" world. What I overheard pushed me to explore the question of whose knowledge is valid, valued as the truth and taught. This is important to state because, in the globalization of knowledge systems, the West forms the center of legitimate knowledge. The postulation of the superiority of the West to everyone else, a superiority based on inherent characteristics of virtue, rationality, independence and innovation of the West creates a distorted hierarchy of cultural knowledge and worldviews. The Western ideology of progress becomes normal and universal, and therefore, dangerous to all.

In writing my Master's thesis, I realized that the goal of Western education is to get our young people to abandon the very essence that makes them Hmoob. Although it was hard to hear, their conversation was proof of how much our young people hate being

Hmoob, and if I was to be real honest with myself, I would say at one point in my life, I felt the same way. How can we not? Our whole education system tells us we are not worthy of being mentioned in their textbooks. To this day, we still have to fight for our very existence as a people in places of higher education with intellectuals who should know better. The whole goal of Western education is to get our young people to abandon their language and culture, making them easier prey to take part in a non-critical capitalist society leading to the mass exploitation of people and the Earth's resources. I have chosen the path of the colonizer (Western education) to decolonize. I believe Western education can be a tool to teach and help our young people to deconstruct capitalism, racism, assimilation, colonization, and globalization and help them to understand the threat to Hmoob people's language and culture.

Through Western education, I have learned that, while much has been written about Hmoob people in the last forty years, most of the work has been done by non-Hmoob or by assimilationist Hmoob academics that apply deficit models of culture, distorting Hmoob history and politics, or emphasizing struggles as a refugee community. It has only been within the last couple of decades that Hmoob people have started writing our own histories. The imposed narratives of non-Hmoob academics have largely defined what Hmoob culture, history and identity are. The discourse paints Hmoob youth as either model minorities or struggling delinquents, two very juxtaposing conclusions. Moua and Vang argue that this Westermized discourse continues to be the accepted discourse on Hmoob youth in order to maintain the power, privilege and status quo of the dominant group (2015). Culturally authentic and critical understandings are lacking; thus, in this study, I adopt critical theory, traditional Hmoob cultural perspective and

Indigenous methodology to pursue greater understanding of Hmoob youths' experiences of their language and culture within the context of a dominant capitalist colonial society.

I also want to state that writing about Hmoob language, culture, knowledge and tradition is difficult because Hmoob culture is community defined. It is, therefore, difficult to make generalizations about all Hmoob people. We are as diverse as our clothing, our dialects, our regional habitats, and the different countries we call home. I also want to stress the fear inside me of printed materials, for this is something that is new to our experience here in the U.S. Although I recognize and appreciate written texts, I do worry where our place is in the written world, when who we are and so much of who we are is oral-based. As someone who comes from the Hmoob community, I struggle with what is appropriate to put in writing and what should be left for oral traditions to carry forth. Oral tradition is truly beautiful, but I myself cannot grasp what it means to live in such a world. The first nine years of my life was spent in it, but I can no longer imagine only being a part of that world. I feel this great sadness for our young people who will never get to experience it.

In my educational journey, Hmoob people have always centered my writing. Education, therefore, became about the loss of our beautiful language and culture through a direct critique of imperialism, capitalism, colonization, racism and assimilation. This research is political, as the issues of poverty, self-determination, environmental justice, cultural preservation, and language and cultural survival are political. As with my past research, this research with Hmoob youth is not being done with the sole objective of advancing an academic body of knowledge but, rather, what we can do as a community

for the survival of our language and culture. This still holds true for my dissertation and, in writing this, I hope to instill hope for Hmoob language and cultural survival.

Participants and Setting of the Study

The participants in the study are 25 Hmoob youth from an upper midwestern state in the United States. The youth are second generation Hmoob-American. All of the participants in the study were born in the United States and are active participants at a local Youth Center. The age range among the participants is 13 to 18. Their Hmoob language abilities range from fluent to only understanding Hmoob and not being able to speak it. They come from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Most of their parents work in factory jobs or blue-collared jobs. Three of the five youth who participated in the individual interviews live with both parents. Half of them had parents who have a high school degree. The other half had parents who never had the opportunity to attend school. All their parents and grandparents speak fluent Hmoob, and a quarter of the parents only speak Hmoob with a limited understanding of English. None of the grandparents speak English.

All the participants come from large families. They all live with family and sometimes have extended family living with them. Their households range from six to fifteen people. They all have 3 or more siblings, and some of their siblings are also part of the programming at the Youth Center. They enjoy doing family activities and hanging out with their siblings. The majority have a close relationship to their siblings or cousins but not their parents. They enjoy watching Korean dramas, listening to hip hop and kpop, and participating in after school extracurricular activities.

All the participants come from three school districts. The three districts are relatively close to one another, taking less than 30 minutes to get from one to the other. Two districts are small and are semi-rural;the other district is the gathering place of the Hmoob community and has a larger population of about 60,000 people. In this mid-sized city is where the Youth Center is located and where the observation, focus groups and formal and informal interviews took place. This town has two Hmoob grocery stores and 2 Hmoob restaurants. It is important to note that the Hmoob community from these three districts sees itself as one community. In these **three** school districts, White students are the majority, and Hmoob students make up the majority of minority students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of participant observation during Center activities and conversations with participants. There were **two** focus group interviews and **5** individual interviews. Study data included field notes of participant observation and audio recordings of the formal interviews. Data collection occurred in **three** consecutive tiers, each informing the next. During the first tier of data collection, I had conversations with the youth and observed the participants' interaction in activities, for which I kept field notes for a two-week period. The routine activities in which the youth engaged included working in the Center's garden, learning Hmoob language (reading & writing), talking circles, and art and culture projects. During group activities, I engaged with them in conversations about their experiences with, thoughts about, and practice of Hmoob language and culture. I collected field notes of **8** observational sessions with approximately **25** youth participants within a **two**-week time frame.

Based on preliminary analysis of field notes, I identify **ten** youth who were actively involved at the Youth Center and who showed strong interest in Hmoob language and culture to participate in **one** of **two** focus group interviews. The second tier of data collection consisted of **two** sixty-minute focus group interviews. I invited the **ten** youth to participate in **one** of **two** focus group interviews with **five** youth in each interview. The focus group interviews engaged the youth in a more focused discussion about their perceptions and experiences with Hmoob language and the role that language played in their identity formation. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Following the focus group interviews, I invited **five** of the focus group interview participants for individual interviews. The youth in the individual interviews were selected on the basis of their interest shown in the focus group interviews and the depth of understanding of their culture and language demonstrated during focus group interviews. I purposefully invited youth with different language abilities and self awareness of their culture and language for the individual interviews. The individual interview participants had greater experience with their Hmoob language and were excited to share personal stories about themselves and their relationship to Hmoob language. The individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis of the data was interwoven with data collection as each tier of data collection. Preliminary analysis of the field nontes consisted of identifying patterns in the participants' engagement with Hmoob language, including when and under what circumstances they spoke their language, when and how they exhibited knowledge and experience with Hmoob cultural practices,such as greetings and similar indications of

their relationships with Hmoob language, culture, and community. The analysis of the field notes informed the subsequent focus group interviews in two ways. First, observations of the participants enabled me to identitfy youth who exhibited knowledge of and experience with Hmoob language and culture or who exhibited strong desire to know their language and culture more. While all youth who participated at the Center did so because they desired to engage in their language and cultural practices, the analysis of the field notes allowed me to distinguish among those who exhibited particular abilities and interests. Secondly, consideration of the diverse abilities, motivations, and interests among Center participants informed the content of the focus group interview protocols.

The focus group interview protocol focused largely on their experiences with language and culture in their Hmoob community and their experiences as Hmoob persons in the greater communities in which they lived. I adopted constant comparative method for the analysis of the two focus group interviews (Creswell, 2013) to identify patterns of beliefs and ideas about Hmoob language and culture in regard to their sense of themselves as Hmoob youth in their communities. Drawing upon the patterns that emerged in the analysis of the focus group data, the individual interview protocol was refined and questions engaged participants in deeper conversation about their experiences with language and culture in their Hmoob community and their experiences as Hmoob youth in the greater communities in which they lived, as well as the relationship of their engagement in the language and culture with their identity as Hmoob youth. Constant comparative method was again adopted to analyze the individual interview data, first to identify topics and themes within each individual interview and then across interviews. Patterns identified in both the focus group and individual interviews were then treated

together in the final tier of analysis in which overarching, emergent themes were identified. Themes were defined, and attributes ascribed.

Summary

As members of a Hmoob community, we have to have a better understanding of thetransmission of culture and language to the younger generation. To do so requires listening to the perspective of Hmoob youth and to their experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand: 1) the perceptions of Hmoob youth regarding their language; 2) the relationship Hmoob youth have to their language; and 3) the barriers to their Hmoob language acquisition. I chose a phenomenological research design because it is culturally sensitive and allowed me to conduct the interviews in a setting in which language and culture were central to the youth participants. The design allowed for greater flexibility to actively engage the youth and carry out the research in a way I felt culturally appropriate and, at the same time, allowed the flexibility to explore the shared "phenomenon" of Hmoob youth perceptions with their language. Theories such as CRT, Tribal Crit, and Indigenous methodologies were adopted to guide the data collection and analysis procedures and the interpretation of the data. The analysis and interpretation of the observations and interviews of the Hmoob youth participants is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction to the Findings

When I started organizing the outline for my research, I thought this chapter on the findings would be the easiest to write. However, it has become the most challenging to write. I am torn by my choice of voice to use: the voice I have been trained to speak in, the one academic institutions tell me is the more important and valid one, or my Hmoob voice, the one that I was raised with and taught to speak and be in. Given the methodology for this research, my Hmoob voice would be the most appropriate. However, I struggle with it because I am still learning to write in it. Even with the encouragement and full support of my advisor, I hesitate, for my trained Western mind is telling me that it is not appropriate. I have to remind myself constantly that this is the chapter where I give voice to and honor the youth and those who have shared a part of their lives with me, that this is not only for academia but, more importantly, for the youth and my community. I want to openly and honestly acknowledge that, in writing this chapter, I have been in a constant battle with myself in order to stay true to the methodology that I believe is most appropriate for my community.

I want to start this chapter by addressing the racism in the schools, because it was a central theme with the youth. The students felt that, because they looked and behaved differently than non-Hmoob students, the teachers did not give them the same treatment. In my time with them, I was troubled by what I observed and heard in the interviews and the focus groups. Listening to them, it was like we all walked in the same hallways, had

the same teachers and friends despite the different time periods. I thought to myself, "How could so much time have gone by, and yet so little has changed?" Those same feelings of hopelessness and shame that haunted me twenty years ago haunt them, too. I did not set out to be autobiographical in the study nor in this chapter, but after interviewing the youth, I knew that my past experiences, their current experiences, and our futures are intertwined. Through this process of data collection, thinking, reflecting, and writing, my experiences of language loss and schooling naturally merged with theirs. When I was analysing the data, there were repetition of ideas, themes and topic, so I intentionally left this in, for this is how the youth spoke in the narratives that they wanted to share. I believe this natural pattern of speaking reiterated their stance, feelings and positions (whether it was negative or positive) on their relationship to their language, what they believe were the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition, and their perceptions Hmoob language. I have left it in to remind the reader that this was what was important to them, for this is their story and their lived experiences.

I also want to add that I am not only a researcher, but also a mentor, community leader, and Elder to many of the students whom I have known for a long time and care deeply about. When I heard their stories, I could empathize with how they were feeling. We are trained as researchers to always separate ourselves from our "subjects;" however, I find it impossible, because how can we really separate ourselves from our research. It's a lie, a lie to the people whom we are writing about and a lie to ourselves. When the youth spoke of their experiences with their language and their struggles, I am taken back to the time when the teachers and many of the non-Hmoob students were horribly racist toward me, and I spent the vast majority of my day staying out of their way. As a teen, I

lived in a world where nothing made sense, from the classes to the tests to the behaviors and actions of the people who taught me. I knew that this was reality, all the while knowing that it was not right to be treated in such a way. The worst feeling was going through the free and reduced lunch line with all the Hmoob students. As I talked with and listened to them and later on listened to the interviews, what the youth shared with me hurt my soul deeply. All this time, did no one make an attempt to make it better for them? Ntaub Lee[2], a sophomore in high school, who also grew up in the same small midwest town that I grew up in, described perfectly the experiences of Hmoob students:

> It's like we have to go and do something that is no good for us. Sure, we learn to write and read and math, but the environment that we are made to endure that learning is so bad. It's so bad that we feel bad for ourselves. We know that when we go, we have to lose who we are, and yet we still have to go and lose ourselves. We can't even find or be who we want to be in school. How can we even speak Hmoob language?

What Ntaub spoke of were the same feelings that lived inside of me the whole time through public education. She described eloquently the feeling of Hmoob students entering learning environments to assimilate to White people's language, culture, history, philosophy, art, science, etc. For a 14-year-old Hmoob girl to summarize this feeling so eloquently, I knew that nothing had changed. Our lived experiences were as different as night and day. She was born in this country, I in a refugee camp in Thailand. She had parents who spoke both languages to her; mine only spoke Hmoob. Her parents both finished high school and understood how the education system here worked; one of my parents finished grade school, the other never had a chance to go to school. She had all the cool clothes and gear; mine came from Goodwill and the Salvation Army. Yet, our

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

struggles and experiences with public education were almost identical. Every story that the youth shared with me, I either had a similar experience or knew of someone who did.

As we talked about our language, culture, hopes and dreams, I understood them and saw myself in them. I find myself wanting to tell them that things will change once they are done with school, that people will be better to them, that they will have a fair chance at life, that they will finally have the chance to be who they want to be, and that they can use Hmoob when they want to, be around people who they feel understand and support them. But I hesitate, because I do not know if it will be true. I do not want to promise them a future that I myself struggle in creating for my only child. In this chapter, I will attempt to convey their lived experiences of what it means to be a Hmoob teen living in the Midwest, their perceptions of their language, their relationship to it, and what they believe are the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition.

Hais lus Hmoob

When I asked the youth questions to assess the scope of their relationship to their language, perceptions of it and barriers, most of the answers centered around the school atmosphere as their first memory of their language followed by an observation of a causal link to language loss. For many of them, Hmoob was the only language they spoke before entering preschool or kindergarten. The direction the conversations steered us toward was interesting because my assumption was that they would talk about their language ability and fluency.

Yer Lor's story points to the many reasons Hmoob students lose their language fluency. Yer is a junior in high school. She has adequate grades, participates in

afterschool activities, and is liked by her friends. She was quiet throughout the focus group interviews, but when she finally spoke up, it was like a light bulb went on for all the youth in the circle. Yer shared her earliest memory of her relationship to Hmoob language with the following story:

> I remembered going to school when I was in pre-school, and I thought that everyone just spoke a really funny language. I then went to my teacher and asked her a question in Hmoob because I couldn't understand them. I remembered the look on her face, and as a little kid, I knew that I did something that was not right.

She stopped, hesitated, and was quiet, seeming to ponder whether to continue and whether it was appropriate to share. I could tell by her body language that she was uncomfortable, unsure, and regretted what she had just shared. The circle waited a little longer, each individual reflecting on this new state of awakening at her story which, although short, had connected some dots in regards to their estranged relationship with their Hmoob language. They knew that the conversation was about to get very difficult, for Yer had just named one of the culprits of language loss. I asked how the experience made her feel. She thought about it for a bit and responded:

> I was really embarrassed. I was really ashamed. I knew that I was not normal because I was not like the other kids in my classroom, and…...I then, uh….I started not speaking anymore. I stopped talking.

Imagine thinking that speaking Hmoob was the norm and entering a space that is unfamiliar and learning that Hmoob, in fact, is not only *not* the norm but also unacceptable. In my observations, when the youth interacted and shared with each other, they were sometimes boisterous.However, Yer was always shy and withdrawn. I have often wondered if this shyness is linked directly to her experience and many other similar experiences like this throughout her education. For example, when the youth were having

a passionate discussion on which Korean boy band was the best band, everyone had an opinion except Yer. Throughout the discussion, she just smiled shyly and observed everyone else. You could tell by her facial expression with whom she agreed as far as the best Korean boy band, but she never said a word as to what she thought. This was Yer's personality in every sense.

Her story adds another complicated layer to the findings of this research. Initially, she was not a chosen participant for the focus group interviews because, during observation, she was withdrawn and did not seem interested in topics that revolved around Hmoob language or culture. When she asked if she could participate, I hesitated. I figured her desire to take part was because her best friend was chosen to be in the interviews. At the last minute, I agreed because our vision at our youth programming is to make sure that all youth feel included and welcome, a core Hmoob cultural value.

Yer tells us a compelling story that took all of her strength to share. Her body language said she did not want to. Reading between the lines and through observations, I can only assume that she had reflected on my focus question, had come to terms with herself for not being a fluent speaker and, beyond that, could identify a specific incident that changed the trajectory of her language development. Yer's story is moving and poignant.It was the only one she shared.

Through Yer's story, we see the confusion that is created at a very young age for Hmoob students that continues throughout their education. We could hear the anger in her voice as she points out that it was a deliberate choice on her part to not speak Hmoob. There is a tendency for our young people to blame themselves for their lack of fluency in their mother language. How can they not? Their parents tell them that it is up to them to

learn. The Elders, even their mentors, tell them that it is their choice. The people who love and care for them tell them that it is a "choice," and if they would only try, they should be able to competently retain their language. However, Brian Brayboy's (2009) work reminds us that it is not even a fair choice, that there is an entire system that goes into destroying a Native person - in this case, a Hmoob person's - concept of him or herself without the individual recognizing what is happening. One of Yer's last comments was:

> You know that Hmoob is [to be used] at home, and Mekas (English) is for school. I do not speak Hmoob anymore. I speak Mekas at home, too. I have a hard time even wanting to try because it's so hard. With my grandma, I just speak Mekas and use a little Hmoob so she knows what I mean.

Shame leads many of our young people toward the path of assimilation. Shame, in this case, of not being able to speak Hmoob fluently, as well as the shame of not fitting in or identifying with the dominant culture's practices, norms, ways, and behaviors. In fact, throughout the interviews, many of them stated it as one of the primary reasons they stopped speaking Hmoob. Yer's older sister, who also took part in the focus group interviews, shared that their grandmother was their primary caretaker when they were toddlers. This is important to point out because Hmoob families live in extended groups, with grandparents often taking on the role of primary caretaker, their traditional role to pass on the language, culture, and traditions. They grew up hearing their grandmother's stories of their family history, what life was like in the old country, and Hmoob folklore. Through this process, our children not only acquire the language but learn Hmoob values, epistemologies, and culture. For oral cultures such as ours, language is the main vehicle through which conceptualization of the Hmoob worldview, perspective, ontology, cosmology, and ways of being are passed on to the younger generation.

Paj Dawb Xiong describes it like this:

> We are losing Hmoob language and culture because we have to go to school and learn how to be Americans.

There is a huge cultural expectation put on many of our students, which often conflicts with the values of school and American popular culture. This conflict is exacerbated by the loss of a framework of traditional knowledge, in particular, oral traditions. For our students, this loss is exacerbated by the replacement of a framework that devalues oral tradition and traditional Hmoob understanding and worldview. With language comes the power to see, have different perspectives, and different interactions with the world. A language holds secrets to another world and allows us to express and define ourselves in such a way. Its loss not only represents a loss of perspectives and worldviews, but also the loss of relationships that are unique and can only be expressed using that language.

For example, our ancestors see a mountain as something that is alive. In societies that are driven by capital, the mountain's value boils down to how much money can be made through mining, clear cutting or eco-tourism. Through the worldview of capitalism (profit and loss), the mountain has to generate revenue in order for it to have value and worth. However, Hmoob traditional beliefs recognize the holistic connection, the spiritual and physical connection, to the natural world. We realize that these relationships are critical to Hmoob knowledge reproduction. It is in these spiritual relationships that both the sense of personal sovereignty and a wholeness of life are found (Brayboy, 2009). The spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape, rocks, and living things, seen and unseen, are a partial indication of the different worldviews and alternative ways of coming to know which still endure within the Indigenous world (Smith, 1999). For

Hmoob people, adopting such contrasting worldviews changes our values and beliefs, thereby, our Hmoobness. When we start thinking like capitalists and no longer see the life and intrinsic value of the mountain, we no longer have the values and beliefs that have guided our ancestors to protect the environment for our survival. The loss of this worldview perhaps is as tragic as the loss of our language. When Paj Dawb states that she is losing Hmoob culture because she has to go to school to learn how to be "American," perhaps she already knows that she is not just losing her language and culture but a whole paradigm shift of her mind, heart, and soul, the very thing that connects her to her ancestors.

Being American

Through this schooling process, how could our children not want to become "American?" Very little of what they bring to school is seen as valuable. For example, many teachers see Hmoob language not as an asset, but as a deficiency that needs to be remediated. The students spoke of the numerous times when they were asked to not speak Hmoob or to speak only English. Most of the students agree that this is a commonplace occurrence. Hmoob language is not seen as something that enables them academically. This sends a message to our students that a core part of their identity and what they bring into the school environment is not valuable, adding another complicated layer of shame and embarrassment. The message translates into direct attacks on Hmoob culture and, by consequence, the survival of Hmoob people. The direct attack on their identity and especially their language is important to highlight because all the participants, from fluent and semi fluent speakers to those who only understand Hmoob but cannot speak it agreed

that knowing how to speak Hmoob is core to their identity as a Hmoob person.

Bee Vang shares one of his experiences thus:

> []We [Hmoob students] were sitting in there and talking in Hmoob. Well, after the class started, the teacher was going through the rules of the class, and she said, "In here, we speak English." She looked right at us and told us, "So don't speak Hmoob. If everyone else is going to use English, then you will to. Please don't come to class until you are ready to use English." We were like, "What?!" We were shocked and embarrassed. I still don't understand why she cared, but we didn't speak Hmoob in there.

When students begin to internalize a sense of shame or abnormality because of who they are, color-blindness takes the form of micro-aggression slowly chipping away at their identity. For example, when Ntaub shared that she knew at a very young age that she was not like the rest of her classmates, instead of supporting her in being a Hmoob child (recognizing that she has different language abilities and gifts to bring to the classroom), most educators just pretend that they are color blind and avoid the fact that Ntaub is ethnically and linguistically different. Most educators believe that this approach is best for their students. However, not recognizing her identity reinforces for Ntaub that being White is the norm and the only way to be in the world when, in reality, she could never be White, leading to further embarrassment and shame of her identity as a Hmoob person. We know that embarrassment and shame have the effect of limiting the number of possible selves our youth can see. Limiting the number of possible selves pins our children into a box of limited opportunities in which Hmoob culture is represented only by a handful of traits and is not as a viable way to perceive and interpret the world. For example, through their school experiences, the shame of their identity as Hmoob people limits how they see themselves and what they can and cannot be. Stephanie Fryberg (2006) has found that minority students exposed to racist environments have limited

contexts of themselves and experience a reduction in feelings of self esteem and self efficacy.

Khong Xiong describes it in this way:

> No, I don't feel like we are a part of the school. It is just not made for us. If it was, we would see ourselves represented in it, and we don't anywhere. We know that they want us to just conform and be like them, or just shut up and stay out of the way.

Many students spoke of how there is no opportunity for them to learn about who they are, their culture, history or language. Even though history class provides the perfect opportunity to teach about our Hmoob role in the Vietnam war, for instance, nothing is mentioned. Khong Xiong further adds:

> We do not have anything in common with the teachers. When we share, it does not relate well to what they want us to share. So we often don't say anything in class. Even when it comes to history class and it is about the Vietnam war, we get so excited and then they don't talk about Hmoob people at all. It's like we don't exist, but we are here, so it makes no sense.

I asked him what he would like for his teachers to know about Hmoob people.

Khong's reply:

> I would like them to know about us and why we are here in the United States. That our families are really important to us. We care about each other and when we do things, we always do it with our family. We always feel included in everything that we do and at school, we do not feel that. It's like being excluded in everything.

Bee Vang jumps in and tells us how his family is core to his identity as a Hmoob person and how they help him shape his understanding of what it means to be a young Hmoob man. Bee Vang comes from a large family. He has four sisters and four brothers. Bee tells the group that his family is really close, and he grew up being really close to his grandparents and his whole extended family. He shares that when others talked about family, he assumed it was the whole extended family. When he was older and found out

that, for Americans, a family is just your nuclear family, he was shocked. He tells us a story of when he was in grade school and had an assignment to draw his family tree. He remembered that all his classmates were done and happily playing outside while he was still sitting there trying to finish his family tree, having no idea that they were only to draw their nuclear family. He stated that he sat there almost to the end of recess and was still not done with his assignment (which he had to take home later and finish). To Bee, his family is his whole extended family and that included hundreds of people, his uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. This assignment made him mad and frustrated. He even questioned what was wrong with him. He felt he was not as smart as his classmates. It is stories like these that can help us understand the everyday struggles of our young people and what they must go through. Stories like this one reinforce that being a Hmoob person is not normal and, for our children to succeed, they must abandon their identity as Hmoob people, and the first step in that direction is to abandon their language.

Although Bee's story is a simple one about a class assignment, repetitive, innocuous assignments similar to the drawing of one's family tree can lead our youth to internalize a sense of shame, eventually leading them to turn away from and reject their culture and language. Bee is an excellent student and probably one of the most fluent speakers of Hmoob language in the youth group. He graduated high school a semester early and is currently enrolled in college courses at the local University. He does not have an English accent, unlike many of the youth who speak Hmoob fluently but have an English accent. He is one of a few youth who can code switchfrom one thought, sentence or idea to another perfectly, almost like he is speaking one language and living in one culture. Having language ability like Bee's has become more and more rare as many

youth choose only to speak English out of efficiency, one of the many factors that has led to language loss which I will later discuss in the chapter.

Throughout the interviews, Bee spoke about his family helped shaped his identity as a Hmoob person. His reality is that his family is his whole extended family. The whole extended family as a nuclear family is also the Hmoob worldview. When Hmoob people meet each other for the first time, the introduction always starts with, "Kuv hu koj li cas." The English interpretation would be, "How do I address you as my relation." Through this introduction, we learn how are we related to each other and how to address each other. This reinforces and centers not only our relationships to each other, but crosses time and place to our relation to our ancestors. Bee adds:

> I think it is sad that we no longer carry those important introductions that our parents and grandparents did. They all knew each other and understood how they are all related. We can go to a different town and my parents would always find relatives that I never knew we had. All they had to do was tell them who their parents and grandparents were. I've always thought that was so cool. I mean, so cool.

I asked him if this was something important for him to carry forward:

> When you think of yourself as always having relationships to other people, you can't get angry at them or suspect anything of them because you know that they are your relatives. I think so many of the problems we have nowadays is because we are more like Americans. We only think of our family and not our relatives, our mother's relatives, and all other Hmoob people [we do not think of them] like our family.

Bee makes an important point about the relationship that Hmoob people have to all beings that is no longer practiced among young people. This practice is important to bring up because the Hmoob world is not divided and separated but always in relation to one another. This is difficult to explain because this concept does not exist in dominant discourse, therefore, there are no words in the English language to express it. However,

the closest interpretation is that there is fluidity in the act of addressing each other, which allows many things to transpire, change, take shape, and have meaning. In other words, it is not a black or white world, but a world that has a lot of gray, leaving room for individuals to discern, interpret, relate and apply what relations they may have currently to other beings. Our ancestors laid the foundations of how our language is to be used to help strengthen and tie everything together (this may be positive or negative). For example, when we address relationships practices, the speech, culture, and nuances are already embedded into our language. Language then becomes our lens in which to view the world and our reality. As Bee stated, there is no simple solution to the social problems that the Hmoob community faces, but if we go back to this practice of *"how do I address you as my relation"* it may help us to start resolving some of the social problems in our community.

What if we were to go back to this simple practice of our culture and use language to build and connect people to each other? How different would our communities look? Our Elders talk about how our language establishes and sets the foundation for these relationships and life events to come naturally, how to see the world, each other, and the use of our language pushes us to build relationships to those people we often do not and cannot see ourselves in. Through this established foundation, Bee believes we could learn how to have good relationships or use these already established foundations to build relationships with others. Bee hits this thought on the head when he concluded that it if we begin to practice these traditional ways of addressing each other, this would change who we are, how we see the world and each other.

Bee adds that if relationships are established, we acknowledge strangers as our

aunts, uncles, grandmothers or grandfathers, etc. As in many Indigenous cultures, our relationships come before everything else. We are taught that we are a collective of a whole, and there are few things that separate us from each other. At a very young age, for example, we are taught the concept of how a community works to help and support each other. Through this belief, if you fail, I fail; if you succeed, then I, too, succeed. Therefore, Hmoob relationships are not just an act of how we address each other. They go deeper into the community level where they are put into practice and lived.

To understand how Hmoob concepts of relationships work on a deeper level, we look to the Hmoob memorial service, or funereal, as an example. For Hmoob folks, the funeral is one of the most important events in a person's journey. The moment we are born, all the important ceremonies in our lives revolve around the funeral. It is so important that we save all our best, most beautiful and intricate clothing for our journey in the afterlife. A traditional Hmoob funeral can last anywhere from **3 to 7** days, depending on the age of the person. These ceremonies go on day and night, with little to no rest in-between. During this process of mourning for the immediate family, all extended family and the Hmoob community come together to take care of the funeral arrangements of the deceased; this is a tradition of how our people gather.

During the days of ceremonies, the Hmoob community comes to make sure that the proper ceremonies are being done to pass the deceased into the next life. The community also comes together to cook and host guests who will be traveling both near and far to attend the funeral. It is hard to imagine someone not having a role at the funeral; everyone has a direct or indirect role. Everyone from our community goes to a funeral to make their presence known to the family that they are there to support them

and will be willing to do whatever is needed, even a simple task like running to the store to buy Kleenex. The memorial services are a place to come and socialize. Through this process of socialization, all relationships are reaffirmed and new ones established. In this way, relationships, worldviews, and core and important parts of the Hmoob community are maintained.

When our youth are taught this worldview and to act in this manner, always in relation to others before anything else, then told the opposite in their educational learning environment, this creates much confusion for them. Moua Vue gives us an example:

> The teacher in my science class told me to stop helping my cousin in class...because she needs to learn it on her own, even if she fails….She said it was for her own good. Well, why wouldn't there be someone around to help her? That is what we do. She didn't get it. She thought that it would help her and me be more independent, but if [my cousin] failed, then I would get in trouble, too. So I just started helping her at lunch, and we would talk in Hmoob in class. Now I wish I would have told her to fuck off and got kicked out of class so we could get a new class.... I felt so conflicted. It was like I had to choose between being Hmoob and following the rules in school.

Moua's comments show how Hmoob students refuse individualism, prefer to work in groups, and are embarrassed when singled out. In fact, there is much research that has shown us that students not only achieve better when they work in groups, but that both the weaker and stronger students retain a better understanding of the material by working through it together (Timm, Chiang, Finn, 1998). For Hmoob students, collective success is valued. Individualism encourages competition, which is hard for them when they are taught that they should support and help each other, an important trait of their Hmoobness that they have to compromise in order to "succeed" and, I would argue, to take part in the dominant culture's ways and norms. Comments like this are direct attempts to assimilate our youth by breaking their right to speak Hmoob and assimilating

them to become White.

Kev Cai Hmoob

In the interviews, Hmoob was spoken roughly 10% of the time. When asked why they chose to speak English and not Hmoob in their everyday conversations, the youth's responses varied from, "It's just too hard," to, "From a young age, I just stopped using it." Others mentioned that they became embarrassed speaking Hmoob. A few pointed out that they did not realize they had stopped speaking Hmoob and, with time, lost the ease and spontaneity of doing so. Some mentioned that, even if they want to, they have a hard time speaking Hmoob. Khong Xiong shares:

> I don't use Hmoob because it's not the first language that I think of when I speak. English is just easier to me. I feel bad, but unless you think really hard before you speak. Hmoob is….English is just easier.

He adds:

> I want to speak Hmoob, but my grandparents would tell me that I speak it weird. Or they are always yelling at me about not speaking Hmoob, but when I do, and it's not right, they just yell at me some more instead of helping me. Like this one time, I said that I was going to wear my shoes, but I used *hnav* instead of *rau* (two verbs that translate into the single verb "wear" in English but are not interchangeable in Hmoob), and they just yelled at me, said that I never come home, and that I am a bad kid, and that's why I can't speak Hmoob. It just makes me hate [Hmoob culture and language] more. It's like they expect me to speak it perfectly. I know I don't speak it perfectly, but instead of helping me, they always tell me that I'm doing it wrong. Everyone does that to me.

Khong personifies the lived experiences of our young people. As the youth say: "Everything is stacked up against us." Our youth expressed that they feel intense pressure to give up their culture, language and traditional ways of knowing in order to conform to the dominant culture's economic, social and political standards. They simply want to be teenagers, fit in, and hang out with friends, but they have to navigate two very

contradictory and opposing worlds. The dominant American culture sends messages that if they give up their identity, they will fit in; yet, they know they do not fit in. Their own parents and grandparents tell them that they need to work hard to succeed in the dominant culture, then criticize their weak grasp of their language and culture. Mai Yer gives us another example:

> It's like they want us to speak [Hmoob], but they don't know how to teach it to us. They always say, "Oh, speak Hmoob. You are Hmoob. You should know how to speak Hmoob." Where are we going to learn how to speak Hmoob? There's no place. How are we supposed to magically know how to speak it?

The lack of language learning opportunity is a predominant complaint from the youth. Khong adds that he knows that Hmoob language is dying. He feels that he and his peers have a responsibility to keep it alive but feels powerless to do anything about it. This adds yet another complicated layer of the struggles of our youth, who are raised to always listen to and obey their teachers and Elders. In Hmoob culture, older individuals, especially Elders, are revered and given much respect, for they are the teachers, entrusted with the passing of culture, language, and history. In many ways, they are the only teachers traditional Hmoob society has. These cultural beliefs are extended to American teachers with the same respect and responsibility.

Many of the youth voiced that English is the language to use in modern times. In other words, Hmoob language is the past, just as their grandparents are the past. Perhaps this is the saddest part of the story, our youth not having a fluent enough grasp of the language to appreciate its beauty, its natural poetry, as the Elders would say. A Hmoob Elder describes it eloquently when she says:

> Our students are told that they have to be Americans, so they go to schools to learn those ways, but never do they fully become that. They are told that they can't succeed unless they throw away their culture and language, and when they

> do that, they have nothing left: no ancestors, no identity, no shell. In many ways, they are like lost souls, always wondering and never belonging, always wanting but never knowing. They don't even know what they are missing.

What this Elder described is true only to an extent. Like Khong, many of the youth worry about their ability to maintain Hmoob culture for their kids and their Elders. When the youth spoke of the fear of losing their language and culture, they also know that they are losing a traditional set of knowledge that is unique and makes them Hmoob. Often, this fear belies a feeling of shame of loss of that culture. Carol Cornelius writes about how this feeling of shame is powerful in discouraging youth from "going back" to learn traditional ways (1998). Keng Xiong offers this explanation:

> I feel like there are two different Hmoob cultures. The Elders, who are Hmoob, and then us young people, and we don't really know anything about the things the Elders know about. They are always talking about being outside and farming. All the examples that they use have to do with trees or plants or spirits, and I am always like, "What are you talking about?"

Pao Vang shares:

> The Elders, they know so much about everything....they can't speak English, but they know about American things. Sometimes, they even know a lot more than I do….My grandpa asked me about Obama, and I didn't really know anything about him. And they know all about Hmoob culture, and I know some stuff about American culture, but I don't know anything about Hmoob culture. I feel so stupid around them. I am really afraid I will never be able to really talk to them.

Xao Vue laments:

> It is so sad that so many of us can barely speak Hmoob anymore. Like we use Hmoobglish and just talk about things we don't really know how to speak Hmoob….We never use it because we are always in school, and when we do, we only use it so that other people don't know what we are talking about, but most of the stuff around us is not really Hmoob, but spending time in the woods and the garden or at Hmoob things like funerals, it is totally different.

Bee Vang jumps in to add:

> The older people, they can speak so well, and sometimes I can't understand them

> because they use all these old words, and it's like they are always saying everything in poems. They always talk about going hunting or going to the garden or who is related to who. They use examples from the garden or things that they have to make, and I never know what they mean or what those things are.

The disconnect that our youth feel is real, and we can see it in their lack of interactions with their parents and grandparents. In traditional Hmoob family structures, the grandchildren should have the closest relationship to their grandparents. This has been ingrained into Hmoob family structures for the survival of Hmoob language and culture since time immemorial. When it starts to crumble, it is much easier for assimilation to occur.

According to many Indigenous scholars, assimilation occurs most completely when people begin to believe the oppressor's stories of them. Brian Brayboy (2009) gives the boarding school era as an example of how the dominant culture has attempted to extinguish the individuality of Native cultures while simultaneously keeping Native people marginalized and, more importantly, viewed as antiquated, savage, and superstitious impediments to "civilization."

We see throughout Western history, from the arrivals of the first Europeans on the soils of the Americas to the colonization of the world to the slave trade, how Whites have viewed their culture, language, and history as superior in juxtaposition to every other culture with which they have come into contact. Our young people are susceptible to believing these narratives without understanding that language is the glue that ties their culture and tradition to them. For Hmoob youth living here in the U.S., this subtle onslaught of the superiority complex slowly but surely erodes away at their values and understanding of who they are. When our young people start to believe and value the things that the dominant culture teaches them, they, too, perpetuate systems of power that

ultimately destroy their language, culture, and traditions. As Tribal people, we are the most vulnerable to globalization, that neoliberal drive to hegemonize and standardize everything for the sake of efficiency and capital gain.

When Khong stated that it is easier for him to speak English, what he means is that this is the system that has taught and converted him, and it is much easier to go with it then against it, and who could even blame him? He speaks the truth of what it means to be torn by two opposing cultures. Khong is 15 years old and a responsible youth. His family dynamic is complicated, so he avoids going home when he can. He spends most of his time in afterschool programs and with other Hmoob youth. He walks everywhere and has a group of very close and caring friends. He talks about getting into fights with non-Hmoob students and shares that he was never a good student (his grades were mostly C's and D's). He tells us his story of feeling hopeless and lost no matter where he goes. He has been part of the youth program for about a year and enjoys coming to meet other Hmoob youth from the area. He plans to go to the local technical school when he graduates to become a certified mechanic because he loves cars, especially import race cars. He is a thoughtful young person and helps without being asked. He is a person the Elders would say knows *Hmoob kev cai* (a set of prescribed Hmoob traits, practices, knowledge, rules, protocols, norms and ways). I noticed that he would always eat last, making sure that everyone eats first, another *Hmoob kev cai,* one which our young people no longer practice. For someone who does not feel like he is Hmoob, the traits Khong exhibits are very much that of a Hmoob person and, I would add, is at the heart of what it means to be Hmoob.

Khong does recognize that those are important traits of a Hmoob person. He is

one of our typical youth who feel like he belongs in either the Hmoob or American world. Both worlds tell him contradictory ways to act and be. He just can't figure out why he is failing in both. When we honestly look at Khong's interpretations of his world without all the complicated players, the simple truth is that the Hmoob and dominate worlds have been set up to place blame on him instead of racist institutions whose sole responsibility is to uphold the status quo.

When we talk about language loss, it is not the mere loss of a complex system of sounds that make up words that form complex thoughts. It is also the loss of a way of being and acting in the world. Through my observation of Khong, I see that the loss of *Hmoob kev cai* closely correlates to the loss of Hmoob identity. This loss of *Hmoob kev cai* (which Khong exhibits but does not identify with) is also painful like the loss of the Hmoob language.

Nkag Siab

At one of the opening circles at youth programming, a discussion came about that illustrates the complexity of the barriers to language acquisition and Hmoob youth's relationship to their language and identity. Many researchers have proven that when a person's identity is threatened, he or she will abandon who he or she is in favor of one that is perceived as more valid or acceptable. In the interviews, at one point or another, the youth agreed they were embarrassed to be Hmoob. Minimizing Hmoob culture, language, and values were important ways of coping, not only in the school atmosphere, but in their everyday interactions with others. The students agreed that assimilation was the number one goal of their education. It has led to the destruction of Hmoob culture by

promoting its disintegration through subtle promotion of shame and deliberate ignorance of curricula that teach Hmoob culture, language and history. This denies our students the eloquence and pride of being who they are in the world. Pa Der Yang agrees:

> If we thought that Hmoob culture was more valuable, then why would we want to become Americans? I think that is probably why we don't learn anything about Hmoob people in school. I want to know about who I am. My grandma is super smart and I want to be just like her. She thinks so different than me. It's like when she problem solves one problem, she's able to do it for all the other problems. I'm just like, how did she do that. My grandma doesn't read or write at all, and when she writes, it's so strange. It makes no sense to me, it's like she's making up her own writing system. I keep thinking that it's so cool because she has never been to school. She's 78 years old, and here she is writing numbers and letters in her own way. I mean no one can read it, only her.

Seng Vang adds:

> I know it's so cool, right? Like the way the Elders think. I would see my uncle only when we go hunting, and he would just show me stuff outside that I'm like, holy shit, did he just come up with that or did he know that all along. He can make anything, solve any problem. I feel so stupid when I am with him, but I know that he knows that I want to learn from him.

Ntaub Lee adds:

> I don't know if we can learn those things. We have to go to school and are busy working. I wish we could learn it, because it is important to our identity, but how do we make time, unless we don't want to sleep. I want to be normal, too. It's so hard for us to want to be just normal like everyone else. I want to do things that my White friends do, but instead my parents want me to do this or that, and then they always say, well that's what Hmoob people would do. It's like, what does that even mean? Do they know that we don't know what they are talking about? We do not understand what they want or mean.

Seng Vang agrees:

> I mean they want us to know things, but they never say it to us. They just expect us to understand and know those things.

Pa Der Yang shares:

> I think that the way the Elders think and the way we think are so different, then you add language on to that, along with the little that we know of our culture, and we are…we are just not anywhere at the level that they are at. I guess in some

ways we don't know how to think like Hmoob people.

These statements illustrate how many Hmoob youth internalize their identity. The youth continued this conversation for a long time, giving examples of their disconnect, their desire to learn Hmoob culture and ways of being and, eventually, concluding that language plays a huge part in what it means to be "Hmoob." What I believe the youth are speaking about is how a Hmoob person rationalizes, carries him or herself, and comes to understand the world. For example, our verb for "to understand" is *nkag siab*. The literal translation to English is "to enter the liver." In the Hmoob worldview, we come to understand our experiences and lives through our liver, the equivalent to the English concept of the heart. The liver is where our emotions are felt. This organ helps us rationalize, think, and understand the world. To *nkag siab*, therefore, is to both feel and understand, two states of being that are not mutually exclusive. When a person *nkag siab,* he or she acts with compassion, taking in the whole of a situation before acting in the world.

The verbs "to understand" and "to think" are interconnected in our language. To think is to take the whole into consideration. The act of thinking is the highest act of being a human being. It is a holistic way of looking at your world. This is why Pa Der's grandmother is able to problem solve so effectively, because she is thinking about the issue from all different perspectives and in all the ways of knowing and being that our young people have never gotten the chance to learn. If we do not take the whole into consideration, acting on our thoughts alone can have negative consequences.

The Elders often question a person's thoughtfulness by asking, "*Koj puas paub xav?*" which translates as, "Do you know how to think?" For us, to be able to think and to

be thoughtful is interconnected. A thinking human possesses qualities of compassion, kindness, and thoughtfulness, for thinking and thoughtfulness originate from the same organ.

Our youth struggle because they are taught that thinking and understanding happen differently in the way of being in the world. This worldview provides a tiny glimpse into the world of our teens and the Elders. I believe this is why our youth feel that there is such a disconnect between them and the Elders.

Adam Thao states it perfectly when he says:

> To think like a Hmoob person, we have to speak like a Hmoob person. What do they call that: Hmoobspeak. I mean learning to Hmoobspeak is hard. There's all kinds of cultural things that I don't know that don't allow me to Hmoobspeak well….You have to live in that society, environment that okays you to do that and teaches you how to do it. I mean, look at Isiah right? He speaks Hmoob perfectly, but he can't Hmoobspeak. So what does that mean for those of us that are just learning how to speak Hmoob?

Following this, Jess Chang shares:

> Yeah, I think that we are so disconnected. Hmmm, I mean like, we don't know how to be Hmoob (laughs). I mean we are Hmoob, but we aren't Hmoob, like how the Elders are Hmoob.

The youth speak about Hmoobness in literal terms. For many of them, growing up in the United States and only hearing stories of their parents' and grandparents' experiences with little to no background information has sowed much of their feelings of disconnect. The lack of fluency in their own language or, as Adam puts it, inability to Hmoobspeak, exacerbates this disconnect. Although they did not go further to explain how going through trauma, war, and displacement connects to their feelings of Hmoobness, it also brings up an interesting point of why they would feel that those are important events in confirming their identity. Through the discussion, the youth felt that

these experiences were part of the Hmoob experience that they themselves do not have.

Language as Resistance

The youth shared that key in retaining their identity was creating a new Hmoob identity in atmospheres where they knew that Hmoobness was not welcomed. The more fluent speakers would intentionally speak Hmoob to encourage the ones who were struggling to also use it in defiance of their peers and teachers, especially in front of those they knew did not want them speaking Hmoob. Adam Thao shared how important speaking Hmoob is to him and many Hmoob students' identity:

> We used Hmoob, because it was like something that we had that no one else had or could take away from us. Like it is ours that we own it and that is pretty cool.

Pa Der Yang says:

> I think that knowing Hmoob is the most important part of being Hmoob. If you don't speak it, then it's like are you really Hmoob?

All the students stated that they use Hmoob everyday for the reasons shared by Adam and Pa Der. They also stated that using Hmoob was an act of open resistance: as well as connecting them to their culture, it helped them maintain their identity. Many of the youth expressed that, prior to coming to youth programming, they did not feel as though speaking Hmoob was empowering. However, through the youth programming, they have learned that, indeed, their language is unique and something worth becoming proficient in.

Adam Thao adds:

> You can just feel that they don't like it when you speak Hmoob, but we do anyway. Sometimes it's because we don't want others to know what we are saying. Sometimes it's even to piss off White people and the teachers. But mostly, we should speak Hmoob because we are Hmoob.

Adam has a unique perspective on Hmoob language. He tells us that he grew up speaking Hmoob and, with time, lost the ability to do so. He is relearning how to use it and says that it has been challenging, but he feels proud of himself. When his family moved to a small city in the Midwest, he noticed that the school atmosphere was completely different than his former high school. It was a struggle for him to enter this new high school where Hmoob and non-Hmoob students were segregated and hardly interacted with each other. In his words:

> They were not tolerant of the Hmoob students at all, and you could just feel it. They were mean and sometimes outright crazy about the little things that we did. That's when I started fighting back with Hmoob language. I was like, "Fine, if you don't like us because we are Hmoob, then I'm going to be as Hmoob as I can just to piss you off." And that was...like a year ago, I started speaking Hmoob to my grandma and my dad. I mean I played soccer, I did everything they wanted and yet they're going to hate cause I'm Hmoob. That's just messed up.

Adam demonstrates solidarity with his Hmoob peers by sticking up for other Hmoob students who do not have social or political power. Through Adam's interviews, we come to find out that he is a popular student. He has a large circle of Hmoob and White friends and is able to shift through these different circles because of his involvement in multiple extracurricular activities, such as soccer and show choir. Adam mentions that one of the hardest things about moving to this area was that the Hmoob and non-Hmoob students never interacted, so he felt that he had to either be Hmoob or White, whereas at his former school, he could just be Adam Thao. He states why he choose to speak Hmoob when he knew it was not welcomed:

> Hmoob language is what makes us Hmoob. Hmoob kids are shy. We just don't do things because we feel like doing it. There's always a reason. I don't know what is wrong with this city. I mean, really, you are going to give some kids a hard time because they look different than you.

What Adam speaks about is when our students withdraw and are quiet. School staff and administrators tend to interpret theses behaviors as affirmation of our students' compliance. It is, however, another form of resistance and a shutdown mechanism: nothing happens when they speak up, so why say anything? This feeling of powerlessness is reinforced by the indifference of most school staff. It is easier in many cases to continue to promote Hmoob culture through actions such as deference, lack of eye contact, keeping quiet, and nurturing their relationships to each other.

Their schools do not offer relevant curriculum or anything reflective of their culture, so the students found it in other places. This idea of relationships is very important to the youth and, throughout the interviews, they spoke of their relationships to each other and how they support each other through their hostile learning environments. For example, skipping school gave them the ability to affirm some of those relationships. It became not just a form of resistance but also of cultural protest at the school's attempt to break up their cultural tradition of building relationships. Ntaub Lee explains:

> We skipped school so we can just be with each other. We knew of this conference in Madison, and my cousin's boyfriend was running it, so we just left school and went. I was afraid my parents were going to find out, but we had fun. We got to see what college was like and be with each other.

As powerful as the creation of a strong Hmoob identity of resistance against oppression can be for many of our students who do resist, they are depicted by the school as fulfilling the other stereotype of Hmoob students as "oppositional," "gangbangers," and "violent." Consequences often include further marginalization through segregation, restrictive placements, and dehumanization. Xao Vue, who often does not attend youth program, adds this really important piece at one of the talking circles:

> When we say anything, nothing happens. When we call them on their BS, then

> they tell us that we are playing the race card. And if we go along, don't complain, if we sit and pretend to listen, then we lose ourselves. Our parents are sad because we can't speak Hmoob and don't know anything that they value. So what are we supposed to do? We have no choice.

Xao brings up an important question that everyone wants to ask but no one has the courage to do so. What he is questioning is important for us to think about and constantly have discussions about, especially educators. Xao is stating that Hmoob students have no choices at all. When they fight the system, they are labeled as delinquents, but in going along with it, they know they will inevitably lose themselves. Xao does not attend youth program often but feels the same way that many Hmoob youth do. Our youth know that, in attending school, they are going to lose a part of who they are. You can't help but wonder what they have to do everyday to prep themselves to go into these learning environments. Yeng Vang explains it in this way:

> We started a Hmoob club, and after a few years, the new principal told us that it was discriminatory, and that we had to call it something more fitting and welcoming for everyone, so we had to change the name. I remember my friends and I being really upset. It was like the only thing at our school that we could actually call our own, and they said that we had to make it for everyone.

Noah Vue adds:

> It's like when we are together, they always break us up, put us in different classrooms, so we can be a part of the school. Don't they know that that's worst for us? Even when we are in the same resource time period, they always put us in different rooms. They want us to not to be around each other, as though we scare them when we are together.

Bee Vang agrees:

> At our school, there's a class that makes us do exactly that, so we would know what it felt like to be in a minority group or a group that is discriminated against. It's hard because for the assignment you have to go sit with a bunch of White kids, and they just look at you like, what the hell are you doing here. You have to do it, or you get an F because you have to write a paper reflecting your experience. It's like, we live this everyday, we don't need to do this as an experiment to know what it feels like.

Schools have come up with many ways to respond to our youth who actively resist. This can be seen when they are segregated and put into more restrictive programs, such as alternative education, special education, or ELL. The examples above demonstrate to us that schools will do whatever it takes to break our students from who they are. This is especially true for our youth who are unable to articulate why they are uncomfortable with teachers and curricular bias and turn either outward or inward with their resistance. Our youth are resilient, strong, innovative, and smart. It is inspiring that they have created strategies and tactics to resist so they can at least find a little part of themselves to get through schooling.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the students through the analysis of focus groups, observations and individual interviews. The youth focused heavily on their educational experience as a platform to talk about their relationship to their language, the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition, and their perceptions of their identity. What emerged was that the youth shared that they cared deeply about their language and culture but feel powerless in maintaining it. They spoke about racism, assimilation, the pressures to conform, the need to belong, and how they tried hard to fit in with their White peers and dominate culture. At the same time, they spoke about using Hmoob language as a tool to resist assimilation. They added that building relationships and having relationships to each other was a major tool of resistance. Although the schools tried to seperate them, the Hmoob students found ways to be with each other and to support each other. The student also shared that at times, they were embarrassed and ashamed to be Hmoob. However,

they found coping mechanisms such as avoiding classes or events they knew were not made for them. Another coping mechanism the youth spoke about was finding ways to reflect and talk about what they were going through with their Hmoob peers. This strategy helped them to strengthen their relationships with each other and their identity as young Hmoob people.

They also shared what they believe are the barriers to language acquisition, which included schooling and the education they were given, social pressures, parents, and surprisingly, their community of Elders. The youth voiced that they will continue to struggle to come up with creative ways to maintain their identity, language, and culture. They shared that Hmoob language is imperative to their Hmoob identity, worldview, and ways of being. Although they are sad and worried about the current state of Hmoob language and culture, they also understand that Hmoob culture will not disappear just because schools are trying to assimilate them. They know that Hmoob identities and language will continue to change and adapt. The youth felt empowered that they will create new identities within oppressive structures that were never made for them. This was both sad and hopeful to hear. It was sad that they knew what schools were doing to them in terms of trying to get them to abandon their language and culture. However, it was hopeful to see that they could articulate what was happening to them and come up with strategies and tactics to resist and maintain their language.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction and Implications

The present study describes Hmoob youth's perceptions of Hmoob language, their relationships to their language, and what they believe are barriers to Hmoob language acquisition. For the youth who took part in this study, the school environment was a significant focus in which they talked at length about their relationship to their language and their perceived barriers to language acquisition. When they spoke of barriers, they spoke passionately about the pressures from both their communities (Hmoob and school) to conform to the status quo, how both do not acknowledg, listen or understand what they have to give up. They mentioned barriers which include assimilatory school policies, racism, school personnel, and curricula that do not reflect who they are and, I would argue, minimize and marginalize their lived experiences. When they spoke about their perceptions of their language, they shared their concerns for the future of their language, culture, and the survival of their Hmoob community. When they spoke about their relationships to their language, they spoke of their love for their Elders, and their desire to create a different learning community for their younger siblings and the younger generation of Hmoob children.

Through observations, interviews, and focus groups, I learned that our Hmoob youth care deeply about their language and know that it is central to their identity as Hmoob people. However, they felt powerless in maintaining their language and culture. The aim of the study was to try and understand the relationships that young Hmoob people have to their language. The results are that they are scared about the future of

Hmoob language, for they feel that they are not fluent enough to teach the language to their children to secure its survival. They expressed the desire to learn but have no foundation to do so. What is encouraging is that the youth spoke about having one another to lean on. They use language to inspire and support each other through their toxic Western educational journey. For example, the more fluent speakers will use it in uncomfortable spaces (schools) to encourage the ones who are not as fluent to speak. Their relationships to each other really support them in maintaining their language and, by default, their identity.

The youth also spoke of the shame in being Hmoob because they know that they are not grounded in their Hmoob identity. This is most apparent when they do not know how to defend themselves from dominant culture's pressures to conform and assimilate. Through their learning environments they have learned when they can and when they cannot be Hmoob. They share stories of teachers asking them not to speak Hmoob as well as asking them to do things that go against their instincts as a Hmoob person, such as sharing and helping each other with homework. The competitive learning environment was hard for many of them, and they voiced multiple times how hard it was to walk in two really juxtaposed worlds. A few of the youth shared that sometimes skipping school was their way of being with each other in order to feel that they are a part of something (their Hmoobness), and not be around environments in which they are made to feel terrible for being Hmoob.

They questioned the role of our culture and what is going to happen to them as young Hmoob people without Hmoob language and culture. They asked what we (the adult Hmoob community who have social and political clout) are going to do to support

them in learning Hmoob language and culture. Throughout my conversations with them, they demonstrated that they are not ignorant of what is happening to their language, and that we as the adults should not treat them as such but instead listen to them. For example, they tell us that they know that the whole purpose of Western education is to make them into White people. The youth know that it's not who they are, and they want the Hmoob adults and Elders to support them in exploring and finding out who they are as young Hmoob people. They share that they crave conversations and an understanding of their identity, culture and language. They also expressed their desire for relationships to their parents, Elders, and their Hmoob community. They are concerned because they do not know how to "Hmoobspeak."

My role is that of a Hmoob woman, mother, daughter, aunt, decolonizer, and language rights activist. These are our young people, the future of who we are as a people. In these interviews, they gave powerful personal narratives on their perceptions of Hmoob language, their relationships to Hmoob language and culture, and what they believe are the barriers to learning Hmoob language. As I listened to them, I was shocked and surprised, even though I should know better because I see and interact with them daily. What they shared with me, at times I wanted to hug them and comfort them, and at times, I wanted to cry with them, because only from the depth of despair were they willing to share and give me a little glimpse of what their hopes were for their language and culture. The depth of their sadness when they spoke of language and culture loss is difficult to synthesize and convey. Their voices reminded me of so many of our Elders who have passed on who shared their stories with me when I was writing my thesis. These young people's voices echoed that of those Elders, asking the same questions and

pointing out the same concerns. These concerns were also true in Yang's research findings (2005), where he concluded that Hmoob parents and children want Hmoob language in their lives. However, each group assumed the other did not want to maintain it.

In following the core principles of Indigenous methodology, I am speaking directly to those in positions of power, though it may seem that the vast majority of the recommendations are written for teachers, administrators, and policy makers. These recommendations are very much for the Hmoob community and especially for clan leaders of the Hmoob community. Again, when I say we, I mean we as the Hmoob community and I speak specifically from this place. The recommendations are really for us to push and advocate for policies and practices that will maintain and secure the survival of our language and culture and, by extension, our very existence as Hmoob people. Dominant education has for far too long been a tool of assimilationour children have little choice but to take part in. As adults charged with the care and responsibility of the future generation, we can no longer afford not to fight for the survival of our language and culture. Our youth see the assimilation and the pressures from both their communities, the Hmoob and non-Hmoob community to assimilate to success. The youth understand that success means giving up on their identity and, therefore, they struggle with it. We cannot leave this up to our children to contemplate. We already know that when we look at success through a Western lens, there is no way we can be successful, for this success runs contradictory to our core principles and beliefs as Hmoob people who think of the community first. We must redefine success for the survival of our language and our culture. Our young people understand this, and this is why this is such a

struggle for them, especially when we push them to succeed in Western education. Therefore, to change the paradigm, we must organize and fight for our language's rightful place in every educational setting, in every institution, all the way from the K-12 system to higher education.

In all different social and political environments where Hmoob language was the topic of conversation, I often heard similar concerns from adults about Hmoob language and our culture, questioning why our children do not care to learn. Based on the analysis in this study, I conclude that the youth care deeply about their language and culture. Through their voices, we know that they do care about their identities as Hmoob people and share very much the same concerns as our Elders and their parents. However, our youth also tell us that they no longer learn the way that we were taught to learn. They are surrounded by Western pedagogy throughout their schooling experience and Western pedagogy is embedded in the way in which they learn how to conceptualize and come to understand the world. Hmoob Elders cannot expect our youth to sit through hours and sometimes days of oral ceremonial traditions. They can no longer learn this way and the Hmoob community must adapt and accept other Indigenous communities' pedagogies and model to teach our young people if we want to give our language a chance of survival.

A significant point I want to reitreate from what I have learned from this study is that we in the Hmoob community cannot talk about our lived experiences and our relationship to Hmoob language without critiquing our educational system. For there to be positive changes in our young people's lives, the Hmoob community has to engage in truthful discussion and analysis of the Western educational system, a system we know is

responsible for the diminishing number of Hmoob language speakers. Yet, we keep pushing our young people to be a part of it, believing that it is the only way to "success," What we can take away is that by failing to provide learning environments where our youth see themselves reflected, schools will continue to perpetuate and promote learning environments that will innately harm them. The youth spoke about how they do not see themselves in their schools that force them to become White with little regard for their rich culture and language. As a Hmoob community, we have a responsibility to make sure that this does not happen. We also must make sure that our young people will have access and opportunities to be Hmoob, and I mean it in every sense of the word Hmoob, from language to culture, to identity, and praxis. I do not have the answers, but here are some of the answers from our young people, and I cannot stress enough that we need to listen to them if we are going to secure the survival of our language and culture.

Limitation of Study

The results of this study are specific to the Hmoob youth population from a small Midwest city in the United States but could be applied to other Hmoob communities across the United States. It is important to recognize that there are many dialects of the Hmoob language, and the urge to standardize it for the sake of language survival is also dangerous. We must appreciate and allow for diverse dialects and written forms of Hmoob to emerge from those diverse and different communities, which means that we have to allow space for each Hmoob community to determine its language needs.

Study Design

There needs to be more critical studies where young people already have an established relationship with the researcher. I believe this is what makes a study powerful. relationshipsencourage young people to speak from their most authentic voice. I should also add that if the Hmoob community is going to address learning Hmoob language, we must allow youth voices in spacespredominantly occupied by those in power. In addressing language and its relationship to the youth, we must ask them, and although it may be hard, trust and allow them to set their own terms and conditions. This also applies to educators, policy makers, stakeholders, administrators and parents.

This research design was adopted using phenomenological research that draws upon Indigenous methodologies and adaptation of grounded theory. The principles of Indigenous methodology were adapted because Hmoob youth share similar social, cultural, language and political history with other tribal nations around the world. The tenets of Indigenous methodology help give a more accurate analysis and approach when examining the lived experiences of Hmoob youth as Indigenous people with language as the phenomena to be explored. Indigenous methodologies also recognize that Indigenous people are the most diverse group of people in the world and, therefore, all approaches to research must be adaptable and culturally appropriate.

The study was done using Indigenous methodologies with the intent of bringing out the authentic voice of the youth. We need more research that is reflective of our youth's experiences, grounded in their lived experiences, and published not only for the academic community but, more importantly, for their communities. We have to be cognizant of the spaces in which these conversations are happening, who they are done with, how they are done, what their intents and purposes are, and who will benefit from

them. When taken the whole in to consideration, all these questions will greatly impact the research design and outcome of the study.

The youth participants are Hmoob youth between the ages of 13 to 18 who take part in the programming and activities at the Youth Center, a place where Hmoob youth come to learn about language and culture, build relationships, find support and be empowered to make changes in their lives. The interactions with the the youth included observations of routine activities, focus group interviews, as well as informal, formal and individual interviews. During the observations, there were always between 15-25 youth at the Youth Center. After observations and going through and evaluating the field notes, I invited 10 youth to participate in two focus group interviews. After evaluating the focus group interviews, I invited 5 youth to do individual interviews.

This research design is unique in that I am a member of the community in which the young people that I am writing about live. I also have an already established relationship with them, which made it easier for them to share their stories. My role at the Youth Center is to support, guide, and act as a mentor to support youth. I am also a respected and well-known leader in the Hmoob community, therefore, the Hmoob community knows that I have the best interest of the youth in mind. For example, the ways in which I interact with youth will have to be done according to *Hmoob Kev Cai* (a set of prescribed Hmoob traits, practices, knowledge, rules, protocols, norms and ways), such as building relationship, trusting, listening to and hearing the voices of the youth. Therefore, the research follows *Hmoob Kev Cai.*

Introduction to the Recommendations

Many of the recommendations I make here are for educational institutions, because when our youth spoke about their relationship to their language, they came back again and again to their lived experiences in learning environments, the public schools. However, I would like to reiterate that, although these are recommendations for education, it really is for the Hmoob community to take in and advocate for. If not us, then who? Our young people tell us that schools play a huge role in shaping who they are. We also know that 40% of the Hmoob population in the United States does not have a high school diploma or a GED. As a community invested in our young people, we have to start asking why Hmoob youth would want to attend school? Is there anything in our educational system that reflects or reinforces who they are? For our children, more often than not, schools are places of marginalization and spiritual and psychological abuse, where shame, fear and racism are a part of their daily experience. Our students internalize this marginalization and face the harsh consequences of either resistance or assimilation. Vang (2010) also included this statement in her conclusion of her dissertation.

Schools must be cautious that they are not simply providing space without sharing power. To ensure that Hmoob youth will succeed socially and academically, educational institutions should offer preparatory courses focused on issues and concerns that are important to the Hmoob community. There must be Hmoob language, history, culture and contemporary issues embedded throughout the curriculum, and the curriculum must in both content and methodology reflect the values, wants, hopes, and dreams of our community. In this, the Hmoob community can help develop and provide a critical lens from which to begin to address issues of concern to our community. Our community must be able to determine our own educational needs and priorities, and educational

institutions must recognize these as legitimate and directional. In addition, schools must allow our community to define the ways in which our priorities are met in the schools. This can only happen if schools invest in training more Hmoob teachers, offer curricula in Hmoob language, history and culture, use and develop Hmoob materials, books and resources, bind teaching advancement to understanding and involvement and are accountable to the Hmoob community.

Schools must realize that the inadequacy of Western education to reach Hmoob students is not a problem for the Hmoob community to fix. There exists a complex web of racism, privilege and oppression, as well as poor teacher training, that leads to disproportionate responses, deficit thinking, marginalization of Hmoob students, and low educational attainment of our people. Brayboy (2009) also highlighted this in his argument. Schools must be open to other forms of teachings, especially that of our Elders.

Teachers

Educators must first and foremost recognize that education is a political activity, and that they are distributors of the power of the state. Everything educators do in the classroom reflects that role. As educators, they must learn to engage critical theory, understand their own bias, and appreciate and acknowledge their privilege. Education must be deconstructed so barriers that prevent teachers and communities from incorporating Indigenous knowledge in schools and curriculum can be identified and challenged. As Paulo Freire states, education could either be used as a tool to assimilate to the status quo or a tool to liberate and it is up to educators to choose which tool they

are going to engage in (Freire, 1993).

Most teachers are not aware that they play a role in the assimilation of our youth. Instead, they believe that they are only teaching to the standards. Teachers must take seriously their role in the assimilation of other people's children. They must understand why it is happening and to what they are assimilating our youth. I realize that this becomes difficult in a society in which you have the far right screaming for a "return to the basics," the very basics that created these systems of inequity in the first place. It is ironic to hear such things, as the so-called "basics" have never stopped. When conservatives refer to such basics, they are really talking about focusing education on that industrial education model. The basics are of a time when education was militarized, students were indoctrinated with nationalist rhetoric, and pedagogy was based on developing technical skills. We must not forget that the "good old days" was also the era of boarding schools and of segregation.

This back to basics is a cry for a focus on math, and science through a very rigid lens, one that leaves many students behind, especially Hmoob students who do not come from such a worldview. It is also a move to preclude innovation in education and rely solely on corporate-driven standardized curriculum, such as what is happening. As such, ethnic studies and most critical theory-based programs are being attacked. There is a growing policy of criminalization, and marginalization of students. Add on top of this the slow creep of privatizations of schools through a neo-liberal competitive model, and our youth really don't have a chance. Yet, we still hear our politicians calling for a neo-liberal model of education. We have federal policies claiming to make education more equitable but, really, it is a backdoor attempt by capitalists to privatize education and to

push out the students they feel do not belong. Even centrist politicians are espousing a need to move education towards competing with countries like China and India, which openly track their students and leave millions undereducated.

The role of non-Hmoob teachers in this recommendation is not to teach all parts of Hmoob culture but to help students confront the oppression, racism and privilege that maintains the deficit model of educating Hmoob and all minority students. For example, the critique of cultural assumptions upon which modern industrial civilization has been built could be used to explore how they have contributed to the exploitation of the natural world and human populations. Also, cultural relevance could be incorporated into the classroom with the use of Elders and community members as teachers.

In writing this, I have discovered that traditional Hmoob teaching methodologies are among the best and most relevant to our young people. Yet no one is practicing it. I hope that if Hmoob education practices are to be among the best, they should be for all students. I also hope that, given proper encouragement and a lot of work, teachers can make the changes necessary to become better allies to Hmoob students and the Hmoob community.

In our vision of working with youth at the Youth Center, we say to teachers that they must teach our youth to love being Hmoob. They must become invested and responsible to the Hmoob community. Teachers must also begin to develop relationships with Hmoob students based on Hmoob cultural principles of reciprocity and what our students bring to the classroom. They must learn to be flexible, patient, and humble. Whether they want to or not, teachers must become social and political advocates for their students and their students' communities. Again, teaching is inherently a political

act. One is either acting to maintain the status quo of oppressive relationships being reproduced in the classroom or challenging it.

For teachers teaching Hmoob students, they must be willing and able to critique their own practice and the bias of Western education. Freire reminds us to do this everyday (1993). Attending a "diversity event" is not an adequate experience in knowing how to be critical or supportive of a community. Teaching is one of the hardest professions. Yet, teachers do it because they know that they play a vital role in the passing of knowledge, values, and ways of being. Hmoob people believe that there is no profession more honorable than that of teaching, and when we look to traditional Hmoob culture, we see that this is true. Through this research, we know that teachers have the power to shape and to set the tone in how Hmoob youth see their language, their relationship to it and, ultimately, their identity as Hmoob people. The youth said it over and over again, that one of the biggest reasons they stopped using their language was because of their teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused specifically on Hmoob youth who are in high school. Although this study gives us a better understanding of their perceptions and relationship to language, what grew out of this study is that we need to further explore what Hmoob youth believe is core to building a strong Hmoob cultural identity. This may or not may involve Hmoob language. Future study should explore how Hmoob youth would identify as being Hmoob in America without specifically identifying language.

Future studies should explore the perceptions of Hmoob language with different

members of a family, including siblings, parents and grandparents. The study would look at how the whole family views Hmoob language and believes are the barriars to language acqusition. Through this future study, we would be able to see the multiple perspectives of the different generations and the relationships each individual family member has to Hmoob language and compare the difference and similairties of the perspectives.

Future studies should also look at what are the other barriars to Hmoob language aqusition. The youth in this study mentioned schools as the number one barriar to their language aqusition. Future studies could look at other barriars and identify what would be able to break through these barrairs. This future study would be helpful in addressing language loss quickly for it might be an easier tactic then addressing a whole system such as schooling, which the root cause would have to be addressed in order to support language acquisition.

Future research should be conducted with the intention of language and cultural survival. One of the best practice is for the reseracher to be a part of the Hmoob community or has a deep commiment to Hmoob language survival.

Schooling

The legacy of the boarding schools lives in contemporary education system. Such education has very little to do with helping young people develop a critical understanding of the world. Instead, it is oriented towards assimilating students into a dominant norm to maintain current power structures. The current capitalist power structures seek students who are obedient, uncritical, and believe deeply in the hegemony of such paradigms as nationalism and American exceptionalism. This is the system into which our youth are

being indoctrinated in to but which is dubious when our students are not part of the dominant culture. This is especially true for Indigenous peoples whose value systems contradict dominant cultures.

The assimilation of students of color into a Western value system begins and ends with the systematic destruction of young people's self worth. Educators have yet to address the fact that American history and the basis for public education are based in assimilation and racism and modeled through the tactics of militarism and industrialization. In the absence of discourse on the purpose of assimilation and education, educators carry on the tradition started by the boarding schools and continues to be successful in destroying youth self perception of their culture, language, and ultimately their identity.

Hmoob Education

Throughout history, education has been the primary tool of assimilation of Indigenous peoples into oppressed positions within dominant, power assertive, multinational societies, such as the United States. However, today we see that Indigenous societies all over the world are claiming education for themselves as a tool of resistance, liberation, and cultural survival. They are teaching culture, language, and history, and reinforcing positive cultural identity via community strengthening and sovereignty building. Indigenous educators and activists understand that education must be culturally and community responsive through developing reciprocal teacher-learner, learner-teacher relationships.

Through this research, I strongly conclude that education can no longer serve as

assimilation into a greater, so-called "national" interest. It cannot be assimilation to consumerism, nor can it be education to a workforce. Education must create multiple learning opportunities for communities, as well as challenge the threats to the survival of those communities. This means education must serve as a tool of multifaceted activism to fight oppression, racism, and environmental degradation, and to build community consciousness. For example, Hmoob education builds culture, history, resistance, and survival and relates the narratives necessary for the development of critical thought, liberated minds and open hearts. Indigenous education provides the settings through which Hmoob communities can re-teach the traditional knowledge used for so long to maintain the healthy balance that builds community with the spirit world and dependence on the Earth. This is at the heart of Hmoob people as an Indigenous people.

Although we no longer have a formal federal assimilation policy, the discourse has simply shifted and is talked about in terms of "citizenship." Instead of moving students toward assimilation, policy makers now speak in terms of moving students toward an individualism for competition for globalization. And while they may feel that they are preparing students for the "modern world," this is the same system of colonization and imperialism that led to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples in the first place and continues to do so. Chief Sitting Bull's remarks are apropos. The goal may not be to turn Hmoob people into "slaves of the White man" but certainly slaves of the dollar. It is painfully obvious that a part of the teacher's job is to void a student's identity and teach him or her to fit into a capitalist society so he or she may forget the language and culture of their ancestors.

Hmoob language, worldviews, and ways of being offer a way to create an

inclusive yet individualized curriculum while learning to recognize, confront and oppose the forces of oppression, imperialism and hegemony embedded not just in the school system but also in current socio-economic paradigms. It also offers a way for Hmoob students and non-Hmoob students to more fully and fairly participate in their own education. We cannot simply try and fit Hmoob youth into an oppressive, abusive system that blames them for failing. We have to remember that when schools fail to be political, when they fail to challenge these dominant oppressive discourses, they end up perpetuating them.

Hmoob Language Curriculum

School curricula need to reflect the cultural background of their students. Schools also need to understand the dynamics of how children are socialized both into their home culture and into the school culture. Teachers need to be able to get students to think about culture and how it shapes their lives. As the Hmoob community, we know that there is a hidden curriculum that promotes imperialism and capitalist discourse. When we leave this hidden curriculum unchallenged, we become complicit in the colonization and ongoing ethnocide of peoples around the world, especially Indigenous people who are the most vulnerable and susceptible to globalization.

Instead, the Hmoob community must find ways to embed Hmoob language, culture, and knowledge across all areas of curricula. We must advocate for schools at the very least, to bring in perspectives of people who can offer counter stories. The Hmoob experience in the Vietnam War, for example, should by now be mandatory and well known. Curricula should not be standardized but open. All students should be allowed to

explore learning and content that is important to them while being given opportunities for multiple expressions of interest and reflection. It is not enough to just teach Hmoob language in the school. The Hmoob context must be perceivable by all students and the community as an integral, valid and legitimate.

Kauv Caum (Circle) Learning and Teaching

If education institutions want our students to feel connected to their learning, Hmoob education is imperative to the process. Hmoob education holds the relationship between the learner and teacher as circular, evolving, like breathing in and out. I believe this should be viewed as best practice for all teachers, and teacher education programs. Flexibility and patience for the learner's pace are at the heart of building a significant relationship and the key to unlocking the web of Hmoob knowledge. Experiential and interactive teaching methods must be employed in critical, culturally responsive classrooms.

I believe circles should be thought of as form informing function in critical classrooms. Circles work on multiple levels to reinforce traditional Hmoob culture and pedagogy. Pulling the learning community literally into a circle brings everyone together in a way that most classrooms cannot. It allows students and the teacher to see each other as equals and adds to the sense of community. It helps everyone to recognize that we all belong and have an integral place as individuals. It reinforces ideas of respect, reliance and reciprocity, not just because everyone can see each other, but also because you know that what you say and do is put into the circle and affects everyone. This helps to build honesty and relationships that are integral to understanding and learning.

When students begin to believe in the circle, there is no need to remind them of attendance, because a circle is only one when everyone is there. This helps to build a reciprocal responsibility for students. It also moderates the time each person takes in the circle when they know that there is only a limited amount. Circles tackle learning in the same way that Hmoob Elders talk about learning. They allow time for listening, reflecting and practice in a supportive context. They physically mirror the circle of life and that natural process of learning.

Teaching Hmoob

A Hmoob classroom uses a lot of oral tradition. Elders are important. They are the traditional teachers through whom our children come to learn about who they are, their history, culture and language. Again, our Elders are the true knowledge keepers. This reinforces traditional relationship practices and the natural cycle of teaching and learning. Through this traditional method of teaching, each individual student's story is powerful and becomes part of a larger whole. It would be flexible and individualized, where students working in small groups are tackling issues and reporting back to the class as a whole, a natural process of praxis. Grades, if there are any, are based on how far the student has come in his or her own specific learning and are largely up to the student to determine through set goals. Testing, when used, must help students learn effectively. Trivial tests and a reliance on detail rather than content or any other superficial quality must be discarded as irrelevant.

Through this whole process, the teacher is a guide and resource as opposed to an authority figure. Educational institutions should recognize and celebrate the survival of

Hmoob people. They should teach specific stories of where this has happened, especially against overwhelming political and social odds. In support of this, teachers should also help students remember what did happen, talk about war, genocide, colonization, civil rights and why these things happened and are forgotten. This helps to build a collective recognition of a more realistic past. In a similar vein, teachers should help to relate the learning to a Hmoob context. They should make connections to both historical and contemporary Hmoob issues.

Finally, educational institutions must become advocates for their students' cultural needs. I am insistent that no longer can education be an agent of assimilation in pushing our students to become White. Instead, these institutions must pick up the political banner of the communities that they serve and become political advocates against conservative and neo-liberal policies and standardization of any kind. In this vein, the classroom becomes a place of liberation for our students. When we are able to connect our youth to the past through critical dialogues, this allows them to make sense of the present and to envision a bold, inclusive future for our community.

Hmoob Community

This research was done to support of our struggles in keeping our language and culture alive here in the United States. We, as Hmoob people, have invested very little into our traditional ways of teaching and being. For starters, we have to actively support our youth in learning about who they are, especially when they tell us that everyone and everything is stacked up against them. They tell us that they want to learn Hmoob language, culture, and knowledge, and we have to create foundations for them to do so.

The hardest part is how to do it in a healthy way that teaches them to value and love who they are when everything they see is telling them the opposite. We have to be more understanding of the social pressures they face. Our responsibility is to care for them, love them no matter how they show up, push them, encourage them, and support them to be the best that they can be, even if it is against our "culture." Our traditional beliefs tell us that all our youth already have a "life letter," that they have a purpose and as their Elders, we must help them discover and help facilitate the discovery of that purpose. Indigenous education tells us that teaching is not about "fixing" students; it is discovering new ideas, new values, and new worlds of hope with them.

We also have to revitalize the fostering of our traditional and spiritual relationships with Hmoob knowledge, ways, and being in the world. Hmoob language and culture create opportunities in all kinds of ways for our community as a whole. To truly understand the effects of educational assimilation, cultural loss and the refugee experience of our people and to fully and adequately address the needs of our students and our community, we need to fight for our seat at the table and determine our own educational needs. We have to start demanding for representation of our culture, knowledge, and language in all spaces, not just safe spaces but at the same time, we have to be critical of those spaces and be cognizant that we are not tokens but have real say in the matter.

Assimilation is so devious and often so subtle that it usually requires us to look back over many years to see how our identities, language, culture and knowledge have been replaced and our values have changed. If our people continue to pay little attention to the deterioration of our culture, language and spirituality, then Hmoob people will be

amalgamated into blind capitalists and cease to exist as a distinct people with a distinct language, culture, perspective, and way of being in the world.

Finally, here is a story about the multicultural potato that we teach our young people, a tradition we started 15 years ago. Our people are farmers, a trade that we should be proud of but are not. As a Tribal people, we have always lived close to the Earth, dependent on her for our survival. It is only fitting that I close with this story of the Quechua people:

The Quechua people of the Andes in South America, also known as the Incas, and the people before them developed over four thousand varieties of potato. They did not simply find them growing wild. They observed them and experimented with them in all manner of land and habitat. They say there might be over one hundred variety growing in a single valley. By exploring new varieties, they enhanced the potato as a whole. This great diversity in the potato increased its strength and overall resistance to disease.

When the Spanish arrived, they found the potato to be ugly. They felt that it was inferior to their grains and used it only for animal feed. Eventually, they brought around four varieties back to Europe. They did not appreciate the need for genetic diversity. Most Europeans felt it was sinful to eat potatoes, but in Ireland, where the people had nothing else to eat, the potato became a staple food for a third of the population. When the potato beetle was introduced to Ireland, it caused a devastating potato blight. This was rarely seen in South America because of the resistance innate in genetic variety. The Quechua understood that there was strength in diversity.

In Ireland, the potato was wiped out, causing a million people to go without food. Thousands starved. Thousands more were forced from their lands by British landlords and emigrated to the Americas and Australia.

A little potato permanently changed the history of Ireland, the U.S. and Australia. That potato teaches us that strength is found in diversity. Today, this is the very things that millions of farmers and gardeners around the world are trying to promote as they bring back old and develop new varieties of potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, and other plants.

It strikes me, then, that we do not seek the same inspiration in teaching our children but, instead, aim to standardize and hegemonize.

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Apendix A: IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

June 15, 2017

Lynn Brice

218-340-2618
lbrice@d.umn.edu

Dear Lynn Brice:

On 6/15/2017, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Hmoobness: An Analysis of Hmoob (Hmong) Youth and Their Perceptions of Hmoob Language in Mid-size Wisconsin Community.
Investigator:	Lynn Brice
IRB ID:	STUDY00000474
Sponsored Funding:	None
Grant ID/Con Number:	None
Internal UMN Funding:	None
Fund Management Outside University:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed with this Submission:	• CSLetterHead1Wordcopy.docx.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • HmoobAssentForm.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Final IRB, Category: Other; • Board Approval for Study , Category: Other Committee Approvals; • English Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • FinalIRBXong.docx.pdf, Category: IRB Protocol; • Hmoob Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • English Assent Form, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that this study meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To arrive at this determination, the IRB used "WORKSHEET: Exemption (HRP-312)." If you have any questions about this determination, please review that Worksheet in the HRPP Toolkit Library and contact the IRB office if needed.

This study met the following category(ies) for exemption:

- (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices. (Both the procedures involve normal education practices and the objectives of the research involve normal educational practices.)

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that Human Subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the Human Subjects responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Ongoing IRB review and approval for this study is not required; however, this determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a Modification to the IRB for a determination.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the HRPP Toolkit Library on the IRB website.

For grant certification purposes, you will need these dates and the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003).

Sincerely,

Jeffery Perkey, CIP, MLS
IRB Analyst

We value feedback from the research community and would like to hear about your experience. The link below will take you to a brief survey that will take a minute or two to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will help us better understand what we are doing well and areas that may require improvement. Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Even if you have provided feedback in the past, we want and welcome your evaluation.

https://umn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_5BiYrqPNMJRQSBn

Appendix B: English Assent Form

English Assent Form

Protocol Title: Their	Hmoobness: An Analysis of Hmoob (Hmong) Youth and Perceptions of Hmoob Language in a Mid-size Wisconsin Community.
Principal Investigator:	Xong Xiong [redacted] (608) 784-1617
Emergency Contact:	Mai Xiong (608) 433-6953

Purpose, Procedure and Duration of Research:

- The purpose of this study is to understand Hmoob youth perception of Hmoob language and how they are reconstructing their identity and culture through the language lens.
- Procedure: There will be 3 Tiers to this research:
  - The 1st Tier consists of observations of routine programs and activities at the Youth Center, formal and informal interaction and engagement with youth.
  - The 2nd tier of data collection will be formal focus group interviews. I may be asked to take part in the focus group interviews and all interviews will be audio recorded for analysis by the researcher.
  - The last tier will be one on one interviews. I may be asked to take part in the one on one interviews, which will also be audio recorded for analysis.
- The duration of the research activities above with youth will be June 7, 2017 to August 31, 2017.

Potential Risks:

- I may experience emotional distress when expressing my feelings and thoughts on my identity and language loss.
- I may also feel uncomfortable when discussing this topic.
-

Possible benefits:

- Ability to express and document my feelings, thoughts and beliefs of Hmoob language, cultural and identity.
- Contributed to area of Hmoob research.

Rights and Confidentiality:

- My participation is voluntary.
- I can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty any consequence.
- Should I feel uncomfortable participating in a discussion or answering a question, I can decline to respond to participate or answer a question with no consequences.
- The result of this study may be published in education literature or presented at professional meetings and conferences.
- All information will be kept confidential through the use of alias.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to the researcher Xong Xiong (608) 799-8638 or to the study advisor Dr. Lynn Brice, College of Education and Human Professions, University of Minnesota, Duluth (218) 726-6815 or lbrice@d.umn.edu. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) within the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 or go to www.irb.umn.edu/report/html. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the researcher.
- You cannot reach the researcher.
- You want to talk to someone besides the researcher.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Student Assent_____
Date___/___/_____

Print Name_____

Researcher_____
Date___/___/_____
Xong Xiong

Appendix C: Hmoob Assent Form

Hmoob Assent Form

Ntawv Tso Cai

Daim Ntawv Tshawb: Los tshawb txog cov tub hluas ntxhais hluas txoj kev xav txog	Hmoob cov lus thiab lawv xav li cas txog lawv cov lus.
Tus Thawj Tshawb:	Choo Xyooj [redacted] (608) 784-1617
Emergency Contact:	Mai Xiong (608) 433-6953

Hom Phiaj, Txheej Txheem thiab ntev npaum cav:

- Lub hom phiaj ntawm daim ntawv no yog los tshawb txog cov tub hluas ntxhais hluas txoj kev xav txog Hmoob cov lus thiab lawv xav li cas txog lawv cov "identity" ua neeg Hmoob thiab li no kev ki lawv tus "identity" rau lawv cov lus Hmoob hos txawv li cas.
- Txheej Txheem: Muab 3 theem txheej txheem ntawm txoj kev los tshawb:
  - Theem 1, yog saib cov kev sib tham, sib ntsib pem lub Youth Center.
  - Theem 2, yog nrog ib pab neeg tham. Cov lus no yuav muaj kaw tseg thiab yuav muab sau tseg cia.
  - Theem 3, yog yuav nrog ib tug neeg tham xwb. Cov lus no yuav muaj kaw tseg thiab yuav muab sau tseg cia.
- Ntev npaum cav: Yuav pib lub 6 hli mus txog lub 8 hli.

Kev txhawj xeeb:

- Thaum kuv qhia txog kuv li kev kawm thiab kev xav tej zaum yuav ua rau kuv yuav tus siab los kua muag los tsis paub.
- Thaum tham txog Hmoob cov lus, tej zaum yuav muaj qhee lus uas yuav ua rau kuv tsis nyiam, txaj muag los txhawj xeeb.
-

Tej yam uas yuav ntxim li muaj nuj nqis rau yus tus kheej:

- Yuav haj yam muaj peev xwm ntxiv mus los piav thiab kho kuv li cov lus xav hauv kuv lub siab thiab kuv li kev tshawb hais txog lus Hmoob li thiab kuv xav li cas txog lawv kuv cov "identity" ua neeg Hmoob thiab li no kev ki kuv tus "identity" rau kuv cov lus Hmoob hos txawv li cas.
- Yuav pab ntxiv rau cov ntaub ntawv qhia txog Hmoob.

Txoj cai rau kuv ua tswj tsis pub lwm tus neeg muab nthuav tawm:

- Qhov kuv ua nod yog kuv zoo kuv siab ua xwb tsis muaj leej twg yuam.
- Thaum twg kuv xav tsum tsis xav khoob khuab kawm ntxiv lawm kuv yeej muaj cai rho kuv tus kheej tawm yuav tsis raug lus dab tsi.
- Cov lus kawg ntsis ua kuv tau sau txog kuv hais ntawm nod tej zaum yuav tawm rau suav daws saib rau hauv cov ntawm qib siab thiab tej paj xoos sis tham loj nyob pem tsev kawm ntawm qib siab.
- Tas nrho cov lus tau los hais yuav tsis pub muab nthuav tawm yog tsis yeem los muab lub npe cuav los siv.

Muaj lus dab tsis txog lub hom phiaj yuav los tshawb cov ntaub ntawm no tiv tauj tus thawj tshawb: Choo Xyooj (608) 799-8638 los tus xwb fwb Dr. Lynn Brice nyob rau lub tsev kawm ntawv University Minnesota, Duluth (218) 726-6815 or lbrice@d.umn.edu. Yog muaj lus xav noog txog cov cai los tiv thaiv neeg tiv tauj rau Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 los www.irb.umn.edu/report/html. Yog koj cov lus noog zoo li no

- Tus thawj tshawb tsis teb koj cov lus noog.
- Tiv tauj tsis tau tus thawj tshawb.
- Xav nrog ib tug neeg txawv ntawm tus thawj tshawb.
- Muaj lus noog txog sab koj muaj cia li cas yog it tus neeg tus thawj tshawb nrog tham.
- Muaj tswv yim thiab lus noog cov qhov research no.

Tus neeg pab lub npe_____Hnub ___/___/_____

Sau Npe_____

Tus thawj tshawb _____Hnub ___/___/_____

Choo Xyooj

Appendix D: English Consent Form

English Consent Form

Consent Form

Protocol Title: Their	Hmoobness: An Analysis of Hmoob (Hmong) Youth and Perceptions of Hmoob Language in a Mid-size Wisconsin Community.
Principal Investigator:	Xong Xiong [redacted] (608) 784-1617
Emergency Contact:	Mai Xiong (608) 433-6953

Purpose, Procedure and Duration of Research:

- The purpose of this study is to understand Hmoob youth perception of Hmoob language and how they are reconstructing their identity and culture through the language lens.
- Procedure: There will be 3 Tiers to this research:
  - The 1st Tier consists of observations of routine programs and activities at the Youth Center, formal and informal interaction and engagement with youth.
  - The 2nd Tier of data collection will be formal focus group interviews. The researcher may ask my child to take part in the focus group interviews and all interviews will be audio recorded for analysis by the researcher.
  - The last tier will be one on one interviews. The researcher may ask my child to take part in the one on one interviews, which will also be audio recorded for analysis.
- The duration of the research activities above with youth will be June 7, 2017 to August 31, 2017.

Potential Risks:

- Your child may experience emotional distress when expressing their feelings and thoughts on identity and language loss.
- Your child may also feel uncomfortable when discussing this topic.

Possible benefits:

- Ability to express and document your child's feelings, thoughts and beliefs of

Hmoob language, cultural and identity.

- Your child's contributed to area of Hmoob research.
-

Rights and Confidentiality:

- My child's participation is voluntary.
- My child can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty or consequence.
- Should my child feel uncomfortable participating in a discussion or answering a question, they can decline to respond to participate or answer a question with no consequences.
- The result of this study may be published in education literature or presented at professional meetings and conferences.
- All information will be kept confidential through the use of alias.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to the researcher Xong Xiong (608) 799-8638 or to the study advisor Dr. Lynn Brice, College of Education and Human Professions, University of Minnesota, Duluth (218) 726-6815 or lbrice@d.umn.edu. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) within the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 or go to www.irb.umn.edu/report/html. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the researcher.
- You cannot reach the researcher.
- You want to talk to someone besides the researcher.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Parent/Guardian_____
Date___/___/_____

Print Name_____

Researcher_____
Date___/___/_____
Xong Xiong

Appendix E: Hmoob Consent Form

Hmoob Consent Form

Ntawv Tso Cai

Daim Ntawv Tshawb: txog	Los tshawb txog cov tub hluas ntxhais hluas txoj kev xav Hmoob cov lus thiab lawv xav li cas txog lawv cov lus.
Tus Thawj Tshawb:	Choo Xyooj [redacted] (608) 784-1617
Emergency Contact:	Mai Xiong (608) 433-6953

Hom Phiaj, Txheej Txheem thiab ntev npaum cav:

- Lub hom phiaj ntawm daim ntawv no yog los tshawb txog cov tub hluas ntxhais hluas txoj kev xav txog Hmoob cov lus thiab lawv xav li cas txog lawv cov "identity" ua neeg Hmoob thiab li no kev ki lawv tus "identity" rau lawv cov lus Hmoob hos txawv li cas.
- Txheej Txheem: Muab 3 theem txheej txheem ntawm txoj kev los tshawb:
    - Theem 1, yog saib cov kev sib tham, sib ntsib pem lub Youth Center.
    - Theem 2, yog nrog ib pab neeg tham. Cov lus no yuav muaj kaw tseg thiab yuav muab sau tseg cia.
    - Theem 3, yog yuav nrog ib tug neeg tham xwb. Cov lus no yuav muaj kaw tseg thiab yuav muab sau tseg cia.
- Ntev npaum cav: Yuav pib lub 6 hli mus txog lub 8 hli.

Kev txhawj xeeb:

- Thaum kuv tus menyuam qhia txog nws li kev kawm thiab kev xav tej zaum yuav ua rau nws tus siab los kua muag los.
- Thaum kuv tus menyuam tham txog Hmoob cov lus, tej zaum yuav muaj qhee lus uas yuav ua rau nws tsis nyiam, txaj muag los txhawj xeeb.
-

Tej yam uas yuav ntxim li muaj nuj nqis rau kuv tus menyuam:

- Yuav haj yam muaj peev xwm ntxiv mus los piav thiab kho kuv tus menyuam li cov lus xav hauv nws lub siab thiab nws li kev tshawb hais txog lus Hmoob li thiab sab nws xav li cas txog nws li "identity" ua neeg Hmoob thiab li no kev ki kuv tus "identity" rau nws cov lus Hmoob hos txawv li cas.
- Yuav pab ntxiv rau cov ntaub ntawv qhia txog Hmoob.

Txoj cai tswj tsis pub lwm tus neeg muab nthuav tawm:

- Qhov kuv kuv tus menyuam ua nod yog kuv zoo siab tso rau kuv tus menyuam ua xwb tsis muaj leej twg yuam.
- Thaum twg kuv tus menyuam xav tsum tsis xav khoob khuab kawm ntxiv lawm kuv tus menyuam yeej muaj cai rho nws tus kheej tawm yuav tsis raug lus dab tsi.
- Cov lus kawg ntsis ua kuv tus menyuam tau sau txog kuv hais ntawm nod tej zaum yuav tawm rau suav daws saib rau hauv cov ntawm qib siab thiab tej paj xoos sis tham loj nyob pem tsev kawm ntawm qib siab.
- Tas nrho cov lus tau los hais yuav tsis pub muab nthuav tawm yog tsis yeem los muab lub npe cuav los siv.

Muaj lus dab tsis txog lub hom phiaj yuav los tshawb cov ntaub ntawm no tiv tauj tus thawj tshawb: Choo Xyooj (608) 799-8638 los tus xwb fwb Dr. Lynn Brice nyob rau lub tsev kawm ntawv University Minnesota, Duluth (218) 726-6815 or lbrice@d.umn.edu. Yog muaj lus xav noog txog cov cai los tiv thaiv neeg tiv tauj rau Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 los www.irb.umn.edu/report/html. Yog koj cov lus noog zoo li no

- Tus thawj tshawb tsis teb koj cov lus noog.
- Tiv tauj tsis tau tus thawj tshawb.
- Xav nrog ib tug neeg txawv ntawm tus thawj tshawb.
- Muaj lus noog txog sab koj muaj cia li cas yog it tus neeg tus thawj tshawb nrog tham.
- Muaj tswv yim thiab lus noog cov qhov research no.

Niam/Txiv lub npe_____Hnub ___/___/_____

Sau Npe_____

Tus thawj tshawb _____Hnub ___/___/_____

Choo Xyooj

Appendix F: IRB Submission Form

INSTRUCTIONS:

· Use "SOCIAL TEMPLATE PROTOCOL (HRP-580)" to prepare a document with the information from following sections.
· If your research involves physical or invasive interventions, e.g., physical examinations, blood draws or specimen collection, or exercise activities, then you must use "MEDICAL TEMPLATE PROTOCOL (HRP-590)" instead.
· If your research involves a drug or device, then you must use "MEDICAL TEMPLATE PROTOCOL (HRP-590) instead. If you are unsure about whether your study involves a drug or device, please contact the IRB office at irb@umn.edu to obtain guidance as you prepare your protocol.
· Depending on the nature of what you are doing, some sections may not be applicable to your research. If so mark as "NA". For example, research involving a retrospective chart review may have many sections with N/A. For subsections, like 1.x or 8.x, you can delete it if it's not applicable.
· After you submit your protocol for review in ETHOS, your protocol will be saved there. You should use that saved version as your starting point for edits to the next version. You may choose to track protocol versions for yourself outside of ETHOS; however, you should ensure that any version you edit is the same as the most recently approved version in ETHOS.
· As you are writing the protocol, remove all instructions in italics so that they are not contained in the final version of your protocol.
· See the Table of Contents instructions for updating page numbers after you complete your protocol.

PROTOCOL TITLE:

Hmoobness: An Analysis of Hmoob (Hmong) Youth and Their Perceptions of Hmoob Language in a mid-size Midwest community.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR or FACULTY ADVISOR:

Dr. Lynn Brice
UMD Education
1-218-726-6815
lbrice@d.umn.edu

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR:

Xong Xiong
Ed.D. Candidate
Department of Education

1-608-799-8638
xion0159@d.umn.edu

VERSION NUMBER/DATE:

Version number one on 5/11/2017

REVISION HISTORY

Revision #	Version Date	Summary of Changes	Consent Change?

Table of Contents

After completing your protocol, right click on the Table of Contents below and select "Update Field." If prompted, select "Update entire table." This will automatically update the protocol sections and page numbers for you. Do this also each time you modify your protocol after initial approval.

ABBREVIATIONS/DEFINITIONS

Include any abbreviations or definitions for key or technical terms you use in your protocol.

- [Abbreviation/Definition 1]
- [Abbreviation/Definition 2]
- [Abbreviation/Definition 3]

STUDY SUMMARY

Study Title	Hmoobness: An Analysis of Hmoob (Hmong) Youth and Their Perceptions of Hmoob Language in Mid-size Midwest Community.
Study Design	Qualitative Design - Phenomenological

Primary Objective	To understand Hmoob youth perception of Hmoob language, their relationship to their language and the role language plays in the formation of their identity.
Secondary Objective(s)	To understand the multiple and often complex layers of barriers to Hmoob language acquisition for Hmoob youth.
Primary Study Intervention or Interaction	Formal focus groups interviews and individual interviews, and observations.
Study Population	Hmoob youth ages 13 to 18 who are active members at the Youth Center
Sample Size (number of participants)	Total number of participants 25 Two focus group interviews of 5-7 participants from the 25 total 3-5 individual interviews with participants from the 25 totals
Study Duration for Individual Participants	June 7, 2017 to May 30, 2018

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Purpose:

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine Hmoob youth perceptions of Hmoob language in order to understand the ways in which engagement with Hmoob language shapes their identities as Hmoob youth in a mid-size Midwest community.

2.0 Background

2.1 Significance of Research Question/Purpose:

The Hmoob diaspora poses threats to Hmoob cultural commonality, drastically impacting Hmoob identities in complex ways that threaten Hmoob language and culture (Thao, Arguelles, Afterword, & Pennekamp, 2006). While many scholars theorize about historical, social, political and cultural factors that impact language and culture transmission, what is less known is how Hmoob youth perceive to be the barriers to Hmoob language and culture acquisition.

The United Nations predicts that a language dies every two weeks. At this rate, it is estimated that 90% of the world's languages will die by the end of this Century, leaving the world with only 100 of the most commonly used languages. The majority of these endangered or extinct languages are Indigenous languages. Indigenous people make up only 5% of the world's population, yet they speak 90% of the world's languages. What is worth noting is that locked within Indigenous languages are Indigenous knowledge systems (ecological knowledge) that have yet to be documented and preserve. The vast majority of Indigenous people do not have writing systems and knowledge is passed down orally from generation to generation through their language. The rate of language extinction equates to the extinction of thousands of years of knowledge that can potentially save the Earth's delicate ecosystem.

2.2 *Preliminary Data:* NONE

2.3 *Existing Literature:*

There have been studies focusing on language loss and how this phenomenon differs from one community to another. Past research tells us that Hmoob youth believe that language is an important factor in their identity as Hmoob people (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012). It also tells us that they have a general idea of what Hmoob identity is and understand that language plays an important role in coming to that conclusion. However, the research is still unclear on how Hmoob youth come to the conclusion of identity formation, and how this then is tied to language advocacy and culture survival (Xiong-Lor, 2015). This research will add to literature on the Hmoob experience in the U.S., Hmoob youth's perceptions of their language, and how they are reconstructing their identity and culture through the language lens.

3.0 Study Endpoints/Events/Outcomes

3.1 Primary Endpoint/Event/Outcome:

The primary outcome of this study is to describe Hmoob youth perceptions of the Hmoob language, the barriers to Hmoob language acquisition, and how Hmoob youth are reconstructing their identities and culture through a language lens.

3.1 Secondary Endpoint(s)/Event(s)/Outcome(s): NONE

4.0 Study Intervention(s)/Interaction(s)

4.1 Description:

This is a phenomenological research design. The interactions with the research participants will include observations of routine activities at the Youth Center, focus group interviews, and formal individual interviews. The setting of study will be at the Youth Center in a mid-size midwest community (pseudonyms will be employed in the reporting of the study). The PI is an adult Hmoob woman who is fluent in both Hmoob and English, a member of the Hmoob community, part of the Xyooj (Xiong) clan and plays the role as the granter writer as well as an advocate for Hmoob youth at the Youth Center. The PI also engages with the youth routinely as an adult role model in their lives. For the purposes of the study, the PI will conduct weekly informal interviews (conversations with youth) and observe group activities for which PI will keep field notes of participant observation with approximately 25 participants. After observations, preliminary analysis of the field notes will be taken. The PI will invite 10-14 participants to participate in one of two focus group interviews. Following focus group interviews, the PI will invite 3-5 interested individuals for individual interviews.

5.0 Procedures Involved

5.1 Study Design:

The PI adopts a phenomenological research design that draws upon Indigenous methodologies and adaptation of grounded theory. The research participants are Hmoob youth between the ages of 13 to 18, who take part in the programming and activities at the Youth Center and live in mid-size community in the midwest. The Youth Center is part of a non-profit agency with the mission to provide culturally empowering advocacy to the Hmoob Community through holistic support services, with revitalization of the Hmoob language and culture as the foundation. The vision is to build a culturally vibrant Hmoob community. The Youth Center is a place where Hmoob youth come to learn about language and culture, build relationships, find support and be empowered to make changes in their lives.

The PI's role at the Youth Center is to support, guide and act as a mentor to support youth. Also as the grant writer, the PI has written language revitalization into the grants as learning objectives in combating violence in the Hmoob community and forming healthy identities. The PI is a well-known leader in the Hmoob community and the Hmoob community knows that the PI has the best interest of the youth in mind when

administering the programs at the Youth Center.

Indigenous methodology (IM) is adopted for this research because outside of the United States Hmoob people are identified as Indigenous tribal people of Asia. The principles of Indigenous methodology are adapted because Hmoob youth share similar social, cultural, language and political history with other tribal nations around the world. When engaging with Hmoob youth the tenets of Indigenous methodology will help the PI to give a more accurate analysis and approach when examining the lived experiences of Hmoob youth as tribal people with language as the phenomena to be explored. Indigenous methodologies also recognize that Indigenous people are the most diverse group of people in the world and therefore, all approaches to research must be adaptable and culturally appropriate.

For example, the ways in which the PI will interact with youth will be done according to Hmoob Kev Cai (the Hmoob way, norms protocols). Such norms involve building relationship, trust as well as listening and hearing the voices of the youth (which the PI has done with most youth for the past 6 years.) Therefore, the research protocol will also reflect Hmoob Kev Cai, which will be followed throughout the 3 stages of data collection. These protocols are followed so the findings will be most authentic and culturally responsive.

5.2 Study Procedures:

The PI will rely on formal and informal methods of collecting data. There will be three tiers of data collection. For the first tier of data collection, the PI will conduct weekly informal interviews (conversations with youth) and observations of group activities for which PI will keep field notes of participant observation. After observations and preliminary analysis of the field notes, the PI will invite 10-14 participants who are actively involved at the Center and show strong interest in Hmoob language and culture to participate in one of two focus group interviews. Participation will be determined by the first to sign up to participate. The focus group interviews will be conducted by the PI and will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis and reporting purposes. Following focus group interviews, the PI will invite 3-5 interested individuals for individual interviews. The participants in the individual interviews will be selected on the basis of interest shown in participating and representing a range of language ability and self awareness, determined informally by the PI. The individual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis and reporting purposes. To analyze all interview and field note data, the PI will employ constant comparative method.

The 1st Tier will involve participant observations by the PI of the routine activities in which the youth engages in language practice at the Youth Center. The activities include working in the garden, learning Hmoob language (reading & writing), talking circles and art and culture projects. The PI will engage with youth in conversations (i.e

informal interviews) during the group activities about their experiences with, thoughts about, and practice of Hmoob language. After the activities, the PI will take time to write down field notes. The PI anticipates collecting field notes of 4 observational sessions with approximately 25 youth participants within a four- week time frame.

By adapting principles of grounded theory, the PI will be involved in ongoing analysis of field notes to identify particular patterns and topics that emerge (Creswell, 2013). The principles of grounded theory allow patterns and topics to emerge naturally, therefore, after Tier 1 of the data collection, the PI then can discern topics or patterns to help inform Tier 2 of the research.

The 2nd Tier of data collection will be informed by prior analysis of Tier 1 and will explore the research question more in depth. For focus group interviews of Tier 2, the PI will invite youth to participate in one of the two focus group interviews with about 5-7 participants in each group. Participation will be determined by those who decide to sign up first. The focus group interviews will engage the youth in more intensive discussion about their perceptions and experiences with Hmoob language and the the role that language plays in their identity formation as Hmoob youth growing up in the midwest in the United States. The focus group interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interests of Tier 2 participants will help inform Tier 3.

The 3rd and final Tier of data collection will be one-on-one interviews with 3-5 youth. Based on the PI's observations, participants for one-on-one interviews will be invited by the PI based on their interest and participation in Tier 2. The youth in Tier 3 will be those who have greater experience with the language and would want to share a stronger sense of themselves as Hmoob youth. The individual interviews will also be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Throughout the study the confidentiality of the participants will be respected. The PI can assure the confidentiality of the youth who are members of the Youth Center. Youth confidentiality will be respected, and pseudonyms will be used throughout data reporting. The PI will be the only person who has access to the field notes, and the audio recorded interviews in order to protect and safeguard the confidentiality of participants as well as to minimize the risk to participants, therefore, the risks are minimal.

5.3 Follow-Up:

Base on adaptation of grounded theory principles, the process of this research will be done in 3 stages or Tiers. The 1st Tier of data collection, will be observation, interactions and informal conversations. This 1st Tier of data collection will help inform the 2nd Tier of the research, where the PI will ask interested participants to take part in focus group interviews. The 2nd Tier of research will then help to inform the 3rd Tier of one on one

interviews. The different stages of research process are based on the preliminary analysis and findings of the previous stage and helps to inform the following stages. Principles of grounded theory, state that we cannot fully anticipate the phenomenon, for it is emergent, and therefore, one stage helps to unfold the stages that follow.

6.0 Data Banking

6.1 N/A

7.0 Sharing of Results with Participants

7.1

One of the main tenets of the Indigenous methodology is that the research goes back to the community and most importantly, that it does not harm the community. Reciprocity is stressed in all relationships, especially with outsiders. Though the Hmoob are not Indigenous to this country, they are Indigenous to Asia. As Indigenous people of Asia, the Hmoob community still hold many of these same beliefs. This important tenet stresses that research being done benefits and gives back to the community. As the PI and member of the Hmoob community, I strongly believe and want to follow through with this tenet; therefore, it is my community's expectation that the results of the study will go back to help support and empower them.

Adhering to this tenet the PI will ask the Board of Directors of the Hmoob Youth Center, staff who work directly with the youth, Hmoob educators and Hmoob community members what and how they all envision the results of this research and how it can support or be useful in their work with the Hmoob community. The PI assumes that perhaps the biggest goal of this research would be to help the Hmoob community in advocating for Hmoob language classes in the school districts where there are large number of Hmoob students, for this has been something that the Hmoob community has advocated for the last 30 years with little to no success. Perhaps this research will add weight to the efforts to support Hmoob language in the school districts.

This research will also go to help the PI write grants to help support Hmoob youth in reclaiming language and identity. Though the PI does anticipate sharing the findings with the youth, the PI anticipates that throughout data collection, the youth participants would ask how the research is going and the PI would inform the participants through informal conversations about the research. The PI anticipates drawing from the study to present at professional conferences and publish in professional journals relevant to language revitalization, Indigenous research, and Hmoob community.

8.0 Study Duration

8.1 Describe:

Pending IRB approval, the PI anticipates that data collection will begin June 7, 2017. The data analysis, writing and reporting of the study will be full time starting in June 2017 to May 2018. The beginning of June, the first 4 weeks will be collecting field notes as the participant observer at the Youth Center. Observation will be about 32 hours of combined activities and events.

The focus group interviews will follow after observations are done. 2 weeks will be dedicated to doing 2 to 3 focus groups of 90 minutes each. The focus groups will also be transcribed for analysis. After analysis of focus group, one on one interviews will take place with 3 to 5 youth for the following 3 weeks. These interviews will be 90 minutes long and will also be transcribed for analysis.

The PI expect data collection to begin June 1, 2017 and be done by August 2017. Analysis, writing and reporting will be done from September 1, 2017 to the end of May 2017. The duration for an individual participant's participation in the study may last anywhere from 4 to 12 weeks.

9.0 Study Population

9.1 Inclusion Criteria:

Students who are included in this study are Hmoob youth, who are active participants at the Youth Center and are between the ages of 13-18. The PI is not controlling who engages in the activities, for the program is open to any youth, therefore, through observation of the activities and informal conversation, the PI will specifically focus on Hmoob youth between the ages of 13 to 18 who are active participants at the Youth Center.

For the focus group interviews and the individual interviews, the same group of youth who are part of the 1st Tier of students will be included. The inclusion criteria will also be Hmoob youth who are active participants at the Youth Center and are between the ages of 13-18.

For the 2nd Tier of data collection, focus group participants will also have the same criteria of being Hmoob youth ages 13-18 and engages in regular program and activities at the Center. For the 2nd Tier of the study, the youth must also have volunteered and be selected by the PI to be part of the focus group.

The last Tier of participants will also have the same criteria of being Hmoob youth ages 13-18 and engages in regular program and activities at the Center and must volunteered and be selected to be part of the individual interviews.

9.2 Exclusion Criteria:

Exclusion includes youth who do not identify as Hmoob, do not take part in the programming or activities at the Youth Center and is not between the ages of 13-18. For the 2nd Tier of data collection, youth who have not been part of Tier 1 will not be included. For the 3rd Tier of data collection, youth who have not been part of Tier 2 will not be included.

9.4 Screening:

All participants already have an ongoing relationship with the Youth staff at the Youth Center, therefore, it is easy to discern all of the inclusion criteria.

10.0 Vulnerable Populations

10.1 Vulnerable Populations: None of the above, all participants

- ☒ Children
- ☐ Pregnant women/Fetuses/Neonates
- ☐ Prisoners
- ☐ Adults lacking capacity to consent and/or adults with diminished capacity to consent, including, but not limited to, those with acute medical conditions, psychiatric disorders, neurologic disorders, developmental disorders, and behavioral disorders
- ☐ Non-English speakers
- ☐ Those unable to read (illiterate)
- ☐ Employees of the researcher
- ☐ Students of the researcher
- ☐ None of the above

10.2 Adults lacking capacity to consent and/or adults with diminished capacity to consent:

N/A

10.3 Additional Safeguards:

The PI is a well-known member of the Hmoob community and has lived in the area for 30 years. The PI is known for her work in supporting and advocating for Hmoob youth in the community. The PI's role at the Youth Center is to support, guide and act as an adult mentor to support Hmoob youth. Also as the grant writer, the PI has written language revitalization into the grants as learning objectives in combating violence in the Hmoob community and forming healthy identities. The PI has a long history working with youth and the Hmoob community knows that the PI has the best interest of the

youth in mind when administering the programs at the Youth Center.

11.0 Number of Participants

11.1 Number of Participants to be Consented:

In Tier 1 of the study, there will be participants who will not meet criteria for research, however, they will not be excluded from the activity. The number of participants to be consented will be between 15 to 25. In the 2nd Tier of the study, the number of participants to be consented will be around 10 to 15 youth. The 3rd Tier of the study, the number of participants to be consented will be 3-5 youth. All participants are Hmoob youth who come to the Center for support.

12.0 Recruitment Methods

12.1 Recruitment Process: The potential participants will be recruited through word of mouth in mid May at the Youth Center. A place where youth come to gather and find support. The PI will ask for volunteers to be part of focus groups and individual interviews. If youth agrees to participate, consent forms then will be sent home with the youth for parent/guardian permission. Youth will assent to all Tiers of data collection.

12.2 Source of Participants: N/A

12.3 Identification of Potential Participants: The method used to identify potential participants will be through word of mouth at the Youth Center. The participants will self-identify of their participation in the study. The youth and their parents are accustomed to parental permission slips from the Youth Center, therefore, asking youth to take home the forms is not out of the norm

12.4 Recruitment Materials: N/A

12.5 Payment: As part of Hmoob culture, the Student Investigator will provide a culture gift that she has made to the all participants in focus groups and individual interviews.

13.0 Withdrawal of Participants

13.1 Withdrawal Circumstances: Potential times participants might be withdrawn from research without their consent is if they are being disruptive and their behaviors do not align with the goal of the Youth Center.

13.2 Withdrawal Procedures: I will respect the decision of the participants if they no longer wish to participate in the study or wishes for the already collected

data not to be shared.

13.3 Termination Procedures: I do not foresee this happening, however if it does happen, the data collected will not be used. All notes and any direct interactions with the youth will be excluded in the analysis of the field notes of observer participation, similarly, should the person withdraw from the focus group interview, the engagement in the discussion will not be included in the analysis. Lastly, should a person withdraw from the individual interview, that interview will be excluded from the study.

14.0 Risks to Participants

14.1 Foreseeable Risks: Participants may experience mild distress when discussing sensitive issue about language loss. The PI anticipates little to no risk because the PI has had an ongoing relationship with most of the participants at the Youth Center since they entered the program at a young age. The PI also has a reputation of supporting and advocating for youth as well as act as their mentor. The Hmoob community knows the PI well and knows that the PI has the best interest of the community at heart, therefore, the PI anticipates little to no risk for this research. Lastly, the youth routinely engage in discussion of concerns and issues of the Hmoob community and discussing Hmoob language is not foreign to them.

14.1 Reproduction Risks: N/A

14.2 Risks to Others: N/A

15.0 Incomplete Disclosure or Deception

15.1 Incomplete Disclosure or Deception: N/A.

16.0 Potential Benefits to Participants

16.1 Potential Benefits: The potential benefits for the participant is the opportunity for him/her to share their feelings of language loss and to have it documented. Another benefit is to share their experiences with a group of people their age about their feelings about Hmoob language and identity as young people in the community, as well as to have opportunity to share their experience with an adult.

17.0 Data Management

17.1 Data Analysis Plan: N/A
17.2 Power Analysis: N/A
17.3 Data Integrity: N/A

18.0 Confidentiality

18.1 Data Security: Only the PI will have access to all field notes, and all data. All participants will be given pseudonyms and all identifying information about the Youth Center, families, and community will be masked.

19.0 Provisions to Monitor the Data to Ensure the Safety of Participants

- N/A

19.2 Data Safety Monitoring. Describe:

The plan to periodically evaluate the data collected regarding both harms and benefits to determine whether participants remain safe. The plan might include establishing a data monitoring committee and a plan for reporting data monitoring committee findings to the IRB and the sponsor.

- What data are reviewed, including safety data, untoward events, and efficacy data.
- How the safety information will be collected (e.g., with case report forms, at study visits, by telephone calls with participants).
- The frequency of data collection, including when safety data collection starts.
- Who will review the data.
- The frequency or periodicity of review of cumulative data.
- The statistical tests for analyzing the safety data to determine whether harm is occurring.
- Any conditions that trigger an immediate suspension of the research.

20.0 Provisions to Protect the Privacy Interests of Participants

20.1 Protecting Privacy: Participants will be given pseudonyms. The PI is a well-known member of the Hmoob community and has lived in the area for 30 years. The PI is known for her work in supporting and advocating for Hmoob youth in the community. The PI's role at the Youth Center is to support, guide and act as an adult mentor to support Hmoob youth. Also, as the grant writer, the PI has written language revitalization into the grants as learning objectives in combating violence in the Hmoob community and forming healthy identities. The PI has a long history working with youth and the Hmoob community knows that the PI has the best interest of the youth in mind when administering the programs at the Youth Center.

20.2 Access to Participants N/A

21.0 Compensation for Research-Related Injury

21.1 Compensation for Research-Related Injury: N/A

21.2 Contract Language: N/A

22.0 Consent Process

Note: You must follow "SOP: Informed Consent Process for Research (HRP-090)" and "SOP: Written Documentation of Consent (HRP-091)."

22.1 Consent Process (when consent will be obtained): Written assent will be obtained when participant have given verbal assent. Consent forms will be in both Hmoob and English languages and will be sent home with participants if they've agreed to participate in the study. When interviews take place, PI will restate goal of the research, ask for verbal assent and permission before proceeding with interviews and focus groups.

22.2 Waiver or Alteration of Consent Process (when consent will not be obtained, required information will not be disclosed, or the research involves deception): N/A

22.3 Non-English-Speaking Participants. Participants and guardians will be given both Hmoob and English Consent forms. Verbal consent/assent will be given to ensure participants and the parent/guardian have agreed. Written consent/assent will ensure understanding of the research.

22.4 Participants Who Are Not Yet Adults (infants, children, teenagers under 18 years of age): All participants will have to have permission from one parent/guardian to be part of the study, as well as their own assent.

22.5 Cognitively Impaired Adults, or adults with fluctuating or diminished capacity to consent: N/A

22.6 Adults Unable to Consent: N/A

23.0 Setting

23.1 International Research: N/A

23.2 Community Based Participatory Research: N/A

23.3 Research Sites: The research site is located in area at the Youth Gathering Place.

24.0 Multi-Site Research

- N/A

25.0 Resources Available

25.1 Resources Available: The faculty advisory provides support to the PI through guidance, advice, knowledge of protocols, rules and guidelines about research. The number of participants will be around 15 to 25. This is the number of participants that come to the Youth Center. The anticipation is that about 20 students will want to take part in the study. Three mounts will be the amount of time devoted to conducting and completing the research. The Youth Center is housed in a business center, connected to 3 other offices. The space is clean and has privacy for individuals, group discussions and observations.

26.0 References

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

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Thao, Y. J. (2002). *The voices of Hmong elders: Living, knowing, teaching, and learning within an oral tradition* (Order No. 3059062). Available from ProQuest

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