Building bridges between refugee parents and schools

YEONJAI RAH, SHANGMIN CHOI and THU SUONG THI NGUYEN

This interview study examines the way practitioners in Wisconsin public schools created conditions to facilitate refugee parent involvement. Practitioners’ perceptions of barriers to refugee parents’ school involvement are explored as well as the strategies used to promote meaningful parent involvement. Interviewees included nine school practitioners who worked closely with recently arrived Hmong students. The findings of the study suggest school practitioners considered the following barriers to refugee parent involvement: (1) language proficiency; (2) time constraints due to family socio-economic status and traditional family structures; (3) deferential attitudes towards school authority. Strategies viewed as useful to the interviewees included: (1) creating a parent liaison position; (2) tapping into existing community service organisations; (3) providing parent education programmes. While the findings illuminate ways school practitioners and policy-makers may better facilitate transitions of recently resettled refugee students into host communities, our discussion challenges school practitioners and policy-makers to question an absence of community control in traditional conceptions and enactments of parental involvement. Further, we raise concerns over technical rational approaches to social integration of refugee families and critique a colonial discourse of ‘helping’ these vulnerable communities.

Introduction

Over the past decade refugee populations have increased dramatically. With more than half of all refugees being of school age, international agencies, governments and educational institutions such as schools must meet growing challenges in serving these children. For refugee children schools in the new host countries provide educational opportunities, but, perhaps more importantly, they are a means of integration into mainstream society (Frater-Mathieson 2004). Refugee families are uniquely situated socially, culturally, economically and linguistically. Consequently, school leaders and educators must be sensitive to the specific challenges and needs

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brought to bear within schools, as well as how being so situated plays out in relationships between school practitioners and refugee communities. While there is clearly a need to explore multiple dimensions of educational services for refugee children, in this study we focus on parental involvement.

While the education research literature asserts the importance of parent involvement in minority students’ success in schools (Bhattacharya 2000, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) 2001, Jeynes 2003), there are few specific recommendations regarding recently arrived refugee parents navigating their new host countries. We begin to fill this gap through an examination of school practitioners’ perceptions of barriers to refugee parent involvement as well as strategies employed to enhance involvement. Specifically, we draw out common perceptions and patterns of action across schools having recently received a large number of Hmong refugee students. The following questions provide the focus for this study: (1) what did school practitioners interpret as barriers to outreach regarding refugee parents; and (2) what strategies did school practitioners employ to enhance parental involvement?

**Background**

Refugees are defined as individuals fleeing persecution in their home country who are unable to return for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 1951). In 2006 it was estimated that 9.9 million people became refugees throughout the world (UNHCR 2007). This reflects numbers of refugees in excess of the populations of Norway and Finland combined. Over the past decade the number of refugees has doubled. In 2005 approximately 20,000 asylum seekers arrived and over 58,000 refugees naturalized in the USA. In contrast to immigrants who actively seek economic opportunities and greater political and religious freedom, refugees arrive in their host country traumatized and disoriented by war or persecution.

The Hmong are a minority ethnic group residing in several countries across Southeast Asia. Having allied with the US military during the American War in Vietnam, persecuted Hmong refugee families resettled in the USA beginning in the late 1970s. The initial wave of refugees consisted mostly of members of the elite or families of highly ranked military men. Fearing further persecution, those left behind—the second wave—fled to Thailand. Several Thai refugee camps existed up to the early 1990s, however, the Thai government closed these due to financial constraints and mounting political tensions with neighbouring countries. Displaced camp dwellers gathered at a Buddhist temple, Wat Tham Krabok. This population of Hmong refugees reached 15,000 in 2003 (http://www.wisinfo.com/legacy/thailand/images/thailandmap.pdf).

In April 2003 the Thai military overran Wat Tham Krabok and granted the Hmong extremely limited access. With this change, living conditions in the camp worsened dramatically. Thus, in December 2003 the US government received the displaced Hmong of Wat Tham Krabok. More than 1900
Hmong had arrived in Wisconsin by December of 2004, and 1280 school-age children were scattered across the state (Weroha 2005). This study explores perceptions of school practitioners involved in educating and serving these Hmong refugee students and the parents from Wat Tham Krabok.

Unique circumstances by which refugee students arrive in US schools call for greater attention in our research communities and, perhaps more importantly, in our communities of practice. After initial resettlement, refugee families often experience continued economic challenges, limited support in educational arenas and difficulty achieving proficiency in the host country’s language. In many cases refugee parents are unfamiliar not only with US school systems, but also with schools more generally. Limited school resources—linguistic, emotional and psychological—often hinder the transition of refugee students. These supports are also limited within the home. Material and monetary needs place near intractable constraints on the time parents might spend providing academic support for their children. Additionally, severe constraints on time also often disallow development of proficiency in the host language. This further limits parents’ abilities to provide academic support within the home. Moreover, Ascher (1989) found that it is often difficult for refugee children to receive emotional and psychological support from their parents since these adults are themselves victims of trauma. The unique experiences of refugee families demand that school leaders and educators develop approaches to help refugee children adjust to school life.

School outreach to refugee parents is one effective and necessary route to refugee students’ social and academic success. Studies indicate that parental involvement is salient in how well minority students do in school (Jeynes 2003). Bhattacharya (2000) emphasized parent–school linkages in successful school adjustment of South Asian children. In her recent review of the literature on refugee students in the USA, McBrien (2005) found that parent involvement in children’s learning is frequently cited as a critical factor in refugee students’ success. Here we use the term ‘parental involvement’ in education as a broad category of practice reflecting activities beyond those typically manifest in US schools, such as volunteering in children’s schools and classrooms or participating in parent associations and councils. We contend that for populations such as these—economically disadvantaged, linguistically isolated, culturally distinct—parental involvement also includes often overlooked strategies in supporting children’s learning, such as ensuring completion of homework, creating appropriate environments in the home for learning and valuing education and learning (Hamilton 2004).

**Methods and procedures**

Data for this article were collected as part of the first author’s dissertation research (Rah 2007). The second and third authors contributed to data interpretation and analysis. Primary means of data collection were in-depth interviews with nine school practitioners, including four school administrators, two Hmong American teachers and three bilingual teaching assistants across
three school districts which received between 50 and 180 Hmong refugee students in the 2004–2005 school year. Interviews lasted from one to three hours and were audiotaped when the participants consented. A semi-structured interview protocol was used focused on: (1) how participants communicate with Hmong refugee parents to decipher needs; (2) what situations enable and/or constrain these communications; and (3) availability of any other support mechanisms (programmes or services) provided to these parents. Other sources of data included school documents and local news archives to provide background and guide interviews and participant observation field notes of meetings and activities organized by the school district. Table 1 describes the school districts and school practitioners who were involved in this study. In order to protect participant confidentiality we use pseudonyms for individual, school and district names.

Data analysis followed the principles of inductive analysis (Hatch 2002), influenced by Grounded Theory and techniques of constant comparative analysis. To begin, an in-depth knowledge of the data set was gained. All data from interviews, field notes and school documents were compiled into a database. Data were fragmented into ‘segments’, a section of the text containing one item of information that is comprehensible even if read outside the context in which it is embedded (Gall et al. 1996). Domains were created based on semantic relationships. For example,

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Small rural town</td>
<td>Medium-sized urban setting</td>
<td>Large-sized metropolitan area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong refugees enrolled 2004–2005</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
<td>(1) Mrs Addison, European American, Newcomer Center Director, District ESL Director</td>
<td>(1) Ms Vang, Hmong American, District Hmong Community Liaison</td>
<td>(1) Mrs Colman, European American, Cross Elementary School Principal</td>
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<td>(2) Mr Baker, European American, Abraham Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>(2) Ms Thao, Hmong American, Bridge Elementary School Kindergarten Teacher</td>
<td>(2) Mrs Xing, Hmong American, Hmong Liaison and Educational Aide</td>
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<td>(3) Mr Xiong, Hmong American, Bridge Elementary School Hmong Bilingual Specialist</td>
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<td>(4) Ms Lu Chang, Hmong American, Hmong FAST Staff Member</td>
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Table 1. District and participant background information
regarding the first research question concerning barriers to involvement, parents’ lack of time and availability were often mentioned. Perceived reasons provided by participants were extracted and included in the domain reflecting the semantic relationship ‘X is a result of Y (cause–effect)’. An example domain is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Domain example

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Cover term</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Included terms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of time to attend school programmes</td>
<td>is a result of</td>
<td>Longer work hours; Many children to care for; Single mother heads of households</td>
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As Hatch (2002) recommended, we then deciphered special relationships among the included terms within each domain. In Figure 1 for instance, we determined that the last two terms could be grouped meaningfully together based on characteristics derived from the literature around traditional Hmong family structure: early marriage and polygamy. Another salient domain was ‘parent education programmes’. While each district and school site offered parent education programmes, these varied in structure and duration. This semantic relationship is called inclusion, where ‘X is a kind of Y’. The included terms in this domain are: (1) Hmong parent workshop in Cross School; (2) parent group, a part of Hmong FAST in Bridge School; (3) parents’ meeting in Adam School District.

Limitations of this study included time and resources. Study participants were exclusively school practitioners, including principals, school district staff members, teachers and bilingual assistants. While including voices of parents would have provided a richer dataset, limitations of time and resources (linguistic in particular) precluded collection of these data. We strongly encourage those interested in this topic of study to consider inclusion of refugee parent accounts for a greater depth of understanding. Since this study focuses on practitioners’ practices and perceptions of refugee parents’ involvement, we limited our study to those involved in conceiving and administering school programmes for enhanced refugee parent involvement. Further, the study participants were largely practitioners within elementary school settings. This leaves open questions regarding Hmong refugee parent involvement in secondary schools. A final consideration revolves around the small number of Hmong refugees. Schools contending with issues of how best to serve Hmong refugee students are few and far between. However, as instability worldwide persists those seeking asylum, Hmong and otherwise, will continue to grow in number and public service sectors, including schools, must understand the challenges and complexities of serving these vulnerable populations. We leave it to our readers to determine the degree of transferability this study may have for their own local contexts and populations.
Findings

The following section presents the findings of the study. We first offer a discussion of what our participants perceived as barriers to outreach among Hmong refugee parents. These include barriers of language, time constraints resulting from traditional family structures and socio-economic conditions and parents’ deferential attitudes to school practitioners. Common practices and strategies employed in attempting to enhance parent participation across schools included the creation of an English–Hmong bilingual parent liaison position, collaboration with community service organisations and facilitation of parent education programmes.

What did school practitioners interpret as barriers to outreach regarding refugee parents?

Language barriers. School practitioners viewed communication with parents recently arrived from Wat Tham Krabok as particularly complicated due to illiteracy, in English as well as in their own Hmong language. Thus, communication in the form of texts (letters, memos, newsletters, emails, etc.), arguably the prime means of communication between schools and parents, is rendered ineffective. As a consequence, the workload for translators and interpreters is intensified in the need to make personal contact via phone and in person. Not only does this require finding individuals who are Hmong–English bilingual, a truly limited human resource, but it too comes at a greater cost to schools and districts. Principal Her of Delight Elementary School received 103 refugee students in the 2004–2005 school year. She described the Hmong refugee parents as ‘an oral group, explaining:

If we are going to have a meeting or anything we send them a note as we do with all the families but the bilingual aides always call the families. Always call them and say ‘we are going to have a meeting’ … that is the only way to get them here. So few people are literate, they are not going to read anything we send home. All of the stuff are just thrown away. They are such an oral group, somebody tells you, that’s important. If you get a note, that is not important. So we are going to have a meeting on Thursday. Then, they send a note on Monday, and you would call on Tuesday to remind them, and Wednesday we call again. (Interview, October 11 2004)

Ms Vang, a Hmong American family liaison, also reported that many Hmong refugee parents in her school district were illiterate. She said ‘the BRS (Bilingual Resources Specialist) feel that more than 50% of the Hmong parents cannot read and write in Hmong’.

Lack of formal schooling was noted by some Hmong bilingual educators as reasons for illiteracy. Mrs Xing, a Hmong educational aide and family liaison in Cross Elementary School, reported ‘a phone call is the main route to communicate because a lot of them do not read and write in their own language because they did not go to school’. This is consistent with previous studies that found refugees from developing countries often lack formal education or that school quality and customs are often quite different from that in the USA (Sutner 2002). Rutter (1994) explained that
continual unplanned and rapid upheaval during war, exodus, escapes, temporary resettlement and secondary resettlement that refugees experience resulted in limited access to and opportunities for formal education. A second major explanation for widespread illiteracy posed by study participants concerned the relatively short history of the Hmong writing system, established only 50 years ago.

Illiteracy may contribute to parents feeling ill prepared for the US education system. In her study of South Asian immigrant children and their adjustment to US schooling, Bhattacharya (2000) asserted that ‘self-consciousness about inability to speak “correct” English’ (p. 81) is the predominant reason for parents not attending school meetings. According to Timm (1994, as cited in McBrien 2005), Hmong parents in her study did not understand what parent–teacher conferences would be like. Such self-consciousness around language ability, limited communication with school personnel and little to no understanding of the processes and procedures involved in US schooling understandably generate feelings of discomfort and play a role in how parental involvement is enacted in schools.

Although the participants did not mention other difficulties associated with language barriers, it seems worthwhile to briefly consider relevant findings from previous studies. McBrien (2005) found that when parents do not acquire the host country’s language as rapidly as their children, parents are less able to assist with homework. Beyond an impact on academic involvement, parents’ limited host language ability often results in ‘role reversal’, where the responsibilities of parents shift to the child, whose host language acquisition often quickly surpasses his/her parents. Zhou (2001) also pointed out that refugee children often take on the roles of family spokesperson, act as substitute parents for their younger siblings at school and serve as drivers for their families. Importantly, this reversal of roles often results in a narrowing of parental authority and inter-generational conflict.

*Lack of time to participate.* Most Hmong refugee students in the four schools we visited were eligible for the free lunch programme under Title I, a US federal programme that provides financial support to public schools serving economically disadvantaged students. This suggests that standards of living among these Hmong families reflect low socio-economic levels. School administrators reported that refugee parents were heavily concentrated in the lowest wage occupations. In many cases both the father and mother worked to meet living expenses. According to Principal Her, Hmong parent involvement was limited in her school because these parents each typically held two jobs, day and night. Townsend and Fu (2001), in their interview study of a Laotian girl, found that the refugee girl and her family had little time for sharing their feelings. While struggling with understanding their new context and new school environment, the girl’s parents, aunts and uncles and older siblings were at work in local factories. Material needs and work demands severely impinge on the amount of time parents could be involved in school and their children’s learning. As US schools and communities experience influxes of refugees from war-torn countries our traditional notions of parent involvement must shift to better serve the needs of these uniquely positioned communities.
Another domain relevant to understanding why parental involvement (narrowly defined) is limited within the Hmong refugee community concerns Hmong family structures. Hmong families tend to be comprised of many children. Hmong individuals traditionally marry between the ages of 14 and 18 years and often have larger families (http://www.laofamily.org). Principal Her suggested that the large numbers of children in each family was a central difficulty where families ‘have six, seven, eight and nine kids’. At a meeting of Hmong families at Bridge Elementary School at least two-thirds of the families had more than five children among 15 families (site visit, April 6 2005).

Another significant dimension of the Hmong refugee family structure was that there were many single-parent families. Mr Xiong (interview, April 6 2004) spoke of the large numbers of Hmong households headed by single mothers among recently arrived refugees. He suggested that this may be a result of thousands of Hmong males having been killed in battle in the 1970s. Additionally, in Hmong culture it is socially acceptable for a man to have more than one wife. Consequently, when Hmong refugees arrive in the USA wives who are not the first are registered as single mothers. Ms Thao, a Hmong American teacher at Bridge School, agreed with Mr Xiong’s interpretation. She explained:

The second wave of new arrival Hmong families are classified that way because men may have more than one wife. If they do, they only validate one as their wife and the other wives are named as a sister, cousin or something else. So yes, the other wives are considered single mothers. (Email communication, October 2 2007)

Such family structures may create additional challenges for Hmong refugee parents in the USA. In particular, US refugee dispersion policies and practices often disallow the social, psychological, material and emotional supports generated through extended inter-generational family structures typical of traditional Hmong homes.

**Deference to authority of the schools.** Participants interviewed commented on Hmong parents’ attitudes toward schools and teachers. They reported that Hmong parents tended to behave in ways indicating a parent’s proper role is to listen and defer to educators’ professional judgement. Although commonly seen as a positive posture, such trust may also operate as a barrier to active parental involvement. Parents were often reluctant to challenge the school’s authority and tended not to initiate conferences with teachers. Principal Her stated:

Hmong families are not used to getting involved in the school. They send their children to school and they think their job is done. They think teachers take over. That is what happened in Laos. That’s what they learned and knew. And parents never say anything because they think teachers know everything. They never argue with teachers. (Interview, October 11 2004)

Principal Baker, at Abraham Elementary School, described the tendency of Hmong parents to abdicate responsibility for their children’s education to school faculty and staff. ‘The parents did not know how American schools work and what to expect. They put their sons and daughters on a bus in the morning and magically they come home at 4 o’clock.’ Study participants’
interpretations were somewhat consistent with Timm’s study (1994) of Hmong families. The Hmong adults Timm interviewed had a tendency to view ‘teachers as the experts regarding their children’s education’ and did not expect to be involved in their children’s learning (as cited in McBrien 2005).

While the responses of principals Her and Baker suggest a degree of ambivalence towards parents who, on the one hand, comply and, on the other, appear lackadaisical, Ms Vang, a Hmong American teacher, interpreted this attitude in terms of trust in schools rather than indifference, as well as in terms of cultural conflict. She emphasized Hmong parents’ belief in education while pointing out forms of participation often went unrecognized and a lack of confidence in their abilities to support their children. She explained:

Schools probably think that Hmong parents do not have good attitudes and education is not an important value. I would disagree. Many Hmong parents place a high value on education. This is the [Hmong] parents’ attitude: ‘I prepare my child. I bring them into school. I totally trust the school. Education is your [the school’s] job’. Many times they say ‘I am ignorant, I am not educated’. The ‘trust’ is given all right to the school and ‘I don’t question you’. I think there is a lot of cultural conflict. (Interview, November 8 2005)

McBrien (2005), in her thorough review on refugee students’ educational needs, found a cultural disconnection in the conceptions of school involvement among US school personnel and refugee parents. As noted earlier, refugee parents’ involvement in their children’s learning diverged from traditional norms of participation, such as volunteering in class, organizing bake sales and participation in parent–teacher councils. Instead, these parents appeared to engage in culturally informed deference to teachers and school personnel, as well as through more practical means given incredibly trying circumstances.

In sum, school practitioners in this study surmised several reasons why Hmong refugee parents appeared less involved in schools. One reason centred on issues of language literacy and proficiency, in both the host country’s language (in this case English) and the native language. In addition, this seemed to explain in part why parents were reluctant to come into contact with school personnel. This reluctance may also be compounded by Hmong refugee parents’ inexperience with formal school settings. A second reason interviewees commonly mentioned was a lack of time to participate as a result of material needs and work demands and the Hmong family structures described. Lastly, school practitioners pointed to Hmong refugee parents’ tendency to defer to the authority of teachers, thus seeing no need to be involved.

What strategies did practitioners use to enhance parental involvement in schools?

Creating a bilingual liaison position. Hamilton (2004) emphasized the importance of a ‘mediator’ between school and refugee students and their families. He described mediators as individuals ‘who need to have an in-depth
understanding of both the culture of the school and that of the refugee family and child, can act as brokers to develop good communication channels between the child, school, and parents’ (p. 89). The participants in this study call these mediators ‘liaisons’. At a minimum, in each of the schools we visited a Hmong bilingual liaison was available. These liaisons acted as the connection between Hmong families and the schools. Principal Colman of Cross Elementary School created a parent liaison position and hired Mrs Xing, one of their Hmong bilingual aides, as the liaison. The principal described the responsibilities and importance of this role as follows:

If you call Cross school you will get a voice mail message, in Hmong after English. Mrs Xing translates the message into Hmong. And I’ve made a parent liaison position which is Mrs Xing. During the morning and afternoon she is available to answer phone calls and make phone calls. So she makes lots of phone calls to parents for teachers. She calls them and she helps out. She has been really instrumental for us. Having that person I could depend on that would be a good parent contact. (Interview, April 27 2005)

Mrs Xing’s work focused on three areas. The first was communicating with Hmong parents via phone calls. For example, teachers asked her to speak with Hmong parents to schedule teacher–parent conferences. The second was inquiring into refugee families’ needs in order to organize food and clothing drives for incoming refugee families. Mrs Xing explained:

Our school helped the refugee families a lot. I myself did a lot for the families. I made a list of what the family needed and then put the list in the lounge so that everyone could see it. Teachers and others signed up for what they could donate. Upper level grade students had a clothing and food drive too. (Interview, June 9 2005)

Finally, Mrs Xing developed and organized workshops for the Hmong parents. These workshops were delivered as evening classes for recent Hmong parents every other month. She discussed with parents the kinds of topics they might be interested in and proposed these to her school principal. The workshops covered issues ranging from mundane day-to-day concerns of attendance notification to substantive academic issues. Mrs Xing stated:

I am going to ask the refugee parents in the beginning of the year what the parents need to know. For example, kids need to get a flu shot, call for attendance and absence. They need to know winter is coming and they need appropriate clothing for the children. Fourth graders and eighth graders have to meet a certain level of proficiency, otherwise they cannot go on [to the next grade level]. I set up the topics and talk with the principal about the topics. We cover Internet safety, discipline issues, learning resources. They learn how to adapt [to] modern society, for example, where they can find tutoring for their kids, libraries, other resources. Behaviour issue is a big one—when children do not listen to parents what steps to take. (Interview, June 9 2005)

At Bridge School there were three Hmong educators, including two certified teachers (kindergarten and art teachers) and one Hmong BRS. Additionally, Mr Xiong, an experienced educational aide in the school district, was reassigned to Bridge School since 25 Hmong refugee children (accounting for almost half of the K–5 school age Hmong refugee children in the district) were newly enrolled there. Mr Xiong explained his role saying:

I just help with the kids to make sure they understand the basic rules and regulations of the school and help them feel comfortable in school. The other part is social work; I am helping Hmong
Mr. Xiong’s primary task was to act as an educational aide for Hmong students. However, his role was not limited to the role of teaching aide in the classroom. He translated between student and school personnel to facilitate understanding. He also worked as a Hmong parent liaison. He translated weekly school letters and other messages into Hmong text. Also, using the Hmong hotline Hmong parents were able to call him to ask about school activities and make appointments with teachers.

Xiong also worked for Hmong FAST (Family and Schools Together), ‘a multifamily group intervention … designed to … empower parents to be the primary protective agents for their children’ (http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/FAST/). As a Parent Partner, he acted as the representative for parents who participated in the FAST programme. Vang, a Hmong American teacher, described how Mr. Xiong helped to recruit Hmong families for the programme. When Vang worked with the FAST programme in her prior school recruiting families was not an easy task. She attributed the difficulty to minimal contact with the families, as well as being young and female, which clashed with traditional Hmong views of authority figures. However, it appeared that since Mr. Xiong was in his 50s and was considered an authority figure in the Hmong community, Hmong newcomer families and refugee parents welcomed Xiong’s invitation to participate in FAST.

For Hmong parents liaisons Xing and Xiong are a bridge for parents to reach into the school community. Similarly, they are a channel through which the school is able to enhance communication with parents. The position does not simply address issues of linguistic translation and adequate services. More significantly, it is a critical position through which refugee families’ needs are discerned and through whom cultural conflicts and contradictions may be resolved. Bilingual Hmong American staff in this study served as the core personnel resources for the refugee students and families across all school sites. These Hmong staff members arrived in the USA during the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, their length of exposure to and experience with the two cultures, Hmong and American, enable them to actively assist newly arrived refugee students to adjust to school life, both academically and socially. They are also able to provide instructional leadership for the school and establish a zone of comfort through which to facilitate meaningful involvement of parents.

The above noted activities reflect what Hamilton (2004) described as important strategies for facilitating parental involvement in schools. Hamilton emphasized regular meetings organized and run by mediators, while Cummins (1986) asserted the importance of working closely with teachers or aides proficient in the native tongue. Moreover, he suggested effective communication must be conducted in a non-paternalistic manner with parents from minority groups.
local non-profit organization for Hmong people called the Adam Area Hmong Mutual Association, Inc. (pseudonym) (AAHMA). This organization was established in the 1980s to develop English language and communication skills within communities of Southeast Asian adult refugees with little or no prior education in their native country. In Adam community the organization’s goal was to create bridges between schools and Hmong refugee families:

Our Home–School Liaison Project promotes cultural awareness and appreciation in schools, while advocating for Lao-Hmong parents and students alike. Equally important is the bridging language and cultural barriers while educating parents and students on the nature of American education and their responsibilities and rights. Our program works with at-risk students and their families to redirect their time in a positive manner. This project also assists schools in coordinating and promoting family involvement. (AAHMA website)

Addison found this organization helpful in reaching out to refugee families and described the ways in which AAHMA provided support to the school community:

AAHMA was very supportive and helped us [Adam School District] set up the programme and they carry on [The AAHMA leaders] have been there very long time and very supportive of assisting parents helping them realize some of their needs are. We were working with students but AAHMA works with parents. When parents would have issues and concerns they [AAHMA] would be willing to do we can do workshop and retreat, all sorts of things [for parents]. (Interview, December 14 2005)

Cross School also worked with a non-profit organization for Southeast Asian communities. Through the school–community organization partnership Cross School benefited in two major ways. First, the local organization held an evening literacy class for Hmong parents. Their ‘Even-Start’, a literacy programme for refugee parents, lasted for four years. Secondly, it helped to increase enrollment in Cross School since the school had recently been reorganized as a charter school. Principal Colman explained:

Five years ago, they wanted to add us to be a partner for a family literacy programme which is called ‘Even-Start.’ They needed a school from our school district. We were already involved in the Hmong Education Alliance and that is how they got our school’s name. We’d already established a relationship with Hmong education advancement. So we worked with the organization. I got the call and I said ‘absolutely, I’d love to partner’. It’s amazing because I was looking for a community partner. (Interview, April 27 2005)

As noted earlier, the Bridge School also created links with an existing community organization supporting Hmong refugee parents. The Family and Schools Together (FAST) programme operated within a school building, however, it was administered through a local social work service organization called the Children’s Service Society of Wisconsin (CSSW). The district selected Bridge School to receive FAST services for the last several years. Vang, a Hmong American teacher and the school social worker, discussed possibilities for tailoring FAST to Hmong newcomer families. As a result, Bridge School and CSSW held two Hmong FAST programmes in 2005 and 2006. Each year approximately 15 Hmong refugee families participated, showing a high rate of retention through the eight week sessions. In the 2005 evaluation report all 11 parents who participated in the survey
responded affirmatively to the question ‘As a result of what you may have learned or experienced in FAST, has your relationship with your child improved?’ In addition, 75% of the parents reported some positive change in their relationship with school personnel. Ms Vang reported that Hmong refugee parents felt that their children were more comfortable attending school and were more apt to comply with their parents’ requests.

The examples above are consistent with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP 1997) recommendations for practice. Cummins investigated successful school practices for minority group students emphasizing community participation in students’ education. He maintained that educators should take the initiative to enhance mutual collaboration within minority communities, families and schools. AAPIP also emphasized the importance of community, school and family partnerships as fundamental to the success of their recommendations for educational equity for these student subgroups. They assert that ‘such partnerships reduce barriers to educational equity and create an enriched learning environment by bringing together the full complement of a community’s resources for each child’s benefit’.

**Facilitating education programmes.** Hamilton (2004) suggested that parent education programmes are a critical need for refugee parents. In particular, he emphasized establishing mechanisms through which parents might learn the host language. However, the four schools we visited were more focused on enhancing the academic progress and acculturation of refugee students. Principal Colman once offered English classes for parents but noted that the class ‘fell through after a couple of sessions’. She reported parents appeared more interested in immediate and practical issues such as ‘how and when to enroll their kids in a school programme, and what to ask teachers during teacher–parent conferences’.

Other school practitioners also noted more interest in parents learning how to help their children academically. Study participants reported parents demonstrating more interest in how to discipline children in the USA than in how to speak and write in English. For example, Cross School’s Hmong parent meetings (held every other week for a year) covered topics including Internet safety, discipline issues, parent–teacher conferences, summer schools, open-houses and learning resources. Mrs Xing discerned topics of interest from conversations with the parents and from her own experience as a refugee and parent. Behavioural issues were always important because parents did not have much knowledge and experience of US mores and norms. Xing explained:

> We try to do a refugee parent conference every other month, and find topics that parents need to know like Internet safety. I set up the topics. I just decide by myself and talk with the principal about the topics. Myself as a parent right now and even working in the school I have a problem with that and all the parents are worse. So we need to teach them. Yes, from my own experience. (Interview, June 9 2005)

On one occasion a workshop on Internet safety was conducted. At 5:30 in the evening six Hmong mothers gathered in a school conference room. Liaison Xing, the Assistant Principal and a computer technician welcomed
a police officer, the guest speaker of the night. He opened the workshop by questioning the parents to find out if and how often the Hmong parents accessed the Internet. He then proceeded to talk about how to protect children from harmful information while surfing the Internet. Every word was translated into Hmong by Xing.

Adam School District also focused their Hmong parent education programmes on issues of how to be effective caregivers and disciplinarians of school-age children. When we visited the school in mid September 2005 the school personnel had already met with Hmong families twice. The first meeting dealt with understanding the role of schools in the USA and the responsibilities of parents while the second focused on advice to parents in preparing students for school. The Director of the Newcomer Center explained:

We have a lot of family meetings. We had two so far this year. One was specifically just for the new families, helping those families understand what school is about, what they should be doing with their kids. We had another one—kind of general about more things they can do: getting them to sleep on time, giving them food before they go to school, getting them a place they can study—the place should be quiet, with the TV off—how they dress for school. (Interview, April 27 2005)

These meetings provided the district with opportunities to share school-specific information (i.e. curriculum, teachers’ names, class placement and the school policies) as well as general guidelines regarding how parents could help create a learning environment at home for their children (e.g. ensuring children are well-rested, that they eat breakfast before going to school, providing a quiet place for children to do homework, creating sufficient study time and ensuring children know their address and telephone number). In addition, Adam School District distributed a small guidebook entitled *A Guide to Cross Area Schools for Parents of Southeast Asian Students—English and Hmong Versions*. The guide provides Hmong parents with information about the educational system in their community and answers frequently asked questions specific to communities new to the USA. It also includes contact numbers for school district offices, literature on parents’ roles in the educational process, descriptions of instructional programmes and a directory of school personnel. An appendix provides seven samples of notes parents can duplicate when needed, including notes to: (1) excuse a child early; (2) explain a child’s absence; (3) inform the school about moving; (4) explain a child’s tardiness; (5) make an appointment to see teachers; (6) inform the school of a child’s bus change; and (7) make a phone call to the school.

At Bridge School Hmong parent education was undertaken during the FAST programme. The eight week sessions included a parent only component. During this time the parents discussed issues, including how to help their children survive resettlement. During the first week of FAST Chang, a main facilitator, explained the programme and asked the parents to identify topics of interest for further future discussion. One night teacher–parent conferences and other related schooling issues were discussed. On another night a Hmong social worker talked about raising children in the USA. Chang described this particular meeting:

the day that you were here two weeks ago, we had a CPS [Children Protection Services] worker. He came and talked about raising kids. I guess this person was very beneficial … . He talked about
parenting and being able to be there for their kids, positive supports for their kids. Some of them shared their experiences and hardships of being parents. Some of them talked about disciplining kids. You don’t want CPS to call. (Interview, April 4 2005)

Parent education was customized for the Hmong newcomer families. In the regular FAST programme parents are supposed to have ‘buddy time’ in which parents pick another adult or their spouse, if she/he is also present, to talk about how their week went. Buddy time, however, was skipped. Instead, more educational components were added. The reasons given for this adaptation of the programme were two-fold. First, Hmong parents wanted to know more about their children’s educational settings and, second, parents expressed discomfort in talking in one-to-one situations.

Discussion

Prior to discussing our findings, we feel it is important to briefly situate ourselves as scholars. The first two authors are international scholars from South Korea with an interest in understanding how to serve an influx of refugees from North Korea in South Korean schools. The third author attended US public schools and is the child of refugees of the American War in Vietnam. Her interest is in understanding hybrid place-making practices of vulnerable communities in and around schools. All three authors share a commitment to creating schools and school communities as places where vulnerable populations can thrive and not simply survive (Glidden 1998).

Previous studies found that parental involvement has a significant effect on children’s success in schools. This may be even more salient for communities marked by violence, trauma, displacement, linguistic isolation and cultural contradiction and dissonance. While we found parent education and outreach programmes to be critical in gaining new forms of social and cultural capital, we note significantly limited attention to Lee’s third approach to parental involvement, i.e. community control. Thus, a critical piece in further developing our work will be in attending to the voices and accounts of Hmong refugee parents. Not only must this focus our future scholarly work, but we contend that it must also inform relations with and the actions of school leaders and practitioners.

To summarize our findings, school practitioners reported several challenges in enhancing parental involvement among Hmong refugee parents. These included issues of parents’ literacy and challenges to gaining proficiency in English, constraints on parents’ time stemming from material, monetary and familial demands and Hmong cultural norms privileging the authority of teachers while stymieing the involvement of parents. These findings are consistent with the cultural and structural challenges to student learning noted by Ngo and Lee (2007) in their review of Southeast Asian American education regarding studies of Hmong American students. Of Lee et al.’s (1993) three categories of parental involvement, participants noted and we observed two of these primary approaches: parent education and outreach. We discuss the promise and perils of these in the remainder of this section.
Lee et al. (1993, as cited in Hamilton 2004) categorized parental involvement in schools into three types: (1) parent education programmes; (2) outreach programmes; (3) community control. Asserting the first of these as key for refugee parents, Hamilton suggested focusing parent education on understanding school curricula and strategies to help children adjust to school life. In this way parents ‘participate more fully in their child’s education experience and [are able] to support the efforts of schools’ (p. 86). In this study we found parent education to be one major strategy used to structure Hmong parents’ school involvement. However, these programmes were often limited to arenas outside decision-making domains (for an example of how minority parents participated in leadership roles in school see Bryk and Schneider 2001). We assert that maintaining zones of authority divided along professional–parent lines and, in particular, along majority–non-majority lines reinforces a ‘logic of rational distrust’ (Larson and Ovando 2001). As Larson and Ovando noted, when diverse communities come into contact in schools we can no longer work from assumptions that may have worked within more homogeneous communities. They wrote ‘as communities become more diverse, the nature of trust in schools is changing’ (p. 63). The expectation that parents trust schools will do what is best for their children comes increasingly into question where communities are confronted by difference. We encourage school leaders and practitioners so confronted to ask themselves not how to solve problems of difference, but rather the often less expedient but more socially just question, what problems might difference solve for us (Honig 2001)?

While understanding school curricula and school life are indeed important, Hmong refugee parents’ priorities did not appear so aligned. Across the three parent education programmes two main topics of discussion emerged. These included: (1) raising children in the USA compared to raising children in their native lands; and (2) questions of how parents might help children understand and negotiate the complex intersection of two cultures. The dissonance between Hamilton’s primary concerns for refugee parents and the expressed concerns of these refugee parents is significant. In making sense of this, we encourage school leaders and practitioners to question in what ways Hamilton’s primary concern privileges a rational technical approach to integration; in what ways do the parents’ areas of concern reflect more than a simple problem of technical integration; in what ways does a disembodied and decontextualized recommendation to understand curriculum neglect a deeply embodied and context-bound experience of war and its aftermath? By no means do we suggest here that schools must be the panacea for all ills. However, we contend that schools must not exacerbate the ills and traumas with which refugees often contend. In particular, we are troubled by a seemingly persistent insistence that ‘others’ conform to and abide by curricula and school systems that often do not recognize nor honour difference.

Another critical aspect of parent outreach was the use of bilingual parent liaisons. We encourage school leaders to examine ways in which parent liaisons may create spaces of authentic interaction between school and refugee communities beyond mere translation of words. In this study parent education and outreach (creating parent liaison positions, working with community...
service organizations and facilitating parent education programmes) were reported as crucial components in finding ways to involve Hmong refugee parents in schools. We found that bilingual liaisons were the primary resource in creating a zone of comfort for refugee parents to be actively involved in school. In concert with building bridges through parent liaisons to facilitate communication, educational leaders and practitioners must ask critical questions of themselves in an effort to guard against attending solely to technical communication while neglecting moral dialogue (Shields 2004) aimed at what Anderson (1998) described as ‘authentic participation’. As Shields (2004) warned, educational leaders often, with the best of intentions, perpetuate ‘pathologies of silence’ reproducing educational excellence for some and alienation of others. Anderson’s study reminds us to question the ways in which community–parent liaisons may simultaneously build bridges while unwittingly keeping communities at a distance (see also Nguyên 2006).

In working with community groups schools increasingly strapped by diminishing resources are well advised to tap into existing service networks aimed at social support. Such social supports are crucial in communities where navigating unfamiliar educational, social, governmental and economic institutions are continually demanded. In this study schools worked with non-profit community organizations like the AAHMA. While we concur with recommendations offered by Cummins and the AAPIP regarding the importance of collaboration and the development of community, family and school partnerships to meaningful learning by students, we also urge school leaders and practitioners to critically examine these partnerships to guard against deficit discourses and practices.

A closer examination of the language used to describe these partnerships reveals contradictions and tensions within notions of ‘educational equity’ and colonial language reflected in desires to ‘redirect their [Hmong families] time in a positive manner’ (AAHMA website) and to ‘assist [Hmong] parents helping them realize [what] some of their needs are’ (Mrs Addison). We do not intend to diminish the good work of those involved in these organizations, nor do we doubt the good intentions of those invested in developing capacity and success within these communities. However, we would be remiss in overlooking deficit notions embedded in a common discourse of ‘helping’ (see for example Cooke 2003). For so-called perpetual foreigners (Wu 2002) such discourses of ‘caring’ and ‘helping’ to assimilate into the dominant culture are inherently political and can be deeply damaging to the psyches and hearts of Asian émigrés and residents (Valenzuela 1999). Like Valenzuela, we are fearful of the kind of subtractive schooling that takes place in our institutions of education. Further, we are fearful of the subtractive schooling children of refugees experience through other ‘helping’ professions.

While the participants in this study clearly have a stake in and a desire to enhance the well-being of Hmong refugee students and parents, the strategies deployed for social and systemic integration (Habermas 1984) point toward a politics of universalism (see Mouffe 2000). A politics of universalism ensures the reproduction of a social order in which ‘the dominant or majority culture becomes the mold into which all other cultures are cast; the majority culture becomes the universal norm’ (Larson and Ovando 2001: 72). In her ethnographic study of a Vietnamese language and culture
programme Nguyễn (2006) explored ways in which a Vietnamese community appropriated spaces and district policies for community control and self-determination. Having experienced ways in which universalized Western norms had a corrosive effect on intra-communal and familial relations, the Vietnamese programme teachers and parents enacted hybrid and improvisational strategies to navigate their school system. Such enactments were informed by a desire to thrive rather than simply survive as perpetual foreigners in an uncomfortable and ill-fitting one size fits all approach to ‘normalizing’ others.

Schools are often a prime point of contact between refugee families and the host country. Through experiences in schools refugee families learn the social norms and traditions of their new country. Perhaps more importantly, these families begin to decipher the way in which the world is ordered, where and if they fit within this new order and what role schools and communities might play in conforming to or generating new ways of understanding and enacting school policies and practices to better serve vulnerable communities. While we remain both hopeful and sceptical of schools as channels through which dreams may be actualized for current and future survivors of war, we too hope the findings of this study can help to guide school leaders in educating refugee children, in understanding the vulnerability of refugee parents and in developing parental involvement initiatives sensitive and responsive to the needs of a uniquely situated population of new US residents.

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