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Theresa Thao-Yang
tthaoyang@gmail.com

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ALL IT TAKES IS ONE PERSON: FIRST-GENERATION HMONG WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Theresa Thao-Yang

A Dissertation
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
College of Education
May 2021

Dissertation Committee:
Laura Wangsness Willemsen, Ph.D.
Acacia Nikoi, Ph.D.
Sally Baas, Ed.D.

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ABSTRACT

Theresa Thao-Yang, Ed.D.

Concordia University, Saint Paul

In this dissertation, I examined the educational and life experiences of 13 first-generation Hmong women and how their lived experiences impacted their earlier education experiences as well as their post-secondary educational choices and their children's educational pathways. Drawing from a qualitative, narrative analysis approach to explore which educational practices support young immigrant women, this study highlights the determination and resilience in first-generation Hmong women's lives by revealing the oppression and invisibility they faced. Through utilizing a life history approach with 13 Hmong women, this dissertation focused on three first-generation Hmong women's complete life histories to examine the role schooling, family, and culture have played in achieving academic success. This dissertation advances three main arguments: 1) the construct of intersectionality is useful for examining first-generation Hmong women's complex identities, their wellbeing, and educational trajectories; 2) the model minority myth (MMM) was experienced by these women in schools, and their gender further exacerbated the educational challenges they faced; and 3) patriarchal aspects of some Hmong cultural values and practices have created a feeling of oppression and the need to prove one's worth for some Hmong women. As such, this study reveals the struggles these first-generation Hmong women encountered, the lack of support they received educationally and culturally, the significant educational and life achievements they created for themselves by drawing on communal and individual sources of encouragement, and the power of teachers and educational systems to either support or hinder wellbeing for young immigrant women.

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And to all of the family members, friends, and people who I could not mention here but have been just as important to my journey, thank you.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mom, my sister, Vickie, my daughter, Audrey, and all the young Hmong women trying to find their voice and identities in a complex society. You have so much to offer this world, are full of potential, and can achieve whatever you set out to do. May you find your voice to chart your own destiny, bounded by no limitations and constraints.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"I tell my story not because it is unique, but because it is the story of many girls."

--Malala Yousafzai

Malala's story of speaking out publicly for the right to an education for girls in Pakistan despite the Taliban seeking her out and shooting her ("Malala's Story," n.d.) may resonate with courage and hope for immigrant girls: for many, their life stories may have some similarities to hers with regard to the struggle for equality in education and in life. For Malala, this struggle almost took her life; for many Hmong girls, the struggle for equality is a fight they often endure alone. Traditionally, Hmong girls are raised to be homemakers, often having fewer opportunities and exposure to schooling and extracurricular activities compared to Hmong boys or many non-immigrant girls in US schools. They may be seen as comparatively unimportant because they will leave their family one day and become a part of their husband's clan, becoming an "outsider" to their family. Yet for many immigrant girls, Hmong immigrant girls included, education is seen as the pathway to independence and empowerment.

In this dissertation study, I examined the educational and life trajectories of 13 first-generation Hmong women, all of whom came to the United States with their immigrant families when they were young and are now currently mothers of school-aged children. Using life history methods, my aim was to better understand education's role in my participants' lives and in their children's lives. As an educator and a Hmong woman, I pursued this study with the dual hope of improving educational practices and illuminating the voices and experiences of Hmong women, who have historically been overlooked in classrooms and research alike.

Problem Statement, Significance, Preview of Findings and Researcher Stance

When compared to other ethnic groups, the educational attainment of the Hmong people, specifically Hmong women, falls within a range that is much lower (Hmong 2000 Census Publication, n.d.; Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Walker-Moffat, 1995) as evident in Table 1. When searching for more current data on the educational attainment of Hmong women compared to other groups, the issue then becomes a lack of data due to Asians being seen as homogeneous and grouped as one, as demonstrated by this outdated 1990 table. Here, it is evident how the model minority myth (MMM) perpetuates the educational success and struggles of Hmong Americans. It has been argued that the needs of Hmong students have not been served well in schools and Hmong women have been overlooked in research as well (Vang, 2005; Reierson, 2015; Thao, 2017). Therefore, to better understand this problem, more research needs to be done.

Table 1

Educational Attainment by Sex: 1990

(Percent 25 years old and over)

	High school graduate or higher		Bachelor's degree or higher	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total population	**75.7**	**74.8**	**23.3**	**17.6**
Total Asian	81.7	73.9	43.2	32.7
Chinese	77.2	70.2	46.7	35.0
Filipino	84.2	81.4	36.2	41.6
Japanese	89.9	85.6	42.6	28.2
Asian Indian	89.4	79.0	65.7	48.7
Korean	89.1	74.1	46.9	25.9
Vietnamese	68.5	53.3	22.3	12.2
Cambodian	46.2	25.3	8.6	3.2
Hmong	44.1	19.0	7.0	3.0
Laotian	49.4	29.8	7.0	3.5
Thai	88.6	66.2	47.7	24.9
Other Asian	85.9	78.7	47.5	34.2

Source. U.S. Census Bureau (1993)

Although there have been many studies conducted on the educational experiences of the Hmong people, there are no known studies examining the connection between first-generation Hmong women's educational experiences and how these experiences have affected their educational trajectory or their children's educational pathways. Due to the tension between my role as a Hmong woman while also seeing educational success as a way of breaking barriers in a patriarchal society, negotiating between the educational system and my culture has been a battle. Because of my struggles as a second-generation Hmong woman, I have often wondered how first-generation Hmong women, despite their varied experiences, continue to demonstrate resiliency and perseverance.

In addition to the lack of research on first-generation Hmong women's schooling and how this may affect their children's schooling, the research on students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) is still emerging and thus a more complete picture of SLIFE students' experiences will be valuable in shaping how educators support and teach these students. As the United States continues to receive refugees and immigrants who have had limited or interrupted education, more research needs to be done on the best practices for educating these children.

Before continuing on, it is important to define the words refugee and SLIFE in order for readers to have the same reference point. A refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership or a particular social group or political opinion" (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020, para. 4). Students with limited or interrupted formal education are a diverse subset of English language learners (ELL) who share several unifying characteristics: usually they are new to the U.S. school system, have

had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their native country, have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s), and are below grade level in most academic skills (WIDA, 2020). This subpopulation of ELLs may have experienced interrupted education due to war, migration, or other circumstances and for some, high school may be their first exposure to literacy in any form (DeCapua et al., 2009). In addition to academic challenges, many of these students are facing emotional traumas, "such as fleeing civil wars or natural disasters or who may now be separated from immediate family" (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 2).

When students have grown up with little to no formal education, and enroll in American schools, there is more to learn than just the English language, since many of them are coming from countries "where poverty, disaster, and civil unrest affect the development of literacy and opportunities for education" (Robertson & Lafond, n.d., section 3, para. 1). Students with limited or interrupted formal education are most at risk for failure due to their unique needs (WIDA, 2015); thus, those who have the responsibility of working with these students need to understand what these students have endured and why they may have certain academic gaps and challenges. This understanding can help educators discover effective strategies that will assist in building on what they already know and what they will be expected to do in their new academic setting (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020).

At the outset of this study, intergenerational trauma was the main construct I anticipated focusing on as it is likely that such trauma has had a significant effect on the lives and educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women. This is due to the war-related trauma their parents carry with them because of the events of the CIA's Secret War in Laos from 1961-1975 ("The Hmong and the Secret War," 2017). After all, it has been shown that how parents experience schooling will often impact their own children's schooling experiences. According to

Alwin and Thornton (1984), "parents play a strong role in shaping opportunities for children which provide them differential educational experiences" (p. 784) and when trauma is involved, these experiences may differ immensely from others. If the trauma of first-generation immigrant parents has not yet been fully understood or addressed, it is likely that even less is understood about how parental experiences may have shaped children's experiences in life and schooling within the Hmong community. While trauma remains an important construct, it is not as useful and crucial as the construct of intersectionality as applied to examining the experiences of first-generation Hmong women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) used the term intersectionality to "describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap" (Coaston, 2019, para. 3). Her work examined how the tendency to see things from a single-issue framework, such as race or gender alone, is insufficient, problematic, and creates challenges (Crenshaw, 1989). Having a singular focus on race, gender, sex, language, educational status, and immigration status cannot capture the multiple constraints and opportunities people with complex identities experience within their social worlds. To apply the notion of intersectionality to understanding first-generation Hmong women's lived cultural, social, and educational experiences, it is crucial that gender, race, and other constructs of power are examined together. Unfortunately, intersectionality is a construct that has often not been used to analyze first-generation Hmong women's experiences with marginalization. As such, this dissertation advances the argument that the construct of intersectionality is useful for examining first-generation Hmong women's complex identities, their wellbeing, and educational trajectories. To be clear, intersectionality is a framework for understanding multiple locuses of oppression, therefore, it is a different lens to understand the complexity of how Hmong women are

minoritized and oppressed in multiple ways. Conversely, their stories of overcoming multiple marginalizations highlights their resilience in the face of adversity.

This dissertation used the notion of intersectionality to understand women's lives by focusing on Hmong women's experiences to address a comparative dearth of research on Hmong women, specifically first-generation Hmong women. A greater understanding of first-generation Hmong women's experiences is likely to illuminate the practices and pedagogies that were valuable in their schooling, with implications for the practices and pedagogies that educators employ with other newly arrived and generation 1.5 immigrant women, arriving "in the United States as children and are largely educated and socialized in the United States" (S. J. Lee, 2001, p. 507). The experiences of first-generation Hmong women represent a big wave similar to the refugees and immigrants who are arriving in the United States now, particularly the Karen community, and thus this dissertation may have insights valuable for current educators working with similar populations. This dissertation also argues that without a deeper understanding of Hmong women's history, one cannot fully know how the structure and organizations of schools have served and supported them—or not—and influenced their children's educational journey, and whether this has improved or changed. The implications for current practice in schools for refugee and immigrant students are immense when considering the impact of the knowledge gained from this proposed study.

Furthermore, this dissertation makes the argument that the model minority myth was exacerbated for these participants due to being women, which makes it even harder to perceive the advantages and disadvantages of these women. The model minority myth compounds the struggles of Hmong women because of the assumptions that Asian Americans are smart, quiet, and successful, thus not needing support (Suzuki, 2002). However, what they experienced was

substantial due to what they had to contend with—at school and at home—and was comparatively different when compared to their White counterparts. According to Kim (2021), "There is a deeply-rooted tradition in this country that sees everyone in the AAPI [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders] community as monolithic. All Asian Americans are seen as the 'model minority'—successful, hard-working, and largely wealthy. However, many communities in the Asian diaspora are subjected to extreme poverty levels…" (para. 11). In fact, Asian Americans are not a monolith and are often misunderstood because of the diversity and complexity that falls within that overarching label (Dobson, n.d.). Asian Americans face different issues but are treated as though they are all the same. Rather than being helpful, this myth "tends to silence and render invisible the complexity" of Asian Americans (Chow, 2011, para. 2). In fact, as readers will soon learn, this myth is still continuing to impact the participants' children's educational experiences: all 13 participants spoke about their children being silenced, overlooked, passed along, or not receiving the academic support that he/she needs due to this stereotype. The misconceptions attributed to the model minority myth may lead many educators to disregard the actual, individual needs (social, emotional, and academic) of these students, which was evident in the life histories of the 13 participants and their children.

Finally, the last argument this dissertation makes is that for many Hmong women, patriarchal aspects of some Hmong cultural values and practices have created a feeling of oppression and the need to prove one's worth. Cultural processes and practices play a critical role in how first-generation Hmong women view themselves, how they raise their children and is "instrumental in shaping how one views and interprets the world, and how we organize and process information" (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b, p. 164). Their stories reveal that for some Hmong women, the cultural practices and expectations were restrictive due to what they could

and could not do, such as staying after school or having to take care of siblings, and led to feelings of oppression, low self-esteem, and negative feelings of "being Hmong." In addition to the practices and expectations, many of the things said about them or to them were demeaning and demoralizing. Recognizing and understanding how cultural processes and practices shape many Hmong women's identity is profoundly important because of the impact it has on their lives. What they pass on to their own children then shapes the experiences of the next generation.

Turning to examine educational culture, because culture is learned, culture influences what is valued in learning; therefore, the culture of schooling of these women needed to be further explored in order to better understand how this has shaped their decisions to continue onto higher education and how their children's schooling may have been impacted by their mother's experiences. Research gathered around the stories of these women and how they have raised and advocated for their children can benefit educators in understanding how to better support 1.5 and second-generation children of immigrant and refugee families.

In this dissertation, in order to create a coherent whole through the arguments presented above, readers will find that the findings chapters are not organized by research questions, themes, and/or theoretical framework, but rather by three whole life histories in three separate chapters. Each life history embodies the overarching arguments advanced within their singular histories while also representing themes that recurred in other participants' stories. However, by presenting themes in the form of singular life histories, it allows for a deeper analysis and discussion of the study's key concepts. Presenting findings in this way "requires this to be a relational process, in which the researcher is continually thinking about and engaging with those to whom the argument is being made as well as, of course, the grounds on which the argument stands" (Mason, 2018, p. 219). When reading each life history, readers should consider that the

arguments made about educational journeys in the context of particular stories do also represent larger themes that occurred across other participants' stories.

This study was situationally unique due to the positionality of the researcher: I am a Hmong woman whose parents immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s as refugees. I am a member of the Hmong community, and am intimately familiar and involved with its culture, values, and beliefs due to the traditional upbringing I have had. I also have family members of the generation being studied. I am an educator, having taught English language learners whose parents were first-generation parents, and having had ELL students who were 1.5 and second-generation students. As a Hmong woman, I am closely connected to the Hmong community and am an educator, thus I am able to examine this study from different angles.

Research Context, Purpose, and Research Questions

My study was conducted with first-generation Hmong women participants in Minnesota and California, as these two states have the highest concentration of Hmong people. With current research mostly focused on the educational experiences of Hmong youth today, first-generation Hmong women's voices are being left behind. The purpose of this study was to:

- Reveal the narratives of first-generation Hmong women and their lived educational experiences;
- Learn how their educational experiences have impacted the educational decisions they have made for themselves and their children;
- Illuminate educational practices that will support the academic needs of newly arrived young immigrant women.

Through these narratives, my hope was that themes would emerge that could potentially help educators to better conceptualize the experiences of immigrants and minoritized youths, so as to

not stereotype and/or alienate these students but to create an urgency in changing the ways in which we teach, engage, and connect with these students, and point to practices and pedagogies that support their learning and wellbeing. In addition, I hope to also educate the Hmong community in seeing the effects of patriarchy and how some of its cultural values and processes have affected the self-esteem and educational attainment of Hmong girls and to consider empowerment rather than "power over."

To achieve the goals of this study, a qualitative methodology was used to draw out the narratives of first-generation Hmong women. The participants interviewed came to the United States right after the Vietnam War, in the mid-to-late 1970s. These Hmong women were between the ages of 1-15 when they arrived, so they are currently in their early 40s to early 50s. Gathering the narratives and stories of these women and examining their lives through their own lenses allowed me to explore patterns and themes that emerged from their experiences and examine who they have become because of these experiences.

My curiosity around academic achievement and first-generation Hmong women led me to think about the larger themes around my topic, one being support systems, and another being the role the patriarchal culture plays in a Hmong woman's decision to go onto higher education. Taking these factors into consideration, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What experiences do first-generation Hmong women understand as being pivotal in determining their course in education?
2. What supports, or lack thereof, do first-generation Hmong women view as having shaped their educational experiences?

3. How do first-generation Hmong women view their own educational experiences as having shaped their children's educational path?
4. What do first-generation Hmong women identify as ways in which the education system can better support newly arrived immigrant young women?

These research questions were important in framing how educators can become change agents when working with immigrant students and families with limited schooling. According to Fullan (1993), "Systems don't change by themselves. Rather, the actions of individuals and small groups working on new conceptions intersect to produce breakthroughs" (p. 11) and it is through these breakthroughs that moral purpose and change occurs.

Paradigm

This study was grounded in interpretivism with a critical stance. Interpretivist researchers take into account the total context of the participants' experiences, feelings, and perspectives and search for meaning rather than the truth. Here, "truth and knowledge is subjective" (Ryan, 2018, p. 9) and multiple truths exist with regard to social realities. They view complete objectivity and neutrality as being impossible as the researchers' and participants' values are an integral part of the study.

Since this study also critically examined how gender, race, education status, language, and immigration status are experienced by these participants, a critical stance was needed in order to acknowledge and examine the fundamental themes expressed by marginalized individuals and to support the advocacy desired. The struggles of marginalized individuals/groups become the central issue due to the focus being on the "systems of power and control, privilege, inequity, dominance, and influence on groups based on race, gender, and socioeconomic class" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 347). Through a critical lens, "all

thought and practices that justify or uphold domination and exploitation" are questioned and "demands for a self-determined, participatory, and just democracy" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 7) are made, in order to reduce inequality. Through a critical approach, not only are the participants studied, but the systems in which they have lived and learned are examined. It is the hope, then, that advocacy is enacted by improving educational systems to better serve SLIFE and other minoritized students as well as empowering Hmong women to create change.

Previous Research

As explored in Chapter Two, this study is rooted in four bodies of literature. The first body of literature is around Hmong women and education. This looks at the educational experiences of Hmong women and the educational achievements of Hmong women compared to Hmong men. The second body of literature focuses on the model minority myth and the implications it has on the educational experiences of Asian American students. The model minority myth implies all Asians are the same and have made it while hiding the fact that many Asian American ethnic groups are struggling (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Although this myth is seen as a positive stereotype, research shows how this myth contributes to a biased perspective.

The third body of literature is on the educational experiences of refugee/SLIFE students. This section explores the needs of refugee students, language instruction, teacher preparedness, and family and cultural factors that impact the educational experiences of these students. Policy and professional development are also examined. Research on acculturation, spiritual beliefs, language loss, parental involvement, and intergenerational conflict are also addressed in this section. The final body of literature is on the educational experiences of Hmong students with a focus on Hmong women's educational experiences. The literature in this section addresses what research says about culture, marginalization, racism, and empowerment and how these impact

Hmong students schooling. The literature review presented in Chapter Two is essential in understanding the impact education had on the schooling experiences of first-generation Hmong students and the barriers they encountered.

Definition of Terms

- 1.5 generation: They are “neither part of the ‘first’ generation of their parents, the responsible adults who were formed in the homeland, who made the fateful decision to leave it and to flee as refugees to an uncertain exile in the United States, and who are thus defined by the consequences of that decision and the need to justify it; nor are these youths part of the ‘second’ generation of children who are born in the USA, and for whom the ‘homeland’ mainly exists as a representation consisting of parental memories and memorabilia, even though their ethnicity may remain well defined” (Rumbaut & Ima, 1987, p.22); foreign-born individuals who arrived in the United States as children and are largely educated and socialized in the United States (S. J. Lee, 2001, p. 507)
- Acculturation: The dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005, p. 698)
- Culture: Learned patterns of actions, language, beliefs, rituals, and ways of life (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 23)
- First-generation: This is a very contested concept. For the purpose of this dissertation, first-generation refers to “immigrant students born abroad. First-generation immigrant students came to the United States sometime between birth and their enrollment in college. These students were legally authorized to reside in the United States and

were admitted to the United States for the purpose of obtaining permanent residency, had permanent residency, or had become American citizens" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, pg. 2). First-generation students' parents were also born outside of the United States.

- Hmong: A distinct ethnic group with ancient roots in China ("Hmong in Minnesota," n.d.)
- Intergenerational trauma: Occurs when the maladaptive effects of an original trauma experience, such as historic trauma, results in unhealthy effects on the first generation being passed down to the next generation or multiple generations (Gaywish & Mordoch, n.d., p. 3)
- Intersectionality: How race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap" (J. Coaston, 2019, para. 3)
- Model minority myth: The stereotype of Asian Americans as being hard-working, smart, high-achieving students from "good" cultures (S. J. Lee, 2004, p. 123)
- Patriarchal: A social system in which men hold the authority and power to make decisions (Thao, 2017)
- Patrilineal: Descent or kinship through the father's side instead of the mother's (Moua, 2003, p. 7)
- Refugee: Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership, or a particular social group or political opinion (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2001-2020, para. 4)

- Secret War: In 1961, four years before the Vietnam War, the CIA funded a Secret War in Laos. The Hmong became CIA's surrogate army, fighting and preventing communism from consuming the country of Laos ("The Hmong and the Secret War, 2017)
- Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE): A diverse subset of English language learners (ELL) who share several unifying characteristics: usually they are new to the U.S. school system, have had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their native country, have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s), and are below grade level in most academic skills (WIDA, 2020)
- Second-generation: Students who were born in the United States to at least one parent who was born abroad (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 3)

Conclusion

With the alarming uptick in anti-Asian hate, discrimination and violence in the last few years as well as the recent Atlanta shooting that killed six Asian women, this dissertation comes at a critical time. By advancing the narratives of first-generation Hmong women and their experiences, the hope is this dissertation allows others "to hear, to listen, and to believe, each individual voice" (Son, 2021, para. 16). In this chapter, I explained why there is a need to study first-generation Hmong women and their educational experiences. I have provided readers with the background of my study and a preview of my findings. This study urges educators to search for and provide improved educational practices for newly arrived young immigrant women, and to become a change agent that will reflect the needs of these students. This study also calls on the Hmong community to empower Hmong women by changing some of its cultural values and

processes. In the next chapter, I provide a deeper review of relevant literature on educational experiences of immigrant youth and narrowing down to Hmong-specific research. My intention with the literature review is not to show only the challenging aspects of Hmong women's experiences, but to highlight the extensive gaps in research, which have created an inequity in understanding how Hmong women have experienced their educational journey. In my concluding chapter, there will be implications for educators and leaders, and messages for the Hmong community.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

If not for the sake of the individual refugee child, then for the stability of society as a whole, helping refugee children to succeed in school should be of importance to educators, administrators, and policymakers.
(McBrien, 2005, p. 358)

Hmong Women and Education

The Hmong are an ethnic group who lived in the southern provinces of China for thousands of years, farming and maintaining their cultural roots. In the 1800s, when the Chinese tried to oppress the Hmong through military powers, they migrated to the mountainous regions of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar (Burma; Hmong Timeline, n.d.). Hmong women, coming from a patrilineal culture, did not have opportunities to attend school until the early 1960s when the war in Vietnam was spreading into Laos. During this time, the United States funded new schools in remote areas of Laos, which opened opportunities for Hmong girls. As men were being recruited into the CIA to help fight the war, Hmong women were being trained as nurses to help care for the wounded. In an interview with the Minnesota Historical Society, Lao Thai Vang (2009) stated,

> Where we lived, girls did not attend schools until the late 1950s. When the war started in our country, the Americans began building small schools in nearby villages where both boys and girls could go learn. For some students, they walked as far as half a day just to get an education.

This was the first experience some Hmong girls had with schooling, as not all girls went to school.

As the Hmong immigrated to the United States after the war, schooling was more accessible; however, many of these Hmong students came with no previous formal education, no English skills, and low-socioeconomic backgrounds, posing a problem for schools and school

districts (K. Lee, 2014). Students who reached the age of 20 but did not finish all the required number of credits for graduation were terminated with a certificate of attendance or meaningless diploma (Downing et al., 1984). Furthermore, Walker-Moffat (1995) argued the low achievement rates of Hmong girls were due to the cultural disparities between Hmong patriarchal beliefs and the United States educational institutions. According to Walker-Moffat (1995),

> For many Hmong girls, a tension exists between a sense of traditional cultural identities and the wish to attend school … In Laos, Hmong girls did not go to school because they had to work and the education of girls was deemed less important than for boys. (p. 116)

Furthermore, the model minority myth, which implies Asian American students are high achieving (Rah, 2018), perpetuates the assumption that Hmong Americans do not need the assistance and support of educational programs to obtain educational success (Sui, 1996); therefore masking issues when Asian Americans are categorized as homogeneous (Chang, 2017).

In actuality, Asian Americans are very diverse, differing in language, culture, and length of residence in the United States (U.S.; Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Data from the 2000 US Census shows a lack of education within the Hmong population, with 60% of all Hmong above 24 years of age having a highest educational attainment of high school or equivalent, as many of these immigrants came to the U.S. as adults or young adults, and 7.5% having a bachelor's degree or higher (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Besides the lack of education, there is a high dropout rate with 40% of Hmong Americans dropping out of school and 38% having not received a high school degree. According to the Hmong 2000 Census Publication (n.d.), the educational attainment between Hmong women and Hmong men is significantly lower, as Hmong men show higher educational attainment compared to Hmong women nationally: 56.8% of Hmong women across the United States reported having completed no schooling compared to 33.5% of Hmong men,

20.1% of Hmong women compared to 34.4% of Hmong men in the United States were high school graduates, and 7% of Hmong women compared to 16.5% of Hmong men obtained a bachelor or associate's degree. Furthermore, there is a difference between the academic achievements of foreign-born students compared to U.S. born students. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported "approximately 52% of Asian-American students were U.S. born and 48% were foreign-born; three out of four came from bilingual homes. Foreign-born students were twice as likely as U.S. born students to be identified as at-risk for school failure" (Vang, 2005, p. 30), as these students were typically from non-English speaking backgrounds, lived at or below the poverty level, went to urban schools, and entered the U.S. in their teenage years (Vang, 2005).

The issue of educational success continues to resonate highly within the Hmong community. In order to understand the systems at play and how to better help and prepare young Hmong women and newly arrived immigrant young women, the purpose of this study was to provide improved educational practices that will support the academic needs of newly arrived immigrant young women by examining the educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women. Specifically, I looked into how their experiences have shaped who they have become and their children's educational experience and what they deemed as essential in supporting young immigrant women in schools.

The purpose of this chapter is to allow for an understanding of the cultural and educational challenges first-generation Hmong women faced when they first arrived in the United States by reviewing literature around refugee students and students with limited or interrupted formal education and their experiences, narrowing down to Hmong specific scholarship.

The decentralized U.S. educational system is not easy to navigate nor to understand, particularly for refugee families whose native language is not English (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Many families may have had limited access to, if any, education in refugee camps and for those who have had formal instruction before resettling in the U.S., the education system often differs widely from what they previously experienced. From the requirements made of students, parents, and teachers, to lockers, school bells, and cafeterias, adjusting to such changes is a challenging task (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services [BRYCS], 2018).

Although there have been recent restrictions placed on refugee resettlement amid changing political orders, in the past decade, the United States has welcomed more than 50,000 refugees per year. Nearly one-third of these refugees are children (Shafer, 2018). In a global report by UNHCR (2019), children below 18 years of age constituted about half of the refugee population in 2018, 63% of refugee enrollment was in primary schools, 24% was in secondary, and 3% in higher education. In the U.S., the number of resettling refugee children increased from 13% in 1998 to 37% in 2008. These refugee children, along with immigrants, make up one in five children in the U.S. Furthermore, data from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) showed more than 44.7 million immigrants lived in the United States, meaning one in seven U.S. residents is foreign born. Of the 44.4 million immigrants ages five and older, approximately 47% (20.8 million) were limited English proficient (LEP), those who speak English "not at all," "not well," or "well," and accounted for 81% of the country's 25.6 million LEP individuals (Batalova et al., 2020). "The education of these newcomers is not only crucial to their own well-being, but to the future of American society" (BRYCS, 2018, para. 3). These numbers are important in order to understand the resources needed in the schools for these students, as teachers, even ESL teachers, are inadequately trained due to these students' specific needs (DeCapua et al., 2009).

This chapter is a review of empirical and theoretical literature sought to answer the following question: What arguments have been made around the schooling experiences of refugee/SLIFE students, with implications for first-generation Hmong women? I explore three critical views on this question (the model minority myth, refugee/SLIFE students and education, and the educational experiences of Hmong students) in order to gain an insight into the educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women.

The examination into the educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women is crucial due to the lack of research around their experiences. Over the 40 years the Hmong have been in the United States, Hmong women, particularly first-generation Hmong women, are still struggling to be seen as important and vital in their contributions to the community at large (Xiong, 2015). The changing nature of the Hmong culture is exemplified by the conflicting views on education for Hmong girls and women. According to McCall and Vang (2012), "Although Hmong parents value education, they also want their daughters to marry, have children, and fulfill women's traditional role within the Hmong culture" (p. 35). Ngo and Lee (2007), in a literature review, stated "the Hmong practices of early marriage and early childbearing were identified as the two most significant barriers to educational persistence for Hmong girls" (p. 429). As these quotes demonstrate, Hmong women's role has historically been defined in terms of the domestic household chores of cooking, cleaning, and raising children. Furthermore, there have been comparatively few educated Hmong women to be recognized as role models for teenage Hmong girls, and those who are seen as role models are married with families (S. J. Lee, 1997; Walker-Moffat, 1998). However, as gender roles between Hmong women and Hmong men are beginning to be transformed, opportunities once limited, such as in education and employment, are being sought after by Hmong women (Duffy et al., 2004).

"Education has become a powerful resource for women in gaining respect and honor" (Khang, 2010, p. 23). Additionally, S. J. Lee (1997) stated, "while the older males mourn what they believe is the loss of male power, many Hmong women of all ages embrace what they perceive to be the increased opportunities for freedom offered by life in the United States" (p. 809). Therefore, it is critical to explore the educational experiences of refugee/SLIFE students in order to gain a better understanding of how schooling affected first-generation Hmong women and the decisions they make for themselves and their own children.

The SLIFE designation is important to understand in application to Hmong students, as many Hmong students arrived in the United States with no formal schooling and were placed in grade levels based on their age, which may have been inaccurate due to the Hmong not using a calendar but basing birth days and years on the time of harvesting. The limited but growing literature on SLIFE students "describes the array of challenges they face adapting to school" (Birman, 2017). Students with limited or interrupted formal education are particularly challenging for educators, especially at the high school level, due to the short amount of time these students are given to develop their English proficiency skills while developing literacy skills and academic content knowledge (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a). According to DeCapua and Marshall (2010b),

> Teachers expect learners to come with (a) an urge to compete and excel as individuals and (b) age-appropriate preparation for both literacy development and classroom activities requiring academic ways of thinking. These expectations and assumptions differ from those of SLIFE who need immediate applications, interpersonal relationships, collaborative opportunities, oral learning components, and repeated contextualized practice. The key elements of the US classroom—future relevance, independence,

> individual achievement and accountability, the written word, and academic orientation conflict with the SLIFE learning paradigm. This conflict leaves learners feeling isolated, confused, and inadequate, and marginalized by the discourse of academia, an unfamiliar and alienating learning paradigm. (p. 167)

It is apparent the needs of SLIFE students are unique from those of most ELLs and teachers play an essential role in supporting SLIFE students to adjust (Hos, 2014). Educators should take the necessary steps to see that these students are properly identified and placed, as most are placed in regular English as a second language (ESL) classes and/or regular mainstream classrooms and eventually drop out due to frustrations and feeling lost (DeCapua et al., 2009). According to the Pew Research Center (2005), 70% of SLIFE students drop out of high school due to school difficulties. Although SLIFE students may lack academic knowledge and skills, they are likely to have witnessed life changing events, contributing to their "knowledge of life" (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 19) and should not be considered "deficient but rather as students who come with funds of knowledge that can and should be used as building blocks for the acquisition of new, academic knowledge" (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 19).

Model Minority Myth

Before the 1960s, Asian Americans were portrayed as the "Yellow Peril"—threatening, exotic, and a menace (Kim, 1973; Tang, 2019; Yu, 2006). Two articles, published in the 1960s, coined the term model minority. The first article, written by William Petersen, a sociologist, entitled, "Success story: Japanese American style" appeared in 1966 in *The New York Times* (Kasinitz et al., 2011). In Petersen's publication, family structure and a cultural emphasis on hard work was emphasized as allowing Japanese Americans to overcome the discrimination against their group and "achieve a measure of success in the United States" (Kasinitz et al., 2011, p.

173). Furthermore, success of Asian Americans was attributed to Confucian values, work ethic, family values, and genetic superiority (Chang & Au, 2009; Kasinitz et al., 2011; Kawai, 2003). The second article also appeared in 1966, in the *U. S. News and World Report*, but with no author. This publication, entitled, "Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.," focused on how well Chinese Americans were doing without having to use welfare programs (Kawai, 2003). With these two publications, one factor overlooked was the 1965 Immigration Act, which reversed years of restrictive immigration policies and allowed for a greater number of immigrants to enter the U.S. Although this Act lifted previous restrictions, it allowed only those with certain backgrounds to enter, resulting in a large influx of educated professionals and scientists from Asia. This group of Asian Americans and their children, who came after the Immigration Act of 1965, make up a large portion of the Asian American community today ("Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965," 2020; Kasinitz et al., 2011; Yu, 2006; Zhou & Lee, 2014).

According to Zhou and Lee (2014; J. Lee, 2018), this change in immigrant law explains the different socioeconomic profiles of Asian Americans. The Immigration Act of 1965 allowed for selectivity, in which those who immigrated to the United States were more highly educated and skilled than those left behind. Further, it also allowed for *hyper-selectivity*, a set of "characteristics that helps immigrants selectively import cultural practices from their countries of origin and use them for social mobility in their host society" (Zhou & Lee, 2014, p. 8322) in contrast to those entering the United States with little or no education or money (Chang & Au, 2009) or those arriving as refugees, particularly, the Southeast Asians who came to the United States to escape war (Ng et al., 2017; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Siu, 1996).

In comparison to their counterparts from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, Southeast Asian students are less prepared academically at the time of arrival in the United States due to a lack of schooling (Siu, 1996). Ngo and Lee (2007) took this further by pointing out how diversity in the refugee waves of Southeast Asians account for the educational achievement of Asian Americans. Three waves were marked by the immigration of Southeast Asian refugees: 1) the first wave (1975-1979) consisted of educated elite, professionals, and those who worked closely with the U.S. military, 2) the second wave (1979-1982) were primarily family members of the first wave immigrants who had the economic and social resources, and 3) the third wave (1982-present) were those who had lived in refugee camps in Thailand for many years, comprising mostly of Hmong and Lowland Lao (Ngo & Lee, 2007). It is important to note this because of the dynamics these refugees add to the model minority myth (MMM) stereotype.

Implications of Model Minority Myth on Asian American Students

The MMM is used to argue Asian Americans have “made it” through hard work and education and serves as a model for other racial minorities to follow (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Wing, 2007; Yu, 2006). Unfortunately, this simple explanation has had tremendous implications for education, politics, and social services (Chang, 2017; Yu, 2006). These implications include: 1) the U.S. educational system works and does not need reform; 2) Asian Americans do not need accommodations, services, funding, or policy reform in education; 3) perhaps there is something at fault or in deficit with other minority groups instead of the system if there is a “model minority” who is adapting and achieving; and 4) for other minorities who are not doing as well, there must be something within the Asian American’s “culture” to be emulated, since Asians are able to achieve highly (Chang, 2017).

While some Asian Americans may welcome the seemingly positive characterization, others oppose it for the negative consequences it has on members of the Asian American community (Kasinitz et al., 2011; Siu, 1996; Suzuki, 2002; Yu, 2006). Suzuki (2002) reported a lack of Asian American counselors at a college even though more than 15% of the student body consisted of Asian Americans. Because very few Asian Americans used the services of the counseling center, Suzuki (2002) found the staff concluded these students were so well adjusted and had few personal problems they did not need psychological counseling. Suzuki questioned the validity of their conclusions and insisted the center hire an Asian American counselor. After insisting for over two years, the first Asian American counselor was hired and within months, the new counselor was inundated with Asian American students seeking advice on a variety of psychological problems. This example reveals, because of the MMM stereotype, how many Asian American students receive little, if any, help in coping with their problems because they go unrecognized and unacknowledged by institutions (Suzuki, 2002; Yu, 2006).

Similarly, Wing (2007) found Asian American students felt isolated and invisible, often experiencing discrimination because of the assumption they were high achievers. Even though some of these students were at risk, teachers did not see them as failing or needing help. Furthermore, Wing found parents were uninvolved in their child's education, partly because they were uneducated or working, and gender, culture, and family often played an important role in the girls' educational paths, particularly the practice of arranged marriages, which conflicted with girls seeking postsecondary education or professional careers. Pane, a high school student interviewed, stated,

> It's not really expected, especially as a girl, to go off to college or to be really smart. You know, a lot of the Asian girls that I see are getting married at 18, 19, not necessarily because they want to but because parents are forcing them to. (Wing, 2007, p. 469)

Even though these girls saw how important education was, their families did not. Instead of being supportive, families were often forcing their daughters to get married.

All six students revealed a sense of isolation and invisibility due to the feelings of being overlooked and lumped into one stereotype that all Asians are the same, resulting in being racially discriminated against (Wing, 2007). These students recounted specific instances when racism took the form of statements by other students and teachers, such as, "You all look alike" or "You are all the same." Some students, like Franklin Nguyen, expressed their anger through acts of resistance. In response to an encounter with a teacher, Franklin stated,

> Some Vietnamese students don't speak up when teachers mispronounce their names. When my teacher called me ''Noojun,'' I corrected him. I said, ''My name is pronounced Nwin, not Noojun.'' The teacher said, ''Whatever.'' Then I said, ''No, my name is not Whatever. It is Nguyen. (Wing, 2007, p. 474)

These students were dealing with their own educational challenges, along with family and cultural conflicts. The many obstacles and hardships they endured were masked by the perception Asian students were doing well and had no serious problems, or they were predisposed to do well in school. There is a need to recognize many Asian students are in need of support services; therefore, it is important to dispel these stereotypes in order to provide assistance to these students (Wing, 2007).

The high expectations the MMM places on Asian Americans lead to Asian Americans internalizing the stereotype. This internalization may lead to mental health problems due to many

students not being able to live up to the stereotype (Lee et al., 2009, Wong & Halgin, 2006). According to the Asian American Psychological Association (2012), suicide was the eighth leading cause of death for Asian Americans, compared to 11th for all racial groups, the second leading cause of death for Asian Americans aged 15-34, and those aged 20-24 had the highest suicide rate among Asian Americans. Lee et al. (2009) obtained information on mental health problems through focus groups with 17, 1.5 and second-generation Asian American young adults living in Maryland, ages 18-30. Several factors were reported by participants as affecting their mental health: 1) the pressure to meet parental expectations of high academic achievement and to live up to the "model minority" stereotype; 2) the difficulty of balancing two different cultures and communicating with parents; 3) family obligations based on strong family values; and 4) discrimination or isolation due to racial or cultural background (Lee et al., 2009).

According to the participants, "mental health is seen as something that an individual should have control over in Asian culture" (Lee et al., 2009, p. 5). Because it was historically taboo to discuss mental health issues in many Asian cultures, this led to hiding, neglecting, or denying symptoms rather than seeking help. Furthermore, participants discussed deterrents that prevented them from seeking professional help: 1) the stigma associated with mental health; 2) the lack of awareness of mental health issues in the community; 3) to avoid worrying their parents with their problems; 4) the lack of mental health professionals who can offer linguistically and culturally appropriate care; 5) parents' lack of knowledge of mental health issues; and 6) the costs associated with mental health care (Lee et al., 2009). This research suggested in working with Asian American students, teachers, counselors, and administration should be aware of the misconceptions the MMM engenders, the extensive pressure some Asian Americans may experience due to living up to this stereotype, and the shame and reluctance to

reveal personal difficulties when they are not able to live up to this image. Every effort should be made to understand each person's individual narrative in order to not assume all Asian Americans have the same experiences.

It is evident the MMM does more damage than benefitting Asian American students. Delucchi and Do (1996, as cited in Wong & Halgin, 2006) showed how detrimental the MMM is for Asian American students when racial intolerance is involved. In a qualitative study at the University of California, the researchers examined student and college administration reactions to racial incidents involving Asian American and African American students and found students and administrators treated the racist incidents differently. For instance, when African American students were harassed by members of a White sorority and when members of a White fraternity were painted Black and sold as slaves to raise money, the students and administrators immediately denounced the incidents as racist and the administration reprimanded both groups (Delucchi & Do, 1996, as cited in Wong & Halgin, 2006). However, students and administrators were less willing to condemn incidents as racist when it involved Asian Americans. For example, during the same time the racist incidents occurred with the African American students, an Asian American student was assaulted and battered by a White student, receiving numerous injuries to his face, including a broken nose. The administration refused to “subject the White student to disciplinary actions, even after the White student continued to harass the victim” (Delucchi & Do, 1996, as cited in Wong & Halgin, 2006, p. 47). Furthermore, the campus newspaper refused to cover the story or print letters to the editor by Asian American students and at a rally to bring attention to the incident, students against the violence and students in support of the perpetrator shouted at one another. It was only after many hate letters were sent to Asian American students that the administration called a press conference announcing the police would investigate the

incident. One student, in a letter to the editor, wrote "Asians should not be considered an underprivileged group because they have acquired economic equality with Whites" (Delucchi & Do, 1996, as cited in Wong & Halgin, 2006, p. 47). These examples reveal how Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic minority groups receive differential treatment when they are victims of racial intolerance and how the MMM perpetuates this.

Through this myth, obstacles and challenges are often dismissed as *all* Asian Americans are generalized as high achieving by focusing on exceptional success stories (Kim & Yeh, 2002); however, as previously pointed out, this myth does not acknowledge the trials of Asian Americans and the diversity of the Asian ethnic groups, which can be seen when comparing literature and data between East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians. The MMM only complicates the lived experiences of Asian Americans, often classifying Asian Americans as homogenous and not at risk. In contrast, research has shown how diverse Asian Americans are and emphasizes the importance of understanding how the MMM contributes to a biased and limited perspective that does not reflect the diversity within their groups.

Refugee Students and Education

Educational Needs of Refugee Students

Research indicates, in every classroom, high-quality teachers are the key factor in promoting children's learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000). For refugee children, this is especially true, since they are often behind their peers in grade-level knowledge and "are working to master the English language and are tasked with healing from past trauma—including being uprooted because of conflict—while also acclimating to a new country and culture" (Kasper, 2018). Upon entering the school system in the United States, many refugee students receive English language (EL) services since language acquisition is a critical component of adjustment (McBrien, 2005).

Despite the efforts of integrating ESL students into the mainstream classrooms, ESL and former ESL students remain socially segregated from mainstream students (S. J. Lee, 2001; Vang, 2005). This is evident in a field study by Goldstein (1988) with Hmong students being placed in either an LEP program or in regular classrooms but isolated from their American classmates. Despite the number of Hmong students in regular classrooms, the social contact was severely limited due to language and cultural differences. Having Hmong students in regular classrooms did not increase the interaction and cultural understanding among American and Hmong students.

Goldstein's (1988) study suggested it is important to consider how the needs of refugee students (and families) can be addressed by school personnel such as administrators, mental health professionals, general education teachers, and EL teachers. Other research similarly highlights the importance of well-prepared school personnel. Wille et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study with 11 school personnel in three rural school districts to learn about their experiences in working with refugee children and their families in order to develop recommendations for promoting the inclusion of refugee youth in rural schools. Their analysis of the data showed communication and differences, including strategies and challenges for working with refugee students and families, was the strongest and most recurring theme (Wille et al., 2019). Those interviewed understood the importance of communication as a way to help support students and parents in understanding school norms and expectations, but they also described the difficulty in achieving effective communication. As for differences, three sub-themes emerged: 1) overcoming prejudice, 2) responsive practices, and 3) understanding sources of trauma (Wille et al., 2019). Participants acknowledged the diversity of appearance, religion, and traditions and the complexity of integrating newcomers into the culture of rural communities. Finally,

participants shared their own lack of awareness and limited ability to support students who had experienced trauma and mentioned the critical need for (and lack of) mental health services for families and children in their communities.

In contrast to Wille et al.'s (2019) study, Garcia (1991) conducted a case study with three teachers, a first grade, third grade, and fifth grade teacher to find out how to best educate bilingual students, focusing on the effectiveness of classroom teachers. These three teachers, consistently identified as effective teachers at their school and the district-level who taught in a school in central California committed to dual language and literacy development in Spanish and English for all students, regardless of native language or ethnic affiliation. Garcia (1991) found these three experienced teachers were highly skilled in communicating with students, parents, and their administrative supervisors, collaborated with their colleagues, understood the community they served by incorporating attributes of the local culture into the curriculum, and adopted instructional methods which were student-centered, collaborative, and process oriented. Most importantly though, these teachers cared for their students, advocating for them while also challenging them with high expectations.

Although educators and the school environment are key in facilitating socialization and acculturation of refugee and immigrant children (Trueba et al., 1990), they do not always do so. Cultural misunderstandings can result in prejudice and discrimination, resulting in students working to overcome these negative implications. For example, Mosselson (2007) revealed the alienation and disrespectful interactions felt by 15 adolescent Muslim refugee girls from Bosnia by their peers and teachers; therefore, their school success and achievement became a way to become invisible from their teachers so they would not be focused on and singled out. For instance, Natasa, a participant, described how some teachers treated her:

> The teachers were horrible. Some of them were really nice, some of them were really insulting, asking me questions like … do you know what rock music is, have you ever heard that, do you have a television … just questions like I came from some kind of jungle. (Mosselson, 2007, p. 107)

The participants in Mosselson's (2007) study pointed out how their challenges helped them achieve high academic success and allowed them to hide behind their "accolades." Once they started receiving straight A's, teachers and students started seeing them differently, their attitudes changing from one of ignorance to acceptance. Although these Muslim refugee girls encountered alienation and discrimination, they demonstrated tremendous resilience. The focus for schools should be to assist these students, acknowledging that they bring with them a wealth of skills and strengths.

In addition to Mosselson's (2007) study, Valenzuela (1999, as cited in Warikoo & Carter, 2009) found Mexican American students experienced "subtractive schooling" through school structures, such as tracking, having an anti-Mexican climate, and having an anti-Spanish-language bias in the curriculum. The large urban school in Houston denied students their Mexican heritage and promoted assimilation to White America as the road to school success. Finally, an ethnographic study by S. J. Lee (2001) found many educators blamed the academic problems of Hmong American students' on a lack of motivation. Other educators assumed cultural differences created problems for the Hmong students and these cultural differences were the responsibility of the ESL department, "freeing themselves from the responsibility for guiding these students towards achievement at UHS" (S. J. Lee, 2001, p. 524). It is clear from these examples that educators viewed these students from a deficit mindset, believing they were not

capable of learning due to language and cultural factors. Instead of asking what they can do to build on these students' existing strengths, these educators blamed the students.

With this in mind, schools and educators need to be aware of the challenges refugee students face, along with the ways in which they have unintentionally created these challenges, as many schools and teachers are ill equipped or reluctant to address students' cultural and language needs. Ima (1992, as cited in Siu, 1996) conducted a study on the effectiveness of schooling for recent Asian American immigrants and refugees enrolled in five secondary schools in Southern California. The researcher found students received poorer services in schools that were Eurocentric, or were preoccupied with keeping order, and none of the schools in the study provided a culturally affirming environment. There were inadequate bilingual and ESL programs, a lack of teaching materials written in the students' first languages, and ineffective assessment and monitoring of student progress. This, in turn, "shattered the dreams of a better education and a better future for many Asian American newcomers" (p. 40). Ima (1995, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007) also conducted a case study at a California high school with Lao students and revealed "the school did not have bilingual staff members, resources, or programs to provide monolingual English teachers information about Lao students" (p. 438). Because the teachers lacked training in assessing and second language acquisition, mistakes were often made by teachers in assessing the language skills of Lao American (and other minority) students (Ima, 1995, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). This lack of knowledge on the part of the school often led to truancy and even delinquency for the Lao students, due to feelings of discouragement.

Examining Language Instruction

In understanding the challenges refugee students encounter in schools, it is evident language instruction should be examined carefully since language acquisition and its use plays

an important part in their academic success. In fact, it is crucial to their adjustment to society (Trueba et al., 1990). Teachers need to have the knowledge, skills, and experience to effectively meet the needs of students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; otherwise, the potential for conflict and failure increases considerably (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). Connor and Boskin (2001, as cited in Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008) found teachers who "lacked understanding of the process of learning a new language" (p. 64) were more likely to identify students as having a learning disability rather than having difficulty in learning. Turning to Hmong youth, a two year qualitative study of Hmong students in Southern California by Trueba et al. (1990) found, through systematic observations and interviews, many teachers and administrators perceived the immigrant and refugee students as having low intelligence and learning disabilities, and exhibited prejudice by believing they were inferior to the native born students. They also found one of the major criteria for this was the children's inability to communicate in English. Because of this, students moved between depression and isolation and believed they were "dumb" and disabled, eventually stopping their attempts at learning (Trueba et al., 1990).

One reason why refugee students may experience difficulties in learning is because they are often taught only in English (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988, as cited in Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) examined language acquisition in context with psychosocial adjustment and identity and discussed how children's language acquisition and retention related not only to academic achievement but also to their success with acculturation. Bilingual children had the highest test scores, lowest levels of depression, highest self-esteem, and highest education and career goals. The researchers criticized the tendency of English immersion in schools as it increases cultural dissonance and can cause children to not only lose their native

language but also to fall short of fully acquiring proficiency in English. In fact, in an ethnographic study, Matute-Bianchi (1986, as cited in Zhou, 2007) found fully bilingual Mexican-American youths performed better in school than those who lacked proficient bilingual skills and they had a stronger Mexican identity. For ELLs, this leads to higher academic achievement (Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Accordingly, dual-language education, "in which immigrant students and children of U.S. born parents learn in a half English, half immigrant-language environment" (Warikoo & Carter, 2009, p. 375), produces an environment for immigrant students where their culture and home language "are valued and placed on par with English and the dominant culture" (Warikoo & Carter, 2009, p. 375). This is evident in a study conducted by Gebhard (2002) examining the second language instruction chosen by three elementary schools in California going through a school restructuring initiative. The researcher found teachers and coordinators in two schools "had not explored much of the current research regarding biliteracy development, which might have led them to develop a different kind of program" (Gebhard, 2002, p. 37). In one school, students were expected to learn silently, through reading and writing. In another school, it was almost the opposite, where teachers withheld subject content until children developed oral language abilities through the use of games and songs. However, Gebhard (2002) found a better approach in the third school which incorporated verbal and written activities along with group projects and facilitation by teachers and bilingual specialists. This school also provided professional development and research-based decision-making based on the needs of the community. According to Jones and Rutter (1998, as cited in Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), the main issues in refugee education "were delivering adequate language support, providing all students

with information and understanding about refugee students' experiences, and meeting the students' psycho-social and emotional needs" (p. 43).

Certainly, language acquisition is a high need of refugee students and needs to be considered carefully. Without such consideration, there may be negative implications if refugee students do not become proficient in English. According to Zhou (1997), proficiency in English is "regarded as the single most important prerequisite for assimilation into American society" (p. 86); however, evidence indicated schools are not providing sufficient instruction to ELs "in acquiring English proficiency, as well as access to academic subjects at their grade levels" (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, 2017, p. 246). Nicassio (1983, as cited in Nicassio, 1985) found a strong correlation between alienation and insufficient English skills, socioeconomic status, and self-perception in data obtained from 460 Southeast Asian refugees living in Illinois. Furthermore, in a study of an aggregate sample of 1600 refugees obtained from personal interviews, English language classes, and a mail survey, Nicassio and Pate (1984, as cited in Nicassio, 1985) found advanced age correlated with greater alienation, whereas being employed and having a longer residency in the United States were related to less alienation. Higher education, income, and being employed also correlated with less perceived difficulty in social interaction with American and comprehension of language and culture. Thus, it is evident refugee students need to be proficient in English in order to integrate successfully into society.

Schools' and Teachers' Practices on Refugee Students

Schools are significant institutions in improving the educational livelihoods of refugee students. To understand the educational experiences of refugee students, it is imperative I explore the practices of schools and teachers. I also highlight how policy and professional development were recurrent themes with teachers and schools. Without a carefully designed plan

and appropriate training, educators may feel overwhelmed when teaching new to refugee students. Educators may also attribute poor academic outcomes of these students to learning difficulties without first understanding how they might adapt their teaching to support these students' needs (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008).

In order for all students to be successful, administrators, teachers, and staff personnel need to build relational practices with marginalized groups (e.g., students of color, immigrants, and refugees), because having strong teacher-student relations, and "knowing" students, increases their sense of belonging and is likely to contribute to academic achievement (Rodriguez, 2015). Schools therefore need to adopt a strength-based approach, focusing on the knowledge and abilities acquired through their experiences and on the influences they have within their own lives to help overcome these problems (Hammond & Zimmerman, n.d.), rather than a deficit model in education.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found discrimination on the part of the education system, such as peers and teachers, was the greatest barrier to adapting for immigrant and refugee students. In order for students to thrive and achieve, students need to feel a sense of belonging (Roxas, 2011). While belonging is a contested concept, I borrow from Bic Ngo's (2017) work in this literature review to show when refugee students do not belong, their "attempts to belong may manifest in negative attitudes toward the self and their own racial and ethnic group" (p. 56) due to internalized racial oppression and "question the worth of their cultural and ethnic community" (p. 56). Belonging creates a strong school community where students are not susceptible to the negative behaviors of others, thus reducing delinquent behaviors and activities and resulting in positive academic and social outcomes for students (Van Ngo et al., 2015). Student achievement is enhanced when: 1) teachers structure classrooms to provide effective instruction, 2) the

curriculum and instructional materials are appropriate, 3) teachers are skilled in diagnostic/prescriptive teaching, and 4) teachers can adapt instruction on the basis of evaluation of student progress (Garcia et al., 1995). For refugee students, these educational conditions are critically important due to the many barriers they encounter.

Schools and Teacher Preparedness

From 2004 to 2013, refugees who were native speakers of at least 228 languages were admitted into the United States (Capps et al., 2015). According to UNHCR (2016), quality education is “the anchor” that will keep students in schools and “lies in sound and inclusive education policies as well as motivated and well-trained teachers” (para. 3). As schools are rapidly changing, with students who are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse (Freeman & Freeman, 2001), refugee students often face difficulties in their adjustment to public schools due to their limited or interrupted formal education (Bailey-Jones, 2018). Schools need to consider how they can be more inclusive of these students. Taylor and Sidhu (2012) investigated the role of schooling and its contribution to the successful resettlement of refugee children by conducting case studies of four schools—a high school (School A) and three Catholic schools, one primary (School B), one inner city high school (School C), and one high school in the northern suburbs (School D)—and the approaches they used to meet the needs of these learners. The results showed targeted policies were crucial in addressing the educational disadvantages of refugee young people. For School A, an equity program was “pivotal in providing resources for literacy support, and for welfare and advocacy activities,” along with school-based cultural understanding projects, experiential excursions, and various support programs (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012, p. 46). As for the three Catholic schools, they developed a “specific Strategy for Refugee Students as part of its current ESL Strategic Plan,” highlighting

"the need for a strategic approach to the enrollment and support of refugee learners and their families" (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012, p. 47). Furthermore, in all four schools, there was an explicit commitment to social justice, which influenced the approaches taken to supporting the educational needs of their refugee students. This is important as schools should be committed to a social justice framework when it comes to the education of refugee students. This not only benefits the refugee students but it also benefits the native-born students (Krasnoff, 2016).

For refugee students, schools are one of the most influential institutions, providing academic and social engagement (Cureton, 2020). Schools have the opportunity to foster these students' learning and to create an environment where students are respected and cared for. Teachers must learn to "recognize, honor, and incorporate the personal abilities of students into their teaching strategies" (Gay, 2018, p. 1). Despite this, the challenges, needs, and vulnerabilities are still apparent when looking at how schools and teachers educate this population of students (Cureton, 2020). Cureton (2020) examined student engagement among Muslim refugee youth and their families in Chicago. Through interviews with 47 students (ages 13-17) and their parents, Cureton found students mentioned numerous examples of bullying and discrimination from teachers, school staff, and peers, resulting in mixed feelings around their emotional engagement with school. Furthermore, data analysis showed parents were welcomed by school administrators, staff, and teachers who shared similar racial and ethnic similarities to the refugee families. However, the discrimination and xenophobia against their children by some school personnel from other racial and ethnic backgrounds caused parents to develop "a level of distrust in the school leadership and staff and to disengage with the schools" (Cureton, 2020, p. xiv). When it comes to educating refugee students, schools need to help them feel welcomed and supported; it is not enough to just teach them (Landers, 2020).

Equally important, schools play a critical role in nurturing respect for diversity ("The value of inclusive education," 2019). The greatest asset schools have in learning about refugee students is in the refugee students themselves. In the late 1970s and 1980s, schools were unprepared for Southeast Asian refugee students and their reactions varied with some more successful than others, as demonstrated in the following two contrasting examples (Walker-Moffat, 1995). One school, in central California, took it upon themselves to learn as much as they could about the refugees, reading about them and talking to anybody who knew anything about the families and students (Walker-Moffat, 1995). This challenge brought about an "increased cohesiveness among the teachers" and showed the refugee students and families that the teachers cared about them (Walker-Moffat, 1995, p. 57). This school was welcoming and did whatever they could to help make things easier for the refugee families and students. Unfortunately, this was not the case in a school located in the East coast. "Hmong bilingual" teachers were hired to help with the influx of Hmong refugee students; however, they were neither Hmong nor bilingual. Administrators and those at the district-level thought teachers knew enough about the different cultures and languages to "make do on their own" (Walker-Moffat, 1995, p. 61). This school, in contrast to the one in central California, did not welcome their refugee students. According to a high school teacher, "the school district was ignoring the 'refugee problem' in hopes that it would go away, that the refugees would move on to California or somewhere else" (Walker-Moffat, 1995, p. 68). These contrasting examples suggest schools would do well to build on these students' potential and work to understand their strengths, rather than giving up and assuming "they will be fine."

In order for all students to improve their futures, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or income level, and to ensure the country produces the human resources necessary to

remain competitive, schools need to provide all students with the skills and knowledge that will prepare them for the challenges of postsecondary education and the competitive workforce (America's Promise Alliance, 2008). In spite of this, research shows subject-area instruction continues to be an area of instructional need across the United States for emergent bilingual students (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000) and content teachers find it challenging to teach refugee/SLIFE students because they have to teach language and content (Franquiz & Salinas, 2011). This is evident in a case study by Correll (2016), where the researcher examined the perceptions of 79 elementary teachers regarding their preparedness in teaching ELL students. Through observations and interviews, the findings showed most of the participants felt they were not prepared by their teacher education program for teaching ELL students. Many teachers stated they "lacked preparatory coursework that included strategies for teaching ELLs, had few observational experiences in classrooms with ELL students, and lacked experiences in working with ELLs during their field placements and student teaching" (pp. 215–216). This highlights the importance of effective professional development for general education teachers already in the profession, since new and currently practicing teachers are unprepared in teaching ELL students. Consequently, in a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, Meka (2016) investigated teachers' culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy (CRTSE) with refugee students and looked at factors that might impact teachers practice in classrooms with these students. Meka found "great variability in teacher self-efficacy for culturally responsive teaching" (p. 97), concluding in order to implement culturally responsive teaching, "strong teacher preparation programs that are comprised of rigorous pedagogy in meeting the needs of culturally diverse, linguistically diverse, and refugee students" were involved (p. 99).

Lastly, it is important to consider how leadership, particularly administrators, respond to the needs of refugee students. Administrators have a pivotal role in not only supporting, guiding, challenging, and initiating teachers, but also advocating for their refugee students, providing the route to self-sufficiency and a new life (Rah, 2007). Because of this, it is essential to understand how leaders address the needs of refugee children and how they create and maintain conditions in schools in order to integrate them into school communities. In an exploratory case study looking at "principals' responsiveness in terms of their thinking and the strategies employed to address the integration and education of refugee students" (Bailey-Jones, 2018, p. 81), Bailey-Jones (2018) interviewed and observed three principals and one assistant principal from three schools with high refugee populations, along with the district liaison for immigrant and refugee students, and a social worker at one of the elementary schools in Arizona. The dominant themes that emerged were a holistic approach for education and welfare and a climate of inclusion. However, when discussing issues affecting refugee students in their schools, the need for professional development to assist with strategies for working with refugees and using district resources to address the needs of refugee students and families were mentioned (Bailey-Jones, 2018).

Similarly, to understand the leadership practices of schools with newly arrived refugee students, Rah (2007) used a cross-case analysis to investigate the artifacts (programs, procedures and policies designed to shape or reform existing practices in the institutional context) leaders developed and implemented across three different schools with Hmong refugee students in Wisconsin. Through interviews with school administrators, teachers, and other staff members who were involved with these students' learning, and an "array of documents to trace how the artifacts were developed and used in the school" (Rah, 2007, p. 41), Rah found the placement of

the newcomers in schools was influenced by the decision of the school districts. This led school leaders to develop artifacts to "compensate or to enhance the advantages of student placement practices" (Rah, 2007, p. v). Furthermore, increasing Hmong refugee students' interactions with mainstream peers was an important issue that came up through data analysis. Finally, Hmong American bilingual staff members served as core resources for the refugee children. These staff members bridged the gap between Hmong students and school and were a resource for the Hmong parents (Rah, 2007).

Refugee students should be seen as an asset to schools and add to the school culture. The diversity they bring provides learning opportunities for all involved and exposes native-born students, faculty, and staff to the different cultures and languages beyond their scope (Davern, 2018). These opportunities include "opportunities to compare and contrast learning, cultures, and traditions from other countries to those of their own, helping them cultivate deeper understanding, borne out of direct relationships, that they could never get from a book or video" (Davern, 2018, para. 13). The literature review on schools' and teachers' practices reveals there is still much to do around preparing educators in teaching refugee students. If schools do not address these issues, it is likely these students will continue to be ill-prepared for higher education and society, and will continue to be alienated and disadvantaged. This research suggests refugee students should be given opportunities to understand their educational experiences in ways that do not shame or lead to self-hatred or internalizing negative racial representations (Davern, 2018). Educators need to provide them with the tools they need to develop affirming racial and cultural identities in order to take on meaningful actions and overcome barriers they may face.

Family and Cultural Factors

In addition to analyzing research on the practices of schools and teachers with refugee students, literature gathered around family perspectives and cultural factors that impact the educational experiences of these students is critical. Family and cultural factors can influence an individual's academic decision in many ways and create conflict within the family structure. With refugee students, acculturation, defined as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" has huge implications for student success (Berry, 2005, p. 698). However, acculturation can also create family strain and inner turmoil, as it can be a difficult process that it is "associated with psychopathology, risk taking, and family conflicts" (Walker-Moffat, 1998, p. 301). In a qualitative study conducted by Hyman et al. (2000), the researchers set out to identify the important stressors encountered by Southeast Asian youths in refugee families. The researchers conducted 16 individual interviews and three focus groups with Vietnamese youth between the ages of 15-20 in Toronto, Canada. They found the host societal values created intergenerational and cultural strains since parents and children had different expectations regarding autonomy and freedom and often, could not articulate these differences (Hyman et al., 2000). Besides this, the Western values focusing on self-fulfillment and the traditional principles of subordinating oneself to the interests of the family was a source of inner conflict.

Family strain is not uncommon among acculturating families due to the shifting between the new culture in school and their family's native culture at home (van Limbeek Johansen, 2011). This is "daunting for young people as they are also grappling with issues of identity" (van Limbeek Johansen, 2011, p. ii). Phinney and Alipuria (2006, as cited in Berry, 2011) used the concept of *multiple social categorization* to refer to the "common experience of simultaneously

being (and identifying with) two social groups of different kinds, such as being female (gender) and Canadian (nationality)" (p. 2.12) and stated:

> The issue faced by these individuals is not that of balancing the importance or relevance of two distinct characteristics of the self, but rather that of integrating or otherwise managing an internal complexity involving two potentially conflicting, often enriching, parts of one's ethnic, racial, or cultural self … These individuals can claim membership in two or more groups but are sometimes not accepted by others as a member of either. (p. 2.12)

Acculturation impacts the family dynamics immensely due to the internal conflict these children have with their own culture and mainstream society and with how families may be trying to adapt to a new culture while preserving their own. These children may feel that they do not belong in either group and struggle with their self-identity, whereas families may become stricter on their children due to a fear of being unable to preserve their culture and beliefs.

Acculturation is evident in a qualitative study conducted by Bacallao and Smokowski (2009), who conducted in-depth interviews with 12 undocumented Mexican adolescents and 14 of their parents who had immigrated to North Carolina. The researchers found parents often feared their children would forget their cultural heritage and become too independent. As one parent said, "I worry that my son will pick up the customs of the Americans here. You know … (said in a whisper, learning towards interviewer) using drugs, becoming too independent. That is what worries me" (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009, p. 433). Parents became overly protective of their children and restricted what their children could do, resulting in children reacting in different ways; some respected their parents' decisions, some became resentful, and others rebelled. Similarly, S. J. Lee (2001) found Hmong parents (through interpreters) were afraid of

losing their children to the American culture. Some families explained their children were "good Hmong kids" but were afraid their children would be influenced by the "bad Hmong kids." Hmong parents divided Hmong youth into "good kids" and "bad kids" by labeling the "good kids" as those who will help the parents, do homework and chores, dress differently, attend school and get good grades, and do what the parents want them to. Whereas the "bad kids" are those who rebel or talk back to the parents, not obeying, wearing baggy clothes, and not attending school (S. J. Lee, 2001, p. 510).

Sometimes parental attitudes about school and education were also linked to their spiritual beliefs. In an ethnographic study, Smith-Hefner (1990) examined how spiritual beliefs of the Khmer—Cambodian refugees who fled their country during the Pol Pot regime—influenced the parents' lack of involvement with their children's schooling. The researcher interviewed and observed 35 Khmer families with children in primary schools in the Boston area. Smith-Hefner also conducted interviews with Khmer teachers, leaders of ethnic associations, and religious leaders using in-depth questionnaires combined with open-ended interviews. Their findings revealed Khmer parents felt they had done their part and the rest was up to the teacher and the child. This was supported by "the belief that children come into the world with inherent talents and predispositions and cannot be pushed far from their intended trajectory" (Smith-Hefner, 1990, p. 139), along with an important cultural focus on the autonomy of the individual.

In contrast, other researchers have emphasized the mixture of Buddhist and Confucian traditional values as being vital factors in the educational success of Vietnamese American children (Ngo & Lee, 2007). According to Caplan et al. (1991, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007), the successful adaptation of Vietnamese youth is due to holding onto the traditional values and

norms of their culture and not the willingness to adopt American customs. Zhou and Bankston (1998) found similar results in their study of Vietnamese youth in New Orleans; the most successful Vietnamese youth were those who followed family and community values and did not become too American.

Furthermore, acculturation can cause family discord due to the many misunderstandings concerning different expectations Hmong youth have for their parents and the immigrant parents have for their children (Khang, 2010). However, when it comes to acculturation and loss of language, there are always fears and reservations as language is a way of preserving culture. According to Baas (2011), “there is significant concern in the Hmong community that children are losing their cultural foundation” (p. 21). In a two-year field-based qualitative study of Hmong living in Minnesota and Wisconsin, Timm (1994) and a Hmong research assistant interviewed 23 Hmong men and women aged 15 and older to learn about their opinions on a variety of family and educational values. Timm (1994) found,

> The primary ideological conflict between the Hmong culture and American culture is the Hmong focus on traditional family values in contrast with the American emphasis on individual freedom. The tug between these two values is at the heart of the Hmong dilemma in the U.S. and is causing major problems between older, less acculturated and younger, more acculturated Hmong. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Timm (1994) also found many parental concerns over their children’s schooling; the main one being of language loss. Hmong parents valued their children having an American education but worried their children would lose either their language or culture, which they viewed as interconnected. Parents were also concerned about their child rearing practices, as Hmong parents have traditionally practiced corporal punishment, which has caused

misunderstandings at school. According to Timm (1994), "Some teachers have interpreted Hmong practices as being child abuse and have, on occasion, encouraged Hmong children to report punishments to them" (p. 21). Parents viewed this as interfering with their parental rights in disciplining their children as they see best. Finally, parents, particularly the older ones, expressed confusion about teacher/parent conferences, as they had little to no frame of reference for these conferences and viewed teachers as experts in teaching what students needed to know (Timm, 1994). Because of this, when parents did not attend conferences, it was due to their belief they have nothing significant to contribute to their child's learning.

This confusion around parent conferences was reiterated in an interview conducted with MayKao Hang, who was the president and CEO of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (Hillmer, 2012) and a first-generation Hmong woman who arrived in the United States in 1976 with her family. As Hang discussed her educational experiences, she talked about how her parents never attended any teacher conferences and school activities. Her father felt "if there were things that the teacher really needed to talk to him about, they would really be calling him" (Hillmer, 2012, 20:39). When parents did attend conferences, they were primarily concerned about their child's behavior, rather than their academic performance (Adler, 2004).

Although acculturation can cause intergenerational conflict and misunderstandings, Lowe (1996, as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007) has criticized the tendency to explain the difficulties faced by Asian immigrant families through explanations of intergenerational conflict. Asian American parents and youth are blamed for their difficulties and struggles as first-generation/second-generation and are denied the existence and effects of institutionalized racism and the history of exclusion faced by Asian immigrants.

Educational Experiences of Hmong Students

Many refugee students enter American schools without having any school experience or have had their schooling interrupted (Robertson & Lafond, n.d.). Schools may become a stable aspect in the comparatively unsettled lives of refugee students, providing safe spaces for new encounters, interactions, and learning opportunities. However, their educational experiences may differ considerably due to various factors, resources, and stereotypes. To understand the schooling of first-generation Hmong women and its effects on their lives, it is necessary to review literature around the educational experiences of Hmong students. Whereas the previous body of literature focused on the MMM and its implications for Asian American students, school and teacher practices in order to understand how well schools and teachers were prepared to teach refugee students, and how parental values and cultural factors contributed to their educational experiences, this section focuses on the cause and effect of these students' actual experiences in school with educators and peers.

For this section, the literature focuses on Hmong students and Hmong women. Before examining the literature, there is a need to delve deeper into the data on Asian Americans in order to understand how successes and important issues can be masked when Asian Americans are grouped into one (Chang, 2017; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016; Sui, 1996; Wing, 2007; Wong & Halgin, 2006), such as when a characteristic can be found applicable to the Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, and is applied as the norm for all other Asian Americans despite their differences (Chang, 2017). Furthermore, within ethnic subgroups, certain ethnic groups have overshadowed others within the same region, skewing scholarship and pedagogy on Asian Americans (Chang, 2017). For example, when addressing Southeast Asia, there tends to be more discourse on Vietnamese Americans, on South Asia, more on Indian Americans, and Chinese

Americans tend to have the largest emphasis when it comes to East Asia, as well as with Asian Americans in general (Chang, 2017).

Accordingly, these assumptions cause a generalizability that does not apply. For example, in the 2000 U.S. Census, approximately 80% of both the total population and all Asians in the U.S. 25 and older had at least a high school education; however, 44% of Asians compared to 24% of the total population had earned a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, when breaking down the data into Asian ethnic groups, this figure is not representative of all groups of Asian Americans (Tang, 2019; Yu, 2006). Asian Americans are a heterogenous group, differing in languages, culture, beliefs, and length of residence in the U.S. (S. J. Lee, 1996; Reeves & Bennett, 2004) and should not be categorized as homogenous (S. J. Lee, 1996; Ngo, 2008; Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Sui, 1996); therefore, the data should be disaggregated to achieve a clearer understanding. For instance, with the data above, Asian Indians had the highest percentage at 64% with a bachelor's degree, whereas about 7.5% of Hmong had a bachelor's degree (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Without understanding and disaggregating data about Asian American success in schools, the percentage of Asian American students scoring high on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) for example, can be misleading and disguises those Asian American students who are not doing well (Poon et al., 2016; Sui, 1996).

To counter the assumption all Asian Americans are the same and have "made it," one must be careful when interpreting data, since disaggregating data highlights extremely diverse outcomes (J. Lee, 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007). For example, when compared to the total population (12.4%), poverty rates for Asian Americans were similar (12.6%); however, Hmong had the highest poverty rates (37.8%) and Filipinos (6.3%), Japanese (9.7%), and Asian Indians (9.8%) had the lowest poverty rate (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). In addition, only 5.6% of Japanese

Americans had an elementary education or less whereas 61% of the Hmong Americans fell into that category. Furthermore, with language proficiency, the mean percentage of Asian Americans not speaking English well was 15%, however, this ranged from 69% for Laotians to only 5% for Asian Indians (Ng, 1995, as cited in Siu, 1996; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). For these reasons, many researchers are cautioning against praising Asian American students as super-achievers (Kobayashi, 1999; Ng et al., 2007; Suzuki, 2002; Takaki, 1991; U.S. Census, 1993; Wong & Halgin, 2006).

As previously stated above, the MMM is a recurring theme with Asian Americans in scholarly research. This myth implies Asian American students are quiet, obedient, and high achieving and are doing well overall academically (S. J. Lee, 1996; Rah, 2018; Sui, 1996). Because of this, it is difficult for many to think of them as at-risk students (Sui, 1996). For Asian American students, this stereotype can be a “double-edged sword,” often perceived as a positive stereotype by Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike, but it also reveals Asian American students face double barriers (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2014). Although it sounds complimentary, it is a racial stereotype and carries negative implications (Wing, 2007; Yu, 2006). For this reason, the next section examines the educational experiences of Hmong students and Hmong women.

Addressing what some have termed “the achievement gap” for students of color has been a national concern for over half a century (Lee & Madyun, 2008). When compared to other Asian American ethnic groups as well as their White counterparts, the educational attainment of Hmong youth lag far behind (Lee & Madyun, 2008; Reeves & Bennett, 2004). The literature on the academic achievement of Hmong Americans highlights many challenges faced by Hmong American students, such as high dropout rates, language proficiency, and microaggressions

(Kwan, 2015; Lee & Madyun, 2008; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Siu, 1996; Timm et al., 1994; Trueba et al, 1990; Vang, 2005). However, the clash of two cultures, the divide between Hmong culture and mainstream society, is often identified as the main reason behind the barrier to success (DePouw, 2012; Lee et al., 2017; Ngo & Lee, 2007). This singular focus on cultural conflict sets up binary oppositions (Ngo, 2008), which is evident in a critical race analysis by DePouw (2012), who framed Whiteness as property in order to understand the racialization of Hmong Americans in education. According to DePouw (2012), the Black/White binary on Southeast Asians is one way in which Whiteness as property relates to the racialization of Hmong Americans. This binary of Blackening and/or Whitening is "related to 'culture clash' in terms of how 'close' or 'far' Southeast Asian Americans are assumed to be to a White American middle class Christian norm within particular spatial or ideological situations" (DePouw, 2012, p. 232). Through interview data from Hmong American college students throughout Wisconsin, DePouw (2012) found Hmong American students were "Whitened" by postsecondary institutions in order to raise their enrollment numbers of students of color, "promote a public image of 'diversity' and inclusion, create interracial contact and experiences for White students on campus, and perform exotic and symbolic versions of traditional Hmong culture for the use and enjoyment of Whites on campus" (p. 233). Hmong American students were likely to be "Blackened" by postsecondary institutions when advocating for inclusion in campus decision-making, pushing for Hmong-related courses, and exposing and demanding recourse for their experiences of racism on campus, particularly at the hands of White faculty and staff members.

The Hmong American participants also shared their K-12 schooling experiences with DePouw (2012), recounting being bullied, ignored, stereotyped, and racially threatened. No matter what their experiences were, all of the students spoke of how often White school

personnel would dismiss or pretend it was an isolated incident unrelated to race. The students also "recognized that many of their White teachers held lower academic expectations for them than for their White peers, provided them with less access to postsecondary-related information" (DePouw, 2012, p. 234), did not make an effort to build home-school relationships, and did not teach about Hmong or other cultures in a meaningful way. In fact, the participants often communicated feelings of being overlooked or ignored and naming the normative culture of Whiteness as an issue for Hmong American students. According to Kou, a student interviewed:

> Well, I felt like there coulda been help in terms of resources or people that understand me, perhaps. I just didn't think there was enough resources there to help me in terms of anybody or, or people who were knowledgeable of me or who understood me, who I could go to. Umm, the counselors, I didn't feel like I could connect with or could connect with me, and they didn't seem like they cared as much … Because growing up in this mainstream society itself is hard enough for me to figure things out, and at the time I didn't have things figured out, you know, as much as I have them figured out right now. Still not a lot, but … It would have helped if there would've been someone who understood at least the process of first generation or second generation refugees or immigrants, you know, what the experience is like and what we're going through and stuff like that. And just, in relations to academia and stuff like that. (Depouw, 2012, p. 236)

In a predominantly White space, school personnel and staff members did not know enough about Kou or the Hmong people to help him become academically successful. Through Depouw's (2012) research, Whiteness as property through a critical race lens shows how "culture clash" is

used to conceal racism in the education of Hmong American students and fails to recognize the structural barriers to achievement for these students.

Culture should not be seen in a binary context as there are many complexities to an immigrant student's experience. Scholars have advocated for a move beyond understanding one's culture and identity as good or bad and should be seen as dynamic and changing (Ngo, 2008). While this may be true, Whiteness still plays an important role in how Hmong students are viewed. In an ethnographic study lasting one and a half years, S. J. Lee (2002) examined how the culture of Whiteness at a Wisconsin high school shaped Hmong American students' experiences and their understanding of what it meant to be American. In talking to teachers and administrators, S. J. Lee (2002) found the most influential families at that school were White. Staff who worked closely with the students of color "asserted that the culture of Whiteness/middle classness at UHS privileged White middle-class students and disadvantaged Hmong American students and other lower income students of color" (S. J. Lee, 2002, p. 236).

Not only were Hmong students behind academically, but they were also socially isolated from the mainstream (S. J. Lee, 2002). Most educators' explanations focused on cultural differences, stating language was the main issue, and some characterized these students as culturally deficient, as inherently inferior to mainstream White middle-class culture. Unfortunately, the Hmong American students were aware of this perception, often complaining about how teachers and other staff members judged the Hmong culture. Because of this, many Hmong students did not trust their teachers and would not ask for help when needed, often staying quiet in class in fear of their ideas being devalued by their teachers and classmates. Here, Hmong students equated Whiteness with American-ness and were marginalized academically and socially (S. J. Lee, 2002, p. 244). In an increasingly diverse society, schools need to educate

students on the many ways of what it means to be American, that being White is not the only way.

Due to culture being seen as binary, the many microaggressions Hmong youth encounter due to culture and language also affect the way they regard schooling. In a qualitative study, Kwan (2015) investigated how school policies and decisions, anti-immigrant sentiment, and personal experiences shaped Hmong Americans' perceptions of their home language. Kwan conducted one group interview and 15 semi-structured interviews with Hmong American college students from California. The findings showed participants experienced *objectification*, when a person's ethnicity, race, or culture is exoticized or objectified, and *assumed inadequacy*, when a minority culture is seen as inadequate, abnormal, irrational, deficient, and less desirable (Kwan, 2015). Due to the lack of curriculum on the Hmong in the classroom, participants felt invisible and like they had no voice. Their experiences inside the classroom made them feel like "second-class citizens: ignored, objectified, and criticized for their appearance and language" (Kwan, 2015, p. 32). One participant, Pachia, stated how her non-Hmong peers would ask her, "What is Hh-mong?" (emphasizing the silent "H") and other participants stated being asked why they were not Thai or Laotian if they came from those countries. Because of this constant demand to justify and define themselves to others, some participants no longer identified themselves as Hmong, but as Southeast Asian instead. These objectifications left participants with deep, negative impressions about Hmong culture and language, resulting in students feeling ashamed to be Hmong and to stop speaking Hmong. As the participant, Jyliah explained, "A lot of Hmong children are embarrassed about being Hmong because it's so different. It's so hard being different. And I totally understand how hard it is. So then they don't want to immerse themselves in it" (Kwan, 2015, p. 34).

Furthermore, many participants felt the Hmong language was deficient, due to teachers telling them they had to stop speaking Hmong in order to speak English well (Kwan, 2015). Through interactions with teachers and peers, the participants realized English and Hmong should not be used together, internalizing the belief speaking Hmong was inferior. Because of experiences like this, the participants realized no matter how assimilated they became, they would never be seen as "American." Here, according to Ngo's (2017) notion of belonging, a sense of belonging never occurred for these students, resulting in negative attitudes towards themselves and a sense of resentment. The subtle yet hurtful actions these participants encountered have affected their identity development; thus, this suggests culture and language should not be seen as a deficiency but, more so, as an asset in order to give voice to these students (Kwan, 2015).

Truly, research has shown racial and social climate in schools contribute to student's lack of success (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1992),

> The pervasive anti-Asian climate and the frequent acts of bigotry and violence in our schools not only inflict hidden injuries and lasting damage, but also create barriers to the educational attainment of the Asian American student victims … (p. 97)

Instead of being a safe haven for students, schools may be hostile and unfriendly. Furthermore, teachers and staff may fail to take the necessary steps to deal with this racially charged environment and frequently minimize or overlook the seriousness of these incidents. These interactions, in turn, can lead to negative attitudes toward schooling (DePouw, 2012; S. J. Lee, 2001; Siu, 1996; Trueba et al., 1990; Yang, 2004), resulting in high rates of drop-outs and youth delinquencies (S. J. Lee, 2001; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992; Xiong & Huang, 2011).

In an exploratory study conducted by Xiong and Huang (2011), the researchers investigated the importance of individual, peer, family, and school factors in delinquent behaviors in Hmong youth. Two hundred six youth (115 males, 91 females), ranging from 11- to 25-years-old, from Minnesota participated in this study. The results of this study showed: 1) those with antisocial behavior were more likely to be at-risk of delinquency; 2) those who reported a lower grade point average (GPA) were more likely to be delinquent; 3) the lack of mother's monitoring contributed to delinquent behaviors from the girls; and 4) lack of school commitment contributed to the delinquency behaviors in boys (Xiong & Huang, 2011). Schools that create a climate where students are welcomed and encouraged to be a part of the school culture may therefore be more likely to reduce delinquent behaviors.

It is evident the marginalization of Hmong American students affects the outcome of their academic performance. Cultural differences are often the main blame for the lack of success, one of these being the attitudes towards Hmong girls and women. The high dropout rates among Hmong female students have been linked to the Hmong values of women's roles (Goldstein, 1985; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Walker-Moffat, 1995). S. J. Lee (2004) found White teachers saw Hmong American girls as victims of a "patriarchal culture that requires them to give up school in order to take on the female role" (p. 122) and needed to be saved from the "sexism of their culture" (p. 122). The underlying assumption about the Hmong culture here is that it is static and unchanging; however, "all cultures are dynamic, constantly in the process of being created and re-created" (S. J. Lee, 1997, p. 804). Therefore, this assumption ignores the history the Hmong have carried with them.

In a study examining the cultural, economic, and racial factors that affect Hmong American women's pursuit of higher education, S. J. Lee (1997) focused on Hmong women who

have challenged the existing cultural norms. Twenty-one first-generation Hmong women, age 18-32, who were either pursuing a four-year college degree or completed four-year college degrees were interviewed. S. J. Lee (1997) found the participants were motivated by economic factors to pursue higher education, seeing themselves as pioneers who hoped to "affect their own lives and the lives of other Hmong women" (p. 809). Although they saw themselves as pioneers, they were quick to point out their internal cultural struggles such as whether to marry early or to postpone marriage in favor or pursuing higher education. The participants 25 years and older reported being pressured by their families to get married when they were adolescents—some remain married, some divorced, and a few were able to resist family pressures to marry (S. J. Lee, 1997). One of the participants, Moua, was pressured into an early marriage which did not last, saying,

> I guess I'm one of those statistic cases. I was pressured into an early marriage to my Aunt and Uncle's son when I just finished my junior year in high school. We were together for two-and-a-half months. It didn't last because we didn't love each other and had never been with each other since we were in Laos. And that was twelve years ago. (S. J. Lee, 1997, p. 812)

After her divorce, Moua went on to finish high school and graduated college before marrying again. However, even though she married after college, she still felt like she married sooner than she would have liked due to cultural pressures.

In addition to the belief education will lead to financial stability, all the participants spoke about the relationship between education and the freedom from male control, that education leads to independence and self-empowerment (S. J. Lee, 1997). These women pointed out Hmong men are valued more than women and that men have more power than women within

marriages. Through education, these women believed that gender equality is achieved. Ploa, a participant, stated:

> We are in a patriarchal culture and men get the support, men get the respect, just, they get a lot more of things upon birth than the women, the women do. And I think a lot of us feel that many of us have to sort of prove ourselves in a lot of ways in that … a lot of us have to speak up because if we don't speak up for ourselves, no one's gonna speak up for us … (S. J. Lee, 1997, pp.814-815)

Although Ploa and the other participants see education as a gateway to expanded opportunities, they also worry the majority of Hmong girls and women will still marry early and not pursue four-year college degrees.

Participants also spoke about the negative impact racial and ethnic stereotypes had on them (S. J. Lee, 1997). Some seemed to have internalized the rhetoric of the dominant society, questioning their own self-worth and what others think of them. With fears of being judged by her peers, Blia explained how she was afraid to speak up in her college classes:

> College is really intimidating. I think I really feel, um, the fact that I'm a minority here. And I think that I'm inferior, I don't know as much. I don't have the cultural background. I don't have the economic upbringing to perhaps know something. (S. J. Lee, 1997, p. 822)

In spite of the cultural barriers to pursuing higher education, these Hmong women showed how they were able to achieve what they set out to do, acting as change agents through their hopes and dreams.

In contrast to the above Hmong women, who saw education as a way to empower themselves, Ngo (2002) found early marriage for some Hmong American women was a form of

opposition to family and education due to structural inequalities and power. In Ngo's (2002) study, nine college students (five women, four men) were recruited, between the ages of 20 and 25; however, the data analyzed focused on the five Hmong American women. The students in the study talked about feeling "stuck" at times between expectations from parents and the American culture and seeing marriage as a way to defy parents control and restrictions on their social life (Ngo, 2002). As Hmong women, the participants were often restricted from dating, interacting with young men, and on how they spent their free time. Because of these social restrictions, all the women participants lived at home due to parents' concerns about their reputation. Due to these limitations and restrictions, participants believed Hmong women married to escape their parents' home and strict rules.

> I see a lot of teenage girls get married so they can get away from their parents. 'Cause they don't know what else to do. But their parents are so strict, and their parents have such strict rules they want to get away from the parents and the only way they see out of it is through marriage. (Zer, age 21; Ngo, 2002, p. 174)

From the perspective of Hmong American women, early marriage was a way to challenge authority and gain independence.

In addition to parental control, Hmong American women students engaged in early marriage as "a way of leaving school because of alienating college experiences" (Ngo, 2002, p. 176). On campuses, the participants' experiences were filled with blatant and subtle displays of racism, often with remarks about gang involvement or eating dogs, and feeling like they were being watched by white students or criticized for the way they dressed, talked, and looked. In order to combat this, Hmong American students had to create safe spaces for themselves in order

to feel secure and comfortable (Ngo, 2002). Furthermore, participants were afraid to participate in extracurricular activities, sensing other students did not want them to join.

When alienation occurs on campus, marriage, then, allows Hmong American women to feel like they belong (Ngo, 2002). For Tia, a participant, her interests and perspectives (including other Hmong students) were ignored and marginalized by the campus community. As she became more discouraged, Tia saw marriage as an option to escape her negative college experience:

> … I wasn't planning to get married until I was done with college. So um, it wasn't something I planned on. It was just kind of happened. I guess part of it was because I wanted to get out of Hills College so bad. And um, it was—I didn't think my parents were going to understand it either. Because they, they really wanted me to stay there. So I felt kind of stuck, and um, that's when he came in. And um, he wanted to get married, and part of it was you know that I really wanted to get out of Hills College too. (Ngo, 2002, p. 180)

Marriage allowed Tia to leave school and reject its norms; for Tia it was seen as a strategy. Ngo's (2002) study, like S. J. Lee's (1997), showed how complex the experiences of Hmong women are, and that their decisions to marry early is much more complicated and goes beyond "cultural differences." Through the participants' stories, early marriage was found to be a form of contesting strict, parental rules and alienation in education.

Conclusion

The literature provided on the MMM, the educational experiences of Asian Americans, and of Hmong American and Hmong American women students have shown how this group of minorities have been stereotyped, alienated, and discriminated against due to a generalized

assumption that ALL Asians are the same, that Asians are smart and overachievers, and that cultural differences are the reasons why Hmong American students are struggling. While the MMM may initially sound positive, the impact of the label on Asian American students is often very negative, causing indifference and ignorance towards these students' needs. These students may experience more problems and difficulties due to the unrealistic expectations placed upon them by their teachers, parents, and peers, potentially resulting in poor academic performance and personal well-being. Although the stereotype refers to Asian Americans as "models," they are often seen as "foreigners" and "other," being denied the status of "real" American and being alienated and discriminated against by schools, peers, and society (Kobayashi, 1999; Ngo, 2017; Suzuki, 2002). This myth masks the realities and perpetuates the social injustice and education inequalities faced by minorities (Yu, 2006). The MMM does a disservice to Asian American diversity and needs to be "unmasked" in order to challenge the forms of inequality that exist in schools and society today (Change & Au, 2009). In regard to Hmong and Hmong American women students, cultural differences are seen as the barriers to their success; however, through the literature presented, it is evident more than just "culture" is at play.

In order to fully grasp the importance of the educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women and how this impacted their future and their children's future, it is essential we understand the impact education has on the lived experiences of refugee/SLIFE students and the barriers that encompass their lives. In the following chapter, I present the methods for my study that enabled me to do just that.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the qualitative research design used to examine first-generation Hmong women's educational experiences and how their experiences led to the choices they made for themselves and their children, along with the methods for data collection and analysis strategies.

Research Design

In order to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Hmong women and how these experiences affected their life decisions and the educational paths they created for their children, a qualitative approach was used as it "considers a range of participant perspectives and experiences, including the unexpected and anomalous" (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 9). Furthermore, qualitative research allows researchers "to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13). Having been in the United States for over 40 years, these women have faced a multitude of challenges and many successes that have not been heard by larger society. This type of research design allows the participants to voice the actions and interactions in their lives. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008):

> the nature of human responses creates conditions that impact upon, restrict, limit, and contribute towards restructuring the variety of actions/interactions that can be noted in societies. In turn, humans also shape their institutions; they create and change the world around them through action/interaction. (p. 6)

The institution I was most interested in understanding through these interactions was the public K-12 schooling system since this system influences the choices these participants make for themselves and their children.

The research design used in this qualitative research was the narrative inquiry method. The hope was that by examining the educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women, how their experiences have shaped whom they have become and their own children's educational journey, and what they deem as essential in supporting young immigrant girls in schools would, in turn, lead to improved educational practices that would support the academic needs of newly arrived young immigrant women. Narratives, according to Creswell (2018), are "experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (p. 67). Narratives "whether told only to oneself or to others, provides a robust way of integrating past experience into meaningful learning, locating oneself and others in the account, and foreshadowing the future" (McAlpine, 2016, p. 33). This approach is used in a narrative dissertation by Thao (2017) with Hmong women college students. The researcher collected and analyzed stories lived and told through cultural and gender contexts to understand how gender and cultural roles influenced their educational experiences. In addition to Thao (2017), Huster (2012) also conducted a narrative study that focused on using 13 Hmong women participants' stories about their language and literacy development experiences. Through the stories told by the participants, Huster (2012) found "linguistically diverse students may often be inadvertently subjected to marginalizing experiences in their interactions with both educators and classmates" (p. 34). These studies show how valuable narratives are in sharing multifaceted perspectives; through my research, I add another layer of understanding to the specific experiences of first-generation Hmong women's distinctive experiences.

First-generation Hmong women are multifaceted, with many perspectives to consider. Using the narrative inquiry method is intended to elicit stories illuminating these complexities, with rich and thorough representation, to answer the following research questions:

1. What experiences do first-generation Hmong women understand as being pivotal in determining their course in education?
2. What supports, or lack thereof, do first-generation Hmong women view as having shaped their educational experiences?
3. How do first-generation Hmong women view their own educational experiences as having shaped their children's educational path?
4. What do first-generation Hmong women identify as ways in which the education system can better support newly arrived young immigrant women?

Participants

This study's participants were first selected by convenience sampling, selecting participants based on accessibility (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), then snowball sampling, by asking participants if they knew of anyone else with the same requirements (Naderifar et al., 2017). Due to the nature of the study and being from the Hmong community myself, many of the participants were those I knew or those I had heard of. I contacted friends and family members I thought would fall in the first-generation category in Minnesota and California to see if they would be interested and if they knew of anyone interested in this study. Demographic questions were asked—were they born in the United States, how old were they when they arrived in the United States—to see if they fit the age and first-generation criteria (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questions
For First-Generation Hmong Women Study

1. How old are you?
2. What year did you come to the United States? What city did you arrive/live in?
3. Did you have any schooling before coming to the United States? If so, what kind?
4. What grade did you start in when you arrived in the United States?
5. How many brothers and sisters do you have? What position are you in terms of oldest to youngest?
6. Do you have any children? If so, how many boys and/or girls? How old are they?
7. What is the highest level of education or degree you have completed?
8. Are you currently employed? If so, what is your profession?
9. What is your marital status?
10. How old were you when you got married?
11. Did one or both of your parents have any education prior to coming to the United States? If so, what kind?
12. What kind of schools do/did your children attend? Public? Charter? Private?

Once these women were identified, I called them and introduced myself and my topic of study to see if they were interested. If they agreed to participate, I gave "participants assurance of confidentiality and anonymity" (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 338) including by assigning each a pseudonym, explaining the process, procedures, and my intention, through their narratives, to provide educators with a better understanding of how to support other young immigrant women who are trying to navigate the same institutions these women once went

through. Thirteen participants were selected from this, ten from Minnesota and three from California, ages ranging from 44-52, and arriving in the United States from 1976 to 1980. I emailed them a consent form to sign, explaining what they agreed to and that they can withdraw from the study at any time. I also included a demographics questionnaire and a copy of the interview questions[1]. All the participants were fluent in English, so the forms did not have to be translated into Hmong. The participants varied in their professional/academic life (see Table 2).

Table 2

Demographic Information from Participants

Name	Age	Year Participant came to U.S.	Highest Level of Education	Marital Status	Age When Participant Got Married
Sofie	44	1980	Bachelor's Degree	Married	34
Christine	45	1980	Bachelor's Degree	Married	23
Allison	44	1980	Bachelor's Degree	Married	20
Nouchi	45	1976	Doctorate Degree	Married	25
Mai	45	1978	Doctorate Degree	Re-married	17; 31
Pa	44	1980	Master's Degree	Married	32
Kashia	47	1978	Master's Degree	Married	24
Zoo Saib	50	1978	Master's Degree	Divorced	14
Ntxoo	52	1976	Bachelor's Degree	Married	32
Amanda	49	1978	Doctorate Degree	Married	22
Eve	44	1978	Doctorate Degree	Married	32

[1] Appendix A details the interview protocol and questions sent to participants to gather information, which was used for the three life history narratives and analysis.

Maya	51	1979	Associate degree	Married	15
Shoua	48	1978	High School	Married	18

Positionality

In order to provide insight into the positionality of the researcher, and to alleviate any possible biases, the following is my positionality statement expressing my experiences and views as a Hmong woman having grown up in a patriarchal society.

Being the youngest of four and a girl, many would say, “Oh, you’re the baby girl! How lucky!” However, I did not see it that way. Through conversations, attitudes, and behaviors, I knew that boys were valued and had more meaning than girls. I saw this every day as my brothers were favored, as they could go places, do things without being questioned, whereas I had to get permission or show proof that I was indeed going where I said I was. I remember an eighth grade field trip that I was looking forward to, that both my brothers got to go on. It was a sleepover trip to San Francisco, where all the eighth graders went and slept in a church with teachers and chaperones, then explored San Francisco the next day, going to Alcatraz, walking across the Golden Gate Bridge, and riding the cable cars. When it was my year to go, my dad said, “No” because I was a girl and “things could happen.” When I was looking at colleges and had decided on applying for some out of state and further south in California, in the Los Angeles area by my sister and her family, my dad gave me the same response, saying I could not because I was a girl and that it would ruin my reputation as a “good” Hmong girl. Instead, I was to stay at home and attend the community college in our small city in Northern California.

My parents are very traditional, believing that one is to follow the rules and roles of the culture. Growing up, I saw how hard my sister worked—taking care of my brothers and me

while both of my parents worked, cooking, cleaning, all the while trying to get her schoolwork done. There were many times my sister fell asleep at school, and my dad would get phone calls from her teachers and the school, resulting in not so great memories. This created a sense of fear and eventually, a need for escape—my sister “ran away” and got married. As my sister got married, the role changed over to me. I learned to cook and clean, and although my brothers were older than me, I was also expected to take care of them—doing their laundry, washing their dishes, and cleaning up after them. Where they were able to join sports teams, after school clubs, and attend school dances and functions, I was not; I was to come home right after school, cook, then do homework. It was made clear early on that girls do not do things such as those. If I were to be a good Hmong girl, my job was to learn how to cook and clean so that I could make a “good” housewife. If I made a mistake or disagreed with something, my mom would always say, “If you keep that up, no one will want to marry you. If they do, they will return you within three days!”

As hard and traditional as my dad is, getting an education was important to him. My dad had nine siblings, five sisters and four brothers, and out of all his siblings, my grandparents allowed him the opportunity to go to school. Because of this opportunity and his life experiences, he has gained a vast knowledge about life and can speak six different languages. He knew the value of an education and pushed all of us to do well in school, even though he and my mom could not help my siblings and me with our homework. To be honest, my early years of schooling were terrible. I began school in Washington when I was six due to having a September birthday. I remember being tested to see if I could start Kindergarten before turning six, failing the screening, and the teachers laughing at me for not knowing how to say school bus in English. When I did start, I was constantly pulled out of my classroom for ESL services with another

Vietnamese speaking boy. I hated school and would often leave the bus stop to play at the park after being dropped off by my dad or brothers or walk to my grandma's house, which was a few blocks from my bus stop. I would even get another boy to join me sometimes in going to the park. When my dad found out, he started driving me to school, and every day, I would cry and cry, saying I did not want to go. I just could not connect with my teachers and felt that they did not care. It was not until I was eight that I finally started caring about school; we had moved to California and my teachers cared about me and wanted me to do well. They recognized me and my potential and continuously told me how smart I was. They gave me the attention I was seeking and needing. I loved school, I loved learning (reading and writing were my favorite subjects), and I made friends. It felt like a brand new start.

However, I also had teachers who had taught my brothers and would make comments about how great and smart they were or comparing me to them. I had math teachers and science teachers who would always ask how my brothers were every time they saw me, never asking me how I was. This eventually created a sense of competition, with me wanting to prove myself to them and to my parents; I wanted to prove that my own worth was not measured in what my brothers did or in being a girl and that I was capable of being "more" than just a good housewife. While I was competing with my brothers to be accepted, I was also struggling with the racism I encountered. There was not a big Hmong community where we lived and not many had heard of the Hmong. I was always thought of as Chinese or Japanese, and when I said I was Hmong, my peers had no idea what that meant or where we came from. Only a few teachers knew about the Hmong. I often had to educate my peers and my teachers about the history of the Hmong.

At my high school, girls and boys did not have P.E. together. In my sophomore year, we had been playing flag football for the week. One day, our P.E. teacher said we would be playing

flag football with the boys. As my friends and I walked to the field, I heard someone yell, “There’s a Chink on our team!” then laughing from the boys. My friends also heard this but did not think anything of it, did not understand the racist connotation behind it. I was offended and angry by the comment and was going to tell our P.E. teacher, but my friends said to just let it go, that it was nothing. Not wanting to be confrontational, I did let it go and said nothing. Being a minority, I always felt that I did not belong, that I did not fit in, that I had to work harder.

As an educator, I made sure that every student who stepped through my door knew how much I cared about them because of my experiences. In my eyes, I believed that society had become more accepting, that minoritized students would not be experiencing racist behaviors. However, I was not prepared for an incident that happened to me my third year teaching. As I walked into the library to grab my copies, there was a second grade class in there checking out books. I heard a student say, “Mrs. Yang is a Chink.” I froze, with a myriad of emotions flooding through me. Once I regained my composure, I went and spoke to that student about what he had said. His teacher had heard what the student said so he came over and apologized and said that he would talk to the student and call his family. At the end of the school day, the teacher brought the student to my room and explained to me that he had talked to the student and his family and that the student wanted to apologize to me. The student apologized to me, and as he did, I started crying, telling him how hurtful those words were and for him to think about the things he said before saying it. My principal had found out about the incident but did not come and talk to me about it, he did not talk to the student or his family about it, but instead had the social worker come and talk to me. As difficult as this experience was, it opened my eyes to the racist behaviors that still exist and how as an educator, I can help my students understand and process these negative behaviors and be resilient over them.

As hard as I have worked to get to where I am today, academically and professionally, I still feel that I am not good enough, that there is still something I need to prove. What has been difficult in accepting my accomplishments are the continuous mixed messages I continue to receive. To me, I should be content with what I have accomplished, I should be proud of myself, but that is hard to do when others constantly question me and my academic achievements or tell me I should just work and be a good wife and mother. My role and status as a Hmong woman is so deeply ingrained in me that there is often a feeling of powerlessness. It is this drive to not conform that propels me to prove that I am more than "just" a Hmong girl."

My experiences as a Hmong woman has shaped how I view Hmong life. Due to my own lived experiences, it is impossible for me to separate myself from the social processes and contexts I study. Explaining my experiences and how they have molded me is part of reflecting on my relationship with the research participants in order to be transparent in my positionality and not pass on judgment. As an interpretivist researcher, I want the knowledge gained from this research to be shaped by the experience and interactions with the research participants, as "knowledge is co-created or intersubjective—produced through the interactions of the researcher and study participants" (Hiller, 2016, p. 103) and not through how my "values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124).

Research Ethics

The ethical considerations for my study are challenging, as there are many factors to consider. As McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated, "The costs may include injury and psychological difficulties, such as anxiety, shame, loss of self-esteem, and affronts to human dignity, or they may involve legal infringement on human rights" (p. 117). As the researcher, I am "responsible for the ethical standards used in the conduct of the research" (p. 117).

To address these standards, I ensured full disclosure of my research's purpose at the onset, sharing my research goals with the participants, allowing them to decide if they were interested in this study. Once participants agreed, consent was obtained by asking the participants to sign a form, explaining the research goals, process, and procedures, and agreeing to participate. In order to protect the privacy and the participants' confidentiality, participants chose their pseudonyms or were given an alias if they could not think of one, and any forms of data, paper or electronic, were stored in secure locations and deleted or shredded once the research finished.

In addition to the consent form, I anticipated possible risks, such as asking participants to answer personal questions that may result in embarrassment or reliving of trauma, and did what was necessary to minimize these risks. Also, power dynamics were not an issue since many of the participants were people I had relationships with. For those who I did not have as close a relationship with, building trust was at the forefront of my research process. To do this and to reduce the risk of harm, it was essential to ensure my participants they had the choice of not answering a question if they felt uncomfortable, or they could speak freely and off the record, that what they said would not be added to the research unless they wanted it to be. It was critical they knew I valued them and that their comfort and well-being was a priority. As Merinyo and Wangsness Willemsen (2021) pointed out in their work on "Caring Relationships in Research with Youth:"

> We learned to turn off the recorder, physically and metaphorically, whenever we felt it necessary to be present for each other as fellow humans first, allowing us to temporarily bracket the research relationship. Most often this was to offer off-the-record space to process whatever was intense or perhaps too personal for a greater audience, however

> removed that audience may be from the room at that moment … Participants and researchers alike came to understand the recorder as both a powerful tool and symbol in our work, one that we used—or choose not to use—purposefully. Though as researchers we did not lose sight of our research objectives, we chose not to allow the recorder to have power over our relationships. (p. 21)

As a researcher, it was vital to remember this, as the power was in the relationships I built with my participants and not the power I had as a researcher.

Instrumentation and Protocols

For this study, I used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol, where identical open-ended questions were asked, but additional probes were added in response to participants' comments and answers. "This open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up" (Turner, 2010, p. 756). Interview questions were sent via email to the participants a week before our interview to review. Due to the pandemic and for the participants' safety, all interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom. The interviews were conducted in English, with instances where the participant and I would speak in Hmong.

Procedures and Analysis

To answer my research questions, I conducted an analysis of narratives, as this "seeks to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13). This qualitative method identifies the information given and categorizes them into general concepts that share a common element (Flynn & Black, 2013). In fact, Wangsness Willemsen (2016) stated, "this approach privileges paradigmatic and thematic knowing over narrative knowing: it uses life stories as a means to examine phenomena, themes,

and processes external to and distinct from the life histories themselves" (p. 95). My research drew on the meanings and insights arising from my participants' life histories. Through an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), my participants' experiences were analyzed to uncover what factors contributed to their post-secondary educational journey, how this has impacted their children's education, and what they deem as essential in supporting young immigrant women educationally. "In turn, this can also compel a focus on the applicability and meaningfulness of one's work to practitioners" (Bochner, 2018, as cited by Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 262; Kvale, 1995;).

At the outset of my dissertation, I planned to analyze and organize participants' interviews thematically. However, while interviewing my participants, I started thinking about what would be left out and lost if I presented it this way. It was difficult to decide because all the experiences were different and unique but embodied hope, resilience, and perseverance. Through themes alone, the valuable and powerful lessons could be overlooked and the participants' voices left behind. I was conflicted and unsure about which method would be best since the stories I heard were extremely compelling. I spoke to my advisor about this, about not knowing if I wanted to go the traditional route of analyzing themes because I felt a lot would be left out. My advisor suggested if I had stories that had depth and encompassed my research questions, I could choose three participants and write each of their life histories as an analysis. She had done this in her dissertation and felt that this gave readers a deeper understanding of what was at play in each participant's life. When I finished interviewing my participants, a story stuck with me, and it was her story that I knew I wanted to tell. Therefore, I chose not to present my data as a series of themes, but complete life histories instead.

After finishing my interviews, I went on to my Zoom account to look at the recordings and Zoom's transcriptions. I took the recordings that had not been transcribed and downloaded them onto Temi.com to have them transcribed. Once the transcriptions were done, I went back and listened to each story while editing the transcriptions—if words had been omitted, if participants spoke too fast and it was transcribed wrong, if Hmong words had been transcribed, etc. Once I finished editing all the interviews to match what the participants said, I thought about which three narratives I would write and analyze. I knew that Kashia's story would be the first because her message was so powerful. While interviewing her, all I could think about was how to share her story because of the struggles she endured throughout her educational journey and how she did not become broken. I was afraid I would lose something important if I did not share her whole life history. I then chose Christine's as the second narrative due to the strong patriarchal aspect that defined her lived experience, and her perception on being in ESL. Deciding on my third narrative was much more difficult because there were varying aspects that each participant shared about their life histories that stood out however, I chose Nouchi's because of her experience of studying abroad and how this changed her life trajectory, along with the sense of invisibility that she felt and the many assumptions that were made about her and her children. Although they shared different perspectives, the three women's lived experiences epitomized the realities and struggles of first-generation Hmong women - struggles as told to me by all participants - on schooling, culture, and family. With each of their narratives, I edited some of the wording to make it grammatically correct; I omitted the "Umm'" and moved paragraphs around so the flow of the story would not be so choppy. I also did some editing for readability purposes, in order to be concise and on point, and changed minor details that did not

impact the meaning of each narrative to protect confidentiality. I consulted with my advisor and the participants before doing this.

Although I chose three life histories to analyze, the other participants' narratives are highlighted in my concluding chapter to provide a more extensive and profound understanding of the arguments and recommendations made. Their narratives added to the interpretations and analysis of the three whole life histories, while also contributing to advancing the stance of empowerment that is interwoven through the findings chapters and my conclusion.

According to Creswell & Poth (2018), narratives tell "the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences" (p. 73). With the data gathered from these narratives, I used a combination of inductive coding (coming from the narrative data), borrowing from the grounded theory method. Glaser and Strauss (2009, as cited in Wangsness Willemsen, 2016) offer the grounded theory method as a means from which data can shape analysis and theorization, rather than forcing data into predetermined categories. However, I also used deductive coding, drawing on categories of meaning from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. For example, I looked for examples of the phenomenon mentioned in Chapter Two about the model minority myth and SLIFE experiences, such as belonging. Once I determined these inductive and deductive categories, I looked for patterns in order "to understand the complex links among various aspects of people's situations, mental processes, beliefs, and actions" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 378).

Once I finished my initial analysis, I sought participant feedback as a way to validate my findings. I contacted them through text messaging and Facebook Messenger to see if they would be willing to read my analysis, to which they all agreed. I sent them my preliminary analysis of

descriptions and themes by email and then discussed the findings through Zoom a few days later when they were ready. Participants were asked to examine the findings and to judge the accuracy and dependability of the analysis. Participants were also asked to provide their views on my analysis and if language or interpretations needed to be adjusted. Maxwell (2013) stated:

> This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your biases and misunderstandings of what you observed. (pp. 126–127).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered this to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (as cited in Creswell, 2018, p. 261), as this approach “involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2018, p. 261). Buchbinder (2011) recommended member checks should "enhance reciprocity, equality, and openness, which in turn may allow the communication of more abundant in-depth data" (as cited in Candela, 2019, p. 625). As mentioned above, with my own perspectives, member checking was a way to validate my findings to maintain this study's integrity. If I needed more information, I contacted the participants for follow-up interviews, either by phone or Zoom, where follow-up questions were asked of participants to elaborate or give more details on shared memories. These follow-up conversations lasted between 30-45 minutes.

Although member checking was one of the strategies in validating data analysis, there were also ethical concerns I needed to be cognizant of, such as acknowledging these findings may result in distress or embarrassment. “Participants should be consulted to ascertain if they

wish to take part in any validation exercise, whether that is checking interview transcripts or commenting on analyzed data" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1806). According to Birt et al. (2016):

> Before using member checking, researchers need to be clear on the relevance and value of the method within their design; they need to have strategies for dealing with the disconfirming voice, and to have considered whether they have the resources or willingness to undertake further analyses if participants do not agree with their analysis...For example, if the purpose of the research is to provide knowledge to enact social change, it is an ethical and methodological imperative that alternative interpretations are reported to enable others to make decisions on the transferability of results. (p. 1806)

For my three participants whose narratives I used and asked to member check, I assured them I would safeguard their identities and should they disagree with any of the analysis, I would work with them in establishing what they felt was their story.

Besides member checking, I had a colleague and friend, who is a Hmong woman, peer review my findings by looking at my data and "assessing whether the findings are plausible, based on the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250). She has written a dissertation and understands how to code and analyze data. Lincoln and Guba (1985)

> define[d] the role of the peer debriefer as a "devil's advocate," an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings. (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 262)

I shared the narratives and my analysis with her, asking for feedback on my analysis, in which she added comments or questions. We then talked on the phone and discussed her thoughts on

my analysis and the questions/comments she had made. Besides sharing with my friend, I also shared the narratives with my advisor to get her feedback. We then talked about the narratives, my analysis and next steps over the phone.

Limitations

As this study is situated with first-generation Hmong women in Minnesota and California, it cannot be assumed that these women's narratives are the same as other first-generation Hmong women in other countries or states and other first-generation women of color of any ethnicity. However, the themes that come out of these participants can guide further research and allow educators to improve their practice in supporting young immigrant girls and women in school.

Conclusion

This chapter described and justified the research methodology used in this dissertation. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were the primary method of data collection. Data were analyzed through organizing, transcribing, coding and pattern seeking, member checking, and peer reviewing to ensure reliability. In the next chapter, I present my data gathered from the participant interviews as well as my analysis in relation to the research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR: KASHIA

This first narrative comes from Kashia's life story and illustrates how the complexities of culture, education, and intersectionality come together to shape one's educational path. Not only does her story exemplify the intricacies and difficulties of learning a new language and learning in a new country, but her story also reiterates the impact educators have in shaping what immigrant children believe about themselves and how critical they are in empowering immigrant young women and minoritized young people in advancing their educational attainment. Kashia's story resembles many of the same viewpoints shared in the literature review while also illuminating the inadequacies and discrimination often felt by immigrant students and the impact educator's voices have on them.

Before turning attention to Kashia's life story, I offer a short summary of how I met Kashia before our interview. I had heard of Kashia in the community; however, I had never met her until my husband ran his campaign[2]. We would see each other at events and fundraisers and would talk casually about life and family. She was very personable and easy to talk to. To me, she was intelligent, funny, kind, confident, and passionate about her work--someone everyone liked. However, through our interview together, her story revealed something beyond initial appearances. I was often left mouth wide open, shocked and in disbelief after hearing her recount her memories, and feeling amazed and inspired at how she persevered through her struggles and continued to be so positive. From early on, she was often told by teachers that she was not smart, which made her question herself and her capabilities. Furthermore, being Hmong and a woman contributed to a worsening of how she felt about herself, often being discriminated against and feeling like she had to prove herself.

[2] My husband ran for an open judge seat position during the 2018 elections and won.

The following is Kashia’s narration of her life from the interview I conducted with her. She came to the United States in 1978 when she was four years old and started her educational journey in Pre-K. She was married at 24, earned her master’s degree, and is currently working on her doctorate degree. She was open and honest, candid, and at times, emotional and vulnerable.

Kashia Part One: Schooling, Identity, and Family Support

Kashia: Education played such a huge role in my identity. I remembered early on loving school, but I always remember that I didn't fit in. I didn't think that I was problematic, but I think that I might've been. Education just shaped me in such a different way because, from what I can remember, I remembered being told that I wasn't a good student and that I wasn't smart. I just had really negative experiences associated with school and I remembered work was really hard for me. I remembered, even as a fifth grader, I remembered having to carry home all of my books that my teacher said, “Why are you carrying so many books home?” And I just thought, ‘Well, I have so much homework. How will I ever do all this work if I didn't bring this all home?’ But no other kid was bringing homework home and it wasn't until much, much later in my adult life where I realized that I could never get homework done in school because I think that I was, I'm a sensory person and I might've had some dyslexia and some ADHD, which made it so that, when you were supposed to read silently or work on these little cards where you read a story then you had to fill out the answers and stuff; I had never read one thing in school ever, because I was so sensitive to the noises around me that I could hear people flipping their pages.

I could hear people tapping their pencils and that distraction made it impossible for me to do work in class. So I just was labeled as somebody who didn't want to do my work, where I wasn't smart, but it was because I could not do work in those spaces. I just remembered it being my whole entire life loving school so much, but being so awful at it. I don't know why I was so

awful at it, but I still loved it so much. I remembered little things like going to the library and I loved poems. I don't know why I knew this, but as a kid in elementary, I loved poems. I didn't know how to use the card catalog so I just remembered one time where I found this poem book and I would always just go to that section and I would just check out poem books.

And then I just started making my own poem books and writing my own poems. Even though the rest of school was awful, I loved those things. I loved art class. I loved gym class. Those two things were the things that made me love being at school. As I got older, people thought I was smart and everyone always, cause my older sister got straight A's, she was so smart she got straight A's, and everyone just assumed that I was really smart like her. I just kind of rode that and I just was so ashamed to tell people I didn't get straight A's, but I think back then, we thought if we didn't get straight A's we weren't smart.

But I think I was a, mostly A’s, some B’s student and I thought that meant I wasn't smart because I just did think so differently. I had to read out loud to myself or I had to do math on my fingers, but I was so fast at it and I was so good at it. I just learned so different, but yet I was really good at these things and so I just had this mixed emotion of what school was. I remembered in ninth grade, a math teacher saying to me, and I remembered, I used to go ask for help all the time. I went in to ask him for help and he looked at me and he said, “I don't know how else to explain this any differently to make you understand this math.” I was just like, ‘Oh my God, I literally was just told I'm so stupid that a teacher could not explain to me how to do this math.’ and I remember walking away thinking, ‘I don't know what to do with this.’

I remembered I was a really good singer and I was in ninth grade choir. I was one of the best singers in both of this teacher's choir class and I remembered after the mid-semester evaluation or the big core evaluation, I had some friends who were really, they were really

popular friends, but I wasn't considered popular, but they were very popular. I remember my friend, Anna[3] and Tiffany[4], who Anna was not as good of a singer, but he told Anna she was getting an A, and he told me I was getting a B. So I was like, 'Wait, what? I'm a soloist. I sing the loudest. He's always using me as an example. He's always asking me to sing, why am I getting a B?' So I asked him and he lost it. He yelled at me and he was like, "How dare you challenge me?" Back then, teachers yelled at kids. But he yelled at me and he shamed me for asking the question of, "Can you help me understand why Anna's getting an A?" and Anna was with me so she was totally okay with me telling him, "And why Anna is getting an A and I'm getting a B because I want to understand what I need to do better." Cause if this is the one thing, singing and gym is, and art is all I'm good at, it was really hard for me to hear that I was getting a B in choir. So, he yelled at me and he shamed me and he took away a solo from me because I asked him the question. And so I wondered if he would have done the same thing if I would have been a White child, if I would've been a White kid. But those things I'll never know if it was racism or just bias for other reasons, but it was just, it's those types of experiences that I had throughout my entire education that back then, you didn't know how to identify it.

I think the time we were growing up too, even back in those days, it was so okay for boys to touch you inappropriately at school. I was touched by boys all the time and teachers just ignored it. They never did anything. Teachers were, my gym teacher, his daughter and I were really good friends. I remembered we did a sleepover. They didn't do this at school, but I can't imagine that he was any different at school. But he said to my friend who is his daughter, who invited me to her birthday, he's like, "Oh, so you invited this Chink over for your birthday." I was like, 'Oh, that's not, I don't think that's a nice thing he's saying.' I remembered being

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[3] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.
[4] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.

uncomfortable, but he was our gym teacher and he was my volleyball coach when I got to middle school. At the same time I was experiencing that racist teacher, I also had a teacher who happened to be our pastor's wife and she was a math teacher and she used to say to me, every day, “You are so smart. You are so smart. There's nothing that you can't be.” And I was like, ‘Well, that's so interesting’ cause I would use to be so conflicted because up until then, everyone kept telling me how dumb I was. They would just be, the teachers would say to you, “You're very dumb” or “You're never going to make it.” And I was like, ‘Wow, they just said that to you.’ So it was just really interesting the dichotomy of the different feedback I was getting. But you know, I think that because I had such a low self-esteem around how smart I was that I think I just accepted when teachers treated me poorly.

And I remembered just being so challenged with reading and writing forever and my senior year of high school, I had a teacher who, I don't know why she took such interest in me, but my senior year, my first semester, this teacher said to me, "You're so smart. You're brilliant. Why can't you write?" and I was like, “I don't know. I really want to write good things.” She sat me down and she said, "Okay, when you write and if this is what you're thinking, this is what you would say." And then, this is how you would quote, you would put quotations to support what you were saying and she literally taught me everything that I hadn't known my entire life in one semester. Then I graduated high school early and I went to college and had it not been for that one teacher who took interest in me and who said something different to me than every other teacher said to me and she could see that I was brilliant and I didn't believe her, but yet, because she saw that, she helped me. Had she not done that, I would have never graduated college. I would have never graduated because she taught me everything I needed to do to write in order to

be successful in college. My education is so important to me because of that journey that I went through.

Theresa: So, what were some struggles or barriers you experienced as a Hmong woman while in school? So culturally, what were some struggles you experienced?

Kashia: Culturally, my father was so supportive. It was my dad, my family, we have, there's six kids and his first three children were all girls and then he had my brother, and then, they told us that the fifth child was actually a boy, but she ended up being a girl so then they had a sixth one and it was my, I had another brother. So there's two boys and four girls. I remembered people used to tell my father, and I would hear them saying this because I was kind of that kid who loved to sit around and listen to adults or I would hide really close by so I could just hear what adults were saying, and I remembered hearing them say that my father was never going to have any sons and that he would never be, he wouldn't be anything because he didn't have sons. So I remember thinking, ‘We're going to, I'm going to show them. I'm going to become something’ because my dad was always very supportive of my sisters and I having our education. He always made sure that we were never looked at as less than boys. So when we all turned 16, he bought us all cars. My older sister had a Camaro. I had a Supra. We were these 16 year old girls driving in cars that boys would be driving in. But he expected us to have all these responsibilities, that we still had to take care of our siblings. I'd come home and cook and clean before I would do my homework, I'd feed my siblings.

He was always very supportive and he was a really great advocate. When boys started to like us, he would not let us date because he knew, he was afraid that if we dated, we wouldn't go to college. And so he was like, “Nope, they're going to college.” I didn't have as much challenges around what it meant in my family, but I did always have the feeling of culturally, that people

didn't respect my father and my mother because they didn't have sons. I felt like we had something to prove to them, too. In school, I don't think I ever had challenges cause, I think that was something very interesting about my own identity. My sisters and I, even though we grew up in Wisconsin, we didn't have any Hmong friends because my dad didn't let us out. And my parents didn't let us hang out even with our cousins or aunts and uncles. And so we didn't have any Hmong friends. At school, we only hung out with *Meeka*[5] people and it was just a very different, I kind of thought maybe I was White and I was striving to be White. I was really shunning that part of my identity as a Hmong person. I was always so relieved when people would say, "Oh, you guys don't look Hmong at all." and we'd be like, 'Oh, thank God.' like, it was just something so shameful to be a part of, to be Hmong, because there were all these negative stereotypes of what it meant to be Hmong. So those are kind of my experiences going to school and everybody would be really racist towards Hmong people, but they would say, "Oh, not you guys though. You're not like the other Hmong people." And we'd be like, 'Oh, thank God.' It was not a good time for me.

Theresa: So, how about personally? What were some struggles?

Kashia: You know, my mom and I, we're so close now and my kids just think that my mom and I were always this close, but my mother was so young when she had us. She had my older sister when she was 16, which in Hmong terms, it wasn't that young back in the old country. She was 17 when she had me, but it was like, I grew up with my mom and she just, there was so much that she was learning and the trauma that she was experiencing as a Hmong girl, like her father was a Colonel so she never learned how to cook or clean. She had military people escort her to school every day so when she married my father, even though she had such a

[5] Meeka is a Hmong term used to refer to White, Caucasian people.

good name and she was a good person and she literally was the reason why my father's family survived, she was really not treated that well by my father's family. She was struggling with her own issues of being the kind of daughter-in-law that they wanted and so there was so much pressure put on us as kids and so my mother and I butted heads because I was very vocal and my sister and I were so close in age, just a year apart, that we fought all the time.

Because my sister was so perfect, not any fault of her own but she was very perfect, my mother always just kind of took her side and because I was considered the bad one, the one that wasn't smart, it was just a really kind of hard dynamic growing up and just feeling like I was never good enough for anybody. I wasn't good enough in school for teachers. I wasn't good enough at home as a daughter. It was really hard as a kid. When I was 15 though, I decided, ‘All right, I'm going to do everything she and my parents want and I'm going to do everything and be everything that they want me to be.’ And so once I did that, things really did change. My parents stopped ever saying anything to me. They stopped watching me, they stopped yelling at me. They stopped arguing with me because the first thing I did in the morning was wake up and put the dishes away and cook. Then I would feed my siblings and my sister would study, cause she ended up going to become an engineer, and I would be the one coming home and cooking and feeding my siblings. My dad had two jobs so I would stop doing homework at nine o'clock so I could cook for him so that he could go to work and then I would clean up and I, so I started doing everything and then I realized, ‘when you do everything perfect, people love you.’ So I just kept doing that. I just felt like I had to be perfect all the time, because that was the only way people would love me and acknowledge me.

The funny thing is my dad and I were always very close. I don't know why. My dad wasn't ever around a lot, but my dad's just seemed to understand me and so we were very close

and I always just loved him so much. I watched my father and I wanted to be just like him. It was so odd. He went hunting and I was like, “Can I go hunting?” It was just all men, and they were like, “You can't go.” But he let me be there when they were skinning the deer and doing all that stuff. And I remember everything my dad did, I wanted to do. I watched my father and I would see the way other Hmong men would, because back then my dad led the Lao Hmong Association and I was like, ‘I want to do that one day. I want people to look at me the way they look at him. I want people to respect me the way they're respecting him.’ I remember already knowing that I wanted that kind of respect from people as a really young kid.

But, it wasn't just the respect. It was that I saw how much he helped other people. My father used to put his name on loan papers for other people so they could get cars and they could buy homes and stuff like that. There wasn't anything that my dad wouldn't do. He would go over in the middle of the night to help somebody or he would, he just did so much and I saw how much it meant to other people for him to be that giving of himself to them and I knew that that's what I wanted to do. I hung onto every word that he just said to me about how you care for people and what you do for people and how you should always feed people and how you should always give them shelter. It was those types of things that I always remembered.

I was also really close to my grandmother. She's gone now, but I was really close to her. I used to run away from home and I would go to her house and she just lived 8 blocks from us, but I would run away to her house and she would never ask me any questions. She would never tell me I couldn't be there. She never told me to go home. She would just feed me, ua paj ntaub[6] with me. And then, it'd been a while. She'd be like, “Okay, well, you know, maybe you should let your mom know where you are.” and I was like, “Alright.” She's like, “But you don't have to go

[6] Form of embroidery using a variety of stitching techniques, such as cross-stitching.

if you don't want to." Then she'd tell me all the reasons why I should go and then she'd say, "But you don't have to." And then she'd always make me feel like it was my decision that it was time for me to go so I always felt like it was my decision and I would go back. All of the things that kind of led me to where I am had to do a lot with her.

She would always tell me it doesn't matter if you ever get married one day, as long as you can take care of yourself or, you're just as good as a boy. She would always say to me, "Gosh, if you were a son, I can't even imagine" and I think that she meant that in the nicest way possible. But, she would always say, "If you were a son, I can't even imagine the things that you would, you would be ib tus nom[7]. You would be so..." and so she always was just really encouraging and really never told me to settle and always said that I didn't ever need a man, even though it was in the eighties and my grandfather died when we came to America. She never remarried and she knew how hard it was to be a strong woman.

The things I remember about her, too, was that she would say to me, because everybody always wanted the nice clothes for New Year, and she would always say to me, "You're not somebody who needs really nice things. You have a good heart and you don't have to be the prettiest, so you don't have to have the nicest. And it doesn't matter if people tell you that you're not smart or you're not pretty because that's not what's gonna get you to where you want to be one day anyways. So take the bad things, let everybody else have all the good things. And you should just, you know, cause these things won't matter anyways." So, it was all the little things that she would tell me, like to not fret over the things that don't matter and really focus on the things that are really who you are. She said something to me once. She was like, "If you're not pretty, then you have to be nice so that others will like you." So I was like, 'Okay, I know I'm not

[7] Hmong term for an Official.

pretty so I'm just going to have to be really smart and really nice. And that's what I'll do.'' All of these things that are super oppressive, but yet are the things that I cherish and hang on to because they were the things that really helped me sort through what doesn't matter and what does matter. She would say, loving people and being kind to others, those are the things that matter.

Discussion of Kashia Part One

Kashia's stories of schooling and family reveal multiple themes, but perhaps none more so than how intersectionality can be in racialized, genderized spaces. Educationally, as a Hmong student, Kashia's opportunities were impacted by what her teachers said and thought of her. That was apparent when her solo was taken away by her music teacher for asking him about her grade and questioning herself if she was a White student, would he have done the same thing. Additionally, the racist attitudes she experienced impacted her identity and made her shun being Hmong. The comments from her peers about not looking Hmong made her feel "White" and accepted. Her experiences of being told repeatedly by teachers that she was not smart reflected how educators did not take the time to get to know her and what her learning style was. As she mentioned, she could not get anything done in class due to the distractions that she was facing--hearing pages turning or pencils tapping. She knew she learned differently and yet, educators did not. Furthermore, her example of her math teacher telling her he did not know how else to explain it to her so that she could understand made her feel defeated. This exemplifies the way many immigrant/refugee students felt that teachers did not care about them and were quick to label them. However, when one teacher does care enough and takes the time to really see who that child is, it makes a world of difference, as was apparent with her senior year English teacher who saw what she was capable of doing and took the time to help her with her writing.

In addition to what teachers were telling her, because her sister, who was a year older, and as Kashia said was so smart and got straight A's, teachers assumed Kashia was also smart. Due to internalizing the negative things teachers have said to her, Kashia felt ashamed. Although she was getting A's and B's, she felt that was not good enough, that in order to be smart, you had to have straight A's. This belief that you have to be smart and have to be a straight A student in order to be liked perpetuates the model minority myth and places unrealistic expectations on Asian American students. Much like Kashia, I often felt I had to be perfect and smart in order to be liked due to having teachers who had had my older brothers and often felt immense guilt if I did not perform the same way they did. When educators believe in this Myth, it only adds to the amount of pressure Asian American students feel, especially if they are struggling.

Culturally, Kashia's struggles were not similar to mine or many of the participants that I spoke to. Unlike many of the participants and myself, Kashia was very close to her dad and grandmother, and although she butted heads with her mom, she eventually got along with her. She spoke of her dad treating her and her sisters and brothers as equals, valuing education for all of them, and wanting to be like him. Here, we can also see how patriarchy did not have the same effect, that if used to love rather than for power, it shows how fathers can positively influence their daughters' lives. She also talked about her grandmother affectionately and about the influence she had made through the things she had said. Although Kashia felt she had to prove herself, it was not for the same reasons as other Hmong girls had: she felt she had to prove herself to the clan members and Hmong elders because of what they were saying about her dad, that he would not be anything without sons. In the Hmong community, what clan leaders and Hmong elders say bear a lot of weight. When thinking about Kashia's journey thus far, the intersectionality of being "Hmong" and a "girl" affected her identity in different ways; first,

feeling like she was not good enough for anybody--at school and at home--then deciding she was going to do everything her parents wanted her to do and to be perfect all the time so that she would be loved and acknowledged. In addition to these parts of her identity, as readers will soon discover, Kashia suspects that she had a learning disability, which combined with these two aspects of her identity compounded her learning which made schooling more challenging. Kashia's feelings of not being good enough then having to be perfect highlights what "many" Hmong girls experience, among many other things.

Kashia Part Two: Challenges, Shame, and Children's Educational Journey

Kashia: Schools and teachers didn't do a lot, you know. So at my school, we didn't have hot lunches so we didn't hardly have any food to eat when we would go to school. I never ate breakfast and for lunch, because there were so many of us, you could pack one slice of bread with two of these little really cheap lunch meats and then you would just fold it into a sandwich. Then the little Debbie snacks that come in two, we would cut it in half and you would get one of those and that's all we would eat during the day. Then we'll have dinner but it was such a small amount because there's so many of us living together, my grandmother and them lived with us at the time.

So, we didn't have hot lunch, we didn't have ESL. We, when I was going, we didn't have ESL, we didn't have any of these things. And I remember teachers were so mad at me when I couldn't read because I was like, "Well, how do you know that letter makes that sound?" and nobody could explain it to me. They just said, "Oh, it makes the sound." But I'm like, "How do you know?" I've, my whole life, I've always asked people, "But how do you know it makes that sound?" and I would always ask questions that just made people so mad at me. But I remember thinking, 'But I would say in my language like this so why would I say it like that there?' and

nobody could tell me because the language doesn't translate in the same way and so learning was such a challenge for me. They didn't have any support services at that time for if you were not a traditional learner.

It was really hard. I almost flunked the second grade and it was interesting cause my mother was, for somebody who was so young and didn't know anything, she was a really fierce advocate for her children. She went to every single one of our parent teacher conferences and no matter how much somebody told her that her kids weren't gonna make it, she'd just be like, “Nope, they are.” They were going to hold me back in second grade and she was like, “Nope, you're not.” and so, she just was a really fierce advocate for us and anything that we needed for school, she always made sure that we had. She knew she couldn't help us with school, but she always made sure that we had the time to do our homework and we had spaces to do our homework. It was really just sheer will on our parts and my mother just doing the best that she could to make space for us to learn.

But, I don't remember any teachers helping me. I just remember I kept passing and because my sister and I were so close in age, I would just copy what she was doing. Fifth and sixth grade we're together, and third and fourth grade we're together. So she and I would end up in classes together sometimes. I remember distinctly when she was learning the vowels, I would just hear her saying /e/, /e/, /i/, /a/, /u/ but I had no idea what that meant, but I knew that when they asked me the vowels, I could do the sounds for them so then they thought I was learning, but I wasn't learning. I just was repeating what my sister, I'd heard her doing, and so, because I didn't cause trouble while I was in school, I just kept getting passed along.

I wasn't problematic so they just kept pushing me along because, I think when I did work, I did try really hard and so my things were very pretty. They might not have been good or right

but they were very pretty. So, I think that that made a big difference cause I was a very meticulous person and even in my science projects, I would draw really perfect lines to label things or, because it looked like it was good work, even though it might not have been, I just kept getting passed along. I remember one time, I made up a complete thing that wasn't even real cause back then, you had to have encyclopedias. I had to do this project on a fish, but there's no internet and there's no, we didn't have any encyclopedias so I just made up a fish and I called it a rainbow fish in the Caribbean. I made this beautiful fish and it was a 3D fish, which I was the only kid that did that. I colored it all beautiful rainbow and I stapled it on and I stuffed it. The teacher knew that it was not a real fish and she even called it out. She didn't say it was mine. She even called it out that people were not doing their projects appropriately and then she called out a rainbow fish, but I still got passed, I still passed it. Nobody cared that you had barriers to why you couldn't do work. My parents were both working two jobs. My mom couldn't take me to the library when she, when I needed to do this work. And so all of the barriers that existed, why kids couldn't do their work, it was there and nobody helped me, but they kept passing me along. I just made up a fish. I still remember it though, till this day.

When I went to college, it was like I had to go because I needed to become self-sufficient because my youngest sibling is 10 years younger than me. I still had all these small siblings I needed to take care of and be able to take care of myself so I'd never even thought I was never going to go to college. It was never even an option. My dad used to always say to me, “You know, you could be really smart but if you don't work hard, you're never gonna make it. But, you worked really hard and you're going to be something one day. It doesn't matter what people tell you right now, if they think that you're smart or not. Because you work hard, you're going to make it one day.” And I was like, ‘Okay, I just gotta keep working hard until I make it.’ So it

was really him and my mom and just my grandmother and all of that support around me of why I went to college. It was just expected that we were all going to go to college and my father was always very, I think he knew, my parents knew us better than we knew ourselves. My dad looked at each one of us and he said to my older sister, “You're very good at math, you're,” and by the way, people told her she was never going to make it as an engineer cause she wasn't smart enough either, but she did. So he's like, “You're going to be an engineer.” Then he said to me, “Well, you're very friendly and nice. You should go into banking.” They were never like, “Oh, you're so smart.” It was like, “You're very friendly and outgoing. You should go into banking.” And then he told my younger sister she should be an engineer as well and so everybody became what he told us we would become so going to college, we all went.

If I were to let what society was telling me, I would've never gone. I mean, just considering I'd been tracked into the lowest classes and back in those days, if you didn't test a certain way, then you got tracked into a certain kind. I was actually in classes with the kids who ended up dropping out of high school or the kids who are in the lowest, like the remedial classes. When I got to high school, I had a couple of teachers who would look at me and they're like, and this teacher would never say this now, but a teacher said to me, “Why are you in this class with these dummies?” And I was like, ‘What? I'm in classes with dummies and I didn't even know?’ so he used to send me to go do my own work and while he was teaching class, he would just let, because he knew that I was really good at computers for some reason, he would just let me program and do work on the computer. It was teachers like that that kind of dropped clues, like, “Oh, you're smarter than what the system is telling us you are.” Though I've been tracked in these low classes, I had these teachers who were like, ‘This doesn't make sense. What are you doing here?’ And if I would listen to how the system had categorized me or what they said about

me, I would've never gone to college. I probably would have never, I should have never even finished high school.

But, I didn't go back to get my masters until I was probably in my mid-thirties because I was always so ashamed, because I barely graduated college. Studying finance was one of the hardest things I ever did because I had never heard some of these words or terms until I went to college and so, I had no concept of finance, like markets and stocks or bonds or basic things because we didn't grow up that way. We're from a culture that doesn't have those terms and words and so it was really, really hard.

I remembered it was my first semester of my senior year. I took this finance class. It was intermediate finance and I failed this class. I would go in to see the professor all the time for office hours. I would do all my work and he saw me sitting in the front row everyday and he said to me, "You're in the front row every class." I'm like, "I know." And he's like, "How are you failing?" I was like, "I don't know." And he took such sympathy on me cause if I failed, if he would've given me an F on it, I would not have had the minimum GPA to graduate college. So in my major, I had to have a minimum GPA to graduate and that was just a 2.5 in my core major classes, even though my overall GPA was higher, it was a little higher than that. My business courses had to be a 2.5 minimum. If he would've failed me, I would have been below that 2.5 and I wouldn't graduate. So he said to me, "I'm not going to make you re-register for the class and pay again but what I want you to do is retake the class with me next semester. If you do better next semester, I will give you the grade from that semester so I'm going to leave you as an incomplete right now." So he gave me this chance and I went in every single day. And for me, for some reason, if I see material a second time, it clicks so differently in my head and so everything that I did not get the first time, I got the second time. I ended up getting a B in his

class, which was really hard for an intermediate finance class, but I got a B in his class and it was because he did that for me that my minimum GPA of 2.5 is exactly what I got, which is why I was able to graduate. Because I was so ashamed of how poorly I had done, I never even thought I would ever go to graduate school. I thought, ‘No graduate school would ever want me, I'm too dumb.’

Because my undergraduate grades were so bad, they accepted me on a temporary basis that if I could get good grades, they would let me in permanently and so I did that. I got into the graduate program and I remembered, it changed my life to be in that graduate program. My reading became phenomenal and I almost had a 4.0 getting my MBA. The finance stuff that I didn't know before, it just made so much sense to me because I had lived it, I had worked it, I had already studied it once and now, it was the ability to put pieces together. It wasn't just trying to understand the material, it was using the material in ways that my colleagues were doing, or my classmates, they were not doing.

My professors in my masters, it was them that really encouraged me. I never heard so many people say to me, “You are brilliant.” I always think it's so weird when I hear people say that to me cause people don't say, “Oh, you're smart” or “You really know stuff.” They're always like, “You're brilliant.” It took me so long to have to hear multiple people say that to me before I was like, “Maybe I'm not dumb. Maybe I'm not not smart.” and I was already in my mid-thirties to late thirties when I realized that. That's when my life just took off and my career took off because I realized, I'm so much more than I thought I could ever be, that there's nothing that I can't do if I've overcome all of this. And then my whole life just completely exploded in the best way possible. But it literally took educators, multiple educators, saying the same words to me before I was like, ‘Oh, I, maybe I am smart. Maybe I'm not dumb.’

I've learned so much, which is why education is so important to me. When my girls were growing up, I put them in Montessori school because I had to learn the kind of learner I was and I had to make up for all the things that the education system couldn't see in me and didn't know because I was a high-performing person. I didn't realize it until now. I was so afraid that my girls would be labeled as dumb and so I had them tested very early on and it turns out that both of my girls were gifted and talented. One of them was really far off the high end of gifted and talented and she learns a lot like me actually. And I realized, ‘Oh, I think my teachers did not understand that I was gifted and talented. They did not see that and they did not know how to nurture that or foster that.’ So my girls' education became something very deliberate on my part and how I showed up for them was so different because I knew that they needed something really, really different. By the time my older one, when she was in third grade, she was reading at a high school level and, you know, she was just amazing. I just nurtured education really early on. I just knew that all the studies that said how, if they're, even if you're gifted and talented, if by fourth grade that that isn't nurtured in you, that you potentially will never become what you could have been and so I was always really afraid of that. I knew that I was the anomaly that, even though I had all those negative experiences that I still, I persevered, and I knew that that would probably not be the case for my girls and so it was really intentional on my part.

I took a job that took me out to Maryland and it was a big promotion from where I was at so we moved out to the DC, Baltimore area and I remembered when we moved out there, Kailey[8] was about two. She was just about to turn two and I remembered looking for schools for her. I did not want her in just a daycare or for somebody to just give her childcare. I wanted her to be in an educational setting because she was so smart. I could already tell from when she was

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[8] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.

a baby, she was brilliant. I used to say to my mom, "I swear, this child knows what I'm saying to her." She must've only been nine months when she said her first words. She dropped a pen and she said, "Uh-oh." and we were like, “Oh no, she did not just say that.” Then we gave her the pen and she dropped it on purpose and she said, "Uh-oh" again and we were like, "Oh my God, this baby is so smart." By the time she was one, she knew all of her aunts and uncles names and she would call them Tais[9] Mee[10], Tais Kia[11], Dab[12] Moua[13]. She would know their official title and their name and she could count to 10. By the time she was 14 or 15 months, she was speaking three word sentences. She was just brilliant. I was like, ‘Oh my God, I got to nurture this.’ And so by the time she turned two, I put her in Montessori school and then I had Aubrey[14] out there. Then Aubrey and Kailey were both in Montessori school and both of their education costs me more than my mortgage at the time. But that was what I felt was the most important thing to do was give them access to education and to be stimulated in that way so my whole life revolved around making sure that they got the education that I felt they deserved.

Aubrey is so much like me and I'm struggling because, I think this is the problem. When you're high functioning people with mental health issues or learning issues, people don't take what you say seriously when you talk about the issues that somebody is experiencing. So Aubrey, I struggled the most with because she struggles a lot in school, but she is also exactly like me, which I know that she's brilliant. She's the one that's off the chart gifted and talented but she feels really dumb and she feels like she's not smart. I always tell her, “Look, that's exactly where I was, but you got to persevere through this” and the challenge is school districts wouldn't,

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[9] Hmong term for Aunt from the mother’s side of the family.
[10] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.
[11] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.
[12] Hmong term for Uncle from the mother’s side of the family.
[13] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.
[14] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.

especially when we went to distance learning, they would not help her. I had to get her a 504 in order for them to support her. Before I got her 504 last year, teachers sent a note cause I don't think the teacher thought I was on it. She was like, “I am not going to help Aubrey because Aubrey didn't come to me. And unless she has a 504 plan, I have no responsibility to work with her directly.” and I was just like, ‘Hell no, you did not just say that to me.’ So I sent a note back and I copied the superintendent and copied the principal and said this is not okay and that teacher backed down. Then I was like, “Fine. If you all say this is the only way you're gonna help then, I'm gonna make, I'm gonna get a 504 plan for her.” and so I did get one and that's why now they all have to work with her individually to help her.

That’s the way I’ve had to show up for my girls. I literally have had to fight for every little thing. Just like when they kept coding my daughters, my older one as ELL, my one who started reading when she was two and was reading at a high school level when she's in third grade. They kept putting her in ELL and they kept pushing, then years of fighting with the school district and they finally said to me, “No, we unflagged her as ELL” and yet, her junior year in high school, she's like, “Mom, they're making me go test out of ELL. I'm not even in ELL.” They would not let her leave and forced her to take the test, to test out of ELL in the 11th grade.

Then my second one, they kept coding as ELL and I'm like, “She doesn't, they don't speak another language but English. I do not understand.” And they said to me it was because I filled out a form that said that she, at some point, spoke another language. I said, “That's not true. That might've been true for my first one, but that is impossible for my second one.” I said, “Pull the form.” and they refused to, and I said, “Pull the form.” They pulled the form and it never said that she spoke any other language or that there was any other language spoken in the home and

yet, they placed her in ELL for six years. I've had to fight every tiny thing for my children. Everything that they deserve, that they needed in education.

Discussion of Kashia Part Two

This section of Kashia's life history brings our attention to the lack of support that she received in school and how her educational journey has shaped her two daughters' educational paths. It is evident that teachers did not believe in Kashia and continued to label her as someone who was not smart. This was apparent when talking about being tracked in the lowest classes; however, teachers constantly passed her, even when she made up her science project about the rainbow fish. Teachers did not recognize the barriers that Kashia faced at home, from both parents working two jobs to not having the appropriate materials to do her work. Kashia's story underscores how often immigrant children get passed along from grade level to grade level, without any concerns as to what may be going on in their lives. From her school not having hot lunches to not having any ESL services, she lacked the resources she needed to thrive. As educators, we know that a child cannot learn if their basic needs are not met. Throughout Kashia's educational journey, her needs as an individual were often not met. Although she encountered more dismissive teachers, the praise and kindness of a few teachers is what she hung onto, showing determination and resilience.

Her family's expectation that she attend college, along with her decision to attend graduate school, exemplifies the importance of schooling. Even though societal norms were telling her that she was different, that she was not smart, she did not let that dictate her outcome. Through the support that she received from her parents and grandmother, she worked hard and showed tenacity. Her determination comes through when she talks about almost not graduating college. She was given a second chance to take an intermediate finance class and showed up

everyday, relearning and earning a B. Additionally, she persevered, if not excelled, in graduate school even though she felt so ashamed about almost not completing her undergraduate degree. However, had she not gone to graduate school, she may not have realized her full potential, as it was at grad school that her professors encouraged her and helped her to see what she was capable of. The attitudes of her graduate school instructors' differed greatly from her earliest teachers, offering contrasting feedback on her intelligence. This helped her see herself in a different light.

Kashia's story conveys how her struggles with learning have made her an advocate for her children. Realizing how hard school was for her and not wanting the same experiences for her daughters, she had them tested early on, only to find that they were both gifted and talented. Wanting to nurture this, Kashia enrolled them in a Montessori school early on. Although they are both gifted and talented, she realizes that her youngest daughter is struggling the same way she did and needs additional support from her teachers. As educated as Kashia is, navigating through this has been difficult because of the hoops she has needed to jump through in order to get her daughter the help that she needs. Because teachers were unwilling to help, she had to get a 504 plan for her daughter. As difficult as this process was, when thinking about the educational system, it is not set up in a way that is helpful for families who have language barriers. Even if families do not have language barriers, they may have other issues, such as mental health, issues of time and availability, that prevent them from getting their children the resources and support that they need.

In addition to getting the support that her daughter needed, she also had to speak up for her daughters when they were coded as ELL students. Due to having them tested and in school early on, her daughters did not need to be placed in ELL. Besides this, no language other than

English had been spoken in their home. However, her oldest, even after being told that she had been unflagged, had to test out her junior year in high school and her youngest was coded as ELL for six years. Oftentimes, minority students or students of immigrant families are categorized as ELL students even though their family does not speak their native language at home or if English has become their primary language without being tested or without looking at the child's file.

Like Kashia's daughters, my oldest son had never had any ELL services in elementary school. He was not even coded as ELL. However, when he started middle school, we went to his orientation and all of his classes were ELL classes, even his math class. I was startled at first, then became upset because I did not understand where this confusion and mistake came from. I called the school and left a message with the principal saying had they looked at his file, they would have realized he was not ELL. She apologized and said she did not know how that happened but it was probably due to his last name, since there were so many Asian students with that last name. That made me even more upset so I sent an email to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), which never responded back to me. It seems though that this has also happened to other families whose children were not ELL but were placed in ELL classes. This assumption takes away the opportunities that may be available to them, such as AP classes or in choosing the electives that they want, and they may be tracked in lower ability classes, as was the case with my son when he was placed in all ELL classes. As parents, especially as parents of minority students, not only have we had to fight for our child's right to learn but also for our rights as parents to be heard.

Kashia Part Three: Impact of Teachers, Relationships, and Acceptance

Kashia: I wish teachers would know how greatly they impact and the things that they said to people, like what it does to people. I wish they knew that. I think people kind of know, but I don't think that they understand the emotional toll or impact that it has on somebody so young. I remember things that people said to me when I was in first grade. I remember Mrs. Miller saying that I was a bad reader out loud or not letting me read because I wasn't a good reader or just such small things, like even asking, “Why are you bringing home so much homework? Why don't you do it in class?” Even just little things that reinforced for somebody, “Why are you so dumb?” that those things have long lasting impact for children and what that means as they get older and develop. But also, too, every small positive thing you say, the impact that has on people, too.

I realize now though, my 12th grade English teacher, I didn't know this back then. She looked just like a White woman to me, but I realized that she's from the Middle East and so, I realized it was a teacher of color, and I think about the teachers who invested in me and the bosses who invested in me, they were women of color. I don't know if other people would have ever done that for me. I didn't think that this was important until I just said that, how it was a teacher of color that actually, because, growing up in Wisconsin, there were no teachers of color. If I think about it, she would have been my only teacher of color and I didn't even know she was a woman of color. I could tell that she had some ethnic look in her, but I didn't know until much, much later that she was a woman of color. I think that having people who may be, even if they're not exactly like you, that they have a different life experience really, really matters in what children see.

When I look at my daughter, she has an Asian teacher. She said to me, “Mom, I love my literature class.” I said, “Why?” and she said, “Because the way she talks, it just resonates with

me. I feel like she understands where I'm coming from or what I'm thinking." and for a child to go through their whole education and never feel like that is, to me, really sad. You don't know what you're missing until you see the thing that lets you know what you're missing, so she could have graduated high school, never had an Asian teacher, never experienced this and not know, but now she knows. Now she knows what it's like to have a teacher teach her in a way that validates her, her stories and her experiences and that's really, really critical. I think it is so critical to have good education and good teachers early on.

Teachers also need to be understanding without judgment. I think people's first reaction is always to kind of judge like, "Oh my God, your family made you do all these things" and it's such a shock to people. But, how do you provide the support through situations in which you'll never understand? How do you do that without judgment? And that's really hard to do because human nature tells us we have a set of norms that we believe what everybody should be like and when it's not, we might be empathetic but sometimes, we just, we don't know how to do it without judgment. And, how do you really listen so that you could give them access to the things that they need without that part of, the shaming of who I was as a Hmong woman came from judgment of other people like, "Oh my God, you have to do all these things." It made me think, "Oh my gosh, that's bad. This part of my culture is bad." when the truth is, I don't think that it's necessarily bad. It was learning to juggle multiple things that made me who I am today, or learning to be caring and thoughtful towards other people made me the person I am today. So yes, there are good and bad to all cultures, but how do you not say things or do things that make somebody else kind of ashamed of who they are instead of embracing and saying, "How do you use that to really lift that person up?" and I think that that's what young immigrant women need; their life is very, very different.

I wish so many things, but I also wondered if it would have been different, would I have worked so hard to be in the journey that I am today that I struggle with giving kids the resources that they need, but also how do kids find grit and tenacity and the perseverance when they never have to fight really hard for themselves. I think about the number of times, because my parents couldn't advocate for me, the number of times I had to advocate for myself. When I think about my kids now, I think about the drawbacks of how much I've had to be there to advocate for them and how they have not had to advocate for themselves and I wonder the impact of that.

I really struggle with would I do anything differently, though. I mean, all those years of self-loathing or low self-esteem, did I need that to be the person I am today, to do the work that I do now, and to love kids the way that I do when I see somebody struggling and to fight so hard for children who don't have people fighting for them. Would I know to do that now, if my experience would have been different? I don't know. I don't know if I would change anything, even if it was awful for a really long time. I think about every person who influenced my journey, and my 12th grade teacher, my professor in college, my professors who later on who saw things in me, or even the teachers who had made comments about, "What are you doing in here with these dummies?" Not very smart or sensitive of them to say that, but every one of those words left something, an imprint on my heart, that really changed me in a way.

Discussion of Kashia Part Three

The role of teachers and the impact of their voices was a recurring theme in young immigrant women's lives, and is evident in Kashia's life story. Kashia speaks of the emotional toll that these teachers and their demeaning words had on her along with how it impacted her self-esteem. What they were saying reinforced the thought that she was dumb and she internalized that until adulthood. Although she encountered constant negativity, there were

others who saw her differently and told her so. Kashia showed enormous grit and tenacity in how she did not let the pessimism envelop her and how she continued to push forward. It was the voices of teachers who were considerate and kind hearted, who took an interest in her and told her, “You’re brilliant.” that made her question her self-worth and see that she was so much more.

Furthermore, as a young immigrant woman, we are often told by many that we are not smart, that we cannot do things, that we will not be anyone important. If culture and society is constantly telling us this, it is crucial that educators do not add to this construct. As Kashia said, teachers need to understand and listen without judgement and shaming. There are many layers to a young immigrant woman’s life, layers that one simply cannot understand just by hearing about it from others. All too often, people jump to conclusions. Teachers may come down hard on a student for not turning in an assignment, when, to that student, that assignment was not important. For that student, going home means cooking and taking care of their siblings first. Without understanding, listening, and compassion, young immigrant women cannot move forward in their educational journey.

This section also reveals an important piece of Kashia’s education, a piece she did not realize until talking about it. She reflects on the teachers and professors who have made the most impact on her and realizes that they were people of color. She also goes on to talk about her daughters not having had a teacher of color until high school and how critical it is to have teachers that can relate to minority students. These teachers do not have to be teachers of color, but they should be able to connect with their students from their own personal experiences. Immigrant and minority students often talk about not having teachers of color or teachers that look like them in their schooling experience. I heard this often in my interviews. Schools should strive to obtain more educators of color and if that is not possible, then teachers need to be

understanding and caring. All it takes is one person to make a difference, whether negatively or positively.

Throughout Kashia's narrative, she has been told again and again that she was not smart, and had some painful encounters with teachers, such as with her gym teacher when she had the sleepover. Although she had these agonizing experiences, she did not let them chart her course in life. Additionally, when thinking about her educational experience, it is surprising to consider that she would not change anything about what happened to her. She has the wisdom to understand that had she not struggled and gone through what she did, she would not be who she is today doing what she does. As a first-generation Hmong woman, we see how the intersectionality of being Hmong and a girl shaped her educational journey and how she defied what the educational system labeled her as. Her life narration suggests that her success in education arises from family support, educators that believed in her, and her own determination.

Conclusion

Kashia's life narrative, although disheartening at times, provides an insight into overcoming the negative stereotypes and struggles associated with being a Hmong woman through perseverance and tenacity. How might an understanding of her life story and perspective provide cognizance into how education impacts a young immigrant woman's life and how their internalization of this experience affects their self-worth and their decision to pursue post-secondary education? More importantly, how can teachers become change agents in a young immigrant woman's life? Kashia's life narrative shows the detriment of intersectionality and the model minority myth in a variety of ways and stresses the importance of familial support, especially from her dad and grandmother, and the words of a few teachers who saw a promise in

her. In the next life history interview, Christine offers many contrasting views on schooling, family and support.

CHAPTER FIVE: CHRISTINE

Christine's life history puts into perspective how culture can play an integral part in a Hmong woman's education. What will become apparent in her account of her life story is a lack of respect for women and the need to prove her self-worth to her family and that she is just as valuable. Christine's story adds new perspectives to themes already raised by Kashia's story, including how intersections of marginalized identities can result in discrimination and how oppression and the need to belong, whether in one's family, school or community, shapes a young immigrant woman's identity.

Christine shared the complexity of what it meant to be a Hmong woman growing up in an American society, especially in a patriarchal culture. She not only criticized how men in her community viewed women as lesser individuals, but also found fault in how the married or older women did not see the potential in Hmong girls either. Her story is one of intricacy and shows how her identity was shaped by culture--being a Hmong woman and American society--and wanting something better for herself. Christine drew me in because her story was so similar to mine, and provided insight into overcoming hardships and obstacles.

Christine came to the United States with her family in 1980 when she was five years old and started her educational journey in Kindergarten. She was married at the age of 23 and earned a bachelor's degree.

Christine Part One: Belonging and Culture

Christine: So growing up, it was very confusing. We landed in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This is back in the eighties, probably when the big first wave of refugees came and probably during that time, I'm sure the U.S. wasn't very well equipped to handle all of this influx of refugees and how to handle all of us. In elementary school, one of my biggest memories that really stuck with me

was navigating the process of school was very hard. It was very confusing. We couldn't really rely on our parents to help us navigate. They had no idea what we were going through, they had no idea what school was even like. They just, they didn't even know how to help us to get on the bus.

But one of the things that really stuck with me and was really confusing for me was, in elementary school, we got on the bus, went to my elementary school with everybody else, got out of the elementary bus, went into my classroom, and in that classroom, it was me with a bunch of other kids, you know, very diverse. You've got your Caucasians, you've got your kids of other races, you've got your African American students. But I remember being there for just a little while, maybe an hour perhaps. Then, what they would do is they would take all of the rest of us refugee students and they would put us on another bus and they would bus us to a different school and that was where we spent the majority of our time. At that other school, looking back now, that school probably had a program or something specific to newcomers, to refugees and probably more like an ESL program. I remember going there and this was my routine every day. So they bused us to this other school and within that school, I would be in a classroom with all of these other Cambodian kids and some Hmong kids.

That's all it was. There were no other kids who spoke English, it was just all of us. We were all kind of in the same boat. Tsis paub[15], you know, didn't know English, didn't, we were just kind of doing whatever. But that was my routine every day and it was very confusing. We would spend most of our day there and then we would get on another bus and then the bus would take us back to our old elementary school, the one where we started, for the end of the day. For most of my first grade, I would say I missed being with my mainstream class. I was mostly with

[15] Hmong word for “didn’t know”.

these other kids at this other school and learning to color within the lines, the ABC, really basic stuff, but I wasn't part of the mainstream class at all. It was very confusing to me as a kid, to be part of two schools. I really didn't understand what was going on. So, that was one of my earliest memories of like, 'Why are we being shipped out to this other school? Why wouldn't we just go to that school to begin with?' But, we only lived in Tulsa for about a year and a half and so for that year and a half, when I was going to school there, that's what happened. It was really tough for us to feel like we belonged. We belonged to neither school because you were just in transition all the time, nor did we really feel like we had any relationships with either teacher. This shuffling of being back and forth, I think that did make an impression on me as a kid, to not really feel like I belonged to a classroom.

I remember in second grade, on St. Patrick's day, everybody was supposed to wear green because if you didn't wear green, then your punishment was you get pinched. So I remember that day, I told my mom I had to wear green. She had no clue what that meant. She didn't even know what green was, but I said I had to wear that color. So we put on a shirt, a little sweater that had green triangles on there cause I had to make sure I wore green. I wore green that day and I went to school. I was so proud of my green in second grade. During recess, there was this Caucasian girl who came up to me. I think she was probably in third grade or fourth grade. She was older than me, but she just started pinching me anyways, at recess. I pointed, I didn't really know English well at that time, but I was pointing to my green saying, "Look, I've got green on" and she wouldn't stop. Looking back, I just wondered if that was motivated by race, motivated by just her wanting to bully me.

I remember walking home from the bus stop. Our parents, they had no clue to send us and walk us to the bus stop and pick us up, even if it was just across the parking lot. I remember

every day of my first and second grade little life, there would be this girl, she got home earlier. She was some neighborhood girl living in the project. She would run out and terrorize us and chase us, every single day, and so we learned how to be clever. We made my brother be the bait. He, we would make him run out first because he was fast and she would chase him. The rest of us would run home, then he would outrun her and he would come home and I would make sure to hold the door open for him. This is kind of the childhood that you grow up with, which makes learning that much harder, makes it that much less important than just getting through the day.

When we were growing up, we didn't have money for a nice house in a safe neighborhood. We lived where we could. So I remember growing up and living in Oklahoma in the projects or in the public housing, we call those the projects. But the other people that live there, I remember just making us feel unsafe. I remember one day, waking up in the morning, there was a white powder all over our house. Someone had thrown in through the windows a white powder to scare us. We had no idea what it was, if it was rat poison or if it was chemical or if it was just flour. To this day, I don't even know what it was, but it was all over our living room and all over our kitchen. I remember calling the police and just being so scared.

I think this may be slowly changing over time, but in the eighties, when I was growing up, people pigeonholed you. You go to school, you're a newcomer, you're a refugee, you don't understand. They look at you and they judge you for what you look like. And I think they, I think it's very interesting to me how people and part of racism is. When they look at someone, they either see potential or they don't see potential and they judge you just based on that, based on your looks or based on how you sound. If you are deemed that you don't have any potential, you're just kind of casted aside, or you're put into a bucket or you're put into a slot. Once people have their minds made up that you belong there, whether it's the ESL program or whether it's

some other type, they just dismiss you and you kind of fall by the wayside. There really isn't a way to catch up, at least that's what I've found with my experience. I don't know that a lot of teachers found potential in me. And so one of the most interesting things in terms of schooling and grades was, I was in ESL in public school until I was in fifth grade. Up until that point, all of my report cards, I was lucky if I got a B. I was really lucky if I got a B, and that was like in music. All my other classes, English, math, science, I was doing C's and D's or at least that's what my report card said.

The funny thing is is that in sixth grade, my parents transitioned us to private school, to Catholic school, and we were lucky enough to have scholarships from the church to help us go and we didn't have to pay tuition. There was no ESL at that private school. There was just the mainstream class. You either sunk or swim. My brother and I, we were both there. He was in fifth grade and I was in sixth grade and we started thriving there. It was funny because our report card that year, all I was getting was A's and B's, and I couldn't help thinking between fifth grade and sixth grade from two different schools, how could I be so different? How could my performance be so different? Was it me that was different? Did I really accelerate that much over the summer? Or was it something bigger? Was it something that, at that public school, did they just not see the potential in me? Did they just, did they just have me written off as low performing and really didn't take into account what I could do, whereas in this other school, there was no such thing as, ‘Oh, easier work for Christine because she’s special. She's low so I'm not going to give her the same worksheet that everyone else gets and see how she does.’ There wasn't that lesser expectation at the private school. Their expectation was everybody is doing the same work. And so, certainly I talk about the English as a Second Language program. That's one of the most confusing things for me growing up as a child. Throughout my childhood, I've been

in that program right up until fifth grade and to me, the thing that I've always wondered about that program was, what was ever the plan to migrate me back into mainstream learning? Was there ever a transition plan? And I don't know that there ever was a transition plan.

That was my hard, fast crash course of my transition into mainstream learning. But for those that didn't get to experience that, I've always wondered about that program, on how do you get out of ESL and how do you ever transition back into mainstream and how do you ever catch up to the rest of the class? I guess from my experience, ESL was not necessarily teaching you the foundation, but it was always kind of holding you back a little bit and I think part of that, again, kind of going back to the racism, I don't know that they ever saw potential in people to kind of say, “You know what, let's test her out or let's test him out and put him back into mainstream and see how he does and then gauge and then if he needs to come back for additional support, we can do that.” I feel like once you're, at least for my experience, once you're in that program, that was all they saw. It was that you were a kid who didn't understand and you could not handle mainstream and you were an ESL student. I think it was tough for a kid because not only do the teachers, they view you that way, but certainly the kids around you view you that way, that you are a lesser human being almost or that you are not quite up to par with them. I don't think that every single teacher understands the point of view of that student and where they're coming from culturally, where their mindset is at, the issues that they're undergoing as a child or as a girl from that society. They may have so many other issues, whether it's self-esteem or self-worth, or even questioning themselves in their value and their potential that nurturing some of that goes a long way.

When I was in school, I envisioned myself working in these big, tall buildings. To me, as a child, you drive through any downtown and there's these big skyscrapers and in my little mind,

I thought the people that worked in those tall buildings were probably so smart and so glamorous and so that was where I wanted to be. I always imagined myself growing up and working in one of those tall buildings because I wanted to be an important person in society.

Theresa: So, what were some struggles or barriers you experienced as a Hmong woman while in school? So culturally, what were some struggles you experienced?

Christine: Well, certainly, you know, culturally, the Hmong society is very, it's a very patriarchal society and so they really did not place value on girls. On women. Women were really viewed as homemakers. They were really viewed as, you cook, you clean, you have children and that's really all you were good for. There was quite a lack of respect for girls. I mean, they really didn't think that girls had any capabilities. I would say that this is changing slowly over time, but certainly when I was growing up in the eighties and in my childhood, the value on girls, there wasn't any. All we were were really just, we were just taking up space. I guess that's how I would put it, especially in my family where it was so important to have a son to carry on the name and that wasn't the case in my family at all. We didn't have a son. My mom, although she had given birth to multiple sons, I think we had three or four in my family, they all had all passed away and so my childhood growing up was my dad seeking that, seeking a son. That definitely, in seeking a son in the way of wanting to marry a second wife and wanting to make sure that he did have a son to carry on the name, that certainly made a big impression on me growing up to kind of want to prove that differently or to try to live my life for myself and try to change that a little bit. That definitely made an impression on me, not only that, but just seeing my friends, how they live their life and looking at the society around me and kind of seeing that that isn't the way it has to be.

It was very confusing growing up as a child, living in this society, but then looking at the world on TV. That's the other part I would say is our parents not knowing how to guide us. The way that I learned English and the way that I learned, probably many of us, was really by watching TV. Sadly, I would probably say that English as a Second Language, those programs probably weren't as effective when I was growing up. I think a lot of the things that we learned, or at least that I learned speaking for myself, was from watching your friends, your American friends, and how they lived their life. You learned from TV. You learn from watching Sesame Street and Electric Company and cartoons on Saturdays and after school specials, and you learn how other families are and you observe the world around you. So, that was always in conflict for me culturally, to say and to wonder to myself, “Why is it so different in our culture versus how everyone else lives?”

I remember, just a demonstration of the culture and how little respect they had for girls. I remember talking to, we had neighbors that were related or they knew my parents. So one of their sons came downstairs to talk to me during the day. He said to me, I remember I was 16 at the time, 16. He comes to me and he says, you know, part of his spiel was, “You know, girls your age,” keep in mind, I was 16 “are perfect.” He says, ”You are like a flower that is just about to bloom.” And I said, “What about girls who are 18? I'm so young. Why would you say that? What about girls who are 18 or 19 or 20? What are those girls? If I'm a flower that is just about to freaking bloom, what about those girls?” and he says, “Those girls are like a used car. Who would want to drive a used car. You're like a new car and girls, when you’re over 18, you're like a used car.” I was beyond belief and this is not an old guy. He was 18. He was around my age. You think about that and the mindset of the culture and that is his mindset at that time, that is the mindset he's going to bring into his family, into his daughters. That's the barriers that his

daughter is going to receive about going to school, about being a person developing their own personality. That's all he's going to expect out of them. I was just so disgusted and thinking, ‘You're my age and that's all you can think about. Your mind is so small.’ That is the reality of how I grew up. That is the reality of the people around me and unfortunately, all of us grew up in that, in that cultural mindset, around those same people.

There was certainly hefty bitterness and anger inside of me as well, wanting to try to, as a child, wanting to prove them wrong, whether that's my dad or whether that's the whole clan or whether that's the whole culture. I think, slowly over time, I've learned that you can't change people, you can't change anybody. You've just got to live your life for yourself. But certainly the way that our culture is made a huge impression on me and what I wanted for myself. Just the lack of respect for women was really, really hard. You live with that expectation that people have of sons and males in the society, but they don't even cast an eye on you that, as a girl, they don't have the same set of expectations at all or the expectations they have of you are just so ridiculous to say, like the best that they could hope for me was that I would be a virgin when I got married. I honestly felt that as a girl, don't bring shame upon the family and that was the best that I think my parents and my clan probably wished for me, that's all that mattered. You can cook and you can clean and you're obedient. I had no expectations of “You should work hard and you should get good grades.”

The expectations from a Hmong society was, “Nope, you need to stay home and you need to be a good girl. The minute you go out, you have no self control because I bet you're just going to go wild and party. You cannot do after-school activities because you can't control yourself. You're just going to go crazy.” But you know what, if you're a boy, you got all that control. You can do sports, you can do clubs, you can do whatever, because you've got that self-

control. But just because you're a girl, for whatever reason, we have no self control, we're just going to go and be loose women. I feel like there was no trust there, there wasn't. And that lack of opportunity certainly was a huge barrier. It goes to just having no faith, no support, and so all of these little things add up. No opportunity, no expectation, no value. I think with the Hmong culture, I feel like our girls are just so under exposed to some of those opportunities, especially us growing up in the eighties and nineties. It's hard to break out of that system or break out of that cycle.

And the thought of going to college was, when I reached that college age, it was that girls couldn't do it and then if you were able to do it, they certainly thought that you had to be in town so that parents could watch over you, because again, the minute you are out of eyesight, well, you're just going to be some loose hussy. I mean, you're not going to be able to control yourself and you're just going to go crazy and wild and party all the time. That was the impression, that's what they said, and so if you were gonna go to post-secondary school, if you were going to go to college, you had to do it in town. For me, I did go to school out of town, out of state, and I think building my parents up to that point to be able to support me and letting me go was huge. I don't know how it happened, but it happened, where they did believe in me enough to let me go.

But I remember going and then coming back one summer and it was funny because right around the same time that I was going to school out of state, I had several other local girls that were going out of state, too, because they had been able to go. I remember coming back one summer and one of my uncles talking and saying, “You girls, you know, when you go out of state, I know that you are just loose and easy. And, oh, look at so and so. Look at this girl, she went to school out of state. She came home pregnant right away. That's what you all are going to do. That is you. I know you're going to do it too.” And he said that to me and that stayed with me

for so long and it made me so bitter and angry. And of course I just lost all respect for him because he was an uncle. Why would he say that to his niece? What have I ever done to show you that I would be this way? But you're judging me based on one person. Imagine if I judged you on the behavior of one man.

Even the women were part of this. I remember aunts telling me I shouldn't go to college. Why am I going so far? I'm not being a good daughter. And that guilt that they placed upon you, the terrible guilt of 'You're not here anymore so who's going to take care of your parents? Why are you leaving your mother? Why are you leaving your father? Don't you know that they only have you, and if you leave, what's going to happen?' There was no support for 'Yes, live your own life and be a good person and go get your education so you can come back and help your family.' That was so not the story, that was not what I wanted to hear, but that's what it was all about, the reasons why I shouldn't go and the pressure why I shouldn't go. As a girl going to school, out of state post-secondary, it's like nobody had any faith in you and my reputation probably was in tatters for all. People make up stuff all the time.

Theresa: So, how about personally? What were some struggles?

Christine: I think personally, it goes back to culture. I think personally, that was probably my biggest struggle and trying to, trying to change a culture or trying to, as a child or as a girl, trying to prove people wrong. I think I was trying to do that and to some extent, I realized at some point that you can't change people, that you can't change a culture overnight. But, it is really hard fighting that, when there's such low expectations, and there is just no opportunities. If you try to fight that, it's like swimming upstream, it really is. Nobody seems to understand and everything is against you. And it's even funny because even the women of the culture are against you and you would think that they would understand, but it is so ingrained in part of the culture

that certainly the men see it that way, but the women condone it as well. Your sister-in-laws, your mothers, your aunts. It was okay that girls don't have the same opportunities. They view girls the same way. In fact, they were part of the problem. They weren't part of the solution. My sisters, certainly you would think that they would understand, but they didn't. Their way of escaping was marriage, which was also a contributor to the issue because that's all that was expected of girls is to get married young and not bring shame onto the family and be a good wife and be an obedient wife.

Discussion of Christine Part One

The opening of Christine's life history shows an educational system that did not know how to support immigrant/refugee students. Being transitioned back and forth every day between two schools created a sense of not belonging to either school and a lack of relationships between teachers and classmates. The literature review showed belonging is a crucial piece of learning in an immigrant's educational experience, especially when considering the barriers and hardships that these students are encountering. In addition, Christine's narrative on education challenges the benefits of ESL as she did not see it benefitting her but instead, holding her back, a label to identify herself as a student without potential and a student not ready for mainstream. Not only did teachers see her this way but also the students around her. It was not until she started private school, where she did not have ESL, that she questioned the integrity of the ESL program at the public school. Christine's narrative on the ESL program is similar to previous research studies (Goldstein, 1988; Trueba et al., 1990; Ima, 1992; Ima, 1995; S. J. Lee, 2002).

Furthermore, the discrimination she experienced from students and teachers affected her learning and how she felt about herself, from being chased every day after school to teachers thinking she was incapable of doing things. Christine's thought about teachers not understanding

the mindset of immigrant students and the many issues that encompass their lives, such as questioning their value and seeing their potential, is indicative of the lack of tolerance teachers had and suggests an absence of compassion.

Christine's stories of family and culture show how intricately the two are intertwined in creating an oppressive environment. She understood from an early age the value that was placed on boys, which was apparent when she talked about her dad seeking a second wife because her mom could not have any (although she did but they had passed away) to carry on the name and the opportunities that they were given, compared to girls. Girls did not have the same expectations as boys, as boys were held to a higher standard. Girls were seen chiefly as homemakers. Girls did not have the same opportunities as boys did and lacked the exposure to many things, such as extra-curricular activities or sports. The resentment is evident when Christine says the most that her family and her clan expected of her was to be a virgin when she got married. Here, patriarchy and intersectionality come together to weave an entanglement of anger, resentment, and discontent for Christine.

Hmong girls are often told to not bring shame upon the family and that is the pressure that girls have to live with. Christine heard this from family members when going to college out of state. As a Hmong girl, there is so much pressure to conform to the role that you are born into, however, when you see the outside world through the lens of the TV or through your friends, you start to question why things are the way they are. Christine questioned her identity, her role as a Hmong woman, and realized that no matter how hard she tried, it would never be good enough. Therefore, she decided she would live her life for herself. The powerlessness that one feels due to the overlapping identities of intersectionality often creates resentment due to the lack of opportunities and the discrimination one feels, as was also mentioned in Kashia's narrative.

Thus far, Christine's educational journey has been one of not belonging--at school and at home. In the upcoming section, Christine discusses the impact of teachers, how they created opportunities for her that showed her there was a different path other than what the Hmong culture expected and dictated, and the role friends played in her life. She also explains how her educational experience along with being a Hmong woman has impacted her son's educational journey. Similar to Kashia's journey, it was the voice of a few teachers that provided a sense of worth.

Christine Part Two: Role Models, The American Dream, and Change

Christine: I was really lucky that I met some really good teachers along the way, some really good teachers who did see potential in me, who created some of those opportunities for me, who showed me that there was a different way. They were there to support me in ways that my parents weren't able to support me and I think even that little glimmer of support really helped me see that there was potential, that there was a different avenue for me. I remember being in 10th grade, my English teacher, her name was Mrs. Pickel. The assignment was to write an essay about why drugs are bad because we're part of the D.A.R.E program, and I was just randomly writing a story about my friends and how I was in an alcohol situation and how I denied it. Ended up that she turned in all of our stories into this competition and I ended up doing pretty well, and so she started encouraging me to write. She started encouraging me to be part of the yearbook club and encouraging me to be part of the newspaper club. She's like, "Come, you can do it over lunch. You don't have to stay after school." because she knew my parents didn't like me staying after school. She said, "I'll let you have your own column and you can write whatever you want in that school newspaper column. You can just express your thoughts and

views on whatever." and so it was those little snippets of support that you feel like, 'Oh, okay, maybe I can do something, maybe I do have value or maybe I do have worth.'

I remember another teacher when I was in 11th grade. We had this club called forensics and it was like a speech contest. There were several facets to it. You can either, it was kind of like debate. You can debate, or you can do readings, dramatic readings. For whatever reason, I got into it and they have this competition in Madison and there was no way my parents were going to take me. They said, "No" I wasn't going to go. It was a state competition and my teacher said, "I'll take you. I want you to be part of this, I'll take you to that competition." And so she took, the other kids, their parents drove them. They had that support. So, it wasn't just me that was going, it was the whole club, the whole class was going, but their parents, the other parents, they were taking their kids and I didn't have anyone to take me. So, she said, "I'll take you and I'll take this other girl, Heather, as well because her parents are busy. I'll take the two of you. You'll go with me and we'll go. It's just Madison, it's just a couple hours away. We'll go to the competition in the morning and then we'll just come back and I'll just send you back to school." It's those little things that really stayed with me to say, you know, there are teachers who are really there for their children or for their students and even that little bit showed me that there are people who are willing to help support and guide me and to just be there.

When I went to school, I got together with some really good, good girls, really good friends, who, they didn't understand what I was going through culturally, but they were certainly there for me from a friend perspective. It was funny because being friends with them, I never let them know about any of the struggles that I went through. They knew nothing about my life. They knew nothing about my culture because when you go to school, at least for me, I pretended that I was like them. You put on this facade that you're just like everyone else because you

wanted to be accepted so badly, you don't want to be different. As a high schooler, you wanted to appear just like them. I remember observing their lives. I could go to their birthday parties because my parents knew a couple of them or had seen them and thought, “Okay, I approve. They’re good girls, so you could go.” I observed them being with their families and I observed how their parents are with them and how their parents treated me. I wanted to be like my friends, I wanted to have that life. Their parents would take us places once in a while and it's like, that is who I wanted to be. I wanted to be independent like that. I see the house that they live in. I want to be independent like that. I don't want to be stuck in public housing or I don't want to always depend on government funds or things like that. That became shameful to me. It's your experiences that you lived through that really shaped who you are and for me, those were the types of things. I saw them at Christmases, I saw my friends. I heard about what their Christmases were like and I didn't want my Christmases to be going to the Salvation Army and going to get gifts.

Growing up, that was how we got our gifts, that was how I got presents and you hear from your friends what their Christmases were like, so different. And then, when they asked me what my Christmas was like, not wanting to be different, what did I do? I made up a story. “Oh, my parents got me a bed.” There was no way I got a bed. I just made that up. As a kid though, you're like, “Well, I don't know. I got a bed.” You just think of something large and astronomical just to match something they got or you would make up toys that you got. You see the life that you live, you see the life that other people live and that was what I was striving for.

Being here and the thing about us, I think, is knowing that we're refugees and we're in this new country. I know that for myself, I really bought into the American dream, you know, the slogan that says America is land of the opportunity. I really, really bought into that and knowing

all of the things that we talked about, whether it's culturally, whether it was just people who didn't support you, and then knowing that there was a different way and being able to see that light, whether it was through teachers or through TV or through friends, it was really knowing that there's a different way and also realizing that that life that everyone, or the majority of the people were living in the culture, that it didn't have to be, that that wasn't my only choice. I think buying into this thing that says you can be whatever you want to be here in the U.S. and that, at some point in your life, you get to make a choice on how you want to live your life. Whether it was my parents bringing us here, we compare that to the ones who didn't even have that opportunity to begin with and that is really what made me say, “I can get a college degree. I should because if I don't, then this time will never come again.”

Mrs. Pickel, she was such an influence on my life that I wanted to go to school for journalism. When I was talking to my school counselor and picking a school, I said, “I don't really know what I want to do, but I know that I like to write. Where could I go that would have a writing program?” They said, “Well, St. Thomas has a journalism program.” and so when I got the packet of information, they did have that major and so I decided to go to that school for that reason. Then I got to school and I started realizing, once I got into the program, that as a minority student or as a person of color, breaking into the journalism world is not easy. You look at the TV, you look at radio, everyone around you looks kinda the same. Everyone's either brunette or blonde hair, blue eyes. I don't see a whole lot of African-American even on TV as newscasters or as journalists or as writers. I didn't see a lot of Asian Americans certainly and so my dad talked to me about, “Why do you want to pursue that? Are you going to be able to make a living?” and so I came to a crossroad in my life when I realized I had to make a choice between something that I think I really like doing. I thought to myself, no matter how good I became, I just don't

even know that I could even secure an internship as an Asian American student trying to break into the broadcasting business. I just didn't see that happening at that time. So I kind of landed on business, back to my childhood dream of working in that skyscraper and then also realizing that I was lucky enough to land in a school where business is one of their core majors, where that is what they're known for. So I did change my major to business but it was out of practicality than anything, not because of a great passion.

My son, he has no clue, he's a third grader now, but he has no clue and no understanding at all of the way of life, of how I grew up, of how his mom grew up. To him, his little world is what we've made it to be and that is, we give him tons of support. I'm sure that he can not imagine a world where a girl could be looked down upon just simply because she's a girl. I don't think that in his little brain, he can imagine a girl not being loved because she's just a girl or not seeing potential, and in his little brain, you know, none of that exists. And we purposely do that because we're trying to teach him a different way than us. I don't think that any of my, the way that I grew up has any influence on him per se but I think it has a lot of influence on how I raise him or what I want him to experience. I don't want him to experience any of the things that I did, any of the negativity. I would say the way that I grew up in my journey with education is something that I never want him to experience and so I make sure to insulate him from that purposefully. You know, I don't even really talk about that. I think when he's older, we can talk about it certainly, but the way he grows up now and the way society is, and him being in private school too, certainly with his little female friends in his class, he sees them as equal. They all see each other as equal and they treat each other as equal, as it should be. This foreign idea of not being equal or having lesser potential, that is not a thing I want for him.

My parents, they didn't value this for us. I mean, my parents, it was them being new to this country and them, their understanding of what makes a person successful is straight A's. They don't realize the importance of extracurricular, they don't understand how kids get along in class and making sure that they're a nice person, that they're making friends, that they're not stressed out at school and that they're not tired at school. My parents, their view of successful is, you come home and you do your homework and you turn it in on time and that's all you do. And you don't watch a lot of TV and you get straight A's. That is their view so they didn't value spring concerts or sports or being involved or anything like that. But with me as a child growing up, I really wished that my parents were more involved. I wanted my parents to be there. I wanted my parents to be proud of me. I wanted my parents to, you know, my brother - I remember he was in wrestling and they would never attend any of his games because it wasn't important to them. He could do that because he was a boy but that didn't mean that they had to attend and see him. But I remember thinking how important it is that somebody be there to watch him to play a game or to wrestle or to do whatever, and I would go, and I thought to myself, ‘If I was in a school play, I would want them there.’ and you miss that interaction from them. So certainly, with my own son now realizing that growing up, I don't want him to miss out on that type of thing. I want him to know that we're here to support him and that we are here and that we care about how he's doing and that he's involved and that he's a good kid. I'm making a very conscious decision to raise my child the way that I wish my parents would have raised me, the way that I've seen the people around me, my friends, how their parents interacted with them or how their parents are with them. That's what I want for him.

Discussion of Christine Part Two

In this section of Christine's life history, we are made aware of the people who made an impact on Christine's educational journey and made her see that there was more to life than what she knew. Teachers saw the potential in her and encouraged her, providing her with the opportunities to do things that she would not have been able to do otherwise. Mrs. Pickel understood that her parents did not want her staying after school and accommodated this by letting her write for the school newspaper over lunch. When her forensics club was going to Madison for a competition, a teacher offered to drive her and another student, knowing that their parents would not be able to take them. Without these teachers' support, there would have been many missed opportunities for Christine and she would not have seen her potential. It is evident through Christine's narrative and Kashia's, along with the rest of my participants, that it is the teacher's voice and action that impacts what young immigrant women believe about themselves and their capabilities.

Although Christine's friends played an important role in her life, she also talks about how they did not understand what she was going through culturally. When she went to school, she just wanted to fit in, to be like everyone else. Being accepted and fitting in is a main theme brought up by participants and in the literature review and contributes to the complex identity issues that immigrant students have--parental pressures to maintain your cultural roots but also wanting to be like your White peers so that you belong. Seeing the life that her friends lived made her realize that things could be different for her, that she did not have to be limited to what her family and culture was telling her. The interactions that she had with their families resonated with how she wanted to live her life, to be independent and not depending on the government.

The way Christine's family raised her and her educational journey has influenced how she raises her son and the things that he experiences. She and her husband are purposeful in how they raise him, shielding him from the cultural norms and expectations of what Hmong boys and girls are expected to do. To her son, he sees his peers, boys and girls, as equals. Because of how they have raised him and in trying to teach him a different way than what we were brought up to believe, he does not see the lack of potential or value in girls. Due to her parents being uninvolved in her school activities and not seeing a value in what she was doing, she is intentional about the things that he does and being there for him. Unlike having to navigate the educational system on her own, she and her husband are there to support him.

Lastly, Christine's belief in the American Dream, that anything is possible, that you can be whatever you wanted to be, reflects what many immigrants/refugees believe about America, that America is the land of opportunity. Like Christine, I believed in this dream, that anything is possible, that I can be whatever I wanted to be. Although there is this "dream," it is difficult to attain due to the discrimination and many barriers that young immigrant girls encounter, often due to patriarchy. In Christine's narrative, patriarchy played a big role in how Christine perceived herself and how it affected her identity, understanding her lack of value as a young Hmong woman early on from the actions and messages she received from her parents and relatives. Christine acknowledged her parents did not value extracurricular activities and attending events, that they saw straight A's and turning assignments in on time as good enough, and wished that her parents would have been there for her and her brother during these times. Although Christine felt discouraged, she believed in the American dream to change her trajectory. Without the negativity and discouragement, and ensuring young immigrant women

are given the support and resources they need, only then can they thrive and see the endless possibilities that they can become.

Christine Part Three: Cultural Awareness

Christine: I wish teachers knew that every kid has potential and I hope that teachers know that they are really in a position of power. They really are role models for kids, whether they know it or not. You know, kids look at you, even when you don't think they're looking and the littlest things that you do have influence. I want educators to know that and to recognize that it takes all of us. It's a group effort to make sure that our kids of tomorrow are raised right and that they all can achieve what they want to achieve. It's a group effort and it's not one teacher. It's not just teachers. It's going to be parents. It's going to be everybody in society that helps raise these kids and teach them the right way because you never know what piece is going to be impactful.

Teachers need to understand that these kids, what they're going through is not your typical, they're not living the typical life. They're not living the typical life of your average, second grader, third grader, whatever age they may be because they've got other stuff going on in their homes that they're struggling with. I think that some do recognize that and are really good about that and I think there are others that maybe need to recognize that yes, schoolwork is important, but it's really hard to focus on schoolwork when you're at home. Maybe you don't even have dinner or nobody cares that you wake up on time or nobody cares that you even get to bed on time. So when these kids get up and they just are in their same clothes and they come to school, they've got way more going on then making sure that they get that worksheet done. Being upset that they don't have their worksheet done, that's not gonna help them get any better so I wish that there would be more sensitivity, more acknowledgement or at least more knowledge in recognizing that these kids have a lot going on in their lives.

I wish that there was that cultural awareness when I was growing up, when there was that influx of refugees. I think that that would have gone a long ways. I think we're really lucky today, that there's lots of programs to help. Certainly when I was in school, there was no programs, there was no support system and I think today, there probably are more than there was then. We need to build up some of these girls, their self-esteem and their self-worth and cater to that because some of them really need that. The experiences of girls are different than the experiences of boys, even within the same culture, you know, or the nuances, and I don't mean to just say that this is in the Hmong culture. A girl, what she's experiencing may be different completely than a boy based on the culture and the cultural differences and the cultural norms. In trying to understand that, you have to almost put yourself in their shoes a little bit and I know it's really hard to put yourself in someone else's shoes when you don't live their life, but I think being exposed to the nuances of the culture would make people in education that much more sensitive and that much more effective if they did have some cultural awareness. Be interested, be curious, ask those questions, instead of just making judgemental decisions based on what you see or what you hear. Learn it for yourself, experience it for yourself, be curious and ask questions. I think before you can know how you can best help someone or help a group of people, I think you have to understand where they're coming from.

The journey that girls go through and the journey that girls are walking may be different than the path and expectations that are set forth for their male counterparts. If there is that discrepancy or if there is that devalue for the girls, it's almost like emotional abuse. Every day of their life, they may have been told that they're going to amount to nothing, and that they are not as good as a boy perhaps, or that they have no control over their life or that they don't even have a brain in their head and they can’t make decisions for themselves. Their starting point is at zero

or a negative, like they're not even starting at the same playing field as everybody else. If teachers recognized that and supported these girls, it would really go a long way.

Discussion of Christine Part Three

Throughout Christine's life history, there have been many themes but in this last section, cultural awareness is at the top. All too often, teachers dismiss a student's home life or the cultural experiences and struggles that they bring with them to the classroom and misunderstands why an immigrant student cannot learn. Their life is not typical of your average White student and as educators, we need to recognize this and not see it as a deficit but an opportunity to find their strengths and help them grow. Who they are and what they bring with them is an asset and we need to build on this. When we start judging students based on their culture, their race, their behaviors, we have failed them.

In addition to understanding one's culture, Christine addresses how the path for an immigrant girl may be different from the path of an immigrant boy and how educators need to recognize this and reinforce the idea that girls are just as valuable, that they are worthy. Even if patriarchy exists at home, there are some ways to overcome it. It is interesting to hear her perspective on how devaluing girls is like emotional abuse. In reflecting on that comment, many would find truth in that. Christine's story is not unique. The stories provided by the other participants in my study as well as my own experience would all suggest that it is not uncommon for young Hmong women and girls to hear this from their parents, but from their siblings, aunts, uncles, and those they hold closest to them. Everytime these young Hmong women and girls hear that they are dumb, that they are ugly, that they will never amount to anything, it breaks them to the point where they will always question their worth; they will never see themselves as good enough. As educators and role models, it is imperative that we are conscious of this and do what

we can to erase the self-doubt that these young immigrant women have internalized due to the power of patriarchy. The power that patriarchy has over these young immigrant women often demoralizes and casts doubt on their abilities. Educators need to be that voice for them, to validate who they are, their journey as a young immigrant woman, to assist in reversing the negative stereotypes that have been placed on them, and to foster positive relationships with them.

Finally, Christine's discussion about the power of teachers, whether they know it or not, is prevalent in the literature review presented in Chapter Two and in the interviews that I conducted with my participants. The power of what a teacher says or does holds just as much weight as what family or culture says about a person. Whether a teacher praises a student or puts them down, that stays with you forever, and in most cases, it is often the put downs that carry the most weight. Christine makes it clear how influential teachers are and that they need to recognize the potential in every child. She also does point out though, that it is a group effort in making sure that our children are raised right and that they can all achieve, that it is our society that has this impact. For sure, teachers can not do it alone; it is a collective effort on all parts. Not only do young immigrant women need access to opportunities, but they also need the support and resources to help them navigate their educational journey.

Conclusion

Christine's life history provides readers with an awareness of what life was like for many first-generation Hmong women, the demands, the expectations, and the lack of opportunities to do things. Her story shines a light on how many Hmong girls were treated and what this does to their psyche. Furthermore, she indicates that teachers should be culturally aware so as to not make judgements.

Although Christine’s educational journey has been arduous, from the oppression felt as a Hmong woman to the discrimination felt at school, her story inspires hope. Hope that as young immigrant women, we can overcome these negative stereotypes, that we are not bound by our labels, and that we can do anything and be anything that we want as long as we remain determined and not succumb to the cynicism of others. In the last life history interview, we meet Nouchi, who shares about invisibility, studying abroad, and how she navigated the educational system as a first-generation young immigrant woman.

CHAPTER SIX: NOUCHI

This last narrative comes from Nouchi's life story and demonstrates the invisibility often felt by immigrant students while also embodying the message of resiliency. The story of Nouchi's educational journey, although filled with good memories of encouragement from teachers, was often saturated with negative memories -- the racism her family and community encountered in a small town, the powerful words of teachers who discouraged her, and the bullying she experienced from peers. More importantly, Nouchi's story validates the importance of how schooling can change the trajectory of a young immigrant woman's life. When Nouchi studies abroad, she is able to take a balcony view of her life and reflect on who she is and what she wants to do. Furthermore, seeing her friends marry early showed her that she did not want that life for herself, that she wanted something more. As with Kashia and Christine, Nouchi's life story adds an additional viewpoint of how intersectionality, family, and education impacts the lack of support given to young immigrant women and reiterates the power of educators.

Nouchi came to the United States with her family in 1976 when she was one years old and started her educational journey in Pre-K. She married at the age of 25 and earned her doctorate degree.

Nouchi Part One: Invisibility, Studying Abroad, and Family

Nouchi: I think the first time I felt really noticed in a good way was in fourth grade when I had a teacher who took me under her wing and really supported me and really made sure that I knew that I was special, that I was smart. I remember that experience deeply. She'd say, "You can be anything you want to be." It was quite progressive for that time because we lived in a small town, and we were part of a small influx of Hmong people that were coming into that town. We just were encountering a lot of racism in the community, and so when I look back, as a

child, I experienced it as just ‘Oh, she was really nice and really sweet.’ I remember once, I got a perfect score on one of our really hard math tests, and she made a huge deal out of it and sent a note home to my parents. And now that I look back, I think she recognized the difficulty that many of our families were facing, and I think in her way, she was trying to encourage us. She was trying to make up for some of the things, the hard things that we were encountering in the community.

At that time, there were just a few Hmong families that had moved into that small town. It was primarily White people. I think there were maybe a few African American families. I remember playing on the sidewalk by our house with my siblings and having people yell racist things out of their cars as they drove by, having our neighbors call us racist things. I remember my parents saying to us about several of our neighbors, “Please be very good when you're outside in public because they don't like Hmong people.” and “Don't ever go over to their house.” We had a neighbor directly across from us who had a girl my age and we went to school together. She always wanted me to go play at her house and my parents would always say, “No.” and I just thought my parents were being my parents. It wasn't until we had already left that town and I was older and I remember having a conversation with my mom once about that person, about that family. She said, “Oh, they always said horrible things to your dad and I and it made us just feel really unsafe and so, while the little girl always wanted to play with you, we didn't feel good about having you go over there because we just didn't know how you would be treated.” I remember a girl who I played with at school and one day out of nowhere, she said to me, “You know, you don't smell bad.” and I said, “Okay.” I felt embarrassed. I was like, “What are you talking about?” She said, “My mom says all Chinese people smell bad but you don't smell bad.” and I was just, I was a kid, I was like, “Okay, but I’m not Chinese.”

I think, at the same time as the good memories, I also have memories of, in that same town, coming into half the year in third grade and moving to that town, having my teacher then do some, say some not very sensitive things in front of the whole class about me. I remember that they had multiple reading tiers, and she had asked me which book I remember working on in my other third grade class. I said, “Oh, I think it looks like that book.” She said, “No, that can't be right. This is for our gifted readers.” in front of the whole class. I was like, “I don’t know, you asked me what book we were reading and that’s the book we were reading.” Being in third grade, I knew something weird had happened because then, kids started kind of laughing and she was so overly astonished. Then, she asked me to read it in front of the whole class, to read a passage and I did, then I remember she kind of scratched her head and then said, “Well, I'm going to put you in this one anyway because everybody can use extra help.” So I was like, “Okay.” and she put me in now what I realized was the remedial tier. So it was very strange because not only did she have me read the passage in front of the whole class, she had me then explain what it meant. But, to do it in front of the whole class, there was a part of me that felt immediately like something had happened that felt shameful but I wasn't sure what it was, other than that was my first day of school. As I've gotten older and I reflect on that, I think, well I'm sure that she didn't make everybody else read in front of the whole class and explain in order to understand what reading category they should be in. I even remember it was me, one other Hmong student, and one Black student, and the three of us sat in the back of the class.

In that same vein, I also remember just how important the role of teachers was. I also remember, so when we moved to the Twin Cities, the summer after fourth grade, so after I had that teacher, we moved to the Twin Cities. I remember my sixth grade teacher who I, my guess is she must have gotten permission from our parents because one day on a weekend, she and her

kids picked me up and the other kids that they picked up were all the other Asian kids that were in my class. They took us to the park and she had some teenage and young adult children and we played baseball, we had sandwiches, and she also kind of gave a little lecture around "You guys can be anything you want to be."

I also remember, at some level, being ignored quite a bit. I was reading a book one time and it was, it had a really long title and I'm not quite sure what his intent was. It was a rather thick book and I love to read. I don't remember what class it was, but one of my teachers made a big deal out of it. I wasn't reading during his class. I was just carrying it but made a big deal out of, "Well, I didn't think someone like you could read." and the other kids were laughing. This was like seventh grade and I think he thought he was being funny, but it was awful.

As I think about my experiences in high school and even in junior high, I was always in the gifted and talented track or the advanced honors tracks, advanced placement tracks, and it was very interesting because I was in a lot of those classes with a lot of the White kids. At the same time that I've talked about these teachers that took these extra steps, there were more teachers that I think ignored me in a way that was different, not as in they ignored everybody but as in most of my experience, it felt like the kids who didn't look like me were often nominated for leadership, whether it was in the classroom or schools, or were afforded different opportunities to do things versus kids like me were not.

There's almost kind of a sense of invisibility of, 'I'm not going to hurt you but I'm also not going to help you.' I've talked and I've given examples of pretty significant moments of both people who have hurt and people who have helped. I would say 90% of the experience was that invisibility, that sense of, 'I'm not going to help you; I'm not going to hurt you, and I'm not going to help you.' It was more of that invisibility of, in a way we were all ignored but in a way that

was very different from how the White children were treated. It’s sort of like, if you go to someone and say, “Can I please have something to eat?” and they say, “Okay, here’s a plate and here’s some food or here’s some food.” That was me. I would get what I asked for. But another child, the teacher would say, “Here’s a plate, here’s some food, and hey, you will probably also need a fork and spoon, so here's a fork and spoon and probably a napkin.” Yes, I did get help. I got what I asked for but another child got both what they asked for and what the teacher anticipated they might have needed.

In high school, I was always in the AP classes that eventually became IB classes. We had to set up meetings with one of our teachers as part of an assignment to talk about our future. She basically, and I was dying for that because I had not really been able to talk to anybody about going to college and my future and all of that. She actually discouraged me from going to college and was like, “You'd just be wasting your parents' money. You should really either go get a job or maybe think about community college.” and I remember having such a, almost an out of body experience of, as a young girl, knowing something was happening that wasn't great but not being able to name it and being really shocked because again, and in my head, I was like, ‘She was mistaking me for someone else cause I'm one of the top students in her AP class.’ Quite honestly, I had no one to tell except for friends and I knew that my parents wouldn't understand and so I never shared that experience with them. But I also stopped going to that class. I think I was getting an A and I just decided I just can't go back and so I think I ended up at the end of the year with a C in that class because I just stopped going. I remember my guidance counselor being like, “Why are you skipping class?” and I couldn't tell him. I just was like, “I don't know, I just don't want to be there.” and I remember him being like, “This is a waste. Why are you wasting your time? Why are you doing this and wasting your future?” Again, I couldn't tell him.

After that, something happened that really, I think helped change my trajectory. I had a teacher who encouraged me to study abroad and he had kind of reached out to me. So he encouraged me to go abroad [to the UK] and I wasn't sure that it was something that I could do. So I came home and talked to my parents about it. I was 15 at the time and thankfully, they were really supportive, and in going abroad, literally, I think saved my life and helped change the trajectory of where I ended up. It gave me a different perspective on life. It certainly wasn’t an easy experience. It was interesting because at one level, speaking with an American accent that I did and people knowing that I was from Minnesota shielded me from some of the racism that existed in that community. That was also a very interesting experience because once people heard me talk, they were fascinated that I was from the United States. Suddenly, that somehow balanced the being Asian part, and I think being Asian in England means something completely different anyway because they have a huge Indian and Pakistani population. But there was a lot of racism in the area that I lived in towards the Pakistani and the Indian folks and then, of course, there was a whole class system between the Indian and Pakistani folks. Then there were hardly any folks that looked like me that were like our type of Asian, and so people didn’t know what to think. As soon as they heard the accent, somehow that was a pass and I had never had that experience before either so that was very strange.

I think I never really, I mean I was always a good student and, at times, not a great, not so good student. But I think in terms of academic rigor, it taught me how to study and to do well but more than that, I think it forced me to grow up in a different way, in terms of really reflecting on who I am and who I wanted to be as a person. Sometimes, you just need to be away from your environment in order to really, really think about that and to benefit from that and so I think the growth that I had during that year and some of my own resolution to take control of my life and

just the sense of, 'If I don't do it, no one's ever going to do it for me.' I think having the space to breathe to do that and having the permission to just be a teenager allowed me to do that and that wasn't my experience at home. My host families did not let me run wild but they let me be a normal teenager.

Theresa: So, what were some struggles or barriers you experienced as a Hmong woman while in school? So culturally, what were some struggles you experienced?

Nouchi: I have a bunch of younger siblings and I was responsible for taking care of them because both my parents worked quite a bit. From a very young age, I was always taking care of kids which is why I only had one initially. I think it got more difficult when I got older because it meant, I'd go to school, come home, sometimes go to work, come home, cook dinner, and it was always an affair to make dinner for that many people. Then sometimes, I wouldn't get to my studies until 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 at night after I'd fed everybody, bathed everybody, put them to bed cause my mom worked nights and so that was really challenging.

I would also say the expectations of, it was really hard to be involved in extracurricular activities. I did manage to persuade my parents to allow me to do a few things, but everything was a fight. Everything was, "You want to go to the mall and the next thing, you're going to join a gang." and I'm like, "No, I don't want to join a gang, like no gang wants me. I just want to go to the mall." But those were the times that I grew up in and that was my parents' way to try to keep me safe. But every conversation ended with me joining a gang and I think not being able to participate in things, feeling like everything was a fight.

Also, I think the conflicting message of go to college and yet, take care of all these kids and clean the house and cook and clean for everybody and do this and this and this and this made it quite hard. In fact, I always tell people that I went abroad not so much because I was awesome

and smart. I went abroad because I just needed to get out of the house and that was the only way I could figure out how to get out of the house. I had so many girlfriends who got married and I watched their lives and I was just like, 'Oh my God, I don't want to do that.' And actually, my mom and I had this great big fight once, but I'm so glad we had it. I should probably tell her how meaningful it was cause we had this big fight when I was a teenager. She was just like, "If you hate us so much, you think about that boy that you like. He has a huge family and his family is even more traditional and if you hate us so much, think about what you're going to be like if you're their daughter-in-law and then you'll never be able to get away." I'm so glad that she said that, that was probably one of the wisest things that my mom ever said to me because I realized she was right. If I was this miserable in my own family, I would be even more miserable and so I knew for me, getting married as a way out of my family was not the way that I want it to go. So, I went abroad and had a chance to really, really think about my life. And again, it changed the trajectory of my life.

In college, I began to notice some of the conflicting pieces where even though my parents were really supportive, the way that my parents and my relatives supported me was really different than from how the boys were supported. And so for example, I worked three jobs constantly to put myself through college and the boys in my family as well as in my extended family didn't have to do that. My cousins my age, we would all come home for break and the boys were always asked about how college was going and no one was interested in how college was going for me except for my uncle who would be like, "Oh, good. You're not pregnant yet." I'm like, "Not yet. Not today." So, on the one hand, people were really supportive and I understand now that that is a really different experience from some of my friends but on the

other hand, there was a qualitative difference that I noticed between how they supported me as a girl and how my brothers and my boy cousins were supported.

Theresa: So, how about personally? What were some struggles?

Nouchi: You know, Cheng[16] and I actually talk about this a lot and when I've worked with, in higher education, with first-generation students, I see this a lot too, where, because there's no one to really help you navigate, you're trying to figure everything out by yourself. So, it's doubly hard. I remember, and sometimes I think, 'Okay, the fish doesn't always know it's in water, right?' So, this has kind of always been life for me in that you got to figure stuff out cause your parents aren't able to really connect other than say stuff like, "study hard, don't get pregnant and graduate." Other than that, they weren't able to help with anything and so, it was a lot of the blind leading the blind and trying to figure out for myself, from very mechanical things like, "Where do I go get a student loan?" because back in the day, you still had to get a form from the school and then you had to go to a bank. It wasn't the way that it is now, where you fill out the FAFSA and then things magically show up. Back then, I had to literally go take a loan out from a bank and not even knowing that and so really leaning on the folks in the multicultural office to say, "Where do I go for all of this?"

I remember many years ago working at one of the local multicultural offices with a colleague of mine who is not a first-generation college student. She and I were working with a lot of first-gen students, a lot of students of color, and for me, that was just normal life that our students were struggling with. I remember at one point, she turned to me and she said, "Oh my gosh, when I was a student--" and I think this was after we had a conversation with one of our students who was basically the driver and the interpreter for her family and her grades were

[16] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.

really suffering. So we were having one of those come to Jesus moments with her of, "You gotta do something, you gotta turn it around somehow because you know, if you don't…" And we were talking about just all the caretaking she was doing for her family and then of her trying to also figure things out herself. I remember my colleague afterwards saying to me, "When I was a student, all I ever had to worry about was studying and having a good time, you know. I never had to worry about paying bills cause my parents did that. I never had to worry about interpreting for my family because they speak English, never had to worry about transporting people around, buying groceries." I knew that there were students who lived that way. Certainly, I was in a sorority so I had sorority sisters that were like that, but it was such an incredible moment of that awareness of, 'Oh yes. That this stuff isn't what most normal students experience. This is a unique first-gen kind of experience.' So, I would say that the personal struggle for me was really feeling like I was blindly trying to figure things out on my own and not having people other than my friends who were equally blind to talk to.

I'll also share that even when I was doing an internship and I was completely not aware of this. I don't know that this was intentional, knowing the people that work there, I don't think it was intentional. About half the year in, so I was interning at one of my various internships with, it was myself and three White folks, three White graduate students. About half way in, I realized that somehow throughout the year, the staff was all White and they were all really great, but at some point in talking to my colleagues, my training colleagues, I realized that each of them had kind of been taken under a staff person's wing and they had done things like, they'd gone to the staff person's house, they had had lunch, they talked about their careers, and I had not had that experience at all. People were super supportive and really great in supporting my training but it seemed like I was completely unaware that all of this was happening. I was just stunned, I was

like, ‘Did I do something wrong? Did I send out a signal that I also didn't want to be mentored?’ I don't think that people got together and were like, ‘I'm, we're gonna mentor these three and we're gonna leave her out.’ but I think people want to mentor people who are like them. I was not like anybody else there and so it was very interesting that all of this was happening. When I asked my colleagues, I just said, “So, how did you come to just hang out with someone?” and one of my colleagues said, “Oh, we started talking about running one day and I said I wanted to start running and so that staff person just said hey I run and so come run with me and we started doing that.” and then I asked another person and that person said, “Oh, you know, we had conversations about this other thing that we're both kind of interested in and they invited me along with them to see, on an excursion to see that.” So, it was kind of similar and I was like, ‘Wait, I’ve had lots of conversations with people about shared interests.’

It was a very interesting dynamic because it's still a staff that I think really highly of but again, it's that invisibility. So, the most interesting piece of this is they did have one person in that office who was a person of color who was out on medical leave most of the year and didn't come back until the last, maybe the last three months of my internship there. It was very interesting because within two days, she came to my office and she said, “Hey, you want to chat about how things have been going?” but it wasn't until after that internship experience that I realized just the power of how people reach out and mentor like people. None of this had happened in an intentional way and yet, it was very interesting that the one person who then finally kind of came and said, “You know, let me talk to you about your career and what you're doing and what you want to do.” was the one person of color.

Discussion of Nouchi Part One

Nouchi opens up her life story with a profound experience that she still remembers, of a teacher that repeatedly encouraged and supported her. However, the invisibility that she often felt outweighed the authenticity and efficacy of educators due to the lack of help she received. Much like in the literature review, she was often ignored and discouraged or, if she received help, it was only for what she had asked, nothing more. She noticed how her White peers were being treated and were afforded more opportunities than her, from being nominated for awards to staff members during an internship mentoring other White graduate students. Her experiences of invisibility also reinforce the model minority myth, that Asian students go unnoticed because they are seen as smart, hard working, and not needing any help. As a first-generation immigrant student, although Nouchi was in the Gifted and Talented program and AP classes, she still needed support navigating the educational system since her parents did not know how. Much like Kashia and Christine, Nouchi and immigrant students are often left on their own to determine the next course of action in their educational journey. What is clear so far in Nouchi's narrative is that educators would do well to prioritize building relationships with immigrant students and in empowering them to build their self-esteem in order to avoid feelings of shame. Building relationships is a central theme in this first section of Nouchi's life history.

In addition to the invisibility that Nouchi felt, although her parents were very supportive of her in getting an education, her stories of family and culture show how intense the two can be when they are interconnected. Nouchi talks about the expectations of having to take care of her younger siblings, cook, and clean when she gets home from school, along with going to work before she can even do homework, not being able to do extracurricular activities, and realizing how, even though her parents and family members were supportive of her in going to school,

they treated her differently from her brothers and her male cousins. Growing up in a patriarchal society, many Hmong girls experienced all of these things. First, the expectations of taking care of your (younger) siblings, cooking, cleaning, and working before doing school work. Readers are likely to understand the difficulty of navigating the mixed messages she receives as on the one hand, your parents are telling you how important getting an education is and how education is the one thing that will get you out of poverty, but on the other hand, they also tell you that to be a "good" Hmong girl, you first need to cook, clean, take care of others, and work to help support the family. There is immense pressure for Nouchi to do both.

Furthermore, Nouchi's Hmong parents, like many other Hmong parents, did not allow their daughters to do extracurricular activities because they were afraid of their daughters joining the wrong crowd or meeting the wrong people and that their daughters would be easily influenced by these activities and friends, eventually leading to gangs. Like Nouchi, this was one reason why my parents would not let my sister and I join extracurricular activities after school or go out with friends. Finally, while in college, Nouchi realized how her brothers and male cousins were treated when compared to her. While she was working three jobs to pay for her college tuition, her brothers and male cousins did not have to. Their parents paid their school tuition for them. Not only that, as with Christine, when Nouchi came home from college breaks, family members would not ask anything about her experience but say things like, "Oh, you're not pregnant yet." In contrast, everyone would ask the boys and talk to them about how college was going for them. Here, one can see how the intersectional realities of being a Hmong woman can be limiting and restrictive. That suggests educators would do well to be culturally aware and supportive of young immigrant women so that they can have access to opportunities that may otherwise be confined.

In contrast to many first-generation Hmong women and the participants that I interviewed, Nouchi had a teacher who encouraged her to study abroad, which her parents allowed. In doing so, Nouchi shares that this changed her trajectory in life, stating that she could reflect on her life and what she wanted to do with it. Back at home, her friends were getting married and she knew that she did not want that for herself yet. Along with reflecting, being away from her family and environment allowed her to be herself and gain some valuable life experiences. This experience changed her and helped her develop her identity. Many of the participants that I spoke to, who went to college outside of their town, also spoke about this, about gaining a sense of independence, finding their identity, and realizing that the world was much bigger than what they had realized. Not having had the opportunity to study abroad, which I often wanted to do, and not being allowed to go out of state or out of town for college, I often wonder if I would be the same person had I been given that chance. I often feel like I missed out on so much. Again, this is why having access to a variety of opportunities is so critical for young immigrant women. These opportunities can open multiple doors to possibilities that may otherwise have been thought to be impossible.

Nouchi Part Two: Support, Assumptions, and Privilege

Nouchi: I don't remember if this was an EL service but in first grade, I remember being pulled out to work one on one with someone on speech and reading. I actually really loved my one on one's with the teacher. I remember him being fun and doing word and grammar flashcards with him in the hallway, where he had two little desks set up for us. I always like to think that's where I picked up my grammar strengths and hangups.

I also remember later that year being pulled out for testing by an African-American woman, along with four other kids of color at school a few times. I don't know that that was EL

though since the other kids were all African-American. It was also a lot of fun because she was funny and I remember, really beautiful. This might sound weird but I remember telling my parents one of my teachers looked like Marilyn McCoo from Solid Gold, which was the show we all watched at the time. I don't remember that I had any bad feelings associated with either.

In fourth grade, the small town, some of my cousins went to a special class. I suspect that must have been EL. I really wanted to attend because the teacher was so nice and they loved her, but I must have not qualified. I also remember doing summer school between third and fourth grade with all the Hmong kids. Initially, my brother and I weren't on the list but he went to ask and got in. It was all Hmong kids K-6, all my cousins and we had so much fun. That school also had the first teacher who looked like us. She was native Hawaiian. She was the music teacher and came in quite a bit to share Hawaiian music with us in summer school and encouraged us to bring in Hmong music. What I remember mostly though was that she looked like us and told us she ate a lot of rice too. So, representation matters.

I think having occasional teachers who really sort of touched my life in that way was important. Then more prominently, once I got to college, I really leaned on the staff who worked at the office for multicultural affairs. In some ways, they sort of became my default parents because at least that was a group of staff that I could go to and say, "How do I find this? How do I find that?" and then eventually, I started working on campus and I worked at the counseling center on campus, and so then, I gained a whole new family of counselors that I could go and ask. So I would say them, certainly the group of people that I was friends with, I leaned on pretty heavily. We leaned on each other to get each other through.

I always knew that I'd go to college. I think for that, I'm grateful to my parents because they always supported that. I knew that they were really strict and I knew that they wouldn't let

me do anything else. But if it was in the name of furthering my education, they were always supportive. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I actually, most of my life, wanted to choose writing or English because I just love reading and love writing. The horrible experience of the woman who told me not to go to college was my English teacher and after that experience, I just thought, 'Yeah, I don't think I want to do that.' and I decided I wanted to do something to be helpful to people and so that's why I chose my profession. I didn't know what I wanted to do other than I wanted it to be helpful and I wanted to make a difference in the community and in somebody's life.

I think definitely for our kids, they just assume they're going to college. When they talk, it's like, "Yeah, when I go to college, blah, blah, blah." There's no "if", so that has been really interesting. On the one hand, it's a very privileged place. When I was their age, while I knew I'd be going to college, I worried a lot about how I was going to pay for it but they don't even worry about that. They just assume that magically, we're going to take care of it. I mean, they're in that space of where my colleague was when she said to me, "I never had to worry about any of those things" and that's exactly where they will be. They won't have to worry because they'll have us to guide them. Now, we have some parameters we put on because we'd like them to also take some responsibility and be accountable but I would say that we try not to pressure the kids. What we've said to them is, "You know, not everybody, college isn't right for everybody. We understand that. We want you all to do something after high school, whether it's college, whether it's a training program, whether it's something else. You gotta do something more than high school to get your life on track." But I think for sure, my oldest who always has been this really brilliant child feels really pressured. Even though we have not pressured him, he has pressured himself. He's saying things like, "I have to get my grades in order if I'm gonna apply to MIT and

we're both just like, “What? No, go to the University of Minnesota. That's a great school.” so I'm not quite sure where he made up those stories from but I think he feels kind of an intense pressure, even though we have not pressured him.

My daughter recently did say to me, “Mom, how come all your stories to us start out with ‘When we were young, we were really poor?’” and I'm like, “Because we were poor.” We try to help them understand in the way that they can, the level of privilege that they have, why we work so hard, and to really say to them, “You also have to work hard if you want to build a life that you want. You don't have to work the way we do. You don't have to certainly go down the path we did.” but we want them to also be able to see to the extent that they can, that they've got to do everything that's under their control to build a life that they want, knowing that there are a lot of external things that already are stacked against them because of their skin color, because of their life experience. To try to do whatever they can, that's under their control and part of that, and unfortunately, in this country, one of the ways, pathways out of poverty is still education. We do our best to instill that.

I don't want to assume this but I think that they will have more support, moral support because we've been through the educational system and so we can provide more direction, more support. Obviously, we can provide more financial support and so I don't want to say it's going to be easier for them because I think everybody just has their own path and I don't know what they're going to suffer when they are older but I think we've done everything that we can to put them on the best path possible. Last year, even though my kids are not bilingual in the traditional sense, I did have them tested once I was told they would get small group help. Three of my kids actually qualified. I have seen how much it has helped them and given them confidence. I know lots of people give EL a hard time but I love it for my kids. I think people just don’t understand.

I've known so many families who were insulted because their kids qualify but I am clearly trying to use every resource I can to support my kids, especially given how behind they started.

For the most part, I think the teachers at least feel like they're trying to support the kids. It's hard because I'm not there. I will say that when my oldest, because he's really smart and when he was at a different school, I think because we are who we are with our credentials, it was a charter school, a small school, the school really bent over backwards to try to accommodate him. So he did math with the fourth graders when he was like in first and second grade, he got to do some of that. But I did feel a difference. He had a Hmong teacher who really went out of her way to support him and to make sure that we knew of resources that would support him. His other teachers were amazing, supportive, but she went the extra effort and I don't know if it's because that's who she was or if, because as another Hmong person, she saw the promise in him and wanted to make sure that he didn't get, he didn't fall through the cracks. I'm sure she saw plenty of that.

I think more than anything, assumptions were probably made about my kids. At some level when we were still in this school district, because we did have a family night where my husband and I went with my son, when he was in first grade, and we were talking to the person who potentially was going to be his second grade teacher. Somehow they started talking about college and this woman knew nothing about us but out of her mouth, to my child, she said to him, "Well, you know, Peter[17], maybe someday you can go to school or you can go to college and then you can tell your parents what it's like." and it was so funny because Peter was in first grade. Peter turns around and he goes, "Oh, please. Those two have a lot of experience. He's a professor" and he couldn't say pharmacist so he said, "and she's a paleontologist." and she looked

[17] Pseudonym to protect anonymity.

shocked. She looked over at us and looked shocked and it was a small thing, but in my gut, I thought, ‘Boy, I hope he doesn't get her as a teacher.’ because I don't know how that influences her thoughts about who we are, influences how she will view my son and will teach him.

I think more than anything, it's kind of that sort of experience. We're in a new district, it's a suburban district. To be honest, and with my younger kids, just because of the many things that they've experienced, I often start an introduction with the teachers by talking about the lives that they've gone through and what has seemed helpful and what has not. It's a small school so the teachers know our family. They're all like, “Yeah, we know.” and we try to really partner with them. Although more recently, in fact just today, I've been having a conversation about learning disorders cause I think two of my kids have learning disorders. I'm ashamed to say, and I have not done this in a long time, but I sent the school staff an email from my work email because I wasn't getting a response, with all of my credentials listed. Initially, I was getting a lot of, “Oh, we think you're just over worried about nothing.” and I'm like, “No. I know there is a difference between how my two children, these two children, learn and how my other children learn. We've noticed it more now that we're learning from home and we're doing some of the teaching that there is a qualitative difference, not just related to that, but even in functioning outside of school. I heard back right away so I don't know if they just got tired of hearing from me or was it all the credentials? I don't know. It's the stuff that happens that sort of gives you a pause. Do I think that they were all plotting to keep my kids from learning? Nope. I don't think that. I actually think that they're really well-intentioned. I think the school has been really supportive of my kids and yet it still took me being who I am in my professional life to get a response. I should have just gotten a response as a parent.

Discussion of Nouchi Part Two

In contrast to Christine's narrative where she questioned receiving EL services, this section of Nouchi's life history shares how she may have been pulled out for EL services, getting one on one support with grammar and reading and wanting to be a part of EL but not qualifying for services. She talks about how her brother got her and him into summer school with all the Hmong kids and how the music teacher, who was native Hawaiian, encouraged them to bring Hmong music to school to share. She also explains how she had her children tested so that they can receive extra support, seeing EL as a benefit for her children rather than something negative. This part of Nouchi's story shows how important it is to belong, whether to a place or a group, a recurring theme of immigrant youth.

We are also made aware of the impact educators make in a student's life, particularly immigrants. Immigrant students are often looking for direction and encouragement, often not knowing what to strive for. As many immigrant students have said, they are told by their parents to get a good education. But what does this mean? Nouchi knew that she loved writing and reading and wanted to go into either writing or English; however, due to her English teacher's words about not going to college, she decided on a different route, a route to help others instead. While in college, she found support in the multicultural center staff and those she worked with on campus. In addition to these support systems, she also found support in her friends. Educators are who these children are looking up to for guidance. Therefore, they need to be proactive in committing to move in the direction of motivating and inspiring these children to achieve, allowing them to dream.

Something important that Nouchi touches on is the privilege that her children have. Most second-generation immigrant students do not understand the privilege they have compared to

their parents, the technology that is available, the resources, and more financial stability. Whereas Nouchi did not have the resources, support systems, and opportunities, her children have these due to her and her husband having gone through the system and working hard to provide for them, which she tries to help her kids understand. While her children talk about going to college, Nouchi understands that college is not for everyone and tells them that they do not have to follow in their footsteps but as long as they do something with their lives. This is a critical piece to consider as an educator. Many children are privileged due to family circumstances. However, for immigrant students, they may not have these privileges. Many of their family members lack the language skills, are working long hours for low wages, or their basic needs may not be met due to the lack of resources available. Because they do not want to seem as less than their peers, they may hide the realities of their lives and make things seem better than they are, as mentioned by many of my participants.

In addition to the privileges, Nouchi also shares about the assumptions that have been made about her and her family, such as when she and her husband went to a family night with their first grader and the teacher, in talking to their son, made a comment about their son going to college and telling his parents about it. This is the most common theme shared by immigrant students and by my participants. Here, the teacher automatically assumes that his parents have never gone to college without ever having met them and talking to them. Not only that, but when she brings concerns about her children's learning to their teachers, they assume that she is just being overly worried and gets no response from the school. After numerous attempts, she uses her professional work email to send an email to the school staff and finally receives a response. With this, Nouchi offers a view from what first-generation parents have to go through to get a

response back from the school about her concerns. We also saw this in Kashia's narrative, where she had to jump through hoops to get her daughter support from her teachers.

Even as a teacher myself, when I sought speech support for my second child, the response I often got was, "Oh, he's fine. There's nothing wrong with his speech." He went through kindergarten, first grade, and second grade with no speech services. Finally, in third grade, at conferences, I brought it up again and finally, the teacher said, "Yes, I'm noticing some of the same things. I'll have the speech teacher come and listen to him." The speech teacher observed him and tested him. When she called me, she said, "If we would've tested him later, he wouldn't have qualified for services because of his age but because we tested him now, he does qualify for services so, I'm really glad that we did." The frustrating part of this was knowing that I knew he needed services, especially being a teacher myself, and not having the teachers take me seriously.

If parents like myself and Nouchi are struggling to get our concerns across and have our children receive the services they need, new to country immigrant families would not even know where to begin. Besides the assumptions made about us as parents, assumptions are also made about our children; we are constantly being judged. As educators, we need to change our mindset around these assumptions that we place on our immigrant families and students. There are already barriers that they face; we do not need to add more to them. As we consider these changes to our thoughts and our behaviors, we also need to listen to what our immigrant families are saying and understand that although they do not have the privileges as others do, that does not mean that they are not successful in their own right.

Nouchi Part Three: Intentionality, Connections, and the Power of Teachers

Nouchi: I wish educators really knew the power that they have, to impact a kid's life for better or for worse. I know that sometimes, and you probably would know this better, but I have staff in schools and I know sometimes, some of the teachers that we work with feel like they're drowning and that the problems are bigger than them. At some level that's true. We have lots of problems in society that are bigger than what any one of us can do but boy, I wish teachers knew how much they can impact a kid's life.

Everybody has a different theory and a different model for what could be successful and there are lots of models out there but I think it starts with the decision. Well, let me roll that back a little bit. It starts with a decision to say we are going to do this because if you're a school district or you're a school or you're a teacher and you're still stuck in that, ‘Oh, I don't know.’ then no matter what model gets rolled out, you're just never going to be able to commit. So I think it's that organizational and individual commitment of ‘Yes, we are going to do this because this is the right thing to do.’ and then to be intentional about it. I find that whatever pathway people choose, while some pathways are probably more successful than others, it's those beginning pieces that get missed. I think that that's where things fall apart and then people get into, ‘We tried that and that didn't work.’ but the reality might've been that we never bought into it ourselves, or we never committed.

I would also love to have kids and families have exposure to people who look like them, who are successful, because kids can't be what they can't see and so while the people in my educational path who have really supported me were largely White people, it was also really meaningful to me when I could have people who looked like me, who were professionals who were educated. When I think of my exposure, it really was conversations with teachers or

counselors, conversations with my parents. I think sometimes we make it out bigger in our heads than we need to. The intention still has to be there, but I think that exposure, I think we are lucky to live in a local community where there are so many incredible mentors. I think we're lucky to live in a local community where we have so many incredible leaders from so many different communities and, not that we have to preach to death to our kids, but that exposure to again, both people who look like them and people who don't look like them, who have chosen different pathways.

The reality is there are lots of inequities that exist in our community, a lot of systemic inequities that are no one individual's fault but that just exists. Because of that, we've got to build in some different ways to encourage kids and young people in learning in a different way. I say that because sometimes, you can't treat everybody the same, what you can do is make sure that they have access to the same things but in order to have access to the same things, you gotta treat people differently. I think really acknowledging that there are different supports that young women need, that young men need, that there are different supports required and challenges for young immigrant and refugee students.

If we go with that equity piece, spend a little bit more time listening as well as modeling for these young women. Try to connect them to other people as well, to help them think more deeply about what choices could be possible for them. If possible, connecting them with people who are similar or from their communities, but also just being a support and extra support, making the extra effort to say, “Hey, I'm here and I may not know exactly your experience, but I'm here to support you.” I have talked to folks who feel like, ‘Well, if I say that to that person, I have to say that to everybody.’ and again, I go back to that a lot of these young women don't have access to those supports. It's part of our job to be intentional about that relationship and to

be intentional about that support and to take that extra effort and it is extra effort but it doesn't have to be huge. When I think of the teacher who really helped me set my life on a different trajectory, it was a 10 minute conversation if even that and then when I think of the woman who devastated my life, it was a 10 minute conversation, if even that. So, it doesn't take very much time to completely tear someone down, but it also doesn't take that much time to build someone up and that doesn't hurt any of us to take that five minutes to say to a kiddo, “I'm here for you. Let's talk about this sometime.”

To go along with the comment I made about making the commitment, if you can't get to a yes and you're still in the maybe, then I think it's just going to be hard to support anybody. Part of that too is we have to make a decision individually and then organizationally that these kids are worth it. Again, I've talked to so many folks in different industries who have wonderful hearts but they're still in the maybe category. I think when you don't fully commit and believe that this is worthwhile and not that we're out to save people or we're out to save everybody, but just that whole concept of these kids are important and it is worthwhile and I am committed to trying to make a difference. I feel like maybe I'm too Pollyannish but I feel like that's the key. But if we can't get there, nothing works. Something that I'm really proud of that I started, and often people ask me how I made it happen and I always say, “Well, because I decided I was going to. I knew that it was an upward battle. I knew that and I decided that's what I was committing to and that's what I wanted to do. But if I wouldn't have decided that, we could have thrown all sorts of money at this thing and it wouldn't have worked. I think of kids in that same way. We have to decide that girls are worth it. We have to decide that immigrant girls are worth it and that we're committed.

Discussion of Nouchi Part Three

In this last section of Nouchi's life history, she imparts on us the power that teachers have. In a moment's heartbeat, a teacher can crush a student's dream or be a beacon of light by accepting and welcoming an immigrant child into their classroom, creating a safe space to be who they are. Educators do not realize the many roles young immigrant women have and are expected to be. At home, these girls are to be caretakers, homemakers, but at school, they are to be good students, smart, respectful. They are continually shifting between roles, juggling many things at once, while also trying to be accepted. Instead of putting down students and telling them that college is not for them, educators need to use their power to motivate and inspire, to create a system of change for these young immigrant women.

Furthermore, Nouchi discusses the importance of being exposed to teachers of color or other professionals that look like them or are from their communities. In literature reviews and from all of my participants, this was a significant theme when considering how schools can help young immigrant women be successful. When immigrant students see other professionals, teachers, administrators that look like them, that gives them hope that they can also be like that themselves one day. When they see adults that look like them, they do not feel so alone anymore, as if they do not belong. These immigrant students can connect and build relationships with them, share their life experiences and feel that they are not being judged.

Finally, educators' commitment to being intentional is vital to the educational success of young immigrant women. When a teacher or a system is not fully committed, change cannot occur. Things are only done half-heartedly. As Nouchi states, inequities already exist for immigrant students, but even more so with young immigrant women. Understanding this and taking action to create ripples of change allows these women to be who they are, to find their

identity in the midst of the chaos they are surrounded by. Educators need to be authentic while showing compassion instead of operating on their biases. Nouchi states it perfectly when she says, “We have to decide that immigrant girls are worth it and that we're committed.” Immigrant girls are hearing conflicting messages from an early age; therefore, it is critical that educators work with families to affirm their identities and their potential by praising and allowing them opportunities that would otherwise be denied or not considered. Young immigrant girls need to know that educators are committed to advocating for and supporting them, with no judgment, recognizing the need to be their voice.

Conclusion

Nouchi’s narrative provides a perspective on how she was treated as a young immigrant woman by teachers and the cultural expectations. Throughout Nouchi’s life history, she has shown resilience, from figuring things out on her own to working three jobs in order to pay for school tuition. Assumptions were also made, along with the feeling of invisibility. It seems that Nouchi has often had to fight for what she believes in. The interplay between being an immigrant and the educational system shows how problematic intersectionality is for a young Hmong woman. For young immigrant women, we see how the many overlapping identities create different experiences and how it impacts their access to opportunities. While there are no definitive answers on how to best support young immigrant women, I offer the arguments this dissertation makes and examine this study’s implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and scholarship in this dissertation's conclusion, which I turn to next.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Through a qualitative methodology, this dissertation studied how first-generation Hmong women's educational experiences affected their educational trajectory and the choices they made for their children based on these experiences. This study involved interviewing 13 first-generation Hmong women who came to the United States with their families as refugees after the Vietnam War to find out about their schooling. The hope is that their experiences may inform educational leaders, policymakers, educational practitioners, researchers, and families in providing the necessary skills and tools for young immigrant women to have improved educational experiences that allow them to, if they so choose, then pursue post-secondary education.

The following purposes guided this dissertation:

- Reveal the narratives of first-generation Hmong women and their lived educational experiences;
- Learn how their educational experiences have impacted the educational decisions they have made for themselves and their children;
- Illuminate educational practices that will support the academic needs of newly arrived young immigrant women.

While the academic achievement of Asian American students has received significant scholarly attention, with some being on Hmong students, there has been a dearth of research examining the schooling of first-generation Hmong women and how their experiences affected their educational trajectory and their own children's educational journey. The studies cited in this dissertation discuss the challenges and stereotypes affecting minoritized immigrant youths, but few explore the educational experiences of young immigrant women, in particular, that of first-generation

Hmong women and how their experiences have shaped their lives. Through this process, my goal was to add to the discussion and scope of knowledge by focusing on the lived schooling experiences of first-generation Hmong women and how the educational system can support the educational needs of young immigrant women. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the research findings and describe the implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and scholarship, along with my own personal reflection.

Summary of the Current Study

Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Hmong women and how they experienced schooling is crucial when supporting and advocating for young immigrant women and academic success. Through an analysis of the participants' narratives about their lives as well as their reflections on their experiences, this dissertation revealed a variety of significant recurring themes within young women's lives that worked alongside or against the process of learning.

At the outset of this dissertation, I offered the construct of intersectionality as being critical when examining the lives of first-generation Hmong women and how this affects their schooling. There are many characteristics that intersect and overlap often creating a complex convergence of oppression and discrimination toward the Hmong women growing up in American society, something that along with my participants, I have experienced myself. Each aspect of my participants' identity does not exist independently of each other; rather, aspects of their identities overlap and impact their access to opportunities. In the dominant culture of the United States, those with most privilege are those "who enjoy normative or non-marginalized statuses such as Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, or upper class status" (Steinbugler et al., 2006, p. 808). My participants expressed how their particular intersectionality played a role in

their identity, culturally, socially, and educationally. Navigating their identity in these different contexts often created oppressive circumstances where participants were not able to say things due to how they would be seen—disobedient, non-compliant, or a problem child. This internal suppression often led to resentment or an early marriage, as was the case for two of my participants. As Reinert (2016) stated, “I know and remember how much effort choosing silence requires, the mental space it requires and the exhaust that comes from the effort to negotiate an identity” (p. 7). For these first-generation Hmong women, negotiating their identity often meant silencing their voices. Here, it is important to consider the “meaning and consequences of multiple categories of social group membership” (Cole, 2009, p. 170) as it shapes social inequities.

In addition to intersectionality, aspiring to the property of Whiteness also complicated their identity, causing many to be ashamed of being Hmong. According to Harris (1993), the property of Whiteness is seen as:

> Treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain - by fraud if necessary. (p. 1713)

This finding is similar to previous findings (DePouw, 2012; S. J. Lee, 2002). For many of my participants, this was what they experienced and grappled with. All of my participants expressed struggling with finding and/or balancing their identity while in school. At home, they were expected to cook, clean, and take care of their siblings, whereas at school, they wanted to fit in, to be “White.” As Amanda stated, “Unless you talk like *Meeka*, dress like *Meeka*, and act like *Meeka* kids, you are not really one of them.” For Mai, this came at an expense:

> I made friends with White people so it was kinda weird. When I would meet people, they would always make fun of me and say, “Oh, you're whitewashed the way you talk, the way you act.” I'm like, “What do you mean?” But to me, I didn't know the difference. That's the community that I grew up in; those are the type of people that I made friends with. And so for me, I didn't understand what they meant by it, by being so whitewashed and being, you know, so different.”

Here, the property of Whiteness was achievable but at the expense of being made fun of by others, and being seen as “whitewashed” made it difficult for participants to be accepted by their Hmong peers. Many participants also spoke about being glad when their White peers commented on them not “looking Hmong” or when they made racist comments to other Hmong students but said, “Oh, not you, though.” At school, “being White” had its benefits: they did not encounter the racism and stereotypes other Hmong students did and they were not seen as “those” Hmong kids. For these participants, the property of Whiteness was bestowed on them and seen as honorary. However, just as easily as the benefits were given to some of these participants, it was also held from others. For Ntxoo:

> They had never seen people of color. There were hardly any black people and then suddenly, there were all these Southeast Asians. A lot of the families there were still very unhappy about the Vietnam War because they protested the war or their uncles and dad died in the war. They saw us as the enemy and they would call us Gooks and Chinks, but they also thought we were the Vietcong's, which is the communists. And so I think that there was a lot of anger and resentment towards the Vietnam War, and they took it out on us as children and as families.

This balancing act made it difficult for all of my participants to feel like they belonged, a significant piece to schooling and academic achievement for immigrant students (Ngo, 2017; Rodriguez, 2015; Van Ngo et al., 2015).

Just as important as the property of Whiteness, the model minority myth obscured the complexity of each of the participants' lives. Due to the myth categorizing all Asian Americans as homogeneous, many participants were overlooked, passed along, were not given the support and resources that other struggling students may have received, and endured racist behaviors from educators and peers. Eve's teachers referred to her and other Asian students as "you people" and in high school, she noticed other Asian groups being afforded the property of Whiteness compared to others:

> So there were very few Hmong kids in the high school and the other Asian students were children of doctors. So they were Filipino families and their parents were doctors and that's how they came to the Midwest. They didn't really associate with us because they had money so they kind of felt like they were different from the Hmong kids. The Hmong kids, everyone knew we were refugees. Every one knew that there was a lot of poverty among the Hmong community. So the Filipinos really thought they were different from us and we didn't really connect with them even though there were so few Asians.

Through Eve's example, it is evident how the Hmong students were perceived due to being refugees compared to their Filipino counterparts, who came from wealthy families. Here, the MMM exacerbated her experience due to being seen as an Asian; however, she was not afforded the attributes due to being Hmong.

In addition, Southeast Asian students, such as the Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese, are particularly vulnerable to this stereotype because they "are less likely to receive the language

support they need as students and come from families that are highly likely to live in poverty" (Chow, 2011, para. 8). Their dropout rates are the highest of any Asian American groups. All 13 participants stated their families lived in poverty, which played a role in their access to opportunities and resources. These women saw education as the pathway to bettering their lives and achieving economic success, albeit enduring educational struggles and hardships along the way. The model minority myth masked their inner battle with society, culture, and identity. Ntxoo stated it perfectly when she said:

> We lived in public housing so people would egg our homes, call us and do that racist Ching Chong thing on the phone, and so even though I was young and my parents would say, "Just ignore it," I could not because it was so much hatred and it was targeting me and my community. But for me, I took it very personally. I often say that it was at that time that I started thinking a lot about the world and I was probably 10 years old at that time. I thought a lot about how I wanted to change the way that society should be, and that no little girl should be hurting like that. I used to go to bed crying because I was thinking, "Why are there so many hateful people out there?" And so I think that that really interfered with my education because I could not focus on learning. I was so distracted by the hate that I was experiencing and so I definitely was not a good student. I probably got by, I don't know if I was a bad student, but I know that I wasn't learning. There were so many things happening in the community that questioned my identity and my own personal potential.

Ntxoov's narrative was replicated in all participants narratives, with participants recalling the hateful attitudes and behaviors that they felt from others, questioning themselves and the world, and wanting to change society for the better.

Participants also shared substantial aspects of how culture played a role in their decision to pursue post-secondary education. Due to the cultural pressures of being married early during that time, two of my participants were married by the age of 15, one was married at 17, and one was married at 18. Out of these four participants, the one married at 18 did not pursue post-secondary school after graduating high school due to balancing work, family, and kids. For those participants who did pursue post-secondary education, four participants earned their bachelor's degree, one participant earned her associate's degree, three participants earned their master's degree, and four participants earned their doctoral degree. Although all of my participants spoke about their parents wanting them to go to college because that was seen as the way out of poverty, eight out of the 13 participants stated the main reason for going to college was to prove their self-worth. Allison spoke to this when she said,

> Being a Hmong girl, I wanted to break that cause I felt my dad didn't have high expectations for me. College is expected for boys and my dad was always talking to the boys about going to college but that wasn't expected of me. I wanted to just go to college to prove that I'm just as good as the boys and I can go to college and that I'm smart.

Here, the power of patriarchy is evident, along with the role that father's play in establishing what girls can and cannot do, the expectations, and the limits placed on girls. Patriarchy, for many of my participants, often had negative implications, from their self-worth to their self-esteem. However, when father's did not fall into this role and loved and supported their daughters, they became the role models these girls needed, as was the case for Kashia. For all of my participants, they saw post-secondary education as an opportunity to gain independence and become self-sufficient in a patriarchal culture.

Equally important is the fact that all of these women revealed the lack of support they received from teachers. Of course, participants spoke about parents not being able to support their academic needs due to the language barrier along with working multiple jobs; however, teachers often ignored them, made assumptions, or said insensitive things. This is also similar to many studies conducted on immigrant students (Suzuki, 2002; Wing, 2007; Yu, 2006). Along with the lack of support, teachers also did not recognize when these students were struggling due to a learning disability, as was the case with Kashia. Due to the lack of support these women received, they are strong advocates for their children, which was apparent in the three life histories shared. All of my participants are involved in their children's schooling, attending conferences, emailing and calling teachers, and volunteering and speaking in their child's classrooms.

Although participants did not receive the support they needed, they were also quick to point out the teachers who encouraged them and helped them see a different path. These teachers made an impact in these women's lives by taking the time to say, "You're smart!," "You can be anything you want to be," and "I care about you." Through these educators seeing the potential in these participants, these women gained the strength and the ability to see themselves differently than what their culture dictated. They saw a future where they did not have to be bound by the limitations placed upon them, whether by their family, society, or the educational system.

Reflections, Implications, and Looking Ahead

As I reflect on the narratives I have heard, and shared my own personal experiences, I am left questioning how I can do this work without perpetuating the stereotypes already common within the Hmong community, for what you readers have read are all based on true, personal

experiences. Some of the stories shared were difficult, whether from participants or myself, for fear of backlash from the Hmong community. By sharing these stories from 13 incredible first-generation Hmong women, they are finally able to give voice to their own experiences without being discredited and invalidated. Along with perpetuating the stereotypes, I am also left wondering what it is I want to say, particularly to my Hmong brothers and sisters, to the Hmong community, about how to empower our Hmong girls and allow them to voice their ideas instead of silencing them. Coming from a patriarchal culture, roles are imposed on men and boys and women and girls as the latter are often devalued, leading to choices that may be unfavorable. The Hmong people can be very critical. I often think about the physical and emotional abuse Hmong women endure and how they often perceive themselves as the ones to blame because they did something wrong. As Maya stated in her interview:

> For my generation, we were raised to be a good mom, to be a good wife, to take care of your husband no matter who he is or what he does, or whatever he does to you, whether it's bad or good. He's the man. It's okay for him to do it. If he is cheating, it's okay.

This is certainly what many young women heard and still hear today—to be an obedient wife, to respect your husband, and to not talk back. When the cultural expectations and processes do not place value on the voice of Hmong women and continue to silence them instead of empower them, it becomes a vicious cycle for many Hmong women that oftentimes lead to physical harm, or even worse, death.

In advancing my leadership mission, equity has always been at the forefront. After hearing the narrative of 13 first-generation Hmong women, I am particularly moved to advocate for lifting up immigrant women because “when you lift up women, you lift up humanity” (Gates, 2019, p. 2). According to Melinda Gates (2019):

> In my travels, I’ve learned about hundreds of millions of women who want to decide for themselves whether and when to have children, but they can’t. They have no access to contraceptives. And there are many other rights and privileges that women and girls are denied: The right to decide whether and when and whom to marry. The right to go to school. Earn an income. Work outside the home. *Walk* outside the home. Spend their own money. Shape their budget. Start a business. Get a loan. Own property. Divorce a husband. See a doctor. Run for office. Ride a bike. Drive a car. Go to college. Study computers. Find investors. All these rights are denied to women in some parts of the world. Sometimes these rights are denied under law, but even when they’re allowed by law, they’re still often denied by cultural bias against women. (p. 4)

There are many obstacles and hardships young immigrant women face. Therefore, when immigrant women are lifted up instead of being pulled down, society thrives and everyone does well. Empowerment should not be seen as a threat but as a way to connect and belong. It may be difficult to change systems and structures in a society, but people need to stand up to the injustices they see in order for a movement to occur. When we keep quiet, we are accepting the inequities and allowing the biases to continue. This work has changed me not only as an educator but also as a Hmong woman. Listening to their stories has inspired me to step out of my comfort zone, to be a voice for young immigrant women, and to find ways to challenge the system, becoming a change agent as an educational leader.

Through the interviews gathered from my participants, several areas for improvement emerged. First, all 13 participants spoke about the importance of *knowing* the power educators have, whether to influence or discourage. As all of the participants shared about their experiences, it was often the voices of teachers that either shamed them or inspired them. It is

critical that educators make it a habit to use positive reinforcement when they notice students doing something well, making improvements and gains or to even just encourage. Even something as simple as “You can be anything you want to be!” makes a world of difference in a child’s life. This reinforcement and encouragement will help students internalize this belief, creating a strong sense of self-worth and pride.

Along with this comes the understanding that young immigrant women are not like the typical White students educators may be used to encountering. The intentionality in building relationships with these minoritized youth is vital, along with the commitment to advocate for their educational success. Due to cultural and societal norms, stereotypes, and alienation, immigrant girls often do not have the opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities, sports, or attend trips. Many families do not see value in this as it takes away from the family duties these girls are needed for or that they are not responsible enough and ready to take on these activities. With this knowledge, it would do well for educators to create and/or provide opportunities for them to take part in, such as an enrichment group during the school day or a club for immigrant girls to connect and build friendships with. In addition to building relationships, it is also crucial for educators to be mentors to these immigrant girls, as they may not have women role models or mentors in their community. For immigrant girls to flourish in school and have the option to pursue post-secondary education, it is critical that they have mentors to guide and support them.

With that being said, it is also essential to build relationships with these young immigrant women’s family, whether through making phone calls or home visits and not just once but throughout the year. When educators take the time to connect with families, they earn the trust of these families, and the student also sees that the teacher is committed. Not only that but there is

also a sense of pride, for both the family and the student. For the family, it is a point of pride because the child is a reflection of them and how they have raised her. For the child, it is a point of pride because she is recognized for something more than being a girl. When immigrant families see that educators are committed, they are more willing to let their child participate in school activities because of the relationship built with that teacher.

For educational practitioners and leaders, it is equally important to continually ask, "What are we not seeing?" In all 13 life histories, all the participants spoke about teachers not seeing them and their challenges, often feeling invisible. They often felt that teachers did not see their experiences were different than others and projected their own thoughts and beliefs onto them. For these young immigrant students, educators need to see them in terms of their unique perspectives, life experiences, and cultural processes and practices. If educators pay attention, issues that did not initially appear to exist will eventually start to surface. For the 13 participants, it was the educators who took notice and impacted their life and their decision to pursue higher education.

Relatedly, as the importance of teachers of color repeatedly emerged from all life histories, it would be valuable for schools and districts to employ a diverse teaching population that closely reflects their student population. When students of color do not see teachers who look like them, it is difficult for them to connect with their teachers. These teachers may not have had similar experiences as their students, and therefore, cannot fully comprehend or empathize with their students and their life situations. This also creates an absence of role models for these students, who may not have role models at home.

As student demographics are changing and there are more students of color, the need for educators to become culturally responsive teachers is fundamental. Too often, educators think

the subjects they are teaching are incompatible with cultural diversity and that “combining them is too much of a conceptual and substantive stretch for their subjects to maintain disciplinary integrity. This is simply not true. There is a place for cultural diversity in every subject taught in schools” (Gay, 2002, p. 107). For educators to be culturally responsive, it is essential for teacher education programs to provide courses about cultural and ethnic diversity, along with creating culturally response curriculum and instructional strategies (Gay, 2002, p. 108). Oftentimes, educators go through programs with one course on the very basics of cultural diversity and not having to apply their learning. To be culturally responsive, it is imperative to develop skills that address the misconceptions of learning styles and apply these skills to their practice every day. According to Gay (2002), “teachers need to develop rich repertoires of multicultural instructional examples to use in teaching ethnically diverse students” (p. 113).

In addition, it would do well for state policymakers and educational leaders to consider its curriculum. The curriculum used in schools today often do not depict students of color and what is taught in Social Studies and History classes build very little on the history of immigrants and the contributions that they have made in society. “U.S. history textbooks particularly define whose experiences and perspectives are necessary, legitimate, and significant in telling the story of the United States and defining the national identity” (An, 2016, p. 245) and “present an incoherent, disjointed picture of those who are not White” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 4). In U.S. History, there is a near invisibility of Asian Americans and their experiences, often focusing merely on the Japanese American incarceration during World War II and the early Chinese immigration during the Gold Rush, transcontinental railroad, and the Chinese Exclusion Act. For the Hmong, their history is not mentioned in textbooks; however, it has significance and should be told. I never learned about the Hmong people in school and my peers had never heard of the

Hmong people. I had to teach my class about the Hmong people in high school from what I learned from my parents. My children never learned about the Hmong people in school and also had to teach their class using what they had learned from my husband and I and their grandparents. If our children do not learn about our history in schools, how can they be proud of their history, of who they are? State standards have defined what students should know and be able to do, impacting textbook contents and test questions in state achievement tests (Darling-Hammond, 2004); however, it should recognize the diversity of immigrants and include their history in textbooks. By including the history of different groups of people, this will open the door to conversations around race and the misconceptions that are often created due to a lack of understanding.

Equally important are the conversations around race that educators and policymakers are having. “We must address the disconnect between the artificial life of the classroom and the real lives of the students who attend our schools” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 10). Educators often believe they are treating their students equally, giving students what they need; however, it is critical that educators understand the lives of their students, where they are coming from, and that all students will need different resources and support systems. Until we have these open conversations about race, racial policies, and the inequities they create, systemic and structural changes cannot occur in education. In trying to enact change in educational policies, recognizing that many policies were created to benefit White Americans (Brown, 2020) would be the first step. In addition to this, it would do well for educational leaders (at the district level and building administrators) to self-assess their own biases and acknowledge its effect on their leadership. Upon recognizing their biases, practical steps should be taken to prevent acting in accordance with these biases. Additionally, professional development for staff regarding biased behaviors

and attitudes should be conducted to address the misconceptions of racial norms associated with minoritized groups and should be revisited repeatedly. When educators acknowledge their many prejudices and change their mindset, only then can they effectively and genuinely make a difference in the academic progress of young immigrant students. This is a small step toward impacting change at the policy and administrative level; however, it is a beginning to implementing systemic and structural change at an educational level.

Closing Thoughts

This study underscores the urgent need for young immigrant women to have more say over their lives. How do we move beyond these stories to equality and empowerment, for "equality can empower women, and empowered women will change the world" (Gates, 2019, p. 263)? As educators, I believe we need to provide these young immigrant women with the resources and access to opportunities in order to thrive, to become their own person, and to love themselves. We need to see ourselves in these young immigrant women and see the potential and promise they hold. For my 13 participants, they saw education, particularly post-secondary education, as a pathway to empowerment and independence from the cultural norms, and it was because of a few teachers who cared enough that opened the door to the possibilities of what having an education can do for their wellbeing and livelihood. Not only that, but post-secondary education was also seen as a way to be recognized as an equal to their men counterparts.

My hope is that this research will add to the conversation around intersectionality, empowerment, mentorship, and relationship building with young immigrant women and how we consider policies around race in education. It is imperative that educators are intentional in how they interact with young immigrant women, providing them with the skills and tools they need to better their future. For a young immigrant woman, her identity is often complex, intricate, and

compounded by many influences. Her story is often filled with marginalizations. For first-generation Hmong women, their narratives have been left out through the years they have been in the United States and just as important as with the voices of today, their voices are integral in understanding the educational experiences of the Hmong people. Their experiences have value and meaning. By sharing the lived educational experiences of first-generation Hmong women, we as educators can see how the educational system has or has not changed and improve our practice to advance the educational attainment of young immigrant women arriving today.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I questioned the message I wanted to send to the Hmong community, to my Hmong brothers and sisters, and to first-generation Hmong women. To the Hmong community, as difficult as it may be, it is imperative that we embrace parts of our culture that is life affirming and recognize those that are oppressive forces from within and make the necessary changes. Having been in the United States for over 40 years, we have made adjustments and changes; however, these changes still have not been equitable, especially to our young girls. To my Hmong brothers, it is paramount that you treat your wife, your sister, your daughter with respect. How you treat your wife, your sister, a woman or girl, your son will see and mimic. For your daughter, how her mother is treated is how she thinks she should be treated. You do not need to have power over your family, over your wife. Power should be shared between the two of you. Too often, our culture tells us that when the wife is doing better than the husband, whether professionally or academically, that is not good; the wife should not be doing better than the husband because now, she has all the power. Again, it should not be about the power but more about the collective good that you both are doing together, for each other and for your family. To my Hmong sisters, you are good enough. You do not need to prove your self-worth. You can do anything you set your mind to. Do not settle for anything less. One day, you

will look back on your journey and realize how strong you are and that you had the potential the whole time. It is not easy to stand your ground but you have a life to live for life is too short to be living it for others. To first-generation Hmong women, I hope this dissertation helps you be seen. You have not been seen as a woman, a daughter, a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter-in-law, and as Hmong. I see you as all of these and so much more. May you gather strength from these stories in order to share yours.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol with Research Question

Table A3

Research question	Interview questions
1. What experiences do first-generation Hmong women understand as being pivotal in determining their course in education? 2. What supports, or lack thereof, do first-generation Hmong women view as having shaped their educational experiences?	1. What was schooling like for you as a Hmong woman when you came to the US? a. What grade did you start in? b. What memories do you have about your schooling experience? c. When you were in school, what did you imagine your future to be like? 2. What were some struggles or barriers you experienced as a Hmong woman while in school? a. Culturally? b. Educationally? c. Personally? d. Family related? 3. Who helped and supported you while you were in school? a. Who were your role models? b. What did schools/teachers do to help you adjust to learning in a new country? c. How did you navigate the educational system? 4. What life experiences impacted your decisions to pursue or not pursue higher education? 5. What factors led to you choosing your professional/career choice?

3. How do first-generation Hmong women view their own educational experiences as having shaped their children's educational path?	6. How, if at all, do you think your educational experiences influenced your children's schooling? a. Tell me about your children. b. What experiences, if any, have you shared with your children? c. What do your children think about your career choice and educational journey? d. Did you attend your child's school conferences? Why or why not? 7. What, if any, are the differences that you see between your educational experience and your children?
4. What do first-generation Hmong women identify as ways in which the education system can better support newly arrived immigrant young women?	8. In what ways do you think schools can help refugee/immigrant young women be successful? a. What do you wish would have been different about your schooling experience? How about for your kids? b. What advice would you give to educators about how to support immigrant young women? c. What do you wish educators knew about your schooling experience? d. What do you see as being important in advancing the educational attainment of immigrants and refugees? e. How can educators be mentors to immigrant young women in order to pursue higher education?

Generic probing questions:

1. Can you give a specific example of that?
2. Do you have a story about that?
3. Can you say more about that?