



Journal of Southeast Asian American
Education and Advancement

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 1

2008

[Special Issue on Hmong Newcomers to Saint Paul Public Schools] Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Ngo, Bic (2008) "[Special Issue on Hmong Newcomers to Saint Paul Public Schools] Introduction," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1097

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Volume 3 (2008)

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement

www.JSAAEA.org

A peer-reviewed
scholarly journal
published by the
National Association
for the Education &
Advancement of
Cambodian, Laotian,
and Vietnamese
Americans (NAFEA)

Introduction Special Issue on Hmong Newcomers to Saint Paul Public Schools

Guest Editor

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In the late 1970s the aftermath of the Vietnam War brought displaced Hmong refugees (along with other Southeast Asian groups) to the United States (Chan, 1994; Long, 1993). Other waves of Hmong resettlement to the United States occurred in the mid-80s and mid-90s. This has resulted in a Hmong population of 183,265, the majority of whom reside in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Colorado (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). In 2004, the Thai government closed Wat Tham Krabok (WTK), the last of its Hmong refugee camps (Grigoleit, 2006). This resulted in the most recent resettlement of approximately 15,000 Hmong refugees to the United States (Grigoleit, 2006; Hang et al., 2004). An estimated 5,000 of these WTK refugees came to St. Paul, Minnesota (Hang et al., 2004).

To a large extent, St. Paul was well-prepared to receive the Hmong refugees, since the St. Paul-Minneapolis metropolitan area was already home to the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the world (Minneapolis Foundation, 1999). A resettlement assessment task force put together by then St. Paul mayor Randy Kelly also provided city, county, and community members with information about the educational, social service, and physical and mental health needs of the new refugees (Hang et al., 2004). The assessment report provided information about Hmong families that were of special interest to educators. Among other things, it revealed that children 14 years old or younger comprised more than half (52%) of the population; and less than half of these children had experience with formal schools (Hang et al., 2004). Similar to the WTK Hmong children, Hmong adults also had exceptionally limited experience with education (Hang et al., 2004).

To prepare for the arrival of approximately 1,000 school-age children to the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), district personnel assessed the capacity of its English Language Learner (ELL) programs to meet the language and educational needs of WTK families. The district determined that it needed to invest in a language program specifically for the newcomer Hmong population. Transitional Language Centers (TLCs) were thus established to provide short-term, intensive language programs offering bilingual instruction in Hmong and English. From the beginning, the TLCs were designed to be temporary programs that would rapidly transition K-6 Hmong students to mainstream schools and programs.

During the 2004-2005 academic year TLCs were established in four elementary schools as well as one TLC for older youth in an academy for middle and high school students. TLC



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teachers and staff were provided “additional training in ELL strategies, Hmong culture, and refugee issues” by the school district (Saint Paul Public Schools, 2004). All newcomer Hmong students took an initial language assessment test at the district’s Student Placement Center. The families were then able to choose between enrolling their children in a regular school program or a TLC program. Despite encouragement by the district to enroll their children in a TLC, refugee Hmong parents did not always choose the TLC. Instead, some chose more traditional ELL programs or Language Academy (LA) schools.

To determine the effectiveness of the TLC programs, Saint Paul Public Schools asked the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota to conduct an evaluation study (see Bigelow et al., 2005). The multi-part study specifically examined the effectiveness of the newly created TLC programs with the established Language Academy programs. The primary questions for the larger study include: a) What are the perceptions of educators and parents of the capacity of the TLC and LA programs to meet the needs of elementary Hmong newcomers?; b) What, if any, are the differences between the programs in terms of students’ language learning achievement?; and c) If there are differences, are the differences sufficient to warrant the extra costs associated with TLCs?

This special issue draws from this larger research study to examine the experiences and perspectives of three groups who were involved in and affected by the TLCs. The three articles in this issue on the transition of Wat Tham Krabok Hmong refugees to Saint Paul Public Schools reflect the experiences of “stakeholder” groups that include principals, teachers, and Hmong parents. Bigelow, Basford, and Smidt’s article illustrate the perspectives of teachers and educational assistants on how well the TLCs and Language Academies supported the needs of the refugee children. Wahlstrom’s article offers insights from the school principals at elementary schools that received WTK children. Ngo’s article explores the experiences of WTK parents with their children’s education, arguing for a need for more research on the affective consequences of cultural capital.

These articles provide insight into the experiences of the most recent generation of Hmong immigrants to the United States. They contribute to the growing research on Hmong American education (see, e.g., Ngo & Lee, 2007), and attest to the need for practices, policies, and research that attend to the specific needs of different immigrant groups.

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