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**Pre-school Literacy Development:
Opportunities and Challenges for Hmong Children in WORDS WORK!**

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About the Authors

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ABSTRACT

Some Hmong parents have been able to raise literate, academically successful children despite many obstacles. Unfortunately, many other Hmong parents have not met with such success. A number of studies about Hmong refugees have documented the many challenges that Hmong students face in the K-12 education system, including entering school with little fluency in English; needing to receive English as a second language (ESL) support despite having been born in the United States; and not being able to obtain homework assistance due to their parents' lack of formal education. Very little information is, however, available regarding Hmong pre-school children's literacy development. Many research studies have found that children's early experiences play a critical role throughout their lives. The body of literature on child development emphasizes the importance of access to learning opportunities at home, in the community, and at school. Furthermore, neuroscientists and child development experts agree that well-designed programs that promote healthy cognitive, emotional and social development can improve children's educational prospects. Drawing from five years of qualitative and quantitative data collected for the formative evaluation of the Words Work! Initiative, a special project of The Saint Paul Foundation, in Minnesota, we argue that Hmong children's literacy development and preparation for academic success is supported by effective instructional practices that attend to children's culture, intentionally address early literacy development and connect parents with meaningful activities that build on family strengths and give parents practical skills to support their child's progress.

INTRODUCTION

Some Hmong parents have been able to raise literate, academically successful children despite many obstacles. Unfortunately, some other Hmong parents have not met with such success. A number of studies about Hmong refugees have documented the many challenges that Hmong students face in the K-12 education system, including entering school with little fluency in English; needing to receive English as a second language (ESL) support despite having been born in the United States; and not being able to obtain homework assistance due to their parents' lack of formal education.¹ However, very little information is available regarding Hmong children's early literacy experiences.²

Researchers have well documented the importance of home activities to children's development of written language. Because researchers have been interested in how literacy activities operated in homes with families and how these experiences might influence children's attitudes to and knowledge about literacy,³ Hmong children's literacy development is particularly interesting to explore. Research shows that by age three, young bilingual children have already been exposed to a number of home and community factors that will impact their bilingual proficiency. Children with a strong foundation in their home language and continuing support for that language through home activities, such as book reading, are developing skills that will later transfer to English language abilities.⁴ Active, intense, and meaningful participation of parents and families in the learning activities of their child is fundamental to closing the gap for literacy-disadvantaged children.⁵ Interactions between adults and children as they encounter literacy are significant in shaping literacy practices and the human relationships that surround and are embedded in literacy.⁶ But, what happens to Hmong children whose parents are illiterate and speak little or no English? How is learning supported at home? How do young Hmong children with limited English fluency learn in the classroom? In a bilingual early education classroom, children could be expected to have their home language supported at the same time that they are beginning to acquire English. However, the reality is that bilingual teachers are not readily available to provide that support.

This paper presents findings from five years of formative evaluation of the Words Work! Initiative in Minnesota. The Words Work! Initiative is a collaboration among The Saint Paul Foundation, Ramsey Action Program Head Start and the Minnesota Literacy Council. Although Head Start is a program for all low-income students, this paper focuses primarily on the Hmong population, with the exception of student assessment results that compare Hmong children to other Asian/Pacific Islander children and other children of color. We argue that Hmong children's literacy development and preparation for academic success is supported by implementing effective instructional practices that attend to children's culture, intentionally addressing early literacy development and connecting parents with meaningful activities that build on family strengths and give parents practical skills to support their child's progress. We offer insights and observations regarding Hmong parents' involvement in their young children's literacy development and specific instructional practices that teachers and Head Start staff used to meet the needs of Hmong children.

Research questions this paper addresses include:

- What is the performance level of Hmong pre-school children compared to other Asian/Pacific Islander children and to other children of color?

- To what extent do factors such as fluency in English, age, and enrollment status affect Hmong children, other Asian/Pacific Islander children, and other children of color?
- What effective instructional practices/strategies have teachers implemented to increase Hmong children's literacy and English proficiency skills?
- What are effective parenting practices that contribute to Hmong children's early literacy development?
- How are Hmong pre-school children whose parents may be illiterate supported at home in their literacy development?

BACKGROUND OF WORDS WORK! INITIATIVE

The Words Work! Initiative (initially known as the Children's Literacy Initiative) is a \$1.9 million partnership initiated by the F. R. Bigelow Foundation between The Saint Paul Foundation, Ramsey Action Program (RAP) Head Start and the Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC) in Minnesota.⁷ It is an early literacy program for children in St. Paul with two goals: 1) to increase literacy skills of children aged three to five to prepare them to be successful readers and learners when they are in school and 2) to increase the family's role in the development and delivery of high quality early literacy experiences for their children. Specific goals for children include:

- Increasing speaking and listening vocabulary;
- Increasing phonological awareness;
- Developing print awareness;
- Promoting attempts to print;
- Learning the letters of the alphabet; and
- Learning to count from one to 10 and meaningful count of at least 10 objects.

Specific goals for families include:

- Increasing literacy activities in family life;
- Helping family members reinforce classroom goals through home visits;
- Achieving home environments conducive to the child's literacy development; and
- Increasing quality parent-child interactions.

The strategies Words Work! uses to achieve its goals include:

- Developing curriculum support services and materials;
- Training classroom staff members;
- Providing classroom mentors;
- Providing equipment and materials to support an enhanced literacy environment; and
- Providing literacy home visitors to identify specific parent needs, set literacy goals with parents, build parent skills that support parent and child literacy, and link planning, practice, evaluation and reflection.⁸

A total of 1,634 children were enrolled in one of four Works Work! Head Start centers over the course of five academic school years (1999-2003), of which 27 percent (447) are Hmong. This figure represents children enrolled at the beginning of each academic year.⁹ Approximately one-third of those children represented students who re-enrolled as second year students.

BACKGROUND OF THE HMONG

Brief Hmong History

The nature of struggles that Hmong Americans face in supporting their children's education needs to be understood in historical context. The Hmong living in the United States today are an ethnic group from Laos. Very few people had access to formal education and the written Hmong language used today was developed only in the mid 1950s. Because there is no Hmong nation state, it is common for most people to have never heard of the Hmong and/or understand the reasons why over 100,000 Hmong were granted refugee status to enter the United States nearly three decades ago. Beginning in the early 1960s during the United States' involvement in Vietnam, American military personnel recruited Hmong and other ethnic minority groups in Laos to be America's foot soldiers. Given the secretive nature of United States foreign policies during the Vietnam eras, no historical legal document exists describing this alliance. Without written documents an alleged United States promise of protection in exchange for support remains contested. Hmong leaders and their supporters fought for the last three decades for recognition of their contributions. Having aligned with the Americans, the Hmong faced political persecution when the Americans withdrew from Southeast Asia. Consequently, they sought refuge in neighboring countries and were granted refugee status. Thus began the mass exodus in 1975 when the Communist regime took over Laos.¹⁰

United States refugee resettlement policies dispersed families to lessen the economic and social burden on local communities. Dispersal policies isolated many families and ignored the strong family, kinship, and ethnic ties that the Hmong saw as essential to their survival in the United States.¹¹ When they learned where others resettled, the refugees often migrated to places with larger Hmong populations.

Demographics

Although the first Hmong families arrived in the United States in 1975, the vast majority of Hmong refugees resettled in the United States during the early 1980s. According to the 2000 Census, 186,310 persons of Hmong origin were enumerated in the 50 states and Washington, D.C., representing a 97 percent increase in the census enumerations from 1990 Census. Given the multiple barriers to completing Census forms, including language, illiteracy, and distrust of government, community leaders across the nation estimated the number to be around 283,000.¹² Just over 65,000 Hmong were enumerated in California by the 2000 census. The next largest populations were recorded in Minnesota (41,800) and Wisconsin (33,791). Although the largest population enumerated was in California, the 2000 census enumerations indicate the strongest growth in the Hmong population occurred in parts of the Southern and Midwestern United States. The largest metropolitan concentration of Hmong according to the 2000 census lived in

Minneapolis-Saint Paul (40,707). The second largest concentration was in Fresno (22,456) followed by Sacramento-Yolo (16,621), Milwaukee-Racine (8,078) and Merced, CA (6,148). The 10 largest metropolitan concentrations in the 2000 census of Hmong included Stockton-Lodi, CA; Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, WI; Wausau, WI; Hickory-Morganton-Lenoir, NC; and Detroit-Ann Arbor-Flint, MI.

The Hmong population tended to be young, linguistically isolated and unschooled. More than half (56 percent) of the 2000 enumerated Hmong population were under 18 years old compared to about a quarter of the entire United States population. According to the 2000 census data the percentage of Hmong in the United States who were linguistically isolated (34.8 percent) remained much higher than in the nation's population as a whole (4.1 percent). The United States Hmong were strongly overrepresented in the 2000 census no-schooling completed category (45.3 percent) compared to the United States population as a whole (1.4 percent).¹³

METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were implemented in the Words Work! overall evaluation.¹⁴ This mixed methodology was chosen to provide triangulation of the data and to hear the voices of parents and teachers who work with Hmong children. For this paper, we focus on selective student assessment data and findings from Hmong parent focus groups, staff focus groups, and classroom observations.

Quantitative Methods

Instruments

Several assessment instruments are used in this paper to answer the research questions. Assessment practices were intentionally integrated into classroom procedures whenever possible. Children were assessed in the fall and again in the spring with the following: Boehm 3 Preschool Test of Basic Concepts (pre-school version); Alphabet recognition protocol; SPARK curriculum assessment; Book awareness checklist; and Phonological assessment. The Boehm (Ann E. Boehm, published by The Psychological Corporation) is a nationally norm-referenced standardized test individually administered to measure children's knowledge of basic relational concepts important for language and cognitive development. The others are performance-based assessments. All assessments had a script for administration. Classroom teachers completed the SPARK assessment for each child based on their observations. Children were then assessed individually on book awareness and phonological skills. A random sample of Hmong speaking children was selected to take the Boehm, book, and phonological assessments in their home language. The sample was assessed in two languages to study the impact of language on assessment scores.

Population

This analysis only includes assessment scores of all children of color, of which Hmong children are a subset, who tested in both fall and spring and had stayed within their classroom cohorts. This includes 1,082 children: 754 new to Words Work! and 328 re-enrolled as second year students. All children were then grouped into three study categories for comparative

analysis: Group 1-Hmong children; Group 2-Other Asian/Pacific Islander children; and Group 3-Other children of color. Group 1 consisted of 350 Hmong children (32 percent); Group 2 had 51 (5 percent) other Asian/Pacific Islanders; and Group 3 had 681 (63%) other children of color. Group 2 were mostly Vietnamese with a small percentage of other Asian/Pacific Islander children. Group 3 were half Black/African American, one-third Hispanic/Latino, less than one-fifth African, and a small percentage of American Indian children.

Demographics across groups were similar with the exception of English Language status. Table 1 below outlines the distribution of demographic characteristics across the three study groups.

Demographic		Hmong	Other Asian/ Pacific Islander	Other Children of Color
Gender	Female	167 (48%)	27 (53%)	351 (52%)
	Male	183 (52%)	24 (47%)	350 (48%)
Age ¹⁵	Three	79 (23%)	13 (25%)	214 (31%)
	Four	271 (77%)	38 (75%)	467 (69%)
English Language Status	Fluent	53 (15%)	32 (63%)	464 (68%)
	Non-Fluent	297 (85%)	19 (37%)	217 (32%)
Primary Language	Hmong	341 (97%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Vietnamese	0 (0%)	33 (66%)	0 (0%)
	Cambodian	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	0 (0%)
	Other Asian	1 (1%)	9 (8%)	0 (0%)
	Spanish	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	153 (22%)
	Somali	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	65 (10%)
	Oromo	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	19 (3%)
	Tigringa	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (2%)
	English	8 (2%)	8 (16%)	414 (61%)
	Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16 (2%)
Enrollment Status	First Year	257 (73%)	35 (69%)	462 (68%)
	Second Year	93 (27%)	16 (31%)	219 (32%)
<u>n</u> = 1082		350 (32%)	51 (5%)	681 (63%)

Assessment Items

The assessment items were selected to ensure consistent elements across five years and literacy predictors identified by the early childhood field and the experiences of this program's implementers. Based on a collaborative effort and discussions, the following items were chosen for this paper:

- The Boehm was selected to capture children's knowledge of relational concepts, and to provide comparative norm-referenced data. Results were reported as percentiles and as raw scores that ranged from 0-52.

- Alphabet knowledge was chosen as a predictor associated with literacy development. Children were asked to identify uppercase letters from 26 randomly presented cards.
- Four SPARK curriculum assessments items were selected: understanding of opposites; following two-step directions, understanding of positional words, and being able to count to 10 or higher by rote. The first three items were identified as critical skills children use to learn to read. The last item measured children's ability to count numerically. All four SPARK items were recorded as nominal scores: yes, emerging, or no.
- Book awareness was included to document children's knowledge of book operation. The results were reported on an ordinal scale. The scale, however, differed over the years. This change limited pre and post analysis since a common scale to describe progress was unavailable. These scores were scaled from 0-7 in Years 1-4 and 0-6 in Year 5.
- Two phonological items, identifies sounds and rhyming, were included to assess children's sound identification and rhyming skills. Children were asked to provide initial sounds to words and identify and generate rhyming words. Rhyming was included in this paper since it is sound-based similar to the Hmong language. The rhyming results were reported on an ordinal scale. The scale, however, differed over the years. This change also limited pre and post analysis since a common scale was unavailable. Phonological item sounds were scaled from 0-20 in Year 1 and from 0-6 in years 2-5; rhyming was scaled from 0-10 in Year 1 and from 0-6 in Years 2-5. Since the scales have changed from year to year, the data set will be split by year with common scales and reported by themes.

Analysis Procedures

Two analysis procedures were used to synthesize demographic and assessment results:

- Variables with ordinal scales, the Boehm Test and the ABC assessment, were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance. This method allowed us to evaluate mean differences based on study group membership while accounting for the impact of demographic variables on test scores. Adjusted scores were computed for each study group; these scores were based on making the demographic characteristics of children across all study groups equivalent. Fall-to-spring performance was calculated using fall scores as a covariate (i.e., kept scores constant) to calculate growth. The evaluation team carefully chose variables that historically impacted Words Work! children's performance and were supported by research. Identified variables were English language ability, age, enrollment status, and study group membership (i.e., race).¹⁶
- All SPARK assessment items with discrete categories were dichotomized. Various cross-tabulations with demographic characteristics and scores were performed. The results were then transferred to an Odds Ratio Calculator to perform categorical analysis¹⁷. This procedure allowed us to test for main effects and stability across dichotomous covariates (i.e., with different study groups and variation in demographics).

Also included were general frequencies, basic descriptive statistics, independent sample T-test, and paired-sample T-test.¹⁸

Qualitative Methods

Focus Groups

Focus groups provided an opportunity to hear directly from parents their perceptions of children's literacy development and the extent to which the school program supported it. They are also used as one way to learn about factors impacting literacy development for Hmong students and characteristics of parent involvement in their child's education. These conversations provided rich detail in parents' languages and allowed parents to frame the schooling experience as they knew it. Parents of children participating in the Words Work! program were invited to focus groups in the fall and spring of each year for five years. The evaluation team worked with center staff to invite parents to attend and teachers used strategies such as providing child care, transportation and a family meal to support their participation. Evaluators conducted language-specific focus groups based on the center's demographics. One English group and at least one language-specific focus group, usually Hmong, Spanish, and Somali or Vietnamese, were conducted at each of the four centers. Parents chose the language group they wished to attend. Each focus group also included a recorder who took notes. Some focus groups were audio-recorded and notes for each were analyzed using content analysis techniques. From fall 1999 to spring 2004, 32 focus groups with more than 200 Hmong parents were held. Focus groups were facilitated by either a bilingual evaluation team member or another Hmong speaking, trained facilitator and notes were taken by a bi-lingual recorder.

Focus groups with staff members from all four sites were also held twice a year to provide opportunities for them to share their observations about children's literacy development progress and the classroom strategies, parent involvement practices, and organizational practices that contributed to that progress. Teachers were asked to reflect on how their work made a difference for children and families. Facilitated by three evaluators, the notes for each were also analyzed using content analysis techniques.

Classroom Observations

Additional information came from the classroom experience. Observations were used to gain insight into the literacy environment of the classroom and deepen the understanding of teaching strategies and instructional techniques. Observations in each classroom by the evaluation team took place three times a year during the first four years. These observations identified effective instructional practices and strategies in several areas, including: print awareness; phonological awareness; alphabet; numbers/shapes/colors; language; parent-Family involvement; multicultural and lingual; multi-sensory/hands-on activities; and arts as follow-up activities. Each observation began with a brief conversation between the evaluator and teacher about the class goals and activities and ended with a conversation for clarification, reflection and wrap-up.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations exist with the quantitative analysis. First, some researchers and school practitioners argue that pre-school children are un-testable, testing formats are

inappropriate (i.e., asking children to respond to various test items), and that results are unreliable¹⁹. This does not necessarily mean that they lack literacy skills. Researchers have found that English learning students are less likely to react or respond to assessments in classroom settings than fluent English speaking students²⁰. While no response generally means the child does not know the answer, the meaning of no response from an English learning child is unclear. The child might have the skill or understand the concept but unable to understand the assessment or respond in the language of the assessor. To reduce potential testing harm to children, Words Work! staff carefully chose instruments that included authentic assessments based on observations, assessment administration protocols, testing children in their primary language, and building ongoing feedback to promote program improvements.

Secondly, study group classification posed a challenge. The main study group, Group 1, represented children in a specific ethnic category, Hmong. The second and third group lumped children from different ethnic categories. Group 2 represented several different Asian/Pacific Islander children with distinct cultural differences. This group was also the smallest with relatively larger standard errors than the other two study groups. Statistical differences were difficult to detect given this circumstance. In reverse, Group 3 had the largest number of children in the study. Again, this group consisted of children from several distinct ethnicities and cultural experiences.²¹ Since the focus of the study is on Hmong children as compared to other children of color, children of color were separated into two groups: (1) other Asian/Pacific Islander children; and (2) other children of color. The other children of color group could be further separated in the future to isolate effects. This isolation is beyond this paper's scope.

Third, differences were also observed between centers and within classrooms. It was not feasible to cut the data by center for this study given the small numbers represented by year and classroom. Three of the five centers have been part of Words Work! Initiative for five consecutive years while the other two were involved for two to three years. Also, the number of Words Work! classrooms has increased over the years.²² These changes resulted from structural modifications in Head Start. One new center was added during year three to Words Work! and another center dropped. Finally, we are able to account for about half of the variations with test scores. Several environmental circumstances at home or at school could have influenced test scores. Information was not collected on families and siblings to link to specific test scores, which limited analysis.²³

Fourth, data from classroom observations were limited to only four of the five years. In the fifth year a program education specialist conducted the observation using a different and simplified instrument to build capacity within the Head Start system. Consequently, data used for this analysis are only from years one to four.

FINDINGS

The Words Work! Initiative had a positive impact on Hmong children's literacy development and parent's perception of their role and involvement in their child's learning.

Children's Literacy Ability

Hmong children, on average, made statistically significant progress from fall to spring in a variety of literacy skill areas. Differences in assessment results existed among the three study groups: Hmong children, other Asian/Pacific Islander children, and other children of color. Hmong children scored similar to other Asian/Pacific Islanders but lower than the other children of color. The difference, in most cases, can be explained by language, age, and enrollment status (when these variables were factored in the analysis, Hmong children were performing similar to other children in the comparison groups). When researchers examined growth from fall to spring, they also found that Hmong children's literacy abilities grew at similar rates to the other studied groups. Key findings are discussed below²⁴:

Vocabulary

All children, regardless of study group membership and enrollment status (one or two years of Words Work!), struggled with the Boehm vocabulary standardized test. The low scoring was expected because the normed group from the children were compared varied significantly from the studied children, with the normed group being overwhelmingly English speakers and from mixed income families. Although significant progress was noted from fall-to-spring, close to 77 percent of Hmong, 64 percent of other Asian/Pacific Islander, and 51 percent other children of color scored at or below the 25th percentile in the spring. In contrast, the results from the teacher observations, using the SPARK curriculum assessment, showed that the majority of the Hmong children's vocabulary developed. Teachers in the spring observed 56 to 60 percent of Hmong children understanding positional words and opposites as compared to 20 to 26 percent in the fall. One explanation for this SPARK finding could be attributed to children's English fluency ability. However, when controlling for fluency, statistical improvements were noted for children who re-enrolled (enrollment being the main effect). Furthermore, when children were also tested in their primary language, scores improved significantly. This finding suggests that repetition and practice with word recognition helped all study group children learn literacy skills regardless of fluency status.

ABCs

Hmong children learned the alphabet faster than the other children of color. Children at the start of the school year appeared to have similar alphabet skills and all made significant progress from fall to spring. The rate of growth was significantly higher for Hmong than other children of color. Interestingly, language status, age, and enrollment status were no longer significant predictors (i.e., these variables did not influence or predict how well a child will perform).

Phonological skills

All studied children displayed difficulties with phonological skills. Hmong children, in particular, scored significantly lower than other children of color. Reasons are unclear for this difference. When Hmong children were tested in their home language, their scores on sound identification was a quarter of a point less than in English (this difference was statistically significant). On rhyming, the average scores were identical in Hmong and in English.

Other literacy skills

Hmong children, like all studied children, appeared to excel on following two-step directions, counting to 10 or higher by rote, and operating a book. The differences among study group were small. When children were tested in their home language, they scored statistically significantly higher than when tested in English. The relationship between fluency and enrollment status on results was the strongest. Children who were fluent in English and re-enrolled appeared to perform better than children not fluent and newly enrolled.

Instructional Practices/Parent Involvement Strategies

Research studies show that children enter the classroom with language, and thoughts about how the world is working, and with ideas about how to behave. Therefore, the teacher of culturally diverse students becomes a cultural liaison and has the responsibility for developing a connection between the student's culture and the school's culture.²⁵ Children with a strong foundation in their home language and continuing support for that language through home activities, such as book reading are developing skills that will transfer later to English.²⁶ In a bilingual early education classroom, children could be expected to have their home language supported at the same time that they are beginning to acquire English. If children are allowed to thrive in their first language, they will continue to develop their linguistic and, therefore, their pre-literacy skills in their home language, maintaining the match between home support and the activities in the classroom.²⁷

Instructional practices

Classroom-based factors influencing children's literacy achievement identified in the Words Work! evaluation include: 1) intentional instruction and goal setting; 2) individualized, responsive instruction based on teacher observation of individual needs; 3) increased use of home language by teachers and others; 4) increased responsiveness to children's cultures; and 5) literacy-rich curriculum and environment. Teachers developed nurturing relationships with their students and frequently helped them make literacy connections while praising their efforts. Some included Hmong alphabet and numbers in lessons. Bilingual/bicultural Hmong staff often used words and counted in Hmong with the class. A few non-Hmong staff have also learned Hmong words/phrases and numbers and regularly used them throughout the day.²⁸

Through classroom observations and staff focus groups, several other factors emerged that seemed to influence children's literacy development. A major influence was the change in teacher expectations related to student achievement. Initially, teachers were skeptical about the

potential literacy success of children and stressed the risk factors, such as two working parents, poverty, limited English language. In addition, teachers cited that parents lacked understanding of the American school system and were often not expected to actively participate. At the end of the first year, teachers who initially expressed concern that students would not progress quickly talked about the progress they saw with students in the classroom and in the pre- post assessment scores , and how they thought that “teacher attitudes reflecting higher expectations for student success” made a difference.

Over time Words Work! teachers changed how they organized and conducted their classrooms in order to promote children’s literacy development. They carefully created print rich classroom environments that included bilingual materials, and some non-Hmong classroom teachers learned to communicate in Hmong language, providing a welcoming environment for Hmong parents and students.

A critical change teachers made is in increasing their ability to use evaluation results to make data based decisions about their classrooms and children’s progress. Through training with the evaluators and Words Work! project staff, teachers not only learned new techniques but also had time to reflect on their practice and the influence of cultural contexts for their learners. The Words Work! project provided additional resources for teachers to support their professional development and teaching practices. Teachers used what they were learning to make a difference for Hmong children. Examples of teacher practice and support from Words Work! that seem to contribute to Hmong children’s learning include:

- Teachers purposefully identified what worked and did not work to increase literacy levels based on their observation and evaluation results;
- Teacher intentionally planned instruction based on reflection of student progress and connections with center and classroom goals;
- Mentor teachers in Words Work! classrooms supported “ ‘intentionality’ and every classroom situation becoming an opportunity and was modified to aimed at literacy—helping the children to focus and notice’”; and
- Mentor teachers supported instructional efforts with modeling and suggestions for activities.

Parent Involvement Strategies

During the focus groups, parents demonstrated a keen interest in their child’s academic performance, including hoping teachers would teach their children how to add, multiply or read in pre-school. Placing their child in the Head Start program from the parents’ perspective was a major indicator of the parents’ commitment to their child’s learning. Hmong parents in the focus groups while feeling initially that they had little to offer their children, in later years talked actively about the various activities and materials they used to support their child’s literacy development. Parents became increasingly clear about the strategies teachers used to support their involvement with their child’s literacy development. The key strategies identified in the evaluation were: providing more information to parents in their language; increasing the number of staff members who could speak Hmong; and increasing engagement with literacy home visitors. They added additional examples of how teachers supported their involvement with their children’s literacy development:

- Improved communication to build parent understanding of the classroom activities and purposes for those activities, as well as building parent capacity to understand how they might be involved and contribute to their child's literacy development;
- Provided additional information sent home in Hmong about the class structure and activities;
- Revamped parent meetings, including over time more hands-on and interaction. At one center, parents helped plan the parent meetings that included activities parents could do to support children's literacy development. Translators attended the parent meetings.
- Increased "homework" for children along with instructions for how parents could use it; and
- Reinforced information shared with parents during teacher home visits and coordinated the information provided for parents with literacy home visitors. One parent said:

We have a Hmong assistant who comes to my home and helps my child do her homework. They read books together and sometimes they ask me to get involved. When the home visitor leaves, I continue the reading and ask my child questions.

However, parents still struggled with their own literacy and work schedules that often prevented them from being as involved as they would like to be. Over the years, parents reiterated that having few teachers who spoke Hmong and limited availability of books and other resources in Hmong, also limited their ability to be actively involved in school activities and consistent supporters of their child's learning. Specific examples Hmong parents provided of limiting factors included:

- Absence of bilingual teacher, teacher aid or staff person;
- Limited ability to provide support in the classroom due to language barriers, which can lead to confusion about children's demonstrated skills at home versus at school; and
- Lack of teacher multicultural skills and proficiencies to effectively teach other cultures.

Family Practices

Literacy practices at home are varied and complex for Hmong pre-school children. Parent focus groups repeatedly found that Hmong parents want their children to be successful in school and that parents supported their education at home in some way. Parents found ways to help their children even if they did not have experience with formal education or knowledge of the subjects their children were learning, such as counting steps on staircases and helping their children practice writing their names. Such support is documented in other research conducted with Hmong parents who felt that they could not teach academic or vocational skills to their children in the United States, but that they could teach them how to be good people.²⁹

Initially, Hmong parents in the Words Work! program were often hesitant to share details of their and their child's experiences with the schools and the literacy program. Their reticence was often associated with their challenges in speaking English, unfamiliarity with the organization of American schools, and/or literacy levels. In the third year of the program, parents' responses changed. Hmong parents who participated in the focus groups indicated that they had increased knowledge about the schooling context and were more willing to talk about what worked and did not work to increase literacy levels for their children. Contributing factors included: interactive parent meetings that involved parents in classroom activities their children

were experiencing; increased communication about the classroom through newsletters in home languages, teacher conferences, and increased effort by teachers to connect with parents in their language; developmentally appropriate “home work” activities for parents and children to practice newly learned literacy skills and also explained the activity’s relationship to the literacy skill; and increased familiarity with the focus group as a way for parents to share their experiences with the program.

Parent involvement with their child’s learning also changed overtime. By the end of the fifth program year, changes in parents’ responses demonstrated:

- Increased knowledge about the Words Work! program, how classrooms worked and what their children were doing in the classroom;
- Increased reading to their children and working with them at home on informal learning activities;
- Slight increases in participation on field trips and volunteering in classrooms;
- Increased comfort with and interest in contributing their ideas during the focus groups; and
- Increased identification of themselves as primary persons, along with the teachers, who could influence their child’s literacy development.

Representative parent quotes include:

I know I cannot read and write English but I am really good in math. I can always help out in math, numbers, and memorization.

Since we do not know how to read or write, it’s important for us to show our child how to do things. Learn from examples as well as observe the older children. We also depend on our older children to help this child read.

My child loves Hmong folktales. I spend a lot of time telling these stories to him and now he can tell folktales better than I can. He has a good imagination and it’s very funny to listen to him tell his stories.

Home-activities were both parent and student initiated and included several categories, such as: conversation about school; reading and story telling; playing games and doing chores; and helping with homework and learning routines. Each category is discussed below followed by representative quotes:

- **Conversations about school.** Parents spoke often of talking to their children about school. Two parents said:

I try to talk to my child before she goes to bed about how her day went, such as what she liked or disliked.

My child likes to talk about her friends at home. I think it’s good for her to be around other kids who are not family members.

- **Reading and storytelling.** Parents and siblings read and told stories to the children, and children in the Words Work! program “read” to their parent and others. Parents often

noted the importance of telling stories reflecting Hmong culture to their children. Parent quotes include:

My older children help the younger ones to read and write.

I tell stories and folktales on the weekend to my kids.

We look at pictures and tell the stories in the pictures.

- **Playing games and doing chores.** Parents found innovative ways to include literacy skills in fun activities and in routine chores in which their children participated. Some of their quotes follow:

We play memory games.

Building blocks, puzzles, and also videos have helped them learn a lot.

I divide up household chores. All the children have to participate. They know what their jobs are, even the little ones. Everybody has to help out.

- **Helping with “homework” and learning routines.** Especially by the end of the fifth year, parents began to talk more about “homework” and increasingly cited ways they worked on learning activities (homework) teachers sent home and found ways to embed learning routines in children’s home lives. Representative quotes include:

I help them with shapes and colors.

I am happy with my child’s behavior. He would take his own shoes and put them in the closet. He also eats by himself and is actually helping to wipe the table. I am most happy with his behavior because he now knows how to clean up after himself.

We try to make a habit of counting, and saying the alphabet every day at a certain time. Usually when the older children start doing their homework, I try to have my Head Start child study with them.

LESSONS LEARNED

Evaluation findings show that intentional strategies that complement and support Hmong children and their parents contribute to children’s learning. Instructional and parent involvement strategies have certainly helped Hmong children develop literacy skills, but we believe that more concrete steps are needed in order to ensure that Hmong pre-school children have greater access to learning opportunities that prepare them for school. Over the past five years, some lessons were learned about useful classroom practices and strategies, organizational practices, family involvement, and evaluating a pre-school literacy project.

Classroom Practice and Strategies

Classroom observation, teacher reflection and professional development stressed the importance of the following instructional practices:

- Consistent repetition and reinforcement of literacy skills helped children with various items on the SPARK checklist.
- Creating classroom literacy-based routines that clearly demonstrate expectations of children and are consistently practiced, help Hmong children understand what is required while they are acquiring language.
- Hmong students were English learners benefit from support in understanding classroom routines and directions from bilingual staff. The role of bilingual assistants changed from the first two years of mostly translating everything to being more of a teacher and encouraging children to use English when they know that the children understand.
- Bilingual Hmong staff reading SPARK stories in both English and Hmong not only benefited those English learning children , but also other non-Hmong students' exposure to another language benefited.

Organizational Practices

Organizational operations provide the needed structure and procedures to support the classroom environment, teachers and climate for learning that was found in the Words Work! program. Two key organizational strategies included:

- Professional development of teachers is central to this literacy program's success. Effective training strategies include using a mentor teacher in the classroom to model and encourage effective instructional practices, sharing of best practices and promising practices among the teaching staff within and across centers, and participating in professional conferences and off-site training with experienced professionals that offer practical options.
- Ongoing student assessment that directs instruction. Creating a safe environment for staff members to have data-based discussions about what works and what needs to improve to support literacy development contributed to Hmong student success.

Family Involvement Strategies

The vast majority of Hmong focus group parents have never attended any formal schooling, thus making it difficult for them to understand what is developmentally appropriate for children. Given the large family size of many Hmong families, parents often participate in Words Work! for more than one school year. Although not all parents participated throughout the five years, some themes exist across the years. Clearly, as parents become more involved with Words Work! and learn from one another, views about their role in their children's learning changed. We offer the following observations and insights regarding parent involvement strategies:

- Developing and refining effective two-way communication procedures increases parent involvement and participation. Having bilingual staff available to translate information, respond to questions, and call parents to invite and remind them of events encourages Hmong parents to become involved. Bilingual staff increases Hmong parents' comfort level in participating in school activities. For example, the likelihood of parents volunteering in a classroom increased when they communicated with teachers.

- Changing monthly parent meetings to “Family Fun Nights” and teaching parents about what students do throughout the school day increased parents’ understanding. Hands-on activities allowed parents to practice what their children did in school.
- Participating in Head Start activities and understanding what learning takes place with different activities, reduced Hmong parents’ complaints of too much play.
- Being encouraged by teachers and other parents in the focus groups to value the important role parents play in their children’s learning allowed Hmong parents to place greater emphasis on their role as their children’s teachers and reduced their pointing to their lack of a formal education to explain why they were “not qualified” to teach their children.

Evaluation Process and Implementation

Lessons learned about evaluating a pre-school literacy project over the past six years³⁰ enhanced both the validity and reliability of this paper’s data. Key lessons include:

- Evaluators fluent in the participants’ language must be included in the data collection and analysis process. A bilingual/bicultural evaluator establishes rapport faster with the participants than an English-speaking evaluator using a translator. Participants were able to express themselves more comfortably when the conversation was conducted in their native language without interruptions. Cultural nuances were missed when relying on the translator for the information. A native speaker is more likely to ask a question in culturally appropriate ways. In addition, cultural understanding enhanced the data interpretation.
- When few bi-lingual evaluators are available, select a professional translator with potentially suitable language skills and teach them the required data collection skills. Understanding the evaluation context and using appropriate evaluation skills are as important as the bi-lingual ability. A professional translator is more than a person who speaks two languages. The professional translator is fluent in both languages and is also able to understand the culturally appropriate use of the language. This evaluation team’s experience found that a few people who professed bi-lingual ability mistranslated. The error can result in insulting the participants and collecting invalid data. In addition, those with professional translation ability needed more than language skills to reliably collect data. For example, the evaluation team used a bi-lingual translator who reported he had focus group facilitation. However, the team discovered that based on his perspective of male-female relationships in his culture, he directed what mothers should say and the data he submitted did not reflect the groups’ perspectives. From this and other experiences the evaluation team learned to recruit professionally trained translators and build the data collection skills. Their participation in interpreting the data enhanced the data’s validity.
- Staff members were more likely to use evaluation information to make programmatic decisions when the program managers referred to and used the evaluation information throughout the year. Focused discussions and activities targeting specific skills brought about the greatest improvements.
- Evaluation tools must be continuously refined, particularly in a field such as pre-school literacy education with few standardized instruments to accurately assess literacy skills, and be aligned with programmatic intent and activities.

- A home-language pre-school literacy assessment more accurately assesses the child's skill or knowledge than an English assessment. An English assessment for an English learner assesses the understanding and use of English and does not assess the learned skill or knowledge.

CHALLENGES

Several overall programmatic challenges continue to interfere with children's successful acquisition of literacy skills, including:

- Understanding and integrating diverse cultures into instruction given the increasingly diverse populations;
- Maintaining the high level of professional enthusiasm with budget shortfalls at RAP Head Start leading to reductions in teacher hours;
- Identifying instructional practices aimed at reducing literacy disparities between English language learners and English speakers and children of color and white children;
- Lack of resources to provide language specific information and resources to all families; and
- High-turnover of teaching staff due to persistently low wages in the pre-school field.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers agree that the pre-school years play a critical role in children's long-term literacy success. The environments in which children live have received the greatest attention in the research literature on the possible causes of school failure among the low-income families.³¹ Poor families often lack the literacy rich environments of middle-income families. The Words Work! findings reveal that pre-school experience and family support do make a difference in a child's literacy success. Given the changes in education policies that call for greater accountability and what we have learned from five years of evaluating the Words Work! program, we make the following policy recommendations:

- **Data driven decisions that support learning and reduce disparity.** On-going and timely data to direct instruction is necessary if teachers are going to be able to target and implement quality instruction. This study shows that Hmong children do make statistically significant gains in their academic progress. In some areas, the gains were large and in others, the gains were small. Words Work! teachers used the assessment results, discussed areas where children excelled and struggled, and modified instructional practices to increase Hmong children's learning of various literacy skills.
- **Adequate resources to reduce staff turnover, promote use of home language, and provide hands-on learning opportunities for Hmong parents.** Budget crises have resulted in reduction in staff, increased workload for teachers and center managers, and reduced amount of time to plan and implement innovative strategies. In many cases, when Hmong children were tested in their home language, they scored significantly higher than when tested in English. Resources are needed to promote fluency and mastery of first language within classroom contexts and slowly transition to the use of

English as children's fluency level increases. This requires the availability of bilingual teachers. Hmong parents in Words Work! benefited from Head Start activities that showed them how to teach their children, increase their understanding of their children's school experience, and allowed them to interact with other Hmong parents that influence how they view their role in their children's learning.

- **Appropriate teacher preparation.** The increasingly changing demographics require that teachers be prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Institutions need to rethink how they train teachers around assessment, effective instructional practices, and supportive services beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSION

During the last few decades, pre-school literacy development has received much attention. Researchers and practitioners have been interested in how written language is developed among young children. While some research has highlighted the many barriers that Hmong American children experience in the K-12 education system, very little research has captured early literacy development among young Hmong children. Hmong parents' limited exposure to written language and their lack of experience with formal education in the United States indicate to many that their children are disadvantaged in academic success. Findings from the Words Work! program evaluation show that engaging Hmong parents in hands-on activities increases their understanding of what their pre-school children experience. Parents' perceptions about their role in their children's learning and parenting practices changed as they interact with classroom teachers, other Head Start staff, and other parents through Words Work! family activities. Furthermore, Hmong parents creatively found ways to contribute to their children's learning that were not limited by their literacy levels.

The Words Work! Initiative had a positive impact on children's literacy development. Increased time in the program also benefited children as children who re-enrolled appeared to perform better than newly enrolled children. Overall, children excelled with book operation, alphabet knowledge, and other curriculum-based skills, and struggled with vocabulary and phonological skill. In most cases, large gains were noted for all Words Work! study group children. Clearly, repetition, literacy rich curriculum and classroom environments, culturally sensitive and responsive instructional practices and targeting instruction based on assessment results helped all children learn literacy skills regardless of their English fluency status.

NOTES

¹ See Trueba, E. T. (1990). *Cultural conflict and adaptation: The case of the Hmong children in American society*. New York: Falmer Press; Walker-Moffat, W. (1995). *The other side of the Asian American success story*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications; Olsen, L. (1997). *An invisible crisis: The educational needs of Asian Pacific American youth*. New York: Asian American/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy; and Thao, P. (1999). *Mong education at the crossroads*. Lanham: University Press of America, Inc.

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³ Tabors, Patton O. and Snow, Catherine E. (2001). "Young Bilingual Children and Early Literacy Development," in Neuman, Susan B. and Dickinson, David K. (eds) *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. New York & London: The Guilford Press, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵ Smith, Eric J., Pellin, Barbara J., and Agruso, Susan A. (2003). *Bright Beginnings: An Effective Literacy-Focused PreK Program for Educationally Disadvantaged Four-Year-Old Children*. Arlington: Educational Research Service.

⁶ Cairney, Trevor H. (2003). "Literacy within Family Life" in Hall, Nigel, Larson, Joanne, and Marsh, Jackie (eds.) *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, P. 94.

⁷ See Appendix A for a detailed chronology, philosophy and description of the evaluation.

⁸ Literacy home visits have been spun off as of this year.

⁹ Please note that other children were enrolled over the course of each year. However, pre and post data includes only those enrolled throughout the entire school year.

¹⁰ See Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: 1994) and Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: 1993) for background of United States alliance with the Hmong.

¹¹ López, M. G. (2000). "The language situation of the Hmong, Khmer, and Laotian communities in the United States," in McKay, Sandra Lee and Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia (eds.) *New Immigrants in the United States: Readings for Second Language Educators*, London: Cambridge University Press, p. 240.

¹² See www.hndlink.org.

¹³ Data referred to here are completed by the Hmong National Development (HND) and Hmong Resource Center Census Data Project by Mark Pfeifer and Hmong scholars throughout the United States. Publication forthcoming.

¹⁴ This research only examines the classroom and teacher based programmatic strategies. The home visiting component initiated in the 2000-01 school year has been omitted because of its slow development and limited evaluation data.

¹⁵ Age calculation based on September 1 of each enrollment year.

¹⁶ The race variable continues to be a controversial variable for inclusion in analysis. Several researchers argue that differences in achievement among races are present. Most of the differences, however, were attributed to social economic conditions and language abilities. Other researchers believe that differences in race are real. For a review, see Haladyna, T.M. (2002). *Essentials of standardized achievement testing: Validity and accountability*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. See pp 172-190: Standardized achievement testing of students at-risk. Also see Salvia, J., and Ysseldyke, J. (2001). *Assessment – 8th Ed*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹⁷ The Odds Ratio Calculator was developed by Marcel Montañez at ACET, Inc.

¹⁸ See Appendix B for all calculated results.

¹⁹ See www.fairtest.org

²⁰ See article from Fitzgerald (1995). "English as a second language learners' cognitive reading processes: a review of research in the United States" *Review of Educational Research*, 65, pp 145-190.

²¹ A preliminary analysis within Group 3 showed that children regardless of ethnicity were scoring similar on the spring Boehm test once demographic variables were recorded.

²² One of the goals of Words Work! partners is to expand the program throughout the Head Start system.

²³ Note that the evaluation findings are not based on an experimental design with random assignments.

²⁴ Again, refer to Appendix B for detailed calculated results.

²⁵ Shade, Barbara J., Kelly, Cynthia, and Oberg, Mary. (1997). *Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms*. American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., p. 19.

²⁶ Tabors & Snow, p. 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁸ In most classrooms, counting is regularly observed in English, Hmong, and Spanish. In a couple of classrooms, Somali, Oromo and Arabic are also present.

²⁹ Mason-Chagil, Gale Perrie (1999). "Hmong Parents' Perspectives on the Role of Schools in Raising and Educating Children in the United States," Doctoral Thesis, University of Minnesota, P. 88.

³⁰ One year of planning and five years of implementation.

³¹ Vernon-Feagans et al, p. 193.