

Hmong Parents' Perceptions on Instructional Strategies for Educating their Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

This article reports how Hmong parents were involved in an educational research study to examine their views on a structured reading instruction protocol developed in English and then translated into Hmong for Hmong children identified with disabilities. Six Hmong female parents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. The responses from the interviews revealed that Hmong parents of disabled children are not only very concerned about seeking education equity, but that they need more communication and knowledge about their children's education. The research methodology revealed a process to engage Hmong parents in discussing their perceptions about schools and their relationships with schools as well as classroom instruction.

Introduction

Since their arrival in the early 1980s, Hmong students in Minnesota schools have consistently encountered obstacles in academic achievement, especially on scores from statewide academic assessments. Hmong students along with their Latino and Somali counterparts tend to exhibit the lowest academic performance and participation rates on Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (Albus, Thurlow, Barrera, Guven, & Shyyan, 2004). These learning challenges are even more acute for Hmong learners with disabilities (cf. Albus, et al., 2004) and likely reflect the combined effect of limited proficiency in English and the specific disability-related characteristics with which these students may be identified (cf. Garcia an Malkin, 1993; Ortiz, 1997, Barrera, 2003).

Unfortunately, this pattern of learning difficulty and suggestions for addressing the needs of Hmong students with disabilities has been given limited attention in educational research and scholarship. A recent search of the educational literature yielded eleven articles relating to Hmong students with disabilities. These focused on:

- Hmong parents' perceptions related to the the education of their Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children (Wathum-Ocama, J. C. & Rose, S., 2002),
- Hmong perceptions of disability and its implications for vocational rehabilitation (Tatman, 2001),
- Language and hearing disability issues (Lewis et. al.,1989),
- Children's awareness of their differences and the stress associated with it (Jacobs, 1987),
- Factors leading to the incorrect labeling of Hmong students as disabled (Jacobs, 1991)
- Immigrant issues in rural areas (Montgomery, 1993)
- Teacher credentialing (Savelsbergh, 1995)
- Parents' perceptions about Minnesota's graduation tests (Quest, Liu, & Thurlow, 1987)
- Learning styles and suggestions regarding the psychological climate of learning (Shade, & Robinson, 1997)
- Mediation processes for special education delivery disputes for Hmong parents (Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (2001)
- Differences in disability status across fifteen Asian subgroups and how health differences are impacted by the duration of time in the U.S. (Cho, Y. & Hummer, R. A., 2001).

In other terms, research and scholarship on the education of Hmong learners with disabilities has both been limited in total number of studies and varied in scope with little focus on specific areas of instruction.

This limitation compares with similar limitations across the field of education in the area of parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities. A review of educational literature conducted for this paper yielded only seven articles relating to Asian or Hmong parental involvement. Existing papers on this issue included reports and materials on parent involvement (Pecoraro, &

Phommasouvanh, 1991; California Department of Education. 1986; Morrow, 1991), understanding Asian groups (Huang, G. 1993), and academic performance and classroom behaviors of Hmong students (Mueller et al., 1996; Abramson & Lindberg. 1982). In other words, only three papers addressed issues pertaining to Hmong parents with disabled children: one focuses on Hmong parents' and their children who are deaf and hard of hearing, and their children's teachers' views on education (Wathum-Ocama, 2002); a second paper consists of a question and answer guide in English and Hmong related to parents and students' rights in the schools (PACER center, 1985); the third is a paper which discusses Hmong perceptions of disability and the implications of these perceptions for vocational rehabilitation (Tatman, 2001).

The current state of research and scholarship on Hmong parents and their children with disabilities seems to indicate that Hmong parents are overlooked as potential contributors to their children's education. Yet, the existing literature on these issues illustrates the potential benefits of parental participation including the predictability of parental involvement to improve Hmong students' mathematics achievement (Mueller, et al., 1996). Much of the current scholarship on Hmong parent participation has only begun to identify cultural and linguistic issues involving Hmong parent involvement (e.g., Morrow, 1991; Huang, 1993). Actual research describing how parent involvement can increase learning for Hmong students appears at the very beginning stages. The generalized interest (Morrow, 1991), cultural/linguistic challenges (Huang, 1993) and legislative mandate (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997) indicates a clear need to include Hmong parents more directly in the education of their children with disabilities. Education scholars and practitioners must find ways to examine how these parents can share knowledge of their children and the cultural/linguistic needs of their community which may be integrated into the educational practices supporting Hmong children with disabilities.

To this end, the purpose of this article is to report how parents were involved in an educational research study to examine their views of a structured reading instruction protocol for Hmong children

identified with disabilities. This study was part of a larger project examining the efficacy of instructional strategies for Hmong, Latino, and Somali students with limited English proficiency concurrently identified with disabilities.

The focus of this portion of the study addressed two related research questions that deal with how the disconnection between educators and linguistically diverse parents could be addressed by the process used in the study. First, what is an effective way to involve parents in school and classroom-based instructional issues? Second, what instructionally relevant information could Hmong parents of children with disabilities provide about work conducted in the classroom? The detailed description of the methodology presented in this paper will serve the dual purposes of explaining our procedures while also showing how our procedures can potentially be used to involve parents in examining classroom activity and informing instructional practice.

Methodology

Six Hmong parents were interviewed during the summer of 2003 regarding their perceptions of classroom-based reading instruction of a hypothetical Hmong learner and subsequently of their own child. A procedure was developed to involve parents which included participant orientation, use of instructional scenarios and bilingual interviewers.

Participants

Six female Hmong parents participated in semi-structured interviews. Two participants could speak English fluently and seemed knowledgeable about mainstream culture. These two participants were the youngest, around their early 30s and they both held full-time jobs. One of them does advocacy work for Hmong parents with children with disabilities. The other four participants were between their late 30s and 50s. Five of the six parents had spouses. In addition, these four participants had no formal educational training.

Procedure

Parents of English language learners with disabilities were recruited with the help of a disability advocacy organization that specializes in assisting parents with educational equity issues. Staff of this advocacy organization who worked directly with the Hmong, Somali and Latino communities made the first contact with parents to inform them of the research study and ask if they were interested in knowing more. Next, the research team and staff from the advocacy organization held informal dinner meetings for parents from each language group so that parents could get to know the researchers and to ask questions about the study. Parents were given incentives (a gift certificate from a retail store) to attend the dinner meeting and asked at that time whether they would like to participate in an interview at a place of their own choosing. Parents who were not able to attend the introductory meetings were contacted to set individual meetings in their home or another chosen location.

With parent consent, the bilingual interviewers set face-to-face interviews over a 6-week period in the summer. All of the interviews took place in the participants' homes except one, which took place at a community center where the participant worked. Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes to an hour and were tape recorded with parents' permissions. If the parents were uncomfortable with tape recording, the interviewers took field notes. The recordings and field notes were later translated and transcribed into English. All interviews took place where other family members were present except the one interview that took place at a community center. Two Hmong bilingual interpreters conducted four parent interviews jointly and each interpreter conducted one interview alone. All of the interviews were tape recorded except for one that was hand written. One of the bilingual interpreters transcribed the tapes. After transcribing, the questions and responses were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed in English and translated into Hmong, Somali and Spanish (see Appendix A for English version and Appendix B for Hmong version). A review of the literature found no examples of protocols previously used to gather parent perceptions about

instructional issues. At that point, we consulted a cultural advisory panel organized for the project. With their advice and information gathered from teachers in previous phases of the research, the research team developed an interview protocol and process. The protocol and process consisted of three parts: (1) introducing the study and the people involved, (2) gathering background information about the parents and their children with disabilities, and (3) asking parents to respond to scenarios about reading activities conducted by teachers in a classroom

Members of the cultural advisory panel reviewed the English version of the interview protocol and changes made based on their feedback. The protocol was then translated into Hmong, Somali and Spanish by the bilingual interviewers involved in the study. The recruitment and use of Hmong, Somali and Latino bilingual interviewers (staff, professional educators, teacher education students, paraprofessionals and community liaisons) was considered a critical component of the research process. It was felt that members of the same language community as the parents involved in the study and who were also familiar with the schools could more appropriately explain educational issues that might emerge during the interviews. This approach served to make parents feel more comfortable during the interviews and maximize their responses.

In order to keep the tone of the interviews conversational in nature, an interviewer guide on the protocols was developed (Appendix C). The intent of the interviewer guide was to aid interviewers in understanding the critical information needed from the interview protocol. With this guide, interviewers could then have the freedom to structure the conversation with individual parents in any way that felt comfortable so long as the required information was obtained. The interviewer guide was available in both English and the native language of the interviewer.

Interview Protocol

The first part of the interview was designed to elicit basic information about the family and the student's strengths and weaknesses at home and school, as well as the child's role in the family. It was considered important to emphasize the positive qualities of the child with a disability at the beginning of

the interview to avoid parents feeling that the negatives were most frequently discussed in relation to their child.

The second and third parts of the interview were designed to elicit parent feedback on specific reading strategies that teachers of English language learners (ELL) with disabilities had said that they frequently used with these students to teach language arts (Albus, Thurlow, Shyyan, & Barrera, 2004). The interview protocols were written at a middle school grade reading level and parent questions about reading strategies were based on scenarios of a teacher interacting with a middle school aged English language learner with a disability in a reading/language arts classroom. Descriptions of teacher activities during the teaching of reading were written in every day language avoiding educational jargon. The content of the reading used to describe teacher activities included culturally based literature content to maximize parent comprehension of the material used during instruction. This approach was considered important to aid parents in comprehending what might typically occur in an American classroom.

The instructional scenario consisted of teachers using a written folk tale commonly found in Hmong culture as part of the interview and described the activities the teacher might employ with that story. For the Hmong parents, the story chosen was *How the Rooster Got his Crown* by Amy Lowry Poole. It was felt that parents of any language background could relate to the vivid details of the story even if they were not able to read the story themselves.

The interview protocol presented the story in both English and the native language. Parents were asked first to respond to the strategies used by the teacher with an imaginary Hmong child identified with a particular disability, first to teach the child in English and then for teaching the child in Hmong. Next, parents were asked to provide feedback about how the same activities might work with their own child.

Each scenario included a series of described activities (strategies) used by the teacher in English and in the learner's native language. Activities included five items used Before reading, During reading, and After reading. Parents were then asked a series of four questions related to the scenario:

1. What do you think about the Teacher using [English or native language] to teach the child how to read?
2. Please look at the activities the teacher used before reading. How well do you think they work for someone like [name of student]? Really great, ok, not so well? What else should the teacher do?
3. Please look at the activities during reading. How well do you think they work for someone like [name of student]? Really great, ok, not so well? What else should the teacher do?
4. Please look at the activities after reading. How well do you think they work for someone like [name of student]? Really great, ok, not so well? What else should the teacher do?

Finally, the parents were asked to respond to these questions in relation to their own child.

Results

These interviews yielded responses to all three of the interview components. The following describes responses in each of the three areas.

Section 1 — Introducing the study and people involved

Parents were given a brief introduction about the research study and about the organization conducting the study. They were then asked if they had any questions about the study or related issues. Five out of the six parents responded “no.” One parent was not asked that question and therefore, did not respond to the question.

Section 2 — Background Information

In the second part of the interview, participants were asked several questions about their family background and their children with disabilities. Responses revealed that the age range of the children (with disabilities) was eight to sixteen years old and were in grades second to seventh. The range of the number of children in each of the six homes was between five to ten children. The length of the number

of years the families had been in the U.S. was between 12 and 24 years. Further, the main language spoken in the homes was English and Hmong for four of the participants. This response indicated that children and parents spoke English and Hmong to each other interchangeably. Only two parent participants stated that they speak only Hmong in the home.

Regarding the types of disabilities of the children, two participants had children that they described as being “mentally slow,” meaning that their children are functioning two to four levels below their physical age. One parent described her child as having difficulty focusing and sitting still in the classroom for even short periods of time. Three parents described their children as having multiple disabilities. One child is stated to have piloraspinoses, problems involving digestion of milk and food, and CP hypertonia, problems involving the muscle tone that affect the ability of the child to walk or chew food adequately. A second child was stated to have cerebral palsy, hydrocephalus, and mental retardation. A third child was stated to have both physical and mental disabilities where the child was wheelchair bound and was learning below the expected grade level. The children with disabilities consisted of five males and one female.

Parents' perception of the causes of their children's disabilities. One parent stated that she did not know, two parents stated that it was because their babies were born premature. One parent stated that it was because their children ate too many foods with chemicals living in America. One parent stated that it was because of a tumor in her child's brain. Finally, one parent stated that it was because a cord in her child's brain broke.

Number of times the parent participants met with the schools. One parent stated twice a month, one responded as often as necessary, and three responded that they meet staff at the schools two to three times per year.

Parents' hopes for their children. Parents responded that they wished for their children with disabilities to get jobs, be self-sufficient, and be able to read and write, and finish high school.

Section 3 — Teaching Scenarios

Scenario 1. The parents responded to scenario 1 by indicating that they thought it was good for the teacher to use English to teach the child to read. Parents stated different reasons why they thought it was good and included responses (paraphrased) because the child knows English better than Hmong, that the teacher must teach the child repeatedly, or that the teacher should have assessed the child's reading level since the child tested low on the state assessment tests. Additional insightful responses from the parent participants included (paraphrased) that these strategies would help if the child in the scenario had listened, if the child was at such a low level, then the strategies might not work or that the strategies would work if the teacher would teach them directly.

Scenario 2. Two parents preferred that the Hmong language be used to teach the child first, and three parents preferred the use of English first. One parent stated that it depends on the child whether the child knows English or Hmong better and that sometimes some Hmong children might not know Hmong at all. Aside from them having to choose whether their first preference was Hmong or English, most of them preferred both languages to be taught if possible with English first and then Hmong to supplement learning. The parent's expressed reasons for their responses included (paraphrased):

- Teaching in Hmong might be discouraging for the child to learn English
- The child must be able to understand the strategies or else it would be too much pressure on the child
- An example should be used following the strategies
- The Hmong language can be too confusing for the child because Hmong language is wordy
- Learning both languages could be useful for finding jobs

Scenario Three. Parents responded that they all preferred the teacher use English to teach their child first and then supplement learning using the Hmong language. Five parents stated that it was good

to use the reading strategies to teach their children. One parent stated that it would be too confusing for her child because her child is at a very low level. Other responses regarding the strategies included (paraphrased):

- One parent stated that strategies would help if the only problem her child had were reading. She discussed the potential problem may be that the child will not do the work.
- One parent stated that the strategies would be helpful to assist the teacher to know how much her child had been listening when instructions were given.

Discussion

The goal of this research study was to explore effective ways in which educators could involve parents of English language learners with disabilities in the educational process and thereby to gain a better understanding of the parents' perceptions of specific structured instructional strategies in the classroom. Educators often assume that parents, and especially those from diverse language backgrounds, are not interested in the education of their children because of the linguistic and cultural barriers between them and professional educators. The assessment of interview responses indicates Hmong parents are very concerned and have important contributions to make in the education of their children. The tenor of responses indicates that parents are looking for ways in which their children's education can be improved, especially with regard to their academic progress in English.

The use of instructional scenarios and the culturally-based approach described in our methods appear to provide a model in which the disconnection between educators and linguistically diverse parents might be bridged. Thus, it is important to recognize that solutions for dealing with complex educational problems often may not come in a neat package with a one step solution for all issues encountered. When various constituents such as parents, students, and teachers with their multiple perspectives are expected to be involved in solving educational problems, solutions to collaboration sometimes are revealed through the process used in conducting the research. We believe that the procedures used in conducting the

present study revealed one possible way in which educators can access linguistically diverse parents and their perceptions pertaining to the education of their children.

Implications

An important organizing principle for bridging parent disconnection is to recognize Hmong parents' interest in their children's educational progress and then actively engage parents to comment on instructional process in meaningful ways (to the parent). Several such methods were demonstrated as part of the activities conducted in this study. First, gaining the assistance of Hmong cultural advisors through a cultural advisory panel and recruiting cultural/linguistic interpreters increased the likelihood of Hmong parents' participation and the generation of higher quality responses. It is possible that educators may be able to access Hmong parents by themselves. However, without fully understanding and observing the nuances of the Hmong culture, deeply meaningful and high quality responses would likely be difficult to obtain when it comes to sensitive issues such as the parents' views of their children's disabilities. Working with Hmong cultural advisors and interpreters made it possible to gain parents' trust in discussing often-sensitive familial and individual learner issues. Establishing this trust made it possible for parents to share their thoughts and concerns about instructional strategies.

Secondly, the background information gained about Hmong families revealed why it could be difficult for Hmong parents with children with disabilities to access educational equity for their children. Very few responses revealed knowledge of the process by which parents could participate in the individualized planning of their children's education. One parent, who was also a parent advocate, indicated anger at the current educational system for not being inclusive of Hmong parents in the individualized educational plans of their children, whereas, the other parents did not raise any questions about the process. Most parents appeared more concerned about understanding and communicating basic information about their children's educational progress than actually providing educators with teaching strategies to meet their children's needs. Hmong parents hold teachers in high regard — teachers are perceived as experts — therefore, parents may not feel they should question or speak out about teaching

strategies. This perspective combined with the linguistic and cultural issues and the relatively high number of children in the six homes (five to ten children) may make it difficult for Hmong parents to keep abreast of procedural involvement in all of the school-based activities of their children.

Furthermore, parents' responses with regard to the causes of their children's disabilities revealed the parents' differential levels of understanding. Only two parents — the youngest two who were fluent in English and knowledgeable about "American" culture — definitively expressed their perceptions of the causes of their children's disabilities. The parents less fluent in English did express their own unique cultural perspectives on the causes of their children's disabilities. For example, one parent felt that the cause of her child's disability was likely the chemicals in American foods, a common belief among some Hmong about the negatives of living in a modern society.

In the third part of the interviews where parents were asked to comment on how strategies should be used with their own children, the interviews seemed to take a turn toward what the parents considered most important to share with the researchers. Responses to the scenarios involving their own children tended to focus on the language of instruction more than whether the strategies were useful. The subject of what language, Hmong or English, to instruct their children in seemed to override the importance of the learning strategies used. These responses seemed to reveal that Hmong parents were primarily concerned about the perceived lack of progress in their children's education, especially in reading. Parents' concerns seemed to equate the lack of a public school focus on educating their children with disabilities with a lack of concern about teaching their children in an English-based curriculum. The parents almost seemed panicky about the Hmong language being taught in the classroom because they seemed to believe that if their children were already failing in learning to read in English, increasing the number of languages they had to learn would only worsen an already bad situation. Learning to read in Hmong, with Hmong primarily being a spoken language, was perceived to be a distraction by parents' concerned about their children's timely educational progress, especially in reading. These concerns revealed two things: 1) a basic need to help parents understand the processes by learners typically acquire

a second language. It was quite apparent that many of the common perspectives on second language acquisition (e.g., Cummins, 1989) using first language instruction were not part of the cultural/linguistic understanding of these parents, and 2) Hmong students with disabilities are not at the level expected for a child of their biological age by their parents. These observations imply that some modification may be required with regard to such methods when the learner's native language has no strong history of print literacy, and that more has to be done in terms of improving the communication between schools and parents, and more generally that much more has to be done in terms of improving the educational progress of Hmong students.

These results reveal the potential for including parents in educational discussions. As opposed to the belief that parents from diverse language backgrounds are not interested in their children's education, our results revealed deep concern among Hmong parents for the education of their children with disabilities. Despite the expressed concerns about the language of instruction, parents also reported their abiding concern for their children to learn to read, write, and finish high school. Indeed, the parent who served as a parent advocate reported she did so in order to assist other Hmong parents with children with disabilities. Thus, the need for educators to explore ways in which Hmong parents with disabilities can meaningfully participate in the education of their children's education is crucial to the success of both the Hmong students with disabilities and the schools that they attend. Schools cannot claim successes if many of their students are performing well below grade expectations.

A final indication of this deep concern is the fact that many of participants shared information much, beyond what had been asked in the interview protocol revealing some of the unique problems they faced in the school system (this has not been reported due to confidentiality). Parents reported their belief that there existed a huge gap in communication between themselves and the educators. These parents expressed that as Hmong parents of students with disabilities, they face the unique problem of not only having language and cultural barriers, but of having children with disabilities. These difficulties made

parents feel extremely isolated and at a loss as how to access help to support their children with disabilities.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size is very small with only six participants. A larger number of participants would have provided a better sense of parents' perceptions about instructional strategies. Second, the fact that a parent advocacy organization referred the parents to the study could mean that the types of parents who seek advocacy help belong to a particular group of parents interested in the educational improvement for their children. Many parents with children with disabilities do not get involved with parent advocacy groups and thus, this group may not be representative of all parents. Third, all the parents were females. With no male parent participants, it is likely that responses are only partially reflective of parent concerns. It could be that Hmong mothers are more overloaded with child rearing responsibilities and that for this reason the responses we gained from the interviews were more negative. Hmong men might have a different perspective on the issue than Hmong women. Fourth, almost all of the children with disabilities were males. This gender imbalance made the group unrepresentative. Boys are treated differently in Hmong culture, resulting in parents having different perceptions about their children's education. Finally, the parents in this study have large families. Since even the smallest family had at least five children, it could be that the parent participants were spread too thin in terms of attending to their children's educational needs. Thus, the responses of this group of parents may not be representative of parents who have fewer children. A future study which utilized more representative groups of participants would better reflect parent perceptions about instructional strategies.

Conclusions

Overall, the responses from the interviews revealed to us that Hmong parents are not only very concerned about seeking education equity, but that they need far more communication from schools about their children's education. Given this situation, it would be difficult for educators to improve the

educational progress of Hmong learners of English with disabilities without the cooperation and collaboration of their parents. Time in schools is only a portion of the students' overall potential time for learning. What goes on at home will also greatly affect the children.

Our research also revealed a potential procedure to engage Hmong parents in discussing their perceptions about schools and their relationships with schools as well as classroom instruction. We found that the work of improving the instruction of Hmong students with disabilities may involve more complex issues of school/community relations that can lead to increased parent trust in the programs and instruction being implemented with their children. Thus, the research conducted in this study represents a mere initiation into the ways that Hmong parents may fruitfully be involved in supporting instructional programming. Additional research is needed to uncover the multiple ways in which ELL parents can be involved in the education of their children with disabilities.

Recognizing that Hmong parents care deeply for their children's education should move educators to explore ways in which to collaborate with them. The approach used to involve parents in this study may potentially serve not only as a guide in gaining access to linguistically diverse parents and their perceptions about the needs of their children with disabilities, but may also enable further understanding of the unique individual situations of those students and their educational needs.

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