SOCIAL CAPITAL ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ASPIRATIONS: AN INVESTIGATION BASED ON THE STANDPOINT OF Hmong HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Sociology
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Sociology

by

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SPRING 2013
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Department of Sociology
Abstract

SOCIAL CAPITAL ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ASPIRATIONS: AN INVESTIGATION BASED ON THE STANDPOINT OF HMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

Chia Xiong

Utilizing the standpoint approach, eight Northern California high school Hmong students were interviewed regarding their educational experience and aspirations. Social Capital Theory was used to frame the findings from this research. Findings based on semistructured interviews suggested that social capital, particularly in regards to relationships and networks played an important role in the educational experience and aspirations of Hmong students. Relationships with families, peers, teachers and counselors as well as memberships and relationships developed in clubs impacted the educational aspirations and experience of Hmong students. However, students identified racial segregation on campus and moving as interruptions to establishing such potential networks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my greatest appreciation and sincere gratitude to my mentor and chair Dr. Aya Kimura Ida who not only gave me guidance, support, resources but also believed in me. She shared her knowledge and expertise to help shed new light to my research and provided resources to help refine the qualitative methods utilized. Her belief, tireless efforts and encouragements helped me through the milestones and in the completion of this thesis. Her continuous support and encouragement to present my work at various conferences are invaluable.

I owe my profound gratitude to Dr. Kathryn Gold Hadley who provided her expertise and guidance in qualitative methods by kindly volunteering many hours of her summer. I am thankful for her insights and support as my second reader until and even after her move to another campus. I greatly appreciate Dr. Manuel Barajas' flexibility and willingness to hop on board as my second reader. He was always supportive and offered his expertise, time and encouragement. I am grateful for the support of the Graduate Coordinator, Dr. Amy Liu and my cohort who helped revise earlier portions of my paper.

I want to thank my family and friends for their support and much needed words of encouragement. Particularly, my mother, Teng and father, Youa Lee, who has always supported my education, and more recently my mother-in-law, Khou and father-in-law Chong Wa, for providing various means of support so I can focus on my education. I also want to thank my siblings Vue, Pao, Nu, Chong, Yer, Neng and Mai, and my
husband's siblings Angel, Kristy, Jim, Pa Yao, Mai, Mike, Allen, Michelle, Christina, BJ, Brian, and Gerry--you guys are the reason I work so hard. I love you all!

Last but not least, I couldn't have done this without my husband, Reed Brode Vang who challenged and supported me in many ways! I love you and am so grateful for your continuous understanding and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Historical Background</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Hmong Family and Education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Schools and Educational Experiences of Hmong Students</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 The U.S. Schools and Hmong Parents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Effects of School Tracking</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Standpoint Perspective</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Social Capital Theory</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The School Setting</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Getting In</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Recruitment and Data Collection</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Sample</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Researcher Positionality</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Data Analysis</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. RESULTS ................................................................................................................................. 25

    Social Capital and Its Consequence on Educational Aspirations and Experiences .........................................................25

    Educational Aspirations ........................................................................................................25

    Families on Educational Aspirations ..............................................................................27

    Education as a Path to Socioeconomic Improvement ..................................................28

    Clubs and Peers on Educational Experience ................................................................29

    Teachers and Counselors ..................................................................................................32

    Interruptions in Establishing Networks .............................................................................36

    Race and Ethnic Segregation in School ...........................................................................37

    Moving ................................................................................................................................41

5. DISCUSSION ............................................................................................................................ 44

Appendix A1. Parent Consent for Child to Participate in Research ........................................ 49

Appendix A2. Student Consent to Participate in Research .....................................................51

Appendix B. Semi-structure Interview Questions ..................................................................53

Appendix C. Demographic Questionnaire (Pre-Interview) ....................................................54

Appendix D. Participants ..........................................................................................................56

References ..................................................................................................................................58
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The educational experiences of Hmong students have been documented since their arrival in the United States more than 30 years ago. Most research has looked at the ethnic culture and parent-school relations as factors shaping educational experiences of Hmong students (Ngo and Lee 2007). Recently, researchers have begun to explore the impact of larger institutional and social structures—such as tracking and economic hardship—on educational experiences (Root, Rudawski, Taylor, and Rochon 2003; Xiong 1998; Moua 1995). Some research revealed the successful educational experiences of Hmong students, but the vast majority of the literature showed that their educational experiences are comprised of many struggles (Ngo and Lee 2007). The Census 2000 affirmed troubling facts about the lack of educational attainment for the Hmong population. That is, only 7.5% of the Hmong population had a bachelor degree (BA) or higher, and 59.6% did not have a high school diploma (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Additionally, Census data have also revealed that only 17.1% are professionals while many work in production, transportation and material moving (Reeves and Bennett 2004). While Census 2010 data showed that the educational attainment for the Hmong population has improved with about 14% having a BA or higher (Xiong 2012), this number is still low in comparison to the national average. The difficulties in education faced by the Hmong population represent the critical need of investigating the experience of the students in the U.S. education system.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews with Hmong high school students in northern California, this research explored their educational experiences and aspirations based on a
standpoint perspective (Harding 2004). In investigating the experience of the students, I honored their perspectives or *standpoints* in order to give voices to the marginalized population. Furthermore, William A. Cosaro (2005:35) discussed that in order to understand children, it is best to study them from their perspective as they are very much active contributors to society and that “children and adults are complementary participants in the social system”. In this study the educational experiences of Hmong students examined include, but are not limited to: their struggles and achievements in school and influences of other factors on school experience, such as family, socioeconomic status, peers and/or whatever is salient to the students.

While examining the current and past experiences the students have had in school, this study also shed light on their views on the future, especially the educational aspirations of Hmong students. Educational aspiration refers to one’s “wishes or desires” related to future educational careers (Brookover, Erickson and Joiner 1967). In this study, the types of classes in which students are enrolled were considered to see if the students see the classes as adequately preparing them or impacted their future aspirations. In summary, the general questions guiding this research are: How do Hmong students view their experiences in a Northern California high school? What are the educational aspirations of Hmong high school students? Is there any difference in the educational aspirations of Hmong students depending on the classes they take? The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of Hmong students’ educational experiences and the process affecting them in their decision-making process regarding desired future educational paths.
Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on Hmong students in three important ways. First, this study highlighted both successes and struggles experienced by Hmong students from their point of view. Furthermore, by focusing on one specific subgroup, Hmong, especially one that is struggling, avoids the assumption of Asians as a hegemonic group, in essence, challenging Asians as a model minority (see Zhou 2004). Asians as a collective group maintained a high percentage of 44.1% for at least the completion of a Bachelor degree or higher (Reeves and Benett 2004), seemingly confirming the idea of Asians as a model minority (Peterson 1971 as cited by Wing 2007). However, broken down by different ethnic groups, it is concerning that some Asian subgroups maintained substantially lower academic achievement (see Zhou 2004 for similar argument). Disaggregation of the same data shows that Asian subgroups such as Cambodian (9.2%), Laotian (7.7%) and Hmong (7.5%) maintain the lowest percentages of those with a Bachelor degree or higher. Just as troubling, Hmong hold the highest percentage among Asians for obtaining less than a high school diploma (59.6%) (Reeves and Benett 2004). More recent data from the Census 2010 suggested that 50% of Asians have a BA or higher. For the Hmong community, of those who have completed a BA degree or higher has almost doubled from 7.5% in the Census 2000 data (Reeves and Bennett 2004) to about 14% in the Census 2010 data (Xiong 2012). However, the academic attainment for the Hmong community is still much lower than that of the aggregated data of Asians as a group. Therefore, under the stereotype and aggregated data of Asians doing well educationally, the struggles and challenges faced by
the Hmong population are often overlooked. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct research to gain a better understanding on the educational experiences, such as problems that could be contributing to the low academic achievement of Hmong students, in order to help them obtain higher education. To do so most effectively, it is essential that we first understand how the students themselves view their experience in high school and their future desires in education.

Second, this research provided insights into the factors or processes that may explain the difficulties for attaining upward occupational mobility for the Hmong population after schooling. More specifically, this study examined the potential processes and factors resulting in the low educational attainment of the Hmong community by focusing on the population before entering postsecondary education or the workforce. In addition, the Hmong occupied the second lowest percentage (17.1%) of people in professional occupations while the vast majority of them worked in production, transportation, and material moving (41.7%) (Reeves and Benett 2004). This suggests that disadvantages faced by Hmong people are not limited only to the low educational attainment, but restricted job opportunities and income due to lower education. It is no surprise then, that Reeves and Benett (2004) found the Hmong, among other Asian groups, with the highest poverty (37.8%) and occupying the lowest family median income of $32,384. Therefore, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to Hmong students’ educational experiences because their educational achievements could have an impact on their future prospect of job opportunities and their income.

Finally, this study focused on the large population of Hmong youth who are the
future leaders of their community and society. More than half of the Hmong population is under 18 years old (Reeves and Benett 2004). The large Hmong population under 18 is attributed to the high death rates of Hmong adults in Thailand refugee camps and high birthrates in the United States (Hang 1997). These young cohorts can bring about changes for this community as they mature into adulthood. Research showed that the Hmong population in Northern California has grown by 164.5% from 1990 to 2000 (Fong and Kim-Ju 2006). This suggests that the Hmong population is growing at an incredibly fast rate, and with such a larger population of young people, research findings on this population could provide a direction in meeting the needs of the current and future Hmong community. Gained knowledge on this population will help the Hmong and wider communities better prepare their youth for higher education, which is increasingly stressed as a key to upward mobility. Also, because this research investigated the struggles and successes from the perspectives of the youth themselves, new insights may be gained, and this knowledge could be beneficial to the Hmong community and the school to which these students belong.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to gain a better understanding of the research on Hmong students’ educational experience, it is essential to understand the larger historical contexts, which have shaped and will continue to be rooted in the lives of the Hmong population in the United States. Therefore, I will first provide an overview of history of Hmong people in the United States. Second, this literature review will summarize previous works on family’s impact on children’s education: namely, early marriage and role of parents. Followed by, the impact of the U.S. school system and structure on Hmong students, including the impact of tracking on Hmong students’ educational experiences. The last section of the literature review will include theoretical approaches using standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Rubin and Rubin 2005; Wylie 2003) and social capital theory (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Dika and Singh 2002; Stanton-Salazar 1997).

Historical Background

The Hmong is an ethnic group that resided in the mountainous regions of Laos prior to their resettlement in the United States in the 1970s (Yang 2001). The Hmong started to resettle in the United States towards the end of 1975. In 1976, about 750 arrived and continued to arrive slowly but consistently (Bliatout 1988 as cited in Yang 2001). The total number of Hmong population residing in the United States is uncertain, but the 2000 Census estimated 186,310 Hmong residing in the United States; however, others asserted that the total number should be closer to 300,000 (Pfeifer and Lee 2001; Lemoine 2005). One possible reason behind the undercount of Hmong population in the
2000 Census is that some Hmong identified themselves as Laotians based on the geographic homeland while others identified as Hmong based on their ethnic identification (Pfeifer and Lee 2001). More recent data suggest that there is some 260,076 Hmong in the entire United States with the highest concentrations in California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181) and Wisconsin (49,240) (Pfeifer, Yang, and Yang 2013). This number is much closer to the estimated 300,000. Nevertheless, it could still be undercounted as well, since the official Hmong population reported by the Census has increased from 2000 to 2010.

The Hmong arrived in the United States as refugees. Prior to their involvement with the U.S., they lead self-sufficient lives raising livestock and growing crops. After the Hmong were recruited by the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight against the Pathet Lao forces (Vang et. al 1999; Swartz, Lee, and Mortimer 2003), their lives took a drastic turn. When the United States lost the war to Vietnam, the U.S. withdrew its involvement in Laos. As a result, many Hmong were persecuted and were involuntarily forced to seek refuge in other countries.

Many Hmong people lost their lives trying to seek refuge in other countries, while those who survived not only had to relocate, but also faced the traumatic experiences caused by the war and its aftermath. Vang and Flores (1999) described the many difficulties that the Hmong people faced after the war and prior to their arrival in the United States. From losing family members to starvation, illness, and drowning in the Mekong River (a river that divided Thailand and Laos), they also lost their belongings and homes. Escaping from Laos to Thailand meant that they will take refuge in Thailand. Nevertheless, the refugee camps were far from livable conditions. There were poor
sanitation, poor nutrition, and no or few medical services. Some Hmong families were fortunate to relocate to the United States quickly while others waited and lived in these poor conditions for more than 10 years before relocating.

The Hmong’s resettlement comprised of not only successes, but also struggles. In Laos, the sons of wealthier Hmong parents were fortunate to have a formal education. It was uncommon for Hmong girls to get an education in Laos. The Hmong’s arrival to the United States is not just a drastic change being exposed to technological inventions but also the opportunity to obtain an education despite one’s sex or parents’ wealth. The opportunity to obtain an education, however, is dwelled with many struggles and some successes for the Hmong community (Ngo and Lee 2007). Some accounts of success in the Hmong community are the 120 individuals who attained doctorate degrees as of 1999 (Yang 1999 as cited in Yang 2001). Although it is still rare, some became successful politicians and entrepreneurs, and the Hmong community developed self-help organizations and a nationally known Hmong conference (Yang 2001). Nevertheless, as research revealed, the Hmong tend to have little experience in formal education (Ngo and Lee 2007), and many Hmong parents are not familiar with the educational system in the United States (Lee 2007; Ngo 2006; Thao 2003). Moreover, parents also struggle with not being able to transfer the skills acquired in their home country to their career in the United States and, as a result, tend to hold lower paying jobs (Yang 2001), which may limit the educational opportunities of their children.

_Hmong Family and Education_

Two most commonly identified barriers to education for Hmong women by other
researchers were early marriage and childbearing (Ngo and Lee 2007). In Hmong culture, women are encouraged to get marry and give birth early, typically between 15 and 18 years old (Vang 1992 as cited in Vang and Flores 1999). On the contrary to the assumption that cultural values such as early marriage can hinder educational attainment for Hmong girls, studies showed no significant statistical differences between married Hmong girls and non-married Hmong girls in the educational achievements. Research revealed that early marriage did not necessarily affect graduation from high school for married Hmong girls (Hutchison and McNall 1994; Swartz, Kee, and Mortimer 2003). Hmong girls who did marry early returned to postsecondary schools, which suggests that early marriages did not hinder their chances in postsecondary education, but perhaps just delayed it (Lee 1997).

Research has revealed that the age for marriage in the Hmong community is changing as the women occupy roles as agents of cultural transformation (Lee 1997; 2007). Lee (1997) explained that her research suggested that the Hmong are constantly reevaluating their culture and identities as they interact with non-Hmong individuals. In other words, Hmong people do not just “passively” accept changes; instead, they evaluate their situations and make decisions in their best interest. Therefore, Hmong girls and women are viewed as agents of cultural transformation because they are contesting “early marriage” (Lee 1997, 2007). The contestation of “early marriage” in the Hmong culture further emphasized that if early marriage was ever embedded as a cultural value, this aspect of the Hmong culture is transforming or changing (Ngo and Lee 2007). Therefore, culture is fluid and ever changing (Lee 1997; 2001; Ngo 2002). Moreover, taking into
considerations the lifestyle that the Hmong lead in Laos, marrying early and having children may have made sense in order to tend to the crops and the way of life in Laos, as to sustain that lifestyle. If that were the case, then the Hmong community will also be adjusting to their new lifestyle in America. On that account, an emphasis solely on culture (that is fluid and changing) deflects attention away from other individual, institutional and structural factors that may be associated with Hmong students’ educational experiences and aspirations. In addition, looking only at early marriage as a factor in educational attainment, we neglect the experiences of Hmong males, since they generally do not marry as early as Hmong females (Dunnigan 1982 as cited in Hutchinson and McNall 1994).

Despite the lower educational attainment, lower socioeconomic status (Reeves and Benett 2004), and lack of knowledge in regards to formal education (Ngo and Lee 2007), Hmong parents highly value education (Park 2006 and Vang and Flores 1999). However, Hmong students’ educational struggles could further become intensified by being expected to take on household responsibilities, especially for girls because of traditional gender roles and also due to their parents holding multiple jobs or long hours of work to compensate the lower pay (Ngo 2000 as cited in Ngo 2002). In sum, this evidence suggested that although there is a significant value placed on education by parents, Hmong students’ educational experiences can be complicated by their parents’ lower socioeconomic status, gender roles and expectations.

*Schools and Educational Experiences of Hmong Students*

*The U.S. Schools and Hmong Parents.* Another context that can influence
students’ educational attainment is school and the education system. Research on Hmong students have examined effects of schools and parents on students’ educational experiences (Thao 2003; Ngo 2010). According to Thao (2003), a school failed to create and develop relationships with Hmong parents. There was evidence of Hmong parents expressing their desire for schools to make a connection or build a relationship with them. They reported lack of knowledge on how to make these connections themselves.

In addition, while Hmong parents understood the importance of their involvement in their children’s education (Lee and Green 2008), not all of them knew the structure of and expectations in school systems in the United States. The difference between what parents expected the school environment to be, to what it actually was, showed that there is a lack of communication and relationship between the parents and the school. For instance, Thao (2003) found that parents hope the school environment will be safe and low stress, while Ngo (2010) found in another research that racial tensions existed at schools and were not addressed. Perhaps this gap could be narrowed if schools develop strategies to collaborate and form relationships with parents. Additional efforts from the school can also help Hmong parents gain a better understanding of the school system and understand their roles in their children’s education.

Schools seem to lack positive trusting relationships with their own students. Ngo (2010) found that the symbolic acceptance of minority culture through posters and objects masked the actual tensions of race relations at a particular high school she studied. Specifically, students (such as those belonging to the Hmong club) were forced into expressions of their ethnic cultures through dances rather than directly addressing
more sensitive issues. By solely focusing on cultural diversity, schools tend to neglect
the structural issues based on race and ethnicity. Essentially, it is critical for schools to
build trusting relationships with students and provide a space in which racial tensions can
be discussed. Therefore, by investigating through the lenses of Hmong students, we can
gain a better understanding if schools are really meeting their needs from their
perspectives.

*Effects of School Tracking.* School tracking is the process in which students from
the same ability and similar educational needs are placed into the same classes (Oakes
1987). There are two forms of tracking: curriculum tracking and ability tracking.
Curriculum tracking is the division of students placed in courses that are designed for
different outcomes such as college preparatory, vocational and general programs. Ability
grouping, on the other hand, is when students are tracked into different level classes of
the same subject. However, some schools adopt an overlap of the two.

Oaks (2008) stated that tracking have been found to have negative consequences
for students placed in “lower track.” Students placed in lower classes do not have the
same level of access to and familiarities with higher status knowledge (cultural capital)
and have fewer learning opportunities in comparison to higher tracked students. Lee
(2007) further revealed that Hmong students do not have the necessary knowledge to
negotiate their educational experiences. The combination of being in lower tracks and
lack of knowledge to negotiate their educational experiences, can put Hmong students at
a disadvantaged position to move from lower tracks to college preparatory tracks even if
they are well qualified. In addition, it has been found that Hmong parents want their
children to succeed academically, but do not have the necessary resources or knowledge to help them navigate through the U.S. education system (Lee 2007; Ngo 2006; Thao 2003). There is a possibility that these students may very well succeed in higher track courses, but because both Hmong parents and their children are unaware of systematic tracking in schools and do not know how to negotiate their courses, they do not question the school curriculum (Alder 2004) and Hmong students who may very well succeed in college preparatory courses are not moved out of lower track classes (ESL).

Tracking may be one negative factor shaping the educational experiences of Hmong students. Research showed that students in higher tracks are cognitively better off (as cited in Oakes 1987). Research has consistently revealed that lower tracks in school are overrepresented by minority students (Oakes 1987; 1998; 2008; Hallinan 1994). Such evidence suggests that schools are reproducing the existing inequalities of race and class in the society (Oakes 2008). It is also alarming that out of the 136 Hmong students studied, 94% of them were placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses (Park 2006). However, their membership in lower tracks did not affect their educational aspirations—in fact, 77% of them wanted to receive a four-year degree. Consequently, the higher educational and occupational aspirations may not translate into higher achievement possibly due to structural and institutional constraints, such as tracking. Therefore, this research explored the educational aspirations of Hmong students and paid attention to how or if tracking affected their educational experiences.

In summary, previous studies explored the educational experiences of Hmong students considering factors such as early marriage, parent, school and tracking. On the contrary to the commonly held assumption, research revealed no significant differences
between married and non-married Hmong female students. Hmong parents lack knowledge about the school systems, and schools seem to lack developing relationships with parents and students. Minority students, such as Hmong students’ memberships in lower tracks may not only affect students cognitively, but may provide them fewer learning opportunities, possibly less access to social capital and lack of direct access to a four-year college after high school. A standpoint perspective allowed me to gain new knowledge focusing on the Hmong students’ views on their relationships with and experiences in their school. In addition, a social capital theory is used to explain the educational experiences and aspirations of Hmong students.

Standpoint Perspective

Standpoint perspective informed the methodologies and analyses used in this study. Feminist standpoint theorists argued that some social situations are better places to derive knowledge (Harding 2004). Likewise, the standpoint theory model asserts that “knowledge does not exist outside the perceiver, waiting to be discovered by every researcher as an identical and universal truth. Instead knowledge is subjective, what you see depends on whose perspective you take” (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 25). The underlying inversion thesis of the theory states that, “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects” (Wylie 2003: 26).

In the case of Hmong students, their marginalized positions in regards to SES, lack of parental educational attainment, lack of knowledge in school systems, representation in lower track such as ESL courses can derive a better understanding of
their high school educational experiences from their standpoints. Today’s Hmong students occupy a unique “insider-outsider” position (Wylie 2003: 34). While Hmong students grew up in a predominantly Western culture, they still maintain some of their cultural traditions. Although they are similar to their non-Hmong peers, in many ways they are different. For instance, they probably do not have the social capital compared to their peers of the dominant group, such as having parents who are knowledgeable about the school systems to guide them in their educational experiences. In addition, due to their social location, their parents probably do not have connection to people of power and status that could influence the amount of opportunities for them in education and in their careers. Wylie (2003:34-35) sums up this “insider-outsider” experience as, “a race, class, and gender disadvantaged [person] who has no choice, given her social location but to negotiate the world of the privileged, a knower who must understand accurately[,] and in detail the tacit knowledge that constitutes a dominant, normative world view at the same time she is grounded in a community whose marginal status generates a fundamentally different understanding of how the world works.” Thereof, it becomes crucial to study the experiences of Hmong students from their perspective, rather than from the dominant group’s perspective, to better understand their experiences. Moreover, I can gain useful inside information from the Hmong students themselves by utilizing the standpoint perspective in collecting data. In addition, analytically, the social capital theory can help us understand the educational experience of Hmong students and their educational aspirations.
Social Capital Theory

The social capital theory is used to frame the findings of this study. This theory is most attributed to two scholars: Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman. The social capital theory was introduced by French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He defined social capital as “the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to memberships in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986: 51). James Coleman has also contributed to this work and viewed social capital as something intangible consisting of three forms: “trustworthiness of the social environment” where obligations are paid, “actual extent of obligations [are] held,” and “information channels” in social relationships and norms and effective sanctions (Coleman 1988: S102-S105).

I adopt Bourdieu’s social capital because his work focuses on structural constraints and unequal access (Bourdieu 1986). In their review of the empirical research on social capital and educational attainment, Dika and Singh (2002) explained that Coleman’s models has structural-functionalist roots traceable back to Durkheim while Bourdieu’s model is related to social reproduction and symbolic power. Thereof, Bourdieu views “social capital as a tool of reproduction for the dominant class” while Coleman “sees social capital as (positive) social control, where trust information channels and norms are characteristics of the community” (Dika and Singh 2002: 34). Hence, in regards to education, Bourdieu’s work emphasized more on “structural constraints and
unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender, and race” while Coleman’s work supported “family’s responsibility to adopt certain norms to advance children’s life chances” (Lareau 2001 as cited in Dika and Singh 2002: 34). Based on appearing themes and findings from this research, Hmong parents valued education and emphasized this upon their children which Coleman’s social capital can probably describe. However, students did not only talk about family deriving social capital, they also talked about teachers and counselors and the resources that they did or did not receive from these relationships. For instance, the few discussions about teachers and counselors suggested a lack of access to “institutional agents”—a term utilized by Stanton-Salazar (1997). Furthermore, racial segregation in the school suggested there were structural constraints for the development of peer networks. The findings suggested that it is not just the family that can impact the educational resources of students but also institutional structures and institutional agents that can be described by Bourdieu’s social capital of unequal access with considerations to the structures.

The usage of the standpoint approach in collecting data from Hmong students, with the combination of explaining their experiences using the social capital theory then allows us to see from students’ perspectives on their relationships and networks that influenced their educational experience and education aspirations. A standpoint perspective allowed me to gain insights directly from those who are still in high school while they discussed their experiences. Broad research questions without an intention of utilizing a specific framing or analytical concept for results allowed themes to emerge from the standpoint of the students without bias to a particular framework, theory or concept. The latter decision to incorporate social capital as a concept to frame
the findings derived from the appearing themes about relationships and resources.

According to social capital, the relationships or network, can potentially affect the resources obtained (Bourdieu 1986). In other words, through relationships, one can gain resources that might not otherwise be available. For Hmong students, the relationships that these students built and maintained can provide access to resources that impacted their educational experiences and aspirations. The following research questions were examined in this study.

1.) What are the educational experiences of Hmong high school students?

2.) What are the educational aspirations of Hmong high school students?

3.) Is there any difference in the educational aspirations of Hmong students depending on the classes that they take?
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods were utilized in this study. Summarized in this chapter are the school setting, demographics of the school population and the process of getting into the high school. The recruitment process, the sample I targeted for this research, my role as a researcher and the data analysis process are also described.

The School Setting

The data collection took place at Cal High School (pseudonym) located in Northern California. It is a four-year high school consisting of grades 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>. In the school year I conducted research at this campus, 2011-2012, Cal High School’s total student population was about 2,180 (School Accountability Report Card 2012-2013). In this same school year, Cal High School had a graduation rate of 74.77%. The racial and ethnic composition at this high school are as follows: Asians (35%), Hispanic or Latino (24%), African American (20%), Filipino (7%), White (6%), Two or More (4%), Pacific Islander (3%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1%). Of this population, 66% are socioeconomically disadvantaged (School Accountability Report Card 2012-2013). As the data is not broken down by ethnicity, it is unclear what percentage of Hmong students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged.

However, 41 Hmong students were classified as English Learners, the third largest group of EL students at Cal High School (CA Dept of Education 2012). The number of English Learners in 2005 was 131 students, this number increased to 196 in 2006 and dramatically increased to almost 300 the following year. The number of EL students has
been maintained close to 300 every year thereafter (CA Dept of Education 2011). In the 2011-2012 school year, this number was 291 (CA Dept of Education 2012).

Getting In

Access into the field to collect data for this research required a series of steps and contacting multiple gate keepers. I first contacted the principal at Cal High School, Mr. Jones (pseudonym) and was referred to the school district’s research and evaluation department to obtain permission to conduct the research at the high school. After contact with the department, application forms were sent electronically for me to complete. Since a research proposal could not be submitted to the district without approval from the Human Subjects Committee at my University, I submitted a proposal to the University’s Human Subjects Committee and obtained a conditional approval. I then submitted a research proposal to the district. Once both the University’s Human Subjects Committee and the district approved the research, I contacted the Principal, Mr. Jones again to start semi-structured interviews.

Recruitment and Data Collection

I recruited participants from a Hmong Club at Cal High School using quota sampling methods. Following the approval from the school district and the University, Mr. Jones approved my presence on campus during non-school hours to conduct my research and also connected me with the Hmong Club advisor, Mr. Hay (pseudonym). After making the necessary arrangements, I attended one Hmong Club meeting to discuss my project and ask for volunteers to participate. Students who were interested in participating were given consent forms (Appendices A1 and A2) and signed up for
semistructured interview dates and times based on their convenience. The informed consent forms signed by both the student and his or her parent or guardian served as the approval of participation from the students and their parents and, informed them on: the purpose of the study, their confidentiality of the collected information, their voluntary participation and both my advisor and my contact information should they have any questions or concerns. A copy of the interview questions (Appendix B) and demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) was attached to the parent consent forms.

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for the interview guide) and a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C) was utilized to gain knowledge and basic demographic information from the participants. The interview questions were designed to capture the participant’s experience in high school, and their academic aspirations. Each student was scheduled for one semi-structured interview lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews took place on campus coordinated by certificated personnel, Mr. Hay during non-school hours. Each interview session was recorded with the permission of the student and their parent(s). All of the participants except Tou, allowed me to record the interview sessions. Meng and Der were interviewed together because their schedules did not allow me to interview them at a different time and or day.

The other participants were interviewed individually. As Hmong is the primary language for most of these students, I allowed students to express their feelings in both Hmong and English. I translated the Hmong into English during the transcription process. The demographic questionnaire was completed prior to, but given to me by the students at the end of the interview session.
Sample

Eight participants were successfully recruited. Of these eight students, two students took English as a Second Language (ESL), four students took regular English, and two students took honors or Advance Placement (AP) classes. Of the participants, there were five males and three females. There were two sophomores, four seniors, one freshmen and one junior. All the participants were between 14 and 18 years of age and were all born in the United States. They all identified themselves as Hmong. There was no evidence in the interviews to suggest that any of the students were married. Descriptions of each participant are provided on Appendix D.

Researcher Positionality

Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained that interviewing was a conversational relationship, and thus, it was important for the researcher to define his or her role, be aware of his or her responsibilities and position in the society or community as this may affect the interviews. They explained that the relationship that built up in an interview could influence the process itself (2005:79). Therefore, it is important for the researcher to define his or her role, otherwise interviewees may assign a different role to the researcher (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Although researchers are still debating on whether it is better to assume the role of an outsider or insider, there is a benefit to being an insider because such a status allows “the researcher [to be] sympathetic and understand[ing of the interviewee] language, concepts, and experiences” (Rubin and Rubin 2005:87). In this study, I consider myself an insider based on many demographic statuses that I shared with the students who were interviewed.
In this particular research, I introduced myself as a graduate student, assumed the role as an insider based on my ethnicity—Hmong, and was fully aware of my membership in other groups and how this may influence the conversations I had with the interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 2005:). For instance, I was aware of my gender as a woman, my age and my personality and its possible effect on their answers. As a graduate student, I may appeared as someone the students may look up to since many of them aspired to pursue higher education. Yet, as a woman, boys may not be comfortable sharing some personal information while girls might share it easily because I am a woman. Due to my memberships in many groups, I was cautious about not expressing my opinions as it can affect what the students will say or refrain from saying (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

Data Analysis

Rubin and Rubin (2005) stated that the goal of the qualitative data is to “discover variation, portray variation, portray shades of meaning, and examine complexity” (202). In other words, reflecting the complexities of human interaction, actual events and making this understandable to the lay-person. Based on Rubin and Rubin (2005) and Bailey (2009), I utilized the following steps of data analyses.

The first phase included preparing the transcripts based on the audio recording of the interviews. The analysis required different stages that can overlap (Rubin and Rubin 2005). In general, I jotted down things that were important to note while transcribing the interviews. Second, I conducted open coding after the transcribed interviews were organized and prepared for further data analyses (Bailey 2009). Coding refers to
systematically labeling the data into smaller segments so you can retrieve them easily (Bailey 2009; Rubin and Rubin 2005). In the process of open coding, I paid attention to any themes, events, and concepts that were relevant to my research question. I labeled and placed data in their like categories. As the third step, I conducted more focused coding (Bailey 2009). More specifically, I coded all interviews this time based mainly on the themes, events, and concepts that were captured in the open coding process. In the fourth stage, I created a file for each theme, event, or concept by copying and pasting the part of the transcripts that were relevant. Then, each of the separate files were examined to see if there are further categories within each theme, event, or concept that were coded. After I read, re-read, coded and recoded the transcription, the themes, typologies, or taxonomy were used to examine the overall relationships among the derived concepts. It was during this process in which I further examined and summarized themes from the data as the similarities and differences between different cases were identified (Bailey 2009). Throughout the process of coding and analyzing the data, I kept memos, taking notes of the methodological, conceptual, and personal reflection on the data (Bailey 2009; Rubin and Rubin 2005).
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the educational experiences and aspirations of eight Hmong students in one Northern California high school. The research questions were as follows: What are the educational experiences of Hmong high school students? What are the educational aspirations of Hmong high school students? Is there any difference in the educational aspirations of Hmong students depending on the classes that they take?

Utilizing social capital theory, I will first discuss the students’ desires to attend college, followed by family’s influence on their educational aspirations. Second, the educational experience of the Hmong students are discussed regarding clubs, peers and teachers and counselors. Lastly, the interruptions of networks (or potential social capital) are discussed relative to the racial segregation in the school and moving.

Social Capital and Its Consequence on Educational Aspirations and Experiences

Educational Aspirations. Types of English courses in which students were enrolled did not matter in shaping their future educational aspirations. I specifically selected students from different courses, ESL English, Regular English and Honors/AP English and the purpose was to see if students who were enrolled in different classes or similar classes had similar or different educational aspirations. The purpose is not to generalize that Hmong students regardless of the classes or “track” they belonged to desired to go to college. Nevertheless, it is not possible to merely ignore that in this study, these seven Hmong high school students desired to attend college regardless of the
English classes they were taking. Similar to analysis of existing empirical research in educational attainment of racial, ethnic and immigrant differences, there is a general trend of high educational aspirations (Kao and Thompson 2003). The eighth participant, Der was not sure if she would be going to college because she was unsure what to study in college. While Der’s two choices are either, college or the army, college seem to be her first choice as she spoke about the army as an alternative. Furthermore, she seemed very motivated to go to college to help encourage her cousin who dropped out of college to go back.

Mai, Tou, Chue, See and Kong stated specifically that they wanted to attend a four year institution at some point—some of them planned to go to the community college and then transfer while others wanted to go directly to a four year college. Fue said he planned on attending a community college and did not speak of plans to attend a four year college. Meng spoke about knowing that he will “definitely” be going to college, but was not sure where yet. Der also spoke of college or the army and did not specify whether or not she wanted to go to community college or a four year institution.

Park (2006) found that Hmong students desired to attend college even though they were enrolled in ESL courses and Kao and Thompson (2003) found that universally, students had high aspirations for education. The two ESL students in this research did not have a different plan in comparison to their peers enrolled in other English courses. As a matter of fact, they all had high aspirations to attend college. This may imply that tracking does not shape the educational aspirations while it may have real consequence in educational experience and actual achievement. Then, what makes them want to go to college?
Families on Educational Aspirations. Students spoke about how various family members motivate and encourage them to attend college. Fue who was raised by a single mother spoke about his mother being his main source of motivation and that her pain made him want to do better.

Well my mom, she’s the one that motivated me to come to school, and do good in school, and just be really good role model to my brothers and sisters…Just seeing her cry it just, see her cry and it just hurts me and it motivates me to better myself and…I use that as a motivation to do better.

Mai who is also raised by a single mom elaborated,

My family yeah they support me with everything I do. My mom, uh I don’t have a dad but my mom encourages me to do good in school and work and like do scholarship and stuff so I can get into good colleges.

Meng also spoke about his father influencing him to go to a good college.

Well my dad is a really big influence in me going to a good college. Cause they never had that experience, they want us to have a good life, and they want us to go to a good college and have a good career which I believe my parents are one of the biggest influence.

Der spoke about her cousin who is not in college, and her desire to attend college in order to help motivate her cousin to go to college as well.

Well my cousin Anthony [pseudonym]… he actually got accepted to [a local city college] and we were really proud of him. I’m always backing him up like oh he’s going to go to college he’s going to make it but, when he ended up dropping out, I was just like WOW. You let me down. So…I really want to go to college and show him that…if I’m going to college and everyone else is going to college, go to college too, I’ll help you and yeah that’s kind of like what helps me.

Fue, Mai, Meng and Der spoke about the relationships they have with family and friends whom motivated them to do well academically and to go to college. That while there
could be many factors influencing students’ desire to attend college, these students specifically mention their family members in providing this “emotional” resource, or emotional push encouraging these students to do well and aspiring to go to college. This emotional encouragement can be considered as social capital that they gain from their networks with family.

*Education as a Path to Socioeconomic Improvement.* Family situations, particularly financial situations, motivated students to do well academically, encouraged them to attend college and to get a good job. As Mai spoke about success in school, she also believed that her success in high school will give her a chance to do better in the future. Her family’s financial situation also made her realize that she must try harder to be successful. Mai made a connection here from education to a “good job” and hence success.

In school I think success means a lot to me…it means that like I would do good in life. In my view if I do good in school now, it gives me a better chance to doing good in the future like it helps me more, because if I do bad in high school then in life it will just be harder for me but I think if I do good now life will be a little easier cause I’ll know what to expect and like I’ll know how to handle hard problems and hard situations and I’ll know how to be organize with my life. Success means a lot to me, like even when I see my family struggle sometimes with bills and stuff, it makes me realize that I need to try that much harder in school to get good job in life and be successful.

Fue’s desire to “succeed” was rooted from his struggles. Like Mai, Fue is motivated to give his mother and siblings a better life free from financial struggles. For instance, Fue wanted to go to college and find a good job because he saw the financial struggles his mom went through raising him and his siblings.
My mom’s single, like she’s a single mom supporting me my brother and my little sister, just 3 of us. And I want to better my life so I can give my mom a better life than what she have right now.

He said he felt he did not have time and saw that as a challenge because he wants to go to college and work, but he also felt a sense of urgency to help relieve his mother from their financial situation. He defined a better life as,

No need for struggling about like money or when it’s a rainy day, my brother and sister won’t have to walk in the rain. Better life like, just to have money and support, money and whoever needs help, I’ll help. And I just want to be there for everybody. That’s what I think is a better life.

Students’ relationships with their family impacted their desires to pursue education into postsecondary school. Through their relationships with their parent(s), students felt parents gave them the emotional encouragement to continue their studies. Furthermore, through these relationships, they recognized the struggles they encounter due to their family financial situations—and this encouraged them to do well academically, and also aspired them to attend postsecondary institutions (Lee 1997) so they can get good jobs.

*Clubs and Peers on Educational Experience.* Clubs provided students with important social capital to do well in school, such as knowledge, opportunities for community service, other activities and an opportunity to be noticed by postsecondary institutions. Students spoke about enjoying school activities including club and sports activities—things that got them more involved in school. See stated, “Um I do like getting involved in school like Hmong club was like something I do not regret doing. I really like that. And it got me involved in school even more…” In fact, when asked
about what schools can do to make her experience better, Mai mentioned, “I think as long as they always have the clubs and sports they have now…” Such suggests that the relationships created and maintained and the memberships have some impact on the educational experience of students.

Clubs were seen as a crucial aspect of students’ educational experience in building relationships. Students saw the clubs as socially benefitting as many of them mentioned club activities as something they enjoyed coming to school for. For See specifically, it was not only a place to learn, but also to meet older peers who can help. Through the clubs, students met older peers whom shared information or knowledge that helped them. Also through clubs, students are given opportunities to do community service work and other activities.

Some of the clubs have like…older people you can go to for help. And some of them has a lot to do with like, college and stuff. Like key club, it really helps you because you do community service and stuff like that….more stuff to do and then, when you have problems, you actually have people to go to talk to. And they do stuff like helping people and helping this and that, like it’s not just, a plain club you know. It’s actually something you learn from.

Furthermore, they also saw how their memberships in clubs benefited them academically. Chue and Meng stated that if they joined clubs, they would have become more involved with the school and would also do better academically. Clubs were also seen as a way to get noticed by colleges or to look good on college applications. Meng was already involved in many clubs and explains why he is involved.

I want to get out there more as in like I want to be known…I want college people…the people who checks your transcript…to notice me like out of all the students…there’s a lot of students so I want them to see me as a big person in there. So then I can be accepted easier, and yeah. I’m in key club, which I do a lot
of community service hours and I think that’s a big success because it’s just another step towards going to college and achieving my goal…I’m also in link crew…pretty much, you’re a leader.

He also further emphasized his desire to be involved in other clubs and school activities in the future.

Now that I’m getting more involved as a junior…I think I’m going to be more involved in senior year because I also want to be in ASB and… CSF…as a freshmen…I was still a 3.0 and above student but like I didn’t want to get that much involved in school… like I used to skate…I would focus on skating but as I grew more into school, I think this school is actually a really good school.

Meng’s last sentence suggested that his participation in school activities, made him feel more involved in school and for this, he felt his school is actually a “really good school”.

This suggests the importance of the school being a place where students feel “involved” and connected to, as in feeling that they belong there. In this case his memberships in these clubs not only gave him an opportunity to do a variety of activities on campus, but also through these activities and memberships he is able to develop a sense of involvement or belonging, which made him view his campus as a “good” school.

Peers or friends played a huge role in the educational experience of Hmong students. Among the many things students enjoyed about school, meeting new people and making new friends was all around mentioned as the one thing the students liked most about school. Tou discussed how friends can be beneficial when it comes to school work and personal life. Der also discussed how her friends prevented her from slacking off and helped her stay focused in school. Essentially, these relationships with peers provided them resources of emotional support, academic support and role models.
I have a lot of smart friends so they help me a lot when I need help with any of my classes and I need help because I’m not that smart. But they help me a lot and they keep me on track and whenever I’m slacking off, they’ll text me like really get off Facebook do your stuff. And so that’s really helpful.

Mai stated that it motivated her to see her peers do well academically because it made her feel that she can do it too. In other words, peers also served as role models.

I think honestly what helps me like do better in school is when I see people my age that are striving to do good too cause it motivates me…they can get this far in sophomore year, they can take AP classes I’m pretty sure I can handle that too. And it motivates me to do better. Or, I’ll see the people who dances really well but also keeps good grades and are active a lot and I’m just like, yeah I want to be like them. I want to be able to balance all these things out and look back at my high school year and just say I did all these things and I was a good student.

**Teachers and Counselors.** While recognizing that teachers and counselors provided important resources for education, the respondents saw some of the “resources” they provided were not helpful. For example, Der, an AP English student talked about her frustration with the “busy work” her teacher assigned. Furthermore, Der felt the assigned work that is being taught in class is irrelevant and “dumb” as pertaining to being completely useless and pointless.

I don’t like school because I just think some of the stuff are stupid to learn. I’ll be in class and the teacher won’t teach right or they won’t answer my questions or some of the stuff we are learning are just dumb, like straight up dumb. Like I don’t get why we are learning these things and I hate it when teachers give us busy work. Busy work that is useless and important-less. And they don’t even put it in the grade book.

She explained busy work,

They’ll be like go home and read pages like 420 and like and answer all the questions from like 1-20…after you are done and turn it in, and she doesn’t even grade it. And she goes I’m not going to collect just keep it. And I’m like what the
heck. You know and like we don’t even get tested on it and she just made us read it because she just wants us to do something.

The discussion of the teacher not answering questions and assigning “busy work” suggested a lack of even a teacher-student relationship. In other words, within a classroom, students sit in desks as the teacher disseminates knowledge and facilitates the learning process. If teachers are not evaluating whether or not students comprehend the material or at the least answer questions—a “mutual” relationship does not exist. It also suggests the teacher may not know her students or want to educate them—hence assigning busy work. Der’s feelings about school work suggested that students are not simply going to school and absorbing the information that is being taught to them. Rather, they are paying attention to what is being delivered to them and possibly critically thinking about how it can be applied to their world and other purposes in doing such work. Although this is beyond the scope of this research, it would be crucial to understand in more depth what is being missed—are teachers not being clear and making a connection to the work that is assigned and its relevance or purpose? Or are students not making the connection to the purpose of assigned work and lectures? Or, some teachers and students are not doing their jobs? Either way, this finding suggested that a relationship that can allow access to knowledge is “missing” since students feel they are simply given “busy work” so they are doing something—verses gaining resources and knowledge.

On the contrary, teachers can have positive impacts on the educational experience of students by providing social capital that is unique to their positions with the students. For instance, Chue spoke about how hard it was to approach teachers to talk about
education—in essence to build a relationship in which he can gain new knowledge or information. However, through the couple of teachers he felt he could count on, he felt encouraged to participate more in the class and activities associated with those specific teachers. Even though he felt teachers were hard to approach, there were two teachers which he felt he could “count on” and that made some impact on his educational experience in the regards that he participated more in the specific activities or organization lead by those teachers.

Well you can say as in teachers, are, I don’t have a lot of, you can say. No never mind I take that back I won’t talk about it. It’s nothing big I was just going to say I don’t have a lot of teachers I can count on. Only like one or two. Like Mr. Hay I can count on him and then you can say my choir teacher Ms. Smith. Like we do get close because I was in her choir class. But I don’t consider it a big impact but just an impact. It helped me want to do like Hmong club a little more and sing a little more.

While there were minimal discussions regarding teachers, these two examples highlighted the importance of “institutional agents” in the lives of students. That the social capital that can be gained or not gained such as knowledge in a learning environment can be greatly impacted by institutional agents. It is a little concerning that so little is said about teachers especially since students were asked about their experience in high school and that, teachers are the everyday contact that students have in a classroom to derive knowledge within an institution. Furthermore, if the couple of relationships with teachers made this student want to participate more in specific activities or classes associated with those teachers, it becomes concerning then if these positive relationships are not established, as one is left to wonder what potential social capital can be gained from such relationships.
Students also spoke about how counselors help with resources to sort out their academic concerns. Mai briefly mentioned her talk with a counselor to figure out what classes she wanted to take at the end of her freshmen year.

When I went to talk to my counselor about classes he was like yeah you are really good in school, you get good grades and I think you need to challenge yourself to do better and take AP and honor classes I think that’s where you need to go because it gives you more of a challenge and I think it will be more fair for you. And yeah that help me a lot.

And See spoke about how counselors helped her sort out her academic concerns related to classes,

I learned how to talk to my counselors so they can help me with things…when I have a problem with something or you know, about classes, then I talk to my counselors just so I have it deal with and everything.

In sum, relationships with families, clubs, peers, teachers and counselors provided social capital. More specifically, family and family financial struggles provided an emotional push, motivating the students to aspire to attend college. Clubs allowed students to build relationships with older peers who shared knowledge and also opportunities for community service and other activities. Students also saw their memberships in clubs as an opportunity to be noticed by postsecondary institutions.

While one student perceived a teacher’s assignment of “busy work” as pointless, another student’s relationships with two teachers made him want to participate in those class and activities more. Counselors were also perceived as those students can go to for their academic concerns, particularly regarding classes. It is important to note that according to the findings in this research, various relationships provided different forms of social capital such as informational (knowledge), emotional support, or academic support,
emotional encouragement and opportunities. Thereof, in an institution in which knowledge is specialized, such as that—teachers teach specific subjects and counselors have knowledge on college requirements, it becomes important not just to have relationships with teachers but also that of counselors. Clubs, peers and family relationships are just as important. It is interesting to note that while students spoke about family motivating them, they did not speak about parents telling them about specific college requirements and the process of applying for college. This might be because they are aware their parents may not have such knowledge (social capital). Of the participants’ parents, only one parent had a college degree, one parent had less than a high school education, while all the other parents had some college, a high school degree or did not answer the question. Historically, Hmong parents do not have a formal educational experience (Ngo and Lee 2007) and while some of these students’ parents had had some college—it is important to note that only one parent has a college degree. While some of them have had some college, it is also possible that they do not necessarily have resources and knowledge to help their children navigate in the US educational system (Lee 2007; Ngo 2006; Thao 2003).

*Interruptions in Establishing Networks*

Social capital are actual or potential resources gained through different relationships (Bourdieu 1986) that students have. For instance, through the family, students were motivated to attend college—emotional encouragement. Through memberships in clubs, students developed relationships with older peers where knowledge and information were gained. Opportunities, such as community service were
available to them through their membership in the clubs. Memberships in the clubs were also perceived as an opportunity to be noticed by postsecondary institutions—Bourdieu may consider this a potential resource. Furthermore, teachers provided social capital relative to their positions and counselors provided support for academic concerns. Meanwhile, students perceived various sources (family, peers, clubs, teachers and counselors) providing social capital, some students saw race and ethnic segregation in school and moving as interruptions in establishing such networks.

Race and Ethnic Segregation in School. The physical and social racial segregation in school was discussed by students as an interruption in creating relationships or possible sources of social capital. They elaborated on the "separation" of students through socially constructed "racialized" groups through the terminology of "cliques". Meng and Der observed that the cliques existed not only by (social) racial groups but also groups with social characteristic labeling, such as the: "jocks", "weird nerdy people" and "really smart, nerdy Asian people". The latter clique, "really smart, nerdy Asian people" further suggested that race is labeled alongside characteristics—in essence the reproduction of stereotypes. The label illustrated the existence and prominence of the Asian model minority stereotype at this high school as well as the aggregation of the Asian population. In addition, according to the idea of social capital—if through relationships students can potentially obtain resources, such as knowledge, opportunities and more—one is left to wonder what are missed potential resources due to the missed or lack of potential cross "clique" relationships. As mentioned previously, Hmong students relied on peers from clubs and other peers for informational, emotional support and academic support—social capital in advancing education. Thus, the racial segregation that they perceived may be
hindering them from gaining potential networks with resourceful peers, limiting social capital.

Furthermore, although Meng and Der observed the racial segregation of the school, they felt it could not be changed, despite wishing it was different. Meng and Der desired a school environment where everyone is "together" or integrated—a place where everyone can learn from each other and understand each other's problems. When asked if there was anything else they would like to share with me about their educational experiences, Der explained that the school is diverse, but the school is not “together” in the regards that it is separated by “cliques”,

I think for another better high school experience I should have or the school should have is…well, the school is diverse but if the school was more, to-get-her. Um cause there’s like cliques and like you know, no one’s like really together, as a school and I think it would be a better if the school really, would have more spirit and comes together. And I think that would be a good high [school] experience.

While Meng and Der recognized that the school is divided by cliques amongst racial, social characteristics and racial-social-characteristics, their frustrations on not being able to make changes to their school environment made them feel like things will not change. Meng stated,

It is just life or so you know. Or maybe it’s just how society is created in that way. Like maybe back in 1970s that’s how it was created and that’s how it’s still passed along, each year just--cliques. As in like, I watch movies they’ll say jocks, there’s the jocks and there’s like the emo kids and you know, and then, and then like the (pause) the White wash people or so, you know. I guess it’s just society and, life, that’s why, yeah.
Through this statement, Meng also recognized the social construction of such segregation. He saw the media portraying such cliques. In other words, whether the media was intentional or unintentional about portraying these cliques in schools, Meng saw that the media perpetuated and legitimized the “cliques” in the school environment.

Der explained that in classes people build relationships outside of their usual “cliques” but it is hard to build or maintain such relationships even when one makes the effort to build relationships “out there”—as in outside of the classroom. Der felt that nothing will ever change unless a person decided to make the changes, but she quickly explained that even through using her agency to try to build relationships—others refrained from being her friend so she stopped.

I don’t think there really is a solution or idea because I just think that…in the classroom people can get really close in the classroom but outside the classroom, a lot of people just burst out into their cliques again. So I really don’t think, nothing will ever change unless the person want to do it themself. Like I have to go out there and, I tried to making friends with random people but, they don’t want to be my friend so I just kind of stopped.

Their mentioning of a certain group mistreating others, suggested that there is some form of legitimized hierarchy within the school and the prevention of possible relationships that could be built under such structures. In Der’s explanation of the importance of the integration of the school in understanding one another’s experience, she also discuss the existence of hierarchy within the cliques as the “popular” people talks “down” to others and the importance of peer relationships for potential support and resources.

I know that some cliques or like…a lot of the people who are really popular, they like to talk down on people and they like to make jokes to people. But I think if
everyone got to know each other more than we wouldn’t make any jokes because …it’s like you don’t know if they are having a hard time at home so it’s not nice to go around and make fun of them. We think everyone should get to know each other so we can all have a good experience and realize how much everyone is going through a hard time, we can all help each other out. That’s what I think.

Furthermore, such segregation prevents relationships to foster across groups or “cliques.” While Meng and Der help finished each other’s sentences about the different cliques, they never made any mention to “White” students as a clique. For instance, when they spoke of cliques, they mentioned the following groups,

You know…the Hmong people hang out with the Hmong people. And then um, the Filipino with the Filipino people and then the Black and the Mexicans they’re all together. Or like, it’s (Der). The jocks (Meng). Or yeah, the weird nerdy people, and then um, the really smart, nerdy, Asian people. Like that type of cliques… (Der).

While there were a small percentage of White students attending Cal High School (6%), the absence of the mentioning of “White” students either as its own group or dispersed between other groups, suggests an invisible but present whiteness to which other groups are being compared. For instance, “White” was mentioned only when Meng was talking about the media portraying it. Meng and Der did not speak about White students. This suggested that students are aware of the existence of Whites and what it meant to be White, as they are aware of such labels made to students who are not White but adopt certain aspects of the White dominant culture, as those who has been washed. It also further suggested that due to the existence of “characteristic” cliques such as the “popular” people or the “jocks”—white students are not labeled based on their racial group but potentially by characteristics. Minority students are probably labeled by race, as “Hmong”, “Black”, “Mexican” and racial groups that combine race with characteristic
such as “the really smart, nerdy, Asian people”. Even more interesting is that this
specific group is not labeled as “the really smart, nerdy, Hmong people” or “the really
smart, nerdy, Chinese people” or “the really smart, nerdy (Asian subgroup) people”. This
further suggested that Asians are either, still aggregated into one group or that these
groups did consist of students from different Asian backgrounds. The fact that Meng
knew that the Hmong students were hanging out with Hmong students may be because of
his own membership as a Hmong person and can recognize other Hmong students,
whereas, other students may very well see them as an “Asian” group. Furthermore, while
these two students recognized cliques like the “really smart nerdy Asian people”, they do
not seem to associate themselves as part of these groups. These cliques then remain
separate, preventing the development of relationships across groups.

The structure within the school such as the racial segregation played a significant
role in these students’ high school lives and in regards to whom they built and maintained
relationships with, which can potentially impact the possible resources they obtain. They
recognized the segregation and the mistreatment of others due to such physical and social
labeling and tried to utilize their agency to change something that they mention the media
normalized and perpetuated. Yet, felt that there was no solution or idea to change it. As
students spoke about the importance of peers in their educational experience, the
segregation of other peers makes one wonder what social implications this can have, what
relationships students could have if such segregation did not exist and the resources such
relationships can potentially yield.

Moving. A few students mentioned moving impacted their high school
experiences in that it interrupted their experiences and relationships in high school. For Mai, moving was something that she did often. Mai has moved to three different states and estimated about 10 different schools. As a matter of fact, she mentioned that she has attended in over four elementary schools and the high school at which this research was conducted would be her second high school, and she was just a sophomore. While she predicted that she will be attending the school again next year and despite all the moving that she has done, moving was still a struggle for her.

I think some struggles or that I found I had (pause) me moving. Because when I move it’s harder for me to be balance and stuff so I think that was a big struggle for me. Yeah cause I never know like (pause) cause when you move to different places you know it’s different and I don’t know what to expect and it throws me off. And yeah I think moving has a lot to do with it.

Even though Mai developed new skills to adjust with changes, moving impacted her educational experience as she explained that knowing she may stay at the current school gave her confidence,

I guess it’s okay because I am active in other parts of the school stuff, and…next year I’m sure I’ll be doing all that stuff and I be staying here so. It gives me more confidence that I will do better.

Both Mai and Chue felt that their academic experience would have been different if they had not moved. For Mai and Chue specifically, they felt they could have been enrolled in AP/honor courses had they not moved and changed schools. Chue also spoke about missed community service opportunities (social capital) through the HSLC club that he belonged to at his previous school. Mai discussed how moving puts her in an environment in which she did not know anyone, so she did not know what road to take, or what clubs to join—highlighted the importance of relationships for students. She
further pin pointed the importance of relationships when she stated “I had to make new friends”.

I just moved to that school so… I didn’t know anyone I had to make new friends…it was hard but it was okay to because in my life time I moved a lot so I learned how to make friends fast…I didn’t really know what to do because like I was new to high school I was a freshmen I didn’t know anybody so I didn’t know what road to take or like what classes to take, or what clubs to join. But then by the end of the year I figured it out like I know I need to do to this to get to where I want to be…. then…I moved here (pause) for sophomore year and it kind of messed me up because I kind of had my schedule all figured out already like AP classes honor classes and all that stuff but then I couldn’t do that here because we had to do summer work and because I didn’t get enrolled until 2 days after school started I couldn’t do like AP classes… so I think it kind of messed up my schedule and how I wanted my sophomore year to be like.

Chue also had a similar experience in regards to the courses he could be taking. He mentioned that due to the move, he was not able to take the many AP courses he would like to take because it was too late to sign up.

Aside from the interruptions in their academic plans to take certain courses, moving had them encounter another challenge of having to adjust and adapt to a new environment and the changes they had to encounter such as friends. Furthermore, Meng also realized his missed community service opportunities due to his move. In regards to social capital, this could mean an interruption of already established relationships and network within that particular school for the student and having to reestablish them in another school. Mai’s mentioning of the need to make new friends and developing the skills to quickly build those relationships emphasized the importance of such relationships in an education setting for students.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This qualitative thesis shed light on the educational experience and aspirations from the view of eight Hmong students in a Northern California high school. By utilizing standpoint perspective as an approach in hearing from those specifically experiencing it, voices of Hmong students who are disadvantaged not only in educational attainment, but also SES and parent’s level of education were carefully examined. Three main research questions drove this study.

How do Hmong students view their experiences in a Northern California high school? What are the factors shaping their educational aspirations? My analysis of the eight Hmong students interviewed in this research showed that family, peers, memberships in school related activities, teachers and counselors had various impacts on their educational aspirations and experience. Their networks provided actual and potential resources (Bourdieu 1986) that may not have existed without such relationships. Relationships with family and family financial situations encouraged students to aspire to attend college (Lee 1997), while peers and memberships with clubs provided academic support, emotional support and opportunities such as community service. School activities through memberships in clubs made students feel involved or gave them a sense of belonging and also exposed them to peers that shared information or knowledge. Students also perceived their club memberships as an opportunity to get noticed by colleges. Teacher relationships had an impact on the involvement or willingness to participate in the activities and classes associated with these teachers. Counselors
provided academic advice for students. In their educational experience, Hmong students saw that their relationships with different people derived various resources. Students saw that their family and family financial struggles shaped their educational aspirations of going to college (Lee 1997). Peers, clubs, teachers and counselors contributed to their educational experience by providing emotional support, academic support, information and opportunities. In this way, the students exercised their agency to obtain the resources they need from different people, particularly non-family members. Students may have sought out non-family members because they are aware of social inequalities in the society and recognized that due to their parents’ social locations, they may not able to help them navigate through these structures. The social capital that students can gain from these networks then, can support the students within an institution and their future educational attainment beyond high school.

However, certain structures of the institution prevented the development of potential relationships and networks that can yield actual and potential resources. Particularly, there seems to be a neglect of the school structural issues based on race and ethnicity (Ngo 2010). The racial segregation of the school campus was noted as interruptions to their educational experience and networks (social capital). Through racial segregation, relationships are only built with students of similar ethnicities or racial groups, that may not easily allow for cross clique relationships to develop—as Der mentioned when she discussed her difficulties in becoming friends with a student outside of the classroom.

From the findings in this research, questions arise regarding the educational experience of Hmong students pertaining to missed opportunities due to limited or lack of
networks. For instance, as two students spoke about the racial segregation of the campus outside of classrooms, one is left to think of what relationships could have been developed as well as the variations of such relationships that can yield potential resources. According to the social capital theory, relationships can introduce new resources, in many forms such as opportunities, knowledge, support and more, and if that were the case, what are the missed opportunities and resources if students are hanging out with people from not only similar racial background but also similar class backgrounds? Future studies should continue investigating the impact of in-school race relations on high school students’ social networks and their implication for social capital.

Students also noted the significance of their experience moving to another school as an interruption in their accumulation of social capital. Moving is the physical removal of the student from the school they were attending to a new school—it is the physical removal from built or established relationships to a new environment. Mai accentuated the importance of these peer relationships and the social capital that could be obtained through them when she spoke about developing the skill to quickly make friends since she moved so often. While there is research on Hmong parents’ economic hardship on increased student household responsibilities (Ngo 2000 as cited in Ngo 2002), there is no research exploring the educational experiences of students whose parents move due to financial hardship and other reasons. Future studies should examine the impact moving could have on students’ accumulation of social capital.

Another research question was whether there was any difference in the educational aspirations of Hmong students depending on the classes they take. Findings
in this research suggested that it did not matter what English classes students were tracked into, they all aspired to attend college. While the sample for this research is small, other research also shows that educational aspirations are universally high for racial and ethnic groups (Kao and Thompson 2003), and that Hmong ESL students aspire to attend college (Park 2006). Provided that family and family financial situations were most mentioned as students’ source of motivation to attend college, English classes may not have affected their educational aspirations. Given these points, it is concerning what consequences ESL students face when they realize they do not meet the minimum requirements to enter four year institutions as they aspired.

While this thesis adds to the previous literature on Hmong students and their educational experiences and aspirations from their point of view, there were some limitations and future recommendations. First, it is important to note that this study utilized a small sample, yet the themes that arise out of this research cannot be ignored. The themes pertaining to relationships or networks (social capital) and impact on educational aspirations and experience must be further examined in greater detail by utilizing different data collection techniques. For instance, future research can observe these relationships through ethnographic work in which the researcher can spend more time in looking at how relationships are developed—and how resources are shared through such relationships or networks. A more thorough review of considering the structures of the schools, constraints and institutional agents can shed more light on the processes of resources shared and obtained through these networks.

Furthermore, studies of students not involved in clubs and other school related organizations can also help shed light on the impact of relationships on educational
experiences of Hmong students. Because the sample recruited for this study came from the Hmong Club, all the participants were already members of at least one club. And as some students mentioned, memberships in clubs had both academic and social benefits to them. Future studies should investigate what educational experiences other students are having if they are not involved in any clubs or organizations.

In conclusion, students from this research saw that their relationships with different people, family, peers, clubs, teachers and counselors gave them different resources such as emotional encouragement, information (knowledge), emotional support, academic support, opportunities for activities and community service and opportunities to be noticed by postsecondary institutions. These findings suggested that the family, peers, clubs, institutional agents, school structure, such as racial segregation can all shape the kinds of networks students have and resources that they could derive out of such relationships. Based on these findings, schools can reevaluate their structures to see how they can increase each student’s network with students on campus, teachers, counselors and other staff and encourage club or academic based organization participations for the student population. As relationships are important in gaining resources, the Hmong community could also extend their network beyond their communities into other communities with similar educational struggles, as well as those with high educational success to derive new knowledge to support their young population. While programs such as AVID exist, educational policy could gear towards providing EL students opportunities to directly enter four year institutions as students aspire to attend college regardless of the track courses they are enrolled in.
APPENDIX A1

Parent Consent for Child to Participate in Research

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Chia Xiong and I am a graduate student from the Sociology Department at Sacramento State. I am doing a research to learn more about the educational experiences of Hmong students at Cal High School.

I am inviting Hmong students to talk about their educational experiences as a student starting January 2012 to February 2012. The interviews may take 30-60 minutes and I would like to record the sessions using digital audio-recording devise for transcription purposes. However, you or your child can request to have their interview session not recorded. I can arrange a time that is most convenient for your child to participate in the interview at Cal High School.

The interviews will remain confidential. The real names of the students, parents, and the school will not be used when writing or talking about this research. The recordings of the interviews will be deleted as soon as I have transcribed them. Until then, the recordings, consent forms, and questionnaires will all be stored in a secure location that only I will have access to.

I hope that this research will help me, teachers, parents, students and the Hmong community to learn more about the challenges and success of Hmong students. Talking about these experiences can bring up stress, or other emotional responses, but these risks are considered very small. However, it is possible that some questions may cause or bring up emotional responses. Students are more than welcome to call their high school counselor, Susan (pseudonym, actual documents has counselor’s real name) at XXXXXXX extension XXXX, if they need someone to talk to.

Please sign below if the student is willing to participate in the research and you give permission for your daughter/son to participate. Your child’s participation in this research is entirely voluntary. He or she may choose not to answer any question(s) at any given time. Your child may also stop participation in the research at any time. Sign below if the student is willing to participate in the research.

Please find attach a list of the questions I will be asking your child. If I can help you answer any questions about this research, please contact me on my cell phone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or email me at XXXXXXXXXXX@Hotmail.com. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Kimura Ida at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email, XXXX@saclink.csus.edu.
Chia Xiong
Graduate Student of Sociology at Sacramento State

PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE BOXES BELOW AND SIGN

☐ Yes, I give permission for my daughter/son __________, to participate in the interview at Cal High School about Hmong students’ school experiences.

☐ Yes, I give permission for my daughter/son __________, to participate in the interview and be audio recorded at Cal High School about Hmong students’ school experiences.

☐ No, I do not give permission for my daughter/son __________, to participate in the interview at Cal High School about Hmong students’ school experiences.

_____________________________  ______________________________
Date                                           Parent Signature
Dear Student,

My name is Chia Xiong and I am a graduate student from the Sociology Department at Sacramento State. I am doing a research to learn more about the educational experiences of Hmong students at Cal High School.

I am inviting Hmong students to talk about their educational experiences as a student starting this January 2012 to February 2012. The interviews may take 30-60 minutes and I would like to record the sessions using digital audio-recording devise for transcription purposes. However, you can request to have your interview session not recorded. I can arrange a time that is most convenient for you to participate in the interview at Cal High School.

The interviews will remain confidential. The real names of the students, parents, and the school will not be used when writing or talking about this research. The recordings of the interviews will be deleted as soon as I have transcribed them. Until then, the recordings, consent forms, and questionnaires will all be stored in a secure location that only I will have access to.

I hope that this research will help me, teachers, parents, students and the Hmong community to learn more about the challenges and success of Hmong students. Talking about these experiences can bring up stress, or other emotional responses, but these risks are considered very small. However, it is possible that some questions may cause or bring up emotional responses. You are more than welcome to call your high school counselor, Susan (pseudonym, actual documents has counselor’s real name) at XXXXXXXX extension XXXX, if you need someone to talk to.

Please sign below if you are willing to participate in the research. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question(s) at any given time. You may also stop participation in the research at any time. Sign below if you are willing to participate in the research.

If I can help you answer any questions about this research, please contact me on my cell phone at (XXX) XXX-XXX or email me at XXXXXXXXXXX@hotmail.com. You may
also contact my advisor, Dr. Kimura Ida at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email, XXXX@saclink.csus.edu.

Chia Xiong
Graduate Student of Sociology at Sacramento State

PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE BOXES BELOW AND SIGN

☐ I have read the form above and give my consent to participate in this research at Cal High School about Hmong students’ school experiences.

☐ I have read the form above and give my consent to participate and be audio recorded in this research at Cal High School about Hmong students’ school experiences.

________________________________________  _______________________
Student Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX B

Semi-structure Interview Questions

1.) What is it about school that you like? What is it about school that you do not like?

2.) Tell me about your overall high school experience. (Tell me about school, school work, extra-curricular activities, friends, family, work or anything else you will like to mention.)

3.) What does success mean to you in school/in life?

4.) What do you think is/are the thing(s) that contribute to your success in school?

5.) Identify the biggest struggle(s) you have in school. What do you think is/are the thing(s) that contribute to your struggles in school?

6.) What are your plans after high school? (Are you planning to go to college? Have you applied? Do you know the process and requirements to apply for a community college or four-year college? Was there anyone or anything that helped you understand these requirements and process?)

7.) What kind of job(s) would you like to have after you finish school?

8.) Are there any person(s), thing(s), or event(s) that have made you come upon such aspirations in school and future jobs?

9.) What do you think would help you to get to the success that you described? What do you think would make it difficult for you to get to the success that you described?

10.) What do you think could have made your school experience better? How?
### Demographic Questionnaire (Pre-Interview)

For the following questions below, please check what applies to you and/or fill in your answer in the spaces provided.

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<th>Gender:</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ 15</td>
<td>□ Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>□ Regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ 11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>□ Honors/Advance Placement (AP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ 12th</td>
<td>What is your Grade Point Average (GPA)</td>
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<table>
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<th>Where were you born?</th>
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<tr>
<td>□ Thailand</td>
<td>□ Both Parents (Mom &amp; Dad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ United States</td>
<td>□ A relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Other country</td>
<td>□ A Guardian</td>
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If born in a different country, how many years have you lived in the USA? _________

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<th>Language spoken at home:</th>
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<td>□ English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Other __________________</td>
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</table>
What is your mother’s highest level of education?

☐ Less than high school
☐ High school graduate
☐ Some College
☐ Bachelor Degree
☐ Master Degree
☐ Doctorate Degree

What is your father’s highest level of education?

☐ Less than high school
☐ High school graduate
☐ Some College
☐ Bachelor Degree
☐ Master Degree
☐ Doctorate Degree

If you speak Hmong, how fluent are you?

☐ Not fluent
☐ Fluent
☐ Very fluent

Are you working?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If Yes, How many hours do you work each week? ______

Do you participate in any extra-curricular activities?

☐ Yes
☐ No

How many siblings do you have?_____
How many of your siblings are in college?_____
How many of your siblings have graduated from college _____
APPENDIX D

Participants (All names are pseudonyms)

**Mai** is 16 years old and a sophomore in high school. She is currently in a Regular English class and participates in extracurricular activities. She speaks English and is also fluent in Hmong. She lives with her mom, where English and Hmong are both spoken at home. Her mother has less than a high school education. She has one sibling. None of her sibling is in college nor has graduated from college at the time of the interview.

**Tou** is 18 years old and currently a senior in high school. He is also enrolled in a regular English class and currently does not participate in extracurricular activities. He lives with both parents who are high school graduates. He speaks English and is not fluent in Hmong. He grew up in a home where both Hmong and English were spoken. He has four siblings. At the time of the interview, none are in college and none have graduated from college yet.

**Chue** is 17 years old and currently a senior in high school. He is taking an Honors/AP English course at the time and lives with both parents. His mother holds a Master’s degree and his father had some college. Both languages, Hmong and English are spoken at home. He is involved in extracurricular activities. He currently has a self-reported 3.3 GPA. He has five siblings and one of them is in college, none of his siblings have graduated from college yet.

**Fue** is 17 years old, a senior in high school, currently in an ESL English course and participates in extracurricular activities. He is living with his mom where both English and Hmong are spoken at home. His father is a high school graduate and his mom has had some college. He speaks Hmong fluently and has two siblings—none of which were attending or graduated from college at the time of the interview.

**See** is the youngest participant at the age of 14 years old. She is a freshmen in high school and enrolled in a regular English class. She lived with both parents who have had some college in a home where both Hmong and English were spoken. She speaks Hmong fluently and currently helps her parents with their family business. She has seven siblings, with one of them currently attending college and none having graduated from college yet.

**Kong** is 18 years old, a senior and enrolled in an ESL English course. He is living with both parents in a home where both Hmong and English are spoken. He is fluent in Hmong. He has 16 siblings and four of them were attending college at the time of the interview, with none having graduated from college yet.
Meng is 15 years old, a junior enrolled in a Regular English course, living with both parents. Both parents have had some college. He has seven siblings with one of them attending college. None of his siblings have graduated college at the time of this interview. Both Hmong and English are spoken at home. He is fluent in Hmong.

Der is 15 years old, a sophomore and enrolled in Honors/AP course. She lives with both parents where English is the only language spoken at home. She participates in extracurricular activities and has a self-reported 3.25 GPA. She has two siblings, none of which are attending college or have graduated from college yet.
REFERENCES


