The Spirit of a People: Hmong American Life Stories

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Researching life stories can shape students' sense of direction and purpose both within and beyond our classrooms.

We cannot know a culture unless we know the people whose spirit keeps it strong. For educators at all levels, this may be one of the most important lessons that we have to learn and share with our students, particularly if we are committed to developing full respect for their diverse, distinct identities. Meeting that challenge requires an ongoing effort to understand who our students are, in the context of what they bring to our classrooms—a rich array of multicultural heritages representing the face of America in the 21st century. Since the late 1970s, Southeast Asian American students have become an increasingly visible presence in many schools, yet little attention has been given to why their families have journeyed to the United States from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, or to how they have become assimilated—or resisted assimilation—during the past 25 years.

Hmong American students, in particular, are among the most overlooked and misunderstood groups in the public education system. My experiences with these students lead me to encourage other teachers to incorporate reading and researching life stories into the language arts curriculum, so that Hmong American students can have the opportunity to explore and take pride in their own heritage. For students across cultures, this kind of work offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen self-identity and promote respect for others' identities. For Hmong American students, it can make a crucial difference by helping them construct a positive, bicultural identity and a firm foundation for educational success.

The Lost Generation

"We are the lost generation." This is what a Hmong American student told me recently in a Southeast Asian American life stories course that I teach at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. The basic premise of this course is that extraordinary stories often are told by ordinary people: stories of courage, sacrifice, strength, and hope. Selections from a wide array of books (including autobiography, biography, oral history, and cross-cultural reporting) enable students to compare and contrast the various paths taken by refugees and immigrants to this country. As they read, they also research the histories and cultures of Southeast Asian ethnic groups who have made the United States their home. For many students, delving into their family backgrounds is an eye-opening venture that positively changes their self-perceptions. Although they may belong to the "lost generation," the personal stories of Hmong American students indicate that they are striving, often with impressive success, to find an enduring bicultural identity. Informed by an awareness of their shared history, they can build such an identity on a solid basis of individual integrity, family bonds, respect for community values, and a commitment to keeping Hmong culture alive. By making room in the language arts curriculum for reading and researching life stories, teachers can support students in that effort.

The "lost generation" generally refers to Hmong American students in their late teens and early twenties who are the first in their families to attend college. Linda Lor (all student names are pseudonyms) describes their situation of living "between worlds": "We are not completely Hmong or completely American. We cannot be only one or the other, so we try to be both. However, many of

us have lost our sense of identity and direction. We do not have a past in another country like our parents and grandparents do. Our future in this country is not clear. At school, we often feel alone or unknown. Sometimes we feel invisible." For many students, this feeling of invisibility begins in grade school and intensifies year by year through middle school and high school. When asked about memories of their earlier education, my students often say that the sense of not being seen—except as part of an anonymous group of Asian Americans—is very painful to recall.

Although Asian Americans in general are considered the "ideal minority," statistics tell a different story for Hmong Americans. Up to 70 percent of those who have come to the United States as refugees from the Vietnam War have been illiterate in their own language (Cao & Novas, 1996; Pfaff, 1995). Headed by parents without necessary English or job skills, approximately 65 percent of these households have incomes below the poverty line (Stephenson, 1999; Thao, 1999; Tokuyama, 1989). Welfare rates remain high for Hmong in states where they are concentrated, including an estimated 35 percent in Wisconsin, 40 percent in Minnesota, and 45 percent in California (Fadiman, 1997). Education is crucial to changing this bleak picture, yet conflicting accounts of Hmong American students' academic achievements make it difficult to assess their progress in the public school system. Ray Hutchinson, an urban school researcher, claims: "It is likely that Hmong youth will be more successful in their educational careers than any other immigrant or refugee group ever to come to the United States" (cited in Borsuk, 1997, p. 1A). Hutchinson points to Wisconsin state reports that Hmong American students are doing well in elementary and middle schools, often outperforming peers from other ethnic groups in standardized tests of reading and other subjects (Borsuk, 1997; "Educational Performance," 1996; Mueller, 1996).

Yet with equal conviction, Paoze Thao (1999), a community activist and educator, warns that Hmong American students are experiencing an educational "crisis" that threatens to undermine the future of their communities. He underscores the fact that nearly 50 percent of the limited-English-proficiency (LEP) students in Wisconsin public schools are Hmong American (8,785 out of approximately 18,000 LEP students in 1993–94). In his view, Hmong American students generally are not developing the skills in elementary and middle school that they need to succeed in higher education. Similarly, researcher Wendy Walker-Moffat (1995) cautions that reports about Hmong American students' performance often fail to acknowledge the high number who are placed in low academic tracks and remain there until they graduate.

How can despair grip students when they are so young and hold onto them for so long?

What seems to be missing from this debate is any extensive attention to the individual situations of Hmong American students themselves, situations that are complicated by history and culture as well as their personal backgrounds. As I hope more teachers will come to recognize, our attention needs to be given to life stories because they are crucial in shaping students' sense of direction and purpose both within and beyond our classrooms. Chris Nou Xiong, the first Hmong American teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) system, has observed that although Hmong American students tend to do well in elementary school, they fall behind in middle school, and even farther behind in high school. This has proven to be true in other states, too. In California, for example, less than a third of Hmong American students graduate from high school (Miller, 1996). Ge Xiong, a Southeast Asian community liaison for MPS, has identified a surprising pattern: students who are born in America and have a good command of English are more likely to do poorly and drop out than students who arrive from Laos or Thailand and learn English as a second language. Xiong explains, "That's because those born here . . . don't have the same aspirations to do well as those who immigrated. There is a lack of respect. They don't see themselves positively, and they despair" (cited in Alfvin, 1995, p. 44).

How can despair grip students when they are so young and hold onto them for so long? Another student, Steve Lee, looks at the situation in this way: "For years in school, I never thought of being Hmong as something to be proud of. Some people look at Hmong and think: 'dog eater,' 'welfare kid,' or 'no good Asian'. . . . It's easy to feel ashamed when nobody—not family, not teachers—tells you what's the use of being Hmong, what's the good of it when you don't even know how you got here."

Reading and Researching Life Stories

The most basic motivation for reading and researching life stories is to make certain that all students will have the opportunity to strengthen

Informational Books on Hmong and Hmong Americans

Brittan, Dolly. *The People of Laos.* (Powerkids Press, 1998).

Coburn, Jewel Reinhart. *Encircled Kingdom: Legends and Folktales of Laos.* (Burn Hart, 1979).

Epstein, Steve. (Adapter.) *Laos Folktales: Xieng Mieng—The Cleverest Man in the Kingdom.* (*Vientiane Times,* 1995).

A Free People: Our Stories, Our Voices, Our Dreams. (Hmong Youth Cultural Awareness Project, 1994).

Giacchina-Baker, Rosalie. *Stories from Laos: Folktales and Cultures of the Lao, Hmong, Khammu and Iu-Mien.* (Pacific Asia Press, 1995).

Laos in Pictures. (Lerner, 1996).

Livo, Norma J., and Cha, Dia. *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.* (Libraries Unlimited, 1991).

MacDowell, Marsha. *Stories in Thread: Hmong Pictorial Embroidery.* (Michigan State University, 1989).

Mansfield, Stephen. *Laos* (2nd ed.). Cultures of the World. (Marshall Cavendish, 1999).

Moore, David L. *Dark Sky, Dark Land: Stories of the Hmong Boy Scouts of Troop 100.* (Tessera, 1989).

Murphy, Nora. *A Hmong Family.* (Lerner, 1997).

Takaki, Ronald. *From Exiles to Immigrants: The Refugees from Southeast Asia.* (Chelsea House, 1995).

Vang, Lue, and Lewis, Judy. *Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way: Oral Lore, Generation to Generation* (2nd ed.). (Vang & Lewis, 1990). (Hmong and English text)

Zickgraf, Ralph. *Laos.* (Chelsea House, 1997).

their identities by learning how they and their families "got here," whether their families have been here for five years or five generations. As part of our study of Hmong American history and culture, students choose from a number of possible life story projects, and everyone is encouraged to collaborate in pairs or small groups in carrying out this work. Through class discussion and consultation with the teacher, students are asked to consider six fundamental questions:

- What have you found most interesting in the reading that we have done together about the experiences of Hmong Americans?
- What would you like to learn more about by doing person-to-person research for our class?.
- Who could help you learn more by sharing their life experiences: family members, relatives, friends, church or youth leaders, other people in your neighborhood or community?
- What kinds of questions can you ask to find out what you want to know: factual, "yes or no," open-ended?
- What is the best way to ask your questions: face to face in an interview, through a letter or series of letters, by telephone, or through a combination of these?
- How can you share what you learn with the other students in our class (and possibly with a larger audience): through an autobiographical or biographical essay contributed to a class anthology, an illustrated booklet added to the class library, a report for the school newspaper, a skit or play, a collage of written descriptions and visual images, or other creative work?

Appropriate books for initiating class discussion of Hmong American life stories in elementary classrooms are listed in the sidebars with this article. For elementary teachers working with a multicultural curriculum, Linda Winston's *Keepsakes* (1997) is an excellent source of practical suggestions for undertaking life story projects, such as strategies for interviewing, notetaking, and sharing work in progress. As she emphasizes, and as my experience confirms, teachers play a crucial role in helping students discover the rich truths of their own histories.

Ideally, the process of carrying out such research is enriched by four expectations, all of them adaptable to students' capabilities at various grade levels. First, I encourage students to include a "big picture," an *informed perspective* linking what an individual student wants to learn with an understanding of what others have discovered about the subject. A student investigating New Year customs, for example, can begin by composing a description of

the customs that she and her family usually follow; then she can talk with people in her family about the significance of those (and other) customs familiar to their community; and finally she can compare their comments to the explanations of Hmong practices that she finds in the library (or classroom collection of books). In this way, the student's knowledge can be grounded in familiar experiences, yet informed by others' interpretations of those experiences. Accordingly, during class presentation of student research, the teacher should be mindful of the importance of involving everyone in better understandings of cultural practices. The aim is not simply to "display" Hmong culture—by showing photographs, bringing in traditional clothing, and so on—but to respect its richness.

Next, I encourage students to develop a project with a *personally meaningful purpose* that fulfills more than course requirements. For example, the history of women's embroidery in Hmong culture offers many possible research topics, including the traditional importance of *paj ntaub* (flower cloth) in Laotian village life and the origination of story cloth in Thai refugee camps. Delving into this history has special appeal for students who have grown up watching their mothers sew the colorful, intricate designs that make Hmong embroidery unique in the world. In this case, students can take responsibility not only for talking with their mothers (and other female relatives) about the creation of the embroidery, but also for looking at outside sources (such as books about Southeast Asian folk art) to learn more about its motifs or themes. Some students may want to bring in samples of their mothers' work to show how it is patterned; others may prefer to use photographs or drawings from library books. Because of its connection to their everyday lives, research of this kind can be one of the best ways for Hmong American students to investigate continuity and change in cultural identity, specifically in terms of the different purposes that women's embroidery has served in Laos and the United States.

Third, the value of researching life stories increases as students move beyond the personal to the *cross-generational significance* of what they are investigating. For example, reading a story in class about Hmong children growing up in the Midwest might spark a student's interest in writing his own story. To make the project more meaningful, he also could talk with people in his (immediate or extended) family about their childhood memories. What was it like for his grandfather to grow up as the eldest son in his family, working alongside his parents in the Laotian mountains? How different was it for his father to grow up as the youngest son and be given the chance to attend a village school? What was most important for both of them to learn in order to be "good sons," according to traditional values? In this kind of research, teachers and students alike need to stay focused on learning from older generations what they went through during childhood, rather than on judging their experiences by American standards of how children should be raised. Teachers should be aware that many Hmong elders are not accustomed to being asked direct questions about themselves. Therefore, it is more respectful for students simply to ask open-ended questions, such as "When you recall your childhood, what do you remember the most?" rather than pointed questions about what they did or felt. Writing a story that links grandfather to father to son—across countries and cultures—can lead to surprising discoveries about basic needs for home, family, and a secure sense of belonging.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, person-to-person research at its best explores issues that relate to students' *shared identities as citizens* of a multicultural society, where the history of each person reflects the potential for dynamic change and growth within the United States. Indeed, life stories are central to the language arts curriculum, not supplemental to it, largely because they offer us new insights into how complex that history can be.

The Story of Hmong Refugees

At all levels of public education, the story of how Hmong people arrived in the United States deserves our serious attention. Yet that is a story still unknown by most Americans, still not taught in most schools. During the Vietnam War, as early as 1960, the CIA recruited Hmong men into a "secret army" battling Communists along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Hamilton-Merrit, 1993; Leepson, 1999). By 1969, 40,000 Hmong provided the front-line defense for the U.S. troops in Laos, using their knowledge of the mountains and their fierce fighting skills to hold back the North Viet-

namese army's advancement as long as they could. By 1972, approximately 70 percent of American air strikes in Indochina were aimed at targets in Laos; 80 percent of those were along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Up to 300 strikes per day devastated the highlands where Hmong had lived as farmers, hunters, and tribal people for generations (Chan, 1994). As many as 17,000 Hmong soldiers and 50,000 Hmong civilians were killed (Hamilton-Merrit, 1993). Entire villages, more than 100,000 people, became refugees within their own country (Fadiman, 1997; Pfaff, 1995). In an undeclared war, in a country that was officially neutral, the United States dropped over two million tons of bombs: more than the total tonnage it dropped in Europe and the Pacific during World War II (Chan, 1994; Fadiman, 1997).

When Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, Hmong who had fought for the United States expected to be evacuated along with U.S. troops. Indeed, the promise of such protection had been part of the agreement between the CIA and the Hmong years before (Hamilton-Merrit, 1993; Pfaff, 1995). It was no secret that the Communists would systematically hunt down and kill those who had opposed them. To the shock and bewilderment of the Hmong, however, the United States did not keep its promise. Estimates for the number of Hmong airlifted out of Laos range from 1,000 to 15,000 (Chan, 1994; Pfaff, 1995). As many as 150,000 more tried to escape into Thailand. Nearly half died during that treacherous journey across the mountains, jungles, and Mekong River—they were murdered, starved, or drowned on their way to freedom. Those who reached the refugee camps remained there for months or years, waiting for sponsorship and safe passage to another country (Alfvin, 1995; Faderman & Xiong, 1998; Fadiman, 1997). From 1975 to 1995, approximately 100,000 Hmong resettled in the United States, most of them carrying little more than memories of a homeland lost forever and dreams of a new land where their families could be free (Howard, 1990; Livo & Cha, 1991). As of 2001, Hmong in the United States numbered approximately 300,000. About 400,000 Hmong remain in Laos, where their persecution by the Communist Lao and Communist Vietnamese governments continues (Vang, 2001).

All of my Hmong American students have been told, "Go back where you came from!" by other Americans who do not understand why they and their families are here. Missing from U.S. history books to this day are important lessons about the full tragedy of the Vietnam War, including the destruction of Laos by the United States and China, the deliberate sacrifice of Hmong lives in our battle against Communism, the empty promise of our protection, and the overwhelming obstacles overcome by Hmong survivors in their struggle to reach America. This is why history is crucial to working with students in a life stories course. Also, as they read history, students are encouraged to bring family stories and community perspectives into their discussion of research by others. This focus has proven to be truly transformative for many of my students. As one of them, Nor Vang, has observed:

> *Without history, I don't know my own* being in the world. *I don't know my place in my family or my right to be in this country. Before this class, I couldn't ask my parents about the war. I didn't know what to ask, what to find out. I couldn't suddenly start to say, "What did you go through? How did you feel?" Now I can tell them what I study. They're interested. They're surprised. They tell me what they remember, a little at a time. They say, "Never forget what we sacrificed to give you your life."*

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Before our class, Nor said he could summarize in one sentence what his parents had endured during the war: "Their village was bombed, all the houses burned down, and they had to run for Thailand." But as he spent more time talking with them, he came to appreciate their bravery. His parents had survived for a month in the jungles of Laos and Thailand, leading three young children and an elderly grandmother away from Communist soldiers, Thai bandits, pig traps set to cut off legs, bamboo stakes sharpened to cripple feet, and land mines hidden everywhere. In the jungles, Nor's parents scavenged for anything edible—leaves, tree bark, insects—to feed the others. Still, the grandmother and the youngest child, only two years old, died of hunger and illness. Nor's mother tied the other children to herself, one in front and one in back, dosing them with opium when there was no other way to keep them quiet. By the time they reached a refugee camp, they were on the verge of starvation.

Two years later, sponsored by a Baptist church, they were living in

Picture Books on Hmong and Hmong Americans

Brittan, Dolly. *The Hmong.* (Powerkids Press, 1998).

Cha, Dia, and Cha, Nhia Thao. *Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey of Freedom.* (Lee & Low, 1996).

Chan, Anthony. *Hmong Textile Designs.* (Stemmer House, 1990).

Coburn, Jewel Reinhart, and Lee, Tzexa Cherta. (Adapters.) *Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella.* (Shen's Books, 1996). (Teacher's guide and videotape available)

Giacchina-Baker, Rosalie. (Adapter.) *The Story of Mah: A Hmong "Romeo and Juliet" Folktale.* (Pacific Asia Press, 1996). (Teacher's guide and videotape available)

Graber-Wilson, Gerri. (Adapter.) *The Farmer's Son and the Gourd.* Trans. Xia Moua. (Vanger Books, 1994).

Knight, Margy. *Who Belongs Here?* (Tilbury House, 1996).

Lucas, Alice. (Adapter.) *How the Farmer Tricked the Evil Demon.* Trans. Vandy Sivongsay. (Pacific Asia Press, 1994). (Lao and English text)

Marchant, Brian. *A Boy Named Chong.* (Project Chong Productions, 1994). (Hmong and English text)

Marchant, Brian, and Marchant, Heather. *The World without "F."* (Project Chong Productions, 1997). (Hmong and English text)

Sasorith, Issara Katay. *Four Champa Trees.* Trans. Mahn Phongboupha. Adapted by Alice Lucas. (Voices of Liberty, 1990). (Lao and English text)

She, Peggy Deitz. *The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee's Story.* (Boyds Mills Press, 1995).

Thao, Cher. *Only a Toad.* Adapted by Brian Marchant and Heather Marchant. (Project Chong Publications, 1995). (Hmong and English text)

Toyed, Vangtou Xiong. *The Ant and the Elephant.* Adapted by Gerri Graber-Wilson. (Vanger Books, 1994).

Toyed, Vangtou Xiong. *The Hmong People and the Turtle.* Adapted by Gerri Graber-Wilson. (Vanger Books, 1994).

Xiong, Blia. *Nine-in-One Grr! Grr!* Adapted by Cathy Spagnoli. (Children's Book Press, 1993).

Xiong, Ia. *The Gift: The Hmong New Year.* (Pacific Asia Press, 1996).

Yang, May. *Yer and the Tiger.* Trans. Phoua Thao, Se Yang, and Charles Johnson. (Ava Dale-Johnson, 1981). (Hmong and English text)

La Crosse, Wisconsin, where Nor was born. Ten years later, Nor's father worked full-time as the church custodian; his mother embroidered flower and story cloth to sell at ethnic festivals; and all the children were healthy, strong, and safe. Looking at their family then, no one would have guessed that the father could not sleep, haunted by nightmares of the killing he had seen, or that the mother could not stop crying, even if silently, for their lost child. Most tragically, Nor learned, they who had been so brave had become afraid—afraid that they would lose their other children to an American culture threatening their very identity.

Hmong Culture

"What do you know about Hmong culture?" This is a question I ask students as we begin to read life stories in books such as *Hmong Means Free* (Chan, 1994), *I Begin My Life All Over Again* (Faderman & Xiong, 1998), *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman, 1997), and *Trail through the Mist* (Rolland & Moua, 1994). Students who are not Hmong American usually know nothing at all about Hmong culture; if they venture to describe it, they most often call it "primitive," "backward," "superstitious," or "totally strange." Students who are Hmong American see the culture differently, of course. Most have grown up celebrating births and marriages in traditional ceremonies, honoring the dead in three-day-long wakes, participating in New Year feasts with their families. Some also have taken it upon themselves to learn the reasons behind the rituals—the strings tied to a baby's wrists that keep its soul safe, the richly embroidered detail in a wedding dress that shows how much a mother treasures her daugh-

ter, the folk singing that expresses the continuity of Hmong culture over hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years (Klotyk & Foner, 1997; Livo & Cha, 1991; Miyares, 1998).

Hmong mythology traces the beginning of the culture to ancient China (2000–3000 B.C.E.), where Hmong rebelled against imperial rule. According to popular belief, they originally resided along the Yangtze and Yellow River valleys but gradually moved higher and higher into the mountains in search of land to call their own (Cha, 1996; Fadiman, 1997; Livo & Cha, 1991). No matter how far back into the past they look, Hmong are proud that they have remained a free people—with their own language, customs, and fighting spirit—despite the efforts of much more powerful groups to enslave and dominate them. By 400 C.E., they had formed an independent kingdom within China, which lasted 500 years before imperial armies crushed it. During the next 900 years, however, the Hmong would not surrender. They would not speak the language or obey the laws of the Chinese, who built a version of the Great Wall, called the Hmong Wall—one hundred miles long, ten feet high—in a useless attempt to enclose and control them. By the beginning of the 19th century, half a million Hmong had migrated to Indochina, settling in mountainous regions of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, where few other groups wanted to live (Chan, 1994; Fadiman, 1997). Surviving as farmers and hunters, the Hmong had no need for written language, formal government, private property, money, or locks on their doors. The center of their world was the family. All decisions were made in the best interests of the group. No one went hungry. Everyone had responsibilities that interlocked to protect the community (Alfvin, 1995; Pfaff, 1995; Proudfoot, 1990). By the time the Vietnam War began, five generations of Hmong had lived independently in the highlands of Laos for 150 years. Never would the Hmong have imagined that the war and its aftermath would destroy their way of life.

Whatever their grades and ages, Hmong American students—like all of our students—need to know that our classrooms are safe places to explore their backgrounds, traditions, and dreams.

Self-Respect as the Cornerstone of Self-Identity

To be hardworking, self-sufficient, committed to family, loyal to the group, indomitable in their will to survive—these are core values of Hmong culture. Because these values are embedded so firmly in Hmong history, I do not agree with sociologist Katy McGinnis-Dittrich, who predicts that Hmong people eventually "will disappear as a culture or be totally marginalized" (cited in Alfvin, 1995, p. 41). At the same time, however, I recognize that very painful wounds need to be healed in order for Hmong American students to feel that they truly belong in the United States. As educational researcher Henry Trueba (1994) observes, "We all carry profound emotional injuries that affect another deeper sense of self and the ability to recognize who we are individually and collectively" (p. viii). Reading and researching life stories, I am convinced, can be one way to contribute to that healing among our students. By emphasizing the centrality of "resourcefulness, relationship, and respect" in Hmong culture (Hones, 1999, p. 123), we can counter reports in mass media that suggest the culture itself is to blame for most of the problems faced by younger generations in adapting to American life. Unfortunately, such reports continue to wound our students and their communities, making our work in the classroom even more vital to their well-being. Here is how another student, Toua Lee, puts it:

> *If you never get the chance to learn the good things about Hmong culture, you're going to believe the bad. In this class, what we read and learn is what my parents tried to tell me, but I couldn't understand. Partly because they don't speak much English, and I don't speak much Hmong. More because I didn't want to listen. So many things were confusing. Now I want to tell other students: "We belong here. We are smart. We can succeed." I wish I learned about these life stories a long time ago. When I was younger and thinking about who I could be and what I could do.*

Whatever their grades and ages, Hmong American students—like all of our students—need to know that our classrooms are safe places to explore their backgrounds, traditions, and dreams. Accordingly, teachers must be culturally sensitive in their expectations, always remembering that self-respect is the cornerstone of self-identity. For example, the teacher should be careful not to require students to compare and contrast Hmong culture with American culture, which all too often puts students in the position of pointing out what is "wrong" with one and "right" with the other. Similarly, with the teacher's guidance, students as a group should discuss and research a range of subjects, so that they gain

new, better informed views of the variety and complexity in Hmong American experience. Stereotypes are bound to be reinforced, for example, if every time they talk about girls' or women's lives, they talk about oppression. Certainly, it is true that girls and women face special challenges in dealing with the demands of school, peers, family, and community (as detailed by researchers such as Donnelly, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Scott, 1988; and Walker-Moffat, 1995). However, it is also true that more and more Hmong American families are supporting their daughters' pursuit of higher education, and that they take pride in their daughters' achievements (Lee, 1997; Yang, 2001). Among my own students, I have seen a number of young women become involved in youth counseling and tutoring at community centers, dedicated to the advancement of the next generation. In any case, teachers need insight and foresight to help students move beyond gathering information to developing deeper respect for each other.

Conclusion

For students at all levels of education, the opportunity to read and research life stories can validate a positive sense of personal potential. Indeed, after working closely with Hmong American students for the past four years, I believe that they are more determined to succeed in school when they develop bicultural identities rooted in family and community, while at the same time branching out to embrace their own dreams. Certainly this is a possibility underlying Beth Xiong's story, which she shared in a class presentation:

> *I am an American who will always be proud to be Hmong. Years ago, I could not say this.*
>
> *I grew up in a family of five daughters. Our parents tried to protect us all the time. They wanted us to marry, settle down, have children, even when we were very young. We hated being treated this way. We hated being Hmong. We wanted to be American through and through. When I went away to college, I wanted more than anything to get away from my parents. But the longer I was gone, the more I thought about what my mother said about not forgetting who I am. In this class, I understood . . . what she was talking about—the war in Laos, the refugee camp where I was born, going to America. I can say now that her culture is my culture. Hmong people won't be what other people want them to be. They go their own way because that's how they survive. I'm like that, too. The Hmong culture gave me life; the American culture gave me freedom. Both make me who I am.*

Beth has gone on to become an honors student, a leader in the Hmong American Student Association, and an outspoken advocate for women's rights—a pioneer of her generation in balancing personal independence with commitment to her community. One of her main goals is to become a social worker who can reach out to younger Hmong Americans struggling with identity questions of their own. As she emphasizes, "Sometimes Hmong and American cultures feel as different as day and night or black and white. But we have to keep trying to find our way through both. We have to believe we can do it."

Students like Beth have taught me that we cannot know a culture unless we know the people whose spirit makes it strong. Courageous, resourceful Hmong people have kept their culture alive for many centuries in many countries. Thus, I am hopeful that Hmong American communities will thrive even as second, third, and fourth generations become increasingly assimilated. By incorporating life stories into the language arts curriculum, teachers from elementary school through college can take the opportunity to reinforce students' bicultural identities in positive, long-lasting ways. For teachers no less than students, our very "being in the world" can be enriched by this direct encounter with the reality of our shared multicultural heritage.

Author's Note

I would like thank the Cultures and Communities program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, especially its director, Professor Greg Jay, for enthusiastic support of innovation in multicultural curriculum development.

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Langston Hughes Poetry Day: April 2, 2002

The Academy of American Poets is partnering with the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project (based at the University of Kansas) and the National Council of Teachers of English to sponsor a number of special events, including a Langston Hughes Poetry Day on April 2, 2002. On this day, millions of men, women, and children across the country will become part of the world's largest poetry reading group as they gather together in schools, libraries, community centers, churches, hospitals, bookstores, or anywhere else they choose, to read and discuss the poetry of Langston Hughes.