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FACING THE MIRROR: HMONG STUDENTS STRUGGLE AND THRIVE IN SAGINAW

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See that girl over there. She's got a 4.0. I think it's the first time a student has entered this class with a 4.0 GPA.

I looked over to see a small girl dressed in bib overalls working on one of the benches in the midst of 22 high school boys. She looks up and a genuine smile which emanates from her face lights up deep brown eyes behind her glasses. As I make my way around the work area, greeting last year's returning students and asking the new students what they are working on, she greets me warmly, explaining how she had hooked up a single pole switch. I would be working with this class developing projects, to integrate language arts with the technical skills needed by student in an electricity program. I was as thrilled as the Electricity teacher to have a student with a 4.0 GPA because I knew she had the potential to set the academic standard for the other students, which of course she did.

Later in the school year I realized the ramifications. Teacher expectations play a big part in how students perform. I had very high expectations and had felt that the students performed even better than I had expected. Then Wendy's cousin, My Lou, made a comment that made my heart drop. She said that one of the biggest challenges she faced in school was, "competing against others because some people think all Asians are smart and they begin competing with me."

That comment made me question if I had made a stereotypical assumption about Wendy. She was the only girl in a male dominated field, held a good co-op job, and performed to the highest academic and technical standards set for the class.

Later when I later talked to Wendy, she confided there were other pressures. "I live in two different worlds. At school I'm like everyone else. At home I'm Hmong." Being Hmong meant being teased by her brother who believed girls should be home cooking and cleaning, doing laundry and dishes, certainly not working in a plant with tools and electrical circuits. It meant she had a large share of housework to do despite her schoolwork and successful job as an electrician's helper at a local automobile industry plant. In fact, Wendy stated that school would be better if she did not have so many chores at home and she worried that her grades were now dropping. She added thoughtfully, "I feel privileged because my parents couldn't go to school. They did attend school, but only elementary. I can go to school and even go to college. Five years ago, only a few Hmong students went to college. Now almost all go to college and get married later."

My "a-ha moment" began with questioning my assumptions about the 4.0 electricity student, Wendy. I realized I wanted to find out more about the Hmong students in our school so I decided to conduct research with five Hmong students, all of whom I had worked with throughout the school year. I had previously learned fascinating bits of information about each of these students but lacked a composite picture of how their culture informed their learning, nor did I understand how to make my teaching relevant to their needs.

I work with many of the 900 students at The Saginaw Career Complex, a regional career and technical education center, where I teach integrated language arts. My job encompasses teaching diverse topics such as journal writing in the nursing programs, newsletter publication in the child-care program, career research, interviewing techniques, resume building, and portfolio writing in over 25 different programs. Therefore, it was difficult for me to single out such a small group of learners, five students who were registered in five different programs. Studying such a selective group gave me insight into how students address family issues with broader societal issues, and it made me realize that many students struggle to gain a sense of

wholeness when schools sometimes compartmentalize them.

This may be particularly true for Asian students, sometimes viewed by teachers as quiet, cooperative learners who generally do not have many problems in school. I knew these students were open and almost all had shared some of their lives with me previously. I interviewed each one individually to begin putting together a mosaic of what school is like for these young people who, as Wendy had observed, “lived in two worlds.”

There were eleven Hmong students in our city schools. They all attended the same high school and five of these also attended the vocational school where I teach. My students came from three families. Two of the families, the Kue’s and the Cheng’s, were related while one student from the Chang clan had married into the Cheng family. All five of these students’ parents had been born in Laos, and then fled to the United States in the late 70’s or early 80’s with church sponsorship. Two of the fathers had fought on the American side in the Vietnam War, earning medals and recognition from the American government. Both of these soldiers would have been executed had they remained in Laos. Although all of my students had been born in America, several had siblings who were born in Laos. Jackson had eight siblings, four born in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Hmong was the home language for all of these students. Oddly most had no memory of learning English. Some said they learned it in school; others spoke it as a second language at home. The children communicated with one another in English and learned English from their older siblings, but spoke Hmong with their parents. Some parents had learned English and had become naturalized citizens but kept the Hmong language. Wendy explained that most Hmong parents teach their children to speak Hmong first because “If you learn English first, you won’t have the right tongue. You have to twirl the tongue and you can’t do it right if you learn English first.” She also emphasized that it was very difficult for her mother to learn English, that she needed to memorize English words and phrases. Learning the language made gaining citizenship extremely

difficult. Wendy added that she could understand both Japanese and Thai even though she can speak neither language.

All five students were vociferous about the question of dating and marriage. Two of the students were already married. At the age of eighteen, Jackson took sixteen year old Shoua as his wife in a Hmong ceremony, which he called a “culture wedding.” Shoua left the home of her parents and moved 100 miles away to live with her new husband in his parents’ home.

Being married posed different problems for each of the pupils. Jackson had a co-op job as a machinist and endeavored to keep up with the demands of school, work, a new wife, and the ever-present financial burdens of a marriage. He struggled to get good grades in the Machine Tool program because of attendance problems that resulted from working many hours. Jackson had paid Shoua’s family a sizeable dowry. He was working to keep her in a standard of living that was befitting to her family, saving for a car and their own place to live. He credited being married with helping him to get out of the gang life. In the past he had belonged to an Asian gang in Detroit. He proudly displayed three cigarette burns on his arm, symbols of memorable times with the Mongolian Local Boys or MLB’s and their adversaries, the AC’s or Asian Cripps and the AKP’s, the Asian King Possie. Jackson believed that marriage had helped him to gain his focus and return to his family after running away at the age of fifteen. He noted that he had improved his grades because of his wife, stating, “Marriage is hard at this age but it’s also a strength. You might look at me, like I’m an Asian dude, I’m a small dude. But I’m not a quitter. I believe in myself. I can get there.”

Shoua battled homesickness and tried to make new friends in a new school. His wife felt that being married caused others to talk about her. She said, “Everyone at my high school knows about the marriage. They look at us and talk about us when we walk by.” She also noted that if she had the power to change her culture she would like to change marriage customs, saying, “I don’t like paying for marriage. It

feels like parents sell you to someone you don't even know." She was quick to add that she and Jackson knew each other and had been seeing one another before they were married. Shoua, almost in tears, added how much she missed her family observing sadly, "I can never go back home now."

According to this family's tradition, a daughter can go back if her husband is not a good husband. Under this system, the bride's family is allowed to keep the dowry as compensation for bad faith, but Wendy explained, "If your family gave you away, they could take you back, and keep the money, if the husband did not treat you well. But if you elope you cannot go back to the family."

The idea of eloping or marrying an outsider is strictly prohibited in the Hmong community, yet the concept of arranged marriages caused a great deal of worry to the Hmong girls especially. Wendy stated emphatically, "I think it's wrong to buy a girl. It seems like they're (the husband) buying us like a slave." She clarified, "A girl could deny the boy, or her parents could deny, but it is really hard. If you run away with someone you are considered unclean, impure, or a bad person. If you have an interracial marriage, you are disowned. You are not Hmong anymore."

There was also mention of "shotgun," or "forced" marriages. Teenagers were not allowed to date or to be alone with members of the opposite sex. "Boys could come to the house and talk to girls," noted Wendy's cousin, My Lou, but "your parents would call you a 'slut' if you were holding hands with a boy." Additionally, if a boy is caught in a girl's bedroom, marriage is expected, indeed, required.

My Lou demonstrated concern about the marriage issue stating, "I wish I could change the way to marry. When you get married, the groom has to pay for the bride. A price is put on her head. Some girls get married at the ages of 12, 13, or 14. Some girls with no education end up on welfare."

There were also some serious concerns about the price assigned to the girls. My Lou explained that that most girls have a price in a range from \$3,000 to \$15,000 depending on the clan's reputation and

specifically, "If the father is a good person." She added, "My clan name is not that good, girls in my family usually range about \$4,000." My Lou discussed interracial dating or marriage in a distressed way. She emphasized that it is not permitted to date outside of her race, "My parents are totally against dating other races." She related the story of how her sister had dated a Hispanic boy and was consequently almost disowned by her family. "It took a lot of time but they were finally able to work through it." She did not feel ready to follow in her sister's footsteps, adding, "I already know that I will marry a Hmong person I'm not comfortable with anyone else." She then put her hand on her forehead and said exasperatingly, "Listen to me, I sound like such a racist. My tradition is messed up. I want my children to grow up American." Her comment surprised me for a moment, but gave me a perspective on how difficult the issue of dating and marriage has become for these Hmong students.

My Lou's brother, Cheng, also had a definite viewpoint on interracial dating and marriage. When asked to describe his friends, Cheng said, "They're Americans, white people (I'm sorry). My family expects me to hang out with Hmong friends but I can't help it. I live in America. I meet new people. My parents want me to marry Hmong, but whoever I fall in love with, I will marry." Cheng apologized for referring to "white people," feeling that perhaps he had offended me. When asked if there was anything about his culture that he wished he could change, Cheng replied, "I wish my parents' Hmong tradition would change so everyone could marry whom they want. I wish we could have more choice. Hmong girls do not have much freedom." Cheng interestingly enough, also chose a non-traditional career path. He was the only male in the Child-Care program and was very good with the two to five year olds.

Other concerns for these young people included prejudice, friends, and social problems. Each student recalled being teased about their ethnic background in elementary school and some complained of prejudice in high school. Jackson remembered getting into fights with children who

chanted “Ching, Chang,” mocking his name. He also mentioned being teased about having what others referred to as “squinted eyes.” He hastened to add, “I’m not afraid of anyone now. Me and my buddy got in a fight with ten dudes who jumped a friend.”

Cheng related an incident, which happened recently. “Just the other day walking down the halls of school, some kids made fun of me because of my race. They think we’re Chinese or Japanese and try to speak the language. They don’t know that we’re Hmong, or that we speak the Hmong language.”

My Lou fumed as she explained how a clerk in a nearby shopping mall told her, “You don’t belong here.” She later commented, “In school, sometimes I experience prejudice, but not from the teachers. I relate better because I try to do better. They single me out.” Sometimes she said she was teased about her eyes, adding that most teenagers were not even aware that she was Hmong. She added that her ethnic background was “a good advantage in business. Being a female and of a different race can help me.”

Wendy, likewise, saw her ethnic background as advantageous. She felt “kind of lucky, I’m a girl; I’m Asian; I’m entering a program with few females.

It was doubly difficult for these students to confront prejudice because they were dealing with a two-edged sword. On one hand they were expected to “hang together,” and some were only allowed to bring their cousins or other Hmong friends to their homes. Shoua described her friendships saying, “My dad is very strict. He won’t let me hang out with a crowd. My three sisters and I hang out. Everyone in school knew us. They would say, ‘There go the Chang babes!’ Hmong people understand you. It’s normal for Hmong people to understand.”

Wendy added, “I socialize with other friends but only on the phone. I hang out with Kues, my cousin My Lou and my other first cousins. Family bonds are tight.”

Because they socialize in a group, other students perceive the Hmong students as cliquish. In Wendy’s words, “Because we are seen together,

other kids call us ‘stuck up.’ They try to pick fights with us but we ignore them.”

Interviewing these students has given me a renewed respect for their resiliency and their fortitude they addressing so many issues. Despite some serious disagreement with their family ideas, they have a wonderful sense of family and, for the most part, a ferocious pride in their cultural heritage. They support one another and see their Hmong language and culture as something they will want to continue. The girls all happily described traditional dancing and costumes and even volunteered pictures of themselves in traditional garb. All of the students fondly recalled the Hmong New Year’s celebration complete with ball tossing and soccer tournaments as a happy memory. “I like the New Year’s tradition,” noted Cheng, “We hear many historical stories.”

The students are also assimilating into the American educational system by making college one of their goals. My Lou merited over \$7,000.00 in scholarships she observed, “I found out I won a lot of scholarships, this is happy for me. My parents emigrated here and I’ve done well. My sister is graduating from the University of Michigan. That is so great.”

Wendy wants to continue her technical training. She says, “This school is the best. We use our brains; we do not sit in a desk and listen to a teacher lecture. I love electricity and technology. It is hands-on, you see what you made, what you’ve done, watch it run and do what it’s supposed to do.”

With his eyes on the goal of becoming a teacher, or professional musician, Cheng plans to, “go to college, concentrate on what’s in front of me for the moment.”

Neither Jackson nor Shoua saw college as in their future. Shoua was, “undecided,” while Jackson saw himself, “working as a machinist, enjoying my family, and helping the elders.” Jackson wanted to make his family proud of him. He expressed regret at having made his parents, “lose face by running away and joining a gang.” He indicated that he “gave my parents a bad name, my dad was good.”

These goals seem typical of many teenagers. Some want to pursue a higher education, some want

to enter the work force and some are undecided. The impact of the Hmong cultural perspective is a matter of attitude as much as tradition. Clearly these students see themselves and their families as underdogs who have overcome great obstacles. My Lou observes, "My parents came here to give us a better life. I want to take advantage of it." Each student emphasizes that his or her family came to America for a better life. They consider themselves ambassadors for this life, for their family.

Combining the Hmong with the American dream is also part and parcel of their mission in life. This then becomes the seed of wholeness. These Hmong students struggled. Like Jacob, they wrestle with an angel. They live in two worlds, assimilating, evaluating, rejecting, and dreaming. Yet in the end, they sound quite American, ruggedly individualistic, full of perseverance, and extremely determined to fulfill the American dream. Listening to the advice they would give their younger siblings, I am struck by how much of the dominant culture they have adopted. "Keep your culture," admonishes, My Lou, "but do what you want to do."

"Do the best you can do, try your hardest. Have a better life than our parents," is the recommendation from Cheng.

"Take life slow. Love your parents a lot." Warned Shoua, who added a sad footnote saying, "I love and miss my parents so much."

Jackson believes that his siblings should, "Stick with your family. Believe in yourself. Don't quit. Pick a right friend." He philosophically added, "Whatever you do, you end up coming back to your parents. They are the ones who help you."

Finally, Wendy in her indomitable wisdom, advised, "Don't quit. Keep going. There's a lot of obstacles, but there is no use quitting."

I was truly amazed at the number and complexity of issues these students were dealing with on a daily basis as well as the excellent coping skills they had developed. Takaki refers to Asian students as the "model minority," which pretty much described my original view of Wendy, the 4.0 electricity student. I viewed her as the student who would set the standard. Yet Wendy and her peers

taught me that this stereotype is unfair and untrue. These young people were grappling with issues on many different levels. They confronted typical teenage issues such as dating, marriage, prejudice, and future goals, complicated by ethnic and cultural expectations.

They seek to become young men and women who are both Hmong and American, a transitional generation who need to make a tremendous amount of adjustments, who are required to work hard and are obliged to deal with conflict and difficulties clearly beyond their tender ages.

It is truly a disservice to these fine young adults to see them as less complex than they really are. Wendy, it turns out, helped me to face the mirror, to reconsider my assumptions, to rethink the way I view my students. She ended the year with a state level award as a "special populations student," a female in a non-traditional class. I realized that Wendy and her fellow Hmong students are indeed a special group of students. They had taught me so much more than I could have ever taught them.