Guidebook for Teaching Elementary (Hmong) Refugee Children

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**Introduction**

When I started this project, I envisioned this guidebook to have the characteristics of a traditional curriculum with extensive lesson plans and structures. As I researched materials to cite and use in the curriculum, I realized that educating elementary refugee students requires efforts from both within and outside the classroom. I decided that including outside efforts was a crucial part of teaching refugee students, and I decided that the term “guidebook” would encompass what I will be trying to convey and create throughout this document. This guidebook is for classroom teachers, who want to learn how to support their refugee students inside and outside of the classroom.

Within this guidebook, I attempt to highlight the issues and challenges related to and regarding education for elementary refugee students. As this topic is incredibly complicated, there will be issues and challenges that do not have clear-cut answers and solutions. This is further complicated when issues of funding and standardized tests play into issues of refugee education. Much of the material I have gathered base their solutions and suggestions on the assumption that schools and teachers have infinite economic and human resources to support them and their students. This guidebook also assumes that educators of refugee students deeply care about their students and will go above and beyond to integrate refugee students and their families into school communities. Depending on the situation, not all of the suggestions may be applicable or possible, especially if teachers do not have adequate economic and human resources. There are, however, a number of small adjustments that teachers can make to support refugee students that do not involve intense effort on the part of the teacher or the administration.

In this guidebook, I have decided to focus specifically on Hmong refugees. This does not mean that this resource is not applicable to other refugee groups and students; rather, I view this guidebook as a model that can be morphed and reshaped to fit the particular needs of other refugee groups. I focus specifically on Hmong refugees because there is an extensive history of Hmong communities through the United States. I also find their story to be compelling, as they are not defined by specific national borders.

The guidebook will trace the history of the Hmong people from the highlands of Laos to their journey to American soil. I will explore the cultural contexts from which refugee students come from, as well as strategies to connect with Hmong families and integrate them into school communities. This information is incredibly crucial in creating a culturally relevant classroom for Hmong students. As social worker Joyce Kelen writes in her curriculum guide for teachers, “All children have the right to have their culture valued and respected by their teachers, counselors, and fellow students” (Kelen 5). A part of this respect comes from infusing the cultural lives of students, especially underrepresented and marginalized students, into the curriculum.

*Who is a refugee?*

According to the The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) the term “refugee” is defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which states that a refugee is someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country.” (UNHCR 4/18/15) Refugees and immigrants share similarities; they both may have little to no support from the American government, have limited English language capability, do not know how to navigate the American educational system, and may have left their homes and families due to unfavorable circumstances. Unlike immigrants, many refugees who come to America have often spent time in refugee camps; in fact, refugee camps may be the only home that some refugee students may know. Furthermore, refugee students may need more intensive mental health support due to potential histories of war and violence. Author Eileen Gale Kugler and Professor Olga Acosta Price write in “Go Beyond the Classroom to Help Immigrant and Refugee Students Succeed”:

Students who are refugees often bring deep emotional scars. Escaping countries at war, they may have experienced repeated violence, a factor itself linked to lower academic achievement. Some have lived in refugee camps for years, with unhealthy conditions and little or no opportunity for formal education. (Kugler and Price 2009 citing Hurt et al. 2001; Jaycox et al. 2002).

With such deep emotional scars, it may be detrimental to assume that the needs of refugee students are the same as the needs of immigrant students.

*Towards a Desire-Based Approach of Refugee Education*

In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Eve Tuck proposes that we move from what she calls “damage-centered research” of historically marginalized communities to “desire-based research.” (Tuck 409-416). Damage-centered research is based on the notion that historically marginalized communities are “broken” and “defeated” (Tuck 412). It assumes that the only characteristic of historically marginalized communities is the oppression that the community has faced and does not acknowledge the possible hope and the humanity of these communities. Desire-based frameworks acknowledge and attempt to highlight the humanity of these communities, and “are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck 416). Within a desire-based framework, marginalized communities are not characterized only by their oppression.

It is easy to fall into a trap of a damage-centered framework when considering the education of refugee students. As I have emphasized before, many of them have endured considerable hardships, which may have consequences to their mental and emotional health. However, educating refugee students through a damage-centered framework defines them only by their refugee status and does not acknowledge that these students have many different characteristics and identities. In her article, “The Educational Resettlement of Refugee Children,” Amy B. Lerner, a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, also warns against the damaged-based framework and writes, “We should not [assume] that refugee children are permanently damaged by their experiences” (Lerner 11).

The damage-based framework also assumes that the student is incapable of learning and adapting. In their study on the needs of refugee children, university professors Judit Szente and James Hoot cite a teacher who states, “Teachers should not assume that refugee children are not capable of learning just because what they have been through and just because they don’t speak English” (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 229). Furthermore, a damage-centered framework assumes that these refugee students and their families have nothing to give to the students’ education. It assumes that the students’ history and cultural practices are deficits that must be overcome, instead of assets to their education.

The objective of refugee education should be to move towards a desire-based framework. In her curriculum guide, Kelen outlines, a goal of refugee education should be “to emphasize the humanity that they share with other students” (Kelen 5). Emphasizing the humanity of these students is crucial for the refugee youth because they have experienced hardship and violence in their lives. They must have room to discover the collection of complex identities that make them individuals. In order to create this desire-based framework, the educator should always remember that these refugee students are still “*individual* children,” just like the rest of their students (“Welcome to Our Schools” 1053). By viewing these students as individuals, the educator emphasizes their humanity and sees these students as people with potential for growth and learning.

**History and Context of the Hmong**

In this section, I will detail the important aspects of the history and the context of the Hmong immigration to the United States. This is an important aspect of the guidebook, as knowing the context of how the Hmong refugee students arrive in the classroom is a crucial part of knowing how to create a welcoming and engaging classroom and school culture. This next section may also serve as a starting point with which to create and include culturally relevant material for Hmong students into the classroom. However, it is important to note that students may not feel comfortable or willing to share about their experiences or their culture. Kelen writes, “As…cultural content is integrated into the curriculum, teachers should be sensitive to the refugee students in their classes and not assume that just because a student is from Bosnia or Sudan [they] know about that country” (Kelen 5). This statement is especially true for students who may have lived in a refugee camp their entire lives before moving to the United States. Regardless, is important for the educator to know the context as the student arrives in the classroom, if only to find ways to make the student more comfortable in their new setting.

*Hmong Migration to the United States*

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the first waves of Laotian Hmong left Laos for Thailand to avoid persecution from the Laotian government. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. government had recruited Hmong soldiers to fight against Laotian Communists and to curb the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. The Laotian part of the Vietnam War is often left out of common historical narratives of the Vietnam War. However, this history is important to understand because, as Ava McCall, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, and Bee Vang, an elementary school teacher, note, the exclusion of this information in schools leads, “many U.S. residents to misunderstand why the Hmong entered the United States” (McCall and Vang 34). Once US troops began to leave Laos, the Communist leader Pathet Lao pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide of Hmong people because of their collaboration with the United States.

Hmong people and other Laotians continued to leave Laos for another decade after the war because of persecution and drought. Many of these Hmong and Laotians ended up in refugee camps in Thailand, after which many of these refugees resettled in the United States. This resettlement continued until 2003, when the U.S. State Department decided to admit 15,000 Hmong from Wat Thamkrabok, one of the last remaining Thai refugee camps. Many of the refugees at Wat Thamkrabok had reproduced and had created a second generation of camp refugees. These children may not know a world outside the camp and may not know much about Laos, depending on what they learned in school or what their parents shared with them. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that these children may not feel comfortable being the sole representatives of an entire group of people and an entire cultural tradition (Flaitz 199-201).

*Cultural Contexts*

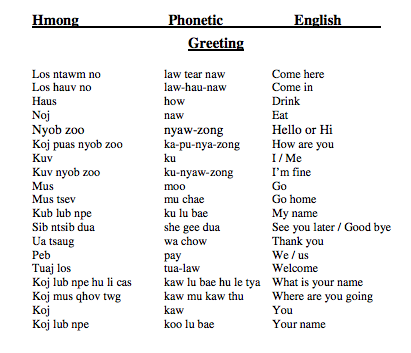
* The Hmong people are not homogenous. Hmong occupy parts of China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Loas. The wave of Hmong refugees that have entered the United States since the 1970s have generally been from Laos, due to the threat of persecution and drought (“Hmong People” 4/19/15). They also differentiate between three main groups, the White, the Striped, and the Green Hmong. Each group corresponds to different colors or patterns of costume and different accents or dialects (Flaitz 201).
* They also differentiate by family clan, each of which has a different clan name. Family is the building block of Hmong society. McCall and Vang write, “Family comes first before other responsibilities and interests…Children’s responsibilities in their families [may] supersede time with friends, extra-curricular activities, and homework” (McCall and Vang 34). It is also important to note that children, especially older children, may need to help around the house and take care of their younger siblings because both of their parents work the entire day.
* Some non-Christian Hmong practice animism, which is “the belief that sprits reside in certain objects and places” (Flaitz 202). These spirits have the capacity to cause illness, for which a shaman may be called upon to heal the illness. These illnesses can take on many different forms, including mental illness, so it is important to consider these beliefs when approaching parents about potential mental health counseling for their child (Flaitz 202-203).

*Education*

* The schools in the Thai refugee camps offer classes in Hmong and occasionally classes in English. Some parents may choose to school their children at home, depending on the parents’ abilities to read and write. Some wealthier parents are able to send their children to the Thai schools, but most parents are unable to afford the tuition of these schools. The teachers in the refugee camps are generally all self-taught volunteers, who often work other jobs in order to make a living. The schools also do not have adequate supplies or facilities, which makes teaching even more difficult. Given these school choices, it is estimated that 25-35% of Hmong children who come to United States have no experience in formal education. Thus, it is important to learn from the parents about the students’ previous educational experiences (Flaitz 204-207).
* Hmong parents and students may feel uncomfortable approaching and speaking with educators about suggestions or questions they may have. This does not mean that Hmong parents and students are not invested in education; rather, parents and students may feel uncomfortable because of their English language capability or because they feel it is not their place (Flaitz 208; Francis-Pester 1; Kugler and Price 50).
* Some Hmong parents and students may refrain from talking about their past experiences with teachers, especially if the topic in question is about the war or the refugee camps (Flaitz 214). One refugee parent, a participant in Szente and Hoot’s study, remarks, “Teachers don’t need to know why my children left their country and what happened to us.” The parent adds, “But I expect the teacher to educate my children like [they do] with the other children” (Szente and Hoot citing Interview with Parents, February 18, 2005, pg. 224). Thus, teachers must be sensitive about certain questions and topics before inquiring about past experiences of the students and their parents.

*Other Cultural Contexts*

* Corporal punishment may be a standard form of punishment at home (Flaitz 209). Students may also attend school with “bruised or red spots” on their bodies, which is a result of home remedies like “cupping, spooning, coining, or the application of tiger balm” (Flatiz 212). In such cases, a close relationship with parents may be beneficial in order to discuss forms of punishment and home remedies.
* While past experiences in war and refugee camps may be sensitive topics to bring up, “home, family, and food” are acceptable topics to discuss (Fraitz 215).



*Key terms:*

Figure 1: From the University of California Cooperative Extension-Fresno County: “Hmong and English Commonly Used Words and Phrases” by Richard Molinar and Michael Yang, November 2002

In order to create a welcoming classroom community for the Hmong refugee students and the parents, the teacher may learn and then teach basic Hmong words to the other students. As one teacher notes in Szente and Hoot’s study, “Simple words in the child’s native language such as *hi, come, good,* or *thank you* can make the child feel safer and more comfortable” (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 228).

**Supporting the Needs of Hmong Students Within and Outside the Classroom**

This section highlights the actions that educators can take both outside and within the classroom to best support refugee students and their parents acclimate to their new education environment.

*Outside the Classroom*

* It is crucial to locate someone who is able to speak Hmong and is willing to act as a translator for communications between the parents, students, and the educator. One teacher suggests that these translators may be “volunteers or work study interns (perhaps from local universities)” to keep costs low, especially if funding is a concern (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 228). Once a translator is located, scheduling a meeting with the parents and the translator early on in the students’ schooling to establish the students’ age and previous educational experience may be crucial in preparing for the students’ needs.
* When parents arrive at the school, it is important to have signs in multiple languages (including Hmong, especially if the school is expecting the parents) to make the families feel welcome in the community (Kugler and Price 50).
* In the initial meeting with the parents, coming to an agreement about how to communicate may be helpful for both the parent and the educator for the future, especially if the translator is not available at all times. One parent suggests, “The teachers should write down all the communication, even the conference notes, so we could take it home and read it and really understand it. If indeed, we can also use some help to interpret the reports” (Szente and Hoot citing Focus Group Interview with Parents, February 18, 2005, pg. 230).
* Home visits may also be a way to create a deep and positive relationship with parents. (Kugler and Price 50) One parent in Szente and Hoot’s study supports home visits and says, “[My son’s] teacher came to visit us one day…My son really liked that, and he stopped crying. I really like it also that the teacher came to visit us” (Szente and Hoot citing Pair Parent Interview, January 28, 2005, pg. 230). Establishing these connections early on is crucial because, as stated earlier, parents may feel like it is not their place to suggest ideas to teachers to better serve students. Once that relationship of trust is in place, parents may feel more comfortable speaking to teachers and administrators.
  + While home visits may be helpful, it may be wise to establish whether or not the parents consider home visits appropriate or not.
* If the school has an English Language Learners (ELL) program, coordinating with the ELL teachers on how to best situate the learning of Hmong students inside the classroom and planning joint lessons before the Hmong students arrive will help to integrate students and families the moment they arrive in the classroom.
* Coordinating with school and local mental health services is crucial for the mental and academic well being of the student. As stated earlier, Hmong refugee students may enter the classroom with deep emotional scars that may impede their academic development (Kugler and Price 49). Meeting with mental health professionals and parents and establishing the best way to help refugee students heal is crucial for their academic development.
* Connecting refugee families with community based programs that support refugee students and families may be crucial in integrating refugee families into the community (Lee and Hawkins 52; Kugler and Price 52) Professors Stacey J. Lee and Maragaret R. Hawkins highlight the Lakeside Community Center in “’Family is Here’: Learning in Community-Based After-School Programs,” which is a community based center that supports the academic development of neighborhood students, many of whom are Hmong. Lee and Hawkins suggest that these centers can provide additional support outside the classroom, especially if educators are unable to provide adequate support within the school setting. These centers also allow for identity formation and cultural expression, which may not occur in schools. Thus, connecting families to these centers may be a way to help them integrate into American schooling and society.

*Within the Classroom*

* One way to support Hmong refugee students in the classroom is to include culturally relevant material and allow space for the students to explore their Hmong identities within the classroom. McCall and Vang cite a study, in which struggling Hmong elementary students were interviewed. In the study, students “wanted Hmong language and culture to be part of the school curriculum to help them communicate with their parents and elders while their parents wanted Hmong culture as well as other cultures to be taught” (McCall and Vang citing Thao 2003, pg. 34).
* While integrating these materials into the curriculum, it is important to remember Joyce Kelen’s reminders that Hmong children and parents may object to talking about their culture in the classroom. If parents object, it may be beneficial to talk over the use of these materials in the classroom. Nonetheless, these materials may be crucial to the development of Hmong students, especially if they have no other avenue to explore their Hmong identities.
* Through literary works, Hmong students may be able to develop their Hmong and English reading skills, as some of these resources are bilingual. They are also able to see themselves represented in literature both as characters and as authors. Literary resources include:
  + *Seven Magic Brothers* retold by Kuang-Tsai Hao in both Hmong and English
  + *Shoua and the Northern Lights Dragon* by Ka Vang in English only
  + *The Imaginary Day* by May Lee-Yang in English only
  + Incorporating folk tales and oral history through books such as *Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos* by Charles Johnson and Se Yang may also be enriching, especially if the families have a history of oral tradition
* In order to teach on Hmong history, teachers may read *The Hmong: An Introduction to Their History and Culture* to get an overarching history.
  + McCall and Vang also suggest consulting reliable Web sites like the Hmong Homepage ([www.hmongnet.org](http://www.hmongnet.org)) or the Hmong annotated bibliography ([www.socialstudies.esmartweb.com/HTMLbibs/Hmongbib.htm](http://www.socialstudies.esmartweb.com/HTMLbibs/Hmongbib.htm)). (McCall and Vang 36).
  + Teachers may also consult the local college or university to find experts on Hmong history or ask Hmong community leaders in the vicinity for support.
* Teachers may create their own lesson plans with these materials and consult with other teachers who have worked with refugee students for help and guidance.
* One specific activity that may be helpful in creating space for both the Hmong and other students to explore their identities as individuals is an assignment that involves a “future” timeline.
  + Kelen, who suggests the activity, writes, “Instruct students to draw or write what they predict for the future. What do they anticipate they will learn? Will they have a new sibling? Will they move?” (Kelen 20). By asking the students to participate in this activity, the teacher acknowledges that Hmong refugee students are not only defined by their past experiences and that refugee students have the capacity to learn and to grow for the future. This aligns with Tuck’s ideas of a desire-based framework, as it regards Hmong refugee students as individuals with potential for change and development.

**Challenges**

This section illustrates three challenges that may pose difficulties for educators in integrating Hmong refugee students into the classroom community. These three challenges represent three major impediments educators may encounter.

*Mental Health*

As illustrated earlier, the mental health of a student may present a challenge for teachers, especially as mental illness hinders academic learning. Finding adequate mental health treatment may also be difficult if families and schools do not have the funds to support students. Furthermore, families may reject counseling or therapy, especially if there are stigmas attached to mental illness. Some Hmong parents may view mental illness a result of the loss of souls and a misalignment of spirits, which may cause them to reject or decline Western mental health treatment (Flaitz 202-203). In such cases, teachers may call upon strong, developed bonds with the families in order to discuss potential treatment options. Teachers with strong bonds should also respect parents’ decisions to consult shamans, if the parents decide to confer with a shaman.

English language ability also serves as a challenge, as most counselors are unable to speak Hmong. One counselor notes in Szente and Hoot’s study, “Since they [refugee children] are not able to speak English and we are not able to speak their languages, it is very difficult to design therapeutic activities for the children” (Szente and Hoot citing Team Counselor Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 227). Counselors are able to work around this communication block by employing nonverbal modes of therapy such as art, play and music therapy (Szente and Hoot 227).

*Academic Assessments*

There are many facets to academic assessments, but I will focus on two main points: grades and testing.

Teachers in Szente and Hoot’s study claim that grading is difficult because many students do not have the English language capability to show how well they perform in different subjects. One teacher states, “While grades for nonverbal classes such as PE, art, and music are relatively easy to be determined, grading becomes more difficult when deciding what grade children have earned in [subject] like math and social studies, which require English skills…” (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 226). Standardized testing also poses a similar problem, as Hmong refugee students may not have the English language capability to fully engage with the test questions. Some states allow for translators and dictionaries to be used. However, students may not know the technical words used on the test even when they are translated and the school may not have access to a Hmong dictionary that includes all of the technical words featured on the test (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 226). As one teacher states, “In circumstances like this, I believe that the academic assessment is invalid at best” (Szente and Hoot citing Team Teacher Interview, February 18, 2005, pg. 226).

Due to greater emphasis on standardized tests as a result of government initiatives like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, educators may have even more difficulty accommodating the needs of one student when they may feel pressured to teach to the test. This poses a challenge to teachers who may want to create a culturally relevant classroom for the Hmong students and build trust with Hmong families, but may not have the time to integrate Hmong families into the class and school community.

*Resources*

While there are many kinds of resources that may affect an educator’s ability to provide for the needs of Hmong refugee students, I will focus on two in particular: economic and human resources.

Economic resources are incredibly crucial, as they play an integral part on whether or not a teacher is able to call upon adequate English language learner programs and counseling services. Economic resources are intrinsically linked with human resources. Economic resources dictate whether or not schools are able to have ELL programs, counseling services, and translators on hand to adequately support teachers, Hmong refugee students, and their families. Without these resources, the teacher’s job becomes more challenging, as the teacher may be unable to communicate with the student or adequately support a student suffering from mental illnesses.

Economic resources also pose an issue in terms of funding and standardized tests. Due to NCLB and Race to the Top, the funding of public schools is closely linked to standardized test scores. As stated previously, in schools without adequate funding, school administrators and teachers may feel pressured to maintain and raise test scores, which leads many of the teachers to teach to the test. In such classrooms, it may be difficult for teachers to deviate from the curriculum and include culturally relevant material.

**Conclusion**

This guidebook is a starting point for educators of Hmong and other refugee students. It focuses on critical issues that educators should think about and highlights major challenges that educators may face when teaching refugee students. Many of the suggestions outlined in this guidebook are certainly difficult to implement and require extensive time and effort on the part of teachers and administrations to integrate Hmong refugee students and families into school communities. This guidebook is based on the premise that all educators care about their students are willing to invest the effort in creating a welcoming and comfortable classroom for all of their students. It also assumes schools and teachers have translators, ELL teachers, and counseling services to support them. Despite it’s obvious and apparent flaws, I hope this guidebook can serve as a resource for these educators in creating a desire-based, culturally relevant education for their Hmong refugee students, from both inside and outside of the classroom.

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