

**Literacy events and practices that position Hmong women to meet academic success  
in community colleges**

by

**Jody C. Koch**

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Program of Study Committee:  
Jeanne Dyches, Co-major Professor  
Anne Foegen, Co-major Professor  
Donald Bear  
Lori Helman  
Gayle Luze

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the literacy events and practices of Hmong women achieving academic success at a community college. Three women participants were interviewed regarding their past and present literacy events and practices. In addition, each participant took photographs of their own literacy events for five weeks. The photographs provided additional material for further discussion during the interviews. The study was designed as a collective case study in order to explore each participant's literacy practices and compare across cases. Coding was first conducted deductively, separating literacy events from literacy practices. Then each primary code was subjected to a second round of coding. Literacy events were also deductively coded, according to the narrative methods of situation, continuity, and place. Literacy practices were inductively coded to draw forth themes within each case. Findings indicate participants used literacy to meet school objectives, aid in learning, facilitate verbal interactions, affirm identity, and achieve goals. A combination of these literacy practices and cultural wealth helped these participants achieve academic success at the community college level. Implications for culturally responsive teaching are discussed.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background**

In education, “success” is often defined as the attainment of a degree. For K-12 students, success equates to receiving high school diploma; for college students, success means receiving an initial degree, either an associate’s (two-year) degree or a bachelor’s (four-year) degree. However, students enrolled in any higher education program are less likely to succeed if they are students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). They are also less likely to succeed if they are first-generation college students, if they are from low-income homes, if they begin their post-secondary education in a community college and if their community college coursework includes developmental courses (U.S. Department of Education 2011, 2016; Moore, Jensen, & Hatch, 2002). Students who fit all of these characteristics are least likely to succeed when they begin in a developmental reading course (Adelman, 1999).

Yet, some of those students, those who are statistically unlikely to succeed, do reach success. They are resilient. They persevere. They overcome personal obstacles and institutional barriers. These students earn two-year degrees, and they transfer to four-year universities. Despite every odd stacked against them, some students prevail. Community college research points to various reasons for success that are unrelated to a student’s ability, including motivation (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014), engagement (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), and institutional supports (Tovar, 2015). However, the basis of education in America is dependent on one’s traditional

literacy ability, or the ability to read, write, speak, and problem-solve (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Many studies have been conducted on how children acquire traditional literacy skills (e.g., Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Ellis, 1994; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). However, those studies have not been able to account for the lower graduation rates of marginalized students. Thus, researchers are now turning toward factors that contribute to the acquisition of these skills. Recent studies have been conducted on disciplinary literacies, those reading and writing skills developed for specific subjects, such as how to read and interpret historical documents (e.g., Fang, 2012; Kok-Sing, 2016; Loveland, 2014, Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Still, few attempts have been made to study literacy practices students bring to community college and how those practices are used or adapted to facilitate academic success.

### **Statement of Problem**

In the past, literacy has been defined as a set of isolated reading and writing skills. However, contemporary views see literacy as a set of social practices embedded in everyday life, referred to as literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Studies of people's home lives have shown that literacy practices vary between communities (e.g., Crozier & Davies, 2006; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983). For instance, Crozier and Davies (2006) found that Pakistani and Bangladeshi families typically value collectivism, using a variety of family members to support one student's learning. This value directly contradicts the individualism that is valued in American schools. In the United States, literacy education originated from European literacy practices and as a result, literacy practices in American schools closely resemble literacy practices

prominent in White, European, middle-class homes (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Conversely, students who are not raised in this "mainstream" culture are often unfairly disadvantaged in their formal education.

One minority group that has received little attention in the education community is the Hmong student population (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Hmong students are often categorized under the heading of Asian or Asian American and Pacific Islander (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2013). This classification proves problematic because these overgeneralized categorizations contain more than 40 different, and distinct ethnic groups. According to the United States Census Bureau, Asians have the highest percentage of educational attainment, as measured by completion of a bachelor's degree or higher, of any ethnic group (American Community Survey [ACS], 2015). However, the aggregate Asian or Asian American and Pacific Islander classification hides disparities within the group (CARE, 2013). Data disaggregated to look at specific ethnicities show the Taiwanese (74.1%), Asian Indian (71.1%), and Sri Lankan (57.4%) populations have the highest rates of educational attainment and the Hmong (14.7%), Cambodian (14.1%), and Laotian (12.4%) populations have the lowest. Therefore, students labeled as Asian without specifying ethnicity may be unduly ignored in educational research.

Many Hmong and other marginalized students find entry into postsecondary education through community colleges (McCabe, 2000). A cornerstone of the community college philosophy is the "open-access" policy, which allows anyone with the proper credentials (e.g., high school diploma) admittance to the school, regardless of his or her previous academic performance(s). However, studies show that persistence and

graduation rate are consistently lower at community colleges compared to four-year universities (ACT, 2015). These lower rates may be due to multiple risk factors that community college students may face, such as being first generation students, having lower household incomes, or enrolling part-time (Horn & Asmussen, 2014). Historically, Hmong students have fallen into one or more of these at-risk categories (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Therefore, researching successful Hmong community college students may reveal patterns for overcoming many barriers and help more Hmong students to earn a college degree.

With their immigration to America, many Hmong families encountered sustained, formal educational opportunities for the first time (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Thus, even though Hmong parents recognize the importance of education, they are often unaware of how to prepare their children for formal schooling, having not participated in the American educational system themselves. This study then focuses on Hmong students to ascertain how they have achieved success despite these barriers. In particular, I will look at how Hmong women's literacy practices intertwine with their culture and gender. Even today, Hmong women face more educational constraints than their male counterparts because of traditional Hmong gender roles wherein women are expected to marry young and run the household, leaving little extra time for schoolwork (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The pressure to be a "good daughter" or "good daughter-in-law" can be both detrimental and/or motivating to Hmong women in college (Lee, 2001; Peng & Solheim, 2015). By studying academically successful Hmong women, this study will add to the literature on Hmong women's experiences in college.

### **Significance of the Problem**

With a dearth of research on both community colleges and Hmong students, virtually no studies, outside of theses and dissertations, focus exclusively on Hmong students in the community college setting. Additionally, because literacy skills are foundational in any learning context, it is important to investigate the ways in which Hmong students use their literacy skills, particularly to see if this differs from the skills common to members of particular ethnic groups. Because the Hmong population completes college degrees at a lower rate than other Asian ethnicities and because this rate is much lower than the national average, it is important that studies focus on students reaching academic success in order to learn from those students (CARE, 2013).

This study aims to add to the minimal literature on Hmong students in a variety of ways. As Hmong student populations increase in the K-20 educational system, this study may give teachers a better understanding of their Hmong students' background, support systems, and literacy practices. Additionally, this study intends to inform community college teachers how to include Hmong students in culturally responsive curriculum. Finally, as the participants in this study begin to recognize their habits and skills, they can then take this meta-knowledge back to the larger Hmong community helping other students to achieve academic success.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify literacy events and practices that contribute to the academic success of Hmong women in higher education. Despite the real and perceived barriers to successful completion of a two-year degree, many Hmong women overcome these obstructions and graduate. As such, it is important to know what

literacy events and practices these women use to achieve success in their academic endeavors.

### **Research Questions**

This research study will use qualitative methods to address the following primary question and secondary questions to explore the literacy events and practices of Hmong women: What literacy events and practices position Hmong students to meet mainstream markers of academic success in community college settings?

- a. What are participants' past and present literacy events?
- b. What are participants' past and present literacy practices?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning. The sociocultural theory of the learning originates from the idea that learning is fundamentally contextual, thus all learning includes people, places, and objects. Rooted within this context is that people inherently have their own social, cultural, and historical perspectives. Scholars who have investigated how language and literacy are socially situated—that is, embedded within social contexts—have since further refined Vygotsky's theory (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Within this overarching lens, the study is informed by Gee's (1996) theory of D/discourse and Barton and Hamilton's (2000) sociocultural perspective of literacy. In addition to these two literacy frameworks, I also use Yosso's (2005) theory of cultural wealth to determine how the participants' literacy events and practices connect with their cultural wealth to help them succeed at the community college.

**D/discourse**

According to Gee (1996) language is learned through socialization or through the families and communities in which we are raised. As such, our language abilities and uses cannot be removed from these contextual settings. Thus, when discussing language, and therefore, literacy, which is in part based on language usage, research must take into consideration the social setting and relationships at hand. Gee (2008) stated, “Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities” (p. 3). In other words, Discourses (capital D) are the ways we use language and expressions in order to fit into a particular group, like church members, scholars, or lawyers. Throughout this study, I will refer to Gee’s Discourse, as defined above, rather than discourse (lower case d) meaning conversations, stories, reports, or other connected uses of language.

Most people have and use several Discourses throughout their lives (Gee, 2008). However, society privileges some Discourses over others. This can result in a person having Discourses that contradict and conflict with one another. With the prioritization of one Discourse over another, society then labels the preferred Discourse “standard” and all other Discourses “other” at best or “deviant” at worst. In the United States, preferred Discourses are highly racialized and classist, privileging White, educated, upper-class citizens, originating in European culture and language (Moje, et al., 2000). The conflict between personal Discourses is often highlighted in school settings, where students without the privileged Discourse struggle continually. As I investigate the literacy events

and practices of Hmong women, it will be important to note how their Discourses may or may not match those that are valued in the community college.

Literacy, then, is also embedding with social and cultural meaning (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008; Street, 2000). As such, it is subject to change across situations. In an early ethnography of literacy practices, Heath (1983) concluded, “literacy has different meanings for members of different groups, with a corresponding variety of acquisition modes, functions, and uses” (p. 25). Heath also determined that these differences in literacy practices are often brought to the forefront during schooling where a student’s home literacy practices may not match the school’s literacy practices, akin to Gee’s (2008) discussion of “standard” and “nonstandard” Discourses.

Studies have shown that many students of color find school difficult because they enter the education system without the same set of literacy practices or the Discourse valued in schools, namely those of White, middle-class citizens (Gee, 2008; Heath, 1983; Moje, et al., 2000). Furthermore, because of this difficulty, these students are often labeled as people who need “fixing” (Gee, 2008; Yasso, 2005). By looking at Hmong students’ literacy events and practices, this research study will investigate how these particular Hmong women adopted, adapted, and finally found success in a school system indirectly designed to fail them.

### **Literacy as Social Practice – Literacy Events and Literacy Practices**

Drawing from Gee’s (1996) work, the sociocultural perspective of literacy views literacy as a set of social practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Barton and Hamilton break down literacy into three parts. The first aspect of literacy is literacy events, or observable activities around a text. Literacy events are singular episodes like reading



*Harry Potter* or writing a résumé. Herein lies the second aspect of literacy – understanding the concept of texts. Sociocultural scholars consider texts to be a sort of blank canvas, in that only once the text is read does it contain meaning. Each person reading the text, then extracts meaning based on his/her social, cultural, and historical perspectives. Therefore, a literacy event occurs when a person takes action around a text, thus creating meaning for the person and the text.

Recurring literacy events mediated by a text then help to create a person's or community's literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). A literacy practice incorporates the context of the literacy event, including its inherent values, attitudes, feelings, relationships, patterns of behavior, and power structures. Research on literacy practices, then, focuses on what a person *does* with literacy rather than what a person *has*. Using the example from above, reading a *Harry Potter* book is a singular literacy event. However, if someone describes reading *Harry Potter* for entertainment, as a way to relax, or as something he/she does every year, this is now a literacy practice because the hypothetical reader has described his/her feelings or pattern of behavior with the literacy event. The literacy event now has a broader context and meaning turning it into a literacy practice.

### **Cultural Wealth**

Similar to Gee's (1996) D/discourse theory, Yasso (2005) argued that marginalized students bring different (or non-privileged) cultural wealth to higher education than their White peers. This lens allows for the strengths of marginalized students to come to be recognized and valued, as opposed to looking at what marginalized students supposedly lack. Yasso identified six forms of cultural wealth.

These forms are aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. As Yasso does, I will refer to the six forms of collective capital as cultural wealth and each entity as a specific form of capital.

First, Yosso (2005) defines aspirational capital as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). This form of cultural wealth is significant because it demonstrates how families work together to dream of possibilities outside of their current circumstance. For instance, several people in one family may work to contribute to one student’s educational fund. Aspirational capital can be used as motivation for students who work hard to succeed for themselves and their families.

Linguistic capital is the ability to communicate in different languages or styles (Yosso, 2005). This capital not only includes documented language differences, like the difference between speaking Hmong and English, but also the differing ways one might use to express him-or-herself. For example, many Hmong families use oral-story telling to pass down folktales. Linguistic capital allows students to communicate with a variety of audiences for a variety of reasons.

Next, familial capital is created through the sense of history, memory, and culture within a family (Yosso, 2005). Though familial capital is based within the immediate family, it can include extended family, those who have passed away, close friends, and the larger community. Familial capital helps students create and maintain ties to their community so no one family or student begins to feel isolated. Older siblings often display familial capital as they introduce younger siblings to school norms. Similar to the

funds of knowledge theory (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), familial capital looks to find the strengths and knowledge the family already possesses.

Social capital not only includes members of the immediate family, like familial capital, but extends further into the whole community's knowledge (Yosso, 2005). In social capital, each individual gains knowledge from the community at large, and then in turn, adds back to the community's collective knowledge. Social capital can take many forms like helping a community member complete a financial aid form or reassuring a student that she is not alone in her pursuit of a higher education degree.

Navigational capital is the ability to operate within an established institution, particularly institutions that value and promote dominant Discourses (Gee, 2008; Yosso, 2005). In addition, navigational capital encompasses resiliency or the ability to overcome stressful events, such as a death in the family. Individuals ultimately have to be resilient and navigate their way through the institution, but the larger community can help facilitate the navigation.

Finally, resistance capital is "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). The first aspect of this form of cultural wealth is the generational transition of the other cultural capitals discussed above. The second aspect is active resistance to the continued oppression of communities of color. Students using resistance capital may challenge institutional rules that perpetuate inequalities.

Taken collectively, these theories allow participants' to display their Discourses and literacy events and practices without the usual constraint found in educational

institutions. These theories may also elucidate ways Hmong students use their literacy practices and cultural wealth to reach academic success.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Community college*: a regional, public higher education institution where the associate's degree is the highest degree offered (Vaughn, 2000).

*Literacy*: "a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000 p. 9).

*Literacy event*: an observable event mediated by a text (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). For example, annotating a textbook.

*Literacy practice*: the values, attitudes, feelings, relationships, patterns of behavior, and power structures surrounding literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). For example, a lack of interest in reading novels.

*Success at a Community College*: progress toward graduation or completion of a certificate or a degree (Wirth & Padilla, 2008). For example, completing a gateway course such as freshman English or graduating with an Associate of Arts (AA) degree.

### **Overview of the Study**

In order to explore the literacy events and practices of the participants, this study utilized a qualitative-case study methodology. The exploratory nature of this study is well suited to a case study, as case studies look for particular details, not generalizations (Creswell, 2013). This collective case study will investigate three individual cases, then compare these cases to better understand Hmong students' academic success. Three participants were chosen from the same community college in the Midwestern United

States in order to conduct both a within-case analysis and a cross-case analysis. In order to volunteer for this study, participants needed to self-identify as a Hmong or Hmong-American woman over the age of eighteen.

Data collected through a series of interviews and participant-taken pictures covered participants' literacy history and current uses, focusing on practices within the home and at school. For six weeks, participants took photographs of at least five literacy events in which they partook. During subsequent interviews, participants shared these photographs as prompts for discussion. I first coded data to distinguish literacy events and literacy practices. Then, I coded literacy events for the three narrative elements of interaction, continuity, and situation. Next, I coded literacy practices through open-coding, creating themes of literacy practices, which could then be compared across participants.

The following chapters further detail the processes of this study. Specifically, chapter two outlines relevant research in order to properly situate the current study within the larger body of research literature. Chapter three reviews the research questions and discusses the research design including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapters four through six report the findings from the individual cases. Finally, chapter seven presents the cross case analysis, conclusions, and ideas for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Even though the Hmong people have been living in the United States for over forty years, little literacy research investigates Hmong families and education attainment (Moua & Vang, 2015). Chapter two aims to explore the convergence of literacy events and practices, higher education, and Hmong students. First, I will review literature on literacy practices found in the homes of marginalized families, ultimately turning to studies of Hmong families. I will continue with a brief history of the Hmong people and their immigration to the United States. Next, I will review literature on community colleges, a comparatively understudied aspect of higher education (McCabe, 2000). Included in this section on community colleges, I will address how community colleges measure “success,” and how students in higher education display literacy practices. Finally, I will describe the few studies on Hmong college students and look at the harmful stereotype of calling Asian immigrants, including Hmong students, “model minorities” (Lee, 2005).

#### **Conceptual Framework**

Literacy cannot be separated from its context; therefore, research on literacy must include the surrounding situation (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In this study, literacy is defined as “a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000 p. 9). These social or literacy practices include the values, attitudes, feelings, relationships, patterns of behavior, and power structures surrounding specific instances of literacy usage, or literacy events. The United States’

educational system privileges some literacy practices over others. These privileged practices are common in White, European culture, and have so far dictated what is considered “correct” English usage in speaking, reading, and writing (Moje, et al., 2000). These standards are applied to public institutions like schools, where those who do not conduct themselves in the “standard” or “correct” way are seen as deficient. This study takes the view of prominent sociocultural scholars who have worked to highlight the variety of ways people conduct literacy practices, most especially when those practices are not considered “standard” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008, Street, 1995).

### **Literacy Practices**

The majority of literacy practice studies are conducted with families and children who are on the verge of beginning school or those in pre-school or kindergarten. These studies depict how children are first learning, using, and adapting such practices. As children age, the study of their literacy practices diminishes, leaving gaps in the literature, specifically as students leave high school and begin college.

One of the first major works completed on home literacy practices was Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words*. For eight years, Heath spent time as an ethnographer in two poor, rural communities building relationships, recording interactions, and tracking children’s literacy in and out of school. She then compared these communities to a nearby middle-class community. Heath, again, documented the various ways this community used literacy and taught literacy to their children. In her findings, Heath determined that the students who were most successful in school did not necessarily read more, write more, or hear more talk at home than others. However, successful students were more experienced in the type of talk most commonly used in

school. For instance, students who did well in school had parents who often asked things like “What do you think would happen if...” at home, mirroring practices at school. For those students unfamiliar with the school practices, literacy became a struggle. Heath concluded that communities do not need to alter their literacy practices, but instead schools should be more responsive to the varied ways in which students’ literacies function.

In the time since this study, not much has changed in educational settings. Though scholars have repeatedly called for schools to be more inclusive in their practices, schools still privilege the literacy practices common to the American White-middle class (e.g., Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992; Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011; Zentella, 2005). Studies of marginalized students’ cultural wealth, or accumulated assets and resources, show that students’ cultural wealth could easily fit into curriculum (Moll, et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) studied students’ home lives and found that each family had “funds of knowledge” or knowledge “generated through the social and labor history of families and communicated to others through activities that constitute household life” (p. 18). After learning about these funds of knowledge through repeated observations and interviews with families, teachers were able to create curriculum units around their students’ knowledge by incorporating these knowledges into subjects such as mathematics and social studies.

### **Literacy Practices of Marginalized Families**

In the past several decades, many studies have highlighted the ways marginalized, or non-privileged, families practice literacy (Perry, 2009; Rodriguez, 2007; Song, 2016). Over a period of nine months, Rodriguez (2007) studied three Dominican families and



one Puerto Rican family living in New York. In documenting the types of literacy used in family life, Rodriguez found that a variety of literacy events took place among the families, including instrumental reading (e.g., reading bills), news reading (e.g., newspapers), and recreational reading (e.g., fiction). The literacies used were often associated with the need to understand and solve practical problems. For instance, responding to letters from the school or completing a permission slip for a field trip were often family affairs. Rodriguez also found that five of the seven homes had literacy resources, such as paper and pencils, available for the children to use.

In addition, Volk and De Acosta (2001) studied three Puerto Rican children for six months in order to ascertain the children's connections between literacy in school, home, and church. In exploring the literacy in the home, these researchers found that literacy help went beyond nuclear families and included family friends, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. For instance, the children sought help from one another in educational pursuits, often doing homework together or quizzing each other on learned material. Studying the Bible in and out of church was also an important event for these families. At church, emphasis was placed on understanding the Bible, and the congregation often read the Bible aloud together. Often children were included in the "adult" services so they could learn how to participate fully in this community. The researchers concluded that throughout the cultures of home, school, and church, children mixed and matched literacy practices to best fit their needs.

In a study of three Sudanese families in Detroit, Michigan, Perry (2009) investigated how these families used literacy in their new lives in America. The six parents who were studied grew up in Sudan reading and writing in Arabic for a variety of

reasons, particularly for communication purposes, since many families did not own telephones. After moving to America and learning English, some for the first time, Perry found that parents and children often came together over English texts to work out the meaning together. This sometimes involved children in “adult-like situations” to which their non-immigrant peers would not be exposed. However, because of this collaboration, children of the Sudanese refugees had potentially seen and worked with a greater variety of texts and real world purposes.

In a study of a Korean-American family, Song (2016) looked at how a second-grader’s literacy practices spanned two languages. The focal participant, Yoomin, taught Korean from birth, started learning English at three years old when she was in daycare. Concerned that her Korean language skills would diminish, Yoomin’s parents enrolled her in Korean classes starting at age four. To continue learning in both languages, Yoomin’s parents spoke to her in both Korean and English, often intermixing the languages. For instance, when discussing homework Yoomin’s mother might talk about the concept of time in Korean, but use the English words hour, minutes, and second, to connect to Yoomin’s school practices. Additionally, materials in the home, like children’s books, could be found in both Korean and English, so Yoomin had the opportunity to practice her literacy skills in both languages. However, despite these practices, Yoomin’s Korean was not progressing as fast as her English. Song (2016) concluded one reason for Yoomin’s advancement in English could be her monolingual schooling experience; she suggested schools should incorporate students’ multiple languages in order to tie home literacy practices to school literacy practices.

### **Including the Whole Family**

Typical studies on literacy practices focus on the parents of the child, mostly mothers. However, as shown in research conducted with marginalized cultures, extended and surrogate family members play an influential role in a child's literacy upbringing. In particular, non-White families seem to utilize a family base that is larger than the nuclear family. Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner, and Ruby (2007) have specifically studied the instances of non-parent literacy interaction and other researchers have also found that household members such as siblings (Kibler, Palacios, Simpson-Baird, Bergey, & Yoder, 2016), grandparents (Compton-Lilly, 2007), close family friends and religious leaders (Jarrett, Hamilton, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2015; Volk & De Acosta, 2001) participate in children's literacy development.

Gregory and colleagues (2007) found that the grandmother in a Bangladeshi family's home was integral to her grandson's literacy. The grandmother played a special role as a cultural conduit and literacy mentor. She often read choras (moral rhymes) and worked with her grandson on recitation of these choras, a tradition from her own upbringing in Bangladesh. Additionally, the grandmother spent a significant amount of time reading storybooks to her grandson. The authors called for further research into non-dominant family homes to observe what other literacy practices may be occurring that are not accounted for when family literacy practices are considered from traditional, or majority, perspectives.

Likewise, Gregory (2001) found that older siblings played a key role in developing younger siblings' literacy, while at the same time developing their own. In a study of eight Bangladeshi and eight Anglo families living in Great Britain, Gregory

found that literacy play allowed siblings to rehearse new skills and knowledge without fear. Though older siblings from both cultures often emulated Discourse and tonal patterns of teachers and parents, their intimate knowledge of their younger siblings' lives, including areas such as television programs, music, books, and games, allowed the older siblings to help translate these meanings to make them more personal.

However, the children from the two cultures were distinct in their path to construct meaning. For instance, in the Anglo homes, Gregory (2001) observed typical White, western behaviors like storybook reading. In these instances, the older siblings played the role of parent or teacher and interacted with the book by drawing attention to the pictures and asking questions of the younger siblings. However, in the Bangladeshi homes, storybook reading was much more formal as older siblings took on the role of teachers. As opposed to reading stories for pleasure as in the Anglo homes, these students read stories in the act of playing school. As such, younger siblings in Bangladeshi homes were much more likely to be asked formal comprehension questions and were not only practicing literacy but practicing the rules of school as well.

A study of nine Latinx families showed that older sibling engaged in both oral and written language and literacy practices (Kibler et al., 2016). In these practices, older siblings either modeled expertise for or engaged in practices with younger siblings. In oral-based interactions, older siblings tended to engage their younger siblings more, for instance having a younger sibling repeat a word or phrase. In print-based interactions, older siblings modeled expertise by spelling words or reading aloud in Spanish or English. Both younger and older siblings initiated interactions, and both sets of siblings did so of their own accord. This finding is consistent with Kibler's and colleagues (2016)

assertion that older siblings are uniquely valuable in that they prepare younger siblings for school-valued literacy practices.

Participants in a study of low-income African American mothers of preschoolers named a variety of family members who helped with literacy practices within the home, including partners, grandparents, aunts, and siblings (Jarrett et al., 2015). These family members were key in helping mothers with younger children and played an important part both in support of the mother and in support of the child's literacy. Additionally, findings included a prominence of verbal activities, such as acting out stories and recitations reflecting the strong oral tradition in African American families.

Among other purposes, studies have shown that families use literacy as a means to problem-solve, to communicate, and to practice their faith. These practices include multiple generations and may include a broader community as well. Though much of the literature has focused on marginalized families, no studies have looked at Hmong families and how they may negotiate their literacy practices. This study sought to add to the literature on home literacy practices by specifically looking at Hmong families.

### **Hmong History and Immigration to the United States**

One reason research on Hmong students may be lacking is their relatively recent immigration. Originating from the mountains of China, Hmong were self-supporting farmers without need for formal education (Lee, 2001; Lee & Green, 2008; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Living within communities of self-supported farmers in the mountains of China, Vietnam, and Laos, the Hmong had little need or use of formal education (Lee & Green, 2008). The Hmong culture boasts a long oral history and a tradition of tapestries that pass down stories through generations (Craig, 2010). For many centuries, the Hmong language

was oral; the Hmong written language, created in 1952, was not widely used in the agrarian society (Vang, 2005).

After serving in the Secret Army on behalf of the United States preceding and during the Vietnam War, Hmong men and their families fled to Thai refugee camps in order to avoid persecution by the Pathet Lao Communists (Thao, 1984). Since then the Hmong have immigrated to several countries, including the United States, France, Canada, and Papua New Guinea (Ngo & Lee 2007; Vang, 2008). Immigration of Southeastern Asians, which include the Hmong, to the United States, occurred in three waves. The first wave (1975-1979) of immigrants consisted of people who were highly educated and those who worked closest with the United States government. The second wave (1979-1982) brought the families of the educated elite and those who had above-average resources. The third wave (1982-2004) included those of a farming and preliterate background (Grigoleit, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Because of the three waves of immigration, the United States now has the fourth largest Hmong population in the world behind China, Vietnam, and Laos. With the closing of Wat Tham Krabok, the last Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, in 2004, large-scale immigration movements of Hmong to the United States are expected to diminish (Grigoleit, 2006). The majority of Hmong people in the United States have settled in the states of California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Lee & Green, 2008). Currently, a population of nearly 300,000 Hmong live in the United States, averaging an age of 23.4 years old (ACS, 2015). With approximately a third of the population under the age of 18, a rise in Hmong populations throughout the educational system can be expected.

### **Hmong Students in American Schools**

Students who are typically considered “at-risk” or underprepared often have limited English skills, are poor, and are ethnic minorities (Vang, 2005). Many Hmong families in America fit these risk factors (ACS, 2015; Vang, 2005). In addition to the above-listed factors, the “limited formal schooling and low print literacy” (Bigelow, Basford, & Smidt, 2008, p. 2) of Hmong immigrants are two additional contributing factors to the difficulties facing Hmong students’ education.

The limited number of studies about Hmong families at home have shown that the Hmong community sees their role of support differently than White, middle-class families. Hmong parents found it most important to provide shelter, food, and supplies for their children, but believed that the academic teaching should be left to the schools (Vang, 2005). However, Xiong and Lee (2005) added that most Hmong parents believe in the same early childhood education concepts as American parents, such as learning names, numbers, addresses, and the alphabet.

These Hmong parents also still believe in the idea of education as a means to mobility (Lee, 2001; Vang, 2005), creating a tension between not wanting to lose children to the dominant culture and wanting children to succeed in the United States (Lee, 2001). Similar to other immigrant cultures who believe education is the schools’ responsibility (Boyce et al., 2004), Hmong parents may also believe that schools will provide all the education that their children need and that there is no need for support or extra help from the home (Vang, 2005).

When schools classify students as “Asian” they do not take into account the multiple ethnicities students encompass and the differences within each ethnic

community. This is particularly problematic for Hmong students, who are among the lowest ethnicities in degree attainment (CARE, 2013). First, Hmong families moved to the United States as refugees. Second, many Hmong families are unfamiliar with formal education so they are unaware of how teachers “expect” students to be prepared before entering school. This study aimed to add to the growing literature specifically about Hmong students. Additionally, the study focused on academically successful Hmong students to highlight the strengths Hmong students bring to their studies.

### **Community Colleges**

As higher education enrollment continued to grow throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many four-year universities chose not to expand in an effort to become “true research universities and professional development centers” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 7). This non-expansion pushed freshman and sophomores students into still-developing community colleges. These “junior colleges” were meant to teach first- and second-year students their general education requirements. Today, community colleges are their own entity separate from four-year universities and are defined as “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 5). One advantage of community colleges is their regional location, which allows many students to live at home and commute to classes.

A defining characteristic of community colleges is their “open access” policies. Unlike four year universities, community colleges accept most applicants, the basic requirement being a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) (McCabe, 2000). The open access policy allows for, “individuals of both genders, from all races and ethnic backgrounds and from all economic and social walks of life” (Vaughan, 2000, p.



5) to participate in higher education. Because of their easy accessibility, community colleges also attract a number of part-time students, students who hold part- or full-time jobs, and underprepared students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). In order to help all of its varied students, community colleges offer support services like counseling, academic advising, and developmental coursework (Vaughan, 2000). As such, community colleges are often the first step to higher education for underprepared and marginalized students (McCabe, 2000).

To help students compensate for underdeveloped academic skills, community colleges have taken on the task of helping students adequately prepare for college courses through developmental education (Vaughan, 2000). Developmental education serves as an intervention for community college students who are lacking foundational skills that are needed to succeed in postsecondary education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Vaughan, 2000). Many states have mandated testing, placement, and developmental course-sequences for students entering community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). While this definition may be similar on postsecondary campuses around the country, the practices of developmental education vary greatly from school to school.

### **Developmental Education**

Nationwide, 67% of community college entrants enrolled in at least one developmental course (Horn & Asmussen, 2014). Students who are in developmental courses often include students who are underprepared for college work, returning students who have been out of school for many years, and English language learners (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013). These students are less likely to graduate than any other disaggregated group, with only

39% of students required to take developmental courses eventually completing a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 1999). This lower graduation rate may be due to labeling students as they enter college or to the inequity found in developmental courses, which serve mainly ethnic and socioeconomic minority students (Moore et al., 2002).

The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that a disproportionate number of marginalized students enroll in developmental courses; for instance, during the 2003-2004 school year, 72% of Black students, 71% of Hispanic students, and 69% of Asian-American students enrolled in community colleges were required to take at least one remedial course compared to only 61% of White students (Horn & Asmussen, 2014). While much research focuses on the achievement gap between Black and Latinx students relative to White students, very few studies on developmental education even include disaggregated data on Asian-Americans. As this study shows, research ignoring Asian-Americans in community colleges is unwarranted and potentially detrimental.

### **Measures of Success**

Students who enroll in community college have several paths to academic success. Specifically, some students use community colleges as stepping-stones to four-year universities and bachelor's degrees (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Others only need to take a few courses to obtain better paying jobs or promotions. However, only those that complete a certificate or degree at a community college are counted as graduates. Because community college students may not seek degrees or may transfer before obtaining a degree, this requirement may be one reason community colleges have lower graduation rate than four-year universities.

At the community college, the three most used measures of success are graduation rate, transfer rate, and persistence rate. The measure of graduation rates is most widely used because it is associated with accountability measurements, which are increasingly tied to college funding for public schools (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach 2005). Graduation rate is measured by comparing the number of students who begin college for the first time and are enrolled full-time and then looks at the percentage of those students who graduate within 100%, 150%, and 200% of “normal time” (Mullin, 2012). For a community college, that measures graduation rates at two years (100% normal time), three years (150% normal time), and four years (200% normal time). However, scholars have argued that these measures do not fit community college students (Bailey, et al., 2005; Mullin, 2012). Community college students tend to work more hours, have greater home responsibilities and do not necessarily seek a degree, all factors that work against the traditional measure of graduation rates (Mullin, 2012). The most recent data, from the 2010 cohort (first-time, full-time students, enrolled in fall 2010) of two-year public college students, showed that a total of 39.2% of two-year public college entrants graduated by 2016 (Shapiro, et al., 2017). When disaggregated by race, the report shows that 45.1% of White students, 43.8% of Asian students, 33% of Hispanic students, and 25.8% of Black students graduated within six years of beginning community college. These data showed that community college students continued graduating at lower rates than their four-year university counterparts did. Of the three measures – all college entrants, four-year students, and two-year students – the community college graduation rate was the only measure where Asian students graduated at a lower rate than their White peers.

Because so many students transfer out of two-year colleges, transfer rates are usually combined with graduation rates as a better measure of success (Mullin, 2012). It is important to note that students who graduate at a community college with an Associate of Arts degree (AA), and then transfer to a four-year university are traditionally only counted as graduated students, not transfer students. Transfer rates are also measured using a first-time, full-time cohort against the number of transfer students within four years. Transfer rates are grossly underreported since it is the up to the community college that students leave to track the transfer and most lack the fiscal capital to do so. Current transfer rates estimate that 20% of all transfer students are community college students transferring to a four-year university (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015).

For studies that focus on students still enrolled in college, persistence rates or progress measures are used as a proxy for success, as these lead to graduation or transfer in time. Measures of persistence and progress vary by study. Examples of persistence and progress measures are completion of a developmental course sequence, completion of gateway courses, like freshman English, or enrollment from fall to fall. In this study, success will be defined as progress toward graduation or completion of a certificate or a degree (Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

In a study of “what it means to be a community college student,” researchers found that the role of a community college student is distinctly different from students’ non-college roles (Karp & Bork, 2014). Participants, who were community college students in Virginia, were most unaccustomed to the fluidity in their role as a community college student. For instance, college students could pick their schedule unlike high

school students, but college students were not guided on study techniques, where high school students are often given specific tasks like making flashcards. A second difference in roles was the need for community college students to engage in self-reflection. Because many tasks were left up to the student, like studying, a community college student needed to reflect on strategies that help him/her best.

In an analysis of interviews with students and faculty members, Karp and Bork (2014) determined students need to develop four skills to engage as a community college student. First, students needed to develop appropriate academic habits, like setting a schedule for studying. Second, students must learn the cultural norms of colleges, those typically associated with White, middle-class students. Third, students should have time management skills, allowing students to balance the multiple roles they play, like student, worker, and/or parent. Fourth, students need to seek help when needed. Karp and Bork concluded that students need to be explicitly taught these “community college student” behaviors in order to be successful. Though these behaviors do not directly relate to literacy, literacy practices may be used to meet these criteria.

### **Literacy Practices of College Students**

A study of college students enrolled in a freshman English course showed that students divided their literacy practices into six categories (Evans, 1993). Described as “mainstream students,” the participants were on average 18.5 years old, 65% had graduated in the top third of their high school class, and 95% were White. Because the participant sample was largely privileged, their literacy practices can also be considered privileged. The first two categories of literacy practices were school-related: school reading and school writing. In this study, “school reading” equated to a required reading

task where at the end, students were obligated to prove they knew the “correct” information. This display of learned knowledge may be through an analysis or a test.

Participants described “school writing” as teacher-directed and formulaic (Evans, 1993). It was only valued as a tool to achieve success. The additional four categories were literacy practices that students did outside of school: story reading, leisure “popcorn-trash reading” (p. 325), creative/imaginative writing, and personal writing. Participants noted that these practices were more prominent when they were younger, but as they attended school these practices became less fun because of the strict structure of their school reading and writing. Even though the participants became disillusioned with their out-of-school literacy practices, these practices are typically found in the dominant culture and are most closely related to the school practices.

A study of a master’s student in the United Kingdom showed how the participant used both his academic literacy practices and his business literacy practices to help write his dissertation (Kaufhold, 2017). Two activities emerged from business literacies to help the participant complete his dissertation. First, the participant, Tim, used his time management skills, gained from his time as an entrepreneur. Tim’s time management included literacy events like arranging tasks in a datebook and creating lists of what he had accomplished as a way to reflect on being more efficient. Second, Tim used his knowledge of writing business funding requests to aid him in writing the methods section of his dissertation. He used questions to help define his sections, which in turn helped him create a structured outline of his methods chapter. The findings of this study support the dynamic nature of literacy practices and the shared nature of a person’s literacy practices.

Interview data from 40 college graduates with advanced degrees indicated that older siblings often served as reading role models and teachers (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016). All first generation students, participants described older siblings with strong reading habits being an influence and creating a stronger culture of reading within the family. Older siblings shared reading materials, modeled independent reading, talked about books, recommended books, read aloud, and acted as teachers to their younger siblings, encouraging these siblings, now participants, to create their own independent reading habits. Knoester and Plikuhn (2016) concluded that strong recreational literacy practices created a “bridge” between home and academic literacies.

### **Hmong Students in Higher Education**

As previously stated, community colleges are often the first step in postsecondary education for marginalized students. Yet, it is not enough to study Asian American students as a pan-ethnic group because there are significant disparities within the educational attainment of different Asian American ethnicities (CARE, 2013). For instance, there is more than a 60% difference between the highest and lowest rates of bachelor’s degree attainment within Asian ethnic groups. The Hmong rank among the three lowest ethnicities, with only 14.7% of Hmong adults over the age of 24 having a bachelor’s degree or higher. As such, it is important that we study each cultural group to ascertain how they are successful.

Data analysis of one cohort of Hmong students attending a technical college in Wisconsin confirmed prior data, which showed educational differences between Hmong and White students (Iannarelli, 2014). Findings indicated that Hmong students had a lower cumulative GPA than White students, specifically when comparing Hmong women

to White women. However, the cumulative GPAs of Hmong women and men did not differ significantly. The parity between genders was a new finding, as previous research showed Hmong men outperforming Hmong women. Furthermore, Hmong students have consistently reported obstacles to success in college. In a survey of 55 students enrolled in a California university, students rated lack of money, poor study habits, lack of direction on how to obtain career goals, and lack of motivation as the biggest problems they have faced while in college (Xiong & Lee, 2011). Presumably, because of the monetary and career concerns, Hmong students rated financial aid services and academic advising as the most helpful services on campus. Participants' qualitative responses also indicated that Hmong students felt that there was a distinct lack of Hmong role models working on campus.

A study of five Hmong graduate students explored the barriers and success factors in Hmong college students (Xiong & Lam, 2013). During their undergraduate years, participants spoke of academic support coming mainly from people the participants felt close to, whether that was a particular professor, an older sibling, or a classmate. They also derived support from the Hmong culture; participants "perceived success in college as a way of giving back to their families" (Xiong & Lam, 2013, p. 139). Though each of these students was ultimately successful, they all faced obstacles during their undergraduate college experiences. Every student discussed the difficulty navigating the higher education system, with concerns like not knowing campus resources or academic requirements. Without having anyone to lean on, students felt isolated and did not know whom to turn to with questions. This isolation increased when meetings with counselors were not successful. In addition to these academic barriers, students also felt



overwhelmed with obligations to their family and culture. For instance, one young man's family often called on him to attend shamanistic ceremonies, while two women felt pressured be the "good mother, good wife, and good daughter-in-law" (Xiong & Lam, 2013, p. 138). These cultural practices further constrained the time students had to study and go to class.

One reason Hmong students may be graduating less frequently than their peers is due to the differing goals of both the college student and the student's family (Chang, Chen, & Kim, 2015). In a survey of European American and East-Asian American college students and their mothers, each group rated the achievement goal of "having a career I enjoy" the highest (Chang, et al., 2015). However, compared to European Americans, East-Asian American college students and their mothers both indicated that their life-goals, particularly those surrounding family, were more important than achievement goals. Immigrant parents may put particular emphasis on prioritizing family over career because they see this as a way for future generations to retain their culture (Chang, et al., 2015). These dual priorities for young Hmong women can be particularly difficult to navigate, as a "good daughter" is one who simultaneously goes to school in order to have a good career and preserves her Hmong culture (Peng & Solheim, 2015).

### **The Complications of the "Model Minority"**

In addition to the barriers described above, Hmong students face the additional barrier of being considered a "model minority." In the United States acculturation is measured through the lens of education, an immigrant's "success" is partially dependent up the completion of high school and college degrees (Luthra & Soehl, 2015). However, measuring the educational success of the Hmong people has not always been easy

because the United States census data labels all immigrants from Asia under one group. By labeling large multiethnic groups under one name, such as “Asian,” particularities found within individual ethnic groups are often hidden (CARE, 2013; Hibel, 2009; Luthra & Soehl, 2015).

In 1966, sociologist William Petterson first coined the term “model minority” in his article “Success Story: Japanese American Style” for the *New York Times Magazine*. Peterson defined “model minorities” as ethnic minorities who have achieved success, despite their minority status. In the United States, Asian Americans are typically seen as immigrants who can succeed without special assistance, thus “model minorities” (Ngo & Lee, 2007). In school settings, this often translates to Asian Americans being considered “academic overachievers” and, therefore, not in need of much help, if any (Kim, Wang, Chen, Shen, & Hou, 2015).

The stereotype of model minority or “academic overachiever” is not only harmful to large groups of people; it also lacks distinction among several of Asia’s immigrant populations. While large scale studies (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Zhou & Bankson, 1998) have shown that Asian Americans are often higher-achieving than other minoritized groups, these studies did not disaggregate the data, and thus hid underperforming Asian American populations (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Studies that focused on Americans from Southeast Asia showed that though these populations were often wrapped into the model minority stereotype, they have not achieved high rates of success like immigrants from China and Japan (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The biggest difference between high and low-achieving Asian Americans is their reason for immigration. Many students’ families from countries like Japan and China have chosen to immigrate to the United States, while

populations from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia often have come to the United States as refugees (Khawaja, Moisuc, & Ramirez, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

When comparing Southeastern Asians, particularly Hmong, to high-achieving immigrants, like the Japanese, there are stark differences between educational achievements. For instance, 8.6% of Japanese-Americans have less than a high school education, compared to 59% of Hmong-Americans; meanwhile, 42.7% of all Asian Americans 25 years and older have bachelor's degrees, but only 7.4% of Hmong-Americans hold the same degree (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Community colleges students differ greatly than students at four-year universities. As a stepping-stone for students who are traditionally considered "at-risk," community colleges attempt to meet their students' needs in a variety of ways. Mostly commonly, community colleges offer developmental education courses aimed at increasing students' abilities before they begin traditional college curriculum. Though success can be measured in many ways, students at the community college continually show lower graduation rates than their peers at four-year universities.

Studies on college students' literacy practices have focused primarily on students seeking advanced degrees. The few studies that look at undergraduate students do not specifically look at students from marginalized communities. Hmong students, when studied as an individual ethnic group, have low success rates. Though Hmong students face typical obstacles of "at-risk" students like being from low-income homes or being first-generation students, they also face specific cultural barriers. By studying Hmong students, this study sought to focus on how Hmong students may have used their cultural practices to help them achieve success at the community college.

## Summary

Literacy practices vary from home to home, and literacy practices found in the homes of marginalized families tend to differ from those in the homes of White, middle-class families. Research into the homes of marginalized families suggests that literacy is used in a variety of ways for problem-solving, information-gathering, and for entertainment (Jarrett, et al., 2015; Perry, 2009; Volk & De Acosta, 2001). Additionally, a wide range of family members contribute to the family's literacies.

Despite their presence in America for over forty years, research on Hmong people in America has been sparse and unsystematic. However, educators, in particular, those in California and the Midwest cannot ignore the rising numbers of Hmong students in their classrooms nor the culture these students bring to classrooms.

The community college is often an entry to American higher education for marginalized Hmong students. Entrance into community college is configured to meet students' needs in accessibility and academics. Hmong students enter college faced with obstacles that many college students have such as lack of money or lack of motivation, and problems particular to their culture, like the need to attend religious ceremonies and attending to domestic responsibilities (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Xiong & Lee, 2011). Additionally, stereotyping Hmong as high-achieving Asian Americans or "model minorities," may contribute to the lack of success in higher education (Lee, 2001). This current study adds to the literature on Hmong students and their literacy practices. Using Barton and Hamilton's (2000) sociocultural view of literacy, this study specifically sought to find literacy events and practices that contributed to Hmong students' success at the community college level.

### CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Understanding how students, and particularly students of color, achieve academic success at the community college level is key to helping more students achieve success (Crisp, Carales, & Núñez, 2016; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015). Hmong students have one of the lowest graduation rates of any ethnic group (Xiong & Lam, 2013), so it is crucial to understand stories of success in order to support these students and increase success rates. Because traditional literacy skills—the ability to read, write, and problem-solve—are the foundation for coursework in institutions of higher education in the United States, there is need for research that will examine how students use or adapt their literacy skills for success. Previous research findings suggest students of color and those who are bilingual need improvement in literacy skills, therefore studying how students use and adapt literacy skills may help these populations achieve more academic success (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the literacy events and practices of Hmong women who are academically successful in higher education. For the purposes of this study, “academic success” is defined as graduation with a degree or certificate or any progress made toward graduation (Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Through interviews and pictures documenting literacy events, participants were able to tell their stories of academic success. The study’s research questions are:

1. What literacy events and practices position Hmong students to meet mainstream markers of academic success in community college settings?

- a. What are participants' past and present literacy events?
- b. What are participants' past and present literacy practices?

The remainder of this chapter will address the research design, participants, data collection and analysis, the positionality of the researcher, and the trustworthiness of the design.

### **Research Design**

As a whole, literacy research and publication tends to favor quantitative methods (Parsons & Gallagher, 2016). However, quantitative analysis is often unable to consider individual experiences, particularly when those experiences deviate from the norm. Because this study proposes to seek an understanding of specific persons' experience, I chose a qualitative case study as the most appropriate design.

In the field of qualitative inquiry, case studies remain one of the most difficult methodologies to define (Barone, 2011). The clearest definition is that case studies are descriptive and nonexperimental, but most importantly they are bounded or have clear boundaries regarding what is included and excluded in the study (Merriam, 1988). Case studies are implemented in situations where researchers want to learn the particulars. The findings are not generalizable because the researcher seeks to understand the human experience (Stake, 1995).

This study is a collective case study that focused on the literacy events and practices of three Hmong women attending higher education institutes in the Midwestern United States. In collective case studies, individual cases are studied, then compared in order to build a stronger understanding of the cases. In this study, each participant represented an individual, bounded case. I bounded each individual case by investigating

only the literacy events and practices in which the participant was directly involved. Though the participants may have observed other events and practice, these were not counted as part of their cases. The study is also bound by the six-week time period, during the end of the academic semester, though I study sought to learn about all literacy events and practices of the participants, it may be that some are more relevant during other times. Finally, this study was bound by its location in the Midwest. Cases outside the Midwest may yield different results. These cases are unique in that Hmong students are rarely studied in higher education and almost never studied in community colleges. By using narrative coding methods, I was able to explore in depth the lives of the participants to see their lived literacy experiences and how they have made sense of these experiences. Then, through the broader context of participants' literacy practices, I was able to see the multiple roles literacy played in participants' lives, and also the different roles each participant took while practicing her literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Narrative methods derive from the teachings of Dewey, who said that by studying education one is, in essence, studying experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry emphasizes the "experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). This method allowed the participants to speak for themselves without the pressure of a "right" or "wrong" answer. Instead, the participants' lives, experiences, and stories are valued for their authenticity. Narrative inquiry is a particularly salient method for women of color because they are typically silenced as women and as Hmong (Lor, 2013). In traditional Hmong culture, women were subservient to their husbands. In addition, women's words were disregarded and treated as unimportant. Though these cultural practices are slowly changing, it is still rare for a

woman to be consulted without first acknowledging her husband, father, or eldest brother. Therefore, it is significant for Hmong women to be able to speak without constraint and have their words valued. With narrative methods, the words of the participants are the most valuable source of information. In this study, all of the data originated from the participants themselves, through interviews and photographs. I recorded and transcribed participants' interviews and, as such, their words became the basis of analysis. Before beginning this study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

## **Participants**

### **Setting**

Participants for this study were drawn from a large community college in the Midwestern United States (subsequently referred to using the pseudonym Midwestern Community College). Based on data from 2016, the community college enrolls approximately 13,000 students, both full and part-time. Of these students, 24% were enrolled in one or more developmental course. Students of color made up 36% of the total student body; students identified as Asian totaled 16% of the student body. (This percentage does not include students who identify as Pacific Islander like some broad Asian categorizations do.) Of the students who applied for financial aid, 58% were Pell eligible, meaning, in most cases, the student's household earned less than \$30,000 per year.

### **Participant Selection**

I selected potential participants from among my former students. The prior relationship was crucial to data collection because people in the Hmong community can



be fearful of judgment from outsiders (Lee, 2005). In a purposeful sample, I emailed fifteen potential participants an invitation to participate (see Appendix B for recruitment email). I asked that participants identify as Hmong or Hmong-American women, and age eighteen or older. Four students responded to the initial email and three consented to participate in the study. Two participants' parents immigrated to the United States as married couples; because they were foreign-born and chose to immigrate, they are considered first generation immigrants (Assalone & Fann, 2017). The third participants' parents moved to the United States as young children. Immigrant children are designated Generation 1.5 because they were born in a different country; like Generation 1.0, they were raised in the United States and did not make the decision to immigrate. Each woman in this study is a second generation Hmong-American, meaning that she was born and raised in the United States to Generation 1.0 or Generation 1.5 parents. Furthermore, all of the women followed a similar entry into higher education: they each graduated from high school, enrolled in the community college, and began coursework in a developmental reading course. Figure 3.1 introduces each participant. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participant.

**Nachia**

Nachia is 22 and enrolled in a four-year university, after graduating with her AA in 2016. Currently, she is working toward a bachelor's degree in Communications. She is fluent in both Hmong and English, and can read and write in both languages. Nachia is very involved with her church.

**Kate**

Kate is 21 and has just declared her major, Dental Assisting, at the community college. She anticipates graduating in 2019. She lives with her older sister and brother-in-law, and frequently cares for her two young nephews. Kate's first language is English, though she knows some Hmong.

**Amelia**

Amelia is 28 and just completed the Dental Assisting program at the community college and graduated in 2017. She knows more English than Hmong, and confesses to speaking "Hmong-lish" with her parents. Amelia lives with her husband, son, and two sisters-in-law, of whom she is a legal guardian.

*Figure 1.* Participants' biographical information.

### **Data Collection**

The best use of a case study is to learn about individuals and the "complex phenomenon of real-life situations" (Barone, 2011, p. 13). In order to best learn about the complexities, case studies demand multiple data sources to form a fuller picture of the phenomenon. These data sources help the author provide the rich, thick description needed to demonstrate the detail and complexity within and across different cases (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). As data are collected and analyzed, researchers conduct member-checks with participants; member-checks allow participants to correct any misunderstandings between the participants and the researchers (Barone, 2011).

When planning this study, I created a list of three literacy topics I wanted participants to discuss during interviews: family literacy, K-12 literacy, and college literacy. I chose these topics because I hoped it would give me insight to how the participants' literacy practices developed over time. Then I decided to add four additional interviews to ensure participants had ample opportunity to discuss all the literacy events in their lives. First, I added an introductory interview at the beginning of the study to gather demographic information, discuss the meaning of the word "literacy," and how literacy events may manifest in their lives. (Seidman, 2006).

During this first interview, I asked participants to take five photographs a week of their literacy events, or observable events revolving around a text (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The use of participant-taken photographs to discuss literacy events was adapted from Barton and Hamilton (1998) and Hamilton's (2000) work. All participants agreed to take photographs and used their mobile phones to do so. Along with the photographs, participants were asked to take notes on the details of the literacy event, such as where it took place and the purpose of the event. Complete instructions can be found in Appendix C. These photographs helped to contextualize the participant interviews by showing how they used literacy in their lives. Additionally, the photographs acted as reminders of the variety of literacy events in which each participant participated, often leading to longer stories about how or why events had occurred. Participants shared and discussed their photographs with the researcher during each subsequent interview. Each participant showed me her pictures on her mobile phone; one participant chose to then text me her pictures so I could refer back to them. While participants described their photographs and the literacy event taking place, I took notes about the picture itself and the surrounding

activity as described by the participant. I encouraged participants to take a variety of photographs to encompass all of their activities in and out of school. I hoped that a variety of photographs would give me a fuller understanding of how the participants use literacy for school and personal purposes. Additionally, I wanted to see if there were connections or overlap between literacy activities at home and at school. Though each participant was able to produce some new photographs each week, around the fourth week, participants started photographing recurring events that they had already photographed and discussed, thus reaching data saturation.

The subsequent three interviews covered my initial interview interests: family literacy, K-12 literacy, and college literacy. I then added three additional interviews to the end of the study. In the first of these three interviews, I asked participants to bring two assignments, an assignment they completed during their K-12 education and another from their college education, in order to collect another form of data. The second added interview, or sixth interview, had no set questions. I purposely left this interview open so I could ask the participants follow-up questions from their previous interviews. For instance, if a participant recounted an assignment that she liked, I may have gone back to ask what she liked about the assignment. The final interview asked participants to reflect on the process of photographing and discussing their literacy (see Appendix D for full Interview Protocol). This planning resulted in six semi-structured interviews and one interview in which questions would be pre-planned, but participant-specific. In a semi-structured design, each interview began with a set of questions, but as participants talked, I could ask for more information if needed. I also advised participants that they could

skip any question they were uncomfortable answering. Table 1 displays the interview topics.

**Table 1**

<i>Interview Topics</i>	
Interview 1	Introduction
Interview 2	Family Literacy
Interview 3	K-12 Literacy
Interview 4	College Literacy
Interview 5	School Assignments
Interview 6	Open Interview
Interview 7	Reflection

Though I planned for seven interviews, I met with two participants five times each and one participant six times; participants had the opportunity to combine sets of interview questions so as to accommodate their busy schedules. Each interview lasted between 30 and 65 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed. Over the course of several interviews, I provided participants with transcripts of previous interviews. They then had the opportunity to read through the transcripts, and amend, add, or change the text as they believed necessary. All participants modified their transcripts, though changes were only made for clarification purposes or for errors in the transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

After the data collection ended, I organized the study materials into digital and physical files, one for each participant. I placed the transcriptions in digital files, but

placed field notes from interviews in physical files. I also reviewed the transcripts for clarity and to determine the need for any follow-up questions. Follow-up questions became the basis for the sixth interview.

Barton and Hamilton (2000) stated that the best way to start analyzing literacy practices is through regular literacy events. In this study, literacy events are defined as observable events mediated by a text. As such, transcripts were first read and coded for the codes of literacy events and literacy practices, or the values, attitudes, feelings, relationships, patterns of behavior, and power structures associated with literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). These codes allowed for the separation of the participants' external literacy actions and internal thoughts and feelings about literacy. I read through each transcript and bracketed units of text that described either a literacy event or literacy practice.

After bracketing, I coded one transcript, then sent the same transcript to Dr. Dyches and Dr. Helman for coding. From our resulting discussion, I refined the labels "literacy events" and "literacy practices." I determined that literacy events would only be coded if the event's purpose was primarily intended to help the participant or if the participant directly participated in the event. For instance, initially, when Amelia discussed the books her son read, this was originally coded "literacy event." However, upon refinement of the codes, this event was no longer coded as a literacy event, because Amelia did not participate in the reading of the book. The code of literacy practices was refined as well. Because of my close relationship with the participants, my initial coding included assumptions I made regarding my participants' literacy practices. Recognizing this limitation, literacy practices were only coded if the literacy practice was explicitly

stated, such as when Nachia said, “I love journaling.” With this new code of literacy practices, I again conferred with Dr. Dyches and Dr. Helman to establish interrater reliability. Then, with the newly defined codes set, I recoded all transcripts accordingly. Some of the bracketed data were coded both literacy event and literacy practice. Because literacy events are one aspect of literacy practices, if a participant discussed an event such as reading a book in high school it was coded as an event. But if she continued to describe how that book made her feel, it was also coded a literacy practice because it now included the feeling involved with the event. Table 2 shows examples of primary coding. Appendix E shows an illustrative example of the primary and secondary codes.

**Table 2**

*Primary Coding for Literacy Events and Literacy Practices*

Interview Excerpt	Primary Code
<p>“This one is my to-do list. Again, it was at the university center. I like to start my day off with a to-do list just so that I know what I need to get done for that day.” <i>Nachia, Interview 2</i></p>	Literacy Event
<p>“My parents, they didn't know how to read in English. It was just only my sister and my brother helping me. If there was like a word that I didn't know, I'll ask them, ‘Okay, what is this word?’ and they'll tell me. I'm like, ‘Oh what does it mean?’ They'll tell me the meaning of it.” <i>Kate, Interview 2</i></p>	Literacy Event
<p>“I remember them teaching us how to say words properly or what it means and all of that. It was a way where I can communicate with other people who were in my boat, in the same boat as me. We knew that we are all together just because we were in ELL together. My first language is Hmong, but my second is English.” <i>Nachia, Interview 1</i></p>	Literacy Practice
<p>“I don't really remember much about reading but I just -- I mean I did -- it was hard for me to read as I grew older too. Even now, there's still some words that's still hard to pronounce.” <i>Amelia, Interview 1</i></p>	Literacy Practice

## **Literacy Events**

I separated all lines coded as literacy events for a secondary round of codes using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space approach. In this approach, literacy events were coded for the elements of situation (place), interaction (personal and social), and continuity (past, present, and future). I used these deductive codes so participants' literacy events could be formed into narrative stories. Before coding, I again read through the data to determine the boundaries of each label, as described below.

I coded literacy events in one of two situations or places: home or school. Literacy events coded as "school" were events that were performed for a specific academic outcome or goal, such as "It's [quiz] out of the chapter that we read because we have a quiz once a week." Events coded as "home," then, were those events without a specified academic purpose. For example, when a participant discussed watching television with the subtitles turned on.

Furthermore, I divided codes labeled interaction between person and social; "personal" codes were used for literacy events the participant performed alone. For instance, when a participant shared her to-do list. Literacy events coded as "social" were events that participants performed with more than one purpose or if the intent of the event was to facilitate communication or interaction with another person(s). For example, Nachia discussed her former blog. Though she wrote her posts alone, it was meant to be read and shared with others. Thus it was coded as "social" the intention was to interact with others.

The final code, continuity, was subdivided into the categories of past, present, or future, in order to see how current literacy practices grew from past practices and how



both of these practices may inform future practices. Because the focus of this study is on how literacy practices effect community college outcomes, literacy events occurring before starting community college were labeled as “past.” For example, any discussion about elementary or high school would be labeled as a “past” event. Events occurring while the participant was enrolled in higher education were labeled “present” and “future” codes were given to events that described processes that occurred over time. Examples of a “present” event include discussions about college homework. Future codes were primarily co-coded with either past or present. For instance, when a participant talked about her reading process, she said, “I have to slowly process the sentence...and then be like okay, that's the one word and that's another word.” This was coded past, present, and future because there is no indication of when this event occurred, and it gives the sense that this is a continuing practice. Examples of secondary coding for literacy events can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Secondary Coding of Literacy Events*

Interview Excerpt	Secondary Codes
<p>“If I don't have a to-do list post-it note or a to-do list paper, then I feel I get lost and I don't know what's needs to be done that day.” <i>Nachia, Interview 2</i></p>	<p>Home <i>Situation</i></p>
<p>“Recently I wrote an essay for my public speaking, about Winston Churchill and his speech.” <i>Nachia, Interview 1</i></p>	<p>School <i>Situation</i></p>
<p>“So I'm constantly in my room doing homework.” <i>Amelia, Interview 2</i></p>	<p>Personal <i>Interaction</i></p>
<p>“We'll study on our own, then we will come together and do it together like, ‘This is what I learned, what did you learn?’” <i>Amelia, Interview 1</i></p>	<p>Social <i>Interaction</i></p>

Table 3 continued

<p>“The first thing I thought of was how in elementary when we were still learning cursive. We were like trace the dotted line.” <i>Kate, Interview 1</i></p>	<p>Past <i>Continuity</i></p>
<p>“I just find it more convenient if I go to class, just type on my laptop. It's faster that way.” <i>Kate, Interview 1</i></p>	<p>Present <i>Continuity</i></p>
<p>Because this thing is growing up, when I was with my sister like and my siblings we all watch movie that was, turn on subtitles and then it just become a habit, when there is no subtitles it's so hard to understand what they're saying too. <i>Kate, Interview 3</i></p>	<p>Future <i>Continuity</i>  <i>Coded: Past · Present · Future</i></p>

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### Literacy Practices

Because literacy practices are socially-situated, it is important to see how they relate to and are embedded in participants' broader lives. As such, interview excerpts initially coded as literacy practices were then coded inductively to determine the purpose for the practice (Burnett & Myers, 2002; Evans, 1993). Coding inductively allowed participants' literacy practices to emerge without predetermined categories, an important point because as marginalized women, their practices may or may not have matched previous research. This hybrid approach to coding, deductive and inductive, gave shape to the participants' stories and then allowed for themes to emerge directly from the data, respectively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To begin, I openly coded one participant's literacy practices (Creswell, 2013), asking myself what was the purpose of this literacy practice? As I read through one transcript, I gave each literacy practice a code. I wanted each code to be broad enough to include multiple events, but specific enough to differentiate between practices. For

instance, though similar, I used the code school objective when participants discussed specific assignments that were given by a teacher, whereas I used the code learning when participants discussed general learning strategies. I then compared my initial codes to codes found in previous literature to see how my codes compared and to gauge the specificity of outside codes (Burnett & Myers, 2002; Perry & Homan, 2014). I then continued to code all participants' literacy practices. After coding, I reviewed all the initial codes to determine if there were similarities. During this process, I collapsed four initial codes into broader, focused codes. For instance, the original codes "learning process," "critical analysis," and "school preparation" were all collapsed into the code "learning" because they showed how the participant learned and used that learning. I collapsed the codes of "self-improvement" and "cultural retention" into a new, broader category of "identity" because both of the original codes were ways the participant used literacy practices to be herself. These new, focused codes also allowed me to compare across participants. I identified nine themes: Application of Learning, Verbal Interaction, Entertainment, Goal-Achievement, Identity, Learning, Organization, Reflection, and School Objective. The descriptions of the final, focused codes can be found in Table 3.4.

**Table 4**

*Secondary Coding of Literacy Practices*

<b>Interview Excerpt</b>	<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Focused Code</b>	<b>Code Definition</b>
<p>"With articles though, I remember learning in your class about being credible, the CRAP test. Whenever I read them, "Is this credible though?" <i>Nachia, Interview 1</i></p>	<p>Application of Learning</p>	<p>Application of Learning</p>	<p>Specific reference to previously learned literacy skill used in a new context.</p>

Table 4 continued

<p>“Probably like 99% of the time we’re writing English, but there’s still a few of the girls that they would write in Hmong.” <i>Amelia, Interview 2</i></p>	Communication	Verbal Interaction	Literacy used as a way to interact with one or more people.
<p>“But when I do have time, I will grab – I will go to Walmart or go to Barnes &amp; Noble and grab a book.” <i>Kate, Interview 1</i></p>	Entertainment	Entertainment	Literacy used for personal enjoyment.
<p>“I get sometimes I didn’t know I would ask for help and that’s how I improved myself.” <i>Kate, Interview 2</i></p>	Goal Achievement	Goal Achievement	Literacy used as a way to achieve a goal.
<p>“Not just journaling but I love to read the Bible. It really helps me on my spiritual walk.” <i>Nachia, Interview 1</i></p>	Self-Improvement	Identity	Literacy used as a way to affirm personal interests and culture.
<p>“It makes me feel upset about myself, but I’m always trying to improve myself all the time with the Hmong language.” <i>Nachia, Interview 1</i></p>	Cultural Retention	Identity	
<p>“That I actually took my time to read through a lot of articles and to find the legit ones, not just the opinionated one.” <i>Kate, Interview 4</i></p>	Critical Analysis	Learning	Literacy used in a generalized way to learn for the first time or continue to learn.
<p>“Also my writing could be good, but if I have another person who reads it or helps me with it then it becomes a better thing.” <i>Nachia, Interview 5</i></p>	Process	Learning	

Table 4 continued

<p>“She taught me to write my name and along with that I started learning how to write in Kindergarten.” <i>Nachia, Interview 3</i></p>	School Preparation	Learning	
<p>“We lived in a household where there was a lot of my aunties and uncles that lived with us too. When I needed help, I had them all to help me.” <i>Amelia, Interview 2</i></p>	Learning	Learning	
<p>“I like to start my day off with a to-do list just so I know what I need to get done for that day.” <i>Nachia, Interview 2</i></p>	Organization	Organization	Literacy used as a way to keep track of one’s life and/or activities.
<p>“I guess throughout my whole school, high school to now. I would have to get print, go google it, just making sure I’m pronouncing correctly.” <i>Amelia, Interview 3</i></p>	Reflection	Reflection	Participant reflects on changes to her literacy practices or compares two or more academic experiences.
<p>“Then I’ve been reading my Humanities, my bought online book, so I’ve been reading it but it’s kind of hard to read it because it’s online.” <i>Kate, Interview #3</i></p>	School Objective	School Objective	Literacy used to complete a specific academic assignment.

After I completed the secondary coding, I divided literacy events into the piles of school events and home events. Then within those piles, I arranged events by past, present, or future, in order to make sense of the participants’ live chronologically. I also

divided the literacy practices into piles based on their focused code. In this way I saw which practices were most dominant. With the data organized, I began my analysis.

### **Analysis**

Using these layers of coding, I first conducted a “within-case” analysis (Creswell, 2013). In each analysis I looked for discrepancies, patterns of behavior, and key themes from the participant. I reviewed each participant’s codes, first counting the number of instances found in each category. Then within each category I looked for repetitions and practices that spanned different periods of the participant’s life, both of which created a pattern. I also looked for explicitly stated attitudes and feelings about these practices, which gave me insight into the value the participants put on their practices. Finally, I reread the pieces of text marked as literacy events to find exemplars of each literacy practice. I also looked for places where participants’ literacy events did not match their stated literacy practices; this indicated places of tension within the participants’ story. Finally, I compared the literacy practices to Yosso’s (2005) components of cultural wealth. For example, Nachia was able to use her linguistic capital to interact and tutor other Hmong students at Midwestern Community College. Through these tutoring interactions, Nachia created a connection to the campus, a trait known to aid persistence (Tinto, 1975). I was then able to see how these literacy practices added to the participants’ cultural wealth, which may have helped lead them to success.

After completing the individual analyses, I sent each participant a copy of the findings so she could review my analysis and we could discuss discrepancies between my analysis and her understanding of her practices. One participant responded concerned that one aspect of her literacy practices did not reflect her thoughts on that practice. We met

to discuss how she saw herself and how I conducted the analysis and came to my conclusions. Through our discussion we agreed to the original analysis, but together reworded several sentences to better represent the participant's view of herself.

After each participant's data were analyzed, I conducted a cross case analysis in which I looked for recurring themes throughout the three cases. In the cross case analysis, I first compared the literacy practices most dominant in participants' academic success. When overlapping literacy practices occurred, I read through each participants' findings to compare and contrast literacy events, attitudes, and skills. For the literacy practices that did not appear in another participants' practices, I looked for how a participant may have substituted a different literacy practice or why other participants may have not found that literacy practice useful. These cross case interpretations are presented in chapter seven.

### **Design Limitations**

One limitation to the design of this study was the short time period. One of the tenets of qualitative research is spending time in the field (Creswell, 2013). Extended periods of time allow for researchers to establish access, gain rapport, and collect thorough data. Though the time period for this study was only six weeks, I already knew and had a rapport developed with the participants. Six weeks proved to be enough time for participants to photograph repeated literacy events. However, a longer time period may have gained insight to literacy events and practices that occur rarely or at different times during an academic semester.

Additionally, there are critiques of using participant-taken photographs. One critique is that though participants take the photographs, researchers generate the interpretations (Moss, 2001). However, in this study participants were asked to interpret

their photographs, by describing the photographs in detail during interviews. Each interview the participant shared photographs on her phone and told me about the event taking place. As the researcher I did not need to guess what was happening or why it was happening and if I was confused or wanted additional information I was able to ask immediately. With participants in charge of the photographs, they were able to lead this part of the research both in conversation and in choosing what to photograph.

A second critique of using participant-taken photographs is that participants may search for images they thought the researcher wanted (Holmes, 1998). This study sought to avoid this limitation through the initial discussion of the definition of literacy during which I told participants if they were unsure if an event “counted” as literacy, they should take the photograph anyway and it could be discussed during the next interview. During interviews, when participants indicated they were unsure if an event was “literacy,” I first asked why they thought it might be considered a literacy event. With this prompt, participants discussed their thought process and any unseen context. In all cases, the participants and I agreed their photographs constituted literacy events.

An additional limitation to the study is the prior relationship I had with the participants. Though the relationship was helpful in allowing the participants and I to have the opportunity for openness, I may have still represented an instructor to these women. Thus, when taking photographs and answering interview questions, the participants may have changed their answers, knowingly or unknowingly, to answers they thought I wanted to hear. This phenomenon, called social desirability bias, is the penchant of participants to project favorable images of themselves (Johnson & Van De Vijver, 2003). In collectivist societies, like the Hmong community, social desirability



also encompasses the need to preserve positive relationships. Because the participants may have agreed, in part, to participate in this study as a courtesy to me, their answers may have been altered in order to “help” me or to maintain our prior relationship.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

In qualitative inquiry, it is important that the researcher(s) begins with a reconstruction of their own narrative, in this case, my literacy upbringing, in order to recognize any tensions between my knowledge of literacy and those of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My self-reflection brought to light my own privileges and the ways I used to view my students through a deficit lens. This self-reflection allowed me to be human, not a “perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62).

As a White woman, I come from and continue to live in a world of privilege. Part of my privilege came in the form of my K-12 education and my parents’ ideals surrounding education. As a child, I was surrounded by books. I read to myself. I read to others. My mom read to me before bed. I found comfort in books and they, in turn, led me to my greatest skill: being a student. My parents were strict about school in the sense that it was always my first job. School came before fun, before extracurricular activities, before chores or part-time jobs. I was expected to earn good grades and get into a “good” college. College was not an ideal goal; it was an expectation. I was never the smartest kid in the room, nor did I receive straight A’s, but I managed my schoolwork with ease, graduating high school and college without a problem. Looking through Gee’s (2008) lens of Discourse, it is clear that my home Discourse closely echoed what was privileged in school and what eventually became my academic Discourse.

After graduating from an undergraduate program, I taught middle school language arts, and after obtaining my master's degree in reading, I taught sixth-grade reading. I eventually moved to teaching reading in a community college, my current position. Though I had worked with sets of diverse students before, I was ill-prepared to work with college students so unlike myself - students who couldn't or didn't want to put college first, students whose parents didn't read to them – or possibly didn't speak English or even live in this country, students who have barely read a book in their entire lives. From this point on, I have continually rethought and renegotiated how I viewed my students, what it meant to be literate and what it took for students to achieve academic success. During this time, I became more interested in my students' backgrounds, particularly those who grew up without the privileges I grew up with. This curiosity led to deeper conversations with my Hmong students and was the basis for this study.

### **Trustworthiness**

One need in qualitative research is the maintenance of trustworthiness. The three main components of trustworthiness are dependability, credibility, and confirmability (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). Dependability in qualitative research concerns the logic of the inquiry process or how the research is conducted. In order to create dependability and meet the rigors of qualitative research, I conducted the research according to the case study norms of studying individual bounded cases, creating rich, thick description, and positioning myself as a researcher (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). A key aspect of narrative methods is the relationship between the researcher and participants. In a sense, participants became co-researchers, as researcher and each participant worked together to determine the meaning of the stories (Creswell, 2013).

A second source of trustworthiness is credibility (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). Credibility means that the final interpretations are believable to the participants. To ensure credibility, participants were asked to member-check their data at multiple points. First, participants were given transcripts of every interview to review. They were able to make changes or add information to ensure they were telling their whole story. Second, in an effort to honor these stories and allow the participants to be the expert, initial analyses were sent to each participant via email (Moll, et al., 1992). Participants were offered a chance to respond via email or in person to discuss any concerns they had.

Finally, confirmability shows the train of thought of the researcher from data collection to data analysis to conclusions and implications (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). This chapter documents the first steps of my process, data collection, and data analysis. Additionally, during data analysis, I also established interrater reliability by comparing my coding with Dr. Dyches and Dr. Helman multiple times. The following chapters will describe my findings and how they connect to my final implications and conclusions. By fully documenting each step of my process, readers can follow the progression of from data collection to data analysis to findings and conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative case study sought to understand the literacy events and practices of Hmong women. Participants were three women, self-identified as Hmong or Hmong-American, who all began higher education at a community college in the Midwestern United States. Data were collected through participant interviews and photographs of their daily literacy events.

Data analysis included two cycles. The first round of deductive coding identified literacy events and literacy practices. Then these two sets of data were coded for a second time. Literacy events were coded using the three narrative themes of situation, interaction, and continuity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Literacy practices were coded using inductive reasoning to ascertain the purpose of the literacy practice. Secondary codes were then used for both within-case and cross-case analyses. Efforts to ensure trustworthiness included multiple member checks, during both data collection and analysis, and write-up.

Chapters four, five, and six describe Nachia's, Kate's, and Amelia's cases individually. I first present literacy events as examples of participant's larger literacy practices. Then, I explain the participants' literacy practices and then connect these practices to their academic success. Finally, chapter seven compares the three individual cases and offers implications for culturally responsive instruction at the community college level.

**CHAPTER 4****NACHIA**

Nachia entered the coffee shop for our first interview, gave me a hug, set her school bag on the floor, and sat down. “So. How is school?” she asked, giving me her “tell me the truth” eye. In a reversal from our former roles – where I’m the one the cheering her on – she (politely) demanded to know everything before I could get a word in edgewise.

Nachia is the fifth and last child in her family. She referred to herself often as the baby of the family and seemed to hold a special place in everyone’s heart, as she was often mothered by several of her older siblings. Nachia was the only child born in the United States, her parents having emigrated from Thailand in the 1990s. Her oldest sister still lives in Thailand, but the rest of her siblings live nearby. Nachia lived with her mother, her older sister Mai Vang, her brother Blong, and her nephew, David (all family members’ names are pseudonyms chosen by the participant). She described herself first and foremost as a Christian. She was an avid reader of the Bible and wrote almost daily in her journal.

Nachia is bilingual, speaking both Hmong and English, a point of pride for her. Though she did not identify herself as fluent in Hmong, she has made concerted efforts to keep learning. During her time at the community college, she took a Hmong class to refresh her skills and currently she reads the Bible in Hmong and tries to talk with her nephew in Hmong so he can learn too. Nachia and her family speak “White Hmong” (Hmong Der dialect) which approximately 60% of Hmong-Americans speak (Center for

Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008). The remaining 40% of Hmong-Americans speak “Green Hmong” (Hmong Leng dialect). Nachia described the difference in dialects like “the difference between Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese.” Though neither language is considered “official,” White Hmong is more closely associated with education (CDC, 2008). In Laos, most Hmong dictionaries are written in White Hmong and the Hmong alphabet resembles the White Hmong pronunciation. Nachia speaks mostly English with her Hmong friends, but she noted it was important for her know how to speak Hmong to the elders in her church and the Hmong village – a sort of community flea market in the city.

I first met Nachia three years ago when she was a student in my developmental reading course at a local community college. She was a quiet student and a hard worker, asking questions until she got it right. In 2016, she graduated from Midwest Community College (pseudonym) with an Associate of Arts (AA) degree and immediately transferred to a nearby state university. There, she is majoring in Communications and hopes to complete her bachelor’s degree in 2018. During her time at Midwest Community College, Nachia worked as a peer-tutor. I often referred my students to her, and through this collaboration, we formed a mentor-mentee relationship. We kept in touch since she transferred to a four-year university, often chatting about our respective schooling. I asked Nachia to participate in this study not only because I knew she would have much to offer, but also as a transfer student, she met two mainstream measures of success in the community college – graduating with an AA degree and transferring to a four-year university.

## **Background**

Nachia grew up in a bustling household, full of English and Hmong both in oral language and in print. Nachia's brothers and sisters spoke primarily English to Nachia; her parents, though, used Hmong, as they understood little English themselves. Nachia's mother told ghost stories and folktales in Hmong, actually carrying a book of folktales from her original home in Laos to the United States, an important cultural heirloom as folktales represented the stories passed down from past generations. In addition to Hmong materials, like a dictionary, cassette tapes, and documentaries, Nachia said there were also a lot of kids' books around from her older siblings. In particular, her older sister PaNras enjoyed buying books for Nachia "because at that time she treated me like her own daughter."

PaNras was not the only sibling to take an interest in Nachia's education. Her older sister Mai Vang, closest in age to Nachia, took it upon herself to prepare Nachia for school. Mai Vang told Nachia often that she did not want Nachia to struggle in school or to be stuck in English Language Learner (ELL) classes as she was. Mai Vang continued to be a resource for Nachia's education from teaching her how to make an outline in high school to being a proofreader and editor for Nachia's college work. Nachia extended this familial teaching cycle herself, by helping PaNras' son David with his schoolwork.

### **Nachia's Literacy Events and Practices**

Literacy events, or observable activities surrounding a text, are the building blocks of literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). For example, Nachia showed me a photograph of a textbook. She described skimming through the textbook to find answers for a take-home test. As this is a singular event that was photographable, it was

considered a literacy event. Literacy practices are broader constructs that encompass literacy events, but also include values, attitudes, feelings, relationships, patterns of behavior, and power structures. For instance, if Nachia had continued her description of the photograph but added that skimming was a regular practice and she liked using that strategy because it saved her time, it would now be considered a literacy practice because she was describing a pattern of behavior and the value associated with the event.

In order to answer my research question, what literacy events and practices position Hmong students to meet mainstream markers of academic success in community college setting, I first coded all the data for literacy events and literacy practices. During the coding process, some chunks of text received codes of both a literacy event and a literacy practice. This usually happened when Nachia turned from telling me about a specific event to reflecting on the event. From Nachia's literacy events, I was then able to draw conclusions about her literacy practices, which were corroborated with her own statements on additional events or her attitudes, feelings, and patterns of behavior. These data showed that Nachia's primary literacy practices are those that (a) affirm her identity, (b) support her generalized learning, and (c) help her complete specific school objectives. Though Nachia used other literacy practices during the study, these three practices were most prominent and closely related to her academic success.

The following sections will begin with two examples of Nachia's literacy events, either photographs or assignments she shared or specific stories she told about one event. Because literacy events are basis of literacy practices, I then used these literacy event examples to describe the broader context of Nachia's literacy practices. Finally, I discuss



how these literacy events and practices have helped lead Nachia to success, or in this case graduation from Midwestern Community College.

### **Literacy to Affirm Identity**

Many of Nachia's photographs focused on her faith. The following literacy events are demonstrations of Nachia using her literacy practices as a way to affirm her identity. The frequency and repetition of these photographs in addition to the interview data indicated the value Nachia associated with her identity-based literacy practices.

**First literacy event: Nachia's Bible.** During our second interview, Nachia shared a photograph of her Bible. It showed one page, highlighted, underlined, and annotated along the side. These text-markings were signs that she interacted with the text as she read. She explained that her markings showed which verses were important to remember or which ones she wanted to return to in the future. There was no difference between what was highlighted and underlined, though she commented that bracketed passages were of extreme importance. Her notes along the side were pulled from the marked text, often repeating a phrase or verse. Though she only shared her Bible in one photograph, several photographs throughout the study showed her daily devotions, bible verses or prayers from an app on her phone.

**Second literacy event: Nachia's journal.** A second photograph Nachia shared was of her journal. She described writing about troubles she had with her boyfriend and how she attempted to figure out where God wanted the relationship to head. In describing this particular entry, she commented on how she felt better after writing it and that her "day can be completed" now that her thoughts were down on paper. The photograph also showed a post-it note affixed to the journal page. When asked about its significance,

Nachia answered that it was a reminder to her that no matter her frustrations God would be there for her. This photograph was the only journal entry she shared with me, though two additional times she shared a sort of spiritual workbook called *Love, Dare* where she would read, reflect, and write on the passages and the actions she was supposed to take that day.

**Practice of identity.** Nachia used her literacy most often as a way to affirm her identity, both as a Christian and a Hmong woman. Many of her daily literacy events were personal activities she completed by herself, for her own purposes. For instance, most of her daily reading and writing revolved around her spiritual life. She used a phone application to read daily devotions and often spent time reading the Bible. Nachia explained how her spiritual reading was something she did daily, creating a pattern of behavior (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). She also drew connections between her thoughts and her actions, which created a fuller Discourse of what it meant for her to be a Christian (Gee, 2008). This literacy practice was also clearly valued because as Nachia explained, this was one of the first things she did each morning, “I don't want to be giving God my leftovers just because- why would you give God your leftovers?” In addition, Nachia indicated that she drew strength from her readings, an emotional connection she made with both her reading and writing.

Journaling about God and her life was another common occurrence for Nachia. She explained, “When you talk to yourself about it, it's not as satisfying as you write it out. Because when you write it out, you're expressing it to someone else.” Though she did not share her journals with others, she talked about rereading her previous journals as a source of intrinsic motivation. She said, “I read my journal and I understand that...if He

was able to help me through that smaller circumstance, I can overcome this big circumstance. It's definitely a reminder for me." Nachia did not indicate a specific "circumstance," so this practice of using her writing as a motivator was one way her faith permeated all aspects of her life.

Nachia's faith was also socially situated, a key component of literacy practices, as she attended a Hmong parish church with her family (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Additionally, Nachia used faith-based literacy events to strengthen her relationships and to refine her own Discourse associated with being a Christian (Gee, 2008). She mentioned that she and her boyfriend Ian occasionally conducted small Bible studies, where they picked a verse to read on their own, and then came together to talk and reflect on it. She was also the co-leader of her church's youth group. As one of the leaders, Nachia often chose passages for the group to read and discuss; in addition she brought additional references to the group to create a larger context for the reading and to encourage the group to "dig deep."

Nachia also used her faith, and the surrounding literacy practices, as a way to support her identity as a Hmong woman, having learned to read and write in Hmong through the church. First, as a child, she matched the words to the hymns her congregation sang to the Hmong words on the projection screen in the church. Then as a leader in her church's ministry, Nachia's ability to write in Hmong grew as she created the slides to be projected to the congregation. Though she was no longer in charge of the projections, Nachia intermittently read the Bible in Hmong as a way to strengthen her Hmong language skills. The social practice of going to church and interacting with others

in her congregation also reminded Nachia of cultural customs, like respecting elders by speaking to and around them in Hmong.

Part of Nachia's drive to continue speaking and improving her Hmong was her connection with her now deceased father. She rued her need to occasionally speak in "Hmong-lish," or a combination of Hmong and English, to her mother. She thought her father would "be ashamed" of her for this habit and resolved to improve her Hmong in order to make her father proud. In this way, and as asserted by Gee (2008), Nachia recognized that her primary Discourse, or the Discourse she was born into, as a member of the Hmong community reshaped as she aged and gradually lost her Hmong fluency. Yet, when asked which language she most associated with herself, Nachia said Hmong without hesitation. Because one's primary Discourse is so ingrained and immune to criticism, it appeared that Nachia was still negotiating what it meant for her to be a Hmong-American woman (Gee, 2008). Possibly, as part of this internal conflict, Nachia was often frustrated and shocked when other Hmong-Americans of her generation did not speak in Hmong. She said,

To me, it's like, "How can you say you're Hmong when you don't speak it, or write it or think it that way and you see yourself so American?"

If I see myself as a Hmong woman, I need to practice it. I need to think about the words; I need to think about what I should say or think about, just reading the text in Hmong.

As an adult Nachia began to notice how her Hmong language was closely tied to her identity and the Discourse she has associated with being Hmong (Gee, 2008). She discussed her childhood attitude of not caring if she knew how to speak Hmong or not, thinking her ability to speak Hmong did not matter to her life in the United States. However, she now grasped how the language may "die" without continued usage,

something her parents warned her of as a child. This continued decline of the Hmong language and its potential extinction in the United States may also explain Nachia's frustration with those of her age who cannot speak Hmong. Here again, Nachia was re-negotiating her primary Discourse or "what it means to be Hmong." Interestingly, though Nachia talked repeatedly about using and improving her Hmong language, none of the literacy events she photographed showed her using Hmong.

### **Literacy to Learn**

Starting from a young age, Nachia's family infused literacy and learning into their everyday activities. This may have set into motion Nachia's propensity to use her literacy for learning. The following events show specific examples of Nachia continuing to learn through her literacy.

**First literacy event: Watching Netflix.** One photograph of literacy Nachia shared was of her family, sitting around the TV, watching the movie *Ip Man*, a Chinese film. Nachia, her mother, her sister Youa, her brother Blong, and her nephew David watched the movie together, with English subtitles scrolling on the bottom. By including David, Nachia's nephew, this practice may position him to start learning from his every day literacies as well.

**Second literacy event: Global bazaar handout.** During our fifth interview, Nachia was excited to share her photograph from an event her university was hosting, a Global Bazaar. The pamphlet-sized handout showed the different ethnicities represented at the Bazaar, along with a recipe of the food each booth gave out. She told me about the food and said, she remembered thinking, "I definitely will take this picture for future reference if I ever want to make anything like that." This was a perfect example of how

Nachia often went into a situation without thinking about how she might learn and leaves with new knowledge.

**Practice of learning.** Nachia looked to learn from almost every interaction she had with literacy, whether or not she consciously realized it. During our interviews, she told me several times that she was “not a reader,” and mentioned her slow processing time as a hindrance. However, during our first interview, when asked what she read on a daily basis, Nachia listed several materials. Specifically she mentioned her spiritual materials as discussed above and informational articles. However, unless she was describing one of her photographs, Nachia never talked about this kind of reading. Somewhere along the line, Nachia seemed to have equated reading with reading fictional novels and since she did not like to read fictional novels, she discounted everything that she did read.

This association could have stemmed from the early learning at her home. As previously stated, Nachia’s older sister Mai Vang read books like Dr. Seuss to her frequently, pretending to be a teacher. Nachia talked about how these interactions helped her learn English prior to entering kindergarten. Mai Vang was not the only one encouraging Nachia’s education. Nachia’s mother, though unable to read herself, often told Nachia “you’ve got to read!”

Her mother’s encouragements may have helped associate reading with fictional books, but it also encouraged an environment of learning (Gee, 2008). Nachia also recalled her mother teaching Nachia to write her ABCs and her name. Her mother often told Nachia the importance of putting her name on assignments, so the teachers did not throw them out. When questioned about her mother’s knowledge of the English alphabet,

Nachia reflected, “It’s crazy how she doesn’t know how to write but she knows how to write the ABCs, which is awesome.” Even though Nachia’s mother could not access this second language English, she recognized the importance and value of her daughter acquiring the dominant language (Gee, 2008).

Another way Nachia’s parents added to the family’s literacy learning environment was by infusing literacy into their entertainment. Nachia talked about how her family watched movies with the subtitles on. She recalled this helping her learn to read and spell, saying she was able to match the words said orally to the word on the screen, then remembered the word “in chunks” to later spell it. As discussed earlier, Nachia used that same strategy to help improve her Hmong language acquisition during church services, showing a way that her primary Discourse had traversed into her faith Discourse (Gee, 2008).

During the study, when Nachia read, it was usually an informational text and she was almost always looking for an answer, a common use of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In our first interview, Nachia discussed reading articles online. Sometimes she looked up the articles herself, sometimes she found them on Facebook, and sometimes she received them from her siblings. One thing that Nachia was wary about was the credibility of any article that she read,

With articles though, I remember learning in your class about being credible, the CRAP test. Whenever I read them, is this credible though? There are some things where my sister sends, and I’m like “This doesn’t really look credible. I don’t really trust that.” I could read it because its good for you, but if it’s not credible and if I looked it up, says it’s not true then I’m not going to keep that information in my head.

She used this critical eye throughout much of her online reading. For instance, Nachia showed a photograph of research she was doing on Ford trucks. In a conversation with

her boyfriend over new cars, she decided she did not know enough about the car, so she went online to learn more. Nachia also shared a picture of a cake recipe she found on the website Pinterest, specifically noting that she read through several comments before deciding it was something she could make. Together, these examples show a pattern of Nachia using her literacy to learn (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). When questioned about her use of literacy in this way, she processed this information out loud saying, “I always think about, well, why don’t I like to read?” But, as she continued, Nachia seemed more confident and finally answered, “Yeah...I only read if it’s purposeful” possibly adding a new dimension to how she viewed and defined her literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

### **Literacy to Meet School Objectives**

As part of the Interview Protocol, I asked each participant to share an assignment from her K-12 schooling and an assignment from her college career. Nachia’s two assignments not only showed how she completed school objectives, but also how important Nachia’s family has been to her education.

**First literacy event: High school speech assignment.** Nachia chose to share a “How To” speech she made during her 12<sup>th</sup> grade year. For this assignment, Nachia needed to create an outline and then make a speech teaching her classmates a skill. She chose to present “How to Make a Cherry Bow.” Right away, Nachia described how she needed Mai Vang’s help to complete the assignment, first by helping her pick a topic. Then after Nachia started making notes about the process, Mai Vang stepped in and taught Nachia how to make an outline. Mai Vang then practiced the bow-making technique with Nachia until Nachia felt comfortable on her own. Nachia practiced her



speech while Mai Vang coached her on skills like making eye contact. The final speech went smoothly and Nachia said she was surprised when she received an A on the assignment.

**Second literacy event: College family interview assignment.** Unlike her high school assignment, which just happened to be an assignment that “popped up,” Nachia was very excited to share an assignment from her favorite class of the semester, Family Communication. For this assignment, Nachia had to create four or five questions, based on readings, to ask a member of her family. Then after the interview, she wrote a one to two page reflection on the process. Nachia quickly noted that the assignment was easy, in part because she was interested in talking with her family. Again, Nachia leaned on Mai Vang for help, this time asking her to be interviewed. Nachia completed the assignment quickly, but talked in detail about how she loved seeing her family from Mai Vang’s perspective and how it differed from her own.

**Practice of school.** As can be expected of a college student, Nachia also used literacy frequently to meet school objectives. She regularly completed her work, but added, “It’s always easier when I’m interested in it.” As far back as kindergarten Nachia favored writing over reading. She was disappointed when she missed writing time in class while she was in her English Language Learner (ELL) class. When she returned from her ELL class and saw her classmates writing she said, “I always felt like I was behind with it. When I go home I would always train myself. You know, when you trace a line.” Not getting the instruction she wanted in class, Nachia taught herself, demonstrating an overlap of literacy practices, those to meet a school objective and those of learning for her own knowledge (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

As for reading, Nachia recalled checking out story books at the school library as an elementary school student. She explained “everybody would check out one, but I would check out two.” Despite her seeming interest in reading, once the books were home she never took them out of her backpack. She explained,

I never really had an interest in it. I wouldn’t say that I love reading [now], but when I was a kid, I would say “I love reading.” But I never really pick up a book, so I don’t really love reading.”

These events, checking out the “maximum” number of books, not reading them, and declaring her love of reading, are contradictory. It appeared that on some level, Nachia recognized the value her school placed on the literacy practice of reading stories for pleasure, one found in dominant cultures and reinforced at schools (Gee, 2008). She may have even begun to see the disconnect between her practices and the school’s values. She wanted to *look* like a good student at school by checking out two books and saying “I love reading,” yet, she never followed through at home (Gee, 2008). Though she regretted these decisions now, Nachia still pushed against reading novels throughout high school and college.

While she enjoyed reading the book *13 Reasons Why* for Health class, Nachia groaned recalling the book *1984*. On one hand, it appeared that Nachia thought she was supposed to like this book, at first calling it interesting. However, as she continued talking her real opinions started to come out as she called the book “confusing” and eventually admitting, “it was boring and it was long. Dreadful.” This pattern continued as she discussed reading novels in college, specifically the book *Outcasts United*. Again, she first called it interesting, before she confessed that the book was “boring” and “not in my interests.”

Nachia's writing, though, continued to be a point of pride in her school work. She spoke about a paper she wrote on *Macbeth*, and said, "I nailed it really well and I'm like, 'This is my first time getting an A on a paper and I'm very proud of myself.'" This success may have been a catalyst for Nachia; she continued to feel confident in writing and much preferred it to reading.

Though she has at times been reluctant in her school work, Nachia recognized the importance of learning during her first year of community college.

I ended up learning a lot from my first year there even though it was like the lowest of the lowest class. It was very interesting. Although it's learning all over again it's pretty cool. Like they all say, you've got to empty your cup. It's kind of like you go into that class, you don't want to go into a class knowing that I know more than what the teacher can teach me. I went into the class expecting I'm going to learn something today and although I didn't like it, I learned a lot.

This reluctant acceptance stayed with Nachia throughout her college career. She may not have enjoyed this type of literacy – like she did those literacies where she could direct her own learning or those that affirmed her identity – but she knew this was important to her academic achievement. In a way, this was how Nachia acquiesced to the dominant Discourse found in schools (Gee, 2008). She took away learning where she could, a practice she enjoyed as discussed above, but Nachia could be disinclined to imitate the structures set forth by schools that may not match her personal Discourses and practices.

### **Discussion**

Nachia's literacy events and practices were deeply situated within her social life and her Hmong culture (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008). Early on, Nachia recognized what literacy practices were valued in school. Though she did not always value those practices herself, for instance reading novels for enjoyment, she used the practices she was most comfortable with to her advantage, like writing for school

objectives. Nachia's writing may have been an access point to a curriculum otherwise unreflective of her (Dyches, 2017). Then, because she could negotiate these Discourses, Nachia was able to move between situations and places in her life and adapted her skills accordingly (Gee, 2008). This adaptability was likely one of the most prominent aspects of Nachia's success.

Nachia's literacy events and practices around affirming her identity, learning, and meeting school objectives have helped her achieve success at the community college in several ways. First, though Nachia's literacy practices around affirming her identity do not directly relate to her coursework, these practices may have eased her academic stress (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, & Lewis-Coles, 2006). One of Nachia's greatest assets was her motivation. She derived much of her daily motivation and resiliency through her religious texts and writings. Several times throughout the study Nachia shared photographs of her devotions, Bible, and journal expressing the importance of her time spent with these texts. She discussed "leaving it in God's hands" and knowing that if He had helped her through previous hardships, He would be there again. Therefore, as Nachia faced difficulties whether academic or social, she felt bolstered by her connection with God.

Previous research demonstrated that intrinsic motivation was one of the key factors in successfully completing a higher degree (Martin et al., 2014; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010). Nachia's motivation, derived from her Christianity, was also part of her navigational and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital relies on resiliency in the face of real and perceived barriers; Nachia faced these barriers through the lens of her faith. Her faith, then, allowed her to be resilient which led to her

continued aspirations (Constantine, et al., 2006). Nachia was able to envision what it would take to complete her bachelor's degree and even spoke about the possibility of graduate school. These aspirations, set in motion through her faith and family, allowed her to set her goals high and potentially achieve feats no one else in her family has.

Nachia's present use of literacy for learning stems from a culture of learning in her home. From a young age, her mother and sisters tutored Nachia in school-like activities before Nachia began kindergarten. Nachia's mother also worked to prepare Nachia for school. Like other Hmong parents, Nachia's mother thought it was her duty to introduce Nachia to basic concepts like the alphabet and writing her name (Xiong & Lee, 2005). These literacy events may have set Nachia on her path to seek out new learning on her own. Her siblings also took it upon themselves to teach Nachia English so she would not be behind in school. As Nachia continued her schooling, her sister Mai Vang continued to be a source of help both as an ad-hoc teacher and a sounding board. Similar to prior studies, Nachia's siblings played a big role in helping her acculturate to the educational system (Jarrett, et al., 2015; Kibler et al., 2016; Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016).

Her family's support helped build Nachia's familial capital (Yosso, 2005). In addition to the modeling her siblings did, Nachia grew up in a family with religious and cultural norms, which has allowed Nachia to connect to a larger Hmong spiritual community. She has attended the same church since first grade and had many friends among the congregation who also attended college. During our first interview, she mentioned that she had even discussed graduate school with her pastor. Support systems including family members, peers, and mentors have often been connected with success in

higher education and success for Hmong students in particular (Crisp et al., 2015; Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Another aspect of familial capital is the connectedness to both living and deceased relatives (Yosso, 2005). Nachia's literacy practices connected her with her immediate family daily whether it was through schoolwork or church. But, also, Nachia connected her Hmong language practices to her deceased father. She felt it was important to honor him and his memory by continuing to speak Hmong. However, despite this assertion, Nachia never displayed her Hmong in any photographs she took of her literacy events. This contradiction may point to Nachia's wider socialization. Hmong populations tend to live in homogenous communities (Grigoleit, 2006). Through her time at Midwestern Community College and at the state university, Nachia continued to have more experiences outside of the community than she did within and so had less and less reason to use her Hmong. She discussed not speaking Hmong with her friends, but also noted that many of her friends are also Hmong women who are unmarried and in college, so their experiences likely reflected Nachia's.

However, Nachia's Hmong, as little or as often as she used it, added to her linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Nachia insisted she was not fluent and spoke Hmong "with an accent." Though her statement about needing to use Hmong-lish with her mother supported this notion, Nachia also told of times she readily communicated in Hmong. For instance, as a tutor she helped other Hmong students by describing assignments and expectations in Hmong. It may be that Nachia's self-assessment of her Hmong differs within the context, a common tenet of situated literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). With her mother, who almost exclusively speaks Hmong, Nachia felt

her Hmong was deficient; with community college students who spoke in a mixture of Hmong, English, and Hmong-lish, Nachia felt her Hmong was adequate and good enough to be helpful. Though Nachia's tutoring and use of Hmong at Midwestern Community College did not directly affect her schoolwork, it provided her a connection to campus, a characteristic found in many successful students (Tinto, 1975; Tovar, 2015).

Linguistic capital not only encompassed Nachia's bilingualism, but also her ability to communicate in a variety of forms. Nachia also demonstrated her linguistic capital through the differences in her reading material (Yosso, 2005). She read often from the Bible, as discussed above, but also informational articles she found online. To be able to navigate the differences between a mostly abstract and poetic Bible, and fact-based, informational articles showed the range of Nachia's reading comprehension abilities. Also, Nachia's careful reading of informational material, like looking for credibility factors, may have served her well in college.

### **Conclusion**

During the six weeks I met with Nachia, she shared several literacy events that provided examples to her broader literacy practices. Throughout the interviews, Nachia told stories, shared feelings, and demonstrated patterns of behaviors that built her literacy practices. Nachia's literacy practices helped affirm her identity, supported her general learning, and aided her in completing school objectives. Through these literacy practices, she employed her familial, linguistic, navigational and aspirational capital as ways to help her achieve success at Midwestern Community College.

**CHAPTER 5****KATE**

Kate, 21, juggles being a full-time student with fifteen credits and being her sister's primary babysitter. As such, Kate's time is at a premium and she has to be ready at a moment's notice to watch the kids. She has found time to squeeze in our interviews, and though she's excited to talk, she's all business. I go over the parameters of the study and she nods along like we're back in class and I'm giving her a homework assignment. We finish the interview and she's off, her next task waiting.

Kate is the youngest of six brothers and sisters; the only sibling born in the United States. She grew up in Wisconsin, where her parents immigrated after leaving Laos in the mid-1990s. She described her neighborhood as "White" and "super quiet." She said there was one other Hmong family in the neighborhood when she was young, but they moved. Growing up, Kate's older brothers and sisters cared for her because her mother worked second shift and her father third shift. Currently, Kate lives with her older sister, brother-in-law and their two sons. She is a full-time student and helps babysit her nephews as needed.

English is Kate's first language, having learned from her older siblings. She knows some White Hmong, but finds it difficult to understand and speak. As a middle school student Kate enrolled in a Hmong language class, but still only recognizes a handful of words. Recently Kate has begun to regret that she does not know more Hmong. She is trying to learn from listening and asking for help translating.



I got to know Kate two years ago when she was a student in one of my developmental reading courses. In that class, Kate was the eye in the middle of the storm: calm, collected, and always ready to work. She helped other students when they asked and offered insightful answers to the large group. Kate occasionally stopped by my office or sent an email with a question, but for the most part, she knew what to do and did it. After the semester ended, I would occasionally see Kate in the hallways where she'd always offer a friendly hello and a wave. As a student who has completed a developmental course sequence and subsequently passed freshman English, Kate meets two mainstream markers of success, and she continues to progress toward graduation. I knew Kate's friendly and straight-forward nature would offer a different viewpoint than the other participants.

### **Background**

Raised in a sense by her older brothers and sisters, Kate was always been independent. She remembered enjoying "chapter books," such as the *Magic Tree House* series when she was young. Because her parents did not know English, when Kate did not know a word or was unsure how to pronounce a word, she went to her siblings. She said she "hated it" when she did not know a word, but would work on replacing it with a different word herself, before going to her brothers or sisters. There were not a lot of reading materials around the Kate's house growing up, but the local library was within walking distance, a place Kate often visited with her siblings.

Kate was the third child in her family to attend college. Her older sister, with whom she lived, graduated several years ago and taught at a Hmong charter school. An older brother, the sibling closest to her in age, attended a state school in Wisconsin. Kate

said going to college was her decision, but that her parents encouraged her saying, “if you want to succeed in life, and get a job, and be able to have a good life, then, yes. Go ahead. Go to school.” Kate’s sister supported Kate while she attended school, therefore Kate did not need to work. Kate admitted that she was “very lucky” that the only thing she had to concentrate on was school.

### **Kate’s Literacy Events and Practices**

The transcripts from Kate’s interviews were coded for literacy events and literacy practices, as described previously in chapters three and four. Three of Kate’s literacy practices, achieving goals, interacting verbally, and meeting school objectives, are closely intertwined. Kate’s main purpose for using literacy was to achieve a goal, in particular, to graduate from Midwestern Community College. Though coding only revealed a few specific instances where Kate explicitly used a literacy event to achieve a goal, almost all of Kate’s literacy practices revolved around her earning her degree. The following sections will explain Kate’s literacy events and practices, and then discuss how these literacies helped lead Kate to success.

#### **Literacy for Goal Achievement**

Though only six sections of text were coded as “Goal Achievement” in Kate’s data, when talking to Kate it was clear that her life centered on achieving one goal: earning a degree. This one goal permeated all of Kate’s current literacy practices, including meeting school objectives and interacting verbally.

**First literacy event: Flash cards.** During our last interview, the week before final exams, Kate showed me a picture of flash cards she made for her Popular Music class. She used these flash cards to help her memorize the information she needed to

know for her final. Though it was a lot of work – both creating the flash cards and studying from them – it was one of Kate’s go-to methods for studying. When a friend questioned the time spent on creating the flash cards, she answered “It is so worth it. I get such a good grade from it,” indicating the value she put on this particular event and creating flash cards in general.

**Second literacy event: Online quiz.** An online component of Kate’s Humanities class was weekly quizzes. She explained there were 50 multiple choices questions and a time limit of 40 minutes to answer them. Because of the time limit, Kate said she always needed to study beforehand in order to do well. The picture she shared was of a quiz late in the semester, so Kate was familiar with the format. However, Kate recounted that at the beginning of the semester the time limit for quizzes was 30 minutes. During her first quiz, Kate recalled being frantic and unable to complete the quiz in the allotted time. As a result, Kate spoke to her instructor and the instructor agreed to extend the time. Kate was relieved at this extension saying, “When she added on the extra 10 minutes, I find it very, very helpful, I did so much better.” With the added time, Kate said the quizzes were easier and she was pleased with her scores.

**Practice of goal achievement.** A common thread through Kate’s literacy events was her focus on school and earning good grades. The events above show two specific instances where she worked to do well on exams. However, these events were incremental in Kate’s view and did not amount to much. When asked how she used literacy to help her be successful, she answered, “Well, I’m not successful.” She elaborated, “I think part of it's like I'm not succeeding at anything because I'm not the top of the point where I'm done school yet.” Kate’s self-criticism gave insight to the

importance of the literacy practice she used to achieve her goals (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Kate said this mindset came from her parents, who encouraged college but allowed Kate to make the decision herself. Of her parents, she said,

They're like, 'If you want to go to college? Then go, if you don't then you just don't. It's on you at the end of the day. It's your life.' So I got the mindset that whatever I do, it's my own fault. It's nobody's fault.

With the mindset of personal responsibility, Kate put herself to work at college, reading textbooks, taking notes, studying for exams, and passing courses – all in an effort to achieve her goal of graduation. Kate's internalization of personal responsibility, which stemmed from her parents, could be part of her primary Discourse (Gee, 2008). Because this attitude came from her primary Discourse, the most prominent Discourse one has, it was expectedly found throughout all of Kate's literacies. In addition, she recognized her position as an unmarried Hmong woman, whose only focus was school, was rare. She talked about friends who got married at 18 and had multiple children; friends who said "I wish I could have done what you are doing." Therefore, literacy was not only a means to a goal for herself, but Kate could also be using this literacy practice as a way to achieve for the broader community of Hmong women (Yosso, 2005).

Kate's drive to meet goals and do well started much earlier than college, though. One of the stories Kate told about growing up in Wisconsin was that she lived near a public library that she and her siblings visited often. She said she "loved" going to the library, in part because there was an indoor playground. However, her siblings set conditions on her play time, "My siblings were like you have to read some books before you can go play, so I was like I gotta read and then so I could go and play." At age five or

six, Kate was already using literacy to achieve her goals, as she read books in order to have time at the library playground. This early literacy event may have been the first time Kate received a “reward” for her literacy, a practice that continued throughout Kate’s education (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

During elementary school, this motivation was turned inward as she worked to better herself. Asked about her reading and writing abilities compared to others students her age, Kate said, “I was in-between [on abilities]. I get sometimes I didn't know. I would ask for help and that’s how I improved myself.” In this case, her self-awareness and drive to improve helped Kate overcome any difficulty she was having. In addition, Kate’s competitive side added to this need to reach higher. She said, “I always felt competitive toward others. I have to be better than them because if someone does better than me, I feel stupid or I feel I’m dumb; I’m not good enough.” In some ways, it appeared that Kate adapted a dominant Discourse practice of individualism (Heath, 1983). She used her literacy as a tool to make herself better, not only for herself as she discussed above, but to be better than others, a distinctly different trait than the communalism typically found in the Hmong culture (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Kate’s drive to achieve led to tangible goals as well. She recounted a program during fourth grade where she took a computerized test after each book she read. She said, “I remember I was reading books, and I got all of them correct. Three or four of them in a row. I was so proud of myself. All that reading was worth it.” In this case, Kate reaffirmed her own literacy practice. She read a book and passed a test – meeting a goal she set for herself and because she was successful, it reinforced the idea that literacy was a good way to obtain one’s goals (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

### **Literacy for Verbal Interaction**

Kate frequently used literacy as a means of facilitating verbal interaction. She was active on social media and read daily emails from Midwestern Community College. Kate's interactive literacy events often turned toward practical matters and how to achieve her goal of graduating.

**First literacy event: Dental Assisting program guide.** Midway through the study, Kate showed me a picture of Midwestern Community College's program guide to Dental Assisting. Choosing a major had been a big decision for Kate, one she was still contemplating when our interviews began. With a decision made, Kate met with her counselor where they reviewed her transcripts and the program guide. Having just missed the application deadline, Kate would have to apply in the fall. Though she was disappointed she could not start sooner, Kate shared that now she would not have to take summer classes, because there were only one or two more courses she needed. She planned to register for those classes for the fall semester and with her application, hoped to join the Dental Assisting program during the Spring 2018 semester.

**Second literacy event: Online discussion.** Kate's classes often had strong online components, including discussion boards with classmates. This semester Kate discussed how she needed to add to the discussion board for her Humanities class. For her class, Kate's instructor posted a question or prompt and expected each student to respond. Kate described the guidelines for her posts, including needing to be at least 250 words and using vocabulary words from the textbook. In addition to creating her own post, part of the assignment was to respond to two or three classmates, which Kate enjoyed; she appreciated the feedback from other peers.

**Practice of verbal interaction.** In addition to required interactive exercises, like the online discussion above, Kate also used her verbal interaction literacies to facilitate her way through her classes and Midwestern Community College's norms. As described, one event Kate shared was a discussion she had with her counselor around choosing her major. With the program guide as their guiding text, they were able to talk about Kate's future semesters and how to plan her path to graduation. While this particular interaction went well, Kate had other appointments that left her confused and frustrated.

Kate recalled a literacy event where after dropping a class, the school put her on suspension because her completion rate for the semester dropped below 66%. She described how she talked to her counselor before dropping the class and understood that there would be no repercussions for doing so, as long as her GPA stayed above 2.5. Then, at the end of the semester, Kate received a letter informing her of her suspension. Though students are often unaware of school policies, Kate knew she should check with her counselor before making this decision. Even though the result was less than desirable, Kate accessed the "appropriate" or dominant Discourse practices of being a student. She recognized there may be rules she was unaware of and sought guidance from someone more (supposedly) knowledgeable (Gee, 2008). Luckily, she was able to again wield her interactive practices and linguistic capital, her ability to communicate with different people for different purposes, to appeal this decision (Gee, 2008; Yosso, 2005). As a result, she was not suspended but only put on probation.

Though this encounter could have swayed Kate to mistrust authority figures in the future, Kate continued to use her literacy practices for verbal interaction to her advantage. For instance, she contacted instructors over email and sought conversations in person

regarding assignments and exams. As described earlier, when confronted with a time limit on her Humanities quiz, Kate went and spoke with her instructor about extending the time. This request resulted in the instructor adding ten minutes to the quiz time for the whole class. Additionally, Kate talked about emailing potential instructors to gauge the coursework for a class, a way for her to set up her semester's schedule without overburdening herself. Communicating with people of authority was an important aspect in the dominant student Discourse, and to Kate's credit, one bad experience using this Discourse did not dissuade her from going back to it (Gee, 2008; White & Ali-Khan, 2013).

Outside of her goal to graduate, Kate used text messages to maintain friendships and stay in touch with her mother. More than once Kate discussed the trouble she has with text messages from her mother. Because her mother did not know much English, she wrote her texts to Kate in Hmong. However, Kate could not read Hmong so she copied the words of her mother's texts and put them into Google translate to understand her mother's messages. She was not proud of this habit, "I know, it's so bad," but knew she could not understand the message without the translation. Interestingly, she kept this hidden from her parents. Kate told me about a conversation she overheard, her listening skills in Hmong better than reading skills, "I was at a family reunion and my mom was like, 'Yes, Kate always texts so slow.' Little did she know I used Google translate." Though Kate is not proud of this method, she accepted that she has to use it in order to interact regularly with her mother.

Despite what drove Kate to use Google Translate, Kate's use of the website displayed her adaptability. She again showed self-awareness in what she knew and did



not know and then found a way to make it work. She did this at school as well. After enrolling and subsequently dropping an online course because of the “overwhelming” workload, Kate said that now, before she enrolled in an online course, she would email the instructor to see if she could see a syllabus or a layout of the semester so she could make an informed decision on taking the class.

### **Literacy to Meet School Objectives**

During our five interviews, Kate’s focus was on school. She declared right away that she needed to “push herself” and “not slack” as the end of the semester was nearing, again working toward her goal of graduation. Her photographs often revealed her efforts; the majority showed school assignments. When the photographs were not assignments, they still often revolved around her life at Midwestern Community College.

**First literacy event: Oceanography notes.** During our second interview, Kate shared a picture of her computer screen. On the screen was a Microsoft Word document showing notes from her Oceanography class. She described taking these notes from her instructor’s lecture during class. Before class Kate said that she reviewed the instructor’s PowerPoint slides which were available online. Then when she was in class taking notes, she was able to mentally compare his lecture and PowerPoint. She said she made sure to write down what the instructor said when it was not in his PowerPoint. Kate also discussed listening for verbal cues, such as “Make sure you label these or remember these.” In this way, Kate felt her notes were more complete than if she were just to read from her textbook.

**Second literacy event: Global Studies study guide.** A current assignment Kate shared was the study guide for her Global Studies class. About two pages long, she said

this was a recurring assignment. The assignment outlined a section of her textbook to read and corresponding questions to answer. Kate told me she did not usually read through the whole section assigned, she only looked for the answers to the questions. She commented that the assignment was “pretty easy” but that she enjoyed it because it was straight-forward.

**Practice of school.** Kate was a full-time college student and the number of school-related photographs or literacy events confirmed that to be a primary role in her life. During our first interview Kate commented that she did not have time for personal writing or reading, saying “if I have a free time, I will be, ‘Okay I’m be doing homework.’” In this way, Kate emphasized the importance and value of this literacy practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). She highlighted the value of this practice again when she said she did not study at home. Instead, she went to the library or somewhere else quiet, a place where she could put her full attention on her work.

Kate described learning how to take notes from textbooks in middle school, then advancing her techniques in high school, showing a pattern that has extended through many years and Kate’s different student roles (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Kate also found that taking notes had its benefits, stating what she “loves” about taking notes is sometimes teachers allow you use the notes on exams and quizzes. Her practice was being reinforced here as she received a “reward” for taking notes, similar to when she was in elementary school and was “rewarded” for all her reading.

Kate saw differences in her learning for high school and college though. For instance, when she talked about reading textbooks, Kate said, “You can just skim through it, and you can still pass with a good grade. In high school, when you’re skimming, no, it

doesn't really work that way." Kate felt prepared for college and adapted her literacy practice to be more time efficient (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). She compared herself to her friends in college saying, "They'll read the whole book and everything, from word to word. I'm like, 'I can't do that. I just don't have time.'" It seemed that during high school, Kate equated certain literacy events with doing well in school. However, as she continued to take courses at Midwestern Community College, she adapted those broader skills to better fit her current studies.

As a full-time student, Kate was protective of her study time. She prioritized her assignments by due date and maximized the time she did have by using study strategies, like skimming, to get the general idea of the material. But, Kate realized that she did not always understand the information when she reads quickly, "If I'm skimming and I don't understand something, I will have to re-read it slower to understand it." Though this slows her down, Kate recognized the importance of understanding the material versus just completing the reading.

Kate found in-class notes invaluable. One of the first things Kate did each semester was look at the websites for each of her courses. She said she looks for PowerPoints, study guides, or other aids that may be available. If they were not present Kate knew "I have to take notes during class." When learning aids were present, Kate made her decision based on her instructors' recommendations in class. During different interviews, Kate described taking notes during each of her four classes. However, she took notes differently based on the content and the teacher. For her Humanities course, Kate said she listened to the lecture first, writing down "interesting facts" or points emphasized by her instructor. However, Kate said that this instructor in particular had a

very engaging manner, so she tended to remember lectures even without taking notes. Similar to her Oceanography class, Kate also listened for verbal cues from her Popular Music instructor. She said her notes for this class were particularly important because he did not post any study aides to the class websites. In her note-taking events, Kate was using the context of her classes to help adjust her literacy techniques. Having multiple techniques for note-taking proved to be helpful for Kate, as it has been shown to be for other students (Neal, 2015).

When needed, Kate then supplemented her notes with added notes from the textbook. She said that she did not like highlighting in her books because it was easier to sell them back when they were unmarked, but also because she became very overwhelmed when she purchased used books and they were full of highlighted material. Again, her textbook note-taking differed by class. In her Global Studies course, Kate used a study guide given out by the instructor, as described above. In this instance, she could skim through the textbook looking for answers. Once she had the answers written, she could study from the guide. For Humanities, Kate's instructor told the class to focus on the bold or italicized words and "whatever we go through in class." When reading, Kate used her usual technique of skimming, but with the added direction from her teacher, she said, "And then if I see the word, I'm like, 'Okay, I'm going to slow down and just try a little bit more.'" Similar to her in-class note-taking, Kate adapted her techniques by class, creating a repertoire for future use or for additional adaptation (Neal, 2015).

### **Discussion**

Kate's family supported her role as a student, especially her older sister. Kate summarized a discussion she had with her sister over whether or not Kate should get a

job. Kate's sister rejected this idea immediately saying, "No, you should just focus on school because we all know how important that is. Whatever you need, we just support you. Just ask." When Kate's family supported her in this way, Kate gained valuable familial capital, a key component of which is the feeling that you are not alone (Yosso, 2005). In addition to this explicitly stated support, Kate's siblings have modeled for her what it meant to be a student, both in the K-12 system and in higher education (Gee, 2008; Yosso, 2005).

Kate's family also provided her with important aspirational capital. Because of her family's support, Kate was able to "do something for myself" before she felt like she needed to be married and have kids. Again, Kate pointed to her sister as a role model, noting that her sister did not get married until she was 30, an old age, even by the newer standards of the Hmong community (Vang, 2013).

In relation to the wider Hmong community, Kate understood this support may be rare in the Hmong community. In a broad statement, Kate said, "I don't know why, but in Hmong community, some people, they find college not important." This contradiction in the Hmong community's value of education to Kate and her family's value of education seemed to create some tension within Kate. Putting it succinctly Kate said, "I can go to school and get a degree, get a good job and not just watch kids. I mean I can always do that after I have a degree. I want do something for myself first." As briefly discussed earlier, Kate repeatedly called herself lucky to be able to focus on school, especially when confronted with friends whose lives were drastically different than hers. Hmong women have not had much agency in their lives, so for Kate to be able to use her

literacies for her own purposes and goals she knew she was pushing the boundaries of what it meant to be a Hmong woman in the United States.

In this way, Kate added to her Hmong community's social capital (Yosso, 2005). Typically social capital involves a back and forth; a person uses the resources of the community to achieve some type of success, then gives back to that community in ways that help others achieve success. It appeared that Kate did not look to the Hmong community for social capital; she talked about the support of her immediate family but did not expand on any larger community aspect. However, Kate did add back to the Hmong community. Using her own poor grades during the first two years of high school as an example, she now told her cousins, "It is very important that you get your GPA up because you want to attend a good college. You have to get GPA up because that's all they look at when you graduate." Because she thought the Hmong community did not value education like she did, she made sure to encourage her cousins and talk to them about college, fearing they would not hear it from anyone else.

Clearly throughout her schooling, Kate came to know the secondary Discourse practices associated with American schooling (Heath, 1983; White & Ali-Khan, 2013). She fit into the role of student easily and her new practices did not seem to contradict any of her older literacy practices. It could be that Kate learned this Discourse as a child, with multiple role models in her siblings. Or it could be that because Kate was so focused on school, especially as the end of the semester grew closer during the study, that she was more or less consumed with this Discourse during the course of the study. However Kate learned her college student Discourse practices, including taking notes, emailing instructors, and talking with her counselor, they have helped lead her to success. Because

Kate adapted to a dominant Discourse, it should be no surprise that Kate has been a successful community college student.

### **Conclusion**

Kate displayed the characteristics of what it meant to be a college student. She adopted many literacy practices valued by the higher education system in the United States, such as working toward individual goals, interacting with authority figures, and using a variety of study strategies to meet her needs. Kate's literacy practices often overlapped and intertwined to help her meet her goal of graduating. Recognizing her freedom as a young, Hmong woman, Kate hoped to broaden the Hmong community's views on literacy by encouraging her cousins to also go to college. Though Kate has not met her own definition of success, she was making progress toward graduation, the definition of success for this study.

**CHAPTER 6****AMELIA**

Every time we meet, the first thing Amelia does is give me a hug and asks, “How are you?” Unlike some people who ask just to be polite, Amelia really does want to know the answer. She listens with her full attention, and then asks about mutual acquaintances, before sharing about her family. Only after we have caught up can we start each interview.

Amelia is the middle daughter of three children. She has an older sister and a younger brother. Of the three participants, Amelia’s family has been in the United States the longest; both of her parents moved here in the 1980s as children. Married at 18, Amelia currently lives with her husband Hudson and their son, eight-year-old Aiden. Hudson’s parents died shortly before he and Amelia were married so as the oldest sibling, he and Amelia took on the responsibility of raising his four younger sisters (all family members’ names are pseudonyms chosen by the participant). The oldest two have since moved out, but the younger two, Kimberly and Vanessa, high school students, reside with Amelia, Hudson, and David.

Amelia was raised bilingually, speaking both English and White Hmong. As a child, Amelia’s grandparents, who only spoke Hmong, lived with her family. Throughout the years, Amelia has lost a lot of her Hmong and estimates that her parents speak about half-English, half-Hmong to her now. Amelia and Hudson are raising Aiden in a primarily English household, though in the past year, Amelia has helped Aiden take Hmong lessons online so he will know the language.



I first met Amelia when she was a student in my developmental reading class. She was a conscientious student, her work nearly always perfect. While at Midwestern Community College, Amelia worked in the Reading Lab as a tutor and was a major support for many of my students. Though Amelia's studies in the Dental Assisting program took her away from tutoring, she still made the effort to see me once or twice a semester to catch up. During the course of the current study, Amelia completed the Dental Assisting program and graduated with an Associate of Science (AS) degree at Midwestern Community College. As a student on the cusp of graduation, I thought Amelia would be a good candidate for this study as she could reflect on her full experience at the community college. Also, as a mother and guardian, Amelia has different responsibilities than either Nachia or Kate so I believed her insights would be important.

### **Background**

Amelia had only a few memories from her childhood and even some of those were from old movies and repeated stories told by her older sister. In the movies, she spoke and sang in Hmong and she remembered watching her parents teach her brother English. She assumed her early years were similar, reciting and writing the English alphabet. Amelia was told that at one point she could not pick out individual letters, only sing the ABCs, so her father wrote the alphabet on paper and hung it on the wall. As the story went, unable to tell her father what letters he pointed to, Amelia burst into tears. She told the story now with laughter and a slight eye-roll at her younger self.

As Amelia worked to complete the Dental Assisting program during the study, she did not have regular classes at the community college, but instead had an internship

where she could practice her skills. In addition to this practice, she was also studying for the state and national board certification tests. This was a major source of stress for Amelia and her classmates, often causing Amelia and her peers to text message each multiple times throughout the day.

### **Amelia's Literacy Events and Practices**

Once again, I began by coding Amelia's data into the categories of literacy events and literacy practices, as described in chapters three and four. Throughout our interviews, Amelia frequently discussed the literacy events of her son and sisters-in-law. When Amelia actively participated in the event, it was coded as a literacy event. For instance, when Amelia shared how she and her sisters-in-law passed around the same book to read, this was coded "literacy event." However, when Amelia discussed events in which she did not participate, such as Aiden reading his new book in the car, these events were not coded. Through two rounds of coding, I was able to see a fuller picture of Amelia's literacy events and how her purposes for using literacy helped to create her literacy practices. Through this analysis I determined that Amelia uses her literacy events to (a) support her identity as a mother and caregiver, (b) facilitate her verbal interactions, and (c) help her meet school objectives. The following sections will show some of Amelia's literacy events, either photographs she shared or physical copies of old assignments she brought to me. Then I discuss how these events are examples of her larger literacy practices; then I end by examining how Amelia's literacies practices have led to her success.

### **Literacy to Affirm Identity**

Amelia was a caregiver and helper. She helped raise five children (her own son and her husband's four sisters) and chose a career dependent on care – dental assisting. Many of Amelia's daily literacy events revolved around her helping others, whether that was her son with his homework, or colleagues with office clean-up. She worried over everyone and sought to help in any way that she could.

**First literacy event: End of day checklist.** Having completed the Dental Assisting program at Midwestern Community College, Amelia applied and was offered a job in her field. During our last interview, her photographs centered around literacy events as she began her new job. One photograph in particular showed a daily cleaning checklist. The checklist was posted in the cleaning area so all staff members would be reminded of daily tasks, for example wiping down all the work surfaces. Amelia said there was a checklist for opening the office and a checklist for closing the office. Since she worked the afternoon and evening shift, Amelia focused on the checklist for closing the office. She noted cheerily that the tasks were not job-specific and that, "We're all going to help each other" before leaving the office.

**Second literacy event: Email from Kimberly's teacher.** As a guardian, Amelia was involved in Kimberly's daily activities, including her schoolwork. She showed me the photograph of an email, saying that she got emails from Kimberly's teachers daily with updates. The emails were not specific to Kimberly, but sent to all guardians. Amelia said that she read every email sent from the school but only responded when there was something she did not understand. Amelia indicated this was not something that happened often.

**Practice of identity.** Amelia's literacy events often revolved around those in her family. She was constantly monitoring her son's and her sisters-in-laws' homework and she often participated in literacy events with them. For instance, she helped Aiden practice his spelling words every week. She discussed the daily routine she had for both Aiden's homework in general and for studying Aiden's spelling words. Recently, Amelia became concerned that Aiden was not understanding the meanings of his spelling words, so now part of his practice included telling Amelia the meaning of each word. She also said that if Aiden was unsure of the definition of a word, together they would go to the computer to use Google to find the definition. Amelia took this opportunity to bring in additional skills from her school Discourse and teach them to Aiden. Here she infused aspects of the dominant school Discourse into their home practices, a common method of parents who hope to advantage their children in a secondary Discourse (Gee, 2008). By valuing homework and teaching additional literacy skills, Amelia displayed the regard she held for the school Discourse she had acquired. With these dominant practices already introduced to Kimberly and Vanessa, and most recently to Aiden, Amelia hoped they would be better off in school than Amelia felt she was. As she saw them succeed, her identity as a mother was reaffirmed.

Though Amelia frequently focused on her family's schoolwork, she also demonstrated literacy events in more "mothering" ways. During one interview she shared a photograph of doctor's instructions for Kimberly and Vanessa. Of the instruction sheet Amelia said, "I like to read it, and just so I understand it. And I could keep an eye to make sure that they're doing correctly." This was part of her mothering nature; when asked to describe why she read these types of documents when the girls could have easily

read the documents themselves, Amelia could not quite explain her reasoning. She started and stopped explaining several times; it appeared that Amelia felt compelled to read the documents because as a mother-figure she could not not read them. Amelia added that it was important for her to understand the directions so she could re-explain them to Kimberly and Vanessa and so the girls felt like they could ask Amelia if they had any questions.

In addition to the members of her household, Amelia helped her cousins as well, “When they need an essay to look over, I am able to like, ‘Let me help you. I feel confident to let me help you—and I would know what to do.’” Throughout college, Amelia grew more confident in her own skills, which she now used to help others. She shared her literacy practices with her extended family, creating a wider net of familial and social capital (Yosso, 2005). One of the very first things Amelia said in our interviews was that she was very “family-oriented” and she repeatedly showed how she valued family, literacy, and her family’s literacy.

Following Hmong tradition, Amelia married young (Lee, 2005). She immediately began raising children, first her husband’s younger sisters and then eventually her own son. Though married Hmong women are often discouraged from continuing their education (Peng & Solheim, 2015), Amelia’s family was just the opposite. Amelia’s involvement as a caretaker was part of her motivation for going back to school and graduating. She reflected,

I think what has made me successful in college is probably my motivation for me. I guess I’m willing to study, willing to learn and going to school every day. Otherwise, I think it’s my commitment as well, like the, as well as support from my family.

As a mother and caretaker, Amelia used her familial capital to draw motivation and lean on for support (Yosso, 2005). Amelia worked hard to balance her roles as caretaker and student, but she knew that she would not be able to be a student without the support of her family. With her son and sisters-in-law more self-sufficient, Amelia felt that she finally had the time to be in school. She noted that when she began school, other members of her household began completing extra chores so Amelia could do her schoolwork. In addition to the support she drew, Amelia created familial capital for her son and sisters-in-law as she helped create a home environment that valued literacy. Not only did she teach her family parts of the dominant school Discourse, she also acted as a model with her own school work.

### **Literacy for Verbal Interaction**

As a caregiver and dental assistant, Amelia's literacy was often a way to communicate expectations and information. While in the Dental Assisting program at Midwestern Community College, Amelia worked closely with a group of peers. During the time of the study, Amelia's dental assisting cohort was no longer taking classes, instead each student was assigned an internship throughout the city. Though they did not meet regularly, this group continued to work together and support one another via text message.

**First literacy event: Group text message.** In our third interview, Amelia shared a photograph of a group text message. During previous semesters, this group of six students often met to study and complete homework. Now that they were all working in internships, they kept in touch through text messages. Because everyone needed to take the national board certification test, most of their text messages revolved around this test.

These peers leaned on each other heavily; Amelia said she could receive up to 30 text messages a day from this group.

**Second literacy event: New patient procedure document.** As Amelia began her new job, she was inundated with paper work. She specifically chose the new patient document because “it's one that's very important in the office right now so I know they want me to learn the format of having a new patient that comes into the office.” As one of her new tasks, Amelia needed to be able to check new patients into the computer system and give them a tour of the office. Amelia said the head dentist wanted new patients to have specific information, including information on the technology used in the office. In addition to the printed material Amelia received, Amelia covered the document in her own notes.

**Practice of verbal interaction.** During the past two years, Amelia worked with a study group in the Dental Assisting program. Amelia was reluctant about study groups at first, since she had always worked alone, figuring she took much longer than everyone else. With the study group, for the first time Amelia was able to see how other students were making sense of their textbooks. She said, “We go over the text and go to that section and reread and be like, ‘What does this mean to you guys?’ and we would discuss it. So I think that really helped to study overall.” She said knowing that others had questions too was reassuring to her, because she knew she was not the only one with questions. Before working with her peers, it seemed that Amelia was not sure of her identity as a student. She questioned whether her struggles were “normal” and assumed she completed her work differently from everyone else. Her work with this study group appeared to have helped Amelia renegotiate her definition of what a student Discourse

looked like, or what it meant to be a student (Gee, 2008). Working with her peers also appeared add to Amelia's student Discourse because she was able to reciprocate her peers' help by answering their questions.

Amelia's study group also helped each other during practical assignments. For instance, before working with their first patient, the students worked together, practicing what they would say and do. During the practice time, peers were able to offer immediate feedback. Amelia said, "That was a really big help because they were also doing the same things as me. I would miss a step or like, 'I forgot to explain about this instruction,' they would kind of remind me." Amelia valued this feedback as a way to improve herself and the multiple mentions of the help of her peers showed a pattern of behavior establishing using feedback as a literacy practice using verbal interaction (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Taking feedback from her peers and from her instructors was one of the most useful literacy practices Amelia engaged in during her time at community college. She commented that college instructors "always write more feedback" than her high school teachers did. She often talked about what she learned in college and expressed frustration over what she thought she should have learned in high school. For instance, more than once Amelia mentioned learning specific punctuation rules in college that she did not learn in high school. Because Amelia considered herself a good writer, she was especially confused and concerned saying, "Did a teacher [in high school] ever correct me?" She went as far as to say her college English classes, "...just changed my whole life. 'Oh my God, I was very wrong. And I like writing so much. What the heck?'" When she learned something new, like the rules to using commas, Amelia was able to think back to her prior work and immediately recognize mistakes. Her embarrassment over previous



mistakes pointed to pride in her work and value in being able to know and use school Discourses correctly (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008).

### **Literacy to Meet School Objectives**

Amelia was a diligent worker. Having liked school since a child, Amelia continued to put time and effort into completing her homework, including reading textbooks and writing papers. She thought she read slower than others, but knew that her close, detailed-reading was how she achieved success in high school and so used the same strategy in college.

**First literacy event: Personal essay.** One of Amelia's favorite types of writing was personal narratives; she liked being able to express herself and the freedom allowed in writing about her own life. Amelia discussed one particular essay from 10<sup>th</sup> grade, where she wrote about a childhood memory. In the paper she described how the basement heater in her house exploded, catching the house on fire. She enjoyed writing this paper so much, that she used the basis of it for another narrative essay due in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She admitted she was not sure if she was "supposed to" use an older paper, but she added that she did revise and edit the paper based on her new knowledge from her 11<sup>th</sup> grade class.

**Second literacy event: Patient assignment.** As part of the Interview Protocol for all participants, I asked Amelia to bring an assignment from both high school and college. The assignment she brought from college centered on her first patient. She described how she had to talk about an important procedure like brushing one's teeth correctly and a topic of the patient's choosing, in this case retainers. Because this was Amelia's first patient, she wrote a very detailed script of what she was going to say. She then highlighted the script so she could follow along when her patient came into the clinic.

Amelia said that her script was much more detailed than her classmates' scripts were, but said, "I want to really know exactly what I'm going to do and not miss a step."

**Practice of school.** Amelia enjoyed school and learning. Recalling her favorite English class in high school, Amelia said the teacher was demanding, but she enjoyed the variety of books that were required. She felt that this was the first place she learned about different literature genres. She remembered that the class was "a little bit challenging" but that she "loved it so much." In addition to opening Amelia's eyes about different types of reading, Amelia said this teacher "gave us a lot of feedback," which, as discussed, helped develop Amelia's student Discourse (Gee, 2008).

In college, Amelia's literacy practices around achieving school objectives became habitual. A textbook chapter took her a "half a day or even a whole day" to read and understand. She realized that her reading strategy was likely unique, "Some people they can just read something quick and understand. For me, I like more specific ways." Amelia was concerned about being able to pronounce all the words, saying that she used Google to look up words and hear the pronunciation. When reading a textbook, she said she stopped after every section to review any questions the textbook provided. Sometimes she reread the section saying "But when I go back it's like I already know these main points. I need to know what I don't know." She paid attention to the graphics and their captions. Additionally, she used Google to look up words she did not understand and to add to what the book said. Amelia wanted to understand the details, not just the main picture. She partially credited her success at Midwestern Community College to her attention to details. This consistent routine again pointed to patterns in Amelia's literacy practices. That she named this pattern as part of her success shows not

only the value of this practice, but also the belief she had in her ability to use these practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

When Amelia worked with a textbook, she was also methodical. She used multiple colored highlighters, each color holding a different meaning. During our second interview, she showed me a photograph of her textbook. She used this textbook as a way to study for her national exam. In the book, the titles of procedures were highlighted in green and the main actions within the procedures were highlighted in yellow. She said she only read the book this time, as opposed to highlighting and taking notes, like she did during the semester, but said it probably would have been better if she went back and highlighted more detailed information in a third color. Amelia said most of her textbooks looked the same way, the highlighting was color-coded so she could easily distinguish the information. Earlier, Amelia's idea of what a student should be and the kind of student she was, collided as she worked with her peers (Gee, 2008). Here, her ritualized technique may point to a rigid idea of what it meant for her to be a student; it was clear that she saw schooling as a specific context which required specific kinds of work (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Amelia did not talk much about taking notes in class or from her textbook. At one point she commented that she printed off instructors' PowerPoints before class so she could add notes to it during lectures. She said she had difficulty taking notes when instructors did not share PowerPoints or notes. Without aids, Amelia said of her notes, "When I go back, then look at it and it's like, 'What is this?' I feel lost." In a different interview she did mention, "When I take notes or if I write stuff, I like it to be pretty....if I do a checklist of pen and I misspell a word or if I wrote it ugly, I like to just rip it out

and I do another one.” Even though Amelia did not refer to her notes as study aids, if she was writing her notes multiple times, which she said she did often, then she was likely inadvertently continuing to learn, adding to her literacy practices unknowingly.

Again though all of her processes were a lot of work, Amelia said, “It’s worth studying. I guess because I like learning a lot. So by going to school, I’m constantly learning about things. I like to bring it home, I like to study it, even though it takes me longer.” Amelia plainly stated her attitude toward her literacy practices and the value she placed on these practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

### **Discussion**

As a mother and a student, Amelia’s literacy practices often spanned both roles. She always emphasized the importance of school in her home, just as her parents did. She taught her son Aiden basic skills like the ABCs and how to write his name, and helped her sisters-in-law with homework whenever they asked, demonstrating components of a school-based Discourse. Amelia always felt like she “struggled” in school, so by helping her family understand what was expected of them, she hoped they would avoid her struggles, creating aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). Though Amelia’s aspirations were not her own, she took on the classic parent role of wanting her children to achieve more than she had. She continued to feed these aspirations as she learned more in school and then in turn could help the children learn more, which then reaffirmed her choices. This cyclic process may have contributed to Amelia’s motivation as she was able to see progress in her schoolwork and the schoolwork of her family.

Amelia’s education also increased her familial capital (Yosso, 2005). By becoming a knowledgeable insider on the ways the higher education system worked, she

became a resource for her immediate and extended family. Her family, then, helped Amelia by supporting her education. For instance, Amelia's husband began working longer hours and her whole family helped with larger chores like cooking meals. Many Hmong women have difficulty balancing school and the traditional domestic tasks associated with being a Hmong woman and mother (Peng & Solheim, 2015). Amelia was met with such a strong source of support, her household chores actually lessened. This allowed Amelia the time she required to study and complete her school work.

Amelia had very clear ideas about how a good student acted and completed homework. In her mind good students read fluently and skimmed texts for an understanding of the material; good students did not have questions and completed homework quickly. It was unclear where these ideas stemmed from. When asked, Amelia could not consciously identify how this picture formed. Potentially, as a result of this specific ideal, Amelia continually described herself as "struggling" with her schoolwork, though she admitted she earned good grades. Because Amelia was so detailed in her reading and studying, it could be that she studied other students subconsciously for years, in effect learning what it meant to be a student through modeling (Gee, 2008). Her description fits the picture of a student Discourse that would be praised for its adherence to dominant school Discourses. Thus in Amelia's mind, because she did not see those traits in herself, she could not identify herself as a "good student."

Her notions of a good student were somewhat challenged by the formation of her study group, where she encountered other students who had the same "struggles" as she did. She admitted that this gave her comfort, but it did not seem to be enough to change her opinions on how good students act or that she could be considered a good student.

Perhaps part of the reason Amelia worked so hard in school was so eventually she could see herself as a good student; so it is possible these idealized images could have motivated her.

As Amelia entered the Dental Assisting program, her study group helped her form social capital, or a network of resources (Yosso, 2005). She used this network during the semesters she studied at Midwestern Community College, but also when she prepared for her national board certification tests. In turn, Amelia found it her duty to help and encourage her younger cousins, adding social capital back to her community.

### **Conclusion**

As a mother and a student Amelia uses her literacy practices to help herself and help those around her. Though Amelia has taken on a more traditional female role in the Hmong community, that of young wife and mother, her parenting has not stopped her from going to school and reaching success herself. Instead, this role inspired her continued education where she then used her literacy practices to achieve success. As this study concluded, so did Amelia's time at Midwestern Community College. Having completed her coursework and internship, Amelia graduated in May.

## CHAPTER 7

### CROSS CASE ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

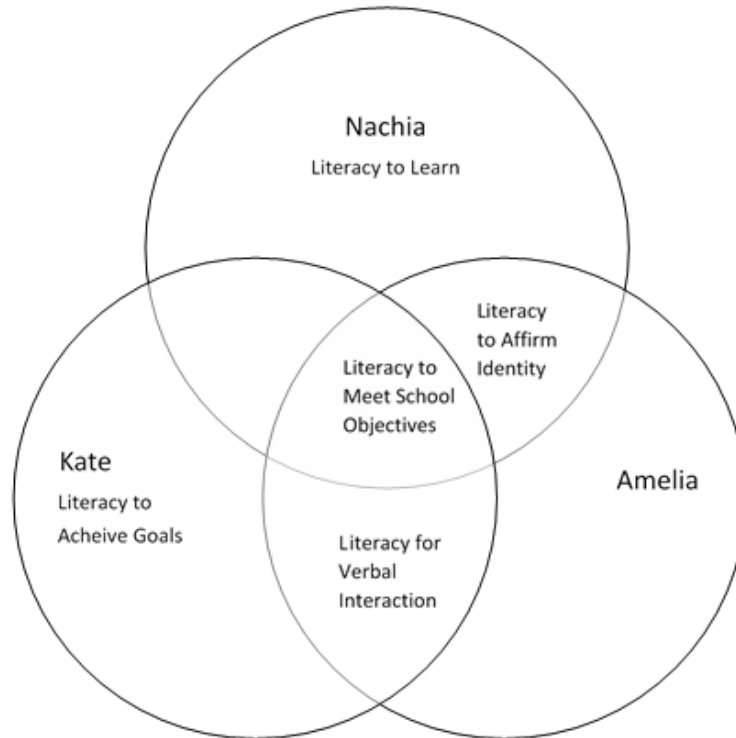
In the previous chapters, I shared the stories of Nachia, Kate, and Amelia, three Hmong community college students at Midwestern Community College. I sought to illustrate the literacy events and practices each student commonly used and how these situated literacies helped her achieve academic success at the community college level. These investigations helped me to make sense of the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) each student brought to her community college experience. Through interviews, photographic data and qualitative analysis, I watched Nachia's, Kate's, and Amelia's stories of literacy unfold and sought to give voice to their stories.

#### **Cross Case Analysis**

Participants' literacy practices arose from their homes, their K-12 education and amalgamations of home and school literacy practices. Each participant was able to adapt her literacies to fit specific contexts and needs, the basis of sociocultural literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Some literacy practices were taken from home and brought to school, others were taken from school and mixed into home practices. Figure 2 illustrates the convergence of participants' literacy practices.

Nachia and Kate each exhibited a literacy practice unique to their situations. Nachia often used literacy as a way to learn about her interests. She frequently sought new knowledge from a variety of sources. In this way, Nachia used her literacy practice to continue learning outside of school. Kate used her literacy practices as a way to achieve her goals, most especially to work toward graduation. Kate's focus on getting to

graduation could be more pointed than the other participants because Amelia had very nearly graduated by the time the study began and even though Nachia was working toward a bachelor's degree, she had already graduated after earning an AA degree.



*Figure 2.* Venn diagram illustrating cross case analysis of literacy practices.

In this study, I highlighted three literacy practices for each participant. Through these literacies participants were able to achieve academic success at the community college.

### **Individual Case Review**

In the previous chapters, I discussed six literacy events and three main literacy practices that each participant used and how those practices helped lead them to success. As literacy events are evidence of broader literacy practices, here I will summarize the findings on literacy practices before moving into a cross case analysis.



**Nachia.** Nachia told of how she used her literacy practices to affirm her identity, direct her learning, and meet school objectives. Daily Bible readings and journal writings allowed Nachia to connect with God. Nachia drew spiritual motivation from her literacy events, which left her ready to face the day, no matter what problems could arise. Nachia's church was also where she learned to read and write in Hmong. Though she spoke often of the importance of her Hmong language, it appeared that she rarely used it.

Nachia was endlessly curious and always looking to learn; as such she often displayed her literacy practice of learning. She searched for articles online when she had a question and looked at the credibility of websites before reading news articles. Nachia may have grown into this curiosity from her childhood. Her family was always supportive of learning, her mother even teaching Nachia to write her name and learn the English alphabet without knowing any more of the language herself.

Finally, Nachia, like the other two participants, developed a literacy practice to meet school objectives. As an elementary student, Nachia recognized the dominant Discourse valued in school. Since then she has appeared to negotiate her need to use those Discourse skills. For instance, she reads novels reluctantly, though enjoys her written work. As a student, Nachia has garnered success through the obtainment of an AA degree and her transfer to a four-year university.

**Kate.** Kate is driven and focused; all her literacy practices lead to one outcome: graduation. Kate's primary use of literacy was to meet school objectives. As a full-time student, nearing the end of a semester, Kate concentrated on her schoolwork for the duration of the study. She used a variety of study techniques, adapted to each different course she took, to help her complete assignments promptly.

In addition to completing her schoolwork, Kate sought out help from others. She liked receiving feedback from her peers through online discussion boards and engaged with her instructors when she needed help. Furthermore, Kate used school counselors to help her make decisions regarding her future and emailed instructors prior to the beginning of class to gauge the amount of work she could expect.

Both of these literacy practices added to Kate's use of literacy to achieve her goals. Kate demonstrated using literacy as a means to an end in her childhood as her older siblings told her she needed to read at the public library before she could use the playground equipment. Currently, Kate aims to graduate with an AA degree. She recognized that her situation as an unmarried Hmong woman is unique, so her motivation to graduate seemed to encompass more than just herself. Kate spoke of friends who married at a young age and had multiple children but regretted not entering college before starting a family. Though Kate does not see herself as successful yet, she is consistently making progress toward graduation, one measure of success for this study.

**Amelia.** Amelia used very specific routines to meet her school objectives and complete class assignments. She discussed the meticulous nature of her textbook reading and note-taking. Though Amelia noted that she probably worked much harder, longer, and in more detail than other students, she felt it was the best way for her to learn.

During her years in the Dental Assisting program, Amelia relied on a study group to help her talk through any confusion. Through these verbal interactions, Amelia received feedback on written assignments but was also able to rehearse real-world situations like bringing patients into the office. She enjoyed working with the study

group; knowing that other students “struggled” like she did assuaged some of her concerns about her perceived academic difficulties.

As a guardian and mother, Amelia frequently used her literacy practices to affirm this identity. She often read school material for her son and sisters-in-law, making sure she kept up-to-date with school happenings. Amelia discussed feeling more confident in her own academic skills since starting college, and so she felt better helping everyone with homework. This caring nature also wove through Amelia’s career as a dental assistant. Though her job had just begun, she shared many pictures of policies and procedures that created an environment of support and caring for both staff and patients.

### **Literacy to Meet School Objectives**

As academically successful students, Nachia, Kate, and Amelia all used literacy practices to help them meet school objectives, like completing assignments. Throughout their time in the education system, each participant was able to recognize the expectations and demands necessary to achieve in order to meet mainstream markers of academic success. Kate saw herself as a student and thus adopted many dominant Discourse conventions of being a student. She used a variety of study strategies that fit into the context of her classes, which included skimming, taking notes, and creating flash cards. Kate was confident in her ability to do well with these techniques. Perhaps part of her ability to take on these characteristics was because her situation most closely matched that of a “traditional” college student (Gee, 2008). Nachia and Amelia, on the other hand, were confident in their abilities, but did not adopt the mainstream Discourse patterns like Kate. Nachia appeared to recognize some of the characteristics of the dominant Discourse at an early age, but chose to reject those norms and work her way around them (Gee,

2008). For example, she took pride in writing assignments, but completed reading assignments reluctantly. Amelia identified the characteristics of the dominant school Discourse, and seemed to measure herself against those norms. She appeared to have concluded that she did not meet those norms and therefore could not call herself a good student.

**Studying through reading.** Each student approached studying and school assignments slightly differently as well. When discussing how they read assigned texts, Kate talked about skimming. She specifically said that she “didn’t have time” to read everything word by word. Amelia, on the other hand, was very meticulous when she read, reading everything slowly and multiple times. She said she needed to understand all the details in order to feel secure in her knowledge. She also said, even though she wasn’t always interested in the readings, she was afraid not to read in case she was called on to read in class. Nachia vacillated between Kate and Amelia’s attitudes. Nachia read textbooks when required, but couldn’t always force herself to read assigned novels, unless they were of interest.

Interestingly, when asked about their reading habits, both Nachia and Amelia said they were not good readers, while Kate said she was a good reader. This self-assessment may explain some of the differences in their patterns and attitudes regarding their school literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Kate never discussed liking or not liking her assignments; they were just something to be done, and since she saw herself as a good reader, she was comfortable skimming the texts. Nachia and Amelia, on the other hand, did not think they were good readers and often discussed the difficulty they experienced engaging in readings. This lack of engagement occasionally led Nachia to eschew her

assigned reading; however, Amelia seemed driven to work even harder to understand, spending hours on each assigned reading.

**Studying through writing.** Conversely, Nachia and Amelia both said they were good writers and much preferred writing. Kate, however, thought she was not a good writer, noting that good writers use grammar correctly. While Nachia and Amelia both favored writing that was personal in nature, they appeared more comfortable completing any written assignment over reading assignments, evidenced by the lengthy written assignments both Nachia and Amelia shared during the study. Specifically, Nachia shared an outline for a speech, as well as a reflection paper and Amelia shared a high school essay and a densely written script for her patient. This approach contrasted Kate's writings, which were mostly notes. Kate did share two research papers, one from high school and one from college, but it was clear these papers were a lot of work for Kate. She was proud to complete them, but she repeatedly discussed the amount of effort each paper required.

### **Literacy to Affirm Identity**

Both Nachia and Amelia used their literacy practices to affirm their identity. Nachia used literacy often to affirm her dual identities as a Hmong Christian; Amelia used her literacies to define her identity as a mother and caregiver. Both of these identities served as motivation, but participants displayed them quite differently. However, it was clear Nachia and Amelia highly valued these literacy practices. Each week we met, both women shared multiple literacy events that eventually built into this larger literacy practice. Interestingly, one of the first things Nachia mentioned in her very first interview was being a Christian. Similarly, Amelia talked about her son and sisters-

in-law early in her first interview. Both of the students' identities were stated often and their literacy events proved these literacy practices to be important.

**Literacy for faith.** Nachia actively read the Bible and journaled daily. She discussed starting the day with her Bible or devotional reading so she could give her best to God, afterward feeling satisfied and that she could continue with her day. She also used her spirituality to connect with others in her life and thus bring more people into her literacy practices. She has attended the same Hmong church since elementary school. She has friends at the church, and is a leader in its youth ministry. Additionally, Nachia and her boyfriend partake in Bible studies as a way to strengthen their relationship.

**Literacy for mothering.** Like Nachia, Amelia uses her literacy practices to strengthen relationships, but hers are more tightly focused on her family, specifically the sisters-in-law she raises and her son. She acts as a model for her family and she is the first person they turn to when they need help. Amelia admitted that she occasionally asks her husband to take over these responsibilities, but that when he did, she felt as though she should read the materials anyway. Her compulsion to read through all the school materials showed the importance of using literacy to affirm her identity as a caregiver. In addition to connecting with her family, Amelia also used her caregiving nature as a dental assistant. She discussed learning the procedure to welcome new patients into the office and the information she needed to share with them on their tour.

### **Literacy for Verbal Interaction**

Kate and Amelia both used literacy as a way to facilitate verbal interactions. Kate focused on using the written and unwritten rules of college as a basis for her verbal interactions (Gee, 2008). She sought advice based on school norms and worked with

instructors to obtain information for decision-making. She also worked with instructors on accommodations so she could show her abilities. In these interactions, Kate sought “experts” to help her, people she assumed had more knowledge or could guide her in aspects of her education that she may have not been as familiar with. Amelia, on the other hand, focused her verbal interactions on her peers. She worked closely with a study group over the course of her Dental Assisting program. This study group continued to work together after classes ended and as each sought a job in the field and board certification.

**Support from faculty and staff.** As discussed earlier, Kate appeared to take on the dominant school literacy practices to achieve school objectives; here she takes on another valued aspect of those literacy practices, verbal interactions, by working directly with authority figures in an effort to help herself (Gee, 2008). She knew there were rules she may not be able to access herself, such as those surrounding admission into the Dental Assisting program or consequences of dropping courses. Therefore, she sought help from individuals who were more knowledgeable. In the case of her instructors, she asked for help when needed during the semester but also took a more direct step to helping her education by emailing instructors before class began to have a better understanding of the class workload.

**Support from peers.** Amelia, on the other hand, asked instructors for help, but only as a last resort. She discussed using her study group as a place to ask questions and work on solutions together. Only when the entire group was confused would they turn to the instructors for help. It could be that Amelia was more comfortable discussing her academic questions with her peers than with instructors. Because Amelia seemed to have a specific idea of what a “good student” did and did not do, perhaps the “good student”

Amelia imagined did not need to ask the instructor questions, therefore in her attempt to be a good student, neither did Amelia. While Kate takes on the student Discourses dominant in higher education, Amelia seems to be “playing the part” of student (Gee, 1996). In this way, Amelia may have developed what Gee named a “mushfake Discourse.” A “mushfake Discourse” occurs when a person partially acquires a Discourse, but does not feel as though he/she is an insider, yet this person has enough knowledge of the Discourse to make it appear as though he/she is an insider. Amelia did not feel “fluent” in her student Discourse, so she took what she knew and did the best she could to imitate the students she thought knew the Discourse better than she did.

### **Discussion**

Participants’ literacy practices helped lead to their success both directly and indirectly. One aspect of Nachia, Kate, and Amelia’s success was their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). One type of cultural wealth, familial capital, or the knowledges passed down through generations, was essential to the success of all three participants. Included in familial capital are messages about caring, coping, and providing education. Displaying one aspect of familial capital, each participant named her family as a motivating factor at the community college. In addition, Nachia and Kate learned from older siblings, who served as role models who attended and graduated from college. Amelia, on the other hand, sought to be a role model for her son and younger sisters-in-law. The close connections these women had with their families limited their feelings of isolation in a school setting that could have been alienating. Because schools in the United States were designed for White students, Hmong and other students of color may not feel comfortable within the educational system. However, the participants in this



study knew they could rely on their family for moral support in the face of the potential hardships at Midwestern Community College.

Similar to other research findings that showed older siblings help build oral and written language skills and practice academic Discourse patterns, siblings were crucial to the academic success of these women (Gregory, 2001; Kibler, et al., 2016). Both Nachia and Kate discussed their siblings introducing them to the English language and preparing them for the American education system. In high school, Nachia and Amelia used their older sisters as both tutors and editors. As a college student, Nachia still used her sister as an academic support, while Kate depended on her sister for non-academic support, like letting her live rent-free. Amelia turned from using her sister as a source of support, to being the source of support for her son and sisters-in-law.

In some ways, all three women drew emotional support from their families, which evolved into aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital nurtures “a culture of possibility” as families continue to believe in the possibility of better lives for themselves (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Because these women had families that believed in them, who knew they could achieve more academically than prior generations, they went to school supported and motivated. Nachia, Kate, and Amelia have now turned this aspirational capital into new goals for themselves and their families. Nachia wanted to attend more school; Kate wanted to find a career that gave her freedom; Amelia wanted to support her husband as he started school, now that she had finished.

In addition to their individual families, Kate and Amelia both took their academic success and used it to contribute to the social capital of the Hmong community (Yosso, 2005). Social capital refers to the network of support and resources developed by a

community for the community. Both spoke of mentoring cousins on higher education in general and with academic assignments specifically. This proved to be an interesting finding, because social capital typically displays a give and take, where one uses the community's social capital, then as she grows, she adds new knowledge back to the community. However, in both Kate and Amelia's cases, they did not appear to use the Hmong community's social capital, instead depending on immediate family and their familial capital. When confronted with unknowns in college life, each woman turned to an immediate family member, even if that family member did not know the particulars of Midwestern Community College. For instance, Kate discussed the repercussions of dropping a course with her sister, who had dropped several courses during her time in higher education without consequence. Despite this dependence on family, both Kate and Amelia thought it important to give back to the wider Hmong community, both explicitly talked of working with younger cousins. Perhaps because earning a degree still is not commonplace in the Hmong community (CARE, 2013), Kate and Amelia were unsure where to turn for help themselves. Kate specifically said she thought the Hmong community did not value education, and so she repeatedly talked to cousins about doing well in high school and getting into a good college.

Though there were definite overlaps in the types of literacy practices and cultural wealth these women used to be successful in their academic pursuits, each woman's path was quite different. Participants adapted their study habits from high school throughout their time at the community college. Each commented on specific skills they learned in college and now used regularly, though none of the skills were the same. This may point to the varying skills the participants brought with them to college or the new skills that

they have found most useful to their learning. The sum of these findings indicates that a variety of literacy practices can aid students in achieving mainstream markers of academic success.

### **Implications for Instruction**

The previous sections described the similarities and differences in literacy practices of three Hmong women in a community college. Literacy practices to meet school objectives, to affirm identity, to facilitate verbal interactions, to enable learning, and to meet goals helped these women achieve academic success through graduation or progress toward graduation. Though these women were engaged in higher education, the findings point to implications for educators of all ages. Participants used multiple forms of cultural wealth and a variety of literacy practices to adapt and succeed in an educational system designed without their sociocultural identities in mind.

### **Culturally Responsive Instruction for Hmong Students**

Calls for teachers to understand students' diverse experiences at home are just beginning to extend to college instructors. Researchers have yet to look at how Hmong students could benefit from culturally responsive teaching and pedagogies. No participant in this study indicated she participated in curriculum that mirrored her experiences; nor did appear that any of the participants' instructors used culturally relevant pedagogies.

Two components of culturally relevant pedagogy instructors can immediately address are maintaining students' cultural competence and ensuring students experience academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Maintaining cultural competence entails instructors learning and incorporating students' knowledge of their culture into classroom curriculum. For instance, Hmong communities have traditions around storytelling and

tapestry-making that could be used as a conduit for a variety of lessons in literature, history, and mathematics. Curriculum could also include lesser-known Hmong historical figures who have contributed to our collective knowledge and controversial topics such as the CIA's use of Hmong soldiers during the Vietnam War. It is imperative that marginalized students see people like themselves throughout the curriculum not just during certain days or months. Tellingly, when I asked Kate if she ever read books where Hmong people were the main character when growing up, she told me she did not even know those kinds of books existed until high school. Had Kate not attended a Hmong charter school for high school, she may have never seen people like herself represented in recreational reading.

Specifically, Knoester and Plikuhn (2016) suggested instructors should offer a wider range of reading materials so students find materials suited to their interests and prior knowledge. A wider range of materials may invite more students into the curriculum through interests or stories reflective of their own. As Nachia demonstrated, traditional books, like *1984*, were difficult to comprehend, adding to her already diminished view of her reading ability. Using a variety of authors or allowing students choice in their readings may have helped Nachia engage in her reading assignments.

Children and adults alike learn best through materials and topics that are meaningful to them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This may be the first step instructors can take to help students experience success, or “choose academic excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Most skills and academic processes can be taught through any material, so instructors should look for material that is purposeful and meaningful to their students. For instance, Nachia frequently sought out information in order to learn; with a

broader range of materials in school, she may have been just as engaged in her schoolwork. Additionally, instructors can support their Hmong students by helping these students access class material through their primary Discourses before introducing the material in academic Discourses. For instance, instructors could allow Hmong students to summarize their learning in Hmong before summarizing or completing an assigning in English.

Inherent in helping Hmong and other marginalized students experience success is to teach students the codes of power present in educational institutes (Delpit, 1988). Because many marginalized students do not use language and literacy in the same ways prescribed by schools, they may have a difficult time understanding how to succeed. By explicitly teaching students these rules, instructors can help students understand the rules of the dominant society so that they may achieve success in and out of school. In this study, Kate appeared to learn these codes of power implicitly; however, Nachia and Amelia only appeared to have a partial understanding. With explicit instruction, perhaps Nachia and Amelia would have felt more comfortable in school, an institution inherently designed to only honor those from the dominant culture.

Similarly, in their study of the usage of academic Discourse in higher education, White and Ali-Khan (2013) called for college instructors to respect their students' language styles, including how they speak, read, and write. They also recommended explicitly teaching the standard academic Discourse to students so they could succeed within the system and gain the skills necessary to change the education system, which to date remains oppressive to marginalized voices.

Because most college faculty members are White, they may assume that their curricula accurately reflects their students' experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, the population of higher education is increasingly diverse each year and instructors should not assume what has worked in the past will continue to be effective. Gay (2013) asserted that one of the core tenets of culturally responsive teaching is that it emphasizes the local context. As such, instructors need to continually look at the particular diversities that occur within each classroom. For instance, Nachia repeatedly discounted school-assigned literature that was not of interest to her; perhaps she would have been more engaged if she saw herself in those readings.

Similarly, educators should be wary of prescribing a "one-size fits all" approach to studying and completing academic work (Marrs & Sigler, 2012). The results of this study show that each participant used literacy in different ways to achieve academic success. Though it is useful to teach study skills, students must also know that it may be in their best interest to take those skills and adapt them to their learning and their courses. For instance, Kate frequently skimmed material and searched for specific information, while Amelia focused on every detail written in her texts. Both of these women were academically successful, but if each had been taught the only way to study was different from her own, she may not have been as successful. In addition, students may also benefit from knowing what "typical" students do. For instance, in this study, Amelia seemed very unsure of her skills compared to her peers. Perhaps instructors could not only recommend study groups, as Amelia's instructors did, but could talk through common mistakes or misunderstandings from previous students. Employing study groups may

help students like Amelia feel more comfortable seeking help, because they would know they were not the only ones with questions.

Furthermore, teachers of all age groups need to continue to honor students' home cultures and literacy practices (Jarrett, et al., 2016). Having their home literacy practices accepted and valued may prove beneficial to students. First, with their funds of knowledge accepted, including the way they use literacy, students may find the education system less antagonistic and more inviting (Moll et al., 1992). Because they would not be forced willingly or unwillingly to adopt or reject dominant Discourses and literacy practices, students may find school more relatable and thus more interesting, something Nachia lacked in her own schooling. Second, when students' home cultures and literacy practices are recognized, the students' identities are affirmed. Both Nachia and Amelia used their literacy practices as ways to affirm their identities. If similar practices were to be recognized in schools, students may be more likely to see themselves as students, something Amelia was never quite able to do. Third, by accepting and valuing students' knowledge, they may begin to see themselves as students and not feel as though they need to change part of themselves to fit into the school culture. For instance, Amelia never considered herself a good student, but had her practices been valued she may have been able to better assess her own skills. As noted in this study, having a strong connection to one's identity proved to be a motivating factor leading to academic success. Participants also had to renegotiate what it meant to be a student several times, whereas if their initial literacy practices had been accepted, perhaps they would have felt more comfortable as a student from the beginning.

### **Supporting Students' Cultural Wealth**

Within a culturally responsive curriculum, instructors need to allow students to use their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). For instance, students of color often have linguistic capital that is underused; these students may be better able to demonstrate the mastery of material through short stories, oral stories, or poetry rather than a typical essay (Gay, 2013). It may also benefit bi- or multi-lingual students to be allowed to converse with each other in the language in which they are most comfortable. In this way, students may be able to help one another understand an assignment or concept more fully. During our interviews Nachia spoke of another Hmong student who visited her often during her tutoring hours. Nachia said this student rarely needed help with assignments, but just wanted to confirm, in Hmong, the expectations of the assignment. With this assurance, the student was able to complete the assignment. If instructors are monolingual, they may consider dual-language usage as rude, but restricting the use of multiple languages in the classroom may disadvantage students.

Higher education institutes tend to think of students as individuals, without a greater context. This is at odds with most marginalized students' social and familial cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Because most community college students are over 18, their families are not usually considered when preparing campus events or policies. Community colleges may benefit from multigenerational activities where students can bring their families (Xiong & Lam, 2013). The results of this study indicate that family was an important aspect of each participant's life. Participants used their families for financial support, for academic help, and as sources of motivation. Thereby allowing



families to be more involved in the community college, may help the participants to feel more wholly supported.

Inviting families into the school through activities and events could have the added benefit of showing larger communities how higher education works, perhaps demystifying it for marginalized communities that have high dropout rates. This inclusion of student families may be a way for students to add to their community's social capital as they bring others into the community college and serve as a resource for future students (Yosso, 2005).

### **Implications for Research**

Future research needs to continue to focus on community college students and stakeholders should not assume that research at a four-year university is transferable to community college students. Additionally, though there has been extensive research on college students who identify as Black and Latinx, there is little literature on Hmong students. One reason for this lack of attention may be that Hmong students are often grouped into a larger category of Asian students, and therefore are considered a high achieving group. Researchers also need to work to dispel this "model minority" myth so students of all ethnicities can reach academic success (Kim et al., 2014). In a similar way, higher education scholars should continue to look for ways to incorporate students' cultural wealth within institutions. Specifically, institutions should help students wield their cultural wealth in classrooms to further their academic success and help build additional cultural wealth through student services.

Similar research on literacy practices of community college students could look at the different literacies students use throughout an entire semester. It may be that literacies

change throughout the semester through learning, adaptation, or need. Research into discipline-specific literacy has shown that the way literacy is used varies greatly depending on the discipline (Moje et al., 2000; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Teaching students to use these discipline-specific skills has helped students' comprehension and their ability to perform assigned tasks with greater ease. Therefore, it may be interesting to look at the literacies of different types of majors. Students in technical fields, liberal arts fields, or in scientific fields may use literacies quite differently based on the demands of their courses.

Because research on literacy practices tends to focus on young children, it may be worthwhile to look at the literacy practices of young adults to see how they change throughout their teenage and early adult years. Future research should also continue to look at the literacies practiced in Hmong homes; like studies of other marginalized families, Hmong families use a variety of literacy practices in their daily lives. As second and third generation Hmong begin to marry and have children, research may also want to consider the continued role of siblings in home literacy practices.

Finally, scholars should investigate how culturally responsive instruction incorporates the literacies of Hmong students of all ages. Currently, most schools still promote practices of the dominant White culture, with little input from the marginalized communities, like the Hmong (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017). Research should look into how textile-making, cooking, or oral-storytelling can be incorporated into curriculum, thereby helping Hmong students maintain and take pride in their cultural knowledge.

### **An Instructor's Reflection**

Finally, as an instructor myself, I need to take a step back from my researcher role to see how this study informs my own teaching. Through sixteen total interviews, one comment has stood out. During our third interview, Kate commented that instructors at the college level did not appear to “care” as much as her high school teachers did. She then equated this “caring” to her high school teachers’ holding the students accountable for their work. Kate contrasted her high school teachers’ expectations by saying that college instructors left the homework up to the student. I was struck by this comment because I have always told students the same thing – I won’t chase after you for homework; it is up to you. But, I have also thought myself to be a caring teacher, so I was not sure how to reconcile my teaching with Kate’s statement. However, thinking in terms of Delpit’s (1988) codes of power, I see how that type of statement may come across as uncaring and weak. Instead, I now want to make sure students know that (1) I am available as a resource to help their learning and (2) I have high expectations for their work and completing their work on time.

Like many instructors, I need to do a better job of incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy into my own classes. In addition to the strategies discussed above, I am reminded again of the need to get to know my students as individuals. In particular, I would like to build on my students’ prior educational successes. In the past, I have had the tendency to view my students as blank slates. However, now I would look to learn more about their literacy practices that have led to success prior to my class. For instance, both Nachia and Amelia often found success in their writing. I could use this knowledge to allow them to complete more assignments in this preferred form. I could also have

them work with other students who do not see writing as a strength; in this way students could leverage their own strengths to help others. Additionally, by knowing what skills students have already grasped, I can spend more time helping students build additional skills and processes.

When thinking specifically of my Hmong students, I now have a better understanding of how they have been silenced and may feel invisible. While my campus has worked on culturally responsive pedagogy, our focus has always been on Black students, essentially ignoring other racial minorities. When I asked each participant, how I, or other instructors like me, could help Hmong students, all three demurred and insisted that Hmong students did not need any specific assistance. Their insistence that Hmong students are not different from other students, makes me wonder if our educational institutes have so erased their ethnic identities that they are unable to see needs of themselves and their community. In the future, I want to ensure that Hmong students have the opportunity share their cultural knowledge and use their strengths, particularly those that are uncommon in the White culture, to achieve success.

### **Limitations**

Although qualitative inquiry may lack generalization, it is exactly this specificity that I sought. Because of the sociocultural viewpoint of this study, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) ring true when they state, “In the grand narrative, *the universal case* is of prime interest. In narrative thinking, *the person* in context is of prime interest” (p. 32, emphasis in the original). These results are not generalizable to the whole public nor even to the Hmong community. The experiences and lives of the participants were just that –

their experiences and lives. However, these stories have added to the growing research on Hmong students in college and the minimal research on Hmong literacy practices.

### **Conclusion**

The persistent gap in graduation rates for both community college and Hmong students calls for continued research on how students achieve academic success. This study provided a description of the literacy events and practices of three Hmong women who were academically successful at a community college. Their combined practices of using literacy to meet school objectives, affirm their identities, facilitate verbal interactions, achieve goals, and learn outside of school helped lead them to academic success. In addition, these literacy practices evidenced different forms of cultural wealth that also aided the women in their persistence and success. Currently, these literacy practices are not often used in classrooms and are potentially misunderstood by instructors. The findings of this study increase the understanding of Hmong students' home and school literacy practices, confirm previous research on the importance of siblings in the homes of marginalized families, and emphasize the role of cultural wealth in academic success. Implications from this study include the need for culturally responsive pedagogy to specifically address Hmong students and integration of students' cultural wealth into community colleges.

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## APPENDIX A – INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202  
Ames, Iowa 50014  
515 294-4566

**Date:** 3/10/2017

**To:** Jody Koch  
118 Avignon Court  
Woodbury, MN 55125

**CC:** Dr. Anne Foegen  
N162D Lagomarcino Hall  
Dr. Jeanne Dyches Bissonnette  
1555A Lagomarcino Hall

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Academic and Home Literacies of Hmong Women

**IRB ID:** 17-030

**Approval Date:** 3/10/2017      **Date for Continuing Review:** 3/9/2019

**Submission Type:** New      **Review Type:** Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems** involving risks to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

**APPENDIX B – RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear <name>

Hello! How are you? I hope you had a good fall semester and are starting off spring semester well!

As you know, I am working on my dissertation this year and I wanted to tell you about my study. I have decided to study Hmong women who are in college. I want to learn about their literacy habits in and out of school. So for instance, what kind of reading and writing do you do for school projects and what do you do at home? I am also hoping to look back to see how these skills developed through your childhood.

As such, I would like to invite you to participate in the research study, if you are a Hmong or Hmong-American Female who is over 18 and currently enrolled in a higher education institution and have completed at least two semesters of community college. Participating in the study would include one interview a week for seven weeks and I would ask you to take pictures of what kinds of reading and writing you do during the week. With each picture, I'd also like you to answer some simple questions, so I have a better understanding of what you were doing.

If you are interested, please review the consent form I have attached to this email. This will tell you what exactly I am expecting from participants and the rights you have if you choose to be a participant. If you are interested in participating in the study, please email or call me and we'll plan a time where we can meet up to discuss the study more. At that time, if you decide you want to participate, it will take a few minutes to see if you qualify for the study, then you can sign the consent form and we can set-up meeting times. If after talking you don't want to participate, then you just need to tell me so. Your participation in this research is voluntary and saying yes or no will in no way effect our relationship. As a participant, you may also choose to leave the study at any time.

As a participant, you would not be compensated for your time. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this research. However, you may benefit from participating by learning more about your own literacy habits. This information may be helpful to you as a student. Any information I collect from you will be kept confidential; when I take notes, transcribe interviews, or discuss your information I will always use a pseudonym. Electronic files will be uploaded to my encrypted storage site. Any notes or physical copies of information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Additionally, if you have questions about my study, you can contact my advisor, Dr. Anne Foegen (515) 294-8373, [afoegen@iastate.edu](mailto:afoegen@iastate.edu), 1730D Lagomarcino Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

If you think this is all a little too much, I completely understand. Please email or call me before \_\_\_\_\_ <insert date> to let me know if you are interested or not. Your response will help know if I should keep looking for participants or if I can get started. Remember, saying yes or no to participating, is completely up to you. I am wishing you the best, either way.

Hope all is well!

Jody

**APPENDIX C – DOCUMENT COLLECTION INSTRUCTIONS****Weekly Photographs:**

Each week I would like you take 5 pictures of what you do that is related to literacy  
*Remember, literacy can be reading, writing, or anything else that revolves around a text, like singing or storytelling. If you're unsure if what you are doing is "literacy-related" take a picture and we can talk about it at our next interview.*

**Literacy Journal:**

For each picture I would like you to answer the following questions:

- Where is this literacy event happening?
- When is this literacy event happening?
- What are you doing?
- Who is participating in this literacy event?
- What's the purpose of this literacy event? (Why are you doing it?)
- How often does this literacy event take place (pick one or describe in your own words)
  - Often (More than once a week)
  - Occasionally (More than once a month)
  - Rarely (Less than once a month)
  - First time

You can choose how to show me these pictures. The pictures may be sent via text or email to me or you may choose to bring the pictures printed or on your own device. You can switch how you share the pictures at any point during the study. I would like to review both the pictures and journals with you once a week.

## **APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### Pre-Interview:

Discuss the meaning of “reading” and “writing” with the participants, so there is a fuller understanding of the activities that might fall into these categories.

### Interview I- Literacy History Narrative

- Tell me about yourself. (Give as much information as possible that you are comfortable sharing.)
- What do you think of when I say “literacy”?
- What language(s) do you speak with your family members? Friends? At work? At church? Other places where your language usage is different?
- What language do you most associate with yourself?
- What do you remember most about learning to read and write?
- What kinds of things do you read/ write?
- Tell me about the last thing you read or wrote.

### Interview II – Family Literacy

- When growing up, what kinds of reading did you do with other members your family?
- When growing up, what kinds of writing did you do with other members of your family?
- What kinds of reading do you do with members of your family or household now?
- What kinds of writing do you do with members of your family or household now?
- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.

### Interview III – Early Education & Literacy

- When did you begin reading and writing in Hmong?
- When did you begin reading and writing in English?
- Tell me about your best / worst experience with reading and writing at school.
- How were your reading and writing skills compared to other kids your classes?
- What else do Hmong students or teachers of Hmong students need to know about reading and writing?
- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.

### Interview IV – College Education & Literacy

- What kinds of reading and writing do you have to do for college?
- Was this reading and writing new?
  - If not, what do you think prepared you for college?
  - If yes, what did you do to be able to do “college” reading and writing?
- Tell me about reading and writing in high school versus reading and writing in college.
- Does your reading and writing ever involve working with other people, in or out of the college? If so, who? What do you do together? Why are these people helpful?

- What else do Hmong students or teachers of Hmong students need to know about reading and writing in college?
- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.

Interview V – Document Analysis (with two pieces of participant’s previous school work)

*For each document*

- Tell me about the assignment.
- How did you feel when you were completing the assignment? Were there any problems?
- Where did you complete the assignment?
- Did anyone help you complete the assignment?
- How does this assignment show who you are as a person? As a student?
- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.

Interview VI - Data Collection and Follow-Up

- Additional questions based on prior interviews and document collection
- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.

Interview VII – Final Interview

- Discuss five pictures participant took the previous week.
- Are there other literacy events that you do that we haven’t talked about in the last five weeks? If so, what are they? Why didn’t we see them in pictures?
- What have you learned from taking these pictures every week? From talking about them?
- What has surprised you about your literacy habits?
- After documenting and reflecting on your literacy habits, can you think of anything that you might change in the future?

*If participants are unsure of a question, examples may be provided.*

**APPENDIX E – CODING ILLUSTRATION**

Literacy: a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts.” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.9)

