Discovering Individualism within Unity:
An Ethnography of a Hmong Charter School

PREFACE

I am originally from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and out of all of my Canadian relatives my family is one of the few to live in the United States. Being an immigrant to Minnesota, I was forced to leave my loved ones and what I knew as a five year old, in order to have a better life filled with more opportunity for my family. When my partner Abby brought up the idea of observing a fifth grade class at Noble Academy, a Hmong charter school, I immediately formed a connection with the subculture. I thought that my experience could relate to what many of the kid’s ancestors and even parents went through, but on a smaller scale, as they traveled across the world for a better life. More importantly, I assumed I could relate to what many of the kids had to go through: finding a balance between adopting an American way of life while staying grounded in their cultural roots.

Dr. Munsterteiger, the principal of Noble Academy, served as our broker into the subculture. Noble Academy is a brand new, K-8 school made up of a majority of Hmong students, some African American students, and one Caucasian student. Because of this, I assume that there will be an obvious difference in dynamics between cultures, in turn causing them to be stay fairly separate.
I had a Hmong classmate in elementary school, and I can remember him sharing some of his Hmong family traditions, along with bringing in colorful garments made of silk that were significant to his family’s culture. This makes me think that many of the Hmong students are familiar with their heritage, and that they practice special traditions with their families often.

Based on stereotypes, I assume that this school is very loud, due to the African American students and their talkative personalities. On the other hand, I think the classroom setting will be very quiet because many of the teachers there, including Ms. Thompson who we are observing, are only English speaking, so there may be communication barriers between them and their students. I also think the teachers will be strict because they will have to keep their classes’ schedules on track, while teaching many students that are not primarily English speakers.

I am extremely excited to dive into this experience with the Hmong and African American cultures and get a better perspective on who they are as individuals and how they interact with one another as kids.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Noble Academy was founded eight years ago by its current superintendent Neil Thao. The school was originally located in an old church basement in North Minneapolis with a student population of 150. Due to increased enrollment and school funding, Noble Academy was reopened at its current location in Brooklyn Park this past September of 2015 (Munsterteiger).

Noble Academy is a Hmong charter school that has kids attending it from all over the metropolitan area. Half of the school’s maximum capacity, 625 students, are enrolled there, out
of which 85% are Hmong, 14% are African American, and 1% is White. Although it is a K-8 school, it has hopes of becoming a K-12 school in the near future (Munsterteiger).

Of the students, 76% qualify as English Language Learners, meaning they are “Non-Native speakers of English and have difficulty with written or spoken English” (Noble). Noble Academy is one of few ELL charter schools in the state of Minnesota that caters mainly towards Hmong children, so attending it is a huge opportunity for all of the Hmong students that study there. The non-Hmong students who attend Noble Academy also benefit from the school’s mission to “provide quality, relevant, and multicultural education for all students” (Noble). Noble Academy also believes that “each student will reach his/her highest potential through an educational program guiding upon their learning styles, language development, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds” (Noble).

We are observing a fifth grade classroom taught by Tia Thompson at Noble Academy. The class is made up of 32 students that consists of four African American girls and 28 Hmong girls and boys. Their daily start time is 9:00 a.m., and they are let out at 4:00 p.m. Their morning ritual begins with ELA (English Language Acquisition) followed by math, lunch, and fitness. In the afternoon, they start with Intervention, transition to science, and end their day with SSR and filling out planners.

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

7 October 2015 (12:30 p.m.-4:00 p.m.); 22 October 2015 (3:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.)

As we pulled into the Noble Academy parking lot, it didn’t feel like we were in a school parking lot in Brooklyn Park at all. When I found out the school was located by Osseo High
School and Middle School, I was expecting a more urban environment with a lot of noise and commotion. I wasn’t expecting a large, empty field of prairie grasses surrounding me with a school plopped down in the middle. As we got out of the car, I stepped down onto freshly paved tar with clean, white parking lines painted on it. The brand new feeling the lot gave off was very prevalent to me. Walking towards the school, I began to notice how calm the school grounds made me feel as I watched the newly planted prairie grass landscaping sway softly in the wind. This shocked me, considering I wouldn’t normally feel that tranquil upon entering a typical K-8 charter school due to the noise coming from students playing at recess. Then it occurred to me that there were students playing on a large, colorful playground beside the school, but the level of chaos coming from it was very low. I came to the realization that this school was not only quieter than most city charter schools, but it was also very well-funded due to the expensive playground equipment there.

I watched as a class walked in a neat single file line towards the front doors. An outsider would have never guessed they were coming from recess based on how well behaved they were. The students were wearing black pants, black dress shoes, and blue “I Love Noble” tee shirts. The uniforms stood out as an artifact to show that this was a charter school that didn’t need the distraction of student fashion within its hallways. Dr. Munsterteiger, Noble Academy’s new principal as of this school year, introduced us to the students and their teacher, Ms. Thompson, a young, cute woman with a short dirty blonde bob. She looked like she was fresh out of college, and like this was her first professional teaching job.

Before accepting a teaching position at Noble, Tia Thompson applied to several schools in the metro area, but she instantly had a special connection with Noble Academy.
“It is student centered, and the students are phenomenal.” she said. “The kids are so great.”

Thompson grew up in Wisconsin and lived in what she calls “white suburbia”. That is why her students having less educational opportunity immediately stood out to her during her first year of teaching at Noble Academy.

“They don’t have the transportation, money, or exposure.” Thompson said.

The students struggle with certain curriculum, especially reading, and this stood out to her as well.

“School was always really easy for me, so it’s harder for me to go into their mindset.”

As we walked through the front doors and into the foyer, it was amazing how beautiful the inside of the school was. I spoke to Dr. Munsterteiger and he mentioned how much the overall experience for students and staff attending Noble Academy has changed since being at the new location.

“It was really incredible that they started the school in a basement of a church in Brooklyn Park.” he said. “The facilities are so nice, it is located in a much safer neighborhood, which should draw more students to the school.”

Dr. Munsterteiger was a School Psychologist at West St. Paul-Mendota Heights Public Schools and a Special Education Administrator at Osseo Area Schools before becoming the principal at Noble Academy. Although many people would assume that his role at a city charter school like Noble requires having to deal with a lot of student behavioral issues, it is actually the complete opposite.
“I haven’t been involved in a single significant behavioral incident with a Hmong student.” Munsterteiger said. “One of the reasons they are so well behaved at school is that the parents have instilled in students that school is very important, and they value education very highly. They see a good education as being a vehicle for a better life.”

The front office was small and made up completely of windows. It was set aside from the main entryway that led into the rest of the school, making it easy for visitors to gain access to the students and staff. Artifacts like the low front desk and glass surroundings added to the accessibility of the office itself. Based on increasing school security issues throughout the country today, it was shocking to see how the front office layout made entering the school so easy.

The main part of the school was one wide open space. Straight ahead was what seemed like 200 meters of cafeteria with high ceilings and one large floor to ceiling window that spanned the end wall. Asian inspired awnings hung over the lunch line area and a few other places that seemed fitting. This showed the school’s commitment to having artifacts that cater specifically towards Hmong students and their culture.

“We celebrate the Hmong New Year, and every student in the school takes a Hmong cultural class as well.” Dr. Munsterteiger said.

Throughout the hallways on the second floor, lockers closed and hand dryers blew as Hmong students made their way back to class after lunch. What struck me as different was the fact that none of the noise was from students talking. A ritual that is very prevalent when inside the schools I attended, whether it be Hanover Elementary or Buffalo Community Middle School, is the buzz of voices that can be heard while kids transition from their lockers to class. Walking
through this hallway, someone would have thought they were in a Lifetime Fitness locker room with everyone minding their own business, rather than a K-8 charter school.

Positive words of encouragement were stuck all over the outside of Ms. Thompson’s classroom door that reminded her students what they were when they entered the classroom. This stood out as an artifact that supported Noble Academy in providing an exemplary learning environment for its students.

Inside, the room’s cream walls were covered in crafty art displays that Ms. Thompson made, along with fun educational posters, and past projects students had done. These artifacts showed how similar this classroom was to many traditional fifth grade classrooms that are not a part of Hmong charter schools.

Another floor to ceiling window took over half of the far wall, which allowed a lot of natural light to shine into the already cheerful room. Fifteen new computer stations lined the far corner of the room, and a Smartboard hung on the front wall facing four rows of curved desks. Although the updated technology in the classroom added to the similarities it shared with today’s traditional elementary classroom environments, the number of permanent computer stations in the room didn’t follow the common elementary ritual of visiting the computer lab. Noble Academy’s funding allowed this classroom, and all of the others throughout the school to have their own personal set of computers in order to promote the usage of more individualized learning.

“Technology allows teachers to individualize curriculum for the students because the online program allows students to work at their own individual level.” Dr. Munsterteiger said.
The class was split into two fairly evenly distributed groups before one group left for Art while the other group waited for Ms. Thompson to give instructions. Although the students were united as a class in the beginning, they were split up based on their reading abilities which proves that not every moment or level of understanding is shared by all.

Ms. Thompson asked everyone except for two of the students to join her in a circle in the front of the room. These students read passages out loud to each other, while the other two students worked at computers because they were not in need of the reading practice.

“You’ll see varying abilities within the kids.” Munsterteiger said. “The degree in which they struggle in learning to read depends on how well they can speak English.”

Based on this, it can be said that the students sitting in the circle are not as fluent in English as the two kids at the computers.

Most of the students in the circle read their passages quietly and inconsistently, needing help from Ms. Thompson every once in awhile. They all repeated the phrase, “Read one 2R book every week.” a few times, and this supported the idea that learning to read English well was one of the biggest priorities for the ELL students in this classroom.

When everyone transitioned to the computers to work on their online reading assignments, a Hmong boy named Jacob held the role of being the hardest worker there. His face looked serious as he intently concentrated on reading a passage on his computer screen and whispering the words under his breath at the same time. This was a reading ritual he had in order to maintain his word fluency and pronunciation.

Jacob was born in California before moving to Brooklyn Park, Minnesota and coming to Noble Academy in the second grade. He is the oldest of nine siblings who all speak Hmong at
home, including his parents who only speak Hmong. The subject he finds hardest in school is expected, considering his background.

“Reading.” he said very softly, but with no hesitation.

Based on his family life and the way he was brought up, it makes sense that speaking Hmong comes much easier to him than speaking English. This explains the persistent struggle he faces with reading English.

He raised his hand a little while later, and Ms. Thompson came over to listen to him read a passage out loud. He brought his face closer to the screen and guided his finger along with his eyes as he speed through the reading. Ms. Thompson then said, “It looked like you practiced a lot Jacob.”

Based on the wide variety of reading levels among students at Noble Academy, a large responsibility the teachers have is to recognize when students, like Jacob, are striving to get to the next level of their learning ability in various subjects.

“Teachers are really held accountable for students showing academic growth throughout the school year.” Dr. Munsterteiger said.

A Hmong girl named Penelope who seemed very intelligent for her age, stood out by having read the most books in the entire class. She was in the other group that Jacob was not a part of. This was Penelope’s first year at Noble Academy, after previously attending Jenny Lind Elementary in North Minneapolis. She enjoys school more this year because there are almost no behavioral issues at Noble Academy, something she had to deal with a lot at her previous school.

“More people get in trouble there.” Penelope said.
This reaffirms that Noble Academy is different than many typical city schools because there is no violence, despite the variety of demographics students come from.

“There is a really, really big geographic area everyone comes from.” Munsterteiger said. “There is just really a lot of good teachers here.”

Noble Academy has a total of 44 teachers, ten of which are Hmong. Most of them attended colleges or universities in the midwest and a few taught in other countries such as Korea and Ecuador (Noble). Having teachers with a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds allows students at Noble Academy to connect with them more easily and build student-teacher stronger relationships.

Both of Penelope’s parents were born in Thailand, and they speak both Hmong and English. As a family they speak mostly English which helps explain why Penelope is so good at reading and writing. She has more experience with this language since she speaks it a lot at home whereas kids like Jacob practice Hmong at home more often, therefore having less experience with English.

The only two African American girls in the class sat at the computers farthest away from the Hmong students, subtly indicating a divide between the two cultures in the classroom. The African American girls were more talkative and confident, while the Hmong kids were more quiet and shy. This observation supports my assumptions that at Noble Academy, the African American students’ role is to be very outgoing and the Hmong students’ role is to be more soft spoken.

A tall African American girl with short, red-streaked curls came bouncing into the room as the rest of the class came back from Art. She waved to no one in particular as she took her seat
at her desk. Her name is Syrena, and she started attending Noble Academy in Kindergarten. She enjoys interacting with her peers the most at Noble Academy, considering her friend group she pointed out included almost everyone in the class.

“The kids are very supportive and nice.” Syrena said.

Despite her loud, dynamic personality at school, Syrena also has an introverted side to her personality. She loves to read at the park and sew with her friends outside of school. This counteracts my assumptions and shows that although the students at Noble Academy have social roles based on their race, that is only taking into account the side of their personalities they show at school.

With the other group, the 2R reading group, now in art, Ms. Thompson asked the other group, the White reading group, what they did in art class. To my surprise, almost every student’s hand shot up. It didn’t seem like that exciting of a question to ask fifth graders, but they were all so eager to dive into the details of what they had done. In my fifth grade class at Hanover Elementary, there wouldn’t have been so many raised hands, but instead many bored and tired faces. This reminded me that many of the kid’s parents instill in their minds that going to school at Noble Academy is a privilege and not a right. Therefore, they do not take anything, even a simple question, for granted.

Ms. Thompson called on a student, and she said they had brainstormed ideas for a story they were going to write. Based on the task they had at hand, it was obvious that the students in the White reading group, had a higher level of reading and writing skills than students in the 2R reading group, who were at 3rd and 4th grade reading levels.
Both groups were reunited in Ms. Thompson’s classroom before they resumed their science experiment of using a pipet to see how many water droplets could fit onto different American coins. Penelope was chosen by Ms. Thompson to conduct the experiment on the Smartboard projector in front of the class. Penelope then chose Hayley, another Hmong girl, to be the next volunteer. This caused one boy to whine, “Pick a boy!” out of frustration. This comment shows the common boy-girl bickering that occurs with kids this age in every elementary school.

Everyone intently watched and counted out loud as Hayley placed one drop of water at a time onto a dime. The kids were buzzing with excitement as the number of drops and tiny dome of water got bigger and bigger. Throughout the activity, Ms. Thompson told them multiple times to keep their noise at a level zero, as she sent a handful of kids to the back of the room to take a break or flip their green card on its side. They did this very obediently and did not seem upset, but humbled instead. This shows that Ms. Thompson’s students are knowledgeable of the rules she sets and the ritualistic consequences that take place if they are not followed.

Ms. Thompson chose Peter, a petite Hmong boy who was being quiet throughout the entire experiment, to be the last volunteer. Peter went to Jordan Park Academy before transferring to Noble Academy in first grade due to violence in the school. His favorite part about attending Noble Academy is the quality educational experience he receives everyday.

“I like learning new stuff every single day.” Peter said.

A brother to eight siblings, Peter was born in California, and his parents were both born in Laos. He and his family speak Hmong at home, but English is easier for him. Peter was the only one out of every Hmong student we talked to that celebrated some Hmong traditions, like
Hmong New Year, with their family. This supports the idea that many immigrants conform to American culture and adopt the specific lifestyle almost subconsciously. Contrarily, Peter’s parents fall into the category of immigrants who contribute to the cultural melting pot that America is by keeping their Hmong traditions alive and passing them down generation to generation.

CONCLUSION

Before I walked into Ms. Thompson’s fifth grade classroom, I had the assumption that all of the students attending Noble Academy were similar based on their cultural backgrounds and their reasons for attending a Hmong charter school. Based on my initial introduction to Thompson’s class, I didn’t see her students as kids with unique personalities. I saw them as Hmong and African American students with similar personality traits based on their race, who were dressed in identical school uniforms.

After observing the Thompson’s fifth grade students for just a short period of time, I quickly realized that each child has their own special way of making the most out of their educational experience. Students, like Jacob, who struggle reading English because their families speak only Hmong at home, have different ways of learning new things compared to students, like Syrena, who speak only English at home. Cultural traditions practiced among the students vary greatly depending on their families priorities and what kind of lifestyle they want to live as Americans. Personality traits are dependent upon the type of person each student is rather than where they came from.
Observing at Noble Academy made me realize how much I enjoy learning about other cultures that are foreign to me and observing how they complete simple, everyday tasks. I especially enjoy engaging with the students at Noble Academy and learning what their perspectives are on their past and present experiences. I plan on going back to Noble Academy with Abby in the near future, just so we can visit the kids again and help Ms. Thompson. Being there makes me feel like I am apart of something bigger than my everyday self.

I believe the future of Noble Academy is very bright due to the increasing amount of parents finding out about it, therefore allowing more students to attend it. I think it will evolve into a K-12 school within the next few years and hopefully become a trailblazer for more Hmong charter schools in Minnesota that provide students with quality educational experiences.

Although Noble Academy is made up of 625 unique student personalities, I know that they all share at least one belief that keeps them united: attending Noble Academy is a privilege that they were granted in order to achieve goals as learners in school and as people in life.

Works Cited

