

RESEARCH STUDY SNAPSHOT

HONORING THE VOICES OF HMONG EARLY EDUCATORS AND CULTURAL CAREGIVERS IN WISCONSIN

OVERVIEW

In 2024, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA) partnered with Dr. Toshiba Adams, Ph.D., and field researcher Sandie Thao to better understand the workforce experiences of early educators who identify as Hmong in Wisconsin – a population whose stories remain largely invisible in state workforce policy discussions, research narratives, and early education decision-making spaces (Brayboy, 2006). Study participants were recruited from July to December. Ten Hmong early educators shared their workforce stories, which illuminated the cultural knowledge they bring to their work and the ways that systemic inequities impact their well-being, professional advancement, and community leadership. By centering their voices, the research seeks to inform policies and practices that honor cultural caregiving, advance racial equity and strengthen early childhood systems.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

RACE: Neeg/Hmong (9) and Hmong/African American (1)

AGE: 18-79 years

YEARS IN THE FIELD: 1-15 years

GENDER: All study participants identify as female

PRIMARY LANGUAGE: Lus Hmoob Dawb or White Hmong (8); Lus Hmoob Ntsuab or Green Hmong (1) and Lus Askiv or English (1)

CAREGIVING ROLES: family child care-based educators (5); licensed group center floater (1); cultural caregivers (4)

CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early educators of color bring distinct cultural knowledge, histories, and lived experiences to their work (Brayboy, 2006; Yosso, 2006), positioning them to critically examine workforce systems and offer informed recommendations for building equitable and culturally responsive early education policies and practices (Adams, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2006). Key aspects of Hmong cultural strength include strong familial and community bonds, interdependence among community members, and the preservation of spiritual and healing traditions through clan leaders and shamans (UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, 2009). Despite this, the experiences of Hmong early educators – particularly women - remain largely invisible in early education workforce spaces (Brayboy, 2006).

In Wisconsin, this exclusion is reflected in the limited availability of high-quality Hmong child care programs, the persistence of poverty-level wages, the lack of culturally responsive professional development and mental health supports and ongoing tensions between state licensing systems and Hmong cultural practices (Adams, 2023, 2025). It is further compounded by a failure to recognize the vital role of Hmong cultural caregivers - those who preserve the Hmong language, traditions, and identity through informal caregiving practices (Adams, 2025, forthcoming; Yahr, 2024).

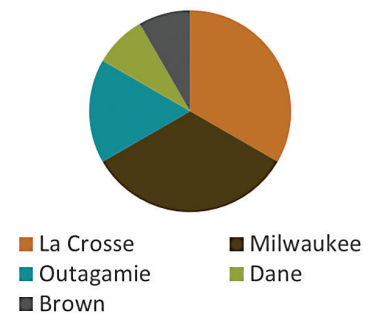
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Five core themes emerged from the qualitative interviews, including:

"WE ARE HMONG, YOU KNOW?": Early educators voiced a resistance to the dominance of Eurocentric curricular models that exclude or marginalize non-Western cultures, particularly describing tension between Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) curricula guidelines and Hmong values and histories.



County of Residence



“IN THE HMONG COMMUNITY, WE’RE ALL RELATED”: Early educators discussed the important role of cultural caregiving, which often occurs outside of licensed systems due to a mistrust of child care licensing structures as well as a desire to preserve Hmong culture. They perceived this practice of cultural caregiving and cultural preservation to best support child development.

“THE ONLY TIME I CAN’T LOVE YOU IS WHEN I’M NO LONGER ALIVE”: Participants described working long hours while receiving poverty-level compensation or none at all. This theme illuminates the deep level of exhaustion (emotional, physical, financial and mental) experienced by Hmong early educators who provide both paid and unpaid caregiving. Yet, many of them remain deeply committed to their families and the preservation of the Hmong culture.

“LOSING OUR TONGUE”: Participants recognized signs of cultural decline, particularly among the younger generation - and predominantly blamed this shift on the prevalence of mainstream educational structures that rarely encourage, require, or support the integration of Hmong language, cultural practices, or historical narratives. As a result, some educators feel pressure to conform to mainstream standards that fail to reflect their identity.

LICENSING AND QUALITY RATING SYSTEMS: Participants described feeling excluded, misunderstood, and undervalued within Wisconsin’s early education infrastructure - particularly in the areas of DCF licensing, YoungStar technical assistance, and professional development offerings.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To build a stronger, more equitable early education system that serves all children and families, Wisconsin’s early education policies must intentionally honor and center the experiences, cultural strengths, and contributions of Hmong early educators - ensuring that future workforce policies are informed by those most impacted and designed to meet the needs of diverse communities. With this in mind, Wisconsin needs to advance policy that:

- Recognizes the important role of cultural caregivers and the Hmong cultural traditions;
- Develops inclusive licensing and YoungStar pathways;
- Funds professional development offerings designed in collaboration with Hmong early educators, cultural caregivers, and cultural leaders;
- Supports rural communities and addresses child care deserts;
- Collects and disaggregates workforce data to illuminate the unique needs of Hmong educators; and
- Establishes advisory committees or working groups that include Hmong educators.

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