

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

*An Executive Summary
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SANKOFA
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INTRODUCTION

Early educators of color bring distinct cultural knowledge, histories, and lived experiences to their work (Brayboy, 2006; Yosso, 2006). These assets position them to critically examine workforce systems and offer informed recommendations for creating equitable and culturally responsive early education policies and practices (Adams, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2006). Yet, within this diverse workforce, Hmong early educators and *cultural caregivers* remain particularly overlooked in institutional discourse, workforce policy development, and research narratives (Brayboy, 2006).

Background and Historical Context

The Hmong people, an ethnic group originating from Southeast Asia, are ethnically and linguistically distinct from Asian populations in the region (Facts and Details, 2019). This differentiation is illustrated through their unique history, dialect, language, and cultural practices (Facts and Details, 2019; Hmong American Center, 2018). A part of Hmong history includes them being recruited by the United States government to fight against Laos in the Vietnam War and later experiencing persecution, by Pathet Lao, forcing them to flee to refugee camps in Thailand and the U.S. (UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, 2009). In 2018, it was reported that approximately 230,000 Hmong individuals are living in the U.S., with the majority living in California (80,000), Minnesota (70,000) and Wisconsin (50,000) (Hmong American Center, 2018).

Despite historical displacement and resettlement, Hmong communities in the U.S. have preserved rich cultural strengths essential to their survival and identity (Yosso, 2006; UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, 2009). These strengths include close familial and community bonds, interdependence among community members, and the continued presence of traditional practices led by community-based organizations, clan leaders, and spiritual healers known as shamans (UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, 2009).

While Hmong communities demonstrate resilience and make significant contributions, they continue to face persistent economic hardship, language barriers, and underrepresentation in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and policymaking in the U.S. (Adler, 2009; Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2020; Gordon, 2023; UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities, 2009). Their experiences often are obscured by the *model minority* stereotype, a generalization that masks the unique challenges and disparities faced by Hmong populations and other marginalized Asian ethnic groups (Cheryan, 2000; Lee et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Ruiz & Tian, 2023; Wu, 2013).

In Wisconsin, as it pertains to the system of early education, this historical 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 (including YoungStar, its quality rating and improvement

KEY DEFINITIONS

Early Educators: Individuals who have an educational background in the field of early care and education and who work in a child care program that is certified or licensed by Wisconsin Department of Children and Family (DCF).

Cultural Caregiving: A model rooted in Hmong cultural values that prioritizes self-reliance, familial obligation and community support – often without expectation or desire for support from institutions that are perceived as intrusive or culturally incongruent.

system) and Hmong cultural practices (Adams, 2025; Yahr, 2004). It is further compounded by caregiving labor being systemically perceived as *women's work*, predominantly reserved for Black and Brown women (Hill Collins, 1986, 2004), and a universal 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).

Such systemic exclusion underscores the need for an expanded understanding of early education – one that moves beyond formal systems like licensed child care to include the informal yet vital contributions of Hmong early educators. Through a partnership with Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA), Dr. Adams led a qualitative research study to specifically highlight the insights, challenges and contributions of Hmong early educators in Wisconsin, including their role as *cultural caregivers*. Throughout this report, the term *cultural caregiving* is used to describe the culturally rooted, family-based care practices carried out by Hmong families and community members. Honoring these practices is essential to recognizing the full spectrum of early education experiences within Hmong communities and advancing equity in Wisconsin's early childhood workforce.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the lived experiences of Hmong early educators, including cultural caregivers, in Wisconsin?

How do Hmong early educators navigate cultural expectations and systemic barriers in their caregiving roles?

What forms of support do Hmong early educators identify as necessary for their sustainability and well-being?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2006)

Exemplifies the strengths Hmong educators bring to their work, including aspirational, linguistic, familial, navigational and resistant capital.

Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Belinsky et al., 2011)

Values the voices of Hmong educators, including them in meaning-making and cooperative policy development.

Asian Crit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Rodriguez & Kim, 2018)

Interrogates racism and exclusion within the experiences of Hmong Americans.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**STORYTELLING
METHOD**

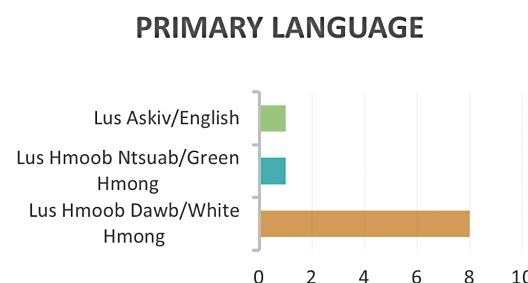
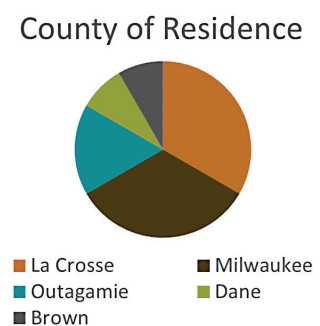
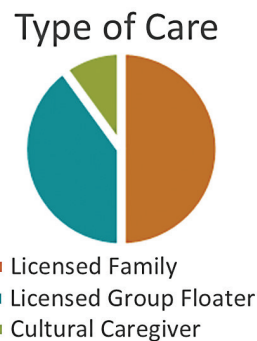
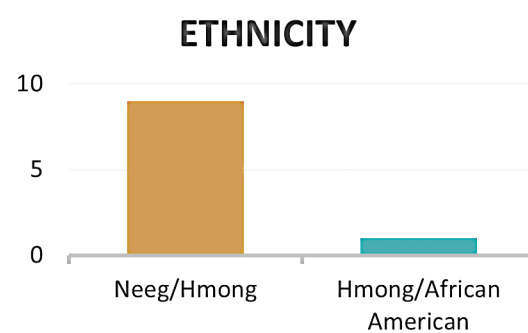
**INDIVIDUAL
INTERVIEWS
(10)**

**FOLLOW-UP
INTERVIEWS
VIA EMAIL**

Data Collection and Methods

- *Storytelling or counternarratives* were adopted to acknowledge the experiential knowledge of Hmong early educators (Chang, 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).
- Data collection transpired from September to December 2024.
- A marketing flier was disseminated through social media posts, personal and professional connections and Wisconsin Early Childhood Association's (WECA) listservs.
- The researcher asked respondents who completed interviews to refer others for the study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2001).
- A demographic survey was disseminated to the 10 respondents, ensuring participant diversity (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender, language, career/education level, caregiving role, etc.).
- First-round interviews were conducted with each respondent and second-round/follow-up data was collected via email for clarification purposes.
 - Nine interviews were conducted virtually and one was conducted via phone.
 - Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.
 - The study prioritized relational trust (Pharr et al., 2014) and Hmong cultural norms of relational knowledge-sharing by conducting one interview with a mother and her daughter.
- All interviews were conducted by a research assistant who identifies as Hmong and is fluent in Hmong language (Berger, 2013).
- Each interview was recorded, with permission from the respondent, and transcribed verbatim in preparation for the analysis process.
- Consent forms were read out loud during the onset of the interviews and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants, affiliated employers, and early education programs (Creswell, 2014).

Participant Profile



AGE: 18-79 years

YEARS IN THE FIELD: 1-15 years

GENDER: All respondents identify as female.

EDUCATION: Infant/Toddler Credential (1); left the field, completed a Ph.D. in Educational Policy (1); bachelor's degree in Human Development (1); obtained certificates in Medical Billing and Web Design (2).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through the process of coding the data according to key concepts that emerged between and across participant narratives. These recurring concepts are presented as emergent themes in accordance to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks (Cresswell, 2014). This process of coding resulted in five major themes being identified for this study, 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.

“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.

FINDINGS

“WE ARE HMONG, YOU KNOW?: RESISTING ERASURE, EUROCENTRIC CURRICULUM IDEOLOGIES AND PRESERVING HMONG WAYS OF BEING

Hmong early educators in this study voiced a resistance to the dominance of Eurocentric curricular models that often exclude or marginalize non-Western cultures. Some respondents described a tension between DCF state-approved curricula guidelines and the cultural values and histories they sought to impart in Hmong children. Sarah illuminated this tension when sharing how important it is to “...keep the culture and stuff alive...Because, I mean, we are Hmong, you know?” Overall, participants described how traditional early education settings often fail to reflect the values, languages, or lived experiences of Hmong children and families. In response to these limitations, some educators sought to counter this erasure by embedding Hmong culture into their daily teaching practice. One powerful form of resisting Eurocentrism included the intentional way that a participant who works at a group center program integrated multilingualism into her program routines. She shared:

I'm actually getting a lot of like, diverse um, diverse kids, which is Hmong and African American...Like they don't speak Hmong...to their kids. And, me, I try to teach them... little things like "thank you". And then I have a kid which is White, and...every time... I give him something, he always says...ua tsaug [thank you]. And, his mom came and she's like, "You know what he said to me the other day? ua tsaug." So it makes me feel good because it's kind of like...we start learning a second language.

"IN THE HMONG COMMUNITY, WE'RE ALL RELATED": CULTURAL CAREGIVING, CHILD DEVELOPMENT, MISTRUST FOR "THE SYSTEM" AND SETTING FAMILY BOUNDARIES

The Hmong cultural caregivers, highlighted in this study, feel more comfortable keeping care within the community where trust, language, and cultural congruency are more easily preserved. Thus, *cultural caregiving* often occurs outside of licensed systems due to a deeply rooted mistrust of child care licensing structures as well as a deep desire to preserve Hmong culture – a practice respondents believe best supports child development. While caring for relatives enforces familial trust and aids in sustaining traditional Hmong cultural practices, for some, demands of cultural caregiving come at the expense of their own emotional/social well-being and self-preservation, thus, illustrating the need to establish clear family/work boundaries. The narratives captured under this theme highlight how cultural care not only reflects cultural strengths but also exposes the complexity of caregiving labor among Hmong women where cultural preservation and community obligation intersect, often with little institutional support.

"THE ONLY TIME I CAN'T LOVE YOU IS WHEN I'M NO LONGER ALIVE": THE INTERSECTION OF LOVE AND THE BURDEN OF WOMEN'S WORK

Participants described working long hours, with many earning poverty-level compensation or none at all. Overall, early educators self-reported annual salaries that fall well below the federal poverty line (Department of Health & Human Services, 2025). For those engaged in cultural caregiving, it is often assumed to be a cultural responsibility rather than a compensated role. Educators describe the deep level of exhaustion (i.e., emotional, physical, financial and mental) they experience while providing both paid and unpaid caregiving. One respondent shared the following about kinship care, highlighting how the historical interconnectedness (see Hill-Collins, 1986, 2004) of being Hmong and woman, even today, perpetuates ideologies of care work as women's work.

...it does come from, like a sense of community like that too, where, you know, I feel like you can't say "No" [to kinship care] ... I think it does stem from the Hmong culture of ... being the Yes Man ... where you just have to go with it ... which I think it's been ingrained, especially into like the Hmong women [to serve as caregivers].

"LOSING OUR TONGUE": ASSIMILATION, MAINSTREAM STRUCTURES AND CULTURAL SHIFTS IN THE HMONG TRADITION

Although many elders and cultural caregivers continue to uphold and encourage the Hmong culture (i.e., food, language, unveiling and resisting forms of oppression, etc.), participants recognized signs of cultural decline, particularly among the younger generation. They predominantly blamed this shift on the prevalence of mainstream educational structures that uphold dominant norms. Participants emphasized that early education programs and child care licensing structures also play a significant role in this cultural erosion. These systems rarely encourage, require, or support the integration of

Hmong language, cultural practices, or historical narratives into the curriculum. As a result, even culturally rooted educators feel pressure to conform to mainstream standards that fail to reflect their identity. The lack of institutional recognition for Hmong heritage contributes to a broader marginalization and invisibility of the community within formal early education settings.

LICENSING, QUALITY RATING SYSTEMS AND OTHER ELEMENTS OF EXCLUSION

Participants described feeling excluded, misunderstood, and undervalued within Wisconsin's early education infrastructure, particularly in the areas of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) licensing, YoungStar technical assistance and professional development offerings. While some acknowledged DCF's recent improvements, such as the translation of materials, implementation of paid vacation policies and "monthly bonus," many described experiences of confusion, frustration, and cultural mismatch when navigating systems meant to support them. They complained about a growing child care gap within Hmong communities, particularly for families living in rural areas of Wisconsin, and explained how their access to high-quality child care is further limited due to poverty and lack of transportation. As a result, many Hmong families are forced to rely on informal kinship networks, forgo paid employment to stay home until their children reach school age, or go without consistent child care support altogether. This theme underscores the difficult trade-offs many Hmong families make in the absence of accessible and affordable child care. It also highlights the urgency of addressing rural access disparities through targeted investments and culturally responsive support.

In addition to geographic and economic challenges, participants expressed a need for accessible, language specific and affordable professional development opportunities tailored to their individual and cultural needs. Many described a desire to expand their knowledge in content areas, such as, child development, behavioral guidance, stress management, activity/curriculum development, supporting children with differing abilities, meal prepping and business management. While experiential learning is a respected source of cultural wealth, all study participants expressed a desire to access more formal types of professional development but felt constrained by inaccessible services and opportunities.

For many study participants, the realities of their work schedules often make participation in traditional in-person professional development options impossible. One participant shared she routinely works a double shift in her home-based program to increase her income, leaving little time or energy for attending professional development sessions outside of her home.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study illustrate both the strengths and systemic barriers experienced by Hmong early educators and cultural caregivers across Wisconsin. Participants shared stories of resilience, cultural pride, and commitment to child and community well-being. Simultaneously, they highlighted critical areas of policy and practice that require reform if Wisconsin is to become a more equitable and culturally responsive state for early education.

This study also disrupts the *model minority myth* (Cheryan, 2000; Lee et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Ruiz & Tian, 2023; Wu, 2013) often applied to Asian American populations. While this narrative portrays Asian Americans as uniformly successful, Hmong early educators in Wisconsin experience deep inequities - low wages, laborious work shifts, mental distress, systemic exclusion, language barriers and lack of access to culturally responsive supports (including high quality early education programming).

The findings affirm the importance of disaggregating data and policy responses to acknowledge the distinct histories and challenges faced by Hmong communities.

Caregivers, situated in this study, are navigating emotional, physical, financial, cultural, and other structural burdens with little institutional support. This research reveals that caregiving is deeply relational and culturally embedded, yet undervalued and taxing. It aligns with and extends frameworks like *Community Cultural Wealth* and *AsianCrit* (Brayboy, 2006; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yosso, 2006), emphasizing that caregivers continue to resist erasure by preserving culture and advocating for change.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of Hmong early educators who participated in this study. These recommendations are intended to guide policymakers, agency leaders, and early childhood stakeholders in designing more equitable, culturally responsive systems of support. They reflect what Hmong early educators say they need—not only to survive within the early childhood system but also to lead, thrive, and preserve the cultural values that shape their caregiving and communal practices.

Culturally Responsive Licensing

- Revise licensing protocols to acknowledge and honor cultural caregiving practices.
- Require cultural humility and equity training for licensors and technical consultants.
- Ensure all guidance is clearly communicated and accessible in Hmong and other primary languages.
- Hire an adequate number of Hmong licensors and technical advisors to support Hmong early educators.
- Require all programs to implement an anti-bias/anti-racist curriculum to ensure that all children have opportunities to see themselves, their families and their communities represented within programming.
 - To resolve barriers in access, professional development options should be made available to all early educators across Wisconsin at no-cost. Additionally, services should be offered in various languages.
- Provide workforce bonuses (i.e., weekly, monthly) to compensate early educators for (non-contact) tasks that require additional time and commitment, for example, curriculum planning, observations and administrative tasks.
- Reform family-based child:teacher licensing regulations to allow family child care professionals to care for more than 8 children.

Recognize and support cultural caregiving as a vital part of the Hmong tradition. Support elders and family members who serve as unpaid caregivers.

- Provide relevant professional development opportunities and resources to support family members who serve as cultural caregivers.
- Ensure support services are offered in the Hmong language, delivered by a Hmong professional.

Strengthen YoungStar's Equity Lens

- Improve technical assistance timelines and offer consulting/training to technical consultants in culturally affirming ways of serving Hmong communities.
- Hire and retain Hmong technical advisors.

Expand Access to Culturally Grounded Early Education Professional Development & Literacy Programming

- Fully fund virtual and online professional development options.
- Offer early education/child development professional development opportunities in the Hmong language, delivered by Hmong professionals. Integrate Hmong cultural approaches to caregiving, discipline, and education.
- Provide no-cost access to ELL, ESL and GED services to early educators and family members to help bridge access to systems of higher education.
- Ensure that resources are translated to the Hmong language.
- Postsecondary systems should offer cohort model curriculum pathways in the Hmong language, delivered by Hmong professionals.

Support Rural Communities and Address Child Care Deserts

- Invest in transportation and rural access grants.
- Incentivize the creation and sustainability of programs in rural Hmong communities.
 - Provide long-term and free technical assistance in the area of program start-up and business management.
 - Offer lofty grants to cover start-up costs.
 - Ensure that all support is offered in the Hmong language, delivered by Hmong professionals.
- Advocate for legislation that will ensure that early educators access a living wage compensation.

Elevate the Role of Hmong Educators in Policy Co-Design

- Continue conducting rigorous – community based and culturally responsive - research to learn directly from the Hmong early educators in an effort to co-design equitable support systems that respond directly to their communal and cultural needs.
- Form Hmong educator advisory groups, including those who assume cultural caregiving roles, to co-create licensing, technical assistance, and professional development practices.
 - Compensate educators for their time and commitment.
 - Provide leadership pathways and compensation for community-based experts.

Culturally responsive mentally health support

- Provide no-cost culturally responsive mentally health support/services to Hmong early educators and cultural caregivers.
- Ensure services align with the Hmong culture and offered in the Hmong language by a Hmong professional.
- Develop and disseminate culturally responsive mental health resources and toolkits for professionals in the field (translated in multiple languages to support all early educators and cultural caregivers). The toolkit can include (but not limited to) articles, mental health provider resources, videos, meditation/yoga exercises, health/nutrition guidance, etc.

Sustain and Expand Supportive Policies

- Maintain, expand public policies like paid vacation time for early educators.
- Extend Child Care Counts funding.



Pathways to connect families to service providers

- Minimize service gaps and relational trust by ensuring that early education state-level leaders and those providing support services mirror the racial, ethnical, cultural and linguistic demographics of those being served.

Living Wage Compensation

- Ensure that early educators across Wisconsin gain access to a livable wage compensation (including affordable benefit structures) that aligns with their years of experience, educational attainment and worth as early educators.

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