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Growing Up American

How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States

Min Zhou
Carl L. Bankston III

Russell Sage Foundation • New York

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Chapter 6

Experiences in Adaptation to American Schools

Thuy Trang Nguyen, 14, of Harvey, Louisiana, was chosen as the 1995 Middle School Student of the Year in the Jefferson Parish School District. Nguyen had won the school district's Superintendent's Award every year since 1987 and first place in her school's social studies fair and second place in the regional competition. Teachers praised her character as humble but determined. Nguyen herself gave all the credit for her school success to her refugee parents. "I don't ever want to let them down," she wrote in an essay for the Student of the Year competition. "When my parents first immigrated from Vietnam, they spent every waking hour working hard in order to support a family. They have sacrificed for me, and I am willing to do anything for them" (*New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 20, 1995).

The preceding chapters have shown that Vietnamese children in the United States suffer from a lack of proficiency in English and from straitened socioeconomic circumstances. For both these reasons, we might expect Vietnamese children to lag behind their American peers in academic achievement. On the contrary, Vietnamese children have adapted surprisingly well to the American educational system in a relatively short period of time. Over the past ten years or so, Vietnamese children have come to excel academically not only by the standards expected of a new refugee group but also by comparison with segments of the established population. They have been particularly successful in science and mathematics, which are weak areas for native-born students, and have started to win top awards at schools across the country (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Rumbaut 1995; Rutledge 1992; Skinner 1984; Spence 1985). They have been doing so well, in fact, that teachers and educational researchers often see them as bringing new life into deteriorating urban public schools, and their parents have been proud to see them attain prestigious occupations as doctors, lawyers, college professors, and engineers.

This chapter examines what determines who will actually achieve aca-

demic success. It focuses on the changing social environment of American schools into which Vietnamese children are received and on the various levels of the social structure that most immediately affect these children's experiences in schools.

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

For the second generation, acquiring skills and credentials is a crucial step in upward mobility in American society. Since immigrant groups arrive in the United States with the hope of moving ahead, education often comes to occupy a central place in their aspirations (Ogbu 1974, 1983, 1989, 1991). The same motivation holds true for refugees, notwithstanding their initially involuntary flight and their lack of preparation for permanent resettlement in a foreign land. In short order, most of them orient themselves toward adaptation to their host country, rather than toward a return to their land of origin. They are therefore likely to establish goals for themselves and for their children in ways similar to those of immigrants.

The availability of education in America and its consequences for mobility in the host society have profoundly reshaped the traditional expectations that Vietnamese refugees brought with them. Vietnamese culture, influenced by Confucianism, traditionally placed a high value on education, but educational opportunities in Vietnam were limited by class and gender; only young men of privileged families were encouraged to obtain an education and were able to do so. In the United States, by contrast, the refugees have found schooling available not only to the privileged classes but also to those from largely uneducated rural backgrounds and to women. Consequently, the traditional Vietnamese view of education as a source of prestige has made parents eager to make use of the American school system. The pattern of response among the Vietnamese cannot be understood, however, without reference to the changes in urban American schools that have come to challenge parents' expectations about educational achievement.

Inequality and Polarization in American Public Schools

In America, public education is open to all, but availability does not guarantee that children of immigrants will succeed in school as well as

their parents expect. Children of different racial/ethnic and class backgrounds face profound inequalities in their educational experiences, despite the school desegregation movement in the 1950s and 1960s and numerous federal educational reforms. The influential Coleman Report, released in 1966, reported that most children continued to attend schools segregated by race and class, even after twelve years of reform following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court outlawing school segregation. The report concluded that social class was the chief determinant of school success, that inequality in educational opportunities had persisted and that schools functioned to reinforce racial disadvantage, at best, and had themselves become sources of inequality, at worst.

The years following the 1970s have seen alarming trends of resegregation of minority and immigrant children in urban schools, rising racial inequality in schooling, and rapid deterioration of school environments in schools that serve poor and minority children. School resegregation is a direct consequence of poverty concentration by the process of "white flight" and economic restructuring (Wilson 1978). The political scientist Jennifer L. Hochschild (1984) found that native minorities and immigrants were disproportionately concentrated in urban schools that were suffering rapid deterioration as members of the middle class continued to abandon the city for the suburbs. She also observed that while racial segregation at the school level might have been reduced, it was reinforced at the classroom level by tracking or ability grouping; the result was greater inequality. At the national level, black and Hispanic students represented 42 percent of the student population in central cities in the early 1970s. This figure increased substantially to 53 percent in the early 1990s (U.S. Department of Education 1994). In large metropolitan centers, the withdrawal of white students has been dramatic. For example, 40 percent of the New York City public school student population were non-Hispanic white in the early 1970s, but by late 1980s, this figure had dropped to less than 20 percent (Reyes 1992). In the mid-1990s, the Los Angeles Unified School District identified 87 percent of the district's students as "minority" and 40 percent as having limited English proficiency (Lopez 1996).

The change in the racial composition of urban public schools has paralleled the concentration of poverty among racial minorities. The 1990 census showed that 46 percent of black children and 39 percent of Hispanic children under the age of 18 lived in families with incomes below the poverty level, compared with 16 percent of white children.

The same census showed that poverty rates for foreign-born children ranged from 21 percent among European whites to 24 percent for non-Hispanic blacks, 27 percent to Asians, and 41 percent for Latinos.

As a result, schools have become "arenas of injustice" that provide unequal opportunities on the basis of class and race (Keniston and the Carnegie Council on Children 1977). While suburban schools are endowed with ample resources, conducive environments, and strong parent-teacher associations (PTA), many urban schools suffer from a wide range of problems; they are underfunded, understaffed, overcrowded, unsafe, and socially isolated, with disproportionate minority-student enrollments. Inner-city schools are even worse; many have become dangerous places where students daily risk being crime victims. A 1992 study by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development estimates that about seven million young people, or one in four adolescents, are extremely vulnerable to multiple high-risk behavior and school failure, and another seven million are at moderate risk. Because of segregation by race and social class, minority and immigrant children are overrepresented in this high-risk group.

The deterioration of urban schools has diminished the opportunities of minority children and has sustained the gap in learning environments and educational outcomes between suburban children and central-city children who are members of minority or recent immigrant groups. A 1994 report of the U.S. Department of Education showed that black sophomores were more likely than their white peers to report learning disruptions by other students in school, that they were more likely to have trouble getting along with teachers, that they were twice as likely as whites to feel unsafe at their schools, and that they were more likely both to be threatened with and to be injured by a weapon in school. The same report observed that blacks continued to trail whites in "preschool attendance, grade retention, academic achievement, dropout rates, parental involvement, school climate, course-taking patterns, educational aspirations, labor market outcomes, and adult literacy levels" (p. 9).

Moreover, American public schools exist in a cultural milieu that is not conducive to academic achievement. Many parents, teachers, and policy makers have become concerned about the growth of an adversarial subculture among American youth, even in well-to-do suburban areas. This youth subculture is especially prevalent in urban schools, among those who feel oppressed and excluded from the American mainstream and who are frustrated by the widening gap between cultural values of freedom and materialism and the reality of a bleak economic

future. Many of these American children have responded to their social isolation and their constrained opportunities with resentment toward middle-class America, rebellion against all forms of authority, and rejection of the goals of achievement and upward mobility. Because students in schools shape one another's attitudes and expectations, such an oppositional culture negatively affects educational outcomes. School achievement is seen as unlikely to lead to upward mobility, and high achievers are seen as sellouts to oppressive authority. Students who show eagerness to learn, who are making good grades, who are disciplined, or who simply carry books and notebooks around are derogated as "geeks" and "nerds." They are not just uncool or unpopular but frequent targets of ridicule and hate. They are also vulnerable to threats and even to being forced into cheating by doing schoolwork for others and giving out answers during exams.

Of course, much of contemporary American youth culture at all socioeconomic levels tends to be anti-intellectual, but the problem appears to be most serious in classrooms dominated by members of disadvantaged minorities. Several studies of the scholastic performance of minority children have attributed the low level of achievement of these children, at least in part, to the negative views toward learning among their peers (Ornstein and Levine 1989; Reyes and Jackson 1993). One prominent young black attorney recounted how she suffered insults and hatred from her fellow students in her struggle to get the most out of her education (Dickerson 1996). During our own fieldwork in a public school attended by large numbers of Vietnamese, another conscientious young woman, also black, complained, "I try so hard to do my work. But the way all these people act, I just can't. And they laugh at you and make fun of you if you do what you're supposed to."

These trends in American schools pose a challenge to all parents, but the challenge is especially daunting for immigrant parents with limited educational backgrounds, limited English skills, and few resources. For many Vietnamese children, being concentrated in low-income, minority-dominated schools has meant studying in a social environment in which those who attempt to learn are not just discouraged but ostracized.

Schooling in Versailles Village

Predominantly urban and socioeconomically disadvantaged, Vietnamese children are likely to encounter an unfavorable school context like the one just described. The two public high schools serving Versailles Village, Washington High School and Jefferson High School, illustrate the impoverished and disruptive conditions found in many urban public schools.

Washington High is located in Versailles Village (see figure 3.1); all of its students are Versailles residents. At the time of the survey, over half the Vietnamese high school students in the Versailles enclave attended this high school, giving it the largest concentration of Vietnamese high school students of any high school in the city of New Orleans. The school's student population was 20 percent Vietnamese, 77 percent blacks, and 3 percent whites or Hispanics.

Regardless of race or ethnicity, all the students in Washington High came from modest socioeconomic backgrounds. Eighty-three percent of the Vietnamese students and 73 percent of the black students participated in the federal free lunch or reduced-cost lunch programs—a conservative though reliable indicator of the level of poverty in this school. Moreover, over 60 percent of the Vietnamese students and most of the black students lived in government-subsidized private rental housing in the Versailles neighborhood.

Many of the problems of contemporary urban public schools plagued Washington High. A school supervisor whom we interviewed described the school as "having a lot of disciplinary problems"; armed guards patrolled the hall at all times of the school day. The constant turnover in principals, of whom there were three during our study period from 1993 to 1995, reflected a serious problem in discipline and control. One teacher attributed this churning to the search for a leader who could keep order. A Vietnamese social worker from Versailles Village recalled that he was appalled by what he found on his first visit to that school: "It was like a jungle. The students were all walking down the halls, pushing and yelling at each other. There was a guard there, but he didn't say anything to make them behave; he just stood there. I felt sorry for our [Vietnamese] kids that have to go to schools like this."

The other public school, Jefferson High, is located on the fringes of Versailles Village. The school drew about 40 percent of the neighborhood's Vietnamese high school students. Minority youths dominated this school as well; 74 percent of the students were black, 15 percent were Vietnamese, and 11 percent were white. Though located in a middle-class black neighborhood, Jefferson High drew students from some neighboring low-income areas. Socioeconomically, the students at Jefferson were only slightly better off than their counterparts at Washington High; 65 percent of the students participated in the federal free lunch or

reduced-cost lunch programs. Among the Vietnamese students, however, 85 percent were in the subsidized lunch programs, an indication of an even higher level of poverty in this population.

Armed guards also patrolled the halls of Jefferson High at all times of the school day. During a semester's employment as a substitute teacher, one of the authors witnessed at least six violent fights, which involved both males and females and had to be stopped by guards and male teachers. None of these fights involved Vietnamese students, among whom fights did occur but with much less frequency and intensity. Active aggression rarely seemed to cross racial or gender boundaries.

The students at both of these schools showed relatively weak scholastic performance. Washington High was a relatively new school, built in the mid-1970s as a junior high school and converted to a senior high in the late 1980s. Possessing an excellent library and a spacious auditorium, it was in good physical condition, showing few signs of the physical deterioration that blight so many urban schools. But these qualities did not suffice to raise the general levels of academic excellence. The students performed very poorly on the California Achievement Test (CAT), a statewide standardized test required of all high school juniors. In 1991, for example, only 16 percent of Washington High's students equaled or exceeded the 50th percentile of those taken the CAT, while 45 percent equaled or fell below the 25th percentile (New Orleans School Board 1993).

Jefferson High compared favorably with Washington High on academic grounds. Jefferson High contained an honors program, referred to as a "magnet component," that enrolled about 10 percent of the student population. To be admitted to the honors program, students were required to have a B or higher average in previous classes or schools and to pass an entry test covering all subjects. Vietnamese students made up about 80 percent of the program's students. In fact, almost 90 percent of the Vietnamese students who attended Jefferson High from the Versailles enclave were enrolled in the honors program, an indication of a conscious mobility strategy among Vietnamese parents, who viewed Jefferson High or other honors programs outside the Versailles enclave as the first step upward for their children.

Despite the magnet component, the overall academic performance of the students at Jefferson High lagged far behind the state average. The results of the CAT given in 1991 showed that only 22 percent of the students in this school equaled or exceeded the 50th percentile of those

taking the CAT (6 points over the percentage at Washington High, but still 20 percentage points below that of the state), while 42 percent of them equaled or fell below the 25th percentile (21 percentage points over that of the state) (New Orleans School Board 1993).

Neither Washington High nor Jefferson High is unique. With the exception of a small population with a middle-class background, most Vietnamese children in the United States attend urban public schools, in which most students come from low-income families and are members of racial minority groups. For example, Asians predominated in the two public high schools in Little Saigon, California; most of the Asian students were Vietnamese, with white students making up less than a third of the remaining student population. In San Diego, half the Vietnamese students were enrolled in central-city schools that were predominantly black, Hispanic, or Asian (Rumbaut 1995a).

PATTERNS OF SCHOOL ADAPTATION: ENROLLMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Many adult Vietnamese arrived in the United States with low levels of schooling, mainly because educational opportunities back home were scarce. Overall, adult Vietnamese compared poorly with average Americans in educational attainment. In 1980, 62.2 percent of adult Vietnamese in the United States aged 25 and over had completed high school, and only 12.9 percent had attained four or more years of college, compared with 66.5 percent and 16.2 percent, respectively, of all Americans. In 1990, the percentage of high school graduates among Vietnamese in the United States decreased by a percentage point (to 61.2 percent), but the percentage of Vietnamese with four or more years of college increased significantly to 17.4 percent, compared with 20.3 percent of average Americans.

The decrease in average educational attainment among adult Vietnamese during the 1980s is probably due to the fact that later arrivals were relatively uneducated and unskilled and that those who entered as adults have been unable to make up for their deficient education through formal schooling because of their age. The improvement at the level of college education, however, suggests that those who entered as children or young adults have been able to take advantage of the educational opportunities in the United States to move ahead.

School Enrollment

A look at educational attainment among the young suggests that the Vietnamese embraced education as a means of social mobility for their children. While the average educational level of adult Vietnamese aged 25 years and over remains relatively low, the picture for the younger generation appears more promising. In 1990, for example, 75 percent of Vietnamese young adults aged 18 to 24 were enrolled in school, a rate similar to that found among the Chinese (77 percent), but much higher than that among blacks (43 percent) and among whites (50 percent). Moreover, about 38 percent of the Vietnamese young adults enrolled in school were attending college, on this count outperforming whites (28 percent), and blacks (18 percent) and doing almost as well as the Chinese (43 percent). Overall, 45 percent of Vietnamese in this age cohort reported that they had had at least some college education, compared with 54 percent of Chinese, 30 percent of blacks, and 43 percent of whites. Even after taking family structure and poverty status into consideration, younger-generation Vietnamese from single-parent families and from poor families consistently fared much better in college attendance and educational attainment than their black and white peers. Though still trailing behind the Chinese in this age group, younger-generation Vietnamese appear to follow the Chinese mode of school adaptation rather than that of either native-born American group.

The enrollment pattern for children under 18 years of age resembles that of young adults, as can be seen in table 6.1. In the 1990 census, Vietnamese children under 18 years of age were as likely as their Chinese, other Southeast Asian, black, and white counterparts to attend school. Family structure did not seem to reduce school enrollment for any of the groups, but poverty status slightly affected school enrollment. While public school has been the norm for all American children, Vietnamese, other Southeast Asian, and black children enroll in public schools at somewhat higher levels than Chinese and white children.

Failure to complete high school was much less common among Vietnamese than among native-born Americans; only 7 percent of the Vietnamese aged 16 to 19 years were neither enrolled in high school nor high school graduates, compared with 14 percent of blacks and 10 percent of whites. The pattern was the same for the older cohort; Vietnamese young adults aged 18 to 24 years not only were enrolled in school at a higher rate than their black or white counterparts, as has been discussed, but they also had a much lower dropout rate, as is

TABLE 6.1 School Enrollment of School-Aged Children by Family Structure and Poverty Status, Selected Ethnicities, 1990

	Vietnamese %	Other Southeast Asian %	Chinese %	Black %	White %
Currently enrolled in school					
All children	84.3	80.2	88.7	84.8	84.2
Children from single-parent families	85.6	81.4	90.0	83.8	85.1
Children from families in poverty[a]	84.1	78.2	85.9	81.7	78.9
Attending public school[b]					
All children	91.9	97.2	84.7	93.5	85.6
Children from single-parent families	95.1	97.8	88.1	95.4	90.6
Children from families in poverty[a]	95.6	98.1	94.4	97.8	91.2

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990, 5-percent PUMS.
Note: Sample included children aged 0 to 17 living in family households.
[a] Families living below 1.00 poverty level.
[b] Among those who were currently enrolled in school.

shown in Table 6.2. The dropout rate of Vietnamese young adults (9 percent), though higher than that of Chinese (5 percent), was lower than that of other Southeast Asians, only half that of blacks (19 percent), and similar to that of whites (10 percent). Among single-parent families and families in poverty, the dropout rates of all groups increased substantially, except for other Southeast Asians, but the rates of Asians were still considerably lower than that of either blacks or whites. Although there are differences among Asian American groups in scholastic performance, the relatively high levels of educational achievement among Vietnamese young people appear to be part of the general trend of academic excellence of Asian Americans (Barringer, Gardner, and Levin 1993).

School Performance

Attendance rates hint at the potential for Vietnamese educational success. More important is academic performance. In recent years, the Viet-

TABLE 6.2 High School Dropout Among Persons Aged 18 to 24, by Family Structure and Poverty Status, Selected Ethnicities, 1990

	Vietnamese %	Other Southeast Asian %	Chinese %	Black %	White %
All persons in age group	9.1	15.0	5.4	19.3	10.0
Persons from single-parent families	12.2	14.8	6.8	23.5	14.9
Persons from families in poverty[a]	14.5	15.7	7.7	31.4	26.6

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990, 5-percent PUMS.
Note: Sample included persons aged 18 to 24 and living in family households. Dropouts were defined as those without a high school diploma and not currently enrolled in school.
[a] Families living below 1.00 poverty level.

namese have been succeeding in American schools at a remarkable rate (Rutledge 1992). Though many are still handicapped by their lack of English proficiency, Vietnamese students have averaged scores higher than the national average on standardized achievement tests such as the California Achievement Test, particularly in mathematics and science. Nathan Caplan and his associates at the University of Michigan conducted a study based on a random sample of 536 school-aged children from 200 moderate-to-poor Vietnamese families in five urban areas: Orange County, Seattle, Houston, Chicago, and Boston. They found that one in four of the Vietnamese youngsters had an overall A average, over half had an overall B average, 17 percent had an C average, and only 4 percent had an average below C. In mathematics especially, Vietnamese students seemed to have outstripped other young people; half of them earned A's and another third earned B's. In national standardized tests in mathematics, half the Vietnamese students scored in the top quarter of those taking the tests and 27 percent scored in the top tenth. Even though most were still struggling with English, they ranked close to the national average in language skills (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1992). In his 1992 study of San Diego's immigrant children, Rubén G. Rumbaut (1995a) showed that Vietnamese students had an overall grade point average of 2.87, the highest among second-generation children of all immigrant nationality groups surveyed (the grade point averages for groups under study were 2.74 for Filipinos, 2.73 for Canadians and Europeans, 2.42 for Latino Americans, and 1.94 for Mexicans).

Our Versailles Village study revealed similar results; Vietnamese students made better grades and scored disproportionately higher in standardized tests than their American peers attending the same schools. At Washington High, 52 percent of the majority black student population scored below the state median on the 1990 Louisiana Graduation Exit Examination, and only 18 percent of the black students scored in the highest statewide quartile. Among the Vietnamese, however, despite their language difficulties and their low family incomes, only 33 percent earned scores below the median for all students in Louisiana, and 48 percent earned scores in Louisiana's top quartile (Louisiana Department of Education 1992).

At Jefferson High, where the Vietnamese made up most of the school's honors program, their standardized test scores were even more impressive. Vietnamese students outperformed their black and white peers by significant margins in all major areas; their average scores exceeded their American peers' by at least 17 percentage points in language and arts, 29 percentage points in mathematics, and 16 percentage points in writing and composition (Louisiana Department of Education 1992). In terms of the statewide median, the majority black students did fairly well; 48 percent scored below the state median, 52 percent scored above it, but only 14 percent of the black students scored in the state's top quartile. By contrast, 95 percent of the Vietnamese students scored above the median for all Louisiana students, and 64 percent scored in the top quartile. Despite their disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, Vietnamese students from Versailles Village appear to have been among the best students in the state of Louisiana.

ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The Determinants of Success

What determines who will succeed in school? One widely accepted explanation for academic success emphasizes social class. The socioeconomic backgrounds of families—specifically the father's education, the father's occupation, and family incomes—have been singled out as the most important determinants of scholastic achievement of children (Blau and Duncan 1967). Social class not only has a direct effect but also arguably works indirectly through the formation of a particular kind of social capital. The 1966 Coleman report found that students' achievement was affected least by facilities and curriculum within schools and

most by the social environment of schools, in the form of family socioeconomic backgrounds of fellow students. The report also indicated that narrowing the gap between black and white schools in resources such as facilities, books, laboratories, experience of teachers, and per-pupil expenditures did not close the black-white gap in academic performance. The report contended that families provided unequal advantages not only through tangible supports, such as income and social positions, but also through intangible supports, such as family stability and expectations for future achievement. These "input factors" (social resources that students bring with them to school) affect performance more powerfully than do "process factors" (the contributions made by school policies, curriculum, methods, and resources) (Coleman et al. 1966).

The economic standing of the family affects school performance contextually; higher-income families can afford desirable neighborhoods that provide access to better schools and a more academically oriented environment. These families also enjoy the resources to provide children with additional support outside school. In contrast, lower-income families are likely to reside in neighborhoods with poor schools, limited resources, and inadequate support facilities.

Family structure is a related and equally important factor that determines children's educational attainment. Previous research has found that dropouts are more likely to come from large families or single-parent households, especially households headed by never-married females (Natriello, Pallas, and McDill 1986; Rumberger 1983; Wagenaar 1987). One of the most common explanations of scholastic performance emphasizes the prevalence of intact and cohesive families that provide constructive value orientations for children. Intact families provide role models, foster belief in the values of education, achievement, and motivation, and make available study aids in the home (Ekstrom et al. 1986). Nathan Caplan and his associates have made some of the most persuasive arguments for this view, seeing the family as the basis of Vietnamese achievement in many areas of life. They even find that family size, a characteristic negatively associated with academic performance in most segments of the American population, promotes a high level of schoolwork among Vietnamese children, since siblings work together in a well-integrated family environment (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991, 1992; Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1989).

An alternative, equally popular explanation of school success highlights cultural influences. This approach derives from research on the

educational experience of Asian Americans in general and is based on the assumption that their academic achievement can be attributed to Asian cultural values, beliefs, and practices (Sue and Okasaki 1990). Many Asian Americans, particularly Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese Americans, come from backgrounds heavily influenced by Confucianism. For these groups, the home culture emphasizes education as a means to mobility. It values consensus, respect, discipline, hard work, the centrality of the family, and social harmony. Advocates of the cultural approach contend that these particular home cultural values have been transplanted to America with few modifications and have been used by Asian American families in socializing the younger generation in accordance with traditional expectations (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986). Such accounts have dominated attempts to explain the scholastic achievement of the Vietnamese. Caplan and his associates attributed the successful school adaptation of Vietnamese children to the family's respect for education, hard work, and cooperative family patterns, arguing that "cultural values are as important to successful adaptation as gravity is to physics" (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991, 156). Similarly, the anthropologist Paul J. Rutledge's 1992 study of a Vietnamese community in Oklahoma provided anecdotal evidence for a cultural interpretation of educational success based on strong family values and hard work.

Culture has been a convenient explanation for the clear but unsettling differences in educational achievement and attainment among ethnic and racial groups. The psychologist Laurence Steinberg (1996) has recently revealed the prominent role apparently played by ethnicity in structuring adolescents' lives, both in and outside of school. He found that Asian American students outperformed European American students who in turn outperformed African American and Latino American students by significantly large margins; the ethnic differences remained marked and consistent across nine different high schools under study and after controlling for social class, family structure, and place of birth of parents. He also found that the ethnic effect persisted in important explanatory variables of school success, such as the belief in the payoff of schooling, attributional styles, and peer groups. Steinberg concluded that the ethnic group to which a student belonged was just as important a factor as social class and gender in defining scholastic performance.

An Empirical Test: Explaining High School Dropout Rates

Among school-aged children aged 16 to 19 in the United States, Vietnamese youths show lower dropout rates than those of the two major native-born racial groups—black and white. As of 1990, only 6.5 percent of Vietnamese youths were identified as high school dropouts, compared with 13.7 percent of non-Hispanic black youths and 9.8 percent of non-Hispanic white youths, a pattern of interracial differences similar to that found in table 6.2 among young adults aged 18 to 24.

Why do Vietnamese children drop out of high school at lower rates than black or white children? We used logistic analyses to examine the effects of social class and home culture, using the 1990 census data.[1] We specifically focused on whether the same situations that made blacks and whites more likely to quit school also made Vietnamese children more likely to quit school. Since, as has been discussed earlier in the chapter, Vietnamese educational accomplishments are often considered in the context of Asian educational accomplishments in general, we also included evidence on why younger-generation Chinese quit school. The Chinese are the largest and most established Asian American group and share with Vietnamese similar home cultural values deriving from Confucianism. If similarities exist between the Chinese and the Vietnamese, we can attribute these similarities in part to the effect of Confucian culture. We would expect to find a different pattern among other Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong), whose home cultures are not so heavily affected by Confucianism.

In our logistic model, we classified all of those who were aged 16 to 19 (that is, within school age and old enough to quit school legally), not currently enrolled in school, and not high school graduates as "dropouts," and all those aged 16 to 19 and currently enrolled in school as "stayers." The dependent variable "dropout" was thus coded 1 for dropouts and 0 for stayers. Following the social class and the cultural approaches, we hypothesized that the probability of dropping out of high school was primarily a function of the student's family socioeconomic backgrounds and his or her ethnicity. Family backgrounds were measured by father's education (coded 1 as completion of high school or more), family structure (coded 1 as living in single-parent family), poverty (coded 1 as living below poverty level). We used ethnic/racial group membership as a proxy for home cultural influence.[2]

Our logistic model also included some of the major individual characteristics that were found to affect dropout rates: age (in years), sex (coded 1 as female), marital status (coded 1 as currently married) (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas 1985). We also introduced three variables measuring exposure to American culture: English fluency (coded 1 as English proficient) and generation status indicated by the 1.5 generation (coded 1) and the second generation (coded 1), with the first generation as the reference category. The exposure variables should enable us to examine how dropout rates are affected by familiarity with American society (Steinberg, Blind, and Chan 1984). Finally, we introduced a Vietnamese residential concentration variable into our model.[3] If social relations among coethnic members influence children's educational attainment, then we should expect living in an area that contains many other Vietnamese to have an impact on dropout rates. Moreover, if Vietnamese have comparatively low dropout rates because of coethnic contacts, then much of the difference between Vietnamese and whites should disappear when we take this residential factor into consideration.

Table 6.3 presents percentage differences among Chinese, Vietnamese, other Southeast Asians, and blacks in the probability of being a high school dropout. Since we were interested in how particular minority group membership raised or lowered the likelihood of being a dropout, we used whites as a reference category. The first step in this analysis showed that the Chinese in this sample were the least likely to be dropouts: being Chinese, rather than being white, lowered the probability of becoming a dropout by 4.8 percent; being Vietnamese lowered the probability of becoming a dropout by 2.5 percent; being Southeast Asian had no significant effect; being black, on the contrary, raised the probability of becoming a dropout by 2.7 percent.[4]

Step 2 controls for the effects of major individual characteristics of young people. Individual characteristics strongly influence dropout rates; nonetheless, race/ethnicity retains its basic effect even after factoring personal characteristics into account. Step 3 controls for the effects of exposure to American society. For the Chinese and Vietnamese, exposure lowers the probability of being a dropout still further, indicating that, were it not for matters such as limited English proficiency or recency of immigration, the Chinese and Vietnamese would stay in school at an even greater rate relative to whites.

Step 4 brings the family background variables into the analysis. Father's education significantly lowers the probability of being a dropout and poverty status significantly increases this probability. Single-parent family structure appears relatively insignificant since poverty status is

TABLE 6.3 Percentage Differences in the Probability of Becoming a High School Dropout

Predictors	Logistic Models				
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Chinese	−4.8**	−4.8**	−4.7**	−4.9**	−4.9**
Vietnamese	−2.5**	−2.5**	−2.3**	−3.0**	−1.7
Other Southeast Asian	−0.04	−0.1	−0.2	−1.9*	−2.0*
Black	2.7**	2.6**	2.6**	−0.4	−0.4
Age		2.6**	2.5**	2.6**	2.6**
Sex		−1.5**	−1.5**	−1.6**	−1.6**
Marital status		9.2**	9.4**	8.1**	8.3**
English proficiency			−3.5**	−3.3**	−3.3**
1.5 generation			−3.5**	−3.4**	−3.3**
Second generation			−3.6**	−2.8**	−2.8**
Father's education				−3.8**	−3.8**
Poverty				3.7**	3.8**
Single-parent family				−0.2	−0.2
Vietnamese concentration[a]					−2.4*

Source: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990, 5-percent PUMS.
[a] Defined as living in a PUMS Area (PUMA) containing at least one hundred Vietnamese households in the population.
$^{*}p < .05$ $^{**}p < .01$

also controlled for. When we take these family background characteristics into account, the effects of race/ethnicity change drastically among other Southeast Asians (from insignificant to significant) and blacks (from significant to insignificant), but not so much among the Chinese and Vietnamese, which means that family background variables do not seem to determine dropout rates for the Chinese or Vietnamese as much as they do for other Southeast Asians or blacks.

These results seem to indicate that an inherited Confucian culture keeps Chinese and Vietnamese students in school (the other Southeast Asians come from the non-Confucian cultures of Laos and Cambodia). Finally in Step 5 we controlled for the Vietnamese residential concentration variable, to probe whether something other than the home culture affects educational attainment. As shown in the table, living in an area that contains large numbers of Vietnamese households does significantly lower the probability of being a high school dropout. Moreover, the difference in dropout rates between Vietnamese and whites becomes insignificant. We still, of course, have not accounted for the educational attainment of the Chinese, and it would be interesting to see what

would happen if we undertook the substantial labor of computing a Chinese residential concentration; because this book focuses on the Vietnamese, we have not done so. The findings presented so far suggest that young Vietnamese are more likely to finish high school than their other Southeast Asian, white, or black peers; that socioeconomic handicaps do not lower the probability of young Vietnamese staying in school; and that living around other Vietnamese significantly decreases the likelihood of dropping out of high school.

ETHNICITY IN CONTEXT

The evidence from the U.S. census indicates that social class factors alone cannot explain why Vietnamese and Chinese children show higher levels of educational attainment. In fact, the data suggest that if the Vietnamese and Chinese were not laboring under socioeconomic disadvantages, their dropout rates would be lower still, particularly among the Vietnamese. Further, census data suggest that living around coethnics promotes educational attainment among the Vietnamese, a finding that is consistent with cultural explanations; where would it be easier to find Vietnamese culture than in a Vietnamese neighborhood? Census data do not, however, provide any information about the norms and values of ethnic groups. Therefore, it is necessary to look more closely at a specific group of Vietnamese people to explain why ethnic residential concentration appears to be associated with educational attainment.

Is the ethnic or cultural effect a matter of family characteristics or family values? The psychologists P. L. Ritter and S. M. Dornbusch (1989) suggest that "something associated with being Asian is having an impact on school performance independent of the family process variables that may work so well in predicting performance among whites" (p. 70). Certain family characteristics that prevail in Asian families in general and Vietnamese families in particular, such as high levels of parental authoritarianism, low levels of parent-teacher interaction and parental school involvement, and discouragement of independent behavior, usually predict low rather than high academic achievements (Dornbusch et al. 1987). Moreover, families are not the only sources of cultural influence; even in families that may hold high expectations for achievement and stress hard work and discipline, children may still perform poorly in school, especially when they have close ties to youths from disadvantaged native minorities (Portes and Stepick 1993). It seems unlikely, then, that family values alone can account for scholastic excellence.

To address the difficulty of using family as an explanation for Asian school performance, the psychologists Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki (1990) have proposed a model of "relative functionalism." According to this model, Asian educational success derives not simply from strong traditional family values or the belief among Asian parents that schooling is the key to success. More important is the parents' own experience or perception of blocked mobility by discriminatory laws and practices in the host society, particularly in areas where education does not have a direct effect, such as leadership, politics, entertainment, and sports. The more the parents experience "blocked mobility," or the more limited the noneducational avenues, the more the parents will focus on their children's education and pressure their children to excel in school as the means to mobility; and consequently, the higher the educational achievements.

While the experience or perception of blocked mobility may influence the life choices of Asian Americans, however, relative functionalism does not seem to account for trends in other racial or ethnic groups, such as African Americans, that also experience blocked mobility. We need, therefore, to take into account the meanings of membership in racial or ethnic groups, meanings that lead to different reactions to similar circumstances. Recently, the psychologist Claude Steele (1995) has enunciated a theory of "stereotype threat." On the basis of his empirical tests, he has found that the stubborn problem of black underachievement has been due mainly to the effect of stereotyping rather than to genetics, social class, family dysfunction, or values. He argues that "the possibility of being judged by a stereotype—or inadvertently fulfilling it—can cause an anxiety so disruptive that it impairs intellectual performance" (quoted in *Los Angeles Times,* Dec. 11, 1995). He also contends that the victim may consciously reject the stereotype and yet not be able to avoid its effects. Steele's theory points to the detrimental effect of pervasive negative stereotypes of blacks' intellectual inferiority; by implication, positive stereotypes may be beneficial to members of an ethnic minority group. As a new group to American society, the Vietnamese may enjoy a halo effect; that is, generally positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as high achievers may be helping Vietnamese students in their adaptation to school. Thus, ethnicity, or being Vietnamese, may be an important contextual variable that is associated with both the ethnic community and the larger society, not simply with defining behavior within families and among group members.

In our view, racially or ethnically based roles define how individuals

behave toward other members of their own group and toward outsiders. A particular pattern of behavior within an ethnic group can be interpreted as an ethnic social structure. Therefore, if we want to understand why ethnicity or race can be associated with a goal such as academic achievement, we must consider the kinds of social relations that exist within an ethnic or racial group and place these ethnic social relations in the context of the surrounding society.

The Theory of Ethnic Social Relations

How may membership in a particular ethnicity, such as being Vietnamese, provide the younger generation with a competitive advantage in school? In addition to looking at how being Vietnamese shapes attitudes—particularly those toward the family—that promote academic achievement, one can look at how ethnic social relations, embedded in ethnic institutions, bind individuals to the group and thereby provide them with support and control by coethnic group members. A theory that attempts to explain why individuals in different racial or ethnic groups adapt to a society in different ways and with different outcomes, therefore, should consider the kinds of social relations that racial or ethnic membership provides and the types of behavior and attitudes produced by those social relations.

If one is interested in explaining upward mobility, one must go further and consider how those types of behavior and attitudes fit the opportunities for mobility that exist in the larger society. When the cultural values of an ethnic minority group lead to behaviors that meet the demands of the mainstream society and are reinforced through a well-integrated ethnic community, these values may become a source of advantage that leads to favorable outcomes of adaptation, even when some of the cultural values, such as parental authoritarianism and collectivism, are in conflict with those of the mainstream culture. The point is that it is not the values per se that cause the favorable outcomes but rather the patterns of social relations among individuals, in which nonconforming is severely condemned, that cause these values to have positive effects on outcomes.

For children who come from modest socioeconomic backgrounds and live in a marginal social environment where the culturally defined goals of their parents' social world are in fierce competition with those of their American peers' social world, the types of social relations engaging these children may be more important in affecting their adaptation to school

than individual characteristics or family background factors. Thus, the theory of social relations may best enable us to understand the scholastic performance of Vietnamese children. Our theoretical model emphasizes the effects of various aspects of ethnicity—values, attitudes, and involvement—as indicators of ethnic social relations, controlling for the effects of individual characteristics, family structure, and family socioeconomic characteristics.

We believe that the source of Vietnamese academic achievement lies not primarily in the immediate family, but in the larger ethnic social context that contains the family, most importantly in the Vietnamese community (especially the form in which it has been emerging around the United States for the past two decades). The social ties among members of the community establish the meaning of "authoritarian" behavior on the part of parents and "independent" behavior on the part of children. If Vietnamese children maintain close ties to their ethnic communities through their parents, they are likely to be supported or constrained by the systems of social relations that confer specific meanings on cultural concepts, codes of conduct, and behavioral standards. This is why we expect that the differences between Vietnamese children and their American peers cannot be accounted for by family or individual-level characteristics alone.

Educational attainment in American society is primarily determined by the interaction among group characteristics, the socioeconomic background of the family, and the receiving social environment. If the social environment surrounding immigrant children is rich in resources and if its goals are consistent with those of the immigrant family, then ethnic resources may be relatively less important, but those ethnic resources may still count. For example, many middle-class immigrant parents move into affluent white neighborhoods, send their children to schools mainly attended by white students from similar or more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, and still insist on enrolling their children in weekend or after-school ethnic schools or involving them in religious or cultural activities. The children then benefit both from privileged socioeconomic contacts with members of the dominant group in mainstream American society and from the group-specific expectations of and opportunities for intellectual development.

An alternative scenario operates where the social environment is not so rich. In this situation, a tightly knit, cooperative ethnic community becomes a crucial source of social capital for its young people. The extent to which young people are integrated into this community also becomes a major determinant of school adaptation, especially when the social environment otherwise places children at risk. The following section examines the empirical findings from our case study in Versailles Village to solve the puzzle of why Vietnamese children succeed, even when they attend poor urban public schools.

The Effects of Ethnic Social Relations

As has been described in detail in chapters 3 and 4, the high level of integration of families into the community stands out as the most conspicuous characteristic of the Vietnamese enclave in Versailles Village. Not only did many of these families know each other before reaching American shores, but once in Versailles Village, they interacted closely on a daily basis when shopping, attending church, and participating in social events. Their overlapping interpersonal connections reinforced the network of relations in the community, which in turn functioned to establish and reinforce community standards. The integration of families was reflected in a high degree of consensus over value and behavior standards (see table 3.2). Vietnamese parents and students whom we interviewed in Versailles Village consistently reported that their families emphasized obedience, industriousness, and helping others but discouraged egoistic values of independent thinking and popularity, which were most commonly associated with contemporary American society. These conservative Vietnamese family values constituted a source of direction, guiding children to adapt to American society the Vietnamese way. Children were constantly reminded of their duty to respect their elders, to take care of younger siblings, to work hard, and to make decisions only with the approval of their parents. Children were also pressured to avoid associating too much with non-Vietnamese children in the neighborhood, not to date non-Vietnamese, and not to become too American.

The results of our 1993 surveys indicate that Vietnamese students not only maintain a high level of consensus on the values held by their families, but also a high level of involvement in their ethnic community. Although value consensus among individuals does not require social control, it becomes a mechanism of control when individuals are deeply involved in a system of social relations. To measure the effects of ethnic involvement, we constructed five indicators reflecting the core aspects of ethnic involvement: language spoken at home, literacy in the parental native language, self-identification, ethnicity of close friends, and the likelihood of endogamy.[5] Vietnamese spoken at home and literacy in the

parental native language represent the most intense forms of involvement in an ethnic culture, while identification of oneself as a member of the ethnic group, keeping mostly coethnic friends, and commitment to marrying within the ethnic group all indicate a clear identification with group membership.

As is shown in table 6.4, Vietnamese students in this community displayed high levels of ethnic involvement on all of our indicators. Over 90 percent spoke Vietnamese at home, 55 percent of them reported that they were able to read and write Vietnamese well, over half of them unequivocally identified themselves as Vietnamese rather than Vietnamese American or other, 80 percent reported that their close friends were Vietnamese, and almost 60 percent of them said that it was likely that they would marry someone of Vietnamese origin.

TABLE 6.4 Measures of Ethnic Involvement Among Vietnamese Youths

	Percentage
Language spoken at home	
Vietnamese	91.9
English	8.1
Ability to read and write Vietnamese	
Quite well	54.5
A little	33.3
Not at all	12.2
Self-identification	
Vietnamese	51.0
Vietnamese American	27.3
Other [a]	21.7
Ethnicity of close friends	
Vietnamese	80.3
Other	19.7
Likelihood of endogamy	
Certain	59.0
Uncertain	34.4
Unlikely	6.6

Source: The Versailles Village Survey of 1993 ($N = 198$).
[a] This category includes 15.6 percent who identified themselves as "Asian American" and 6.1 percent who identified themselves as "other." No one identified himself or herself as "American."

If we add family value orientations and work orientations of Vietnamese students in Versailles Village (see tables 3.2 and 3.3), we can see a coherent, complex Vietnamese American culture that includes a range of related orientations and practices among Vietnamese youth, which can be shown in the results of a factor analysis. In table 6.5, all the variables under consideration are clearly loaded on four factors. By creating scales of these four indicators, we can see that while traditional family values, commitment to a work ethic, and ethnic involvement are positively related to one another, they are all negatively related to egoistic value orientations. Therefore, we can interpret the complex of cultural orientations as consisting of a strong adherence to traditional family values, a strong commitment to a work ethic, a high level of ethnic involvement, and a weak adherence to egoistic values.

How does this cultural complex affect the adaptation of Vietnamese

TABLE 6.5 Factor Analysis of Selected Characteristics of Vietnamese Youths

Selected Characteristics	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Eigen value	2.409	1.775	1.399	1.134
Factor loadings of selected characteristics				
To obey			.524	
To work hard			.773	
To help others			.718	
To be popular		.785		
To think for oneself		.690		
To help with housework				.731
Time spent on homework daily				.715
Language spoken at home	.741			
Ability to read and write Vietnamese	.559			
Self-identification	.619			
Ethnicity of friends	.639			
Commitment to endogamy	.556			
Correlation matrix				
Factor 1 (ethnic involvement)	1.000			
Factor 2 (egoistic values)	−.002	1.000		
Factor 3 (traditional family values)	.055	.019	1.000	
Factor 4 (commitment to a work ethic)	.125	−.071	.143	1.000

Source: The Versailles Village Survey of 1993 ($N = 198$).

children to American schools? Specifically, how does it affect academic outcomes? Table 6.6 presents a set of bivariate relations between Vietnamese cultural orientations and school adaptation as measured by current academic performance and plans for future education using our 1993 survey. To measure current academic performance, we asked respondents to report grades that they most often received. Possible answers were A or B, C, D, and F. To measure plans for future education, we asked respondents if they planned to attend college. Possible answers were a definite no, uncertain, and a definite yes. As is shown in table 6.6, almost all of the bivariate relationships between traditional family values, commitment to a work ethic, and ethnic involvement with each of the school adaptation measures were significant (one-tailed level).

TABLE 6.6 Self-Reported Grades and College Plans by Selected Ethnic Characteristics of Vietnamese Youths

	A's & B's as the Most Frequently Received Grades %	Plans to Go to College %	*N*
Traditional family values			
Weak	33.3	50.0	6
Average	69.8	60.5	43
Strong	78.5	78.5	149
p	.080	.051	
Egoistic values			
Weak	76.0	80.0	75
Average	72.7	70.5	88
Strong	80.0	68.6	35
p	.523	.640	
Commitment to a work ethic			
Weak	61.1	63.9	36
Average	76.3	72.2	114
Strong	83.3	89.6	48
p	.100	.053	
Ethnic involvement			
Weak	38.9	50.0	18
Average	75.9	72.2	79
Strong	81.2	79.2	101
p	.006	.054	

Source: The Versailles Village Survey of 1993 (*N* = 198).

Specifically, students having strong traditional family values, commitment to a work ethic, and ethnic involvement tended disproportionately to receive A's and B's and to have definite college plans. Egoistic values had no significant effect on school adaptation.

In order to examine the independent effect of each of the variables and describe the apparent system of causal relations at work, we used a regression model controlling for sex, age upon arrival, number of siblings, living arrangement, work status of parents, and father's education.[6] Table 6.7 shows the means, standard deviations, and standardized multivariate regression coefficients of major variables predicting school adaptation.

When all other effects were taken into account, adherence to traditional family values, commitment to a work ethic, and ethnic involvement all had significant effects on grades and college plans. The largest of all these standardized coefficients was the one representing the effect of ethnic involvement. These results supported the view that the involvement in an ethnic community could lead to desirable school adaptation.

Our controlled variables, which do not show significant influence, imply possible explanations of the behavior and performance of this group of Vietnamese students. It is often suggested that some young people do better than others because they have the support of unbroken—that is, two-parent—families. Similarly, it may be argued that children who have two working parents ("latch-key" children) lack support and direction and therefore are likely to show problems in developing constructive habits and in school performance. Our results support neither of these explanations at the level of the individual family. Neither having two working parents nor living in a two-parent family has a significant effect. Moreover, the father's education has no significant effect on any of the endogenous variables under consideration. This finding is contrary to the general belief that children's school performance may be attributed to the level of the parents' educational attainment, suggesting instead that children's ethnic involvement is more important than the financial and human capital of parents in determining the outcomes of school adaptation for this particular group.

Tangible Supports from the Ethnic Community

Why may the greater degree of ethnic involvement lead to more desirable outcomes? Vietnamese children gain specific benefits from the involvement in their ethnic community. As we have discussed in previous

TABLE 6.7 Means, Standard Deviations, the Range of Values, and Multivariate Regression Coefficients of Major Variables Predicting School Adaptation of Vietnamese Youths

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Regression Coefficient (S.E.)
Dependent Variable					
School adaptation	4.525	1.191	0	6	—
Predictors					
Traditional family values	10.869	1.268	0	12	.181** (.070)
Egoistic values	3.929	1.559	0	8	−.026 (.056)
Commitment to a work ethic	4.126	1.768	0	7	.111* (.053)
Ethnic involvement	11.303	3.165	0	15	.063* (.028)
Control Variables					
Sex (male)	.500	.501	0	1	−.102 (.173)
Age upon arrival (12 years or older)	.424	.495	0	1	−.255 (.195)
Number of siblings	3.167	2.447	0	12	.001 (.037)
Living with both parents	.747	.436	0	1	−.119 (.209)
Having both parents working	.232	.423	0	1	.005 (.204)
Father's education (high school or more)	.288	.454	0	1	.162 (.186)
Intercept					1.686*
R^2					.129

Source: The Versailles Village Survey of 1993 (N=198).
* p < = .05 (two-tailed) ** p < = .01 (two-tailed)

chapters, the younger generation in Versailles Village is supported by various ethnic organizations, the most important of which is the Vietnamese Educational Association. This association focuses on promoting academic achievement among young Vietnamese and provides after-school classes and annual awards to young Vietnamese. The leaders of the association are prestigious, influential, and knowledgeable figures in the Vietnamese community. During the time when our study was conducted, the association was led by Brother John Nhon and Mr. Ngoc Thanh Nguyen. Both men were teachers working in the local public school system. Because of their experience with the formal school system, they were able to utilize that system more effectively and established appropriate means of preparing students for school.

Although there is a limit to our ability to measure quantitatively all the ways in which ethnic organizations facilitate school adaptation, we examined two major academically oriented programs—after-school classes and the annual awards ceremony—that are made available by the Vietnamese Educational Association and that affect young people directly. We suggest that participation in these community-based activities is likely to lead to desirable school outcomes. After-school classes are an important ethnic resource in the Versailles enclave. Unlike families in affluent middle-class communities, who can provide children with adequate after-school care and a variety of choices in after-school activities offered by private institutions, such as music, dance, and sports, families in poor communities lack economic resources to provide after-school care and activities. Poor children are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to be either left home alone without supervision or hanging out on problem-prone streets, at risk in either case. One advantage that young Vietnamese in Versailles Village have over their American peers is that they are supported by after-school classes offered by their church and other ethnic organizations, which function to help them with schoolwork on the one hand and to keep them off streets on the other.

The after-school classes include several offerings—Vietnamese, English, and schoolwork tutoring—that draw many Vietnamese students. According to our survey, almost 70 percent of Vietnamese students reported that they participated in these classes regularly; among these participants, over half attended Vietnamese language classes. While Vietnamese is not taught or tested in New Orleans public schools, we find that learning Vietnamese fosters cognitive skills and good study habits that can carry over to the learning of school required subjects as discussed in the previous chapter. English classes are designed to provide

students extra help in their language skills with which many Vietnamese students have difficulty. Twenty-seven percent of the students reported that they had attended English language classes. About 30 percent of the students have attended other classes outside the regular school day.

Another program offered by the Vietnamese Education Association is the annual awards ceremony at which high-achieving students are honored. This ceremony is held in June right after the end of the school year and serves as a formal expression of encouragement. Attendance at this ceremony may be seen as ritual participation to show the community's collective commitment to education. For young people, such attendance reinforces their dedication to schoolwork. According to our 1994 survey, 85 percent of the students reported that they attended the ceremony, and 37 percent reported that they attended it twice or more.

The effects of after-school classes and attendance at the awards ceremony are both positively related to academic performance measured by self-reported grades (r = .343 and .208, respectively). On the basis of our multivariate analysis in table 6.7, we have found that participation in these community-offered activities is highly associated with involvement in the community (measured by the five aspects of ethnicity described earlier in the chapter). These findings suggest that in a socially and economically marginal environment, the ethnic community is crucial in providing help and direction to enable young people combat the disadvantages associated with immigrant status and poverty and counter the negative influence of the adversarial youth subculture that permeates urban public schools. In this sense, ethnicity is reflected in the pattern of ethnic involvement of families and individuals in their community and serves as an important form of social capital in facilitating positive school adaptation.

We recognize that social capital in the family and the ethnic community is what the sociologist M. Patricia Fernández-Kelly (1995) calls "internally heterogeneous." Poor families in low-income neighborhoods may provide support and encouragement to their children. But their attempts to generate social capital are often defeated by their isolation and by the social disorganization that surrounds them. This problem is exacerbated when the formation of constructive social relations among young people is undermined by persistent racism and negative racial stereotypes in the larger society. In contrast, when poor families are connected to one another in the community that actually reinforces the efforts of parents and acts as a bridge to the mainstream society, as in Versailles Village, the children can benefit from these social relations. If

the densely knit set of social relations found in a community shapes attitudes and behaviors in ways that are conducive to upward mobility, these social relations can produce cultural values that fit the opportunities for mobility afforded by the larger society.

This examination of how an ethnic community can promote academic achievement provides an explanation of why Vietnamese children seem to be excelling in American schools and why this phenomenon appears to be related to living among coethnics. It also offers a concrete example of a concept that has become popular in the social sciences, the concept of social capital. As previous chapters have shown, many of the newly arrived Vietnamese settled in ethnic communities built from reformulated extended family ties. These communities have promoted productive behavior in the schools and may therefore be seen as sources of social capital, or social relations that result in desirable outcomes. Community organizations such as the Vietnamese Educational Association provide educational resources such as after-school classes. Beyond these specific benefits, however, the densely interknit social ties of the Vietnamese community control the behavior of young people through continual vigilance, maintain a high level of consensus on values, and reinforce parents' goals of upward mobility for their children.

Chapter 4

1. This usage reflects traditional Vietnamese gender relations and the old association of teaching with masculinity. The feminine equivalent of *thay giao* is *co giao.*

Chapter 5

1. Our study used PUMAs (Public Use Microdata Areas) as proxies for coethnically concentrated Vietnamese neighborhoods. All PUMAs in the 1990 census 5-percent PUMS that contained at least one hundred Vietnamese families were selected. Because coethnically concentrated areas offer extensive opportunities for intraethnic contacts, we expected that Vietnamese children living in those areas should show greater Vietnamese language retention than those living elsewhere.
2. When there was a discrepancy between reported reading ability and reported writing ability, reading ability was always just slightly higher; the extremely strong association between the two items suggests that the reporting pattern is consistent.

Chapter 6

1. The data for this examination come from the 5-percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 1990 U.S. census. We took a full sample of Vietnamese aged 16 to 19 (N=2265) and a random sample of comparable size for whites (N=2500), blacks (N=2500), and Chinese (N=2500). Our sample was limited to young people who were living with their parents or guardians. The high school dropout rates in this analysis are therefore somewhat more conservative than those found in the full U.S. census.
2. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous (students either are dropouts or they are not), logistic regression is felt to be the proper methodological approach. The interpretation of the effects of continuous variables (such as income) in logistic regression equations is straightforward; one unit change in family income will increase the log odds of being a high school dropout by its logit, controlling for all other independent variables. The logit coefficients of the noncontinuous, and particularly the dichotomous, independent variables are not sufficient to interpret the model, however, for it is difficult to grasp the magnitude of effects in a logarithmic scale (Alba 1986). For this reason, the logit parameters are translated into multiplicative parameters (that is, odds ratios). The odds ratios are then transformed into percentage differences, for example, the percent increase in probability of being a dropout for each unit increase in the independent variable. Extreme caution should, of course, be used in comparing percentage differences of variables with different numbers of categories, since very tiny percentage differences in continuous variables (such as age) will reflect significant effects, while relatively large percentages in dichotomous variables may be insignificant. For the sake of comparability, then, we have sought to code variables as dichotomous wherever this is methodologically justifiable.
3. This variable was created by identifying those PUMS areas (PUMAs) in the 1990 census that contain at least one hundred Vietnamese households in the population and coding those who live in these areas as 1.
4. Estimates of dropout rates in this analysis may differ slightly from those in the full census, since these rates are based on the 5-percent PUMS and because only minors living with parents were included in our analysis.
5. These five survey items were: 1) What language do you speak at home with your parents? Possible answers were "Vietnamese," "English," or "other." 2) How well do you read and write Vietnamese? Possible answers were "quite well," "a little," or "not at all." 3) How do you identify yourself? Possible answers were "Vietnamese," "Vietnamese American," "Asian-American," "American," or "other." 4) What is the ethnicity of most of your close friends? Possible answers were "Vietnamese," "other Asian," "black," "white," or "other." 5) How likely do you think it is that you will marry someone of Vietnamese origin? Possible answers were "almost certain," "likely," "unlikely," "very unlikely," or "don't know."
6. Except for number of siblings, all the control variables are dummy variables.

Chapter 8

1. There is no breakdown of types of institutions by detailed race categories, but the census does give total numbers of institutionalized juveniles in the detailed race categories.
2. We used a 5-point scale in our questionnaire, ranging from 1 "dislike very much," 2 "dislike," 3 "indifferent," 4 "like," and 5 "like very much."