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Effects of Minority-Language Literacy on the Academic Achievement of Vietnamese Youths in New Orleans

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This article identifies the major theoretical perspectives on native-language literacy—forcible assimilation, reluctant bilingualism, and linguistic pluralism—and reports on a case study of the role of such literacy in the academic achievement of 387 Vietnamese high school students in New Orleans. The study found that literacy in Vietnamese is positively related to identification with the ethnic group and to academic achievement. The authors maintain that ethnic language skills contribute to academic achievement by the community-level sociological means of providing access to social capital, as well as by the individual-level psychological means of cognitive transference. They conclude that ethnic language skills may not always be a hindrance to the social adaptation and upward mobility of young members of an ethnic immigrant group and that these skills may actually contribute to the goals of mainstream education, rather than compete with them.

Since the beginning of American history, popular and scholarly attitudes toward the role of non-English native languages in education have been intricately intertwined with policies toward ethnic minorities. As early as 1753, Benjamin Franklin complained about the use of German in Pennsylvania and helped to establish English schools in German-speaking areas of that colony (Castellanos 1992). Educational policies toward Native Americans consistently used education in the English language as part of a program of assimilation. In 1819, Congress set aside the Civilization Fund to support church groups that were pursuing assimilationist educational goals (Nabokov 1991). Two decades later, over 80 governmental boarding schools were established in the United States to accommodate about 3,000 Native American students. In 1879, the U.S. Training and Industrial School was founded in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and became a model for other schools for Native Americans around the country.

When Native American students entered these schools, "their long hair was clipped to the skull, sometimes as a part of a public ritual in which they renounced Indian rituals. They were forbidden to speak native languages, often under threat of physical punishment" (Nabokov 1991:216). For Native Americans, the abandonment of native languages in favor of English in school was viewed as a first step to their successful adaptation and an important part of "becoming American."

After Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States in 1898, the first American commissioner of education, Martin G. Brumbaugh (1900–01), introduced a policy of "bilingualism." Bilingual education, however, did not view English and Spanish as equally valid means of communication and instruction. Rather, Spanish was permitted to facilitate English instruction in the lower grades, while English was instituted as the medium of instruction for the higher grades. Bilingualism was never pursued

for the intrinsic value of fostering two languages. Instruction in Spanish was seen as a temporary crutch to be discarded with the achievement of proficiency in English (Language Policy Task Force 1992:7).

Within the continental United States, English monolingualism in schools functioned as an arm of the assimilationist policy on minorities. Statehood for New Mexico, proposed and defeated in 1902, was postponed until 1912, when migration finally gave Anglo Americans a plurality over Spanish-speaking people and Indians. With the simultaneous admittance to statehood of New Mexico and Arizona, the U.S. government instructed the two new states to establish, as a part of their state constitutions, "a system of public schools, which . . . shall always be conducted in English" (Crawford 1992:52).

The inculcation of English has been seen as a method of integrating immigrant minorities into the mainstream society, under the assumption that such integration is necessary for full social and economic participation. "Education," in the words of a pre-World War I high school principal in New York, "will solve every problem of our national life, even that of assimilating our foreign element" (quoted in Higham 1992:73). The unprecedented immigration at the turn of the 20th century, by inspiring nativist reaction, intensified faith in the importance of assimilating cultural and linguistic minorities. In 1906, Congress passed legislation denying citizenship to immigrants who could not speak English (Crawford 1992). In 1916, Herbert Adolphus Miller (quoted in Baron 1990:138) declared that the survival of native languages "would tend to soften the abrupt transition from foreign to American ideas and ways of thought." In the 1920s, the Division of Immigrant Education was created within the U.S. Bureau of Education to ensure that education would play a key role in assimilative efforts (Higham 1992).

Since teaching positions in American schools were restricted, until recently, by official and unofficial means to native, usually monolingual, English speakers, the persistent goal in language

education was merely the replacement of native minority languages with English, rather than the achievement of linguistic pluralism or the expression of tolerance for differences in language and culture. Members of immigrant groups with any trace of minority culture, accent, or background were consistently denied access to jobs in education, making schools microcosms through which students were expected to be "Americanized" (Baron 1990).

The official policy of linguistic assimilation has been accompanied by an undercurrent of linguistic pluralism throughout American history. From the earliest periods of American history, the German Americans who so disturbed Franklin maintained both public and parochial bilingual schools, which served nearly half a million students by the 1880s (Toth 1990). In recent years, educators in Miami, New York, California, and other parts of the United States have pursued language-maintenance policies and programs, aimed at enabling students to develop proficiency in English while maintaining proficiency in another language (Ambert and Melendez 1985).

Bilingual education programs for the achievement of proficiency in Navajo, Cherokee, and other languages have been developed in schools serving Native Americans (Ambert and Melendez 1985). In some cases, as in the Native American schools, many students have actually learned their ancestral languages in school, re-creating parts of their culture. In other cases, such as bilingual education programs for Spanish speakers in Miami and for Southeast Asian students in California, students come from communities in which native languages are still widely spoken. Whether the school is the source of learning a minority language or not, there is a growing tendency among educators to support cultural pluralism by encouraging favorable attitudes toward the use of minority languages. Thus, although Americanization through English monolingualism has continued to be the official ideology, it has been resisted by various groups, and linguistic pluralism has been gaining ground

over the past two decades. Still, "the trend of bilingual education in most states has been toward assimilation of the ethnic group into the dominant culture" (Ambert and Melendez 1985:8).

This ideology of Americanization, in language and culture, has been identified as a dominant part of the refugee educational system, created in the 1970s and 1980s to prepare Vietnamese and other Indochinese refugees for resettlement in the United States (Tollefson 1989). As Tollefson (p. 57), a linguist, noted, "Continuing the tradition begun by the Americanization movement, today's Indochinese refugee program furthers the enduring belief that refugees' ability to solve their social, psychological, physical, and economic problems is directly related to their degree of cultural assimilation." Official pressure for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of this newest group of Asian immigrants has affected not only the adult cohort, but their children in public schools. For example, in 1990, parents of a Vietnamese community in New Orleans submitted a formal petition to request that Vietnamese language classes be offered as an elective in a public school in which a quarter of the students were Vietnamese. However, the Orleans Parish superintendent of education and the Orleans Parish school board simply ignored the petition (interview with a former supervisor of bilingual education-English as a second language, Orleans Parish, September 20, 1993).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The assimilationist perspective has provided the traditional framework for understanding the adaptation of immigrants. This perspective is well illustrated in Gordon's (1964) *Assimilation in American Life*. In Gordon's view, immigrants begin their adaptation to the new country through acculturation, or cultural assimilation, divesting themselves of their previous cultural patterns, including their languages, and adopting those of the host society. As the immigrants pass through a number of stages, eventually intermarrying with the majority population and entering its

institutions on a primary-group level, they eventually lose all their distinctive characteristics and cease to exist as an ethnic group. Socioeconomic success is expected to be directly proportional to the degree of acculturation and structural assimilation in the host society.

The most important means for immigrant groups and other ethnic minority groups to be absorbed into the mainstream culture may be education (Blau and Duncan 1967). However, membership in ethnic minority groups and the associated lower social status of the families into which the children were born have been considered a hindrance. In the context of language education, there are two groups of assimilationists who adopted two prominent historical strategies for assimilation. The "forcible assimilationists" insist that English-language skills compete with non-English-language skills and that the latter should therefore be wholeheartedly discouraged. In contrast, the "reluctant bilingualists" support programs, such as bilingual education, as crutches to enable members of linguistic minorities to overcome their language difficulties gradually and eventually to become full members of the majority society.

Forcible Assimilation

The doctrine of forcible assimilation is associated with a sink-or-swim linguistic policy in the schools. Such a policy holds that young people from non-English-speaking homes should be placed in school environments where only English is tolerated. This position constituted the dominant scientific wisdom of the early 20th century. Academic studies in the fields of education and psychology attributed the academic failure, anxiety, and mental confusion of immigrant children to bilingualism. Intellectual failure was alleged to be due to the "linguistic confusion" of children who were exposed to two languages (Portes and Schauffler 1993).

In recent years, adherents of forcible assimilation, particularly advocates of the "English Only" movement, have tended to advance a sociological, rather than a psychological, argument for mono-

lingualism in American schools. They maintain that bilingualism can inhibit social adaptation in a predominantly English-speaking society. This line of reasoning has become something of a commonplace among sophisticated conservative thinkers, such as Chavez (1992) and Sowell (1991). Bilingual education has been referred to in the conservative *National Review* ("The New Apartheid" 1990) as "the new apartheid." The most eloquent statement of this updated version of the traditional wisdom, however, may be found in the writings of Rodriguez (1982:19; see also Rodriguez 1985: 83), who has claimed that any official support for bilingualism simply panders to "the romance of . . . dual cultural allegiance" and ultimately inhibits minority-group members from fully participating in Anglophone America.

The linguistic-assimilation position has been supported more often by rhetorical skills than by empirical evidence. An exception to this rule is a review of the research literature on bilingualism from the U.S. Department of Education (Baker and Kanter 1981) that evaluated the evidence on the advantages of bilingualism. The review concluded that bilingually educated students score below average in both English skills and general academic achievement.

In October 1994, the New York City Board of Education released a study on bilingual education (Dillion 1994). The study found that students who took most of their classes in English generally fared better academically than did students in bilingual programs, where little English was spoken. It thus concluded that the current efforts to educate immigrant students in their native languages are flawed, despite a parallel finding that students of different ethnic groups performed differently in the special language programs.

Reluctant Bilingualism

Unlike forcible assimilation, reluctant bilingualism is tolerant of bilingualism and supports its use in schools. However, the reluctant bilingualists endorse the use of languages other than English only as a strategy for achieving the

ultimate goal of linguistic assimilation. Reluctant bilingualists advocate programs of "transitional bilingual education," established as a stated policy of the U.S. government by the Bilingual Education Act of 1968. "The goal is to help students keep up with reading, math, and other subjects in their native tongues while they are taught enough English to transfer to regular classrooms" (Epstein 1992:334-55). The native language, from this view, is treated as the source of a handicap, rather than as an asset.

Bilingualism as a soft path to assimilation has been a consistent theme of public policy and legislation. Senator Walter Huddleston, (1992:115), in a speech given in 1983, lamented the supposed desertion of transitional bilingualism by the American educational system, remarking that "bilingual education has gradually lost its role as a transitional way of teaching English, and now mandates a bicultural component." In taking "mainstreaming" as the goal of allowing languages other than English in the schools, the Massachusetts Transitional Bilingual Act of 1971 is a typical piece of legislation. This act mandates "bilingual education until students' English is good enough to warrant their being mainstreamed" (Brisk 1991: 114).

Linguistic Pluralism

As immigrant minority groups have become a more assertive part of American society since the 1970s, the traditional assimilationist framework has been challenged. Unlike mainstream thought, which uniformly perceives assimilation to be an unidirectional process, alternative views consider it a segmentary process leading to different outcomes: gradual acculturation and parallel integration into the American middle class, or assimilation into the underclass, or rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of ethnicity and immigrant cultures (Portes and Zhou 1993).

What channels immigrants and their offsprings into these divergent destinies? In her study of immigrant children in New York's Chinatown, Sung (1987) found that

bilingual programs helped students to remain in school, to regain their self-esteem, and to graduate. She suggested that these positive outcomes were associated with the acceptance of a distinctive ethnicity. Ogbu (1989) showed, from his research on Chinese American students in Oakland, California, that in spite of cultural and language differences and relatively low economic status, these students had grade-point averages of 3.0 to 4.0. He attributed these students' academic success to their integration into their families and the Chinese American community, which highly valued education and had positive attitudes toward public schools. The benefits of the deliberate cultivation of ethnicity also appear in the work of Gibson (1989), who found that the outstanding performance of Punjabi children in a relatively poor rural area of northern California was a result of parental pressure on children to adhere to their own immigrant families and to avoid excessive Americanization. Similarly, Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1992) found that Indochinese refugee children excelled in the American school system, despite the disadvantaged location of their schools and their parents' lack of education and facility with English. They attributed academic achievement to cultural values and practices unique to Indochinese families.

These studies suggest that immigrants may not necessarily divest themselves of their previous cultural patterns, including their languages, and adopt those of the host society to take full part in it; instead, they may lean on these unique cultural characteristics to facilitate their adaptation. However, whether ethnicity is an advantage or a handicap must depend on whether ethnicity enables or frustrates the upward mobility of young people. In the study of the effects of native minority languages on the academic achievement of immigrant children, "linguistic pluralism" offers a counterargument to the argument of forcible assimilators for immediate linguistic assimilation and to the argument of transitional bilingualists for gradual linguistic assimilation.

Portes and Schauflier (1993) noted that since the 1960s, a growing body of

empirical evidence has indicated that both cognitive abilities and scholastic achievement are actually positively associated with bilingualism. They cited published and unpublished studies of French Canadians, Hispanics, and Asians that have found positive correlations between bilingualism and school performance. Tienda (1984) found that the retention of Spanish proficiency does not hinder the socioeconomic achievement of Hispanic men and that, at the minimum, bilingual education will not retard lifelong achievement. Cazden and Snow (1990) observed that maintaining non-English languages is, in itself, a valuable goal of academic achievement. Other researchers have found that language-maintenance bilingual programs, as opposed to transitional bilingual programs, help students learn the language of the dominant society effectively (Bhatnager 1980; Cummins 1980, 1981).

These findings that minority culture and language skills offer concrete benefits to educational attainment provide a more secure basis for promoting official support for minority languages, suggesting that the American school system should not only tolerate, but encourage minority students to achieve proficiency in their parental languages through classroom instruction as a regular part of bilingual education programs, through elective classes in the native languages, or through officially supported clubs and extracurricular activities that reinforce the language skills acquired at home.

Two ways in which bilingual abilities can contribute to academic achievement may be identified. First, the fostering of skills in a first language leads to cognitive development that can be transferred to other areas of endeavor. Second, the use of a first language gives students access to ethnic communities that may furnish supports and controls to direct their efforts in productive directions.

The classic piece of evidence for the argument for cognitive development is Peal and Lambert's (1962) study of English- and French-speaking Canadian students, which found that bilingualism was positively related to intelligence, as

measured by standardized tests. More recently, Cummins (1991:95), in a study of Portuguese-speaking children, stated that "both literate and conversational skills in children's L1 [first language] are significantly related to the development of literate and conversational skills in L2 [the second language]. In fact, the same developmental process appears to underlie growth in both languages in the sense that those who perform well in English literacy tasks also perform well in literacy-related aspects of Portuguese."

In support of the hypothesis that advancement in the minority language promotes overall intellectual development, Willig (1985) indicated that bilingual education is a better way for non-mainstream students to catch up in all subjects, including English, than is education through immersion in a monolingual English classroom. Lindholm and Aclan (1991) also found that academic achievement was related to the level of bilingual proficiency, rather than to the fact of bilingualism itself, suggesting that progress in the minority language promotes overall capacity. However, previous empirical work on bilingualism has concentrated on the individual psychological benefits of minority languages, largely overlooking the social context of bilingualism.

The second argument for the contributions of linguistic pluralism is consistent with the first, but adds that social structures that facilitate action may also contribute to the cognitive advancement of individuals. However, there have been relatively few attempts to explore the role of second languages in maintaining ethnic identity as a source of social capital, and these attempts have been largely qualitative in nature. Matute-Bianchi (1986), in an ethnographic study of Mexican American and Japanese American students, found that the school performance of students in these two groups depended on the structures of their communities and on the integration of the students in those communities. For the Mexican American students, in particular, scholastic success was found to be related to a strong Mexican identity, including the ability to speak Spanish, which was an impor-

tant part of this identity. The view that language can contribute to academic success by reinforcing ethnic identity and providing access to ethnic resources is consistent with the work of Ogbu (1974, 1989, 1990), who argued that immigrant groups, as voluntary minorities, have systems of social relations that are geared to adaptation to a new environment, in contrast with involuntary or "castelike" minorities, whose group identity is geared primarily to coping with racism and institutionalized discrimination.

The study of high school students presented here attempted to advance the second argument that proficiency in a minority language can facilitate access to the social resources of ethnic communities. In the study, we examined whether and how minority-language abilities contribute to academic achievement, based on a case study of a Vietnamese community in New Orleans. Specifically, we explored whether Vietnamese literacy, an advanced minority-language skill, contributes to scholastic advancement and how language skills that are correlated with ethnicity promote constructive forms of behavior and facilitate academic achievement. Since none of the Vietnamese students in the study learned or improved his or her native-language skills in school, we cannot, of course, attribute academic achievement or failure to existing school policies. Nevertheless, if language ability facilitates access to ethnic resources, as we argue here, and if the resources of ethnic communities contribute to academic success, then schools should look for ways to encourage the students' native-language abilities to reinforce the positive effects of ethnic communities.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data were drawn from a survey of Vietnamese high school students at two high schools located near the Vietnamese community in eastern New Orleans in February 1994. We surveyed the entire Vietnamese population at the schools who were present on the day of the survey ($N = 387$). Since these two schools contain most of the students in

this community, we were able to survey an estimated 75 percent of all 9th-, 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students in the Vietnamese neighborhood.

We believe that this population merits study for at least two reasons. First, it can provide insight into the educational experience of a new immigrant population in a relatively disadvantaged minority environment. Both these schools are biracial (one is approximately 77 percent Black and 20 percent Asian, and the other is approximately 85 percent Black and 12 percent Asian; except for a few Laotians and Cambodians, all the Asians are Vietnamese). More important, one of the schools is located in the center of a highly concentrated low-income Vietnamese community. In the single census tract in eastern New Orleans surrounding this school, nearly half the population (4,566 out of 10,607 residents) is Vietnamese; this census tract alone concentrates 70 percent of all Vietnamese in New Orleans. The other school is located at the outer fringe of the Vietnamese community.

Second, the high level of cooperation and mutual assistance among Vietnamese in New Orleans has had a historical influence on the Indochinese resettlement policy. The Vietnamese have formed their community in a neighborhood surrounded by streets with Vietnamese names and a large Vietnamese Catholic church. According to Associated Catholic Charities (personal communication with the former director of refugee resettlement, New Orleans Office of Associated Catholic Charities, April 1994), the primary refugee resettlement agency in this area, the New Orleans Vietnamese were among the first to be resettled in the United States in a concentration, rather than dispersed. The success of the New Orleans Vietnamese in developing their own institutions and in relying on one another helped to convince resettlement agencies in other parts of the country to move away from the practice of dispersal, and eastern New Orleans appears to have provided a model for resettlement in other parts of the country. Thus, it is important to learn how such an ethnic concentration affects the life chances of

younger ethnic-group members, and the students of this neighborhood offered us a unique opportunity to do so.

This community is relatively homogeneous in social-class background. Virtually all the Vietnamese in the neighborhood arrived after 1975 from fishing and agricultural villages in Vietnam. Insofar as class differences exist among them, they are differences between the majority of villagers and individuals who formerly worked as military officers, governmental officials, and teachers in Vietnam. Because of the recency of their arrival and because of limited economic opportunities in New Orleans, other major class differences have not yet arisen (on these points, see the ethnographic study of this community by Nash 1992). Therefore, the economic status of Vietnamese families is, to a large extent, held constant at a fairly low level. For the young people, though, the stay in the United States has been long enough for them to be considered members of an American minority: 42 percent of them were either born in the United States or arrived in 1975; the vast majority (about 70 percent) arrived before 1984.

The measure of Vietnamese literacy is taken from the students' evaluations of their reading and writing abilities. We included two questions: "How well do you read Vietnamese?" and "How well do you write Vietnamese?" Possible responses to both these questions were "not at all," "a little," "fairly well," and "very well." Although there might have been some individual variation in understanding what constitutes reading and writing a language well, in the aggregate these variations should not have affected the reliability of the measure. Responses to these two items were highly correlated ($r = .944$), and when there was a discrepancy between reported reading ability and reported writing ability, reading ability was always just slightly higher, as one would expect, providing strong evidence that this is a consistent measure of actual literacy.

We are aware that there may be some question about these students' ability to evaluate their own language skills according to the standards of a trained linguist.

Since we were interested in comparing the students with higher literacy skills to those with lower literacy skills, we focused on whether these students showed a consistent pattern of reporting the skills, not on whether an individual student's reporting was accurate. As we discuss later, the self-assessments of the respondents were associated with other variables in readily comprehensible patterns. We interpret this fact as indicating a consistency of reporting.

Academic achievement among young people may be thought of as consisting of two dimensions: (1) present-day scholastic accomplishment and (2) plans for continuing education. Present-day academic accomplishment was measured by reported grades, since actual grades and test scores could not be used because of the school board's policies and state laws protecting the students' privacy, which made it impossible to examine even a sample of report cards or school records on specific students. To make these reports as valid as possible, we asked several questions about actual grades received in specific subjects and about grades in general at the time of the study and in the past. We asked students "What grade did you receive last year in English?" "What grade did you receive last year in math?" and "What grade did you receive last year in social studies?" To counterbalance the possibility that any of these specific grades could have been an exception to the students' usual level of performance, we also asked two more general questions: "What grade do you receive most often in school?" and, at another place in the questionnaire, "What grade have you received most often during the years you have been in school?" Possible answers to all these questions were "A," "B," "C," "D," and "F." Since one of the authors served as a substitute teacher in one of the two schools during the research, the validity of these responses was supported, not only by asking questions about grades from several different angles, but by this author's personal experience of the performance of Vietnamese students, which tallied with the results of the questionnaire.

Attitude toward future education was

determined by the question, "How important is going to college for you?" Possible answers were "I definitely do not want to attend college," "It's not very important," "going to college is fairly important for me," and "going to college is very important for me."

In any study of educational attainment, it is important to consider the part played by the students' own efforts. This factor was indicated by the question, "How much time do you usually spend on homework each day?" The students could answer "I don't do homework," "fewer than 30 minutes," "half an hour to an hour," "1 to 2 hours," or "over 2 hours."

Variables indicating the students' socioeconomic background and degree of identification with their ethnic group were included to measure the effects of fathers' education and ethnic identification. We used fathers' education as a reasonable proxy for the socioeconomic background of the students' families in Vietnam, since the current economic statuses of their families in eastern New Orleans do not differ substantially. The fathers' highest educational level varied from less than high school to completion of a graduate degree.

Identification with the ethnic group is the most complex and abstract of the variables included in the study. In essence, this variable addresses the issue, To what extent do the students believe that their own identities are tied to the identity of the minority group? On this note, we considered the five worldwide characteristics of minorities suggested by anthropologists Wagley and Harris (1964): Minority groups receive unequal treatment, they are easily identifiable by physical or cultural characteristics, group members feel a sense of peoplehood, membership in the group is ascribed, and group members practice endogamy. Three of these characteristics (unequal treatment, identifiable traits, and ascribed membership) are involuntary and externally imposed. Two (the sense of peoplehood or group membership and the practice of endogamy) are voluntary and indicate the extent to which minority-group members include themselves in the minority group, rather than have group membership imposed on them.

We included questions in our survey to measure both these voluntaristic aspects of minority-group membership.

With regard to the sense of group membership, students were asked, "How do you identify yourself?" Possible answers were "Vietnamese," "Vietnamese American," "American," and "other." Those who answered "Vietnamese" were considered to hold this minority group as their primary source of identification and were coded 2. Those who answered "Vietnamese American" were thought to identify with both the Vietnamese and American cultures and were coded 1. Those who answered "American" were thought to identify completely with the larger society and were coded 0. The one respondent who answered "other" wrote in "Asian American" and was coded 1.

With regard to endogamy, students were asked whether they would prefer to marry someone who is Vietnamese or someone who is not Vietnamese. Possible answers were "I definitely want to marry someone who is not Vietnamese" (coded 0), "I prefer to marry someone who is not Vietnamese" (coded as 1), "It isn't important to me whether I marry a Vietnamese or not" (coded 2), "I prefer to marry a Vietnamese" (coded 3), "I definitely want to marry a Vietnamese" (coded as 4), and "I don't want to marry" (treated as a missing value). The question about endogamy and the question about self-identification were added together to create a scale of ethnic identification ranging from 0 (self-identification

as "American," combined with a definite intent to marry outside the group) to 6 (self-identification as "Vietnamese," combined with a definite intent to marry in the group). (The frequency distribution of the variables included in the analysis are available from the authors on request.)

We first conducted a series of cross-tabular analyses, which are the basic means of investigating relations between individual variables. This method has the advantage of yielding dependable, straightforward, and readily interpretable results, but it is unable to capture complex interrelations among the variables under study. We then established a causal model to examine the suggested multivariate relationship between these variables. A path analysis through a set of multivariable regressions was used to summarize and make theoretical sense of the results.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents a crosstabulation showing the relationship between the grades the students reported receiving most often and the students' ability to read and write Vietnamese. Because so few students were at the lowest letter-grade levels and so many were at the highest letter-grade levels, we combined D and F students (those with averages below 1.5) into a single category and distinguished between B- students (those with averages of 2.5 to 2.9) and B+ students (those with averages of 3.0 to

Table 1. Crosstabulation of Averaged Reported Grades by Vietnamese Literacy (in percentage; numbers in parentheses)^a

Grades	Read and Write Not at All or Very Little	Read and Write a Little	Read and Write Fairly Well	Read and Write Very Well	Total
D-F	20.4	3.3	1.0	.0	4.0 (14)
C	30.6	24.4	12.0	8.2	16.7 (58)
B-	12.1	21.1	12.0	8.3	13.2 (46)
B+	28.6	38.9	50.0	36.7	39.9 (139)
A	8.2	12.3	25.0	46.8	26.2 (91)
Total	14.1 (49)	25.9 (90)	28.7 (100)	31.3 (109)	100.0 (348)

^a χ^2 significant at .000 (12 df).

3.4). Overall, more than half the students reported receiving Bs, with 40 percent receiving B+s. Over a quarter of the students reported A averages (teachers in both schools confirmed this level of performance). C averages were much less common, 17 percent of the total, but there were a fair number of them. Students with averages of D or F were rare, accounting for only 4 percent of the total.

For the sake of clarity, we collapsed the measure of reading and writing skills into four categories—"not at all or very little," "a little," "fairly well," and "very well." Thirty-one percent of the students were highly proficient in reading and writing their native language (Vietnamese), 29 percent were somewhat proficient, 26 percent had some reading and writing abilities, and 14 percent could not read or write their ethnic community's language.

We found that there was a strong relationship between average grades and native language proficiency. Those who could read and write Vietnamese well were much more likely to report receiving As than were those who could not. Among those who could read and write Vietnamese well, 46.8 percent reported themselves to be A students. Among those who could read and write Vietnamese fairly well, 25 percent reported themselves to be A students. Only 8.2 percent of the students who could not read and write Vietnamese at all claimed A averages.

Among those who could read and write their language fairly well and among those who could read and write a little, the modal category was B+. However, 50 percent of those who could read and write Vietnamese fairly well had grades averaging B+, while only 38.9 percent of those who could do so a little had this average. C was the modal category for students who could not read or write Vietnamese (30.6 percent), and those without such reading and writing abilities made up the largest percentage of those with D or F averages (20.4 percent). The relationship between grades (present academic achievement) and Vietnamese literacy thus appears to be significant and linear.

Our analyses also found evidence for a relationship between future academic achievement and Vietnamese literacy. The overwhelming majority (72.4 percent) of the students reported that going to college was "very important" to them, 17 percent said it was "fairly important," 5.3 percent said it was "not very important," and 5.3 percent said they did not intend to go to college.

Of the students who were proficient in Vietnamese, 84.2 percent indicated that college attendance was "very important" to them. In contrast, 80.4 percent of those who could read and write Vietnamese fairly well, 60 percent of those who could do so a little, and 46.9 percent of those who could not read and write Vietnamese rated college attendance as very important. These results suggested a significant and positive effect of literacy in an ethnic language on students' orientation toward higher education.

There are two possible explanations for the positive effects of literacy in a minority language on present academic achievement and future academic aspirations. One may argue that smarter students who are more likely to obtain good grades and to plan to attend college are more likely to excel in other areas, such as learning to read and write the language of their ethnic group. In this case, the causal relationship may be spurious.

Using "smartness" or "intelligence" as an explanation of accomplishments introduces a variable that is difficult to define and makes an argument that may, to some extent, be tautologous. Defining intelligence is largely a matter of *de fructibus cognoscentum* [It shall be known by its results]: A student is said to be "intelligent" because he or she manifests a certain level of accomplishments in classroom activities or on standardized tests, such as IQ tests. The word *intelligence*, then, is no more an explanation of academic achievement than the word *gravity* is an explanation of why objects attract one another. Still, we cannot completely reject the possibility that there is some ambiguous quality of mind that can be the cause of excellence in disparate fields of endeavor.

Alternatively, one may argue that the

process of acquiring literacy in a minority language promotes habits and attitudes that lead to academic excellence. This argument would provide a link between proficiency in a minority language and more positive orientations toward future education. Table 2 presents data that suggest a more concrete and defensible explanation of the relationship between scholastic accomplishments and minority-language literacy than that of innate intellectual ability.

The trend in this table is clear: The better the students read and write Vietnamese, the more time they spend on homework. Thus, 81.8 percent of those with good minority-language skills reported spending an hour or more on homework every day; the modal category for these students was over two hours of homework a day (45.5 percent). Of those who could read and write Vietnamese fairly well, 20.4 percent said that they put in over two hours a day, compared with only 11.4 percent of those who could read and write a little. In contrast, those who lacked Vietnamese literacy not only were the most likely not to do homework (22 percent), but were the least likely to spend more than two hours per day on it (10 percent).

It seems evident that in some fashion, Vietnamese literacy promotes the kind of effort that can lead to academic excellence. In this case, minority-language literacy may be an intervening variable. It still remains to be established what literacy in Vietnamese indicates.

The ability to read and write Vietnamese may be a result of socioeconomic background. Parents with higher educational achievement, which implies higher occupational attainment in Vietnam, may be more likely to provide their children with opportunities to acquire skills in the parental language and to stress education in the host country than are parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 3 investigates the possibility that the students' level of Vietnamese literacy may be a function of their fathers' education. Educational attainment of the father is treated as an indicator of family status in the home country. One clear problem with using family educational background as an explanation for the relationship between minority-language literacy and academic achievement is that the levels of education of fathers are uniformly low in this group. Of the students who answered the question about their fathers' education, 42.1 percent had fathers with less than a high school education, and 39.9 percent had fathers who had completed no more than high school. However, the percentage differences between those whose fathers were high school graduates and those whose fathers had not completed high school do not show any pattern of association with literacy in Vietnamese (see Table 3).

It does not appear that the ability to read and write the parental language can be considered an indicator of elite fam-

Table 2. Crosstabulation of Time Spent on Homework by Vietnamese Literacy (in percentage; numbers in parentheses)^a

Homework	Read and Write				Total
	Not at All or Very Little	Read and Write a Little	Read and Write Fairly Well	Read and Write Very Well	
Don't do homework	22.0	6.8	.9	.8	5.0 (19)
Fewer than 30 minutes	22.0	28.4	17.6	6.1	16.7 (63)
30 minutes to 1 hour	26.0	35.2	31.5	11.3	24.6 (93)
1 to 2 hours	20.0	18.2	29.6	36.3	28.0 (102)
Over 2 hours	10.0	11.4	20.4	45.5	25.7 (97)
Total	13.2 (50)	23.3 (88)	28.6 (108)	34.9 (132)	100.0 (378)

^a χ^2 significant at .000 (12 df).

Table 3. Crosstabulation of Vietnamese Literacy by Father's Education (in percentage; numbers in parentheses)^a

	Less Than High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate or Higher	Total
Read and write not at all or very little	11.3	16.2	7.5	4.2	12.4 (44)
Read and write a little	24.7	22.5	15.0	20.8	22.5 (80)
Read and write fairly well	32.7	25.4	25.0	33.3	28.9 (103)
Read and write very well	31.3	35.9	52.5	41.7	36.2 (129)
Total	42.1 (150)	39.9 (142)	11.2 (40)	6.8 (24)	100.0 (356)

^a χ^2 significant at .271 (9 *df*).

ily status or that elite family status can be considered an explanation of the association between academic achievement and minority-language skills. We do not have evidence, then, that these higher-order language skills are primarily a function of socioeconomic background, so we can safely dismiss the suspicion that the impact of reading and writing abilities on scholastic achievement may be nothing more than an artifact of socioeconomic status.

Table 4, which presents a crosstabulation of the abilities under question with a scale of identification with Vietnamese ethnicity, offers an alternative explanation of Vietnamese literacy.

It presents clear evidence that ethnic-language literacy is highly associated with ethnic identification. That is, 59.7 percent of the students with the highest degree of ethnic identification could

read and write Vietnamese very well, compared with 40 percent of those at the next highest level. Furthermore, the four respondents in the two lowest levels of ethnic identification were all unable to read and write Vietnamese. In contrast, only 4.2 percent of those with the highest degree of ethnic identification could not read or write the ethnic language. It seems clear that any attempt to interpret the meaning of Vietnamese literacy for academic achievement must take into account the strong association of this literacy with a sense of identification with ethnic-group membership.

Crosstabulations make possible a clear and readily comprehensible portrayal of bivariate relationships. However, to discuss the relationships among all variables to suggest a causal order, it is helpful to recast the relationships examined in the tables into a causal model through

Table 4. Crosstabulation of Vietnamese Literacy by Self-identification with Vietnamese Ethnicity (in percentage; numbers in parentheses)^a

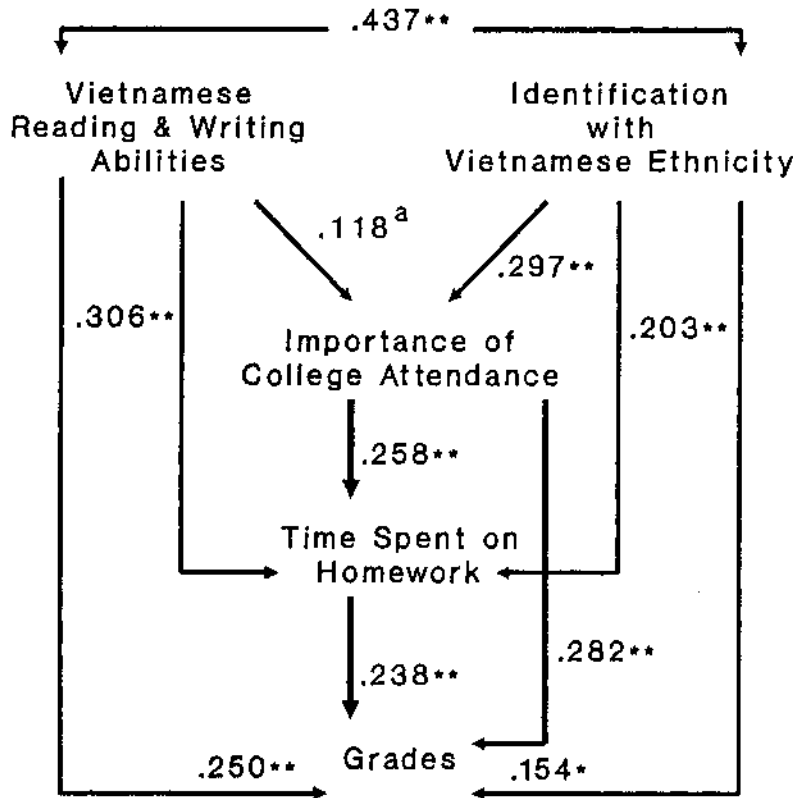
	Lowest Degree 0	1	2	3	4	5	Highest Degree 6	Total
Read and write not at all or very little	100.0	100.0	50.0	20.6	13.5	5.5	4.2	12.5 (45)
Read and write a little	.0	.0	30.0	38.2	29.2	17.3	12.5	23.6 (85)
Read and write fairly well	.0	.0	10.0	27.9	27.1	37.2	23.6	28.9 (104)
Read and write very well	.0	.0	10.0	13.3	30.2	40.0	59.7	35.0 (126)
Total	.8 (3)	.3 (1)	2.8 (10)	18.9 (68)	26.7 (96)	30.5 (110)	20.0 (72)	100.0 (360)

^a χ^2 significant at .000 (18 *df*).

multivariate regression. Grades and college plans are two interlinked aspects of academic achievement. Whereas grades represent an outcome, attitudes toward college represent a motivational orientation toward the future and may be seen as influencing both action, in the form of time spent on homework, and the results of action, in the form of grades. Self-identification with Vietnamese ethnicity and Vietnamese literacy logically come before these three aspects and are therefore treated as exogenous variables.

and the ability to read and write Vietnamese. In fact, the relationship is so strong ($r = .437$) that the two should be seen as indicators of a single underlying dimension of ethnicity. It seems difficult, moreover, to establish a causal order between these two variables. Strong ethnic identification maintains and improves the learning of an ethnic language, but the process of learning and the immersion in one's culture that is afforded by the experience of reading one's language can also reinforce the sense of group identity. Therefore, we treated the relationship between identity and language as a correlation without

Figure 1 shows that there is a significantly positive relationship between an identification with Vietnamese ethnicity



- * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)
- ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)
- a $p < .05$ (one-tailed)

Figure 1. Causal Relations among Major Variables

attempting to establish a causal order between them.

Ethnic identification has a strong positive influence on orientation toward higher education. However, when we took ethnic identification into account, the relationship between the importance of a college education and Vietnamese literacy weakened (significance only at the .05 level, one-tailed test). This finding suggests that much of the association between literacy in one's ethnic language and orientation toward education is not due to the skills of literacy per se, but to the ethnic-group membership that is closely tied to those skills.

Both ethnic identification and literacy show strong effects on time spent on homework. If these two variables are considered indicators of the extent of involvement in ethnic-group membership, it may be said that ethnic-group membership promotes not only positive attitudes toward present education, but constructive behavior that can make both present and future achievement possible. Believing that a college education is important also leads students to spend more time on their homework. That Vietnamese literacy has the strongest effect on spending time on homework suggests that the contribution of bilingualism to academic performance is in the form not only of cognitive transference, but of the transference of work habits and attitudes. That is, the work habits required to master higher-order skills in a minority language may be transferred to the mainstream school environment.

Identification with Vietnamese ethnicity, Vietnamese reading and writing abilities, attitudes toward future education, and current study habits all have significant effects on current educational outcome. Although some of the direct effect of Vietnamese literacy on grades may be ascribed to cognitive transference, it is noteworthy that over half the total effect of literacy is due to its correlation with identification with the minority group and to the attitudes and habits resulting from both minority language literacy in the ethnic language and minority-group identification.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research offer strong evidence that minority students' literacy in their ethnic language can contribute to their academic achievement, which supports the view that advanced bilingualism promotes academic excellence, that bilingualism promotes excellence by encouraging constructive forms of behavior, and that bilingualism encourages constructive forms of behavior because it gives students access to the social capital of a distinctive ethnic identity. The system of causal relations presented earlier illustrates how minority-language skills may not necessarily hinder the adaptation of immigrant children to American society.

First, we found that ethnic literacy is strongly associated with ethnic self-identification, which supports Matute-Bianchi's (1986) qualitative finding that advanced bilingual skills are an aspect of an ethnic orientation and that fully bilingual young people therefore have greater access to the emotional and normative supports of the ethnic group than do those who lack such skills. We conclude that proficiency in a minority language may not necessarily always be a hindrance to the social adaptation and upward mobility of young members of an ethnic-minority group, since ethnic language is intrinsic to ethnicity.

The experience of Vietnamese youths in the two public schools in New Orleans is similar to that of the Indochinese young people described by Caplan et al. (1992). In the Vietnamese community, values and traditions constitute a source of motivation and direction as the families deal with adjustment problems in their new country. These cultural values and traditions are transmitted through the family with the help of the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese literacy, in turn, helps families to cope with such adversities as poor English, poverty, and the disruptive environment of urban schools through the emotional ties of parents who do not speak English and their children, wisdom shared in stories read in Vietnamese, and the mutual and collective obligation among family mem-

bers (Caplan et al. 1992). The Vietnamese youths also resemble the Punjabi children in California, who outperform American children in school through the influence of their ethnic culture (Gibson 1989). They seem to make a conscious attempt to avoid becoming assimilated into the nearby inner-city ghettos by maintaining their ethnic distinctiveness.

Second, we found, consistent with previous research (Cummins 1991; Lindholm and Aclan 1991; Willig 1985), that ethnic language abilities lead to greater overall scholastic achievement. We cannot entirely discount the possibility that this finding may be due, in part, to a transference of cognitive development: Skills developed in learning to read the parental language may be transferred to other areas of intellectual endeavor, such as history, geography, or mathematics. However, we argue that literacy in a minority language does not function in isolation from its social context. Our results show strong correlations between ethnic identification and ethnic-language literacy and between academic effort and both ethnic-language literacy and self-identification.

Ethnic-language literacy and ethnic self-identification, which are so closely related to one another that they should be seen as two interlinked aspects of ethnic-group membership, lead to increased time spent on homework. This finding supports an explanation of the academic achievement of ethnic groups that is more sociological and less psychological than is the cognitive-development argument. Literacy in the parental language connects students to a system of ethnic supports that can provide encouragement and direction that lead to accomplishment by promoting effort and attitudes that encourage effort. Plans for future education and the effort that results from these plans lead to present-day achievement, in the form of higher grades, that can make future education and, consequently, upward socioeconomic mobility, a reality.

This explanation, although coherent and well grounded in empirical evidence, requires greater substantiation. In particular, a more detailed investigation is needed to examine how language

skills are related to the networks of the ethnic community and how various ethnic traits, including linguistic abilities, channel the time and energy of Vietnamese students in their effort to move ahead in the U.S. society. Thus, more in-depth network and qualitative research are needed, and other concentrated communities should be studied for similarities and differences.

Finally, one of the most notable implications of our findings for educational policy concerns the attitude that has been taken toward minority languages. As our findings suggest, literacy in ethnic languages, backed by positive cultural characteristics, does not compete with the goals of mainstream education, but actually contributes to those goals. Thus, we would argue that the proper attitude of public and school officials toward minority languages should not simply be tolerance, but encouragement. If students with literacy skills in their native languages, developed at home and in the ethnic community, have excelled, with little or no support from the schools, then it makes sense for the schools to reinforce this ethnic input. At the least, educators should view native languages neither as obstructions to be swept out of the way in the rush to assimilation nor as inconveniences to be endured while gradually moving students toward assimilation into an exclusively English-speaking society. Schools should actively promote clubs and activities that are aimed at strengthening the students' skills in their native languages. When it is economically feasible, schools in areas with large numbers of ethnic-group members, such as the schools in this study, may want to include instruction in these ethnic languages as electives in the regular curriculum.

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