SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS

10

Southeast Asian Refugees in American Schools: A Comparison of Fluent-English-Proficient and Limited-English-Proficient Students

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There has been a significant growth in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the United States, from less than 1% of the U.S. population in 1970 to 1.5% in 1980, to a projected 3% in 1990 and 4% in the year 2000—a fourfold increase in 30 years (see Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985). Asians are highly concentrated in a few states, notably California, Hawaii, New York, Illinois, and Texas. In California, as a result of both sharply increased immigration and natural increase, Asian/Pacific Islanders (APIs) currently constitute 7% of the state’s population, with a projected growth to approximately 11% in the year 2000 (Bowie & Martin, 1987). Moreover, they have already affected school enrollments well out of proportion to their numbers, since they tend to be a much younger population—especially the Southeast Asians. For example, while the median age of the general American population is 32 years, it is only 18 in the Vietnamese community (Rumbaut & Weeks, 1986). For these young new Americans, the acquisition of English-language competency is the principal obstacle that they must overcome in their educational adaptation; it is also a major liability for their teachers in American public schools.

During the 1980s legal immigration into the United States has averaged about 600,000 persons annually, by far the highest level since the first decade of this century. In addition, 48% of all immigrants and refugees admitted in the 1980s have come from Asia, compared to fewer than 25% in any decade prior to the 1965 law that eliminated racial restrictions from U.S. immigration. Who would have predicted this consequence of the 1965 immigration law, especially the rapid growth of Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and other API populations? And who would have imagined that the 1975 defeat of U.S. policy in Vietnam would lead to a massive and still continuing flow of Southeast Asian refugees into this country?

The consequence for many schools is a significant increase of students with widely different languages, cultures, levels of literacy, social class backgrounds, and life experiences.

An estimated 3 to 5 million K-12 students in American public schools now speak a language other than English at home with over one million in California alone (First & Carrera, 1988). The 1987 language census by the California State Department of Education showed that 28% of all children in the state’s public schools were language-minority students; of these, 613,222 were designated as limited-English-proficient (LEP) and 568,928 as fluent-English-proficient (FEP) students (Olsen, 1988).

In the face of these changes, how well are schools prepared to cope with an increasingly diverse student population? In particular, what are the consequences of these changes for special education programs and service providers?

The Lina v. Nichols decision requires schools to take into account the student’s home language, and because of the large numbers of Hispanic students the public’s impression is that bilingual programs serve primarily Hispanics. Yet it may surprise many to discover that over 50% of all API children come from homes where a primary language other than English is spoken, and up to 90% of the most recent arrivals have no fluency in the English language (Chan, 1983).

Bilingual education services throughout the country have “yet to address adequately” the wide variety of Asian and Pacific Island languages. The most advanced special education services have been extended only to Chinese speakers, not to Khmer, Hmong, Lao, or Vietnamese language groups (Siegel & Holog, 1986). If the teacher observes heightened anxiety, confusion about the “locus of control,” withdrawal, or unresponsiveness in a language minority student, is it possible for the teacher to confidently determine whether or not the child is suffering from linguistic or acculturative stress, depression, a learning disability, or a combination of these conditions?

While many of the usual manifestations of learning problems may have their genesis in a variety of factors, most practitioners are ill-equipped to diagnose the source, thus leaving untended a large number of students who either remain underserved in the corner of a regular classroom or are moved to a special education program that may not have the resources or skills to deal with their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One suspects that, given classrooms with a wide diversity of students, an untrained teacher may be tempted to refer a troubling Asian child to special education as a means of “getting rid of a problem” or, more commonly, to assume that the child’s problem is solely one of second-language learning rather than a learning disorder. In light of the traditionally low prevalence of such students from Asian groups in the past, many teachers are now surprised to see “difficult” Asian children. These observations call for careful research, not only to identify possible learning disorders among linguistic minority students but also to identify the diverse learning styles and approaches that work for these populations. Within the larger context of Asian-American students, we see an ongoing debate on the appropriateness of teaching approaches, particularly as this population grows more diverse (Wong-Fillmore, 1985). Useful information on API groups cannot be adequately obtained by reviewing, for example, older materials on Japanese-American students that may or (more likely) may not be appropriate for new Asian groups such as the Khmer or the Lao.

This article focuses specifically on Southeast Asian LEP and FEP refugee students, and raises questions about the properess of placing them among other Asian Americans. Where policies based on ethnic or racial groups are entertained, the wide spectrum of Asians and Pacific Islanders—both the foreign-born and those born in the United States—tend to be lumped into a single category, presuming a homogeneity of background contexts and characteristics that in fact does not exist. Instead, we argue that there is a need to document and to recognize the extraordinary diversity of API groups, especially as it affects learning in general and language learning in particular. For the purposes of this article, we concentrate on five main Indochinese ethnic groups: the Khmer from Cambodia, the Lao and the Hmong from Laos, and the Chinese and Vietnamese from Vietnam. Their public image—particularly that of the Vietnamese—is often an extension of the “model minority” image associated with East Asian “brain drain” immigrants. It would be a mistake to accept this image, both because of the socioeconomic and ethnic-cultural diversity evident among the Southeast Asians themselves and because of fundamental differences between the immigrant and refugee experiences.
SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

The newest and the largest group of recently arrived Asians has been the Southeast Asians, a population that now includes nearly 900,000 refugees who have been admitted to the United States from 1975 to 1988, plus over 200,000 children born to these groups since their arrival (Rumbaut & Weeks, 1986). Many thousands remain in refugee camps overseas awaiting resettlement to the United States, and still others are being admitted under an "orderly departure program" directly from Vietnam. These refugees come from three countries, all former colonies of French Indochina, with widely different languages and ethnic-cultural traditions. There is not a single Indochinese language, nor are there dialectal variations of a single Indochinese language family. Additionally, the social composition of each refugee group has been shaped by their country's respective histories and by selective admission processes. Only 130,000 refugees, almost all Vietnamese, were evacuated to the United States in 1975 as part of a "first wave" comprising mostly an urban, educated elite with prior American contacts and some familiarity with English. Among the Cambodians the bulk of the educated class either fled to France (as did the Lao elites) or were killed by the Khmer Rouge during the forced deurbanization, massacres, and famine of the 1975-1978 Pol Pot period. However, most Indochinese refugees have in fact been resettled here since 1980. These more recently arrived "second-wave" refugees include much greater proportions of lowland Lao and Hmong from Laos, Khmer survivors of the "killing fields" of Cambodia, Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese "boat people," and rural and less educated persons. Consequently, the adaptation by the school-age children of these refugee groups reflects crucial differences in time of arrival and social class background.

Unlike most Asian Americans who are born in the United States, foreign-born students—whether immigrants or refugees—must confront the immediate problem of English-language acquisition and acculturation to American ways of life. However, what typically distinguishes refugees from other immigrants are their motives for leaving and their persistent memories of the past, especially the acute sense of loss and trauma that often accompanies forced unplanned, and sudden uprooting, and their inability to return to their homeland. The conditions of refugee exit and permanent resettlement in a country of asylum, sometimes after prolonged stays in transit camps, have long-term consequences for psychosocial adjustment that may be reflected in special acculturative and learning problems among school-age refugees. For example, a recent study of secondary-level Cambodian students revealed that half of them were experiencing emotional and psychological distress in the first year of school, and a reduced readiness to devote time and effort to school. An assessment of Southeast Asian schoolchildren must, consequently, look beyond the usual linguistic and acculturative adjustments to more basic socioemotional problems that may be associated with their particular refugee experiences.

The consequences of such traumas for refugee populations may thus include serious disruption of normal schooling, family life, and social support systems; emotional problems among both youth and parents; and a reduced readiness to devote time and effort to school. An assessment of Southeast Asian schoolchildren must, consequently, look beyond the usual linguistic and acculturative adjustments to more basic socioemotional problems that may be associated with their particular refugee experiences.

Although this general distinction between refugees and immigrants has important implications for educators, specific variations and exceptions occur. For example, Southeast Asian refugees who left in 1975 are likely to have been exposed to less severe trauma than those who left after 1978, and among the latter the Cambodians are likely to be more severely traumatized than the Laotians. Refugees from different social classes differ significantly in their coping resources and reactions to otherwise similarly stressful life events. Additionally, some individuals classified as "economic immigrants" or "illegal aliens" may have left their country under conditions very similar to those of many second-wave Southeast Asians, such as escapees from civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala. The latter are not defined as refugees by the U.S. government, primarily for political reasons. Thus an official designation of "refugee" does not necessarily signify a greater level of stress or trauma than that experienced by "immigrants." Furthermore, with the passage of time after arrival in the United States, the differences between refugees and immigrants tend to become gradually less significant, as the varying effects of the past recede before the common challenges of the future (Rumbaut, 1989). Nevertheless, especially during the first few years of residency in the United States, such differences are important to recognize since needs, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors are likely to vary between immigrants and refugees.

SOUTHEAST ASIANS AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Chao (1983), Cheng (1987a, 1987b), Dao and Grossman (1985), and Siegel and Halog (1986) lament the lack of trained bilingual personnel, informed monolingual personnel, and linguistically appropriate instruments for the identification of learning-handicapped Asian students, especially those who are submerged with other language-minority students. In examining the files of a random sample of Southeast Asian students from the San Diego Unified School District, we found that only 17 out of 579 students (3%) were classified as special education students, or roughly one-third of what one might have expected in the general student population. Reasons given for this presumed underrepresentation include lack of trained personnel in primary languages, preoccupation with transition into the regular English-language curriculum, lack of cultural understanding, and lack of parental cooperation. This phenomenon is common in all districts with large numbers of API students, such as San Jose and San Francisco in California and Montgomery County in Maryland (Dao & Grossman, 1985). We remain ignorant of their special educational needs and are thus faced with questions as to whether or not Southeast Asians are truly underrepresented as recipients of special educational services.

Still, it seems premature to target 10% of the Southeast Asian student population for special educational services, since those who come to the United States are not representative of the total population of their home countries. The rule-of-thumb estimate that 10% of the general school-age population needs special educational services may not apply to the refugee population; the true rate is probably lower, owing more to compositional factors than to an inability to diagnose properly special educational needs among refugee students. Immigrant groups are likely to contain disproportionate numbers of individuals with above-average physical and mental competence and hardiness. This is due to (1) subjective self-selection, reflecting the often extraordinary effort, motivation, and resources required to leave one's homeland and to face the hardships of uprooting and transplantation; and (2) the objective selection criteria of U.S. immigration law, including those used by gatekeepers who are mandated to screen out social and mental incompetents, and a system of preferences that favors so-called brain drain immigration by professional and technical workers (combined with family reunification concerns).

In refugee camps in Southeast Asia, interviewers are required to identify individuals with excludable physical and mental disorders; persons thus eliminated from admission to the United States include individuals who would otherwise be identified for special education programs. Hence, in the absence of compelling data to the contrary, the assumption...
that 10% of the foreign-born student population requires special educational services may not be warranted.

Given the present lack of extensive experience with and knowledge of Southeast Asian students who may have special educational needs, we propose here to explore the differences and similarities between FEEP and LEP Southeast Asian students—that is, those who have versus those who have not made the transition into regular English-language courses—as a basis for understanding their particular learning contexts and factors affecting their academic progress. Such an exploratory study lays the groundwork for establishing criteria for intervention with Southeast Asian LEP and potential special education students (Chan, 1983):

SAMPLES AND SOURCES OF DATA

The data for this article were drawn from the Southeast Asian Refugee Youth Study (SARYS), a comparative community study of the adaptation of Southeast Asian refugee youth (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). The project was conducted during 1986–1987 in San Diego, California. Its aim was to examine both successes and problems of these refugee youth regarding their educational and occupational attainment and aspirations, their social adjustment, and their prospects for economic self-sufficiency. It was based on a combination of extensive survey research and school district data for a large sample of Southeast Asian students, plus intensive interviews with a smaller sample of refugee youth about their experiences and perceptions of schooling and the world of work, thus adding a qualitative ethnographic component to our quantitative analyses. These data form the basis of the findings reported.

Two sets of quantitative data are used in this article: (1) all linguistic minority students in the spring of 1987 who were either juniors or seniors in the San Diego Unified School District (N = 5,472), and (2) a random sample of secondary school grades 7–12 Southeast Asian students in the same district (N = 239). Both data sets contain basic information on the students’ age, gender, ethnicity, year in school, active/inactive status, and LEP/FEEP language status, as well as two types of measures of educational attainment: the students’ cumulative grade point average (GPA) and their CTBS (Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills) standardized achievement test scores.

The CTBS is a standardized test that is widely used throughout the United States to gauge educational achievement of students in grades K–12, and its results provide data that may be compared nationally with other student groups at similar grade levels. It measures skills that are prerequisite to studying and learning in school—recognition, translation, interpretation, application, and analysis—and produces three composite indices of achievement: (1) reading (combining the Vocabulary and Comprehension subtests), (2) language (combining Language Expression and Language Mechanics subtests), and (3) mathematics (combining computation skills and mathematics concepts and applications).

In this article we report student scores on these three composite indices.

Southeast Asians versus all other non-Southeast Asian linguistic minority students. It cannot, however, distinguish among the various ethnic groups from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that make up the Southeast Asian student population, since the school district does not specifically code such information. The second data set does permit a detailed comparison among Vietnamese, Chinese-Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian (or Khmer) students. It is part of a larger longitudinal study of refugee households in San Diego—the Indochinese Health & Adaptation Research Project (IHARP)—which collected information on their social backgrounds, migration histories, social and economic adjustment, and physical and mental health (see Rumbaut, 1989).

By joining the extensive IHARP data on refugee parents and households with the school district’s data on the academic performance of their children, we were able to identify a wide range of determinants of the educational attainment of these students. Interestingly, to obtain an indication of the generalizability of our data a comparison was made between the GPAs of the SARYS random sample of Vietnamese students in San Diego and those reported by Caplan, Whitmore, and Bui (1985) for Vietnamese students in five regions of the United States (Boston, Chicago, Houston, Orange County, and Seattle); the grade distributions for both samples were nearly identical.

A cautionary note should be emphasized here preceding the results of our study. It is one thing to look at performance on standardized achievement tests and another thing to review performance in classes as reflected by GPAs; moreover, it is one thing to evaluate English-language reading proficiency levels and another to assess mathematics skills, especially of the foreign-born. Although all of these possible academic outcomes (GPA, reading and mathematics scores) are to some extent interrelated, they are not coterminous; that is, there will be some independence of these outcomes from each other. Thus the practitioner should not assume that test performance is equivalent to classroom performance or, for that matter, that mathematic and reading test performances may be substituted for one another.

In this article, we examine the differences between students who are classified as LEP and as FEEP. In practice, those classified as LEP receive special language assistance (sometimes with the use of their home language), while those classified as FEEP are assigned to regular classes without any assistance in their home language. In the school district of our Southeast Asian sample, a main criterion for transferring students from LEP status to FEEP status is passing the reading portion of the CTBS at the 36th percentile level. This language status transition is one measure of school adjustment, and it seems to be particularly significant for those whose interests involve diagnosing and treating individuals with special linguistic learning problems. In California today an average of 50,000 LEP students are reclassified as FEEP each year. Most of the reclassifications take place within three years after a student has entered the school system, and very few students remain designated as LEP beyond five years (Olsen, 1988).

There is considerable debate, however, over the meaning of the 36th percentile cutoff point for the classification of LEP and FEEP students. It is an arbitrary cutoff point that can be raised or lowered depending on what percentage of the population one wishes to define as having "sufficient" English proficiency. Nevertheless, educators are concerned on the basis of some objective standard, and this has been the accepted procedure for determining the transfer of LEP students into mainstream classes. There is, of course, no single "true" measure of the distinction between LEP and FEEP; rather, as with the concept of literacy, there are multiple determinants criteria as well as a continuum of competence (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Hence, as a method yielding merely a convenient dichotomy between levels of English language proficiency, the 36th percentile remains a rough basis for bureaucratic decisions to mainstream students into regular classes; but since all students are assessed by the same criterion, LEP-FEEP comparisons based on it are at least methodologically legitimate. In any case, on our bivariate analyses we will rely on this distinction in order to identify the principal background factors and other characteristics distinguishing LEP from FEEP students; in our multivariate analyses we will then use the CTRS reading score as a continuous variable in order to estimate the independent effects of various predictors on the actual (not the arbitrary) level of measured English proficiency.

Additional reservations should be noted concerning the use of the reading scores, pur-
particularly since reading is a complex skill area that may require years before substantial fluency is likely to be achieved. Unlike the spelling, language mechanics, and especially the mathematics portions of the CTBS, we found that reading comprehension and vocabulary scores remain low even for Southeast Asian students who are in mainstream classes; it appears to be the most difficult area of basic skills to master. Yoshioka (1929) reported over a half a century ago a similar pattern of high scores in mathematics but significantly low reading comprehension and vocabulary scores for another Asian sample (young second-generation Japanese Americans). Although reading scores improved over time among Japanese-American test takers, this was the last area to show improvement and the one in which improvement occurred over the most prolonged period. An important implication of these observations for Southeast Asian students is that the reading portion of the CTBS is a much poorer predictor of academic success (e.g., of GPAs) than is the mathematics component. Thus the assumption that test scores of Southeast Asians can be interpreted much as those of the general population born in the United States is problematic. These observations raise questions about the timing and level of English-language acquisition and direct attention toward identifying factors that may facilitate or inhibit the transition from limited English proficiency to fluent English proficiency among Southeast Asian refugee students.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Results will be reported in three parts. The first analysis relies on the data on language minority juniors and seniors (N = 5,742), and provides a comparison of the educational performance of LEP and FEP Southeast Asian students as a whole with that of other LEP and FEP ethnic groups. This is followed by an analysis of the smaller but randomly selected IHARP-SARY’S sample of refugee students (N = 229), enabling us to compare the five major Southeast Asian ethnic groups with each other while again controlling for LEP versus FEP language status. Next we focus on a description of those social background characteristics of the refugee students that we found to be most significantly associated with language status and academic attainment. Finally, the results of a multivariate analysis are presented, focusing on those background factors that are independently predictive of our key dependent variable: English reading comprehension and vocabulary as measured by the CTBS achievement test. These results, taken together, should in turn help to delineate some criteria that service providers should consider in assessing these students and developing appropriate programs. Caution should be taken when interpreting the second set of data since the sample size is relatively small, which affects its statistical reliability. Nevertheless, since this appears to be the only data file on Southeast Asians that includes a plethora of background variables as well as performance outcomes, it provides the best exploratory estimate to date of the academic progress of Southeast Asian students.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN SOUTHEAST ASIANS AND OTHER LINGUISTIC MINORITY STUDENTS

Table 1 provides an initial comparison of the academic performance of Southeast Asian and other language minority groups, broken down by ethnicity and LEP or FEP status. Among all ethnic groups, as is shown in Table 1, Southeast Asians are most likely to be LEP, reflecting their recent arrival in the United States. Although the popular image of the bilingual student is that of a student of Hispanic origin, on the whole Hispanics are more likely than Southeast Asian refugees to be native English speakers or classified as FEP. Hispanics (especially in California and the Southwest) include many United States-born Chicanos, whereas all Southeast Asian refugees by definition immigrated after 1975 (and most of them arrived in the United States only after 1980). Thus we found that only 28% of Hispanic juniors and seniors in San Diego high schools were LEP, whereas two-thirds of Southeast Asian juniors and seniors were LEP. Moreover, examining only those with a primary home language other than English (and thus excluding Hispanic-origin students whose native language is English), we found that 43% of language-minority Hispanics were LEP in their junior and senior years, which is still well below the two-thirds of Southeast Asians who classified as LEP.

As Table 1 shows, despite their language handicap Southeast Asian students as a whole are receiving higher GPAs than all other students in San Diego high schools, with the exception of East Asians; they even have a higher GPA than the 2.33 average of white majority students. The “East Asians” category includes Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students. This grouping frequently includes children from “brain drain” immigrant families (such as those headed by a Taiwanese engineer who, as a general rule, have not only received a quality education in their home country but have also had little disruption of their schooling. By contrast, many Southeast Asian students have seriously disrupted schooling histories and parents who are less likely to be well-educated professionals; in fact, a substantial number are the children of illiterate peasants and fishermen. Thus the comparatively high academic performance of East Asians is understandable, given these social class differences (see also Olsen, 1985).

The category “other immigrants” in Table 1 includes linguistic minority students who have immigrated from Europe, Iran, India, and Arab countries, and whose families, like those of many East Asian immigrants, include disproportionate numbers of professionals. Their high GPA thus probably reflects the selective migration pattern of families with highly educated parents. Filipinos exhibit GPAs just above the district average. Under the 1965 immigration law, admissions criteria for family reunification reasons have been used extensively by Filipinos, resulting in the immigration of less well educated individuals as well as persons from highly educated families. By contrast, Hispanics and Pacific Islanders have academic attainment patterns well below district norms. The socioeconomic composition
of these groups is known to include a larger proportion of less well educated individuals and commensurately accounts, at least in part, for the students’ lower GPAs and test scores.

The rank order of student CTBS achievement test scores parallels the GPA pattern, yet notable deviations emerge. On the whole, the Southeast Asian students achieve above-average scores on the CTBS mathematics portion, but in reading they are significantly below average. In all three areas of the CTBS (mathematics, language, reading), as expected, Southeast Asian LEPs have lower scores than FEP students, yet the gap is less in both Southeast Asian and Filipino students, possibly reflecting a wider variation in social background characteristics. More notable is the fact that, in spite of their higher GPA, Southeast Asian LEP students have lower reading scores than those of Hispanic LEP students. Clearly, the Southeast Asians exceed in mathematics overall; they are in the top quartile nationally in mathematics computation. On the other hand, their reading vocabulary subtest scores place them in the bottom quartile nationally, reflecting their present difficulties with learning and becoming proficient in a new language, a new alphabet, and a new culture.

Indeed, the sequence of achievement indicated by these scores—and the pattern is the same for all ethnic groups—reflects a progression from the more culture- and language-bound basic skills tested (i.e., those requiring the greatest familiarity with the host culture), such as reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language expression, to the more easily memorizable and the least culture- and language-bound skill areas, such as spelling and language mechanics and mathematics applications and computation. Mathematics computation reflects the clearest example of objective, rule-bound skills; a vivid illustration of this is the fact that immigrants typically continue to “think in their native language” when carrying out operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, even after they become completely fluent in English and reach the point where they “think in English” in routine conversations and interactions. Further observation of longitudinal data on CTBS tests taken by the Southeast Asian students in our sample suggests that mathematics achievement scores remain relatively stable over time, while reading and language skills undergo significant improvement over time, as the refugees become increasingly proficient in English. That is, the English language-based achievement levels are not indicative of a static pattern, but one that appears to be improving fairly rapidly over time. The transition from LEP to FEP status does take time, of course, and is conditioned by diverse other factors, such as the level of previous education and literacy in one’s native language.

These first observations reveal the following general conclusions: (1) Southeast Asian students are more likely to be LEP than other language minority groups; (2) as expected, FEPs are doing better in all measures of academic achievement than are LEP students; (3) in spite of having proportionately more LEP individuals, Southeast Asians, as an aggregate, have above-average grades; (4) the level of academic achievement corresponds roughly to the socioeconomic composition of each group, such as the proportion of parents with more schooling; (5) while the Southeast Asian students’ CTBS mathematics scores are above average, their reading scores are significantly below average. These observations, in turn, begin to provide a larger context for understanding the English language acquisition of Southeast Asian students.

It should be noted that language identification and assessment decisions, including the determination of LEP or FEP status, are made when the students first enter the public schools. LEP students are then reassessed periodically (usually on an annual basis). The initial assessment does not judge the students’ competency in their primary language (including literacy skills in that language), but rather identifies the preferred language spoken at home if other than English. Data about the composition of the linguistic minority population, including such factors as country of origin, birth date, length of stay in the United States, age upon entry into the United States, educational background, parental social class, and level of proficiency in non-English languages as well as in the English language, are typically not collected by the schools. While eventually a more precise delineation of the composition of each LEP population will be necessary to more accurately ferret out predictive factors, we have included data only for our Southeast Asian sample, which will be reported in the next section.

**Comparisons of Educational Attainment Among Southeast Asian Groups**

Table 2 presents similar data on GPAs and CTBS achievement test scores for our random sample of Southeast Asian students in grades 7–12 (N = 239) broken down by each of the five refugee ethnic groups as well as FEP or LEP status. There is clearly considerable diversity in educational attainment among these groups. The Vietnamese have the highest GPAs; even when we control for language status, Vietnamese LEP students exhibit very high GPAs (2.96) as well as mathematics scores. They are followed closely by the Chinese-Vietnamese, then the Hmong, the Khmer, and lastly the Lao. Surprisingly, Hmong students were found to have GPAs above those of majority white students; Khmer and Lao students had slightly lower GPAs than white Anglos, but still significantly higher GPAs than blacks, Hispanics, and Pacific Islanders. We ran a series of separate analyses to see whether their higher GPAs were due to possibly less demanding ESL (English as a Second Language) courses, but found that with the exception of the most recently arrived Khmer, whose GPAs in ESL courses were somewhat higher than those in mainstream courses, the pattern of high GPA attainment persisted across the ESL and regular curricula. Indeed, Hmong GPAs in regular English, mathematics, science, and social science courses were actually slightly higher than those of their GPAs in the ESL track.

Turning to CTBS reading scores, note that the rank order by ethnic group changes somewhat. The Vietnamese show the highest reading scores, followed by the Chinese-Vietnamese, the Khmer, the Lao, and last the Hmong (whose reading scores place them in the bottom quartile nationally). The particular difficulties that Hmong students exhibit in reading comprehension and vocabulary skills partly reflect the prevalent illiteracy and lack of education among their parents. Nonetheless, the Hmong students do much better in the more “mechanical” portions of the CTBS, such as spelling and, especially, mathematics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>FEP or LEP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>GPA*</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>7.11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>5.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>7.58</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>FEP</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>6.67</td>
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<td></td>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>5.33</td>
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</table>

*GPA = cumulative grade point average, excluding physical education.
†In stimine scores.
What explains the different patterns of educational attainment among these refugee groups and the rank order observed above with respect to their GPAs and CTBS scores? An answer to this question is made possible by the availability of our extensive IHARP data set, which contains comprehensive information about the migration and settlement history of the refugee students' families, socioeconomic backgrounds, and occupational and psychological adjustment in the United States. Some of the most important of these characteristics should be considered. The discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to help sketch a social context within which the educational progress of these refugee students can be better understood and appreciated.

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

What are some of the characteristics of these refugee youths and their families? These parameters include temporal factors (e.g., how long these refugee families stayed in refugee camps overseas prior to their resettlement in the United States and how long they have been in the United States), socioeconomic factors (e.g., father's and mother's prior education, employment, and poverty levels in the United States), and family composition (e.g., the proportion of two-parent versus single-parent families among refugee students). Such characteristics have important implications that service providers might wish to take into account for evaluation and planning.

Overall, the Vietnamese students in our sample had been in the United States the longest, an average of nearly seven years as of fall 1985 (largely because of the presence among them of some "first-wave" students who came to the United States in 1975), although the majority of the Vietnamese did not arrive until 1980 or after. They are followed by the Hmong, the Lao, and the Chinese-Vietnamese, all of whom had been in the United States an average of nearly six years as of fall 1985. The Khmer, finally, were the most recently arrived group overall, with the students in our sample averaging just under 5 years in the United States as of 1985.

Adaptation to a new school or a new society takes, among other things, time. For refugee adults as well as children, time in the United States is clearly an important correlate of adaptive processes. On the average, FEP students had been in the United States a year and a half longer than LEP students. Additionally, FEP students had shorter stays in refugee camps than LEP students.

There is also great diversity in the social class backgrounds of these students' families. Overall, Vietnamese parents are much more educated, with an average of over nine years of education, followed by the Chinese-Vietnamese (nearly seven years), then the Khmer and the Lao (each averaging about five years), and lastly the Hmong (with a parental average of just above a first-grade education). LEP students in general had parents with fewer years of schooling than did FEP students—on the average, a two-year difference. In all groups, fathers had significantly higher levels of education than mothers. In all groups except the Vietnamese, the average level of education of mothers is less than sixth grade, with almost all Hmong mothers never having attended school.

The prevalent lack of education among the Hmong reflects the fact that about 90% came from rural origins (most were slash-and-burn farmers from the Laotian highlands or guerrilla fighters during the U.S. secret war in Laos in the 1960s and early 1970s). The Hmong language, moreover, was but an oral tradition until the 1950s, when missionaries developed a written notation for it based on the Roman alphabet; as a consequence, many Hmong adult refugees are illiterate not only in English but in any language, which tends to handicap further their children's development of literacy and reading skills in English.

PREDICTORS OF ENGLISH READING PROFICIENCY

All of these characteristics of Southeast Asian students, and of their parents and families, clearly affect their learning and educational progress. But which are more important? Bivariate analyses show strong and statistically significant differences between LEP and FEP students in all of the factors with the exception of student age and gender. In order to examine these differences in our investigation, then, we move from a bivariate to a multivariate analysis to determine which of these factors emerge as the main predictors of the students English language status. Before proceeding, it should again be noted that the sample size is small (N = 239), a limitation that leads to small cell sizes when the Southeast Asian students are divided into the various ethnic groups. Therefore, the results are relatively unstable and should be taken as provisional and indicative of general trends rather than of definitive conclusions.

Nevertheless, given the paucity of large data files on Southeast Asians, this initial analysis provides an early estimate of factors that shape their academic attainment.

Since transition from LEP to FEP status is governed by the students' reading skills as measured by the CTBS, we use their reading test scores as the dependent variable in a multivariate analysis that follows. The purpose is to estimate how much of the variance in the students' CTBS reading scores can be predicted by selected background characteristics, and to determine the independent effect of each predictor variable while controlling for all of the other variables. In other words, this last analysis departs from a direct comparison between FEP and LEP students and examines factors that might help predict the level of CTBS reading scores using a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable.

For our purposes here, we report the findings of a stepwise multiple regression procedure. Three main types of predictor variables were examined in the regression procedure: (1) ethnicity, (2) age and time in the United States, and (3) parents' socioeconomic status.

In the first set we included dummy variables for Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer, and Hmong ethnicity (Chinese students were the reference group). In the second set we included the students' ages, years in the United States, and sudents in U.S. secondary schools when all the students were included the parents' level of education, employment status, and level of poverty and welfare dependency. We also looked at household size and entered a dummy variable for parental composition of the children's homes to control for the effect of two-parent households.

Three variables emerged as the most significant predictors of the refugee students' CTBS reading scores: (1) parents' education, (2) years in the United States, and (3) age of the student. That is, the more educated the parents, the more time spent in the United States, and the younger the student, the greater the student's English reading skills when all the other variables in the equation are controlled. Interestingly, the IHARP study found that the same variables were also the key predictors of English reading and writing proficiency among Southeast Asian adults (see Rumrunt, 1989). Among the students, these three variables alone accounted for over 40% of the variance in the CTBS reading test scores. While that suggests that this parsimonious model has considerable explanatory power, it is well to note that more than half of the variance remains "unexplained" by the selected predictor variables, implying the existence of other causal factors not yet captured by our data. Still, the three factors taken together explained most of the difference in the students' English
language composition status accounted for by the model. Once these variables were controlled, neither parental composition, household size, ethnicity, nor any of the other socioeconomic status measures (e.g., poverty and welfare dependence) was found to have a significant effect on reading scores.

**Discussion and Implications**

Teachers and other professionals responsible for the education of linguistic minority students face the formidable tasks of assessing their needs and designing services that will effectively meet those needs. Readers who are unfamiliar with Southeast Asian students may marvel at the complexity of their lives. If a lesson is to be learned from the study of Southeast Asian youth, it is that while their wide diversity of backgrounds and experiences may challenge or overwhelm our initial ability to comprehend them, over time we can come to recognize patterns and insights that deepen our understanding and guide our ability to provide appropriate services. One needs to take into account ethnicity and culture, family and social class background, age and time in the United States, the trauma of the refugee experience, the stress of acculturation processes, and the conditions of survival in this country—conditions that go well beyond questions of whether or not the child has a special learning problem or linguistic disorder. Southeast Asian refugee youth come into American schools with complex life histories that affect their educational attainment and need to be contextualized and understood by American educators. In this concluding section we will suggest some practical implications that follow from the results of our study.

**Interpreting Test Scores as a Measure of Academic Achievement**

Southeast Asian students in general do well in the mathematics component of the CTBS and also reasonably well in the more easily memorized English language skill areas such as spelling and language mechanics. In fact, especially for Vietnamese students, their high mathematics scores, averaging in the top quartile of all test takers, are indicative of a brighter than normal population. Not only do these high mathematics scores probably reflect a strong cultural support for mathematics, but they also suggest that refugee students in general are a highly selected group, both "internally" and "externally." Some Vietnamese parents, for example, did not send mentally retarded or less capable children to the United States because they reasoned that the high risks and costs of escape would not be worth the low probability that these children would succeed in America. All of this suggests that special learning problems manifested by refugee students may be due less to neuropsychological disorders than to linguistic, acculturative, socioeconomic, and temporal factors. Our additional observation that a very large percentage of recently arrived Southeast Asian students are LEPs reinforces an emphasis on language and culture as priority issues.

Reading scores are much less predictive of academic outcomes such as GPA than are the language, and especially the mathematics component of the CTBS (Rumbaut & Ina, 1985). Therefore, assessing Southeast Asian students, practitioners who have access to test scores should pay special attention to mathematics achievement and to the more memorizable aspects of English language skills rather than the more culturally problematic areas that test vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language expression. This is especially important for newly arrived refugees. Indeed, in separate multivariate analyses we found that CTBS mathematics scores alone account for nearly half of the variance in GPAs among Southeast Asian students, whereas reading scores are not significant predictors of GPA. This does not mean that the development of reading skills should be ignored, of course, but underscores the fact that mathematics scores are simply a more adequate indicator of future academic attainment. It should also be noted that standardized tests are time-limited. Therefore, the same students who might have trouble answering test items under time-limited conditions may be capable of performing academic tasks on regular classroom assignments that do not have similar time constraints. Additionally, we have found that reading scores, despite lagging behind both the language and mathematics areas, are the ones most likely to improve over time in the United States.

**Interpreting Differences in English Language Proficiency**

The level of parents' premigration education is a factor that refugee parents themselves use as an explanation for variations in Southeast Asian student performance. Although discovering precisely how the educational background of refugee parents becomes translated into the English reading skills of their children is an area for future investigation, Heath's (1983) findings suggest that more educated parents provide a home learning environment that enhances their children's prospects for academic success regardless of the language employed at home—an observation that may apply to Southeast Asian students as well. For those students whose parents have little formal schooling, intervention will require the presence of bilingual/bicultural professionals or paraprofessionals who can bridge the gap between the home and the school and who can assist the parents to promote their children's success in school.

Time spent in the United States is clearly a crucial predictor of English proficiency. Those who have been in the United States longest have had the greatest opportunity to acquire competence in the new language, and this is reflected in their improving English reading test scores over time. Therefore, if a longtime-resident student manifests little improvement in pattern of low scores in this area of language achievement, then the possible existence of a learning disability or some other related condition becomes more plausible. By contrast, if a student has been in the United States only a short time and is experiencing difficulty in reading skills, it is not easy to ascertain whether or not that person is simply going through normal processes of second-language acquisition or experiencing other learning problems.

Moreover, this study confirms that foreign-born persons who are younger are more likely to acquire fluency in all areas of English language skills than are their older counterparts. Among refugee students who arrived at an older age, particularly after puberty, their academic problems are more likely to be a function of their greater difficulty in acquiring competence in the English language, all other things being equal, thus resembling adult language learning patterns more closely than those of younger children. It should be stressed that age at arrival is a critical variable, almost as predictive of English proficiency as are time in the United States and educational background, and especially with regard to whether a student arrived before or after the onset of puberty. In this regard, educators should be alerted to the need to distinguish between true age and official age in this population, because frequently refugee students are older than their officially listed age. Knowing their true age will give a better estimate of their language-learning problems and processes. Those entering American schools after puberty will generally present more problems, since they will have greater difficulty not only with learning the English language but also with acculturative stress and identity formation during the developmental transition of adolescence. Such problems will be mediated by the quality of the students' schooling in their home country (a function of parental social class) or during their refugee camp period (where high-quality education rarely occurs).

**Integrating Ethnocultural Differences Among Southeast Asian Refugees**

Southeast Asian refugees vary considerably, not only in their social class backgrounds and migration histories but also in their diverse ethnocultural orientations. Though our quanti-
tative analysis above did not identify ethnicity as a major predictor of language status, its power was nevertheless recorded as a key predictor of other academic outcomes, especially of GPA and mathematics scores. Vietnamese and Chinese ethnicity were significant positive predictors of GPA and mathematics achievement, while Khmer and Lao ethnicity were significant negative predictors; Hmong ethnicity reflected a weaker and less significant effect. The responses of Southeast Asian students to the teaching and learning situation vary by ethnicity and evidently reflect differences in cultural values, childrearing practices, learning styles, and modes of family organization. To amplify the cultural implications that were not evident in the quantitative data, we collected ethnographic and other qualitative information through interviews and field observations; this forms the basis of the following interpretations.

The cultures of Indo-Chinese societies have been shaped historically by two major cultural influences, the Indian and the Chinese (see Rumbaut & Ina, 1988, for a review of the scholarly literature). Both the Khmer and the Lao (Luangpraseuth, 1987) have been more influenced by Indian civilization, whereas the Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese (and the Hmong to a lesser extent) have been decisively influenced by Chinese and especially Confucian traditions. The Chinese model is based on vertically organized, hierarchical, patrilineal, highly disciplined extended-family systems that instill deeply felt norms of filial piety and ancestor worship. These norms of deference are part of a system of mutually reciprocated obligations, including the expectation of extraordinary parental self-sacrifice to ensure, in the U.S. context, that children will go as far as possible in pursuit of their education in order ultimately both to honor and support the parents financially, thus making good on the parents' investment (Duong, 1981; Hsuyn, 1987). Furthermore, this Confucian model reflects an adaptive style that is active, pragmatic, and instrumental, based on a work ethic of personal effort and an "internal locus of control" orientation to problem solving. This form of social organization creates a structure of pressures that results in disciplined and directed outcomes on the part of students, greater responsiveness to teachers and rule-bound instruction, and a higher level of competitive academic achievement (Wong-Fillmore, 1985).

By contrast, the Lao and Khmer generally share a common religion (Theravada Buddhism) and common linguistic and cultural roots. Perhaps more importantly, they do not have the kind of patriarchal, patrilineal, extended-family system found in the Chinese model. Instead, family organization tends to be more nuclear, neolocal, bilateral, and matrilocal. Comparatively, where one finds extended families among the Lao and Khmer, they tend to reflect optional and individualistic rather than obligatory or deeply institutionalized commitments. The Khmer respondents we interviewed, for example, illustrated this perspective by asserting their need to establish a household separate from their parents, thus reinforcing the idea of family relationships as conditional and volunteeristic, based on individual feelings rather than on collective obligations. In parent-child relationships, one finds looser social controls and filial piety norms among the Lao and Khmer, less discipline (including less parental pressure to achieve), and a weaker sense of obligation to parents and ancestors for material achievement. These factors seem to result in a lower functional affinity between their cultural orientation toward authority and achievement and the relatively authoritarian and competitive nature of American public schools and work settings.

The Hmong occupy an intermediate position, largely because of the relative absence of social class resources among preliterate parents (although in those cases where Hmong parents had some educational advantage or other human capital, that difference was positively reflected in the children's attainment patterns). Instead, Hmong family and clan organizational resources may be more predictive of future self-sufficiency outcomes, despite the obstacles posed by the demography of this population as well as by the severely disadvantaged labor-market position of the first generation. Clan and family structure is manifested most notably in the discipline and attention that Hmong youth give to authorities, especially teachers. They are highly motivated to avoid negative sanctions and will go to great lengths to avoid shame and to protect their "face" and family name. Nevertheless, despite the promise they have shown through high school, Hmong youth face an array of other problems that may seriously undermine or diminish their potential for success, including their relative failure at present to make the transition to postsecondary schooling. This failure is due in part to early marriages (often coerced by parents) and early family formation, to the severe devaluation of girls by the Hmong patriarchal system, and to the lack of role models and the financial wherewithal to support the college education of children (see Rumbaut & Ina, 1988, for a detailed discussion).

In these characterizations of the Chinese, Indian, and Hmong models of social life are themselves broad oversimplifications, they point to the necessity of recognizing the ethnocultural diversity of Southeast Asians and its effects on patterns of learning and educational attainment.

Final Implications

One result of the general lack of primary language knowledge and cultural understanding of Southeast Asians among American teachers and allied professionals is the confusion over assigning Southeast Asian students to special education programs. However, precisely because of the lack of clarity about the source and nature of refugee students learning problems, is it proper to assign them to special education classes? If there are no bilingual services available, then this may be a reasonable placement, if only because these students may be apt to receive more individual attention from teachers—all the more so if the specialist is informed about the range of possible sources of learning difficulties faced by refugee students (e.g., second-language acquisition, acculturation, trauma) and makes allowances for the specific services rendered. But if teachers simply operate on the assumption that they are dealing with linguistically disordered or special educational students as traditionally defined, then there is cause to be skeptical of such a placement, for all of the reasons mentioned earlier.

An alternative to the referral of Southeast Asians directly to special education programs is a prereferral process that sorts out the various temporal and social factors (including second-language problems, acculturation, and traumatic refugee experiences) that may influence their learning problems, and does so prior to a decision to trigger the regular process of referral into special education. The necessary ingredients of such a process are a bilingual and bicultural staff capable of dealing with the ubiquitous communication problems (preferably a professionally trained individual or at the least a paraprofessional bilingual specialist) and the availability of alternative services. At this prereferral stage the individual student can be diagnosed and, if his or her problem does not clearly require a speech-language pathologist or special education specialist, sent to alternative placements, thus avoiding the need to rely on special educational programs that may lack appropriate resources or expertise. Despite these cautionary comments about the placement of Southeast Asians into special education programs, they are more likely to be left in bilingual and ESL classes on the assumption that they are primarily linguistic rather than special education problems. This trend is associated with the frequent observations of apparent underrepresentation of Southeast Asian LEP students in special education programs. Regardless of placement, unless the combination of language, cultural, and emotional stresses of refugee life is addressed, Southeast Asian students will continue to be underserved. It would be naive to assume that these students bring to the classroom the same general worldview and
life experiences as their American teachers. Instead, as we have argued, their patterns of educational achievement in the United States are shaped by identifiable factors.

While the understanding of strangers is a difficult and often frustrating task, it is also clear that knowing the life histories and cultures of these newcomers will make a difference in providing quality education services. In the process it may deepen our understanding of ourselves and enhance the meaning, value, and quality of careers in American education.

REFERENCES


