

SCHOOLING, IDENTITY, ETHNICITY IN A NEW IMMIGRANT STATE:  
THE CHALLENGES OF BELONGING AND PERFORMANCE AMONG  
VIETNAMESE MONTAGNARD REFUGEE STUDENTS  
IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT  
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Schooling, Identity, and Ethnicity in a New Immigrant State:  
The Challenges of Belonging and Performance among Vietnamese Montagnard Refugees  
in an Urban High School

(Under the direction of Xue Lan Rong)

This dissertation examines how a group of Vietnamese Montagnard refugee high school students transact their identities at a low-performing, urban high school in the U.S. southeast. As a qualitative study, this research draws on principles of ethnographic inquiry and prioritizes the individual voices of nine students and their teachers, as well as field notes taken during classroom observations. It also draws on background data from interviews with parents, and community members to build an understanding of broader tensions and possibilities that shape these students' identities in school. Findings are analyzed through Holland et al.'s (1998) and Holland and Lave's (2001) framework of identity.

Findings reveal that the students generally view themselves and are viewed by their teachers and peers as "good kids" but "poor students," owing to their experiences as a marginalized ethnic minority in Vietnam, interrupted formal education, limited English proficiency, and graduation requirements that stymie their sense of success in and beyond

school. In spite of the tensions they face, all of the students persist in school and hold a strong desire to graduate. Their identities not only problematize the dominant dichotomizing discourse on Asian immigrants in U.S. schools, which has positioned them as either high-achieving and obedient, or low-achieving, delinquent, and a burden to teachers (Lee, 2005), but also reveal the wide range of academic identities among Asian American students who fall between the stereotyped dichotomizations. In addition, rather than viewing themselves through the lens of race, the students generally transact identities, whether internally or externally, through the lens of their Montagnard ethnicity. This study sheds light on the dynamic interplay between labeling, self-perception, and experience, a process which defines the way these students experience school.

Findings have direct implications for questions surrounding newcomer refugee education, scholarship on refugee students, teacher education/enrichment, and educational policies geared toward high school completion.

To Jerry, Ellen, and Alex.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPS	Bankston Public Schools
ELL	English Language Learner
EOC	End of Course test
ESL	English as a Second Language
FHS	Franklin High School
SIFE	Students with Interrupted Formal Education

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This dissertation examines questions applicable to the United States broader experience with resettled refugees and their education by analyzing how a group of Vietnamese Montagnard refugee high school English Language Learner (ELL) students negotiate their identities at Franklin High School<sup>1</sup>(FHS), a low-performing, urban school in Bankston, North Carolina. It emphasizes the complexity of these students' identities owing to multiple factors, including their experiences as persecuted minorities in Vietnam, and their resettlement in North Carolina, with low socioeconomic status, low English language proficiency, lapses in formal education, and unequal power relationships in school.

This research comes out of my several years of experience as a high school teacher and director of a summer camp for English Language Learner (ELL) immigrant and refugee students. In addition, as a community college English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I have worked with students who left high school early because of lack of academic preparedness, or pressures to provide financially for their families, or to get married. Rather than looking at factors that drive students to drop out, this dissertation highlights how a group of Vietnamese Montagnard ELL students negotiate their identities in a way that motivates them to remain in high school in spite of conditions that we might see as working against their success.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of places and participants in this study have been changed to ensure confidentiality.



As a year-long qualitative study, this study prioritizes the voices of nine Montagnard refugee students, while drawing on ethnographic data gathered from classroom observations and interviews with teachers at FHS, as well as supplemental information gathered from interviews with parents, social services providers, and community members as a means to contextualize the students' identities. By exploring how these students view their evolving identities, I examine how their lived histories as resettled refugees in North Carolina shape their adaptive patterns and integration into FHS and society.

As a means of analyzing their experiences and self-perceptions, I adopt Holland et al.'s (1998) and Holland and Lave's (2001) framework of identity and self-making, drawing on the notions of *figured worlds*, *history in person*, *positional identities*, and *thickening* of identities to analyze contextual, relational, institutional and discursive influences on students' identity articulation in school. While other theories employed in the analysis of immigrant and refugee identities often generalize the experiences of these populations across contexts and racial or ethnic lines, this framework situates the identities of a particular ethnic minority refugee group within the localized venue of a low-performing urban school and in a state that has only recently seen an influx of immigrants and refugees. The framework allows for attention to particular contexts and subjective experiences of these students within these contexts.

By looking at how a single group of refugee students shape their identities in school, this study addresses the lack of research on refugee students in K-12 settings, and questions dominant discourse on Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees in U.S. schools which positions them as either high achieving, respectful, and obedient, or low-

achieving, delinquent, and a burden to teachers (Lee, 2005). I delve beneath these common discourses to listen to these students talk about themselves – their identities – and their experiences of adaptation. Their voices suggest that they actively respond to these contradictory, dichotomizing assumptions in unique and creative ways that inform their experiences and motivations in and beyond school. Their voices underscore the importance of understanding identity in relation to local contexts and individual experiences.

### **Research Questions**

*“Why does he stay in school? His grades are so low!”*

(Guidance counselor, FHS, Personal communication)

In looking at these students’ self-identities, this study asks a set of related general questions: Why do low-achieving ELL Vietnamese Montagnard refugee high school students stay in school? What do they see as the purpose of attending school? What is school like for them? What is the role of language proficiency in mediating their school experiences? How do they make the connection between school and what they perceive to be their possibilities beyond school? How do these things contribute to how they perceive of their identities? These questions lay the foundation for this research, and the following specific research question and sub-questions have guided my conceptual and methodological approaches:

- How do Vietnamese Montagnard refugee ELLs transact their identities<sup>2</sup> in school?
  - How does their background shape their identities and aspirations in school?
  - How does positioning by peers and teachers in ESL and mainstream classes influence the identities these students transact?
  - How do their and others' perceptions of their language proficiency influence their identities in school?
  - How do graduation requirements influence students' perceptions of their school identities?

These questions help us understand the intersection of immigration, culture, race, ethnicity, experience, social class, language proficiency, and public education.

Exploring the identities of students sheds light on social and cultural processes that serve to subordinate some while privileging others. As such, it underscores the nature of social inequalities, and how these inequalities are reproduced in school in multiple ways. Examining refugee identities within a changing social context of North Carolina and FHS is of particular significance because it provides a glimpse of how students' identities are changing along with the social environment in which they are situated. In essence, this study reveals that as a small minority population at FHS, these

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<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the work of Holland et al. (1998), the definition of identity employed in this study is people's ever-evolving perception of who they are. The authors broadly define identity as "self-understandings, especially those with emotional resonance for the teller" (p. 3). I use the terms *identities in school* and *school identities* interchangeably to encompass the ways in which the students perceive of themselves in relation to school personnel, other students, and against school structures (curricula, policies, etc.).

students are continuously positioned by school personnel and in turn compare themselves with other non-immigrant and immigrant minorities at the school.

### **Significance of this Study**

#### **Refugees<sup>3</sup>**

This research focuses on the experiences of a small refugee group residing predominantly in North Carolina. Although immigrants' and refugees' experiences in a new country are in many ways shared (e.g., both groups often face language barriers, poverty, racism, xenophobia, and social isolation), pre-migration experiences, and the process of immigration can differ greatly, especially in ways that affect each group's adjustment and incorporation into the new culture and community. Article 1 of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as

a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of her/his race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there for fear of persecution (United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), 2002).

Thus, unlike many immigrant groups who migrate for economic reasons, refugees flee their home countries to escape war, famine, or persecution. In many cases, refugee families are separated and reunite in the resettlement country years later. Many refugees have experienced physical and psychological trauma, discrimination and marginalization in their home countries and in the emigration process, whether in hiding, or in refugee camps. What is more, unlike immigrants, refugees typically have little time to consider

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the students in this study are legally designated as refugees who migrated to the U.S. with family members who were involved in anti-government protests in Vietnam. However, some of the students arrived in the U.S. through family reunification procedures, to join parents (mostly fathers) who came to the U.S. as refugees earlier. I use the term *refugee* to encompass all students in this study, while recognizing that circumstances surrounding their resettlement differ.

their few options regarding resettlement; they may also know very little about the resettlement country and have no family ties or members there. Additionally, those refugees who were highly educated professionals in their home countries often face no option other than downward economic mobility upon emigration. Conversely, many refugees have had little or no formal education, which limits their work and schooling options once resettled. Interrupted schooling poses an additional barrier to adjustment for many refugee youth (McBrien, 2005).

In addition, many refugees encounter resentment or hostility, or what Aihwa Ong (1996) has termed, “compassion fatigue” within communities where they resettle and where they are perceived as welfare recipients and an economic drain. Resettled refugee students are also likely to experience acculturation stress during the first several years of resettlement in a new country, brought on by placement in temporary housing in destitute neighborhoods, enrollment in low-performing schools, as well as language barriers (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The students whose identity paradigms I explore in this study embody among the most challenging of these characteristics, including social, political, and economic marginalization in Vietnam, time spent in refugee camps, little formal schooling in Vietnam, limited English proficiency, and resettlement in low-income neighborhoods. These challenges place them at particular risk for developing marginalized, or oppositional identities (Ogbu, 1987), or dropping out of school.

### **Educational Experiences of Refugee Students in the U.S.**

The UNHCR estimates that nearly half of the roughly 70,000 refugees admitted to the U.S. each year are under the age of 18. Refugee youth whose parents have had little

or no formal education are especially dependent upon the school system for academic and social guidance. In spite of the numbers of refugee youth in U.S. schools, little research and few textbooks have addressed their education and socialization in any substantive way (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) have written that, “schools are one of the first and most influential service systems that young refugees come into contact with after resettlement” (p. 30). Although education plays a central role in preserving hope and resiliency in refugee students, the authors argue that, “once in resettlement countries, young refugees contend with many of their bicultural conflicts and acculturative struggles in the school setting” (p. 30). They argue that continued research on the school experiences of this population is needed to create a better understanding of the social, psychological, and academic challenges refugees often face. School personnel who do not understand the experiences and difficulties of refugee students often misinterpret these students’ and their families’ attempts at succeeding in their new home (Hones 2002).

Educational attainment is an important factor in assisting the formation of a positive identity that gives refugees a sense of optimism about the future. Hamilton and Moore (2004) have argued, moreover, that education can foster resilience among refugees who have experienced trauma in their countries of origin or during the resettlement process. Ogbu (1987) has written that high academic achievement is common among refugee students. However, such broad generalizations fail to account for the experiences of students who do not perform well in school.

In addition, although much research literature centers around low-achieving minority and immigrant students (e.g., Valenzuela, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), little

research has addressed identity paradigms of newcomer<sup>4</sup> refugee students in school, and how identity bears on their experiences in and expectations of school. What is more, while considerable research has documented macro-social factors influencing the school experiences of immigrant groups, such as race, gender, parental education levels, and social class, the lived experiences, or individual voices of refugee students have been understudied (notable exceptions include Centrie, 2004; Lee, 1996, 2005; Mosselson, 2006).

By seeking the perspectives of Montagnard refugee students about their identities in school, we also gain new understandings about the role of language proficiency that research literature has heretofore largely neglected. For instance, although studies have addressed the linguistic needs and experiences of ELLs in U.S. public schools, (e.g., Toohey, 2000; Valdés, 1996, 2001), there is a paucity of research that connects identity to the school experiences of ELL refugee students and to students with lapses in formal education. Similarly, most research addressing the social and linguistic needs of newcomers focuses on elementary school students (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). In high school, however, we see students approaching a crossroads between childhood and adulthood. This can be a particularly challenging time for adolescent refugee newcomer students who struggle with acquiring “survival skills” and accessing tools to make decisions about their lives beyond school. A study that focuses on the experiences of refugee ELL students in high school can offer new insights into the field of second language education with these conditions in mind.

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<sup>4</sup> I define “newcomers” as those who have been in the U.S. for less than ten years.

As a group, young refugees are heterogeneous in terms of their educational attainment and background, including social class, ethnicity, religion, and language, and reasons for and areas of resettlement. In spite of these differences, adolescent refugees share a common set of urgent needs, which educators must be prepared to meet. Thus, while I do not intend to globalize the experiences of the students in this study to include all Montagnard or other refugee youths, exploring the school identities of a small group of refugee students lends insight into the ways that educational practices and policies might become more responsive and effective in meeting the needs of refugee ELLs in high school in general. This being said, this is also a study that intentionally focuses on a particular refugee group that has resettled in North Carolina, a “new immigrant state.” Therefore an understanding of this local context is appropriate.

### **Refugees in a New Immigrant State<sup>5</sup>**

The conceptual framework developed for this study situates Montagnard refugee student identities within the contexts in which they are formed. Therefore, in order to explore the identity paradigms of the nine Montagnard high school students in this study, it is important to understand their collective political history and social experiences as a persecuted minority in Vietnam. It is equally important to frame the broader demographic landscape which they currently inhabit in North Carolina and out of which their identities emerge.

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<sup>5</sup> North Carolina’s foreign-born population increased multifold in the last decade, and the majority (75%) of the state’s recent immigrants are of Hispanic origin (U.S. Census, 2008). As a “New Immigrant Gateway State” (Rong & Preissle, 2009), there are few programs and policies in the state that facilitate this population’s integration into the local economy, social structure, and schools. Services and resources for non-Hispanic immigrants and refugees are even more lacking.



As a state with a historically low immigration rate, North Carolina has quickly become one of the nation's leading new immigrant states, and refugees constitute a significant proportion of the state's foreign-born population. Census data on North Carolina reveals significant demographic changes in the state between 1970 and 2008.

Table 1

*North Carolina census data illustrating demographic shifts between 1970 and 2008*

North Carolina Population Data			
	1970	1990	2008 (est.)
Total pop.	5,082,059	6,628,637	9,222,414
White (%)	76.8	75.6	67.2
Black	22.2	22	21.6
Other	1	3.2	10.6
Hispanic	na	1.2	7.4
Asian	0.1	0.8	1.9
American Ind.	0.9	1.2	1.3
Foreign born (of any race/ ethnicity)	na	na	5.3

(U.S. Census Bureau, 1970, 1990, 2008)

North Carolina's population is predominantly White and African American. However, the state's immigrant population doubled between 2000 and 2004, and its Hispanic immigrant population quadrupled between 1990 and 2002 (Grieco, 2004). The population of foreign-born Asians in North Carolina has also grown nearly twenty-fold in the last forty years. Nonetheless, the immigrant and refugee flow to North Carolina and the southeast U.S. in general remains largely understudied.

The challenges presented by this rapid demographic transformation are particularly visible in North Carolina's public schools, where programs targeting the needs of immigrant and refugee students are often lacking. For instance, North Carolina

has the 12<sup>th</sup> highest high school drop out rate in the country, and this rate is higher among language and cultural minority students in particular (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008). Only 54.6% of North Carolina 12<sup>th</sup> graders designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) entering high school in 2003 graduated from high school in 2007, as compared to 68.1% of all students in the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007). In this research, I explore the identities and experiences of a group of students who, in spite of their low academic performance and marginalization in school and the home and school conditions that might work against them, remain in school while many of their Montagnard refugee and non-Montagnard peers do not. Their voices provide insight that helps address the challenges of keeping students in school.

**Bankston.** This study takes place in Bankston, one of the largest cities in North Carolina, and historically a transportation, banking and manufacturing center. Table 2 illustrates Bankston's demographic transformation between 1970 and 2008.

Table 2

*Bankston's demographic makeup in 1970, 1990, and 2008*

Bankston			
	1970	1990	2008 (est.)
Total pop.	354,656	511,433	890,515
White (%)	76	71	64.4
Black	24	26	29.6
Other	0	3	15.2
Hispanic	na	na	10.8
Asian	na	na	3.9
American Ind.	na	na	0.5
Foreign born (of any race/ethnicity)	na	na	11

<sup>6</sup> Source omitted

As with North Carolina as a whole, and other metropolitan areas in the southeast, Bankston, a historically White and African-American city, has seen tremendous population growth overall, and most of all in its immigrant population, particularly from Latin America. Bankston's Asian population has also increased significantly. By examining the experiences of refugee newcomers in Bankston, this study sheds light on the challenges and opportunities presented by resettlement in a rapidly growing and changing city.

### **Franklin High School**

This study takes place at Franklin High School (FHS), which is one of twenty-two high schools in BPS and is located on the outskirts of the city in a mixed-income neighborhood. Approximately 2,158 students attended FHS during the 2008-2009 school year, and the school's demographics were as follows: 70% African American, 14% White, 8% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 2% Multi-Racial and 1% Native American. Seventy-one percent of the school's students received free/reduced lunch, 17% were designated as Students with Disabilities, and 8% were designated as LEP. From this data one might speculate that the school experiences of other immigrant minority groups, such as Hispanics at FHS might be different from those of Montagnards. FHS was recently termed one of Bankston's four "challenge schools" in a local newspaper report because of its consistently low scores on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) tests, and high poverty and drop-out rates.

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<sup>6</sup> Because I have used a data source that includes the name of the city where this study was conducted, I have omitted this reference in order to maintain confidentiality. Refer to p. 48 for additional explanation.

## Vietnamese Montagnards<sup>7</sup>

North Carolina is home to the largest number of Montagnards outside of Vietnam. Montagnards (a French colonial term meaning ‘mountaineers’) are made up of several indigenous groups from the Vietnamese Central Highlands. Primary among them are the Jarai, Rhade, Bnhar, Koho, Mnong, and Stieng (Bailey, 2004).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Montagnards converted to Christianity by way of contact with French missionaries. The Diem government, elected in 1955, overtook Montagnard lands, prohibited the use of Montagnard languages, and denied their religious practices. Montagnard agrarian communities were relocated to unfarmable jungle lands, and thousands of protesters were killed (Rambo & Jamieson, 2003).

U.S. military presence in the Montagnard region began in 1961, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), viewing the highlands as strategically important, began recruiting Montagnards to fight against the communist North Vietnamese Army. Montagnards saw allegiance with the U.S. as an opportunity to gain political autonomy. By the end of the war, Montagnards accused by the Vietnamese government of aiding the U.S. military were jailed, tortured, or killed; many were sent to “re-education” camps. Other Montagnards formed a militarized ethnonationalist movement and continued to fight for political autonomy after the withdrawal of American combat forces from Vietnam in 1974 (Pearson, 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> The terms *Degar* (or *Dega*), *Montagnard*, or *Montagnard-Dega* are used interchangeably in North Carolina (Pearson, 2009). Dega is thought to be an indigenous Rhade term. Students and other informants in this study preferred the term *Montagnard*, and I use this term throughout this dissertation to honor their preference.

Torn by decades of conflict, Vietnam's ethnic minority groups are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Marginalization of Montagnard populations has increased precipitously in recent years owing to a widening economic and technological gap between urban and rural areas in the country. Forced resettlement of southern Vietnamese ethnic Kinh into Montagnard territories has resulted in loss of local culture and livelihood, and access to social services, such as health care and education, is limited in rural areas. Public spending on education favors more densely populated urban areas, and high tuition costs are particularly prohibitive for poor rural families. In addition, the quality of existing educational structures in remote areas of the country is poor. Teachers are inadequately trained and are frequently absent from their classrooms. Classes are taught in Vietnamese (as opposed to minority languages) and coursework emphasizes basic literacy and math skills, as well as a Vietnamese nationalist curriculum. Elementary schools are run by each district and located in both urban and rural areas. High schools are located in provincial capitals, further prohibiting attendance by rural students. Montagnards in Vietnam typically do not attend school beyond the sixth grade. As a result, few receive enough education to qualify for leadership or professional positions (Ngu, 2004; Rambo & Jamieson, 2003).

### **Resettlement in North Carolina**

The resettlement of Montagnard refugees in North Carolina began in 1986 after a group of U.S. veterans traveled to a refugee camp in Thailand and requested their relocation to the U.S. North Carolina was regarded as an ideal resettlement context because of the number of U.S. veterans of the Vietnam conflict living in the state, the number of entry-level job opportunities, and a climate and terrain similar to that of

Vietnam. Most of the refugees were men once involved in a guerilla movement who were persecuted by the Vietnamese government because of their aid to U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War. Larger Montagnard groups were resettled in North Carolina between 1992 and 2006 through an Orderly Departure Program agreement between the U.S. and Vietnamese government. Table 3 illustrates Montagnard population estimates relative to the overall Vietnamese-American population in the U.S.

Table 3

*Montagnard and ethnic Vietnamese population estimates*

	1980	1990	2000	2006	Est. Total (2007)	
<b>Foreign-born Vietnamese in U.S.</b>	231,120	543,262	988,174	n/a	1,642,950	
	1986	1992	2002	2006	Est. Total Foreign-born (2009)	Est. Total Foreign & U.S.- born
<b>Foreign-born Montagnards</b>	ca. 200	ca. 400	ca. 900	ca. 425	ca. 1,925	ca. 10,000

(U.S. Census data, 2007, Montagnard Dega Association, 2009)

Because Montagnards are comprised of several minority groups within a broader national group, there is no systematic accounting of their presence in the U.S. by the census or other agencies. Virtually the entire U.S. Montagnard population lives in North Carolina. The Montagnard Dega Association (2009) estimates that there are now roughly 10,000 U.S. and foreign-born Montagnards living in the state. The majority live in Greensboro (ca. 7,000), followed by Bankston (ca. 2,000), and Raleigh (ca. 1,000) (Bailey, Personal communication, September 9, 2009).

Many Montagnards have spent time in refugee camps in Cambodia or Thailand, while others came as part of a State Department family reunification program. Most adults arriving in the U.S. since 2002 were farmers who have had no formal schooling (Bailey, 2004). Upon arrival, refugee groups receive five years of services from resettlement organizations, such as Catholic Social Services, Lutheran Family Services, or Jewish International Aid Society. These services include ESL and citizenship classes, help with locating employment and affordable housing, and assistance with school enrollment. In addition, there are Montagnard political organizations in North Carolina who advocate for Montagnard independence and rally against the on-going persecution of Montagnards in Vietnam.

In Montagnard refugee families, both men and women work outside of the home, typically in manufacturing and service jobs, and women are responsible for domestic affairs in traditional Montagnard households (Bailey, 2004). Bankston's Montagnards live in predominantly low-income African-American and Latino neighborhoods.

The voices of Montagnard youth offer a unique perspective on how newcomer refugee ELL students fare in North Carolina schools with these characteristics in mind. Exploring how these students view their identities in school sheds light on the challenges they face and the means by which they cope with histories of marginalization in Vietnam, relocation to a "new immigrant state", and attending a low-performing, urban school.

### **Outline of this Dissertation**

This chapter has provided the background for and outlined the research questions that guide this study. Specifically, these questions address how a group of Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students view themselves in school on the basis of their previous

experiences and current aspirations, relationships with teachers and students, their status as ELLs, and in response to specific school policies. I have also provided demographic and historical information to broadly contextualize the experiences and identity paradigms of Vietnamese Montagnard students. In Chapter 2, I present research literature and the analytical framework that guide this study, and in Chapter 3, I describe this study's methodological approach. The findings are discussed over chapters 4-6. Chapter 4 further contextualizes the self-narratives presented in Chapters 5 and 6 by presenting data gathered from interviews with teachers and administrators at FHS, as well as supplemental information gathered from interviews with parents, social workers, and other community members. In Chapter 5, I present crosscutting themes that address the research questions put forth by this study and that capture students' histories in person and positional and thickened identities as "good kids," but "poor students." However, to counter the notion that Montagnard refugee students might inhabit homogeneous identities in school, in Chapter 6, I present the narratives of three students whose portraits capture divergent identity paradigms. Finally, in Chapter 7, I conclude this dissertation by summarizing the conclusive data, and by discussing the relevance of findings in light of theory and related literature as it concern refugee student identities. I also discuss the implications of the findings for educational policies and practices, as well as for future research.



## **Chapter 2: Related Literature & Analytical Frame**

This dissertation is grounded in conceptual literature and empirical studies in immigration and education (Ogbu, 1987; Olsen, 1997; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), the burgeoning field of refugee education, educational linguistics (Cummins, 2000; Norton, 1995, 2000; Valdés, 2001), and Asian studies (Tuan, 1998; Lee, 2005). In the first half of this chapter I review literature from these fields that builds a background and general framework for this research. In examining the voices of a group of refugee students in an urban high school in the southeast, my study adds unique perspectives to these bodies of literature, such as the role of ethnicity, refugee experiences, and language proficiency in shaping these students' identities.

In the second half of this chapter, I present the analytical framework employed, which draws on Holland et al.'s (1998) and Holland and Lave's (2001) theories of identity. This framework includes the notions of figured worlds, history in person, positional identities, and thickening of identities. In essence, this study of identity focuses on relationships and their interconnectivity by exploring 1) how Montagnard refugee high school students' connect their past experiences with current aspirations, 2) how others in school identify them shapes their self understandings, 3) how self and others' perceptions of their language proficiency influences their identities, and 4) how specific school policies affect their understandings of their identities. These relationships

provide a basis for the literature reviewed, the analytical frame used in this study, the data collection, its analysis and presentation.

### **Background Literature**

The literature presented below addresses influential scholarship on identity formation among immigrant and refugee groups. Because comparatively little scholarship has focused on refugees as a subgroup, I refer to literature on the more inclusive category of foreign-born populations in the U.S., and foreign-born youth in school in particular. First, I review literature from the fields of sociology and anthropology that addresses immigrant and refugee identity trajectories more broadly. Second, I review literature that addresses relational factors that influence immigrant and refugee identity formation in school. Third, I present literature on the experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools, as well as policies affecting these students. Finally, I address scholarship on Asian and Asian immigrant and refugee students in U.S. schools. This scholarship has examined broader discourses surrounding Asian Americans, as well as Asian immigrant and refugee students' responses to these discourses in the everyday world of school. In sum, the literature reviewed provides background for the questions laid out in this dissertation, and points to significant gaps that this dissertation fills.

### **Broader Perspectives on Immigrant and Refugee Identities**

The image of the U.S. as a welcoming and open society into which immigrant groups successfully integrate remains powerful in the popular U.S. imagination. In contrast to this image, however, empirical studies of immigrant and refugee acculturation offer varying perspectives regarding the social integration of these groups.

**Models of assimilation.** Focusing on macro-contextual factors (laws and policies, living conditions, and reception in communities where immigrants settle, and the interaction between pre- and post-migration conditions), for instance, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have argued that immigrants and refugees arriving since the 1970s primarily from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are less likely than earlier European-origin immigrant groups to blend in with Whites because of their racial and ethnic origins. They often live in poor, crime-ridden urban areas and lack positive social and academic support.

Countering straight-line assimilation models that dominated mid-20<sup>th</sup> century research on immigrant incorporation, Portes & Zhou's (1993) theory of segmented assimilation describes different adaptive outcomes of immigrant and refugee minority groups. There are three pathways toward assimilation suggested by this theory: downward assimilation, upward assimilation, and selective acculturation. Downward assimilation results in downward mobility and social segregation of immigrants from the White, middle class majority. Upward assimilation occurs when immigrants successfully acculturate and blend into the White middle class. Finally, selective acculturation, or "accommodation without assimilation," is the deliberate retention of culture, language, and values of the immigrant community, and acceptance of aspects of the dominant culture deemed necessary for survival (Gibson, 1998; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Selective acculturation, in particular, recognizes the importance of family, and community support, and social capital gained from it, in promoting achievement in school (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Though useful in analyzing immigrant acculturation, these theories focus on groups as opposed to subjective experiences. They also do not

pay enough attention to the role of language proficiency and agency in shaping immigrant and refugee student responses to school, or to how educational policies and practices influence students' identities.

**Cultural-ecological perspectives.** Anthropologist John Ogbu's theories have also been widely applied in research on immigrant and refugee students. Ogbu (1987) argues, through the cultural-ecological theory, that immigrant identity formation and responses to schooling are tied to immigration status. Voluntary immigrants, or those who chose to immigrate for social or economic reasons, more readily accept and assume aspects of the new culture as avenues to success. They enact a "dual frame of reference" that allows them to overlook racism and other forms of marginalization they encounter in favor of perceived opportunities relative to those in the countries they left, and they give weight to a "folk theory of success" that places schooling at the center of success in the new country. Through the dual frame of reference paradigm, Ogbu (1987) argues that, "immigrants often compare themselves with the standard of their home country or with their peers "back home" or in the immigrants' neighborhood" (p. 328). They most often find that they are significantly better off because of improved opportunities in the new country. This comparative framework positively influences immigrants' adaptive strategies in school and elsewhere. Similarly, other scholars suggest that immigrants embody a high degree of "immigrant optimism" toward their current environments and possibilities. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001),

Despite problems, setbacks, and much suffering, most immigrants view their American lives in a positive light, an outlook they can translate into high expectations and a sustained effort to achieve them... This optimism about fairness of opportunities and lack of serious social barriers extends to their appraisal of their immediate environment. (p. 95)

Ogbu holds, conversely, that involuntary minorities of color, such as slaves or colonial subjects, are more likely to assume an “oppositional identity” and resist assimilation, viewing macro-contextual variables such as racism and poverty as insurmountable barriers to social mobility. In constructing an oppositional identity, immigrant youth may dismiss schooling and adopt behaviors that put them at risk for failure in and beyond school.

Ogbu places refugees in a middle category as semi-voluntary immigrants. Refugees may perceive opportunities for social mobility in the new country, adopting voluntary immigrants’ dual frame of reference. However, due to factors that differentiate them from voluntary immigrants, such as circumstances of their emigration, lack of financial and linguistic resources prior to migration, and often unfriendly reception of the local community upon arrival to the host country, refugee youth have the tendency to develop an oppositional stance toward education and overall incorporation into the larger society (Lee, 2005).

Though useful in analyzing how immigrant and minority student backgrounds influence their acculturation and attitudes toward school, in recent years, Ogbu’s theories have been critiqued for being overly deterministic, and for overemphasizing psychological variables while failing to account for structural factors, such as tracking and substandard conditions in many schools, that impede or foster minority students’ success in school. Other challenges to Ogbu’s analyses include his tendency to narrowly categorize characteristics and behaviors within groups of minorities, his failure to account for minority groups who succeed under systems of oppression, and his failure to acknowledge that White students may also develop oppositional identities in response to

schooling (Gibson, 2005; Lee, 2005; Tyson, 2002). This study connects psychological factors like those described by Ogbu, with structural factors, such as graduation requirements.

### **Identities of Immigrant and Refugees in School**

Many scholars of education have examined ways in which schooling influences students' negotiation of their cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Scholars of immigration and education, in particular, have long stressed the importance of school as one of the most formative institutional contacts for newcomer immigrant youth, as well as how these students are received in school influences their identities, academic achievement, and position in society (Ogbu, 1987; Ovando, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Social and cultural capital and positioning by peers and teachers are central to the identities that students articulate in school.

**Social and cultural capital<sup>8</sup>.** Much scholarship focusing on contextual factors that impact immigrant and refugee students sheds light on the role of social and cultural capital in reinforcing positive identities in school. Children from immigrant families are often viewed as intellectually deficient because they lack the White middle-class cultural capital deemed necessary for success in school (Lareau, 2003). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (2005) have argued that teachers must be aware of how students' cultural capital, or "funds of knowledge," inform their beliefs about education. The concept of funds of knowledge refer to "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of

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<sup>8</sup> The terms social and cultural capital have been used widely in the field of sociology of education (e.g. Coleman, 1966; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this study, I borrow Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital as knowledge, or skills exemplified through upbringing and educational qualifications. I refer to social capital as knowledge gained through social networks that advance or hinder an individual's interests and possibilities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991).

knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 72).

Recent research has examined the extent to which school structures and teacher beliefs devalue immigrant and refugee students’ social and cultural capital, and negatively impact their identities and performance in school. For example, Valenzuela (1999) demonstrated how a public high school in Houston attempted to subtract the culture of first and second-generation Mexican origin students viewing these students’ social and cultural capital as worthless and deviant. The school dismissed these students’ notion of *educacion*, or moral, social, and personal responsibility as a foundation for all other learning, and instead promoted assimilationist practices that devalued students’ native language and cultures. Valenzuela concluded that the high school “divests these youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (p. 3). Markers of race, class, and language influenced how the students enacted identities in school.

Additional studies have highlighted the extent to which immigrant social and cultural capital contributes to positive outcomes in school. For instance, Zhou and Bankston (1998) conducted a study on low-income Vietnamese refugee children and families in New Orleans. The researchers found that academically successful children in this group maintained strong family and community ties that aligned with the larger community (e.g., the Vietnamese Catholic church). What is more, Vietnamese values that endorse education, respect for elders, and connection to community helped foster achievement in students once in the U.S. Delinquents and dropouts were excluded from the community because their families did not successfully integrate into the Vietnamese

and larger community. These students tended to live in lower-income, higher crime neighborhoods adjacent to native or other immigrant minority communities. Zhou and Bankston concluded that balancing school and home identities can be particularly challenging when the contrast in values, dispositions and attitudes is great.

**Positioning and relationships in school.** Scholarship has also addressed the ways in which race, gender, immigration status, and language proficiency influence how immigrant and refugee students negotiate power relationships in school (Lopez, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). These power relationships affect the identities that students transact. For example, Olsen (1997) analyzed how upon entering U.S. schools, immigrant students are forced into racial categories that range on a hierarchical continuum between Black and White. They are physically separated from their American peers into a newcomer school or into sheltered classes for ELLs. They are also simultaneously required to give up their nationalities and native languages, but are disillusioned when they come to realize that learning English or doing well in school does not guarantee acceptance by their peers and teachers.

For many immigrant and refugee youth, identity negotiation involves a delicate balance between honoring their history, culture, and familial expectations, and adopting the social and cultural norms prevalent among their American peers. For instance, Sarroub's (2005) research illustrates how female Yemeni/Muslim immigrant high school students reconcile cultural expectations between home and school in creative ways. In some cases, the girls created in-between, or hybrid spaces (Bhabha, 1994) as a means of bridging their Yemeni and American lives. They merged their identities with multiple literacy practices by using Arabic with co-nationals in school, and by critically engaging



textual materials in their English Language Arts classes. These girls nonetheless struggled with negotiating conflicting cultural expectations, such as early marriage within the Yemeni culture, and more liberal dating practices in the American high school they attended.

Additional research has illustrated how refugee students adopt a more pragmatic approach to schooling, and actively construct teacher and peer relationships around meeting their individual needs. Mosselson (2006) found that high-achieving female Bosnian refugee students purposefully forged their school identities and social relations in such a way that schooling would address their psychological needs. These students placed schooling in the context of healing: it provided them with constancy, it allowed them to regain a 'student' identity which they were forced to give up upon leaving Bosnia, and it provided them with hope for the future. For them, schooling in the U.S. was a 'raison d'être' in the face of uprootedness and uncertainty with regard to their futures.

In addition, Brittain (2002) investigated how Mexican and Chinese immigrant student groups interacted and exchanged information with co-nationals, and how this shaped their schooling experiences and identities in school. She found that these students purposefully created and transacted transnational messages that helped newcomer co-nationals integrate into American schools. Brittain concluded, however, that the relationships that immigrant students form may not lead to their overcoming social and academic marginalization in school.

## **Identity and Language Proficiency in ELLs**

Several bodies of research within the interdisciplinary domain of educational linguistics provide theoretical perspectives that are useful to framing my research.

Scholarship on adolescent second language acquisition has long acknowledged learner identities, particularly from developmentalist perspectives (Harklau, 2007). Theories within this area have centered on learner age, types of language proficiency, and the amount of time it takes to become proficient in a second language (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1981). For instance, Cummins (2000) distinguishes between two types of language proficiency worthy of consideration in the present study: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Fundamental to an understanding of BICS and CALP is the interdependence hypothesis, which states that academic language proficiency transfers across languages such that students who have developed literacy in their native language tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in the new language. Therefore, a student with low academic language skills in their native language will have more trouble developing academic literacy in English. Also related is the threshold hypothesis, which posits that students whose academic proficiency in the language of instruction is weak will tend to fall further behind unless the instruction they receive enables them to comprehend input and participate academically in class. Cummins (2000) argues, moreover, that it takes five or more years for language minority students to catch up with native speaking speakers in academic language proficiency.

Language learning for immigrant and refugee students involves negotiating multiple cultural values and identities across power-laden social contexts (Canagarajah,

2004). ELLs at the high school where Olsen (1997) conducted her research described themselves and their immigrant classmates as being physically and symbolically separated from their American peers by race and language. Olsen concluded that these students are vulnerable in their efforts to assume a middle identity between their ethnicities and perceived American-ness. Similarly, previous studies have illustrated how ELLs are often harassed or ignored in mainstream classrooms and in schools at large (Cummins, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Toohey (2000) also examined how ELLs at an urban elementary school inhabited particular identities in school based on differential power relations and classroom practices that divided ELLs from their native speaking peers, and presented unequal opportunities to use language in the classroom.

Norton (Pierce)'s research on identity and language learning offers additional insights into my research. From her research with Canadian women ELLs, Pierce (1995) underscores the importance of these students' exposure to the target language and "investment" in opportunities to communicate in it. Investment in learning the target language is also an investment in the learner's own identity, an identity which changes over time and space. In later research, Norton (2000) concluded that although the immigrant women in her study possessed a strong desire to learn English, unequal relations of power prevented them from practicing English in the home and workplace. These women's shifting identities were tied to unequal power structures, their investment in learning English, as well as their perceived future possibilities.

In spite of contributions from this and other research, several scholars point to the need for a better understanding of social contexts of language learning and use in

adolescent language minority students, particularly given the widening achievement gap between these and native-speaking students (Carhill, Suarez-Orozco & Pérez, 2008; Saunders & O'Brien, 2006).

### **School Structures and ELL Student Identities**

Bowles and Gintis (1976) have argued through the correspondence theory that schools invoke dual expectations. On the one hand, they are to treat and reward students on a meritocratic basis, and on the other, they are designed to respond to the needs of a larger economic infrastructure. In responding to these economic demands, schools reproduce class structure through grades, tracking, and competition. Further refining the correspondence theory, scholars have since argued that students are not mere receptacles of state ideology, but sometimes challenge unequal power structures through dynamic, interactive processes that inform their identities (Willis, 1977).

Existing studies have pointed to structural factors that impede ELL achievement in school and reproduce unequal relations of power between ELL and native English speaking students. For example, scholars such as Conchas (2006), Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix (2000), and Valdés (2001) have demonstrated how ESL programming in U.S. public schools tracks language minority students into non-academic curriculum areas thereby reproducing inequity of opportunity for these students. What is more, Gonzalez, et al. (2003) argue that students in ESL classes rarely have opportunities to discuss college or occupational choices, which leaves them ill-prepared for life after high school.

Valdés (2001) has also pointed to the pitfalls of both English-only and bilingual instruction, arguing that ESL programs poorly serve students and that language policies should account for the systemic as opposed to individual complexities surrounding

language learning. Valdés argues that an understanding of school achievement in ELLs necessitates policies that attend to class size, pedagogical needs, lapses in schooling, and students' prior experiences in their countries of origin.

### **Asian Student Identities in American Schools**

Several scholars within the field of Asian studies have argued that because U.S. racial discourse is most often framed in Black-White terms, Asian Americans are positioned as either “honorary Whites” or “forever foreigners” – as similar to the White majority, or as not belonging in the U.S. (Ong, 2003; Tuan, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). As a result, these scholars hold that racial discrimination toward Asians is often overlooked in institutional settings, such as schools.

One of the ways in which Asian Americans are subjected to racializing discursive constructions is through the model minority construct. Put forth in the 1960s, this framework attributes academic and economic success among Asian Americans to cultural norms that place a high value on education. It positions East Asians as quiet, obedient, and smart as a means of upholding U.S. ideologies of meritocracy, drawing attention away from racial inequality, and pitting minority groups against each other (Lee, 1996; Ong, 2003). Juxtaposed against this framework is the notion of adolescent Southeast Asian refugees as “problem youth,” or “problem minorities” who live in impoverished urban centers, have high rates of teenage pregnancy, fall into gangs, and engage in criminal activity (Lee, 1996, 2005; Tuan, 1998).

Lee (1996; 2005) has argued that the model minority stereotype obscures variation across ethnic groups and individuals, and that students able to live up to the stereotype are hailed, whereas students unable to meet high standards are deemed

failures, or substandard for their race. It also proscribes a certain way of being and behaving for those who fall into this racial category, and stigmatizes those who cannot live up to its ethic. In addition, by lauding the achievements of one group over another, the stereotype can create divisive relations between Asian students and their non-Asian peers. My study builds on this work by illustrating how Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students position themselves in relation to these polarizing discourses.

Recent studies have explored the model minority stereotype in relation to Asian immigrant students' self and positional identities in school. In her study of Asian American student relations in a New York City high school, Lee (1996) found that these students divided themselves into distinct groups (Korean, Asian, New Wavers, and Asian American) and reacted differently to the model minority stereotype placed on them. In spite of inter- and intra-ethnic tensions, they also forged a pan-Asian identity in response to social conditions at the high school. In her later research focusing on the experiences Hmong refugee students at a high-performing midwestern high school, Lee (2005) illustrated how teachers' misunderstanding of Hmong culture and belief in the model minority stereotype pitted "obedient" first-generation and "delinquent" 1.5 generation<sup>9</sup> students against one another. 1.5 generation students rejected the processes of schooling because they felt that teachers did not exhibit a sense of caring toward them or their cultures. In addition, these students positioned themselves against "traditional" newcomer Hmong students and viewed them as conservative and old-fashioned.

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<sup>9</sup> Some scholars refer to immigrant students who arrived in the U.S. as elementary and middle school students as generation 1.5 (Harklau, 1999).

Newcomer Hmong students in turn distanced themselves from 1.5 generation Hmong students, regarding them as “bad kids” who were “too Americanized” (Lee, 2005, p. 54).

Centrie (2004) provides a different account of how the model minority stereotype functions in school settings. Centrie studied cultural and academic identity formation among Vietnamese students in a high school in the U.S. northeast. Teachers and administrators at the low performing school valued what they perceived as a hard work ethic and high academic achievement among Vietnamese students relative to the majority African-American and Latino students. Vietnamese students at this school were in a place of privilege, perhaps partly enhanced by the existence of a Vietnamese homeroom teacher and several Vietnamese teacher aides. Centrie found that in this sense, Vietnamese students benefited from model minority discursive constructions, particularly when placed against African-American and Latino students at the high school. My research explores the experiences of Montagnards in a school where native cultural and language resources are non-existent.

Taken together, these studies highlight variation in how Asian immigrant students respond to school structures, and teacher and peer attitudes. In general, because of their positioning as either model minorities or problem minorities, studies suggest that the academic needs of these students have been largely ignored.

The review of literature illustrates ways in which contexts, processes and policies influence immigrant and refugee ELL identities. Looking at the experiences of a group of refugee students in a new immigrant state offers unique perspectives to this dynamic. My research also problematizes existing theoretical and research-based literature on

immigrant student acculturation by offering alternative understandings of refugee student identities in school.

### **Analytical Frame**

The analytical framework employed in this dissertation places identity at the crux of ELL refugee students' experiences in school. It "integrates the language learner and language learning context" (Norton, 2000, p. 4), but also orients the student in his or her past and in future possibilities. The remainder of this chapter outlines the analytical framework. First, I present the notion of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), which I use to explore the social and cultural context – real, interpreted, or imagined – of FHS out of which the students derive meaning and a sense of self. Second, I present definitional parameters of identity used in this study, synthesizing theoretical perspectives used by Holland et al. (1998), and Holland and Lave (2001). Within this section, I outline the concepts of history in person, positional identities, and thickening of identities, which are instrumental to my study because they provide an understanding of how identities become articulated in relation to social and institutional dynamics, and acknowledge that actors draw on multiple resources in the process of articulating their identities in school.

### **Figured worlds**

Figured worlds are part of Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of identity and selfhood<sup>10</sup>. They are a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain

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<sup>10</sup> Holland et al. (1998) draw on different and not always concurring schools of thought to develop their theory of identity, including culturalism, universalism, social constructivism, as well as the works of Bourdieu, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin.



acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others,” and within which identities are created, enacted, assigned, and subverted (p. 52). Holland et al. state:

Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interaction within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it. (1998, p. 51)

In essence, figured worlds have four characteristics: 1) they are cultural phenomena into which people enter or are recruited; 2) they function as contexts of meaning in which individuals’ positions have significance; 3) they are organized in such a way that people within them assume different roles; and 4) they distribute people according to specific actions or practices. Figured worlds are shaped out of social interaction, and in them individuals come to realize who they are in relation to those around them. For instance, the cultural model of romance, as a figured world, is populated by agents (girlfriends, fiancés) who engage in a set of exchanges (flirting, dumping) based on specific forces (attractiveness, status, love). Agents within this figured world are presumed to know the cultural assumptions surrounding “typical” romantic relationships, and shape their lives around these norms. The figured world of school is comprised of classrooms, curricula, policies, teachers and students who are expected to understand and adhere to the norms and roles set out by these cultural models.

Holland et al. (1998) write that identities are formed within the rich context of figured worlds: “Figured worlds provide the contexts of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted. They also provide the loci in which people fashion sense of self – that is, develop identities” (p. 60). Identities develop and shift over time in response to the activities, processes or traditions, which

give us a sense of our selves within these cultural realms. They continue, “The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organization of those worlds’ activity” (p. 41). While recognizing the role of power, reproduction, and hierarchy within figured worlds, Holland et al. (1998) also hold that figured worlds are sites of possibility that provide individuals with the tools to influence their own behavior within these worlds.

My interest is to locate Montagnard students’ identities within the figured world of FHS to gain an understanding of how the students perceive their identities in relation to relationships with other students, policies, and procedures. In essence, I seek to understand how these students are shaped by and in turn shape the figured world of FHS to meet their needs. My research contributes to an understanding of how the figured world of school shapes students’ perceptions of themselves and their possibilities, as well as how students mediate contradictory, misinformed perceptions regarding them, and author their own stories within the context of FHS.

### **Identities within Figured Worlds**

Holland et al.’s (1998) framework of identity and selfhood signifies a discursive shift away from the understandings of the self as static, autonomous, and universal that were prevalent in early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century research on the human psyche. The authors frame understandings of the self as multiple, dynamic, and shaped with and by others across different contexts. Although this dissertation emphasizes identities in the context of school, the framework suggests that the students draw on their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) as they shape their school identities, and that these

identities are equally formed out of distinct relationships between their histories as persecuted minorities in Vietnam, as resettled refugees in Bankston, and as students at FHS.

According to Holland et al. (1998), human behavior is mediated by our sense of self. They write, “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3). Identities form in response to specific contexts, and through time. They are “a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (p. 5). Individuals produce identities through participation in cultural activities that allow them to engage in identity production. Identities develop out of conceptual (mental) and procedural (physical) performances of the self.

Identities form within figured worlds and out of relationships formed within those worlds, and thus identities are in constant flux as are the perspectives that people bring to understanding new activities and new figured worlds. In this study, I explore the identities of students whose identities have been informed by many life transitions, including experiences of marginalization in Vietnam, lapses in formal schooling, resettlement in Bankston, lack of English language proficiency, and adjustment to a school in which they are a minority within and among other minority students. Viewing identity as shifting and contingent upon settlement in new cultural contexts is useful to an exploration of the multiple experiences of refugee students. This framework provides a more person-centered approach to the study refugee identities and experiences that compliments theories of assimilation and acculturation, which have tended to focus on

psychological or macro-structural processes in relation to identity formation among immigrant groups (Gibson, 1998; Ogbu, 1987; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

My study frames identity as formed out of social relations and within institutional settings. Holland et al.'s (1998) and Holland and Lave's notion of histories in person, Holland et al.'s (1998) notion of positional identities, and Holland and Lave's (2001) identity thickening further explicate understandings of identity used in this study.

### **History in Person**

The notion of history in person is an important element of understanding identity as put forth by this study. Similar to although less deterministic than Ogbu's (1987) notions of dual frame of reference and immigrant optimism, history in person suggests that identities are formed out of a constant reflection on one's past in relation to the present. Holland et al. (1998) have written that "one's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to subject positions afforded one in the present" (p. 18). Identity is thus ever-evolving in relation to different contexts, institutions, and people. Holland et al. (1998) and Holland and Lave (2001) build on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogic to explain this logic. Within dialog, meaning has a precise historical actualization – through a speech event. However, dialogic presumes that everything anyone says exists in response to what has been said or done before. As with Lévi-Strauss's (1966) bricoleur, "the "I" builds and so is built, opportunistically with preexisting materials... the "I" draws upon the languages, dialects, genres, and words of others to which she has been exposed" (Holland & Lave, 2001, pp. 10-11).

History in person is an important aspect of identity, which is brought to current contexts. In relation to the self, the “I” cannot exist alone, but instead builds itself with preexisting materials, ideologies, beliefs and experiences. Holland et al. (1998) argue,

Identity, as the expressible relationship to others, is dialogic at both moments of expression, listening and speaking... Bakhtin insists that we represent our selves to ourselves from the vantage point (the words) of others, and that those representations are significant to our experience of ourselves. (p. 172)

As selves we have relationships with others, but also with our histories in multiple contexts. The dialogic nature of discourse and consciousness accounts for the constant generation of new meaning. All dialogic understandings of selves “are struggles across and about differences between self and others” (Holland & Lave, 2001). Self and positional identities are simultaneously co-created to become an aspect of one’s history in person.

Similar to Ogbu’s (1987) cultural ecological theory, history in person presumes that an individual’s sense of self is developed out of his or her background and experiences. However, rather than focusing on psychological responses to personal experiences (i.e., Ogbu’s emphasis on identity in relation to immigration experience), history in person also emphasizes an individual within the context of their social resources. In addition, history in person suggests that identities persist through enduring struggles, and these struggles are “crucibles for forging identities” (p. 3). Refugees from any culture are a unique population given their history of war, and marginalization in their homelands as well as their experiences of resettlement in a new context. With this in mind, the notion of history in person lends itself to an understanding of how the

historical struggles of a particular group of refugees converge with their identity work as students in the figured world of FHS.

### **Positional Identities**

Positioning is one way in which individuals come to understand their identities within a figured world. To further analyze relational aspects of identity transaction in the students, this framework incorporates the notion of positional identities (Holland et al., 1998) to situate students' self-identities within the context of peer and teacher relationships, which themselves infer "deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance" (p. 151). Positional identities

have to do with how one identifies one's position relative to others', mediated through ways in which one feels comfortable or constrained, for example, to speak to another, to command another, to enter into the space of another, to touch the possessions of another, to dress for another. (p. 150)

C. Suarez-Orozco's notion of "social mirroring" (2000) provides a related explanation for students' self-understandings and adjustment in school. Social mirroring suggests that immigrant and refugee students absorb and internalize images and beliefs surrounding them in school that shape their academic and social identities either positively or negatively. Similar to the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993), the notion of positional identities frames understandings of the self in relation to structural factors and interpersonal relationships. However, the notion of positional identities focuses on individual versus group responses to these variables.

Holland et al. (1998) argue that race, gender, and class factor into peoples' understanding of their figured worlds. Similarly, Olsen (1997) and others (e.g., Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, Valenzuela, 1999), have documented how newcomer

immigrant students' self-identities are influenced by how they perceive of their positions within the context of school. In the figured world of schools, newcomers develop identities based on daily interactions – they identify themselves positively or negatively through acceptance or rejection from others. Holland et al. (1998) argue that newcomers

learn a feel for the game, for how such claims on their part will be received. They come to have relational identities in their most rudimentary form: a set of dispositions toward themselves in relation to where they can enter, what they can say, what emotions they can have, and what they can do in a given situation. (p. 143)

The concept of positional identities lends itself to an understanding of how newcomer Montagnard refugee students – as ELLs, and marginalized cultural and racial minorities – come to understand their identities within teacher and peer relationships in school.

Holland et al. (1998) stress, however, that just as positional identities reproduce structures of privilege and domination, agency can be harnessed within them through self-authoring and action. For example, in the context of school, students who become aware of their positions can either accept or reject them.

### **Thickening of Identities**

The notion of thickening is useful for understanding how students' identities develop within an institution over time and space. Holland and Lave (2001) describe thickening as the process of being consistently identified in one way in an institutional context that also solidifies as individuals become identified. Wortham (2004) has written, "The thickening of identity happens across a trajectory of events as certain categories of identity come to identify an individual" (p. 185). Wortham examined how students in one classroom drew on broad stereotypes, local identity models, and a 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum to identify a particular student as one of many good students to an

“outcast” over the course of a school year. The student eventually came to position herself in this way. Whereas positions are context-dependent and unpredictable, Wortham argues that as identities thicken, we often unproblematically treat others as certain types of people. Thus, one’s identity thickens in part in relation to public models of identity. Wortham concludes that

analysis of social identification [must] attend to available sociohistorical categories and models of identity, to the particular local versions of these that emerge in a given setting, to the trajectories of individuals who get identified over time with respect to local categories and models, and to the contingent events in which categories and models of identity get contextualized and acts of social identification happen. (2004, p. 185-186)

Following this logic, an understanding of how the students in my study perceive of their identities necessitates an awareness of the broader and more local discourses and social configurations overlap. Identity thickening provides an analytical tool for examining this nexus. It is also instrumental to an understanding of how students might internalize identities imposed on them (e.g., oppositional identities (Ogbu, 1987), model minority, or problem minority stereotypes (Lee, 2005)).

### **Language and Self-Authoring**

This dissertation conceptualizes language learning and perceptions of language proficiency as one of the crucial sites through which newcomer ELL refugee students filter their identities, and sense of opportunities and constraints in school. Holland et al. (1998) write that language is one of the means by which by which “figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and individually powerful” (p. 61). Language typically serves as the medium for identity construction in the figured world of schools, and a figured world determines what type of discourse, dialect, or accent is appropriate.



Children learn a worldview as they learn a language, and this process is also connected to the construction of beliefs, social roles, cultural affiliations, and behavioral practices (Gee, 2005; Shieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Language transition, or the process of learning a new language while retaining, or losing one's home language, is a vital aspect of immigrant acculturation and identity formation (Tse, 2001). More importantly, and less understood, however, is the importance of group membership in language learning. Tse writes, "We tend to learn languages better when we feel like a member of the group of people who speak that language" (2001, p. 60). Group membership frames the way in which we see ourselves and the world, and carries with it benefits and consequences related to status and self-esteem.

Belonging to a group is, however, impacted by several external factors, such as the political climate and historical events, and group membership can be imposed by those with more power. Norton (2000) similarly suggests that, "it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gain access to – or is denied access to powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak" (p. 5). Norton argues accordingly that languages and identities are socially constructed "in the hegemonic events, activities and processes that constitute daily life" (p. 130). My study conceptualizes refugee students' identities as formed out of interaction with social and institutional processes and discourses to which they contribute or resist.

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Holland et al. (1998) write that language provides ideological and lived perspectives on the world and relates to consciousness and social power. Improvisation and resulting agency, and social

positioning are characteristic of both. Bakhtin (1981) suggested that authoritative voices can be altered. How we are positioned by competing voices and how we orchestrate these voices creates our identity. Agency, or self-authoring, is how we craft ourselves – how we try on, categorize and orchestrate others’ voices, and redirect that orchestrated discourse to ourselves. Holland et al. (1998) argue that we have multiple identities mediated by different voices. They write, “the freedom that Bakhtin calls authorship comes from the ways differing identifications can be counterposed, brought against one another, to create a position, our own voice, from which we speak (1998, p. 209).

Toohey (2000) suggests that ELLs often struggle to find voice. Based on her research on elementary school language minority students’ engagement in school, she writes, “learners must appropriate unfamiliar words and identity positions from those who may resist their appropriation” (p. 126). Tension lies between speakers and their listeners (including past and future listeners). Possibility, however, exists in the belief that learners – even beginners – actively construct new voices and points of view, in addition to learning a new language.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, the notions of figured worlds, history in person, positional identity, and identity thickening provide a rich conceptual framework from which to explore the identities of the Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students in this study. In addition, while this study prioritizes individual voices of participants, the framework allows for structural and relational factors within the school-based research site to be included in the analysis of students’ experiences. What is more, it extends understandings of students’ current self-identities to participation in a wider world, and

more importantly, suggests what is possible in spite of the challenges these students encounter. This framework adopts a person-centered perspective on identity and acknowledges the local contexts and subjective experiences out of which these students come to view their identities.

In addition, literature on ecological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors that influence immigrant and refugee identities is instrumental to more broadly contextualizing the experiences of refugee students in U.S. schools and framing the individual perspectives, or stories, of the students in this study. Scholarship on Asian American students adds an additional layer of analysis of the particular experiences of a small Southeast Asian refugee group, particularly with regard to dominant discourses surrounding Asian American students. This literature has provided me with a keener lens by which to explore how Montagnard refugee ELLs transact their identities in relation to past experience, positioning, language proficiency, and school policies. Combined as they are in the findings chapters with the perspectives and experiences of the Montagnard students, this literature and analytical framework offer me, as a non-refugee, an understanding and perspective on how a group of refugee students negotiate their identities in school.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology & Setting**

This dissertation draws on principles of qualitative inquiry using ethnographic methods to develop a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of how Vietnamese Montagnard refugee high school students orchestrate their school identities in response to specific contexts, interpersonal relationships, experiences, and goals.

My decision to pursue a qualitative approach was guided by several considerations. First, because of the particular experiences of this group of students – as persecuted minorities in Vietnam, and resettled refugees in a new immigrant state – as I began to conceptualize this research, I realized that I would need to gather data from as many sources as possible in order to produce a holistic account of what school means for them. Thus, my interest in understanding the role of context and interpersonal relationships in shaping students’ identities necessitated my own involvement across school, home, and community settings. This approach has allowed me to understand how students’ school identities are shaped within the figured world of Franklin High School (FHS), and how their histories in person (Holland et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001) inform their sense of possibility in and beyond school.

In this chapter, I briefly outline tenets of qualitative inquiry relevant to this research. I then provide a description of the research setting, participants, and data collection and data analysis procedures. Finally, because data collection and interpretation were influenced by my own stake and presence in the research, I conclude with a presentation of my positionality with regard to this study.

## **Qualitative Inquiry and Ethnographic Research**

In this research, I believed it important to develop a rich understanding of the contexts that inform the Montagnard students' identities. I was drawn to qualitative inquiry and ethnographic methods because of their emphasis on interpreting environments, and the meaning of actions and events of the people whose experiences I was trying to understand, from the specific to the general, while also acknowledging my own presence in the research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). An objective of ethnographic research is to "recreate for the reader the shared beliefs, artifacts, folk knowledge, and behaviors of a group of people" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 2-3). My research aimed to capture "naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10), the groundedness of data in local contexts over sustained time periods, richness of data, and an emphasis on people's lived experiences in connection to their social worlds.

Ethnographic methods enable researchers to explore social practices in a given context through in-depth observations, self-reflective recordings of such observations, and theoretically-informed interpretations of observations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Over the duration of my research I worked to create detailed portraits of the nine students, their teachers, and the broader figured world of Franklin High School (FHS). This sustained examination helped me to scrutinize how identity played out for these students in light of social and institutional forces that shaped and were shaped by them.

Ethnographic researchers have in recent decades stressed the importance of acknowledging researcher subjectivity in interpretations of data (Rosaldo, 1989). Geertz (1973) and others have also argued that fieldwork interpretations should be arrived at

through dialogue between the researcher and the participants, in contrast to dichotomous etic/emic, or outsider/insider interpretations of data that characterized earlier anthropological research endeavors. Thus, I also drew on aspects of collaborative (Lassiter, 2005) and postcritical ethnography (Noblit et al., 2004) to account for my positionality in this research and to recognize myself not as transparent, but as a classed, gendered, and raced stakeholder, who constructs, narrates, and negotiates relations of power among my research participants. I also attended to issues of reflexivity and representation by continuously consulting research participants regarding my data analyses and conclusions, as a means of triangulating my interpretations of data, and above all honoring the voices of participants in this study. I believe all of these features lend themselves to a more holistic and ethically sound picture of the meaning of school to a group of Montagnard refugee students, and the identities they transact within this context.

### **Setting, Scope and Consultants**

Because this study emphasizes the students' identities, or histories in person, it is important to provide a detailed description of the school as a figured world that influences how their identities are shaped. I provided the context of North Carolina and Bankston in Chapter 1 as a means of more broadly situating this research in this particular context of resettlement. In this section I detail the context of Bankston Public Schools (BPS) and of FHS, where this study took place.

In addition to FHS, as a supplemental source of data, I also spent time in the students' homes and communities to gain a broader perspective of the multiple worlds these students straddle, as well as how these worlds influence how students perceive of

themselves and are positioned in school. However, because this research focuses on identities in the figured world of schools, I provide brief synopses of my home and community research in Chapter 4 as they relate to the school identities of the students.

In order to maintain confidentiality, I have provided pseudonyms for the city, school, and study participants. Therefore, I have purposefully not referenced sources that reveal the study's location, including data garnered from the city's census records, the school system, or the website of the high school where research was conducted. Readers may seek these sources upon request.

### **Bankston Public Schools (BPS)**

FHS is a low-performing high school in Bankston, North Carolina. Bankston Public Schools' (BPS) history of segregation and desegregation mirrors that of other schools systems throughout the U.S. South. Disputes over student placement, curricular options, and school funding in BPS persist.

In 2008-2009, BPS enrolled 133,664 students. Forty-one percent of BPS students were African American, 33% were White/Caucasian, 16% were Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% American Indian or bi-racial. During the 2008-2009 school year, 18,407 students in BPS were designed as Limited English Proficient (LEP). One hundred and forty languages were spoken, and 161 countries were represented. The majority of language minority students spoke Spanish (18,758), followed by Vietnamese (960), Korean (395), Russian (369), French (363) Hmong (302), Gujarati (261) and Jarai – a Montagnard language (243).

## **Franklin High School (FHS)**

Research was conducted at FHS during the 2008-2009 school year. FHS is one of twenty-two high schools in BPS and is located on the outskirts of the city in a mixed-income neighborhood. I chose FHS as my research site because more Montagnard students were enrolled there than at any other high school in BPS (roughly 30 during the time of this study).<sup>11</sup>

Approximately 2,158 students attended FHS during the 2008-2009 school year, and the school's demographics were as follows: 70% African American, 14% White, 8% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 2% Multi-Racial and 1% Native American. Seventy-one percent of the school's students received free/reduced lunch, 17% were designated as Students with Disabilities, and 8% were designated as LEP.

A 2005 state-wide school funding case threatened to close FHS and three other "lowest performing" high schools in BPS. FHS is now included in an Achievement Zone, and was recently termed one of Bankston's four "challenge schools" in a local newspaper report because of its consistently low scores on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) tests, and high poverty and drop-out rates. The Achievement Zone designation grants FHS and other low performing schools with additional resources and services, including support staffing.

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<sup>11</sup> I entered the research site with the assumption that the existence of a relatively sizeable concentration of Montagnard students at FHS might facilitate my access to a range of student participants, which is what I sought. I also understood that the existence of a concentration of Montagnard students might influence student and teacher responses either positively or negatively.



## Scope and Access

This study focuses on the identities of nine Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students who attend FHS. These students were my primary resources, however, I sought out additional sources in order to contextualize the perspectives of the students. These sources included teachers at FHS (n=10), guidance counselors (n=2), administrators at FHS (n=2), and a BPS administrator. Together they added to the validity of my data and contributed additional insight regarding the adaptation of refugees in Bankston, and the identity trajectories of the students at FHS. In particular, the perspectives of these sources further an understanding of the school context, school policies that impact ELL students with lapses in formal education, and the particular academic needs of Montagnard refugee students, as well as how these things bear on the students' identities in school.<sup>12</sup>

I obtained IRB approval during the spring of 2008. With the help of a Catholic Social Services caseworker, in the spring of 2008, I approached ESL teachers at FHS about the possibility of conducting my research with some of their students. After receiving the teachers' approval, I asked for and received permission from BPS to conduct research at FHS. I began my research in the early fall of 2008 by immersing myself in the broader school context, sitting in on various ESL classes and interviewing administrators and the ESL teachers. The ESL teachers then helped me identify and approach students who fit my criteria for selection. Because I sought to interview

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<sup>12</sup> To gather background data, I interviewed parents (n=5), social workers (n=7), and other community members (n=4) to gain a broader perspective of how students' out-of-school histories and environments intersect with the figured world of FHS. This data helped me to triangulate my interpretations of data gathered from students, teachers, and administrators, as well as my observations at FHS.

students who were comfortable using conversational English, and who could discuss their perceptions about their lives and their schooling, I selected students who had lived in the U.S. for three or more years. All but two students were 18 years old, or older. In the case of the two younger students, once I established their unofficial assent to participate, I approached their parents for consent (See Appendix A for assent and consent forms). I approached teachers, administrators, parents and social workers for consent to interview or observe them separately. In determining which mainstream/content area teachers to approach, I asked the students to identify classes that they would like me to observe. This “snowballing” method (Patton, 2002) produced a list of non-ESL teachers who I approached for consent to interview and observe.

### **The Students**

Below are brief descriptions of the nine students in this study. I provide social-demographic information that is most relevant to this study, such as age of exit from Vietnam, reasons for resettlement in the U.S., and familial socioeconomic status. I also include a brief summary of participants’ schooling experiences in Vietnam and in the U.S. I believe that this information provides a crucial backdrop for understanding interview and observational data, particularly as it concerns how students’ histories and home worlds inform their self and positional identities and imagined futures. Table 4 illustrates characteristics of the students, and more detailed descriptions follow.

Table 4

*Characteristics of students in this study*

Name	Gender	Age	Grade	Arrival to U.S./Bankston	Schooling in Vietnam (yrs)	Languages/Tribe
H'Yin	F	19	12	2003	3	Jarai
Khuih	M	18	12	2002	2	Mnong
Sieng	M	17	10	2002	sporadic	Mnong
Luis	M	18	9	2003	1	Mnong
Vit	M	17	10	2002	1	Mnong
Gar	F	18	11	2002	0	Mnong
Dah	M	19	11	2006	sporadic	Bnhar
Moung	F	19	11	2006	2	Rhade
Tem	F	19	11	2006	4	Rhade

**H'Yin.** H'Yin is 19 and Jarai. She and her family resettled in Bankston in 2003 after fleeing Vietnam and spending one year in a refugee camp in Cambodia. Both of her parents were subsistence farmers in Vietnam. She attended school for three years in Vietnam, but dropped out when she was required to pay tuition in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She was placed in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when she arrived in Bankston. She is currently in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She lives in a transitional neighborhood off of a busy freeway in a house that was provided by Habitat for Humanity. She has four younger siblings and one older brother. Her father works in a factory and her mother is a dishwasher at a restaurant. H'Yin's parents speak little English, and Jarai is spoken at home. H'Yin does not work.

**Khuih.** Khuih is 18 and Mnong. He and his family came to Bankston in 2002. Khuih attended school up until 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, when his family fled Vietnam for a refugee camp in Cambodia, where they stayed for 18 months “because the Vietnamese people don't like [Montagnards],” he told me. Khuih was placed in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when he enrolled in BPS, and he is now in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Khuih's father studied to become a

doctor in Vietnam, but was barred from practicing medicine because of his Montagnard background. His stepmother attended school until the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Khuhi's family lives in a mixed-income neighborhood off of a busy freeway. He has several younger siblings and one older brother. His father works at a cabinet manufacturing factory, and his stepmother does not work. His father speaks limited English, and his stepmother does not speak English. Khuhi does not work.

**Sieng.** Sieng is 17 and Mnong. He is from a small, remote farming village in the Vietnamese central highlands. He and his family came to the U.S. and to Bankston in 2002. He is in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Sieng attended school sporadically for one year in Vietnam, and worked with his family on their farm until protests over land rights led to persecution by the Vietnamese government. Sieng was placed in second grade when the family resettled in Bankston, but was transferred into 5<sup>th</sup> grade because of his age. Sieng and his family live in a house that was provided by Habitat for Humanity in a low-income neighborhood. Sieng has five younger and one older sibling. His father worked in a warehouse, but was laid off during the time of this research, and his mother stays at home to care for their children. Sieng did not have a job at the time of this research. Sieng's father speaks minimal English, and his mother speaks no English. He speaks Mnong with his parents, and English and Mnong with his siblings.

**Luis.** Luis is 18 years old and Mnong. He and his family arrived in Bankston in 2003. Luis attended one year of school in Vietnam. He was placed in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and is currently in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Luis lives in an apartment complex near the airport. He has two older and three younger siblings. His father suffers from mental and emotional disorders resulting from being beaten while in a Vietnamese prison. His mother is on kidney

dialysis. Luis was absent from school during much of the previous school year to care for his parents. His parents were subsistence farmers in Vietnam, but do not currently work, and do not speak English. Luis has a part-time job at a restaurant at the airport to support his family financially. His family receives some financial support from a local church.

**Vit.** Vit is Mnong and is 17 years old. He came to the U.S. in 2002. His family resettled in another city in North Carolina, but relocated to Bankston in 2006 because of the existence of greater employment opportunities in the city. His father left Vietnam for a refugee camp in Cambodia in 2001 after being threatened by the police. His mother and children remained in Vietnam before joining their father at the refugee camp in 2002. Vit has one older brother, and one younger sister. He attended one year of school in Vietnam and was placed in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S. He is currently in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Vit's parents work in a factory and speak limited English. Vit works as an apprentice at a nail salon.

**Gar.** Gar is 18 and Mnong. She is from a small, remote farming village in the Vietnamese central highlands. She and her family came to the U.S. in 2002. She was nine years old when her family fled Vietnam to Cambodia where they hid in the jungle for two months before arriving at a refugee camp in Thailand. Gar is not sure why her family fled Vietnam – “My dad said we have to go,” she related. Gar did not attend school in Vietnam, and instead worked on her parents' farm. She was placed in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when she arrived in Bankston. She is currently in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Gar lives in a transitional neighborhood that she describes as “dangerous, because there's shootings and drugs.” She has three younger siblings. Both parents speak minimal English, and Mnong

is spoken in the home. Gar's father delivers wares for a discount clothing store, and her mother does not work. Gar works thirty hours per week at a thrift store.

**Dah.** Dah is Bnhar and is 19. He and his mother and two younger siblings left Vietnam and reunited with their father in Bankston in 2006. Dah attended school sporadically in Vietnam, but dropped out when he learned that he would resettle in the U.S. He was placed in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade upon arrival, and is now in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He lives in a house provided by Habitat for Humanity in a neighborhood that he calls "dangerous." "I'm afraid at night," he shared. His parents speak limited English. His father works at a cabinet manufacturing warehouse, and his mother works at a restaurant. Dah does not work, but was looking for a job at the time of this research.

**Moung.** Moung is Rhade and is 19. She, her mother, two younger siblings, and an older brother came to the U.S. in 2006 to be reunited with her father who had received refugee status in 2003. She attended school for two years in Vietnam, and her parents were small-scale farmers. She was sixteen when she came to Bankston and began middle school for a few weeks, before being transferred to 9<sup>th</sup> grade because of her age. She is now in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She and her family live in a modest apartment in a mixed-income neighborhood. Her father speaks limited English, and her mother speaks no English. Neither of her parents work, and she is the sole provider for her family and works forty hours per week as a cashier at an airport restaurant.

**Tem.** Tem is Rhade and is 19. She and her mother and six younger siblings came directly to the U.S. in 2006 to reunite with her father, who had arrived in Bankston in 2002. She attended school for four years in Vietnam, but dropped out afterward to work with her family on their farm. She was placed in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when she arrived in Bankston,

and she is now in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She is married and has a baby, who her mother cares for while she is in school. She and her family live in a trailer court off of a busy freeway. Her parents do not speak English. Her husband works in construction in a neighboring state and visits Tem once a month. She speaks Rhade with her family and occasionally in school with Rhade friends. She does not work.

Because of the personal nature of participant selection and the small sample size, I do not propose that the sample is representative of all Montagnard or other refugee experiences. The students in this study differ by year and type of resettlement (refugee designation, versus family reunification). However, they also share many characteristics, such as having family members who were persecuted by the government in Vietnam, limited schooling in Vietnam, pre-departure and current low socioeconomic status, residence in low or mixed-income neighborhoods in Bankston and with five or more family members, and parents with limited or no English language proficiency. In all cases but two (Luis and Moun) one or both parents work outside of the home. Most of the students also hold after-school jobs. As findings detailed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrate, these shared characteristics combine to shape students' self-identities in unique, albeit divergent ways.

### **Data Collection**

Ethnography consists of a holistic account of the worldview of participants using eclectic methods (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I collected data through in-depth interviews and field observations at FHS, and in students' homes and communities

adhering to methods outlined by Patton (2002), Miles and Huberman (1994), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993).

## **Interviews**

As my primary method of collecting data, I conducted in-depth interviews of the nine students, their teachers, and administrators at FHS. Patton (2002) has written, “Interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 4). I believed it important to privilege students’ understandings of their life stories – their thoughts, feelings, and ideas – and their identities within past, present and future contexts, as narrated by them.

I interviewed teachers and administrators to gain their perspectives on working with Montagnard and other ELLs at FHS, and their perceptions of how these students fit into the larger school context. I conducted one thirty-minute individual interview with each of FHS’s ESL teachers during the fall, and several shorter follow-up interviews during the spring semester. I met with six content area and electives teachers individually for thirty minutes each during the spring semester. Finally, I conducted three thirty-minute individual interviews with two Assistant Principals, one thirty-minute interview with two FHS guidance counselors, and two thirty-minute interviews with a BPS administrator who specializes in training high school guidance counselors to advise ELLs regarding graduation requirements and register for courses.

I adhered to a combination of semi-structured and structured interview formats, and I recorded most interviews using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed them at home. In a structured interview, the researcher follows a list of questions formulated ahead of time (Patton, 2002). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher poses



questions not worded ahead of time, which “allows [him or her] to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). I conducted three in-depth interviews with students over the fall and spring semesters, each lasting roughly one hour. In initial interviews with students I focused on gathering facts through structured interviews, and sharing relevant information about myself as a means of building trust. As our relationships developed, I approached later interviews with a topic or two, which I asked students to elaborate on. In these interviews, I encouraged students to discuss their experiences in Vietnam, how they connected their schooling to their aspirations beyond high school, how they viewed themselves and how others viewed them at FHS, and their experience with specific school structures, such as coursework, and graduation requirements. These interviews were open-ended, and I took extensive notes that were both descriptive and reflective. In these notes I recorded such details as what the student was wearing, his or her overall disposition, and non-verbal cues. I later cross-referenced these notes with interview transcripts as a means of prioritizing data that seemed most relevant to my research.

Most student interviews took place after school in a vacated ESL classroom, which the teachers allowed me to use. In addition to the in-depth interviews, I also often checked in with students in classes I observed, asking if they understood the material, how they felt when something occurred in the classroom, or their ideas about a particular topic. On occasion, I met with students in their homes, or at a nearby public library. I spent roughly 12 hours in seven of the students’ homes (Vit and Gar preferred to meet at a public library, so I did not visit them in their homes). In-home interviews were often colored by conversations with parents and siblings about life in Vietnam and in Bankston,

shared meals, music and Vietnamese television. It was in out-of-school contexts that students (and parents) felt more at liberty ask me questions on a variety of topics, such as how to obtain a drivers license, applying for college, looking for work, or occasionally more personal topics such as motherhood (in Tem's case) or dating. In school, I believe students saw me as a teacher, or a caseworker. Outside of school, I was a source of information or help.

I transcribed interviews using the exact words of the study participants, and in many places in this dissertation I provide verbatim quotes from interviews with school personnel. However, because the students are all non-native speakers of English, in some places I have altered student quotations to make them more grammatically correct. I did so intentionally to bring focus to the meaning as opposed to the mechanics of what was said, as the objective of this dissertation is to study the identities of the students in light of their experiences, rather than depicting their accents, syntax, or semantic choices. In so doing I worked to maintain the students' integrity show respect for their words and intentions.

## **Observations**

In addition to interviews, I observed the students in various classes, to better understand the school context, and the students' lives within school, and their perception of particular classroom phenomena. I observed four separate ESL classes in which the students were enrolled for a total of 30 hours between the fall and spring semesters. In addition, I observed an algebra, U.S. history, civics, and science class, as well as three Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) classes during the spring semester for a total of 11 hours. Because my goal was to build an understanding of the students'

identities in school, I focused my observations on the classroom context, students' engagement with materials, and with the teachers and students. After my observations, I approached students and teachers to ask for their impressions about particular phenomena and social interactions. These instances offered opportunities to develop understandings of the contexts, and people and activities within them, but also to question my assumptions regarding what I observed.

In spite of my attempts to remain objective throughout the process of collecting observational data, it is important to recognize that my presence may have altered the classroom's natural dynamic, as well as how the students in my study behaved or responded to situations that arose during class periods. I attempted to account for this by conducting multiple observations of the same classroom where possible, and by asking students and teachers if the classes I observed were typical, how, or how not. These measures helped me validate or in some cases refine my analysis of field data.

### **Data Analysis**

A central objective of qualitative data analysis is to identify common themes in participants' descriptions of their experiences. Data analysis occurred in several stages. Following the methods outlined by Patton (2002) and Heath and Street (2008), upon transcription of interviews, I read through the data and generated codes from interview responses, background literature, and the conceptual framework. I then engaged in what Polkinghorne (1995) has called an "analysis of narrative," moving "from stories to common elements" between stories, looking for recurring themes and concepts, as well as individual differences. I also looked at contextual variables that factored into each theme, narrative, or counter-narrative.

First, I organized details of students' descriptions in logical order and arranged them in a time-line (e.g., descriptions of life in Vietnam, departure, resettlement, schooling in the U.S.). From there I looked for specific events as told by the students that highlighted a particular meaning in relation to my research questions (e.g., Dah's desire to become a pharmacist who specializes in working with Montagnard refugee communities, and H'yn's experience of being positioned as 'innocent' by her math teacher). I then looked for patterns and deviations across all nine participants. Finally, I synthesized the data and considered the implications of my findings beyond these specific cases. Because the focus of my study is on refugee student identities, I analyzed data in light of this objective. The information from interviews with parents, community members and social services workers enabled me to triangulate each piece of data within a broader context of resettlement in Bankston.

Data interpretation consisted of three continuous stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction is the process of selecting, simplifying, and decision-making with regard to which data to include. Data display refers to organizing and compressing data before conclusions are drawn. Using a constant comparative, or recursive perspective, I juxtaposed data from observations and interviews with my underlying assumptions or hunches, as well as theories and concepts from the literature to create a dialogue between existing explanations and ongoing data collection and analysis (Heath & Street, 2008). I analyzed data using Holland et al.'s (1998) and Holland and Lave's (2001) theoretical perspectives on identity and selfhood described in Chapter 2. I then analyzed themes within the broader contexts of school to offer more nuanced portraits of identity in the everyday

school experiences of these youth. In addition, I have read broadly in the field of social theory and was reminded of certain concepts that I believe supplement my data analyses. Occasionally, I include these concepts as a means of supplementing data analyses and providing broader understandings of how students transact their identities at FHS.

Finally, to counter traditional, essentializing and exoticizing representations of less privileged groups, Abu-Laughed (1995) suggests that rather than writing about culture, qualitative researchers should provide alternative, group-centered understandings of cultural phenomena, to bring marginalized stories to the center. Adhering to collaborative ethnographic approaches (Lassiter, 2005), in my research, I continued to seek critical feedback regarding my research formats, goals, and interpretations from the students, their teachers, parents, and Montagnard community members.

### **Coding**

The primary goal of qualitative data analysis is to “identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups and common sequences” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9). After transcribing all of the interviews, I identified statements related to the phenomenon of identity articulation. I then grouped these statements, and developed coding categories based on themes (e.g., good kid, poor student, age, mislabeling, language). This coding scheme guided my data analysis. I also color-coded statements that I deemed meaningful and that were related to the research questions. I used the same coding schema across all nine students, however, in Chapter 5 I present cross-cutting themes generated from interviews with six students, and in Chapter 6 I present the self-driven stories of the three remaining students.

## **“Truth” and Positionality in Qualitative Inquiry**

Although ethnographic inquiry has a long history, more recent scholarship has raised questions surrounding truth and objectivity in this research approach (e.g. Behar, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989). I attempted to work against these critiques through rigorous data collection and by connecting theory to my data analysis. This also necessitated continuously accounting for the ways who I am – my positionality – affected the questions I asked, and my interpretations of what I heard and observed. In some places in this dissertation I insert myself in the data as a reminder to the reader of my presence as a researcher and my positionality in this study.

Archer (2002) argues that research is a “socially constructed process, whereby the identity of the researcher, and the methodology adopted, shape the knowledge produced” (p. 109). In my research, I have attempted to acknowledge my personal positionality without drawing attention from the worlds of the students. I have also attempted to be reflective and reflexive in my research. Self-reflexivity in research lays to bear asymmetry in relationships between the researcher and the communities they study, and recognizes that our thoughts and interpretations stem from who we are and what we believe (Davies, 1999).

Much like the conceptual and methodological approach to this research, this dissertation stems from my own personal narrative of literal and figurative “border crossing” (Anzaldúa, 1987). My transnational experiences of growing up with two parents from different countries, and living and attending school as a child in the U.S. and Sweden, provoked in me an intellectual curiosity about how immigrant and refugee students negotiate culture, learning, and identity in different social contexts. In essence,

my struggles with fitting in as a foreigner in school (in Sweden) who on a superficial level blended with my mostly White peers, made me want to further understand the experiences of other border crossers.

I also entered the research context with professional experiences as a public high school and adult language teacher to students of various backgrounds, and as a graduate student, at once removed from the daily life of teaching, but with particular views regarding how language minority students should be taught, and how they should fit into the larger school and societal context. In conceptualizing this research, I desired to return to a public high school setting to be a “student” of how Montagnard refugee students respond to multiple contexts and relationships in school. In spite of my position as a privileged outsider, a former high school teacher, and as a “UNC Ph.D. student,” I often felt vulnerable under the gaze of students and teachers who perhaps resented my presence in spite of their willingness allow me into their classrooms and to speak with me. Through this process, I questioned my own assumptions and beliefs and often felt powerless in the face of ambiguity. The vulnerability I felt as a researcher motivated me to further seek clarity by doing multiple observations, and continuously asking sometimes challenging questions of myself and my participants.

Twine (2000) has argued, “The issue of representation seems to be a particularly agonizing and complicated one for those researching communities vulnerable due to racial and ethnic inequalities” (p. 23). As a White, middle class, Anglo-American woman in my mid-30s, I differed from student and parent participants in terms of age, race, class, and language background. I carried the “invisible knapsack” of White privilege (McIntosh, 1988), which frames my assumptions about myself and others with

regard to race. My middle-class upbringing and current standard of living has benefited me with educational and career choices. I am also a native speaker of English, and do not speak the languages of the students in this study. This lack of language knowledge undoubtedly influenced the stories the students shared and my interpretation of them. Moreover, I am not a refugee and can not fully understand the experiences of a marginalized ethnic group both in their home countries and in the U.S. In addition, although I did not seek out this role, in some instances, students and parents in particular viewed me as an advocate for their needs as resettled refugees in Bankston, and at FHS. Together these differences underscore an imbalance of power between the students and I. I acknowledge that my power over the students influenced the information they shared, the stories they told, and the stories I chose to include in the writing of this dissertation.

However, in spite of our differences, there were also points of intersection between me and my study participants, such as my experiences as a student in a foreign education system and as a linguistic minority in Sweden, who was pulled out of “mainstream” classes and placed in Swedish as a Another Language classes. These experiences have in some ways helped me understand the sense of alienation and marginalization, as well as empowerment and motivation the students in my study faced.

Raby (2007) suggests that as an outsider a researcher may ask naive, but important questions and also has the advantage of being external to community tensions. As an outsider, I was nonetheless disadvantaged by my inability to speak the native languages of my study participants, and to fully understand their experiences as refugees, and as low-income racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in a region of the country which has only recently become home to new immigrant groups. Conducting research



among youth also raises questions concerning power, in both collecting and interpreting data. Raby (2007), for instance, argues that,

While youth is valorized in North American culture, teenagers are routinely subject to discourses that construct them as being at-risk, as social problems, and as incomplete, discourses that are in turn used in their regulation and control (particularly in schools) and that provide them with little room in which to represent themselves. (p. 48)

The differences between me and the study participants necessitated sensitivity and care on my part as I conducted my research. Conquergood (1991) suggests that sound cross-cultural research requires time in the community as well as input and evaluation of the research design and objectives by community members. I began immersing myself in Bankston's Montagnard community in the fall of 2007 by conducting a qualitative study at an after-school program for refugee middle schoolers. I continued to learn about this community during the spring, 2008 by doing ethnographic work with a troop of Montagnard Girl Scouts that met on a weekly basis. Throughout the year I interacted with Montagnard youth about school, community and family life. I also had the opportunity to dialogue on an on-going basis with a Montagnard caseworker at Catholic Social Services about the struggles of Montagnard youth in Bankston's public school system. These experiences provided a foundation from which to conceptualize this dissertation study.

In sum, my positionality as a white, female, middle-class, native English speaking researcher who is not a refugee in many ways granted me insider access to people and spaces of interest to me, and allowed me to ask difficult questions of my research participants. It also impacted my data collection and analysis in ways that might differ from other researchers. In this study I have attempted to reconcile my positionality by

scrutinizing my assumptions and conclusions – by spending time at FHS and in the communities where the students live, by engaging in on-going conversations with the students, their teachers, parents, and community members, and by asking for feedback from participants regarding my conclusions. Thus, this study is a product of multiple tasks and multiple positions. While acknowledging my self position as a non-refugee, I attempt to privilege Montagnard students’ perspectives and goals regarding education. Following the conceptual framework designed for this research as well as previous studies on immigrant and refugee youth, this dissertation adds these students’ and their teachers’ perspectives to dominant discourse surrounding language and cultural minority students in U.S. public schools.

## **Chapter 4: Contextualizing the Students' Identities**

Statistical data on North Carolina's demographic composition, Montagnard refugees, the state's high school drop out rates, characteristics of Bankston Public Schools (BPS), and of Franklin High School (FHS) reflect great transformation, growth, and seemingly insurmountable challenges. However, examining general statistics of low-performing urban schools and their students in particular – ethnic and linguistic minorities, teenage mothers, the urban poor – can strip students of their agency and overlook pockets of potential. To counter this tendency, in this chapter, I elaborate on information provided in Chapters 1 and 3 by drawing on interviews with teachers and school administrators as a means of providing a more localized and personal account of the figured world of FHS and how Montagnard students are positioned within it.

In addition, because one of my objectives is to explore how school policies influence the self-perceptions of Montagnard students' as ELL students with interrupted formal education, I also provide information about grade-level placement of newcomer immigrant and refugee students in BPS, as well as BPS graduation requirements. Through my findings, I argue that the school identities of the students in my study are in many ways influenced by school policies that on the surface aim to facilitate graduation from high school, but also stymie their chances for social and academic advancement.

Finally, because I hold that students' school identities are in many ways shaped by their participation in their home and community worlds, I also briefly present

supplemental data from interviews with social service providers, and parents as a means of illustrating the dialogic nature of identity. I provide this data not to diminish the importance of the students' perspectives of their school identities, but to compound thematic findings, individual variations, and to present a triangulation of data. Thus, the data in this chapter provide a means of further contextualizing the students' representation of their identities presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

### **The Figured World of FHS**

This chapter prioritizes the figured world of FHS as a localized “space of practice” (Holland et al., 1998) in which identities are tried on and negotiated. I consider the school as a figured world because it is a realm in which students' identities are shaped dialogically and through relations of power. The figured world of school is shaped by and shapes all actors – administrators, teachers, and students, other personnel – within it. Teachers' perceptions of students play a significant role in shaping the identities that students transact.

FHS has enrolled Montagnard refugee students since the mid-1990s. When Montagnard and other Southeast Asian student enrollment increased in the early 2000s, Mr. Anderson, an assistant principal and Vietnam veteran, began offering teacher training sessions which focused on how teachers can best work with Southeast Asian refugees at FHS. He also invited Montagnard community members to talk about the Montagnard culture and experiences as resettled refugees. He explained,

I've taken it upon myself along with Ms. Dodd [the ESL Chair] to indoctrinate teachers and to find out how students are doing - to try and help them individually. The average teacher is pretty busy, so they don't have time to learn

everything about them. But they should know who these students are. They should have a sense of their culture and their difficulties in school.

Mr. Anderson noted that teachers tend to stereotype Montagnard students:

“Teachers think they are quiet, no trouble, limited English, backward...but the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Because [Montagnard students] don’t cause trouble, they don’t get help. Really, the biggest fallacy is that they are doing well.” A later conversation with Mrs. Brink, another assistant principal, elucidated this point. I asked Mrs. Brink what she thought of Montagnards at FHS, and she commented emphatically, “I wish we had more of them here! They don’t cause any problems for us!” She went on to explain that Montagnard students are “meek” relative to other (African American and Hispanic) students at FHS, and that teachers “just loved them” because of this.

Some veteran FHS teachers I spoke with argued that while they had a good understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of Montagnard students, teachers who had begun to teach at FHS in the last three years had less knowledge of this population because Mr. Anderson offered shorter informational sessions during new teacher orientations. Mr. Riley, a Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) teacher who grew up on a military base in the Philippines, stated,

[New teachers] don’t know anything about these students and what they or their parents have been through. Frankly I don’t think they really care. They’re too worried about getting through the day... or their kids passing [End of Course tests]. And there are a lot of new teachers here because of the high teacher turnover.

Mr. Anderson also noted that, because FHS’s enrollment had increased drastically in the last few years due to district rezoning policies, he had less opportunity to provide more in-depth information to new teachers about specific populations at FHS. He also

lamented that the current economic downturn and teacher lay-offs would inevitably lead to less attention to individual student needs in the coming school year:

And nowadays Montagnards are a smaller population relative to everyone else here at Franklin. So we address them in new teacher orientations, but we also address Hispanics and our American kids a lot more too because we just have a lot more kids than we used to. We also have a lot more problems at this school now, so we can only spend a little time on each topic.

In sum, although many teachers are aware of the needs of newcomer Montagnard students at FHS, they are also overburdened by changes at the school, including increased class sizes, more discipline issues, a larger and more diverse ELL population, increased emphasis on state mandated tests, and retaining their jobs during an economic downturn.

### **Absent Guidance**

All students at FHS are assigned to a guidance counselor who they meet with to register for classes and to go over graduation requirements. A counselor I met with explained that she tracks newcomer students based on age, aptitude and educational background, and that newcomer Montagnard students are commonly placed in “tech prep” courses, such as childcare and food preparation. The students in my study are, however, enrolled in the “general” track, and take courses across a variety of disciplines. Mr. Rose, an ESL teacher, noted that counselors do not provide enough academic support for students in earlier grades and for ESL students in particular: “They do an information session on graduation requirements, but they lecture through PowerPoint slides. They give [ESL] students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade a regular Bankston Public Schools graduation completion booklet that the students don’t understand.”

Mr. Anderson also lamented that students are not provided with enough information from school personnel regarding post high school options. “I told counselors

that they need to reach out to Montagnard kids, but there's no time. The counselors have too much to do already. There are college scholarships specifically for Montagnards, but students don't know about them!" None of the students had ever approached a guidance counselor for advice regarding career or college options. Khuih, who is a senior in good standing, related that he was unaware that this was an option.

### Navigating Coursework

The students' daily schedules provide insight into the ways they physically navigate the academic context at FHS. They also provide a foundation from which to understand students' perceptions of their identities in different spaces within school.

Table 5

*The students' daily course schedules during the 2008-2009 school year*

Fall Semester	Spring Semester
<b>H'vin</b> World History English Language Arts IV Health Algebra II	Biology English Language IV Visual Arts Physical Education
<b>Vit</b> Technical Math 1 Reading and Writing 11 ESL Newcomer World History Environmental Science	Technical Math 2 English/ESL III Japanese JROTC Leadership
<b>Dah</b> Biomedical Technology Reading/Writing 11 ESL Newcomer Crafts World History	Computer Apps English/ESL III Technical Math Visual Arts
<b>Tem</b> Chorus Reading/Writing 11 ESL Newcomer Technical Math I Chorus II	Environmental Sci. English /ESL III Technical Math II JROTC

<b>Moung</b> ROTC Reading/Writing 11 ESL Newcomer Technical Math I Crafts	Environ. Science English /ESL Technical Math II JROTC
<b>Gar</b> Law Reading/Writing 11 ESL 2 Technical Math 1 Visual Arts	Civics and Economics English III ESL 2 Honors Visual Arts Technical Math II
<b>Khuih</b> Government Geometry Reading/Writing 12 ESL Computer Applications I	Computer Apps. II Physical Education English IV ESL 3 Accounting
<b>Sieng</b> Algebra 1-a JROTC World History Newcomer ESL 1	Algebra 1-b JROTC U.S. History Newcomer ESL 2
<b>Luis</b> Algebra I-a Paddle Sports Reading/Writing 11 ESL 2 Sports Marketing	Algebra 1-b English II ESL 1 English III ESL 2 Physical Education
<b>H'yin</b> World History English Language Arts IV Health Algebra II	Biology English Language IV Visual Arts Physical Education

The students navigate coursework that is in many cases chosen for them (i.e. graduation requirements). Other courses such as JROTC, physical education, or visual arts are electives courses, which students have selected according to their interests and aspirations. Taken together, the students' schedules illustrate what it means to be an educated person within the figured world of FHS. In this case, education means navigating challenging coursework, some of which students enter with little or no background or preparation. Thus, in theory this coursework provides the students with



the tools to graduate from high school and attend college, or enter the work force. In reality, the coursework renders the students uncertain about their ability to succeed in school or beyond.

### **Sources of Support**

The ESL teachers are perhaps the strongest advocates for Montagnard students at FHS. Several FHS and BPS personnel described the ESL department at FHS as “very welcoming” of all students. The ESL program at FHS started five years ago; before this students designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) were placed in English Language Arts classes with American peers, where they received occasional assistance from a “floating” ESL specialist. There were four ESL teachers during the time of my research (Ms. Dodd, Mr. Rose, Mr. Dvorak, and Ms. Mickelson) and all had Montagnard students in their classes. FHS runs on a block schedule with classes changing each semester. ELL students are enrolled in one ninety-minute ESL class, which they attend daily. During the duration of this study, Sieng was enrolled in Mrs. Dodd’s Newcomer ESL 1 and 2 class, Moun, Tem, Dah, and Vit were enrolled in Mr. Rose’s Reading/Writing 11 ESL Newcomer and English/ESL III class, Gar and Luis were enrolled in Ms. Mickelson’s Reading/Writing 11 ESL 2 and English 3 ESL 2 class, and Khuhi was a student in Mr. Dvorak’s Reading/Writing 12 ESL and English IV ESL 3 class. H’yin had passed out of ESL and was enrolled in an English Language Arts IV class.

In addition to linguistic and academic support provided to students during their ESL classes, I observed the ESL teachers helping students with employment applications or talking through procedures for obtaining a drivers license, or post-high school options

during their planning periods or after school. Students also often stopped by the ESL classroom after school, where the teachers share office space, to simply greet the teachers, or ask for help with homework.

A few of the ESL teachers also mentioned having done home visits to students who were struggling in their classes, hosted community visitors in their classes, or taken student on field trips into the Bankston community. During my research, Ms. Mickelson involved her level 3 ESL students in a photographic essay project with ESL classes from other schools in the BPS system. Students presented their work at an art gallery in downtown Bankston. When I when to the exhibit's opening night ceremony, several FHS Montagnard students involved in the project commented that this was their first trip to downtown Bankston. None of the FHS students' parents attended the exhibit, and most in attendance were students from other schools, and their ESL teachers. The students I spoke with valued getting glimpses of other immigrant and refugee students' lives, and hearing their stories of relocation and continual adjustment to life in Bankston. After presenting her essay in front of the audience Gar shared, "I was really scared to tell my story [of escape from Vietnam], but I also felt really important. It was so cool, and I think I did a good job!"

### **Challenging Classes**

Students have one ESL class per day, and the remainder of their coursework consists of "mainstream"<sup>13</sup>, or non-ESL classes. On occasion, courses required for

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<sup>13</sup> BPS does not have an official term to designate non-ESL coursework. Although FHS teachers and administrators referred to these courses as "mainstream," "regular classes," or "other classes," I use the term "mainstream" throughout this research because of its widespread use in literature on ELLs in public schools, while also recognizing that such "othering" terms perpetuate deficit perspectives on language minority students.

graduation have been offered in Sheltered Observational Instructional Protocol (SIOP) format (Echevarria, et al., 2004). In these classes, most students are ELLs and content is modified to meet their language needs. Teachers of SIOP classes simplify their language of instruction, and provide students with additional visual aids, such as transparencies, or fill-in-the-blank (kloze) notes. Students in SIOP classes are also typically given modified assessments and additional time to complete assessments.

In addition, in most cases, ESL teachers often go to mainstream classes during their planning periods to offer language support to ELLs. All of the ESL teachers remarked that ELLs at FHS do not always receive the support they need in their mainstream classes, “because teachers are so focused on keeping the class under control,” as Ms. Dodd explained. I observed this in some of the classes I attended. Mr. Dvorak noted that teachers are generally receptive to Montagnard students in their classes. However, he shared,

The other day I told a social studies teacher that some of my Montagnard ESL students needed more modifications on homework and in-class worksheets, and she just blew up at me. She rolled her eyes and said, “You want me to do more [for these students]?! ”

The ESL teachers agree that teacher attitudes toward students differ, but that in general more could be done to address their academic needs. However, Ms. Mickelson commented, “At least in this school there are native U.S. students who perform poor academically...because of family circumstances. So the Montagnards aren’t the only ones having trouble.” Other school personnel echoed this sentiment. One counselor I met with exclaimed, “We perform triage here.” That is, school personnel often focus on students with serious social and behavioral issues, as opposed to students who are struggling academically, but otherwise behaving well. A BPS administrator related,

“You know the people you hear about on the local news - who got shot, or shot somebody? Those are the students at Franklin. Or their parents. They have real issues [at FHS].”

The students in this study face additional academic challenges in the form of grade-level placement and promotion, and graduation requirements. These policies apply to ELL and non-ELL students alike. They also influence students’ identities and experiences in school, their attitudes toward school, and their beliefs regarding their opportunities beyond school.

### **Barriers to Graduation**

In order to more generally contextualize the experiences of refugee student with lapses in education, I provide an overview of BPS procedures for placing newcomer ELLs into the appropriate grade-level.

Initial grade-level placement takes place at the BPS International Center (IC) – where newcomer immigrant, refugee, and international students register, and are given a test to determine their proficiency in English. The IC placement is based on a student’s age and educational background. Once the IC has done an initial intake of newcomers, counselors at the student’s designated school re-determine placement. A student’s ESL level is determined by the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT) which students take at the IC. Placement is also determined by the school’s program structure.

All students who have missed two or more years of school are designated as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). One high school in the BPS system has a SIFE center, a “school within a school” (Conchas, 2006), where SIFE-designated students living within the school’s geographic zone enroll in classes geared for students

with no or low literacy skills in their native languages, and lapses in education. FHS does not have a SIFE center, though students such as those in this study receive a SIFE designation, which is intended to alert teachers to these students' needs. All newcomer SIFE students at the high school level are placed in 9<sup>th</sup> grade regardless of age, and all SIFE and non-SIFE students must pass grade-level requirements in order to be promoted into the next grade. Students can enroll in BPS until they are 21, and those who do not graduate before then age out, but can complete a diploma at a local community college.

Upon entry into high school, students meet with a counselor and receive a BPS High School Planning Guide, which explains academic or vocational tracks and required courses for graduation. Requirements may change on a yearly basis, however, and students entering BPS one year may have different requirements than students entering the next year.

Olsen (1997) has documented how school policies segregate ELLs into classes and programs that leave them socially and psychologically isolated from their peers. Although SIFE students at FHS enroll in courses required for graduation along with other ESL and non-ESL students, I often observed them to be segregated within some of these classrooms where teachers were seemingly ill-equipped to work with them. Because of social isolation within mainstream classrooms, and lack of meaningful academic support from teachers or peers, some students withdrew physically and psychologically, while others often attempted to engage the material but were distracted by disruptive classmates. These responses illustrate that many SIFE students may not be well served by placement in mainstream classrooms where they remain socially, linguistically and academically marginalized.

## **Broader Tensions**

In this study, I view students' school identities as influenced by their home and community environments and histories in person (Holland, et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001). Through data gathered from interviews with church leaders, parents, social services staff, and the director of a community organization, I gained invaluable background information regarding Montagnard adjustment and incorporation into the Bankston community, home life, and parental views regarding education, as well as how these contexts influence students' ideas about school. I include aspects of these interviews and field notes deemed important for framing students' identities in school.

Holland and Lave (2001) write that histories in person are comprised of "multiply authored and positioned selves, identities, cultural forms, and local and far-reaching struggles" (p. 6). These struggles shape how individuals define and enact their identities and how they position themselves and others. An understanding of out-of-school tensions is useful to locating students' broader lives, perceptions and motivations within the figured world of FHS.

### **The Montagnard Community in Bankston**

Community members, social services workers, and parents offered differing views regarding Montagnard refugee resettlement in Bankston. A Montagnard church leader noted that Montagnards have generally been well received by the surrounding community and have folded into the dominant Christian community ethos present in North Carolina. The director of the Catholic Social Services branch in Bankston stated that earlier groups have adapted well to living in Bankston, have started churches, and have become homeowners. Their children have attended college and in some cases

graduate school, and many have obtained U.S. citizenship. Montagnard groups arriving since 2002 face greater challenges, however, because of their limited English language proficiency, and general lack of formal education. She also noted that the general Bankston population is now less welcoming of newcomers to the region because of concern for their own welfare during a national and local economic downturn.

In addition, a social worker who works closely with Montagnard clients, noted that unlike services for Hispanic immigrants in Bankston, services for refugees, including Montagnards, are lacking:

In general, there is no sense of urgency regarding refugee needs. Quick self-sufficiency for refugees is the goal, but there is need for an integrated, longer-lasting support system.

Although refugee groups receive short-term assistance from refugee resettlement programs, they often face social and financial struggles long after this assistance has run out. These localized struggles hinder their integration into the Bankston community. Nonetheless, newcomer Montagnard groups have generally been supported by Montagnards who arrived in Bankston in the 1980s and 90s. The director of a Montagnard community organization, noted, however, that there has been some discrimination against newcomers by more established Montagnard and other immigrant and non-immigrant groups because of their perceived backwardness and lack of assimilation into the surrounding community.

In sum, newcomer Montagnards in Bankston enter a social and economic environment in flux. Although they receive support from social service agencies, American churches, and Montagnards who arrived in Bankston earlier, they have also

encountered negative public sentiment toward immigrants and refugees in Bankston in the workplace, and in their neighborhoods.

### **Fragmented Home Life**

Home life presents additional challenges for many Montagnard refugee youth. Several Catholic Social Services staff and an affiliated social worker described issues within many Montagnard homes, including domestic abuse, and child neglect. Several community members I spoke with also suggested that Montagnard youth are often overburdened by having to serve as translators for their parents, often in sensitive situations, such as doctors visits or when accompanying a parents to apply for such social services as Medicaid or food stamps. A Catholic Social Services caseworker, argued that as a result some children become arrogant toward parents because of their parents' lack of English language skills and knowledge of family affairs. He also noted that Montagnard children often resent having to support their families financially through after-school and weekend jobs. Similarly, the director of a Montagnard community organization related that heads of households are concerned with meeting daily needs, such as money for rent and groceries, managing overcrowded housing situations with large families, and worry over family members in Vietnam, and that these concerns cause stress in many Montagnard youth.

In sum, the figured worlds of school, community and home do not necessarily overlap. Conditions within community and home do not match the expectations, values and norms present in at FHS.



## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe of the figured world of FHS as the primary context out of which the Montagnard students come to view their identities in school. I have also provided a glimpse of the context of resettlement in Bankston in order to foreground the themes and stories I present in the following chapters. For the Montagnard students in this study, identities are multiple and shifting in relation to uncomplimentary demands and conditions between home and school, and in a school climate in which they are a minority among minorities, and where teachers hold mixed views toward them.

The context of FHS as one of Bankston's four "challenge schools" places additional barriers on students. The teachers I spoke to reported feeling overburdened by students with behavioral issues, as well as pressures imposed by state mandated tests. There is high teacher turnover, many newer teachers appear to have little understanding of the needs of particular student groups, including Montagnards. The ESL department is a notable exception, and ESL teachers are more attuned to and receptive of newcomer Montagnard and other ELL students. Although many teachers in this study related that they were receptive to Montagnard students in their classrooms, they also felt overburdened by having to accommodate their academic needs. As will be explored further in Chapter 5, students fall somewhere between being welcomed and unwelcomed because of their seemingly good behavior in school, which contrasts with the additional work they place on teachers.

In addition, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) argue that, "The "structures of opportunity" or, conversely, the "fields of endangerment" that many

children face are fundamental for understanding the paths they choose in the new setting” (p. 117). Although North Carolina graduation requirements appear to create parity between ELL and non-ELL students, they do not create full access for students who struggle linguistically, and who lack taken-for-granted background knowledge held by students who have gone through the U.S. educational system, and have not experienced lapses in education.

I obtained a planning guide in the course of my research, and as I leafed through the guide I quickly became overwhelmed by terminology, designations, and charts intended to clarify grade promotion and graduation requirements. I later sought clarification from a BPS administrator who serves as a resource person for high school counselors in the school system, and who herself admitted to the “confusing” nature of North Carolina and BPS graduation policies. I continually asked myself, “If I – as an educated native speaker of English, and as someone with access to “experts” in the field – have trouble making sense of these requirements, how can students and their parents, regardless of their language proficiency and educational aptitude, comprehend them?” This question, persisted in my thoughts as I continued my fieldwork, and opened my eyes to a set of social, academic, and linguistic challenges students such as those in this study face. In short, data on placement procedures and expectations for ELL/SIFE students underscores the need for an examination of how graduation requirements thwart many of these students’ chances for success in school, and ultimately reinforce marginalized identities in many students who embody characteristics of the students in this study.

Findings from the community-based background research suggest that newcomer Montagnards generally struggle culturally, linguistically and economically within the

## **Chapter 5: Self in School**

### **“Good Kid” but “Poor Student”**

This chapter focuses on the questions put forth by this study, employing data extrapolated from interviews with the students and their ESL and mainstream teachers, as well as observations of their ESL and mainstream classes. I divide this chapter into themes that contribute to a broader understanding of how the Montagnard refugee students negotiate their self, positional, and thickened identities (Holland et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001) in school. The themes illustrate how the students’ histories in person shape their experiences and motivations in school, how positioning by teachers and peers further influences their identities, how perceptions of language proficiency bears on their identities in mainstream and ESL classrooms, and how specific school practices affect their perceptions of themselves and their possibilities. In Chapter 6, I further explicate these themes by presenting individual narratives of the three of the students (H’yin, Sieng, and Luis) whose stories represent divergent identity paradigms.

Table 4 illustrates broadly how the findings connect to the research question and sub-questions. These questions elucidate how Montagnard students transact their identities in school in relation to their backgrounds, experiences and aspirations, their positioning by teachers and peers, language proficiency, coursework, and graduation requirements.

Table 6

*Findings in relation to research sub-questions*

<b>Students</b>	<b>Experiences and aspirations</b>	<b>Positioning</b>	<b>Language proficiency</b>	<b>Coursework, graduation requirements</b>
<b>Khuih</b>	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desire to learn English  Desire to start a business in Vietnam	“I think I am not a very good student here. But I try.”	“I don’t want to say something to embarrass myself.”	Desires more coursework for newcomer ELLs
<b>Gar</b>	No schooling in Vietnam  I want to learn English “so that I can do something smart with my life.”	“[Teachers] don’t care about me because I don’t cause trouble.”	“[If] a teacher asks you a question and you don’t know the answer [in English] [other students] say “you’re so stupid!”	Struggles with Senior Exit Project  Desires additional coursework geared toward interests.
<b>Vit</b>	“I could never [learn Japanese] in Vietnam.”  To learn English  Desires to become pilot in the Air Force	“I think I am more serious [than American students] because my parents need me to be.”	“Smart means being interested in school...” not English language proficiency.	Graduation requirements: “I don’t need science in my life, so I don’t know why I need to take it.”
<b>Moung</b>	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desire to learn English	“I’m older than other people. But I don’t feel smarter than other people.”	“American [students] understand everything. They’re smarter than	Struggles with Senior Exit Project  Desires additional

	Wishes to join the Air Force		[Montagnards] because we don't speak English very well."	coursework geared toward interests.  Unsure of ability to graduate before turning 21.
<b>Tem</b>	"In Vietnam they didn't want Montagnards in their school."  Desires to become a prenatal nurse	"I am too old for school, but I go to school for my baby."	"Sometimes I try to speak to American students and they don't know what I say."	Struggles with Senior Exit Project  Desires additional coursework geared toward interests.  Unsure of ability to graduate before turning 21.
<b>Dah</b>	"School is free [in the U.S], and that is good!"  Desires to learn English  Desires a career in medicine	"I try hard, and [am] quieter and nicer than American students."	"I am more relaxed in my ESL class because it's just English and not other subjects too."	Struggles with Senior Exit Project  Desires additional coursework geared toward interests.  Unsure of ability to graduate before turning 21.
<b>H'yin</b>	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desire be first in family to graduate  Desire to become a	"My teachers always say that I am nice, hard working and...innocent!"	"I took ESL 1,2,3,4, but I don't really understand it."	Desires more advisement regarding opportunities upon graduation

	doctor serve Montagnard community in U.S.			
<b>Sieng</b>	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desires a career in the military	“I’m not smart. But if American kids are born here, they are smart.”  “I am Montagnard not Vietnamese!”	Struggles with academic English	Desires modifications on assignments and fewer graduation requirements.
<b>Luis</b>	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desires to return to Vietnam, but is uncertain of what he would do while there	“If I ask questions I still won’t get it...and people will think I’m stupid.”  “I feel bad because I am supposed to be in 11th grade.”	Desires additional ESL courses.	“I don’t like anything about school. Just to learn English.”

### **Model Minority or Problem Minority?**

Among the nine students, there exists variation in how they view their self and positional identities in school. However, there also exist many points of intersection in their experiences and perceptions of their status and belonging in school. All of the students draw on their previous experiences as ethnic minorities in Vietnam who have experienced lapses in education as they shape their aspirations in and beyond school. They also define themselves against other students at FHS and in response to teachers’ perceptions of them and non-Montagnard students, as well as the overall figured world of

FHS. As ELLs with interrupted formal schooling, they are generally and simultaneously positioned as “good kids” and “poor students” by teachers and peers. In addition, they frame their identities in response to specific school practices (policies regarding the placement of ELL/SIFE students, graduation requirements) which they believe work against them. In short, they recreate identities and cultures that are “partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented” (Lowe, 1996, p. 65) in response to unequal power relations in and outside of school.

### **Past Experiences, Current Motivations**

The students come to view their identities through a complex process of drawing on their histories in person (Holland & Lave, 2001) – their dialogic selves – as well as their current motivations and aspirations. In particular, the unique experiences of these students – as refugee ELLs with lapses in education – shape their school identities in unique ways. Their identities are modulated simultaneously by past experiences and current aspirations.

#### **Limited schooling in Vietnam.**

In Vietnam we went to school only sometimes, and we only learned math and Vietnamese. And they only taught us about Vietnam. Here we learn about everything, like world history, English, accounting. I prefer to learn about a lot of things, but I think it’s really hard because I don’t always understand. I think I am not a very good student here, but I try. (Khuih, senior)

Khuih’s account echoes that of all students in this study, who frame their academic identities in reference to their histories in person (Holland & Lave, 2001), and more specifically their school and life experiences in Vietnam. Aligning with Ogbu’s (1987) dual frame of reference, and as discussed in previous research literature (Centrie, 2004, Suarez-Orozco-Suarez-Orozco, 2001), the students reflect on the educational

opportunities and choices (real or perceived) presented by school in the U.S. as compared to educational opportunities available to them in Vietnam as minorities within a repressive communist political system. These students' expectations of school in the U.S. are by and large shaped by their lack of access to education in Vietnam.

Sieng, H'yin, Khuih, Luis, Gar, Tem, MOUNG and Dah cast American teachers in a positive light compared to teachers in Vietnam. For example, Tem commented: "In Vietnam school was easy, but teachers hit students because they didn't want Montagnard students in their school. In America school is hard, but teachers are nice." The exception to this was Vit, who prefers teachers who are similar to those he had in Vietnam who are "strict, and just teach." He continued, "If teachers just teach, students will just learn, and not be up out of their seats like they do [in my classes] here." Vit believes that teachers at FHS are too permissive of disruptive behavior among his classmates, which detracts from his own learning. In spite of this, Vit believes he has more opportunities to pursue his academic and career interests in the U.S. because of the kinds of courses offered at FHS. He is interested in Japanese anime, for instance, and has developed a talent for design in an art class taught by a Japanese teacher at FHS. "I could never do that in Vietnam. They don't even know what anime is over there, and I could never get a job doing this," he reflected. Like Vit, other eight students connect their current school experiences with desired career aspirations. They have adopted U.S. middle class folk theory of success, equating education with "getting ahead" (Ogbu, 1987). They also reflect on their histories in person as they make sense of the new opportunities they perceive themselves as having in the U.S.



In addition to abstract notions of personal advancement through school, the students view schooling as a social service, where they are not required to pay tuition, and receive lunch for free, as well as a social space where they converge with other Montagnard, immigrant and American students. Dah commented, for instance, “School is free and that is good. Here you have the right to go to school, and you eat lunch for free. That’s freedom!” When I asked Dah what he thinks about school, he shared, “I have nothing better to do. And I don’t want to stay home. There is nothing for me to do there.” Of all the students in the study, only MOUNG has a driver’s license and car. For the other students, given the absence of transportation and general isolation in their neighborhoods, school provides a link to valuable social capital and other benefits beyond learning.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, all of the students are labeled as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) because they have missed two or more years of schooling in Vietnam or in refugee camps. Interrupted formal schooling is directly related to experiences as ethnic minorities living in rural areas in Vietnam, and time spent in refugee camps in Cambodia or Thailand. In both contexts, schooling was intermittent, limited, or non-existent. These factors influence how they transact their identities at FHS. Lapses in education are a source of stress for Gar, Sieng, Luis, Vit, Dah, MOUNG and Tem, who struggle with their coursework and meeting graduation requirements. Dah, Tem and MOUNG, for instance, fear being forced to drop out of school if they have not graduated before they turn 21 years old.

Gar did not attend school in Vietnam. I observed a Civics class in which Gar is a student. She sat quietly taking notes throughout the class period, which centered on the

American judicial system. I asked Gar about the class afterward, and she related that she had no understanding of how governments function because she did not learn about this in Vietnam. She then compared herself with Der, another Montagnard student in the class who received more schooling in Vietnam before coming to the U.S. “I wish I had more school in Vietnam. I would be more like Der and other students in my class. I wish I could answer questions and pass tests, but I can’t because I’m not as smart as them.” Gar’s self perception is defined by her history in person as a student with interrupted formal education, as well as well as the figured world of FHS in which she feels she struggles relative to others students.

In contrast to common perceptions of low-income, underachieving minority students in urban schools, with the exception of Luis, the students in this study show little intention of dropping out in spite of perceived barriers to their success. They believe they are not victims of racism at FHS, comparing their current school experiences to their schooling in Vietnam, where they or their family members were chastised for being Montagnard. The students also embody a high degree of immigrant optimism toward their experiences at FHS. This optimism translates into their academic identities. They remain in school in spite of pressures to drop out, including low academic achievement, parenthood (in Tem’s case), and financial needs at home. What is more, they do not see themselves as part of the U.S. racial landscape. Instead they see themselves through an ethnic lens where refugee experiences and experiences with ethnic persecution in Vietnam are more important signifiers than U.S. racial constructions. They also frame their aspirations in and beyond school in light of their experiences as resettled refugees. How they conceive their future remits to their perceptions of their origins.

**Authoring Aspirations.** Holland et al. (1998) and Holland and Lave (2001) argue that the dialogical nature of identities suggests that an identity is borne out of an individual's history in person, and is equally connected to how an individual envisions him or herself in the future. For Gar, Vit, Tem, Dah, MOUNG, and Sieng, what they believe is possible shapes their motivations, investment in learning English, and in staying in school. Stories of experiences in Vietnam, in refugee camps, and upon resettling in Bankston, and present experiences as students at FHS, in after-school jobs, and in their homes and neighborhoods, often centered around hopes for the future – hopes that served as motivation to attend and graduate from high school.

Khuih shared, “I want to have a better education than my parents so I don’t need to work in a factory.” Khuih desires to return to Vietnam or Cambodia “maybe to translate in a refugee camp. Or I want to go back to Vietnam and start a company, like a Wal-Mart, to help Montagnards.” Khuih described a ceremony that took place over Memorial Day in which a Montagnard woman who became a lawyer gave a speech. “Basically I want to be like her,” Khuih said. “A role model for Montagnards.”

Tem would like to be a prenatal nurse because of her experiences giving birth in the U.S. She would like to remain in the U.S. to help young Montagnard mothers like herself. She is uncertain about her prospects, however, because of her low proficiency in English, uncertainty over her ability to graduate before she turns 21, and because she needs to care for her baby and family.

MOUNG aspires to join the Air Force. She is currently in JROTC at FHS, which, after ESL, is her favorite class, because she enjoys wearing her uniform in school and, she commented, “it’s easy to understand. We just follow directions, and I don’t have to

talk much.” Moun’g’s relatives aided the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. When I met Moun’g for our final interview, she carried a cell phone with an Air Force cover, and Air Force buttons on her bag, which she said she received from a military recruiter.

Gar related that she and her family went to a presentation given by a Mnong Montagnard speaker in a nearby city. During the presentation the speaker encouraged Montagnard students to stay in school in order to improve the situation for Mnong people in Vietnam, and to bring recognition to Mnong people and Montagnard cause more generally. Gar dreams of being a fashion designer. Although her mother was a singer and designer in Vietnam, her father told her to give up that dream because she could never support a family with that career. Gar’s mom and dad “aren’t smart,” she related, so they don’t motivate Gar to think about her future. She continued, “They don’t understand having dreams outside of making money.”

Dah would like to pursue a career as a pharmacist. “If my language is good, I would like to help my people. If I work in a pharmacy, I can help Montagnard people here in Bankston get good medicine to help them,” he explained. He shared experiences of taking his mother to the pharmacy in Bankston for her medications, and the sense of confusion they felt. “We didn’t have a pharmacy in my village,” he shared, “and we used Montagnard (folk) medicine, so we didn’t know what to do here.” With his growing understanding and interest in Western medicine, he would like to be a medical broker between Montagnards and U.S. medical system.

Vit would like to become a pilot in the Air Force. He is also enjoys drawing and is interested in pursuing a career in animation. “For now I need to learn English and make money for my family,” he said. Vit was selected to attend a JROTC summer

leadership camp in South Carolina because of his athletic prowess and leadership skills. In the JROTC class I observed, the Sergeant noted that Vit was exceptionally disciplined and motivated, and has great potential, “if his English improves.”

The students view their identities at FHS in part by drawing on previous experiences as ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Internally, this ethnic identity frames how they envision their futures beyond school. Externally, however, the students’ identities are also shaped by how teachers and peers view their racial identities, as well as the challenges presented by being a student in a low-performing school. From this angle, the students do not view themselves in a completely optimistic light. Low achievement and ambivalent teacher and peer relationships are among their sources of anxiety, which affect their identities in school. Thus, they do not entirely overlook mistreatment by American peers or teachers in favor of perceived opportunities in the U.S.

### **“Good Kid” but “Poor Student”**

Several scholars of immigration and education have written about schools as sites of identity formation, where identities are internalized through interaction with institutional structures and peer cultures (e.g., Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In this section, I focus on students’ perceptions of themselves based on their relationships with teachers and students, paying particular attention to racial and ethnic identity, age, and academic standing and perceptions of language proficiency as aspects of students’ self, positional, and thickened identities.

**Teachers: “He is a good student, but he just doesn’t get it”.** Teachers position Montagnard students in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they embrace Montagnard students for being “quiet,” “respectful,” and “hard-working.” This identity thickening

(Holland & Lave, 2001) coincides with broader discourses surrounding Asian students as model minorities. On the other hand, because teachers are not always equipped or willing to help Montagnard students who struggle linguistically and academically in their classes, the needs of these students are not always met, and their identities are not always affirmed. Just as teacher interviews reveal this contradictory positioning of the students, student interviews reveal reactions to these perceptions of them.

During my field work at FHS, I observed Sieng and Luis in an American history class, and field notes below illustrate a classroom environment in which these two students are positioned and position themselves differently:

There are 28 students in this class – 22 of whom are African American, four are Montagnards and two are Hispanic. Students are sitting in assigned seats in rows facing the white board. Mr. Robinson (FHS teacher in his 30s) stands at the transparency projector and frequently reminds students in a loud voice to copy notes from his slide. He tells them that they will be quizzed on material tomorrow. Many students are out of their seats or shouting across the classroom to one another. Sieng and Luis sit quietly in front of two other Montagnard males in the back left corner. Sieng looks like he is taking notes, and Luis puts his head down. The two other Montagnard students talk quietly with one another.

An African-American female student walks into the classroom ten minutes late and tells Mr. Robinson that she has been removed from her regular class for disruptive behavior. Mr. Robinson tells her to sit in an empty desk in the back corner near me while other students jeer in her direction. The girl sits down and pulls out her cell phone and begins to text...I almost feel like saying something to her, but remember, this is not my role. I am supposed to be invisible... I return my gaze to the other students. Her texting goes unnoticed by Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Robinson passes out a worksheet for students to complete in groups. Sieng and the two other Montagnard boys are in a group together with Rosalia, a Hispanic student I recognize from Ms. Dodd's ESL class. The two Montagnard boys continue talking, while Sieng and Rosalia work on the assignment. Luis is still sleeping. Mr. Robinson occasionally circulates the room, but does not approach Sieng and Rosalia...I am surprised that he doesn't attempt to wake Luis...

This passage exemplifies how seven of the students in this study (Sieng, Gar, Tem, Dah, Moun, Vit, and Khuhi) view themselves: as simultaneously “good” and low-achieving students. They believe they are good students because they “try hard, and are quieter and nicer than American students,” as Dah noted. Being a good student means listening to the teacher, doing what is asked of them, and not talking in class. Indeed, in my observations of various classes at FHS, I noted that Montagnard students – and not just those in this study – often sat quietly in their seats listening, or taking notes while other students spoke out of turn, played with cell phones, or got out of their seats without permission.

Some students embrace what they perceive to be positive views of their teachers, albeit for strategic reasons. For instance, when I asked Moun how she thinks teachers perceive of her she explained, “I want [teachers] to think I am smart, so then they don’t ask me questions in class. Then I don’t have to ask for help.” Khuhi related that a teacher encouraged him to apply for college, and helped him apply for a scholarship because of his high academic performance and good behavior in class. He continued, “Students think I’m smart, too, because I do my work. And the teacher thinks I’m smart. Sometimes people ask me for answers and copy my work. I give it to them because I don’t want them to get mad.” Thus, Khuhi’s teachers position him in a positive light relative to other, disruptive students at FHS.

Moun and Khuhi see benefits to being positioned as good kids, and good students by their teachers. Not all students viewed being positioned as a good student positively, however. Vit resists this positioning, wishing instead to be seen as equal to his classmates. He related, “My teachers think I am smarter than other kids because I do

my work. But I don't want to be the smartest in my class. I want everyone else to be like me – to want to learn.” Vit desires an academic context in which he does not stand out from other students. Alternatively, Gar noted that teachers in some classes have given her a passing grade because she is hard-working relative to other students, whether or not she has grasped the content material: “They don't care about me because I don't cause trouble. But then I get to the next grade and I don't get anything. I am lost.” Gar desires more individualized attention from teachers who wrongly assume that she understands the content presented to her. Paradoxically, Gar hesitates to approach teachers for help for fear of chastisement from peers.

To these students, behaving like a good student is different from “being” a good student, in terms of achievement. Students believe that although teachers value their behavior in school, they do not necessarily believe these students are academically capable. In some cases, students receive passing grades regardless of their performance in the class, as was the case with Gar. In other cases, students are held back in classes where they fail to grasp content material. Luis has failed and retaken algebra for two consecutive years. “I think my teacher thinks I am stupid, because I don't understand anything in his class. I even think I did better last year in that class than this year,” he shared.

In short, students fall somewhere between the model minority and the problem minority racial stereotypes. They believe they are seen as well-behaved “good” students who for the most part, try hard. However, they are also, in most cases, low-achieving “poor” students who struggle with learning English and grasping content material. What is more, with the exception of Khuih, they are not always given needed academic support



in mainstream classes, nor are they pushed to excel, or provided with opportunities that connect schooling with future possibilities. While some students desire more support from their teachers, other students, such as Vit, wish that more students at FHS took school seriously. In other words, Vit does not wish to be seen as a model minority, but instead desires more parity between himself and other students because he believes that he would benefit from being surrounded by more academically serious students. He desires a figured world of FHS in which all teachers and students had high academic standards.

The students' positional and thickened identities are thus shaped out of the mixed messages they receive from teachers in school, which reflect broader discourses surrounding Asian students in U.S. schools. Their identities are also conditioned by the figured world of FHS as a low-performing school in which many students struggle academically, and face instability in their lives outside of school. Their identities are equally a product of their histories in person, and their experiences of having limited formal education in Vietnam shapes their perceptions of their academic abilities relative to other students at FHS in negative ways. They perceive of being positioned between the model minority and problem minority stereotype as both good and bad. They desire for their teachers to see them as respectful and obedient, while they also question the long-term benefit of this positioning in terms of their overall academic success. These conflicting messages intercede with their beliefs regarding American students at FHS.

**“Other Students think I’m Stupid.”** In addition to their relations with teachers, students' self, positional, and thickened identities also develop out of their interactions with African-American, Hispanic, White and Asian American students at FHS. As

illustrated by FHS teacher testimonials, and highlighted in other research on race and formal institutions (Lee, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1994), Montagnard students are racialized within the institutional setting of FHS, as are all students. The students also internalize the messages they receive from peers regarding their academic and social positioning relative to other students, and how they are placed in a racial hierarchy that spans from White to Black (Ong, 2003). They grapple with simultaneous desires to assert a Montagnard identity while also making sense of and fitting in with their American and immigrant peers.

Gar commented,

There are a lot of students who are not respectful toward the teacher and think they can do whatever they want. I don't like to hang out with people who don't do their work. It's important be respectful to the teacher so they know you want to learn, to show them how you act at home and at school.

Gar's insistence on acting like a good student relative to other students helps her persist in school. By distancing herself from students she perceives as deviant, she purposefully constructs an identity based on her history in person that she believes honors her Montagnard culture, and overshadows her poor academic performance.

H'yin shared a similar sentiment:

I think American students [at FHS] are lazier. They don't do the work. They talk a lot in class, and they text a lot in class, listen to music. They don't care about the teacher. I do my homework because I'm scared if I don't do it. I don't want my grade to drop. American kids are not afraid of this. They don't care about anything. I feel sorry for them. One day they may want to go to college but their grades are low.

H'yin, like all other students in this study, prioritizes education as a means of finding success beyond school. They believe that many of their American and Hispanic

peers at FHS take for granted the opportunities granted by attending school. Vit also shared that his parents, who work in a factory, expect that he and his siblings will obtain higher paying jobs upon graduation in order to support the family. “I think I am more serious [than American students] because my parents need me to be. They need me to make more money [than they currently make],” he said. For Vit, schooling is a means of advancing his own and his parents dreams of maintaining a better life in the U.S.

Fighting among other students in school is an additional source of anxiety and frustration. Moun explained, “Like at lunch, American boys and girls fight. I’m scared! Why do they come to school and do this?” Like other students, Moun believes that students should prioritize learning over socializing, and that fighting interferes with the academic process. Other students related that they do not always feel safe at FHS because of the fighting. Dah commented,

I hate it when people fight. On the bus, too, they talk so loud – fighting with their mouths. Last week I saw a lot of blood in the hallway. I ran away. This would not happen in school in Vietnam. Some Vietnamese students said bad things to me, but they did not hit.

Rather than school representing “security in an insecure world” for refugee students (Mosselson, 2006), Dah occasionally fears for his safety in school. Negative reaction to fighting is an additional mechanism by which these students forge their identities as “good kids” at FHS. In other words, they construct their identities against the backdrop of the figured world of FHS, in which many students engage in deviant behavior and are academically unmotivated. They resist behavior they see around them (fighting, talking in class) and shape their identities against this behavior. They actively construct their identities in opposition to this behavior by enacting “good student” identities in spite of

their generally poor performance in school. In many ways this perpetuates their being positioned between the model minority and problem minority paradigms.

*Age and lapses in education.* Bourdieu (1977) writes that learning is greatly influenced by timing, and that many styles of acting are more easily learned in childhood. Neophytes, or late learners, often feel impeded by their lack of rights and inside information to act in certain situations. They feel a sense of self-consciousness, which may never subside. For all students in this study, being older than their grade-level peers is a source of anxiety. They view their self and positional identities from the standpoint of their age and their academic standing relative to the majority of their American and immigrant peers.

Dah is 19 and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He noted, “I think everyone is smarter than me because they understand and I don’t ... because I am older and my brain doesn’t work as good, so I feel stuck.” He believes that he should act mature and focus more on his studies, but that he is negatively influenced by younger, less serious students who do not behave like good students in school. Dah also related that students do not believe that he is older than them:

When students ask me how old I am and I say 19, they’re like, “Are you serious, man?! You’re little!” I’m like, “it don’t matter man! [laughs].” I know other MTDs (Montagnards) who are the same as me. But I wish I was finished with school. I don’t know if I will pass or not. Classes are so hard.

The figured world of FHS (and most high schools) is founded on a set of standards which define normative student characteristics, such as age, literacy, and aptitude. Like the other students in this study, Dah realizes that as a SIFE student he does not meet these standards, and this negatively influences his school identity.

Moung, who is 19 and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, expressed similar feelings of hopelessness: “I feel like I don’t want to go to school anymore because I’m older than other people. But I don’t feel smarter than other people.” Tem, who is 19 and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade echoed Moung’s sentiments noting that she feels older, and that having a baby makes her want to stay home. “It’s so hard to leave my baby,” she said quietly. “But I go so I can learn for my baby.” She invests in learning because of her commitment to supporting her daughter in spite of feeling awkward in an environment where she is older than her peers.

Vit is 17 and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Unlike the other students, he regards being older than his peers a mark of prestige. “I was a bad kid in middle school. Then I started going to church and I changed. I am a good student and now I act older, smarter than other people.” Vit frequently commented on his more deviant past, how he joined a “kid gang” in his first years in the U.S. living in another city in North Carolina. When his family moved to Bankston, they joined a Montagnard church in which Vit became heavily involved, and which he believes encourages him to try hard in school. In addition, being older than his peers serves as a motivating factor to do well in school. He equates age and experience with maturity and drive. In essence, he connects his deviant past, and more academically serious present to an enterprising future.

Students position themselves and are positioned by others based on their age and lapses in education. Most students are stigmatized by chastisement from peers, fears of aging out of school, and generally low self-esteem based on their inability to grasp content material in many classes. The exception to this was Vit, who regards being older as an advantage. Perhaps some consolation is that these students are not alone in being older than their grade-level peers. Students find common bonds with other Montagnards

at FHS, many of whom share similar characteristics. In addition, whether or not they are aware of this, there are immigrant and American-born students at FHS who have also experienced lapses in education.

For most of these students age and interrupted education correlate with a belief that they are intellectually deficient in school. This intellectual deficiency is further complicated by external school practices and structures, such as teachers who overlook their needs, and graduation requirements they do not feel prepared to meet. As newcomers, they also struggle to learn and make sense of the rules of engagement and shared references of teachers and students. These students' school identities develop out of an internal sense of inferiority or superiority in relation to age and lapses in education, as well as their positioning by other students at FHS who in some cases believe they are younger than their true age.

***Mislabeling: “They call me Mexican, or Chinese”.*** Students inhabit a regional context which has seen tremendous growth in its Latino immigrant population, and through which many Americans frame the identities of non-Latino immigrants of color. When talking about their school identities, Vit, H’yin, Luis, Dah, and Mounng brought up instances of being ethnically or racially mislabeled by students and teachers at FHS. This influences the way they are positioned and position themselves at school.

Vit related that although he has a Hispanic friend, he resents being called “Mexican,” “because we are refugees. We came here like [Mexican immigrants] to find a better life. But we had to escape Vietnam, and we had to live in a refugee camp. So our life is different.” Dah explained, “Some people think [Montagnards] are in gangs and know how to do Kung Fu. They call me Chinese. I don’t say anything, but I want to tell

them I am Montagnard. Not Chinese, not Vietnamese.” Dah wishes to counter stereotypes and ethnic mislabeling, but is uncertain of how to do so. Other students, like Tem and Moun, want students at FHS to know about them but are unsure of how to transact their identities. Ms. Dodd, an ESL teacher, related an incident in her ESL class in which a Hispanic student shouted toward a Montagnard student, “Hey China – give me a pencil!!” She continued,

And the [Montagnard] student gave him the pencil. Whereas if you called my Salvadoran kid Mexican, he’d be like, “I’m not Mexican!” So [Montagnard students] don’t seem to know how to handle themselves in those kinds of situations. They don’t know how to stand up for themselves.

Ms. Dodd believes that Montagnard students’ are poorly equipped to confront negative stereotypes or mislabeling that occurs at FHS because of cultural difference and linguistic hindrances. As newcomers, they also struggle with learning codes of conduct more readily accessible to students who entered the U.S. school system as children.

The students define themselves through the lens of their Montagnard ethnicity and their unique experiences as refugees. They also position themselves against being called Mexican, or Chinese, or against problem minority stereotypes, such as belonging to a gang, or knowing how to do Kung Fu. They also resist deviant behavior they see in peers in ESL and mainstream classes, which contributes to their being viewed as “good kids” by their teachers. This positioning equally contributes to a view of themselves as “good kids” at FHS.

***Inter-ethnic relations.*** One morning in May, as I stood in a quiet corridor busily jotting down field notes, I was approached by Khuih, who was dressed in a traditional Montagnard black vest with a red, yellow and green woven print. He seemed focused

and anxious as he shared with me that he was on his way to his Senior Exit Project presentation on the story of his departure from Vietnam and resettlement in Bankston. He asked me to attend his presentation for moral support, to which I readily agreed. As Khuhi began his presentation in front of a panel of volunteer judges, he stated, “First of all, let me tell you, I am from Vietnam, but I am not Vietnamese.” This sentiment came up in numerous conversations with the students in this study as well as Montagnard community members. The students actively construct a Montagnard ethnic positional identity, against a thickened pan-Asian or Vietnamese immigrant identity, as well as mislabeled ethnic identities placed on them by American peers. Later, I asked Khuhi why he chose his graduation project topic. He commented,

I want to express myself in writing and in English, and I want people to know about Montagnards, who I am, and what my life [in Vietnam and in a refugee camp] was like. It’s easy to write about it because of my experience as a refugee.

For Khuhi, expression of a Montagnard identity has political connotations. As political/religious refugees from Vietnam, but not ethnic Vietnamese, many students actively seek to assert a Montagnard identity as a group who allied U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. “I want people to know that [Montagnards] are not Vietnamese even though we come from Vietnam, because some Americans are mad at the Vietnamese because of the Vietnam War,” he continued. Like other students in this study, he does not associate with Vietnamese students at FHS.

Gar is also researching and writing about Montagnard refugee resettlement in the U.S. for her Senior Exit project, “because it’s part of my culture. And I want to learn more about it,” she shared. Like Khuhi, Gar does not associate with Vietnamese students at FHS. “They took our land. All of the Vietnam[ese] people at Franklin are the same.



And they know how to take people's worlds. I don't talk to any of them, and I don't care about them." Both Khuhi and Gar related that their parents are instrumental in sending negative messages about the Vietnamese, and that they internalize these messages in their daily lives.

Students related that although they attend classes with some Vietnamese students, they have little or no contact with one another. Vit and Sieng shared that Vietnamese students have called them derogatory names, such as "stupid," and the equivalent of "hillbilly." Later conversations with Montagnard Catholic Social Services caseworkers, corroborated this point. Ethnic Vietnamese - Montagnard relationships can be amicable, though they are mostly characterized by avoidance.

H'yin, Sieng, Tem and Dah mentioned having friends who were from other Southeast Asian countries, such as Laos, Malaysia and Thailand, many of whom were also refugees. Tem commented, "I have some friends from Laos. They are like me. They are quiet in class and respect the teacher." Tem finds comfort and communion interacting with students who, like her, "act" like good students in school. Dah mentioned receiving help with his algebra homework from a Thai friend who has been in the U.S. longer than he, and who is not a SIFE student. "He came here from another school [in Bankston], and he didn't miss any school like me. So he is very smart," Dah shared.

Similarly, while all students expressed disdain for their treatment by the Vietnamese in Vietnam and in the U.S., no students mentioned harboring ill will toward the U.S. over their having abandoned Montagnard allies after the Vietnam War. Tem shared, "We are [in the U.S.] now, so we like America, and we need to be like

Americans. But we also can't forget our past in Vietnam.” Students in this study overlook the “subject-ification” of poor Southeast Asian refugees Ong (2003) has described, upon whom “knowledge and practices” are imposed in the process of becoming American. They find ways of transacting a unique ethnic identity in an institutional environment in which they are a small minority within and among other minorities.

*Assertion of a Montagnard ethnic identity.* There are roughly thirty Vietnamese Montagnard students at FHS – the highest number in the BPS system. Studies by Olsen (1997) and Valenzuela (1999) have shown that collective identities, or peer-group orientations influence students' experiences in and aspirations beyond school. In addition to exploring how Montagnard students understand their identities in relation to teachers and American students at FHS, in my research I was interested in understanding how the students respond to the existence of students with whom they shared a common ethnicity and experiences, and how this influenced their self, positional and thickened identities in school.

When I asked Dah about his relationships with other Montagnards at FHS, he related his surprise and excitement over seeing other Montagnard students on his first day of school: “I had friends right away. They helped me with my schedule and where to go, and told me who my teachers were.” Dah finds solidarity with other Montagnard students at FHS who provide valuable social capital for one another, and who he views as “good kids”. On the flip side, Gar and Vit commented that the existence of Montagnard students at FHS makes it harder for them to befriend American students. Gar noted, “We

talk in Montagnard and in Vietnamese and we don't learn English. So I want a few Montagnards at my school. Then I would learn more English."

Others also expressed a desire for more meaningful and sustained interaction with American students at FHS. MOUNG shared, "I am only friends with Montagnards. American people are nice, but they don't want to talk to me because of my English. But in ROTC they asked me to teach them my language! They said, 'how do you say, 'I want some money?' in your language?'" In my research, I observed several JROTC classes in which MOUNG, VIT, SIENG, TEM and other Montagnard students are enrolled. I saw them interacting more with American students in these classes because these classes are smaller than their other classes and are generally more structured around peer interaction and group exercises. MOUNG, VIT, SIENG and TEM also draw additional meaning from being part of JROTC because of family ties to the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, and desired careers in the military upon graduation. The students feel more at ease in JROTC because of its emphasis on drills and commands as opposed to mastering academic content. JROTC is a space in which the students draw upon their histories in person – their familial connections to the U.S. military, their limited schooling in Vietnam, a context in which students learn by rote memorization – as they transact their identities.

How do the students perceive of the reception of Montagnards at FHS? KHUIH lamented the fact that there is no afterschool club for Montagnards, in spite of FHS having the most Montagnards of any high school in BPS. "Latino students at FHS have a club, so why don't we?" he asked. I later probed the question with the ESL teachers who explained that some teachers had initiated a cross-cultural club a few years ago where

Montagnard and American students were asked to share aspects of their culture. Students lost interest, however, because they wanted more autonomy in the club. In short, they wished for more unstructured time with American students so that they could discuss topics they saw as more interesting, such as music, fashion, and movies.

In addition, although none of the students partook in school-sponsored after-school activities, several male students play in an informal Montagnard soccer team. Vit shared,

We cannot go to practice with American kids everyday because we don't have cars, and a lot of us have to work after school. So we started our own team – the MTDs. We practice two or three times a week in the practice field here at FHS. Sometimes we play against other Asian and Mexican teams in Bankston. Our coach is American, and he gives us rides home.

The soccer team provides a forum for communal activity, and affirmation of a Montagnard ethnic identity. Several male students in this study referred to themselves as MTDs, which is an abbreviated form of Montagnard. “It’s like a gang name, except we’re not a gang. We don’t do bad stuff,” Luis told me. Khuhih responded, “It’s cool.” And Dah shared, “It’s our name for ourselves.” These responses suggest an assertion of an ethnic identity and a simultaneous desire for status, or to fit into the culture they perceive at FHS. Other studies (Kibria, 1993; Stritikus & Nguyen, 2007) have illustrated that male immigrant students often feel a loss of status as they enter racialized institutional cultures, such as schools. By assuming a new name for themselves, the students attempt to assert an identity in a school context in which they are a small minority. Similarly, although the students and other Montagnard community members I spoke with told me that Montagnards prefer to be called ‘Montagnards,’ as opposed to

Degar, or by their tribal affiliations, Dah's response suggests that male Montagnard students at FHS have created an autonomous collective identity as MTDs.

Although individual responses differ, the students perceive benefits to the existence of Montagnard peers at FHS, who they view as similar to them: "good kids" but "poor students". They maintain and refashion a Montagnard identity in school through which they filter their interactions with peers and teachers. Montagnards are a silent minority who differ greatly from non-Montagnard students within the figured world of FHS. In some ways this strengthens their collective Montagnard identity, which in turn shapes the individual identities these students transact. However, although they are a small minority at FHS, their characteristics mirror those of many students at FHS, including their low academic achievement, and residence in transitional neighborhoods.

### **Perceptions of Language Proficiency**

In addition to positioning in relation to external racial and internal ethnic identities, academic performance, and age, language proficiency is a core mediating factor in terms of how the students view their self and positional identities at FHS, as well as their expectations and motivations in school.

**Learning English.** When I asked students about their primary motivation for attending school, they all related that they approached schooling with a dominant motivation: to learn English.

Tem related:

Because if you don't finish school you won't learn English. And if you don't learn English you can't find a good job. My mom wants me to know a lot of English because she wants me to translate for her.

Tem also shared that learning English will open doors for her infant daughter: “School will be easier for her because I can help her more [than my parents can help me].” Gar, who has been in the U.S. longer than Tem, emphasized improving her reading and writing skills, “so that I can do something smart with my life,” she shared. For her, “smart” means obtaining the skills and knowledge to enter into a stable, well-paying profession, which her parents cannot do. Khuih also related that he desired to learn more practical skills in addition to learning English in school, and that he wished that FHS provided more courses targeted toward the needs of newcomer ELLs. He also desired more grammar and vocabulary instruction, with which he believes he struggles with now.

In short, students in this study in part come to understand their identities as Montagnard refugees and their futures in their desires to learn English. They perceive that learning English opens doors to opportunities to construct new lives in the U.S., for themselves and their families. In an abstract sense, English provides needed social, linguistic and economic capital. At the same time, learning English occurs in a school context in which choices regarding their schooling are being made for them (Valdés, 2001), where they are marginalized, and in which they internalize, and sometimes resist negative or indifferent views toward them by their American teachers and peers, and they modulate their identities in response to these factors. In addition, the students’ perceptions of their language proficiency have much to do with the different contexts they frequent within the figured world of FHS.

### **Navigating Self in Mainstream and ESL Classes.**

I go to school to learn English, but I am afraid to use English in a lot of my classes. No one understands when I speak English, and I am afraid people will get mad if I ask questions when I don’t understand the teacher. (Moung, junior)

The Montagnard refugee ELLs view themselves as successful or unsuccessful in school (as “good” and “smart” or “bad” and “stupid”) based on how they are treated by their peers and teachers in ESL and mainstream classes. I wondered then, why and in what ways do they view themselves differently in different classes? And, how do they reconcile different ways of being and feeling within the walls of FHS?

***“I don’t understand, and I feel stupid.”*** The students generally view themselves as inferior in mainstream because of negative messages they receive from American peers. Gar commented that she is afraid to ask questions in her mainstream classes, “because other students get mad and I feel stupid.” Other students mentioned that their efforts to communicate with American peers in mainstream classes often resulted in misunderstanding or chastisement. Tem related, “Sometimes I try to speak to American students and they don’t know what I say. They say I’m speaking in Vietnamese or Chinese even when I’m speaking English, so I just stay quiet.” In spite of her attempts to communicate with her peers in English, she feels powerless and inferior in situations where efforts to connect with American students result in embarrassment. “This is why I am only friends with other Montagnard kids at FHS. They understand what I say because I can speak my language *and* English with them,” she concluded. Experiences such as this reinforce an ELL identity, in which students establish solidarity with those who share similar cultures, languages, and experiences in school.

However, MOUNG, DAH, and TEM mentioned in separate interviews a SIOP science class, (and a graduation requirement) in which they felt the teacher ignored their needs. Most students in the class were Montagnard and Hispanic ELLs, with the exception of three African-American students. During an observation, I noted that although the

teacher made some modifications to his teaching, such as providing notes and visuals on overheads, he stood at the front of the room for the majority of the class period and directed most of his attention to the American students. Ms. Mickelson, who frequently provides language support to students in the class, also commented,

[The teacher] understands that they are ESL students and that they have language issues, and he changes how he does the notes for the class. But what he has on the board doesn't always match the worksheet they have. And they get lost on what to study. And there's so much they need to know for the tests, even if it's less than what [non-SIOP] classes get, and even though it's modified.

In the case of this class, modifications made by the teacher were insufficient to engage students linguistically or academically. Rather than losing interest in the class, however, Moun, Dah, and Tem strongly desire to learn the subject matter. Paradoxically, although they worry that the teacher's lack of attention to their needs will result in their failing the course, they are also uncertain about how to express their concerns to him or to Ms. Mickelson.

Moun lamented, "American [students] understand everything. They're smarter than [Montagnards] because we don't speak English very well. It's hard because sometimes people don't understand me even when I speak English. They think I'm stupid." Gar echoed this sentiment noting, "Like if a teacher asks you a question and you don't know the answer, [other students] say 'you're so stupid!'" They say this all the time!" Khuih also shared that he is reserved in his mainstream classes, "because kids speak English fluent and I don't want to say something to embarrass myself. So I am quiet and the teachers just leave me alone." His lack of participation in these classes does not mean that he is not interested or does not understand the content. On the contrary, he believes that he grasps material more readily than his American peers. He continued, "I



listen more than other kids in my classes. I show the teacher that I want to learn even if I don't understand everything, and I think I learn more than other kids.” Khuih consciously projects a “good student” identity, even in situations where his comprehension is limited.

When Vit first arrived in the U.S. he equated English language proficiency with intelligence. Now, he explained, “smart means being interested in school and not cutting up in class. Asian students at FHS are smarter than American kids because they care more about school.” Vit no longer equates intelligence with English language proficiency. For him, intelligence is demonstrating a desire to learn in an environment where believes many of his classmates do not. Unlike other students, he acknowledges the thickened model minority stereotype, proclaiming that all Asian students, regardless of ethnicity and language background, are more academically oriented than American students. He basis this perception on his understanding of the figured world of FHS in which many students express little interest in doing well in school.

***ESL classes as liberating spaces.*** Most of the students view the ESL classroom as a liberating space at FHS, where teachers address their linguistic needs and affirm their shifting identities. Gar believes she is a “good student” in her ESL class where her teacher takes the time to help her and her peers. Her positive identity in her ESL class can thus be attributed to her identifying with other ELLs, and feeling comfortable in their presence, as well as the extra support and encouragement provided by her ESL teacher.

Dah is also more talkative in his ESL classes. He explained,

In ESL there are a lot of Montagnards, and I talk a lot. Sometimes I speak Vietnamese and Bnhar in ESL when I don't know the English word. I am more relaxed in my ESL class because it's just English and not other subjects too. The teacher lets me use my language when I need to.

When I shadowed Dah in his ESL class and a mainstream class, I observed similar behavior to what he described; where he was candid and at times a class clown in his ESL class, he was taciturn in his mainstream class. Dah desires to speak more English in school but believes American students do not want to speak with him because of his accent. He also desires more coursework that emphasizes English language learning, as opposed to mainstream courses in which teachers focus on delivering content and cannot always attend to the linguistic needs of ELLs.

In sum, students in this study generally feel intimidated by their low English language proficiency, accented English, and failure to grasp content material in their mainstream classes, as well as being older than their American peers. They assume different personae in their ESL classes, however, where they largely feel more welcomed by their teachers and peers. The ESL teachers at FHS also believe that Montagnard students assume different academic and social identities between their ESL and mainstream classes. Ms. Dodd shared:

In my class they open up more than in their other classes. I think they know more how to act because they are with other Montagnards. And we let them work together by language group – to help each other translate new words. So I think that helps.

Although Montagnard students may assume a positive identity in the ESL classroom, Mr. Dvorak noted that Montagnard students are often more challenged in culturally and linguistically diverse ESL and mainstream classes:

[Montagnard students] are not as aggressive as other students in some of my classes. Socializing is different when there's not a structured activity. Like the Latino kids – which is the other major ESL group – will have this intense social interaction, getting out of their seats, or talking loudly. The Montagnard kids

don't seem to know what to do with that time. They're kind of cowering and quiet and the other kids are way out there in terms of behavior. I feel sorry for them when they're not told what to do in their other classes.

Thus, although the students in this study regard the ESL classroom as a liberating space, Mr. Dvorak's comment paints a different picture. From his perspective, in some classes Montagnard students' comportment conflict with that of Latino ESL students owing to cultural differences and linguistic barriers, which translates into their being marginalized or ignored by their peers.

**Transnational Spaces.** ESL and mainstream classes are “transnational spaces” (Brittain, 2002) where students strategically meld English and their native languages as a means of conveying allegiance, sharing information, or subverting teachers and non-Montagnard students. Tem, Moun and Gar speak Rhade or Mnong to other Montagnard students who speak their languages when they do not want teachers and American or other ESL students to understand. Gar commented,

Usually I am embarrassed to speak my language (Mnong) around American people. They say, “Stop speaking Chinese! Ching chong!” But sometimes I speak with my friend in math class so we can talk about other kids, and they don't know what we're saying. Then I like speaking my language, and the teacher doesn't care.

For Gar native language use signals a positive identification with her Montagnard ethnicity and a coping mechanism in contexts where she is a minority.

Students also mentioned using their native languages in cases where they were called on to translate for Montagnard students who were less proficient in English. In one class I observed, the teacher asked Sieng to translate directions for a newcomer Montagnard student with more limited English language skills. I asked Sieng after class

what language he used with the student given that he and the student are not from the same tribe, and do not speak the same tribal language, and neither he nor the other student is proficient in Vietnamese. He related that he explained the directions in simple English, mixed with some Vietnamese words that both he and the other student knew. In this case, English and occasionally Vietnamese are common linguistic media between Montagnards from different tribes. Sieng explained that teachers commonly ask him to translate for newcomer Montagnards who assume that because both students are Montagnard they speak the same language. He looks positively upon being asked for help by his teachers, as he enjoys the sense of leadership and trust this conveys.

In summary, language proficiency is a mediating factor in how the students transact their identities in different contexts within FHS. In some cases, lack of English language proficiency contributes to a positional and thickened “poor student” identity in mainstream classes, where teachers and students perceive of these students as not belonging, or as linguistically, and therefore, academically and socially deficient. In other cases, native language use in mainstream and ESL classes is a coping mechanism that also fosters a strong ethnic affiliation with other Montagnard students. Perceptions of language proficiency are also central to how students’ filter what they perceive to be prohibitive school policies.

### **Desires to Graduate, Prohibitive Policies**

Graduation requirements, End of Course tests (EOCs), and that lack of advisement of ELLs by counseling staff at FHS frequently arose as points of contention in my conversations with the students and teachers in this study. In spite of their strong desires to graduate and their aspirations beyond school, they perceive of these structures

and policies as negatively influencing their performance, and subsequently their identities in school.

ELLs in U.S. schools face a dual task of learning English and academic content (Valdés, 2001). These tasks are even more difficult for ELLs at the high school level and particularly for students with little formal schooling (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). In spite of their assuming a generally positive social identity in ESL classes, the ESL teachers at FHS commented that Montagnard students struggle academically in these and mainstream classes. Ms. Dodd, who teaches an ESL 1 class for newcomer and SIFE students, shared,

I am concerned with the students who are low academically because they haven't had school in Vietnam, and with their reserved natures on top of that... They can't look up words in the dictionary, put things in alphabetical order... We have a few students who are like that. It must be so hard for them in their mainstream classes. I don't know how they do it.

Ms. Dodd and the other teachers noted that they emphasize building academic skills in addition to building overall oral and literacy skills. Ms. Mickelson teaches a level three ESL class, in which students are working on their Senior Exit projects, which students must complete in order to graduate. She commented that Montagnard students in her class struggle with basic grammar, including subject-verb agreements, verb tenses, and punctuation. She also believes that guidelines for completion of the Senior Exit project are unrealistic for ESL students:

Most Montagnards don't have formal writing experience. And even though I can make modifications to the length, I was told by the [Senior Exit project] coordinator that they still have to write five pages because of the rubric. They have to do the research and writing, and the research is challenging because they don't always understand what they're reading. And sometimes the deadlines aren't reasonable. I mean, nine weeks for researching and writing is not enough for an ESL student, especially SIFE students.

Valdés (2001) has researched how ESL students function in schools where unrealistic expectations are imposed on them, which overlook, for instance, the amount of time necessary for ELLs to develop academic literacy in English. Among the students in my study, Gar is uncertain of her ability to complete her Senior Exit project because of the amount of writing it entails, and Dah, Moun and Tem struggle with research they must conduct in order to complete their projects. Although students are enthusiastic about their projects, particularly those who have chosen projects that revolve around Montagnard culture and refugee experiences, they are hindered by expectations placed on them to complete the project. What is more, Tem, Moun, and Dah expressed fears over completing requirements for graduation before they turn 21.

Some students question the worth of certain graduation requirements in terms of their long-term goals. Vit related, “I don’t need science in my life, so I don’t know why I need to take it. I am getting a bad grade in the class, and I don’t like it.” Like other students, Vit believes that graduation requirements thwart his sense of success and opportunities beyond school. Others desire more coursework that addresses their academic and vocational interests. Gar, for instance, is interested in design and wishes FHS offered more than one course in this area. Dah, who is interested in pursuing a career in the medical field, wishes to retake a course in biomedicine which he has passed, but is prohibited from doing so.

Mr. Rose an ESL teacher, argued that students like those in this study need math classes in which basic concepts such as addition and subtraction are covered thoroughly, instead of higher-level courses mandated by the state for graduation, in which many ELL

students fall behind: “Students are lost in algebra. I have one student who took algebra three times and failed each time. You have to ask whether or not he will ever pass, and more importantly if he will get anything out of it,” he lamented. Mr. Rose continued that he and the other ESL teachers have taught SIOP classes geared for newcomer ELLs and SIFE students at FHS, but that the amount of preparation that this entailed on their behalf was prohibitive. He concluded, “These students need a math, history, or other teacher who can focus on their needs. I am an ESL teacher and I have to learn the material first before I can teach it to them. That’s too much when I already have my ESL classes to prepare for too.”

Mr. Dvorak argued that state-mandated EOC tests are detrimental to ELLs, and particularly to SIFE students:

Emphasis on EOCs doesn’t serve this group of students. They need a lot of life skills, to learn English in a pure, un-embedded kind of way, learn career skills. More of a practical education. Seeing them struggle through biology, history and all those other things. I’m not sure what they’re getting out of mainstream classes. And I know they don’t get anything out of the tests.

While the students realize that they have more opportunities in the U.S. than in Vietnam, in the abstract sense, and they believe that education and learning English is key to accessing opportunities, they are not always clear exactly what options are available to them upon graduation. As mentioned in Chapter 4, advisement provided to ELLs at FHS is limited, and focuses on graduation requirements as opposed to helping students engage in career exploration. Although school counselors cannot alter graduation requirements to meet the specific needs of all students, the students believe that counselors at FHS also do not adequately and consistently communicate these requirements to ELL students. Similarly, awareness of opportunity does not necessarily

correlate with academic achievement for this group of students. The ethnic and refugee identity transaction process does not match the academic performance expectations of the teachers and school.

### **Conclusion**

The themes presented in this chapter suggest that Montagnard refugee students' experiences as a marginalized ethnic minority group in Vietnam are a significant piece of their histories in person, and their positional and thickened identities at FHS, and these experiences are continuously mediated by their experiences across multiple sites within the figured world of FHS. School is also a liberating space for Montagnard students, which opens doors to aspects of life less available to them in Vietnam and in their communities in Bankston. By the same token, students often also feel threatened by school violence, and pigeonholed by teachers' and peers' responses to them, as well as their positions as ELLs at FHS..

Positioning by teachers and peers plays an important role in shaping how the students negotiate their identities in school. Similar to Lee's (1996) study of Asian American and immigrant youth in a New York City high school, Montagnard students' self and positional identities are tied to achievement in school. Students in this study believe that they are simultaneously "good kids" and "poor students" – they are respectful to teachers and attempt to complete their work, however they perform poorly in school. They fall somewhere between the model minority and problem minority stereotype continuum. Comments by peers and self perceptions regarding their age, race, ethnicity, and language proficiency negatively impact Montagnard students' sense of themselves and their strengths. Ogbu (1991) has argued, "[immigrant minorities]



rationalize prejudice and discrimination by saying as ‘guests’ in a foreign land they have no choice but to tolerate prejudice and discrimination” (p. 21). In spite of their frustration over feeling ignored by mainstream teachers, chastised, or misunderstood by their peers, students generally accept these things as a condition of their existence as refugees.

Espiritu (1992) has argued that racial minorities have always had ethnic labels imposed on them. The students in this study resent being called Vietnamese, Mexican or Chinese, and some are uncertain of how to verbally articulate their identities. In all cases, however, mislabeling is also a source of encouragement to stay in school regardless of academic performance – to transact a Montagnard identity apart from other students. Students counter stereotypes and mislabeling in unassuming ways by “acting older” than their American and Hispanic peers, by “acting like good students,” and by engaging in academic pursuits or extra-curricular activities that affirm their identities and that focus on Montagnard refugee experiences (e.g., Senior Exit Projects, JROTC, and MTD soccer). They value the existence of a Montagnard community at FHS, but desire greater institutional recognition in the form of after-school clubs, for instance. While they generally position themselves against ethnic Vietnamese students, some students ally themselves with immigrant and refugee students from other parts of Southeast Asia, with whom they share similar cultures or experiences, both in and out of school, and in the past and present. They reject a pan-Asian identity (Espiritu, 1992), however, and instead assert themselves as uniquely Montagnard.

As documented in research literature (Norton, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999), language learning is inherently tied to issues of power and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). Opportunities to speak and be heard are power-laden in contexts where ELLs are in a

minority. Students in this study continuously negotiate their status as ELLs at FHS in response to how other students position them. They believe, however, that acquiring native-like proficiency in English will endow them with greater legitimacy in the form of symbolic and material resources. English is a core ingredient in their self-authoring. They realize that learning English means acquiring linguistic knowledge, and that this process is dialogic. For these students, English, and opportunities, or desire to use it, exists “on the border between self and Other” (Vitanova, in Hall, et al., 2005, p. 163).

The students also construct identities differently in relation to different contexts. In ESL classes they perceive themselves as one kind of student: outgoing, funny, and confident; and in mainstream classes they are timid, and afraid of being mocked for their lack of English language proficiency. They also believe that the onus is on them to understand and be understood, and not on native English speaking teachers and peers to ensure that they understand. On the other hand, students also blame institutional structures, such as the lack of English language support in mainstream classes, and unrealistic graduation requirements, as well as the lack of classes geared toward their career interests, for their poor achievement in school.

The students, however, find different ways of responding to the challenges they encounter. Multiple scholars have explored the notion of resistance among students in school, particularly among low-income and minority students (Kohl, 1991; Lee, 2005; McLoed, 1995; Willis, 1977). Linguists have also suggested that code-switching is a form of resistance in second language learners (Lin, 1996). Students in my study intentionally rely on code-switching in situations where they are a language minority, and situations in which they lack access to vocabulary in English. In addition to being a

coping mechanism, and language learning strategy, I also suggest that code-switching is an identity tool for these students – a dialogic process in which they orchestrate their linguistic identities by forging together multiple voices (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986). In spite of their strong desire to learn English, the students continue to use their native languages with Montagnard peers, which reinforces community with other Montagnard students in ESL and mainstream classes. Code-switching allows them to bring multiple aspects of their histories-in-person (Holland et al., 1998) to their school identities, and enables them to cope in school. Finally, students share a similar desire to help Montagnards who have resettled in the U.S., including family members, as well as family members still in Vietnam, which reinforces a more localized understanding of their identities. Although the students' faith in their ability to realize their aspirations varied, for each, their aspirations serve to propel them through the unequal power relations at FHS and being positioned and thickened as “good kids” but “poor students.”

In the following chapter I present the more detailed portraits of three students: H'yin, Sieng, and Luis. I selected these students because of the richness of our interactions, which highlight how they are shaped by the figured world of FHS, their histories in person, and their positioning. These students' identity paradigms showcase divergent responses to schooling – both in terms of labeling and perception, but also in terms of challenges and opportunities inherent attending FHS.

context of Bankston, in spite of initial assistance from agencies such as the Catholic Social Services. Findings also counter common notions that low-income, minority parents are uninterested in their children's schooling. Indeed, the parents interviewed for this study place a high value on education, but defer to the judgment of teachers, guidance counselors who they deem as better qualified to help their children in school. Having received little or no education in Vietnam, and possessing only rudimentary knowledge of the U.S. educational system, and speaking little or no English presents additional barriers to parental involvement. Thus, parents are generally unaware of their child's progress or well-being in school, the general school climate, or opportunities beyond school. The tensions present in these figured worlds influence the self and positional identities of the students in this study, as illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6.

## **Chapter 6: Three Portraits**

This chapter focuses on the narratives of three students – H’yin, Sieng, and Luis – whose identity paradigms represent divergent responses to their lives in and beyond school. Including cross-cutting themes of all nine students loses the impact of individual words and experiences. Therefore, I present these individual narratives in order to highlight the perspectives of students in an un-embedded manner. In addition, unlike the students presented in Chapter 6, H’yin, Sieng and Luis view themselves differently – as a good kid and good student, as a good kid and poor student, and as an ambivalent kid and poor student respectively. Differences in how they perceive of their identities can be attributed to many things, including age, grade in school, and academic track. Other less measureable variables, such as personality, self-esteem, and motivation, also factor into the identities of these students. The themes encompass topics addressed in the previous chapters, but emphasize more explicitly what these students bring (in terms of their culture and experiences as refugees) to their identities at FHS, how they view and position themselves within FHS, what they want and need and are not getting at FHS, and how they draw on their identities to fashion their aspirations.

Following Portes and Rumbaut (1991), looking at the context of refugee students’ exit from their homelands and resettlement in the U.S. is vital to a more complete understanding of their adaptation in school. In addition, with a nod to the theoretical framework used in this study, the narratives in this chapter highlight the dialogic nature

of identity (Holland et al., 1998, Holland & Lave, 2001), which spans from past to present, and present to future. Presented in this way, the narratives follow a space-time trajectory and further shed light on how low-performing, low-income refugee students transact their identities in such a way that motivates them to remain in school.

Researchers have paid considerable attention to variation between minority group academic achievement (e.g., Ogbu, 1987) and adaptive outcomes of immigrants (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Far less research attention has been paid to variation within immigrant and refugee students of the same ethnic group who have lived in the U.S. for roughly the same amount of time. Therefore, an additional objective of this chapter is to challenge generic understandings of refugee youth adaptation, and to illustrate how students who share similar characteristics, histories, cultures, and living circumstances enact unique and multifaceted identities in school. Table 7 illustrates how their narratives connect with the research questions.

The three students view themselves differently in school. H'yin views herself and believes she is viewed by her teachers and peers as “innocent,” and “smart.” She is also hopeful for her future. Sieng’s identity paradigm embodies someone who is a “good kid,” who is “not smart enough,” but is optimistic about his future. Finally, Luis is a “poor student” who is uninterested in school, and ambivalent about his future. Each narrative highlights the complex nature of identity negotiation among these newcomer refugee students, and illustrates how some students respond differently to the local context of school.

Table 7

*Findings in relation to research sub-questions (H'yin, Sieng, Luis)*

<b>Students</b>	<b>Experiences and Aspirations</b>	<b>Positioning by teachers and peers</b>	<b>Perception of language proficiency</b>	<b>Coursework &amp; graduation requirements</b>
H'yin	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desire be first in family to graduate  Desire to become a doctor serve Montagnard community in U.S.	“My teachers always say that I am nice, hard working and...innocent!”	“I took ESL 1,2,3,4, but I don’t really understand it.”	Desires more advisement regarding opportunities upon graduation
Sieng	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desires a career in the military	“I’m not smart. But if American kids are born here, they are smart.”  “I am Montagnard not Vietnamese!”	Struggles with academic English	Desires modifications on assignments and fewer graduation requirements.
Luis	Limited schooling in Vietnam  Desires to return to Vietnam, but is uncertain of what he would do while there	“If I ask questions I still won’t get it...and people will think I’m stupid.”  “I feel bad because I am supposed to be in 11 <sup>th</sup> grade.”	Desires additional ESL courses.	“I don’t like anything about school. Just to learn English.”

## **H'yin**

H'yin is a 19 year old senior at FHS. She is Jarai, and from a small village in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. She came to the U.S. and to Bankston in 2003 with her parents, older brother and three younger sisters after having spent five months in a refugee camp outside of Phnom Pehn, Cambodia. Like most students in this study, H'yin understood the reasons for her family's departure from Vietnam. However, she enjoyed school in Vietnam and was reluctant to leave for fear of missing school.

In addition to brief conversations at FHS, I frequently met H'yin at her home, a Habitat for Humanity house located off of a busy highway, and in a transitional neighborhood in Bankston. Vietnamese music often played in the background, and walls of the living room held pictures of family members in Vietnam, and a traditional Montagnard long house. Of all of the students in this study, H'yin presented the most elaborate and fluid portrait of her life in Vietnam and resettlement in Bankston. Her identity paradigm illustrates a strong commitment to wedding aspects of her Montagnard culture with a desire to "make it" in the U.S. For her "making it" means serving her Montagnard community in Bankston.

### **H'yin's Experiences and Aspirations**

Memories of life in Vietnam were prevalent in our conversations. H'yin's parents were farmers and sold fruits and vegetables in rural Vietnam and Cambodia until strict regulations imposed by the Vietnamese government prevented them from freely crossing into Cambodia. H'yin's family was also "very religious" and led a bible study group in their home and at a modest church in their village. H'yin related that she had a "very



happy childhood, playing and going to school.” Indeed, the majority of our conversations about her life in Vietnam centered around memories of school. H’yin attended a school in rural Vietnam from first to fourth grade, and dropped out when she was told that Montagnards could only attend school up to fourth grade. She remembers being teased by a few Vietnamese classmates, who called her “dumb” and “poor.” In spite of being taunted, she related:

I really liked school...I am not smart...I imagined a lot things, but I am not smart. I dreamed I wanted to be a singer, and my sister said I needed to school and graduate to be a singer. I was so focused on my work that I didn’t even notice when father [fled] to Cambodia! [laughing]

H’yin has fond memories of Vietnam, in spite of her minority status and persecution of family members by the Vietnamese government. “I was a happy kid! I just dreamed a lot and made things happy for myself!,” she told me emphatically.

**Exit from Vietnam.** H’yin and her mother, older brother, and two younger siblings fled Vietnam in 2002 and hid in the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia for six months until they reached a refugee camp outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodia with the help of a Cambodian friend and American missionaries. H’yin’s father left Vietnam for Cambodia in the months prior to H’yin’s departure when protests over land rights erupted and he was targeted by the Vietnamese government for being a Christian missionary. As a teenager during the Vietnam War, her father had been apprehended and tortured by the Vietnamese government because of his cooperation with the U.S. military. H’yin related that her father is reluctant to share his memories with her:

I ask him a lot but he didn’t really want to talk about it. I write down everything in my journal. I like to ask my parents about stories, but sometimes they make me cry. My mom and dad have really bad memories that happened to them. For me it’s only a little bit. I can’t compare to them.

H'yin reflects on real or perceived images of her parents' experiences in Vietnam as she considers her opportunities in the U.S.

H'yin's family spent five months in the refugee camp, where she learned rudimentary English and received U.S. cultural orientation sessions. She related that she was excited to learn English and snuck into classes for women and men at the camp. Life at the refugee camp was simple, but difficult. Families lived in a small room in a large concrete building occupied by hundreds of other refugee families. Eventually UN resettlement officials granted her family refugee status, which included resettlement in Bankston. H'yin recalled feeling excited at the prospect of relocating to the U.S. and to Bankston, even though she did not know anything about America: "I thought it was a place in the sky... like heaven! [laugh]!" Departure from Vietnam was marked by anticipation and hope.

**Resettlement in Bankston.** H'yin was thirteen years old when she and her family arrived in Bankston. The Catholic Social Services Refugee Resettlement Office immediately provided her family with low-rent housing, cultural orientation and ESL classes. H'yin was placed in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at a middle school near to where she lived. She recalled feeling disoriented during her first year in school, given her limited English proficiency and prior schooling experiences:

I didn't know anything. And in Vietnam they didn't teach much. In school when I came to America and they taught me that map of the world, and I saw all the world. In Vietnam they just teach about Vietnam and Vietnamese. That's why when I came here I thought there was only one country – Vietnam!

She disliked school initially because other students made fun of her accented English and the way she dressed. Her attitude toward school changed, however, as she learned more English and began to dress like her American peers: “Now I like school because it’s my childhood dream to graduate from high school wearing that cap and gown and walking across the stage. And because in my family, no one has graduated from any school. So I try to be the first one to graduate,” she shared. H’yin embodies immigrant optimism (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) shared by other students in this study, as well as a strong motivation to succeed in school, and perhaps more importantly, to honor her family.

**Aspirations.** H’yin engages in dialogue with her past experiences in Vietnam as she imagines her future in Bankston. To explain the kind of person she hopes to become, she described Ben Carson, an African-American neurosurgeon who H’yin had seen a documentary about. Ben Carson experienced difficulty early in school, but excelled later on with the prodding of his single mother. She related, “He went to school everyday and read books and he didn’t go out everyday, like a hardworking person,” H’yin related. “He was curious about everything, just like me. He went to Yale University – that’s smart! And now he’s a famous doctor who helps people.”

H’yin related that she had once dreamed of returning to Vietnam to practice medicine in her Jarai community, where access to medical care is limited or non-existent. After hearing of the dangers of returning to Vietnam as a refugee from family and community members of, she has since decided to stay in the U.S. and in Bankston to help the Montagnard refugee community here. She hopes to send money to Vietnam and Cambodia when she becomes a doctor. In concluding our conversation about future

dreams, she explained, “A lot of [American and Montagnard] kids just want to drop out of school and get a job. Me, I just want to learn so I can help people in life.”

### **How H’yin Views Her Identity at FHS**

H’yin spoke at length about being a student at FHS, how students and peers positioned her, and how she positioned herself within this matrix. She believes that different teachers position her in different ways. In spite of having arrived in the U.S. as an adolescent, she related, “Some teachers treat me like I was born here, like I speak English normally.” Like other students, she feels ignored in some classes where teachers focus on students with behavioral problems, or speak to students whose culture and native language they share. Other teachers set H’yin apart from other students in class. She explained:

My teachers always say I am nice, hard working, and ... innocent! I have math class, and my teacher is a White guy, and he always says that I am the only hardworking student in the class. I am the only Asian student in the class, and everyone else is Black or Mexican. I have a Black friend in the class who keeps on trying to get me in trouble. He says that I am trying to cheat in the class a lot. And the teacher says, “Why are you lying about your friend. She is a sweet, innocent Asian girl!” The teacher compares me to other students. He has our name on the board, like number 1, 2, 3. And last semester I was number one, then I went to number two when the class got harder for me.

When I asked her about other students at FHS, H’yin shared, “I see a lot of students who don’t care about school. They talk about what they do after school and they talk a lot in class. I don’t really like talking in class.” Although H’yin is concerned with doing well in school and fashions her school identity against what she perceives as her apathetic American peers, she is also reluctant to be positioned as a model minority above other students in class.

Like Khuhi and Gar, H'yin feels strongly about her Montagnard identity, but is uncertain of how that identity will be received by her peers and teachers. She shared,

Sometimes I wished they know about me, but sometimes I don't. Because I don't trust some people because some American people don't like Vietnamese people because of the Vietnam War. They're still mad about the war. Some Americans know about Montagnards and they don't like us. I read it on YouTube that the Americans left Montagnards to defend themselves after the war. And this person came on and said, "American people have problems too! Why help the Montagnards!" And I'm scared by these kind of comments.

Although H'yin possesses a firm sense of her culture and history, she is also hesitant to articulate a Montagnard refugee identity for fear of further marginalization by her American peers. Similarly, although she has little contact with them in school, she is reluctant to establish relationships with first and second-generation Vietnamese students at FHS, relating, "Some Vietnamese people don't like Montagnard people. I am afraid that they will be mean to me if they know I am Montagnard." H'yin purposefully distances herself from Vietnamese students for personal and political reasons.

At the same time, most of H'yin's friends at FHS are Montagnards who, like her, arrived in Bankston in the early 2000s. She appreciates the existence of other Montagnards at FHS because, she related, "without other Montagnards I would be kind of lonely." However, she argued that some Montagnards who have lived in the U.S. longer "forget that they are Montagnard." She continued, "There are some Montagnards – even if they are boyfriend and girlfriend, go kissing each other – like American people. It's kind of embarrassing to me because I am Montagnard too, but I don't do that." H'yin is close with a Hmong refugee student at FHS whose family came to Bankston in 2003. She noted, "She and me are the same. We don't play around in class, and we like telling each other about our cultures."

Like other students in this study, ethnic mislabeling is a source of contention for H'yin. When I asked how she thinks American peers would describe her, she related:

Kids at school think I'm Chinese. They keep saying to me, Chinese, Chinese girl. They asked me today are you Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean...? And I said I'm one of those, but not really... And this guy said, "What! You're from Vietnam, but you're not Vietnamese? That's weird!" And my teacher said, I know, there's a lot of tribes in Vietnam.

In this case, the teacher expressed awareness of ethnic diversity in Vietnam. However, other teachers also often mislabel H'yin, which is a source of frustration for her:

Some teachers call me Chinese and say, "Oh, your name sounds Chinese." And some other students in the class said that because I'm Asian I like Chinese food. And then the teacher asked, raise your hand if you like Chinese food," and the class stared at me when I didn't raise my hand. I didn't say anything, but I felt stupid. And sometimes people think I am from Mexico. Like last week this teacher came up to me and talked to me in Spanish during career day.

In other cases, H'yin has resented being singled out in classes in which she is the only Montagnard and refugee. She related an instance where she was asked by her history teacher to share her experiences of coming to Bankston:

In one class – world history – the teacher likes to listen to everyone's problems. So he asked me in front of the class, "Where are you from? How did you get here?" I said, "refugee...airplane". And then he told me to stand up in front of the class and asked me to talk about how I got here. I was so nervous. He said, "go on, go on," and the students said, "Stop forcing her! She's starting to cry!" I was crying because of all the sad stuff that happened. The teacher just wanted me to go on.

The teacher's desire for H'yin to share her story was perhaps an attempt at creating an inclusive classroom. However, she did not want to share stories of her traumatic exodus from Vietnam with her classmates, in spite of feeling as she should obey her teacher.

In a different class, H'yin was asked by her teacher to share an autobiographical essay. She wrote,

I'm a Montagnard girl, the first person to graduate from high school, and I feel safe in America now... because I said I feel safer in school here [than in Vietnam]. And the kids said "aw, high five!" The students in the class treat me like a little kid now. The students are really crazy in that class.

She believes that other students think she is strange, "a 'mystery' because I always do my homework and they don't. I like homework – it helps me to practice more, and I want to get good grades and graduate." H'yin also related feeling alienated in school because she is older than her peers:

I am nineteen, they keep thinking I'm a freshman or sophomore. They don't think I'm a senior! They look at my face and my height and they say I look like a kid! They say, when I took my cap and gown this girl said, "Wow, you're a senior!" They think I got a kid's face. A lot of my classmates say I'm too young [to graduate]. But I'm scared too! Because they say, "Ooo, you're old – you're in this class!" Some people say that, because there are freshman and sophomore in some of the classes I take.

H'yin feels older than other students at FHS because she is committed to her studies, and desires a meaningful future. She nonetheless questions whether FHS has done enough to meet her academic needs.

### **What H'yin Wants and Needs**

H'yin believes that she has many more opportunities in the U.S. than in Vietnam, and that graduating from high school is key to attaining her desired future. However, she continues to be challenged by her lack of English language proficiency, and content area subjects that thwart her sense of success in and beyond school.

Like other students in this study, speaking in class is a source of anxiety for H'yin. She related,

I don't talk in class. Even when the teacher asks me questions, I just give a short answer. Because it's easier, and I don't have to talk a lot. I'm afraid that my grammar is not correct, and I don't like to talk to people a lot in English. I want to be like other students too, like talk in class and have fun too. But I'm scared to

talk, like people will laugh when I make mistakes. And they don't understand my accent.

She has passed out of ESL and is now in English Language Arts (ELA) classes with American peers, but believes she would have benefited from more direct grammar and vocabulary instruction she received in her ESL classes. She noted, "Normal class (mainstream) teachers should ask me first if I know words and then they could explain them to me and give me smaller words." H'yin also believes that lapses in education equally impact the degree to which she has learned English. She continued,

I took ESL 1,2,3,4, but I don't really understand it. You know the stories are really different from mine. You know... William Shakespeare, and Nathaniel Hawthorn. But my teacher is really good. She asks me if I understand, and she explains words I don't know.

In this case, the teacher in H'yin's ELA class is aware of her continued linguistic challenges and attempts to provide adequate instructional modifications to meet her needs.

On the whole, H'yin desires more attention to the fact that she continues to struggle with academic English in spite of having passed out of ESL classes. On the other hand, she resents being infantilized by teachers and peers. Instead, she wishes teachers would treat her as a serious student, and not position her as "innocent," and a "model" for other American and immigrant students at FHS to aspire to. She also wishes more students at FHS took school seriously. Finally, she wishes teachers at FHS would provide advice to students regarding life choices, and opportunities beyond school. "I wish teachers would talk to me about college, like how they got to be where they are in life, how to apply for college, and that stuff," she shared. H'yin has received some



information about college from a Catholic Social Services school-family liaison, and at a church youth group to which H'yin belongs.

Like the other students, H'yin draws on aspects of her history in person as she considers her identity at FHS. In particular, she reflects on her father's imprisonment in Vietnam, as well as her family's flight to a refugee camp in Cambodia as she considers her opportunities in the U.S. Unlike the other students, however, she enjoyed school in Vietnam and continues to possess a strong intellectual curiosity and drive to do well at FHS. In addition, H'yin views her academic abilities in a positive light relative to other students within the figured world of FHS. From this one might wonder how she might view herself if she were a student in a higher performing school.

### **Sieng**

Sieng is 17 years old and a sophomore at FHS. He is Mnong. He came to the U.S. in 2002 with his parents, older sister, and two younger siblings. Sieng and his family fled Vietnam to Cambodia earlier that year where they spent one month in a jungle, followed by one year in a refugee camp. He related that he did not understand at the time why his family needed to leave Vietnam. After a pause, he continued, "I guess we tried to follow the good way [in Vietnam], but they didn't want us. So we came here to follow the good way." For Sieng, the "good way" means leading a Christian life, being a good student, getting a well-paying job, and helping his family.

Sieng's identity paradigm draws on seemingly uncomplimentary forces: poor academic performance, a strong desire to graduate from FHS, and a dream of pursuing a military career so that he can return to Vietnam to help his family members there. From this, he finds meaning in certain opportunities available to him at school, such as being a

student in an ESL class, talking about his culture to his peers, and being a member of JROTC.

### **Sieng's Experiences and Aspirations**

Sieng grew up in a small village. His parents were farmers until the Vietnamese government cut down trees so that Montagnards could not cultivate their land. "There was nothing to do or eat, so we [had to] leave," Sieng's father told me. In Vietnam, Sieng's father was also persecuted for being Christian, and had friends who were either jailed or killed. His father related that he would like to return to Vietnam, but fears that he will be arrested if he does because he protested against the Vietnamese government who took Montagnard lands and destroyed Montagnard churches.

Sieng's school attendance while in Vietnam was sporadic because schools were open intermittently. All of his classmates were Montagnard and his teachers were Vietnamese. He related, "The Vietnamese teachers came to teach us, but the Vietnamese people live very far from us. That's why they came to teach us for three or four weeks [at a time]." Sieng believed his Vietnamese teachers treated students poorly because they were Montagnard. "They hit us, and yelled at us when we didn't know the right answer," he shared. He had math and Vietnamese classes, "but I didn't get it, because when I was a little kid I was playing around. I went fishing a lot and helped my parents." As a child, Sieng did not see value in learning academic subjects. He stated, "There were no Montagnard doctors or teachers or lawyers in my town. Everyone was a farmer, and sold things at a market. Or stayed around the house. So I didn't know that school was important for something else. I didn't care about it." He did not attend school while in the refugee camp.

**Resettlement in Bankston.** Sieng related feeling scared upon arriving in the U.S. because he had “never seen American people before, and I didn’t understand what they said,” he shared. He was placed in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when he arrived in Bankston, but was moved to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade within two weeks because of the age difference between him and his classmates. He stated:

It was difficult. I didn’t speak any English. I was wearing a weird book bag and all the people were looking at me funny. After that someone gave me a new book bag, paper, pencils, because we didn’t have anything. People helped us because we didn’t have anything.

Sieng quickly became accustomed to school practices, and learned English from his ESL classes and classmates. He began to enjoy going to school, even though he did not do well academically. “I like school now. I have friends, and I am in ROTC. I like to learn things, and I like ROTC,” he shared.

**Aspirations.** For Sieng, JROTC is a route to graduation and a career in the Marines. JROTC provides counseling for students who may be otherwise unaware of the benefit of certain academic choice and career paths. This excerpt from field notes taken during a JROTC class illustrates this point:

After a discussion on world geography Major Williams tells the class that one benefit of joining the military is that you get to travel. He talks about his time in Vietnam as an 18 year old in the Army, where he learned a little Vietnamese. Tells class that they should take a foreign language if they want to go to college. And it’s good for the military too.

Sieng and other students benefit from social capital and general academic advisement provided through JROTC. Sieng also believes JROTC students are respected by their peers and teachers at FHS. For instance, he enjoys wearing his JROTC uniform at school because he believes it gives him respect from his classmates and stresses community

among JROTC members. During the time of this research Sieng was also selected to attend a summer leadership academy to be held in a neighboring state. Thus, JROTC instills in him motivation and a sense of belonging in school. In addition, for Sieng joining the Marines is an opportunity to support his family financially, and to return to Vietnam “to beat the Viet Cong,” and help his family gain back the land that was taken from them by the Vietnamese government. I also contend that the culture embodied by JROTC – of discipline and respect for elders, and teamwork – on some levels mirrors that of Montagnard values, in Vietnam and in his home and community in the U.S. Through JROTC Sieng dialogs with his past in Vietnam, and with legacies of family members who fought in the Vietnam War. In JROTC he shapes what he hopes will be his future in Vietnam.

### **How Sieng Views His Identity at FHS**

Sieng believes that teachers find him quiet and cooperative, and give him passing grades because he works hard and tries to do well. He does not believe he is ready to go on to the next level in some classes, however. In a conversation with Sieng’s algebra teacher, I asked about his progress in a class I had observed. “Sieng is a really good kid,” the teacher related, “and he tries really hard. But he just doesn’t get it. He seems like he understands the language, but he doesn’t get the content.” His teacher is doubtful that he will pass the class.

Sieng views himself as a poor student, which he blames on his infrequent attendance in school in Vietnam. He compares Montagnard students with American students:

How they feel is different from how American people feel. And American kids are smarter than me. In Vietnam I didn’t even go to school, and that’s why I’m

not smart. But if American kids are born here, they are smart, maybe their parents are smart and they be smart too. I don't think I'm smart.

He continued,

Some American kids want to go to college, maybe be a doctor, be a businessman, or a boss. Montagnard kids want to work at TJ Maxx. Maybe they want to do construction. They're not smart enough...that's what they think in their mind because they didn't go to school in Vietnam.

Like many students in this study, Sieng doubts his ability to succeed academically because of his interrupted schooling. Nonetheless, although Sieng is aware of his struggles, he appears emotionally unaffected by his setbacks.

Sieng holds a positive self-identity, and is confident with his Montagnard identity and willing to share it with his classmates. Unlike H'yn and some other students in this study, who consciously conceal their ethnic identity, Sieng tells other students that he is Montagnard, and not Vietnamese. Sieng also spoke of being ethnically mislabeled in school. "I am *Montagnard*, not Vietnamese. But people call me Spanish. Some kids once asked me to say something in Spanish. And Mexican students think I'm Chinese." I observed Sieng in many of his content and ESL classes. During a JROTC class, Major Williams asked students for their perspectives on illegal immigration from Mexico. Going around the room, Major Williams eventually asked Sieng for his opinion. His response is captured in the following dialogue with another student:

Sieng: It's just like in my country. People need jobs and have no money so we came here.

African American male (AAM) asks Sieng where he's from and others in the class start laughing.

Sieng: "I am Montagnard. From Vietnam."

AAM: "Monta-who?!"

Sieng: “I’m from Vietnam, man.”

AAM: “Oh, I thought you were Mexican!” [Class jeers and laughs]

Sieng: “No, I am a refugee from Vietnam, but I am Montagnard.”

Sieng resisted mislabeling by one of his peers, and instead, used this opportunity to inform his classmate of his origins. In a later conversation, he also compared himself positively relative to his classmates at FHS, noting “they speak one language, and I speak four. I am a refugee and they are not.” Being a refugee is a strong part of his self-identity. He shared,

We had a hard time in Vietnam, so we had to leave. We didn’t have no choice because we had no food, and no land. And [the Vietnamese government] wanted my dad. So we came here. I want people to know about my life in Vietnam so they can know me and know why I am here – why I go to school. And so I can help other refugees too. I think many people don’t know who I am, and I want them to know.

For Sieng, being a refugee instills a sense of pride, a sense of what he and his family have overcome in coming to the U.S., and a sense of what he desires for the future.

Sieng is in his second year in the JROTC program, and he first learned of the program from a Thai friend who encouraged him to join. Sieng had long been interested in the military because of his grandfather’s and uncle’s involvement with U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. I observed Sieng in his JROTC classes on numerous occasions, and include below an excerpt from field notes taken during one of my observations, which I feel encompass Sieng’s self and positional identity in this class:

There are fourteen students in the class, and Sieng is the only Montagnard. Nine of the students are African American, and three are White. There are ten males and three females. The class begins with students in drill formation doing various exercises. Students stand in formation for announcements. Announcements consist of a lot of gossip about what other students are doing. Students are laughing and joking with Major Williams. Sieng does not laugh and joke with the other students, and remains quiet and attentive to directions.

After class I asked Sieng what he felt about the students talking in class, to which he replied, “I don’t know what they talk about. And I don’t like when they talk because I can’t hear what the teacher says. Anyway, you’re not supposed to talk when the teacher talks!” Sieng’s school identity differs from that of his peers, and he is often frustrated by what he perceives as lack of discipline and respect in the class. He believes he has many opportunities in the U.S. in spite of his interrupted schooling, and that education – regardless of performance or achievement – is a key to future opportunities.

### **What Sieng Wants and Needs**

Sieng shared that his central motive for staying in school is to remain in his ESL and JROTC classes. He has been placed in ESL classes since he began school in the U.S. During the course of my research he was in a newcomer level 1 ESL class. Besides Sieng, all students in this class are recent arrivals to the U.S., and most are Montagnard students who are designated as SIFE. In classes I observed, students worked on vocabulary acquisition, basic sentence structure and reading comprehension, as well as academic skills, such as looking up words in a dictionary. Most students were illiterate, or had low literacy skills in their native languages. Ms. Dodd, the ESL teacher, also believed that some of the students in the class had learning or behavioral issues, because of their inability to concentrate on tasks, or generally disruptive behavior.

Sieng believes he does not struggle with English. Ms. Dodd feels differently, however, noting that although he is orally proficient in English, he continues to struggle with written grammar and syntax. She related that during the previous school year, Sieng had been placed in a Learning Disabled English class because of his difficulties with reading and writing, but that the ESL teachers had petitioned to keep him in a newcomer ESL class because they believed that he would benefit from being around other ESL students and from the instruction they could provide.

Like other students in this study, Sieng finds it hard to go between his ESL and mainstream classes. Mainstream classes are more challenging in content, and he feels less at ease because he struggles to grasp content. Although he does not relate his low literacy skills to his academic struggles, he values his ESL class over content classes “because I understand Ms. Dodd, and she helps me.” ESL class is a safe space where Sieng feels at ease because of his overall comprehension of material. He also sees a connection between learning English and future possibilities. However, he desires more help from content-area teachers, including modifications on assignments, as well as fewer graduation requirements, which he believes do not align with his career interests.

As a “poor student” Sieng believes he fits in with figured world of FHS. However, he realizes that his limited English proficiency and lapses in education are a barrier that most students at FHS do not have to overcome. For Sieng, JROTC is a link between his roots in Vietnam and his present life in the U.S. as well as future opportunities in Vietnam.

## **Luis**



Luis is Mnong and from a small village in Western Vietnam. He is 18 years old and in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. When we first met, however, Luis was uncertain of his actual grade level given that he had failed Algebra 1 (a 9<sup>th</sup> grade requirement) and 10<sup>th</sup> grade science. Luis's ESL teacher, Ms. Mickelson, suggested I speak with him because in her eyes, he exemplified a Montagnard student who shared many of the same characteristics of other students in this study, but showed little engagement in school. Ms. Mickelson believed that Luis might benefit (emotionally and academically) from talking about his life to someone unconnected professionally to FHS. Indeed, through the course of our conversations, though eager to talk with me, Luis seemed preoccupied and melancholic, unoptimistic about his possibilities in and beyond school. His bangs covered his eyes as we spoke, and he wore dark clothing and mainly kept to himself in the ESL and content area classes I observed him in. In essence, he embodies an oppositional identity (Ogbu, 1991) by showing disinterest in school, and by displaying ambivalence toward his Montagnard refugee experiences. His narrative illustrates an identity formed out of past and continual challenges in his home and school lives, and a struggle to fit in and “get by” academically at FHS, while also fashioning his own identity and albeit uncertain future.

### **Luis's Experiences and Aspirations**

Luis attended first grade in Vietnam, where he remembers learning “letters and numbers.” He did not enjoy school because teachers were strict and hit students with a ruler if they misbehaved, or did not complete their homework. He does not remember direct racism toward Montagnard students, however. He left school after the first grade to help his parents on their farm. Luis's memories of an idyllic childhood colored many

of our conversations. His family lived outside of a village “in a small house near a river and in the forest,” he shared. Luis was close to his family, including those who still live in Vietnam: “My uncle took me fishing a lot. We were all day by the river catching food, and that’s all. I didn’t have to worry about anything. Life was easy for me there.” Luis’s uncle became a surrogate father when his father fled Vietnam after having been imprisoned and beaten when he went to Cambodia without authorization. “Sometimes I talk to [my uncle] on the phone, and he still thinks I am a little boy! He can’t believe that I am in school and taking care of my family!” Like other students in this study, Luis frames his experiences of resettlement in Bankston drawing on his life in Vietnam.

**Exit from Vietnam.** Luis and his mother and older siblings came to the U.S. and to Bankston in 2003 to reunite with their father, who had arrived in 2001. Luis did not spend time in a refugee camp. When I asked him if he likes living in the U.S. he said “no, but I had no choice.” Luis remains ambivalent about his current life in Bankston and does not embody optimism toward his current circumstances. Ms. Dodd, an ESL teacher, told me later that Luis’s father suffers from emotional and mental trauma because he was beaten in jail in Vietnam, and his mother is on kidney dialysis. His parents cannot work, and although an American church in Bankston has tried to help, his mother is mistrustful of outsiders. Luis and his older sister support the family financially, and Luis works thirty hours per week as a dishwasher at an airport restaurant.

**Resettlement in Bankston.** Luis was placed in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when he came to Bankston. He shared his memories of his first day of school:

I was so nervous, and couldn’t speak to anyone. I didn’t know anything. I couldn’t say hello, or anything. I was the only Montagnard at my school. There was a Vietnamese boy but I don’t speak Vietnamese, but I tried. He was OK to me. I had ESL class. Someone helped me. I got a certificate for doing good in

class, but I didn't know anything – how to speak and how to do my work. Everything I didn't know, they wrote it down for me. And they did my work for me, so I didn't keep it. It's not fair so it's not important to me.

Although teachers and classmates attempted to assist Luis during his transition to school, Luis did not appreciate having people do work for him, or taking pity on him. He did not like being singled out from his peers.

Luis has struggled both socially and academically while at FHS. His favorite classes are ESL and weightlifting, “because I can do what I want to do – learn English, and play sports.” He is taking algebra for the second time, but continues to struggle with grasping the content. He did not attend school last year and has missed a lot of school this year because he has frequently stayed home to help his parents. A guidance counselor recently told him that he would be kicked out of school if he misses too much school this year.

**Aspirations.** When I first began speaking with Luis he was reluctant to share his future aspirations. “I can't do anything. I don't know English, and I'm not smart,” he related. After a few meetings, Luis began to open up about his dreams, relating that he wants become a policeman, or work in the FBI, “because they do good things in my neighborhood, and I watch a lot of police movies.” He is hesitant to rely too much on this dream, however, because his friends do not like policemen, and he is not sure he “[is] smart enough” to enter the police academy. I ask him why, and he says that he is not sure of his odds of finishing high school before he turns 21.

During a later conversation, Luis related that he would like to return to Vietnam to live in the countryside, because he misses his family and dislikes being around the “loud people” he encounters at FHS and in his neighborhood. He continued,

I want to live along in the jungle. Where there's not a lot of people. I would farm. When I was there it was pretty good because we had a big river. The river is dirty here in America. Our river was in the jungle. I went fishing with my dad and uncle. In America you can go to camp, but there we went fishing and slept outside. I don't know how my dad did it – he has a smart brain. [Luis excitedly tells me how he fished, using a small fish as bait to get a big fish]. There was so much freedom because we were the only people. But it sucks now. It's not the same as it was then. Before we could go anywhere, Cambodia, Vietnam. But now it's different. It's the way the Viet Cong do. We cannot pass to Cambodia, and we cannot farm. We had no food and we can't do nothing there.

For Luis, being smart has to do with being able to survive in one's elements without many resources, rather than grasping academic material and passing tests. I asked him if he believed he and his family had more “freedom” in the U.S., to which he responded,

Hmmm. I don't know. I guess the way Americans do freedom by having money and stuff. But in Vietnam, freedom is being free to do anything. When we go hunt we don't need a license, we can go anywhere anytime. You don't have to do anything. So I think we have more freedom in Vietnam. It was more freedom and peaceful. Here you have to have permission for everything. And you have to have money, cash. But in Vietnam we don't have to, we had everything we needed.

My parents, they don't like it here. It's not where they're born. Even me, I don't like it here. Even though I was still a kid when I got here, it doesn't change anything for me. I still want to live the way I lived when I was a little kid.

Luis believes that although Montagnards have more opportunities for advancement in the U.S., these opportunities come at a cost, in the literal and figurative sense. In our conversations, Luis also drew parallels between restrictive policies against Montagnards in Vietnam and restrictive school policies at FHS, such as graduation requirements and disciplinary actions which he believe are unfair toward students who struggle academically. In summary, he is negative about his current experiences in school and resists what is expected of him because he does not grasp material and/or because family circumstances prevent him from fully engaging in academic work. He

remains in school in spite of these challenges, however, drawing on a strong motivation to learn English and a desire to someday return to Vietnam.

### **How Luis Views His Identity at FHS**

With the exception of Ms. Mickelson, his ESL teacher, Luis believes that teachers at FHS do not care about him. “Ms. Mickelson thinks I’m joking around a lot because I talk in class. Other teachers think that I’m the kind of person who doesn’t talk much, and that I don’t make friends because I am quiet and I don’t ask many questions,” he shared. When I asked him why he does not ask questions in class, he replied, “Because if I ask, I still don’t get it. And I am afraid to ask because people will say I’m stupid.” Luis holds a negative self-identity in school, which he blames on his failure to pass courses required for graduation.

I’m not a good student now. I don’t listen, my grades are not so good. Mostly math classes are hard. ESL class is OK – I can understand, and my teacher is good. Next year, I don’t know. I have to retake a class – American history – because I didn’t pass.

On the other hand, Luis believes he is a “good kid” in his mainstream classes, because he tries to pay attention in class, unlike many of his American classmates. However, in a math class I observed Luis put his head down ten minutes into the class, and he slept through the rest of the class period. When I asked him about this afterward, he related that he did not understand the content, and that he had stayed up late the night before caring for his mother.

Luis continuously positioned himself positively against students who “cause trouble” in school. He related,

It makes me mad [when kids fight]. When they fight then the school has to have a lock out. They locked the whole school one time because people were fighting.

And I was kicked out of class onetime because I didn't make it to class before the lockout. I said "no way!" So I went to gym instead of going to ISS. The gym teacher didn't care. If I could I would make the kids act better; change the school rules. If the students dressed the way normal people dressed, like what they wear to church it would be better. The clothes they wear are really different. Gangster and stuff.

Luis resents being disciplined for the actions of other students at FHS, and as in the episode above, responded creatively by going to the gym – a space in school in which he feels welcome. By the same token, he desires a more disciplined school environment in which students showed more respect for themselves and their teachers.

In essence, Luis draws on aspects of his Montagnard culture, such as respect for elders, and conservative dress, while simultaneously engaging in deviant behavior in school, by sleeping in class, not doing his work, or not following directives to attend ISS. In his ESL class, on the other hand, he projects behaviors picked up in his mainstream classes, such as talking in class and getting out of his seat while others are working. He has also adopted an alternative "Goth" identity, wearing dark, loose clothing, which is at odds with most students at FHS, including other Montagnards. In essence, Luis draws on his history in person as he blends aspects of his culture with an alternative style. Luis's choice of topic for his Senior Exit project illustrates this melding of voices. For this project, Luis has chosen to write about martial arts. He explained:

I used to do martial arts after school. My mom doesn't want me to because I'm kind of mean, and she's scared that I will hurt someone or get hurt. I want to start martial arts again, but I don't have a ride home. When I get my drivers' license I can. So I want to write about martial arts because it's Asian, it's about sports, and I used to do it, and many people already know about it.

While martial arts are not part of Montagnard culture, Luis's choice of this topic is an assertion of a "new" Asian identity with which many Americans are familiar.

I asked Luis how other students at FHS identify him, and how this influences his perception of himself, his learning, and his possibilities. Luis spoke of being older than his grade-level peers: “It’s bad (pause). I feel bad because I’m supposed to be in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I’m 18.” He “feels older” than his American peers, “but no one believes I am 18 because I am small!” Like all other students in this study, Luis also spoke of being ethnically mislabeled by his peers. Some students think he is Vietnamese. Other students think he is “Spanish” because of his name.

I don’t talk to people I don’t know – I don’t trust people I don’t know. And I don’t care if people know where I’m from or that I’m a refugee. Kids think I’m Mexican. Because I speak a little bit of Spanish. But I tell them I am not. But sometimes they say, “but you have a Mexican name.” And I say, “you don’t have to be Mexican to have my name!” If they get to know me well, then they think I’m funny. If they don’t get to know me then they think I’m mean because I don’t talk.

Unlike Sieng, Luis does not care if his peers know that he is a Montagnard refugee. However, Luis associates only with Montagnard students at FHS, with the exception of a Hispanic immigrant student in his ESL class. Luis values the presence of other Montagnard students at FHS, “they understand me and talk to me,” he shared. I asked Luis if he has Vietnamese friends, he responded adamantly, “No, I don’t be friends with them. They don’t speak our language at all. They think they’re so smart! I know they are smart, but they are missing something...[laughs].” He continued that because the Vietnamese students at FHS are not refugees, they do not understand the plight of Montagnards. “They’re not cool like MTDs,” he explained; “they don’t know the fight.” Luis dialogues with his experiences of being a minority in Vietnam and in the U.S. as a means of differentiating himself from Vietnamese students at FHS.

### **What Luis Wants and Needs**

Luis's primary motivation for attending FHS is to learn English.

That's all I want to learn. I ask my ESL teachers why I need to learn math. They say I really need math to graduate. And I say I don't really need math. I just think I need English to talk to people, read signs on the wall. But the math, I don't know. The thing is, I don't know where I will use it.

His motivations are at odds with graduation requirements, which he perceives as unnecessary and as reasons for being behind in school. He lamented, "I don't like anything about school. Just to learn more English. That's all I want. And to do sports." Luis believes that newcomer refugee students should just have ESL classes. He does not see a connection between learning English and acquiring knowledge of other subjects.

Luis also bemoans differences he perceives between his ESL and mainstream classes. Like other students in this study, in ESL class, he feels more at liberty to ask questions, to work with other students, and to share his own work. In his mainstream classes, "I feel more weight on me. The students are OK and the teacher is OK, but the way he teaches - it's hard to remember stuff." Luis also wishes teachers knew more about his family life – that he is burdened by having to care for his parents and to provide financially for his family. "I like teachers who are funny and who I can talk to. I only feel comfortable talking to my ESL teachers about my life," he told me. He also wishes that counselors and teachers would talk with him about vocational or educational pathways.

Unlike H'yin and Sieng, Luis holds a negative view of his school identity. He is challenged by his surroundings in school and at home, and this carries into his attitudes toward school. As an 18 year old in 9<sup>th</sup> grade he believes he is misplaced among his peers although he struggles to grasp content in his courses. He believes he is simultaneously more mature and less academically prepared than his peers. Like the



other students, he draws on his history in person as he imagines a future in which he returns to Vietnam.

### **Conclusion**

The three narratives in this chapter illustrate how students' identities develop over time and space, and out of loss, memory, resilience, uncertainty and hope. The students share certain commonalities, such as reasons for leaving Vietnam, challenging first years in the U.S., and specific social or academic needs which they believe are not always met at FHS. All three students experienced lapses in education, and they all believe that they would benefit from consistent support from teachers with academic language and content material. They are older than their grade-level peers, and resent being perceived as child-like by teachers and students. Sieng and Luis also expressed concern over their ability to complete graduation requirements before they turn 21.

On the other hand, H'yin, Sieng, and Luis also embody individual characteristics, or histories in person, that influence their experiences in and responses to school in different ways. For example, H'yin had three years of formal education in Vietnam, Sieng attended school sporadically for one year, and Luis had one year of schooling in Vietnam. H'yin was placed in middle school upon arrival to Bankston, and Sieng and Luis were placed in elementary school. All three students live in transitional neighborhoods in Bankston, and Sieng and Luis's parents do not work. H'yin and Sieng do not hold afterschool jobs, but Luis works thirty hours per week to support his family. H'yin had passed out of ESL and was enrolled in an ELA class in which she was the only non-native English speaker, whereas Sieng and Luis were still designated as Limited

English Proficient (LEP) students and enrolled in ESL classes. These differences may account for the diversity in their self, positional, and thickened identities at FHS.

H'yin enjoys school, and is viewed as a “good kid” and a “good student” by her teachers and peers. Sieng also enjoys school, and is viewed as a “good kid”, but a “poor student” by his teachers. Luis dislikes school and believes he is viewed as a disengaged, unmotivated and “poor student” by his teachers. All students’ identities are influenced by the figured world of FHS. H'yin views herself as more intellectually engaged than her peers in spite of her limited English proficiency, whereas Sieng and Luis view themselves as less academically prepared than their peers. Regardless of performance or engagement, all three students believe that they take school more seriously, and are therefore more mature than their peers. One might speculate how each student might regard his or her identity in a high-performing school, or in a school with a different demographic make-up.

In addition, H'yin and Sieng adhere to a dual frame of reference, believing that they have greater opportunities for advancement in the U.S. Luis, on the other hand, embodies an oppositional identity and has little hope for success in the U.S. (Ogbu, 1991). In addition, each student responds differently to their Montagnard ethnic identities: H'yin attempts to conceal her Montagnard identity, Sieng outwardly displays his identity, and Luis projects ambivalence toward his identity, regardless of hopes of someday returning to Vietnam.

In spite of differences in their identity paradigms, each student uses his or her responses to school as a means of forging aspirations beyond school. H'yin desires to become a doctor and to help the Montagnard community in Bankston. Sieng hopes to

join the military and to return to Vietnam to help Montagnards there. Luis is less hopeful for the future, but dreams of returning to family in Vietnam. All three cases underscore a self-authoring of a locally situated, Montagnard ethnic identity, which serves as a coping mechanism in school. These students meet their individual needs by tapping into their Montagnard cultures, histories and experiences and by bringing them to a school environment in which they often struggle to shape their futures. They transact different thickened identities in response to their positioning by teachers and peers in school (“smart,” “not smart enough,” and “stupid”). As with the other students, H’yin, Sieng and Luis view themselves through an ethnic lens where their experiences with ethnic persecution in Vietnam and their refugee status in the U.S. are more important signifiers than U.S. racial constructions.

These three narratives point to the shortcomings of imposing homogenizing labels on students who share many characteristics, such as race, class, and linguistic minority status, and whose past and current experiences in many ways overlap. In addition, although it would be easy to conclude that H’yin has progressed farther than Sieng and Luis based on her academic standing, her narrative suggests that she faces uncertainties similar to those expressed by the other students. In essence, these portraits sharply counter discourse that seeks causal relations between student characteristics and academic performance. They also forge alternative person-centered understandings of how students – and refugee ELL/SIFE students in particular – fair in school in different ways.

The final chapter delves further into the findings in terms of the conclusive data, as well as their implications for the theoretical framework employed in this study, and for teacher education, and educational policy and practice.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions**

For decades, U.S. involvement in geopolitical affairs has resulted in the resettlement of refugees in large cities and small towns across the country. More recent events such as wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and natural disasters in Haiti are a reminder that refugees will continue to comprise a significant portion of the U.S. foreign-born population. Many refugees thrive in their new homelands, and the high achievement of many refugee students is a testament to this. Yet not all refugees fair well, in spite of conditions of relative improvement over those in their homelands, and many refugee youth struggle with fitting in and envisioning success in their new environments. The question remains how to effectively serve these populations in states, cities, and towns that receive them, and particularly in states such as North Carolina, where immigrant and refugee populations have grown multifold in recent decades, but where support systems for smaller foreign-born groups are generally lacking. Indeed, as a rapidly growing and changing demographic landscape, North Carolina offers a unique arena to explore the evolving and shifting identities of a group of refugee high school students.

This study has shed light on the experiences of a group of ELL Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students at Franklin High School (FHS), in North Carolina. A central purpose of this dissertation is to overcome the paucity of research on refugee students in school, and adolescent refugees in particular. This study wedds Holland et al.'s (1998) localized and nuanced interdisciplinary framework of identity with contemporary

scholarship on immigrant and refugee ELL students in school, as well as scholarship from the field of Asian studies (e.g., Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1987; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 2001) highlighting the ties that students make between their past and present-day experiences, as well as the importance of agency in response to current and more distant pressures.

The data informs our understanding of the lived experiences of these students and the teachers, parents, and community members who care about them. This research also provides evidence of how some students who desire to graduate from high school find themselves deeply challenged because of their interrupted formal schooling, limited English proficiency, and everyday experiences in a low-performing, urban school. It also overcomes the scarcity of research on refugee groups in “New Immigrant Gateway States” (Rong & Preissle, 2009). The final chapter presents the general findings, and explores the implications of these findings for theories of identity applied to refugee students, teacher preparation, and educational policy and practice. This chapter also proposes additional research that might lend further insight into the education of refugee students in the U.S.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This dissertation opens a window onto the experiences of students who navigate their schooling in the midst of several conditions they see as working against their success. A summary of the figured world (Holland et al., 1998) of FHS and out of school contexts is necessary to understanding the daily conditions under which they transact their identities.

## **Identity Across Contexts**

The analytical framework employed in this study stresses that context – both real and symbolic – is essential to interpreting patterns of identity and selfhood (Holland et al., 1998). In this section, I briefly summarize the context of FHS, as well as characteristics of the surrounding community and in the homes of the students that bear on their identity transactions in school.

The context of FHS as a “challenge school” presents barriers for the students in this study. Montagnard students are a small minority within and among other ethnic, linguistic and racial minorities. Similarly, although many teachers at FHS display authentic caring (Noddings, 2005) toward Montagnards, others exude “compassion fatigue” (Ong, 1996, 2003) as they are burdened by challenges presented by student behavior, emphasis on EOC scores, and keeping their jobs during an economic downturn. Indeed, economic woes weighed heavily on teachers and administrators at FHS who feared teacher lay-offs in addition to reduced resources in the coming years.

The ESL classroom is a space in which teachers understand and accommodate the needs of ELLs at FHS. Conversely, similar to other studies on ELLs in mainstream classes (McKay & Wong, 1996; Valdés, 2001), the students in this study face linguistic, academic and social challenges in their non-ESL classes. Teacher and administrator interviews and school observations bolster findings in the literature on the school experiences of ELLs in U.S. schools (Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), which highlight these students’ social and academic marginalization from American peers. Although many of their teachers are aware of these challenges, others are not, or are unwilling or unable to accommodate for their needs. Similar to findings by Gonzalez,

et al. (2003) regarding ESL students' limited opportunities for interaction with school counseling staff, students in this study have very little interaction with school counselors at FHS. They meet individually with counselors to register for coursework for the following semester, and occasional assembly sessions with other ESL students provide students with an overview of graduation requirements. However, all of the students related that they were not aware that they could approach counselors for advice regarding college or career options. In addition, although the counselors I spoke with were aware of the needs of ESL students at FHS, they also expressed being preoccupied with managing large student caseloads, and students with discipline issues in particular. They "[performed] triage," in the words of one counselor and were unable to address the concerns of all students at FHS. In sum, FHS is a figured world in which the students in this study are in some ways being taken advantage of, whether intentionally or not. They are quiet and well behaved in the classroom, and because of this, their needs are not being met. One might also conclude that other students at FHS are also being ignored because of teachers' focus on state tests and "getting through the day," as one teacher shared. Teachers with poor concepts of their students' abilities offer learning identities that reproduce stereotypes and social injustice. They construct inability and failure rather than ability and success in students.

On a recent program aired on a local radio station, a BPS administrator noted, "Life is harder for small immigrant minorities in Bankston." Smaller immigrant groups whose language and culture differ greatly from the White and African-American, Anglo, Protestant demographic majority are likely to find fewer resources, and have less social capital to draw on as they adapt to life in the city. Moreover, these groups find fewer



resources than the mainstream immigrant groups from Latin America and Asia. Indeed, findings from this study reveal that certain support systems exist, such as short-term assistance from resettlement agencies, services provided by a Montagnard community organization, local churches, and Montagnards who resettled in the city in the 1980s and 90s. However, generally speaking, social services in the region focus on English and Spanish speakers, and programs for immigrant and refugee youth in particular are lacking. These conditions impact how students negotiate their identities in school.

What is more, my research supports previous findings that show the disconnect that often exists between immigrant and refugee students' homes and their schools (Li, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 1996). Newcomer Montagnard parents typically speak little English and rely on their children to serve as language and culture "brokers" (Tse, 2001). With the exception of Sieng, H'vin and Tem, the youth in this study also hold after-school jobs in order to support their families financially. Parents place great value on their child's education and learning English, they have little understanding of their child's life in school since most of them have received little or no schooling in Vietnam or the U.S. In addition, they generally lack the linguistic and academic background to help their children with homework, and in most cases they are unaware of or do not encourage academic or career avenues post high school. However, unlike students in Zhou and Bankston's (1998) study of a Vietnamese refugee community in New Orleans, lack of social capital among the students in my study has not yet resulted in their dropping out of school, or engaging in deviant behavior in or outside of school.

Taken together, findings paint a bleak picture of the school, community, and home worlds of these students, and suggest that students such as these are set up for

failure because of these conditions. The significance of this study lies in its challenge to earlier scholarship, much of which has focused on the victimization of immigrant and minority students by oppressive structural forces in their old and new worlds (e.g., Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1987; Olsen, 1997). Instead, these students are active agents within these structures – they forge elements of their histories in person and current experiences in such a way that helps them cope with the tensions they face.

### **Identity Transactions – “Good kids,” but “Poor Students” and Variations Thereof**

The overarching question put forth by this study is how Vietnamese Montagnard refugee students transact their identities at FHS. Findings show that the students draw on multiple experiences and realities in Vietnam, at FHS, and in their communities and homes as they shape their identities. Although these contexts influence one another socially and politically, the ways they intersect are not always compatible with the needs of these students.

**Experiences and aspirations.** The students draw on their histories in person (Holland & Lave, 2001) as they negotiate their identities at FHS. Specifically, they reflect on limited opportunities for themselves and their families in Vietnam and embody immigrant optimism and a folk theory of success (Ogbu, 1987) toward perceived opportunities in the U.S. This being said, they regard lapses in education as an academic and social barrier in school which ties back to their limited access to education in Vietnam, or in refugee camps.

In spite of challenges presented by their interrupted schooling, they engage in self-authoring of future aspirations. Khuhi and Sieng wish to return to Vietnam to fight for the Montagnard cause. Others, such as Dah, Tem, and H'yin craft aspirations based

on personal experiences in the U.S. Moun, Vit, and Sieng desire careers in the U.S. Armed Forces. All of them had family members who aided the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. These findings challenge the common assertion in scholarship that immigrant students perceive of their futures as constituted within their host country (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Although it is questionable whether the students will actualize their dreams, particularly those who aspire to return to Vietnam, the creation of an imagined national community (Anderson, 1991) is a strong element of their motivation to remain in school, and their hopes for the future.

**Positioning.** Several scholars in the field of second language acquisition stress the importance of exploring the dialectic between identities offered to, or imposed upon learners as well as how learners accept or resist those identities (Pierce, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996; Toohey, 2000). The majority of the students in this study view themselves and are viewed by others as “good kids” but “poor students.” They respect and obey their teachers, are quiet in class, and are hard-working; they are also low-achieving, and struggle with grasping academic content and English. They also have few tangible possibilities beyond school. Within this “good kid” – “poor student” paradigm, they struggle with being older than their peers, believing they are not smart enough, being ethnically mislabeled by teachers and peers, with asserting (or in some cases concealing) their Montagnard ethnic identities in school, and with learning English.

However, to counter the notion that identities are homogenous and linear, individual narratives in Chapter 6 illustrate that Montagnard students with similar histories and characteristics embody different identity paradigms. H’yin, Sieng, and Luis position themselves and are positioned by others differently in school, as a “good

kid/good student,” “good kid/poor student,” and “indifferent kid/poor student” respectively. Although they express similar reasons for staying in school, and have had similar experiences in school, these students differ in how they respond to their identities. H’yin strives to conceal her Montagnard identity and dislikes being positioned as a model minority. Sieng outwardly displays his Montagnard identity and seeks respect from his teachers and peers. Luis projects ambivalence toward his academic and Montagnard identity, in spite of hopes of graduating from high school and someday returning to Vietnam. These findings challenge earlier studies, which portray immigrant and refugee groups as embodying a collective self and positional identities (e.g., Lee’s (2005) study of “traditional” newcomer versus “Americanized” 1.5 generation students), or studies that find differences between male and female student identities (e.g., Lopez, 2003; Centrie, 2004). Findings from my study infer that identities cannot solely be categorized along the lines of race, gender, social class, or immigration status. Instead, H’yin, Sieng and Luis’s narratives suggest that identities are also highly circumstantial, and personal.

In addition, these identity paradigms ultimately further counter the model minority – problem minority binary by blurring the lines between how students perform academically, how they view themselves and are viewed by others, and how they envision their futures. They also illustrate how students are sometimes caught between two equally negative alternatives – to conform to the model minority stereotype, or to fail (or be failed) in school.

**Language proficiency.** Similar to Norton’s (1995. 2000) research on identity and language learning, the students invest heavily in learning English as part of transacting their Montagnard identities, and learning English is a strong motivation to

remain in school. Aligning with Cummins' (2000) framework of language learning, although they have a command of communicative English, they face challenges with academic reading and writing, and responding orally to questions posed by teachers. Although they desire opportunities to interact with non-Montagnard students, they are often chastised, or fear being chastised by native-speaking peers because of their low English language proficiency and accented English. They struggle to find voice (words and identity positions) (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986) among students and teachers who deny the legitimacy of that voice. As a result, they are often peripheral participants in classroom activities, and this peripheral positioning further limits their access to words and knowledge deemed desirable and powerful.

The ESL classroom, on the other hand, is a liberating space where the students more freely interact with other Montagnard students, and where they feel a greater sense of control within the broader context of FHS. The ESL classroom is also a “transnational space” (Brittain, 2002) where the students freely share information with other Montagnard students. They also draw on their cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) engaging in code-switching in ESL and mainstream classes as a means of asserting a hybrid Montagnard identity and coping in situations where they are a linguistic and cultural minority. In addition to their motivations to learn English, relationships formed within the ESL classroom further motivate these students in school and provide rich sources of social capital. On the other hand, the ESL teachers shared that Montagnard students occasionally struggle to interact with non-Montagnard students in their ESL classes because of the cultural and linguistic differences between them. The ESL classroom, then, is not in all cases a safe zone within the walls of FHS.

This study underscores the dual nature of learning English for these students: On the one hand, learning English serves as a motivation to stay in school; and on the other hand, as ELL students with lapses in education, these students also face linguistic, academic, and social challenges that confound their expectations for success in and beyond school.

**Coursework and graduation requirements.** Although public education perpetuates the myth that all students are on equal footing, and that success comes from hard work, school policies that affect ELL/SIFE students place great expectations, and prohibit these students from pursuing vocational options upon graduation. These policies also place constraints on teachers who worked with these students. Unrealistic timelines for Senior Exit Projects, inflexible graduation requirements, and the lack of coursework geared toward ELLs with limited formal schooling stood out as factors that negatively influence the identities of these students. The students in this study by and large feel impeded by courses required for graduation, many of which they perceive as having little significance in their lives. Although many teachers modify their lessons to meet the academic needs of these students, students often continue to struggle with grasping the linguistic and content components of their coursework. Some doubt their ability to complete graduation requirements before they turn 21. For these students, staying in school does not necessarily equate with academic achievement or emotional wellbeing.

In summary, the students draw on multiple worlds, experiences, and positions as they transact their identities in school. However, their identities are neither homogeneous, static, nor deterministic. Should circumstances for each student change,

their identities might undergo a parallel shift. For now, the pieces they draw on serve as a coping mechanism and a reason to stay in school.

### **Implications**

Why look at refugee high school students' identities? At the most basic level, this research contributes new understandings to current perceptions of how refugee ELL students fare in school. This study also focuses on a group of refugees whose experiences are in many ways distinct from other refugee groups, and immigrant and non-immigrant minorities. The experiences of Montagnards in school have heretofore not been studied. In addition, research on refugee students to this point has focused on populations in states that have more traditionally received newer immigrant groups (e.g., New York, California). Yet North Carolina is one of a new category of states that is part of a dramatic current of contemporary immigration whose specific dynamics deserve attention. This study takes an important step toward continued research in this area.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider the significance of these findings for framework of identity employed in this study as well as other theories that focus on immigrant and refugee student identities. I then address implications for teacher preparation for working with refugee students, and policies that impact the educational experiences of ELL/SIFE students.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Grounded in a theoretical framework that sees identity as evolving, context-dependent, and relational, the data in this study reveals a number of angles around which to consider the identities and school experiences of refugee adolescents. Holland et al.'s (1998) framework is particularly useful to exploring the identities of the Montagnard

students because it recognizes the multiple and dynamic worlds and tensions within these worlds – both local and distant – that refugee students negotiate as they transact their identities in school.

The notion of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) offers a means of analyzing the landscape of school as a space of practice, where individuals come to understand who they are, or shift in terms of who they understand themselves to be in relation to others within that world as individuals or members of groups. Figured worlds counters static notions of culture in favor of improvisation, and stresses the importance of power within specific contexts. History in person (Holland & Lave, 2001) offers a means to understand an individual's understanding of their social history and how this history influences their current (and future) understandings of themselves. Positional identities (Holland et al, 1998) provides a lens through which to examine the nature and strength of relationships in shaping an individual's identity. Finally, the notion of thickened identities (Holland & Lave, 2001) suggests identities form out of a marriage of broader discourses and more localized reactions to them.

Established psychological theories of identity posit that individuals progress through linear, static, and sequential stages until a final goal is reached (e.g., Erikson, 1968). My use of Holland et al.'s (1998) framework showcases outcomes that these psychological theories cannot. For instance, the students in this study do not progress through school with an eye towards assimilation. Rather, they embrace aspects of life in the U.S. while simultaneously retaining aspects of their Montagnard culture, and a desire to return to Vietnam or serve the Montagnard community in Bankston. In many ways they are undergoing a process of “accommodation without assimilation” (Gibson, 1998),



adopting and wedding aspects of their new world with their Montagnard culture. Both are instrumental to their persisting in school in spite of conditions and positioning that might push them to drop out.

In addition, the combination of Holland et al.'s framework with theories of immigrant adaptation, and conceptual literature in the fields of educational linguistics and Asian studies yields a nuanced interpretation of the identities and experiences of these students that any one of these paradigms alone cannot. Contemporary theories of identity development and immigrant adaptation emphasize ethnic group comparisons with the majority group (Ogbu, 1987; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Rather than focus on the identities of the students in comparison to other ethnic groups, I highlight important similarities and differences among the nine Vietnamese Montagnard refugees in terms of how they negotiate their identities in response to multiple factors. This sheds new light on variations within and among groups based on local and regional contexts. It challenges scholars and educators to recognize and tap into ways in which students express resilience and agency within structures of power, and in a manner that facilitates their desire to remain in school. It also challenges us to examine conditions under which students are more likely to become agents of their own learning and overall experiences in school, for instance, in classroom settings where they are encouraged but not forced to share their experiences, where teachers connect content material to students' lived experiences, and where students are encouraged to explore academic or career opportunities.

The identities the students transact are indeed shaped by the figured world of FHS and their relationships with others in them, as well as broader discourses surrounding

non-native English speakers, Southeast Asian students, and refugees. The use of this framework with a particular focus on refugee students creates a more informed and contextualized understanding of the unique experience of these students. This study complicates Holland et al.'s (1998) framework, however, by highlighting the dynamic interplay between labeling, self-perception, and experience. In this study, the students' experiences as refugees with lapses in formal education have become part of their self-understandings in school. They have come to see themselves as certain types of people ("good kids"/"poor students," "good kid"/"good student," or disengaged, "poor student") because of these experiences. They have simultaneously shaped these identities based on teachers' and students' responses to them (as ELL/SIFE students) and on their reactions to other students at FHS. For these students, experiences lead to labeling oneself and being labeled by others. This process of external and internalized labeling also defines the way these students experience school.

In addition, the students' identity paradigms blur the model minority and problem minority discourses surrounding Southeast Asian immigrant students in the U.S. (Lee, 2005; Ong, 2003), which leave little room for alternative understandings of youth identity paradigms. The students' testimonials offer a more complex and local account of identity articulation by revealing that their identities fall somewhere between the model minority and problem minority frameworks, and that these identities are indeed not static, but rather shift in relation to different spaces within school. Their identities reveal the wide range of academic identities among Asian American students who fall between the stereotyped dichotomizations.

This study reveals that ethnicity is more central than race to these students' perceptions of themselves – their roots, their current identities, and their possibilities for the future. This finding further complicates the “honorary White” and “forever foreigner” and model minority/problem minority racial paradigms. Rather than viewing themselves through the lens of race, the study participants generally transact identities, whether internally or externally, through the lens of their Montagnard ethnicity. Being a refugee is a vital part of their ethnic identities. From this I conclude that studies looking at refugee student identities must acknowledge the particular layer of ethnicity in shaping the identities that refugee students transact. However, it is also worth pointing out that through the process of being racialized in school, over time these students might come to view their identities through the lens of race.

Finally, one might speculate how other refugee or immigrant groups might fare at FHS. How might their identities be similar or different from those of the Montagnard students in this study? Might characteristics of the figured world of FHS might be more beneficial to other students? How might Hispanic students, for instance, view themselves at FHS in light of the existence of Spanish-speaking teachers, more awareness among teachers and students of Hispanic cultures, as well as the existence of a growing Hispanic immigrant population in the region? As a small ethnic minority at FHS, Montagnards have not yet had an identity constructed for them. Perhaps Hispanic immigrant students bear school identities that have been imposed on them because of their greater numbers and representation in the media.

## **Educational Practice**

In addition to theoretical implications, this study offers several implications for educational practice, teacher education and educational policy.

**The ESL classroom.** Given its overall value to students in this study, I take the view of ESL classrooms as “pedagogical safe houses” (Canagarajah, 2004) where students negotiate orally and in writing the tensions they experience as linguistic minorities within the diverse community of FHS. Because students feel at relative ease in their ESL classes as compared to mainstream classes, ESL teachers should offer space for students to talk about challenges they face in school, and ways to overcome them. For instance, students in this study may benefit from in-class discussions about intergroup relations at FHS, tensions, and opportunities for engagement across cultures.

In addition, ESL teachers should provide students with opportunities to engage in identity exploration, and critical thinking. For the students in this study, this might mean talking about their lives in Vietnam, and as resettled refugees in Bankston, or undertaking writing projects around Montagnard culture, such as Khuih, Gar, and Dah did for their Senior Exit projects. It is also important to bear in mind that not all students may be willing to discuss their past experiences, their current home lives, or their hopes for the future, and that teachers should approach these subjects with sensitivity.

By offering these recommendations, I do not wish to deemphasize the support that the ESL teachers at FHS provided to their students. These teachers helped students not only with language learning and developing study skills; they also helped students fill out job applications, and talked with them about such things as taking a drivers license test, or their own experiences in high school or college. Although these things are sometimes

more easily addressed in situations where groups of students share similar concerns, this should not be the sole responsibility of the ESL teacher. Research has shown that ESL teachers often feel overburdened by serving as teachers, counselors and social workers for students who may be reluctant to ask for advice from other school personnel, or encounter school staff who are unable or unwilling to provide such help (Harklau, 1999). Mr. Rose provided a clear account of this in noting that ESL teachers at FHS are often asked to teach SIOP courses required for graduation in addition to their ESL classes. A concerted effort is needed from all teachers to overcome the burden that many ESL teachers often feel. Students also benefit from hearing the diverse perspectives of different teachers, as pointed out by Khuhi and H'yin.

**Mainstream classrooms.** Toohey (2000) has written, “Learners’ identities have definite and observable effects on what they can do in classrooms, what kinds of positions as legitimate peripheral participants in classrooms they can occupy, and therefore, how much they can ‘learn’” (p. 74). This implies that educators should attempt to build classroom communities in which powerful positions are available to all students. That many mainstream teachers at FHS are unwilling or unsure of how to work with ELL/SIFE students such as those in this study suggests that this group of students will likely continue to struggle in and beyond school. To counter this, teachers must engage in culturally responsive (Gay, 2000), and constructivist teaching that recognizes and validates the backgrounds of students. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring may be particularly beneficial on social and academic fronts. Although not all students are willing to outwardly share their backgrounds or personal stories in classrooms or

elsewhere, the students in this study resented being mislabeled by peers and teachers and desired greater attention to their academic needs.

What is more, if acceptance within a dominant group facilitates language learning among ELLs, as Tse (2001) has argued, teachers must work to build greater interaction between ELL and native speaking students in mainstream classes. In this study, students' desire to learn English correlates with a desire for more opportunities to interact with native-speaking students in meaningful ways. Some students in this study lack the linguistic tools to communicate openly with other students and teachers at FHS, but they are also not encouraged to do so by the structure of their classes. JROTC was one space that I observed Moun, Sieng and Vit communicating with non-Montagnard students. In most other mainstream classes I observed, Montagnard students sat quietly to themselves. Students need more structured opportunities to meaningfully engage with native speakers in and outside of the classroom. Continuous opportunities for interaction result in mutual learning for all students.

In addition, all teachers must understand the particular linguistic challenges ELL/SIFE students face, such as differences in the amount of time needed to acquire communicative competency (BICS) versus academic literacy (CALP) (Cummins, 1996). Teachers in all subject areas must modify their instruction to accommodate the special needs of ELLs. ELLs who have been in the U.S. longer may possess near-native like oral proficiency, but still struggle with academic reading and writing. H'yun, Khuhi, Gar, Sieng, and Luis provided clear testimonies of this. Paradoxically, teachers who are not aware that some ELLs possess little or no literacy in their native language may confuse low academic performance for low intelligence (Loewen, 2004). Finally, teachers must

be attuned to the challenges of students with lapses in education, as well as anxieties such students may have over being older than their peers, which may affect their ability or motivation to remain in school.

**School counselors.** Counselors must provide clear, concise information to ELLs about academic matters, including their academic standing and graduation requirements. They should also inform students about post high school options, including how to apply to a four-year or community college, as well as how to obtain scholarships. Schools must also provide native-language translators and trained counseling staff to work with students suffering from PTSD or other emotional disorders, which may affect some refugee students' wellbeing, but is often undiagnosed, particularly in students who show no outward appearance of having emotional difficulties (Hamilton & Moore, 2004).

**School-wide support.** As “good kids” but “poor students” these students are in some ways invisible minorities who are kept invisible by teachers who focus on disruptive students, and passing End of Course tests. Mr. Anderson attempted to inform teachers about Montagnard students, their cultures and experiences. However in my observations, this awareness did not always translate into practical classroom application. Instilling in teachers a unified desire and the tools to help these students might increase these students' likelihood for academic success while simultaneously honoring their identities.

In addition, although ESL teachers and some mainstream teachers offered extra academic support when students sought it out, the students in this study may have benefited from a more structured tutoring program targeting ELL students with lapses in formal education. This kind of program would need to accommodate for students' extra-

school activities such as work and caring for children or siblings, as well as their lack of reliable transportation options. Finally, communication between ESL teachers, mainstream teachers and counselors is vital to providing an integrated support system for students. ESL teachers believed that this occurred only on limited bases at FHS.

**Community involvement.** Several scholars stress the importance of building parent-school relationships to foster student learning, and among refugee students in particular (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Moll et al., 2005). Yet the parents of students in this study were never mentioned by teachers or administrators at FHS as potential academic or social resources. Findings from this study suggest that schools should work to build positive and sustained relationships with parents, community members and social service providers so that students receive integrated support from various people within their communities. This is particularly vital in cases where parents have had little or no formal schooling and may lack the ability to help their children in school, or in exploring opportunities beyond school. Family literacy programs, transportation to and from parent nights, for example, might encourage greater parent participation in school. Such programming might also create an impression of school as an open, welcoming space.

School personnel must also work with resettlement agencies, other social service providers, and political organizations to ensure that parents are being informed of school policies and expectations, resources, and academic or career opportunities upon graduation. These connections were only minimally fostered among the students and families in this study.



## **Teacher Education**

North Carolina faces specific educational challenges because of its status as a beacon for new immigrant groups, and these challenges must be met through teacher education. In particular, teacher education must build practicing teachers' and teacher candidates' awareness of smaller immigrant groups in North Carolina, differences between immigrant and refugee students, as well as differences between different refugee groups, expectations that may conflict with the home worlds of students, and linguistic and academic challenges ELLs face in K-12 settings.

Teacher education programs must continuously prepare teacher candidates and practicing teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways. Teachers should understand differences between immigrant and refugee students, as well as differences between different refugee groups (high versus low performing). Similarly, teachers should be aware of inter and intra-group relations, and conflicts that can exist between minority groups from with similar national origins, and refugees in particular. Teacher preparation programs must also build an awareness of students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, et al., 2005) by entering students' communities and homes where appropriate. I also suggest that teachers become dialogic researchers (Hones, 2002) who respect and bring to light the stories of their students while also exploring their own sense of cultural identity through ethnographic inquiry.

Teacher education programs must also incorporate coursework that builds understanding of the linguistic challenges ELLs face in K-12 settings. Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol (SIOP) methods and other research-based methods for modifying content materials must also be incorporated into teacher preparation programs

for teacher candidates and practicing teachers in different subject areas. Research evidence, however, is not always easily conveyed to practicing teachers. An administrator at the BPS International Center recently shared that although SIOP training workshops are offered throughout the year for teachers in BPS, principals at many schools do not require teachers to attend. Principals could offer “sub days” and/or stipends for practicing teachers wishing to attend. Given that ELL populations in U.S. public schools are not likely to decrease in the coming years, SIOP methods and other forms of training must be required of all teachers, new or veteran. Schools should also offer incentives for teachers to attend after-school enrichment programs that focus on the needs of students such as those in this study. All teachers across different subject areas must be trained to work with ELLs, particularly at the high school level where the consequences of inadequate academic and linguistic support are particularly dire.

Finally, teacher education programs must build greater awareness of students with lapses in formal education attention, the challenges they face, and ways to overcome them, at all levels of school, but for high school students in particular, who may fear being unable to graduate, be responsible for supporting their families financially, or themselves have children.

## **Policy**

The 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court case mandates that ELLs receive equitable public education and have access to the same academic content as their native-speaking peers. However equitable in theory, this policy poses challenges for students with interrupted formal education, and whose reading and writing skills are weak. As described in Chapter 4, all students in North Carolina high schools must pass specific

courses required for graduation, and ELL/SIFE students are no exception. School personnel may, however, make accommodations to ensure that students meet these requirements. For instance, counselors within the BPS school system are allowed to prioritize certain courses, such as ESL/English Language Arts (ELA) classes, deemed necessary in order for students to complete later required coursework. In addition, ELL/SIFE students take the same End of Course tests required of all students, but are given modifications, such as increased time to take the test if they have been in the U.S. for two years or less. However, accommodations such as these are not always sufficient. In fact, the self-narratives of students in this study point to the fact that graduation requirements and EOCs are a continual source of anxiety, and in some cases a reason to drop out.

In *I Won't Learn from You*, Herbert Kohl (1991) distinguishes between failure to learn and refusal to learn. Failure to learn results from a mismatch between what the learner wants to learn and is able to learn. Refusal to learn is conscious desire to not-learn. The students in this study do not always learn what they want to learn, and also occasionally fail in classes, or are promoted without truly grasping course content. In many cases they desire to meet graduation requirements, but fear being unable to do so in a timely manner for academic and linguistic reasons. In some students, such as Luis, this failure to learn instills a refusal to learn.

Social workers and some teachers I interviewed believe that newcomer students like those in this study would benefit from English immersion education in which English was taught in a simplified and more direct manner, and in which students received longer-term instruction in basic math and other “survival” skills. Scholars have weighed

the benefits and shortcomings of various newcomer program structures that aim to either separate or integrate newcomer ELL students. Many scholars posit that newcomer schools, in which ELLs are separated from native-speaking peers, are isolating and detrimental to students (Feinburg, 2000; Olsen, 1997). Conversely, my classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers illustrate that the students in this study generally flounder academically and socially in mainstream classes. SIFE centers offer a compromise between newcomer schools and schools in which ELLs are submersed in mainstream classes. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4, only one school in the BPS system houses a SIFE center, and it has been met with variable success. On the one hand, students in the SIFE center receive more attention to their linguistic and academic needs. On the other hand, as one teacher at this school related, SIFE students resent being separated from their American peers at the same school throughout most of the school day. Students in this study desired sustained contact with American peers in addition to linguistic and academic support. Taking their wishes into account, schools must design programs and policies across schools that address newcomers' needs while also allowing them to thrive socially and academically.

In addition, some students in this study were unsure of what grade they were in, or whether or not they would complete all graduation requirements before they turned 21. One of NCLB's measurements for successful schools is the school's rate of graduation. Schools are thus penalized for low graduation rates. Indeed, graduation standards are needed to ensure that quality education is being provided to all students. However, the goal of graduating students in four years is not ideal for all students, and particularly ELLs with lapses in formal education. Inflexible graduation requirements and timelines

mean that students who are motivated to graduate are in a sense discouraged or prevented from doing so. North Carolina/BPS should adopt policies such as those in other parts of the country (e.g., Fairfax County, Virginia) with high numbers of ELL/SIFE students who are older than their peers, where such students are given more time to complete high school and take adult learning courses while still in high school.

In sum, contrary to *Lau v. Nichols*, ELL/SIFE students such as those in this study are not necessarily being provided with an equitable education given that they are not in every case being adequately prepared to complete coursework required for graduation. In essence, inflexible graduation policies are in many ways creating failure in otherwise motivated students.

### **Future Research**

This research expands common understandings of how refugee students fare in high school. Yet much remains to be learned from the diverse experiences and characteristics of this population. Additional research could include a larger sample of students from within one or more racial, ethnic and linguistic groups. Research could also compare the experiences of different groups, or of female and male students, and on a more longitudinal scale. Future research should also look at the longer-term impacts of high school after students graduate, or the perceptions of students who drop out of high school.

I have engaged in the relatively novel, yet daunting task of educational scholarship among a student population that is marginalized in multiple ways, on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, language, socioeconomic status, refugee status, lapses in education, and residence in a new immigrant state. Additional research might bring more

in-depth focus to any one of these characteristics, or to other points brought out in this dissertation. For instance, future research could focus more specifically on the challenges of language learning for students who enter U.S. schools as high schoolers, focusing on linguistic aspects such as vocabulary acquisition and academic writing. Research could also bring more focus to the role of lived history in shaping students' motivations in school. Studies could evaluate alternative programming models for newcomer ELLs, such as SIFE centers, and newcomer schools. Finally, research could focus more specifically on pedagogical practices that facilitate or hinder learning in refugee students.

Transcending one's social position to understand the perspectives of others is essential in educational scholarship. In my case, doing qualitative research in an urban school and among students whose experiences, native culture and language(s) I do not share brought me out of my comfort zone. It also put me back in touch with the daily realities of high school students and teachers, and opened my eyes to how home and community worlds influence the school experiences of a group of students. Though at times exhausting and frustrating, I have benefited both personally and professionally from this extensive and exhaustive research endeavor. Indeed, the "aha moments" in my research propelled me forward and encouraged me to ask difficult questions of my participants and myself. The strength of this research approach lies in its quest to transcend boundaries of difference, and future research might also follow this path.

My intent in this research was to highlight individual stories of the participants in this study, and therefore, qualitative and ethnographic inquiry best suited my goals. In addition, much prior research on immigrant identities is quantitative focusing on adaptive processes among and between ethnic groups. My research gives weight to individual

responses to understand how refugee students react to their school surroundings. This emphasis on the individual brings focus to individual agency and self-authoring of identities. I argue that these individual responses have as much impact as studies that focus on large group samples because they highlight the complexity of the refugee experience as well as variation in how individuals respond within the same context. This approach unearths local responses to global movements. However, quantitative, or mixed-method research might shed light on the broader educational outcomes of students such as those in this study. In addition, the conceptual framework developed for this study allowed me to analyze these students' perspectives from the standpoint of the particular questions I was seeking to uncover – how these students transact their identities in school in relation to backgrounds and aspiration, their positional identities, language proficiency, and policies that impact their daily experiences in school. However, future research might address similar questions from different theoretical perspectives.

### **Limitations**

I have employed a Western notion of identity in my analyses, which stresses the individual and her understanding of herself. This notion may or may not be contrary to a Montagnard understanding of identity per se, however, it was not an objective of this study to determine this. Nonetheless, additional meaning might have been derived from analyzing students' views of themselves and others in school in light of both Western and Montagnard notions of identity. Greater depth could also have been given to different aspects of identity, such as behavior and dress and how these might compare or contrast with Montagnard ideals.

In addition, certain terminology throughout this dissertation deserves problematization which I have not done here. For instance, the students often described themselves as “not smart,” “stupid,” or “respectful.” Each of these terms has political connotations depending on their use. The term “smart”, for example, can assume several meanings, including clever, intelligent, or crafty, and meanings differ according to their users and the context of their use. My interpretations of data may have benefited from deeper analysis of the meanings of this terminology, however doing so was not an underlying objective of this dissertation.

A third limitation relates to my positionality with regard to the research participants. I reported and interpreted the words of others, and therefore I made choices in terms of what to include and exclude in my dissertation. I prioritized data that related to my research questions, or that provided important background to the conclusions I drew. A different researcher may have emphasized different aspects of interview data. In the end, while I strove for objectivity, complete objectivity is impossible to achieve in qualitative research.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This study has shown how, in their struggles to “make it” at FHS, Montagnard refugee students come to terms with their racial, cultural and linguistic positioning. They also find space to negotiate and create new meanings connected to their future pathways, and these new meanings entail fashioning an identity that also serves to help them cope in school. However, although these students are staying in school and crafting identities and futures around these identities, it is clear that they are not receiving the adequate academic and social support they need. This dissertation makes clear that there are no



easy answers for how best to educate ELL students with interrupted formal education. At a very basic level, however, one can envision an integrated and longer-term educational approach that taps into the capital of multiple stakeholders, and that ultimately connects students' home and school lives to future possibilities.

Although one must not generalize the experiences of the students in this study, this research contributes to an understanding of how many refugee students continue to be “overlooked and underserved” in K-12 settings (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). These students persist in school and have dreams connected to learning English and graduating from high school. However, low graduation rates for language minority students in North Carolina and in the U.S. indicate that many ELLs struggle to find voice within school. This research reveals glimmers of hope in the face of the frustratingly negative or misguided positioning by many teachers and peers, and seemingly insurmountable barriers to success in and beyond school. In fact, the experiences of H'yin and Khuih prove that it is possible for these students to graduate from high school. H'yin is currently attending a local community college and hopes to eventually transfer to a regional university to study medicine. Khuih is working at a warehouse and will enroll at the community college next semester.

The students' stories do not start and end where I entered and exited this research, and their identities will continue to develop as they progress through life. In time the students may begin to see their identities through the lens of race, as they continue to be racialized by individuals and practices in school. For now, with the exception of Luis, they are optimistic in spite of their limited opportunities at FHS.

## Appendix A. Assent/Consent Forms

### University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Assent to Participate in a Research Study Adolescent Participants age 15-17 Social Behavioral Form

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IRB Study # \_\_\_\_\_ 08-0546 \_\_\_\_\_  
Assent Form Version Date: \_\_5/6/08\_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Study:** School Ties: Academic and Social Adjustment of Refugee Students

**Principal Investigator:** Liv Thorstensson Dávila

**UNC-Chapel Hill Department:** School of Education

**Email Address:** lthorste@email.unc.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Xue Lan Rong, School of Education, CB 3500, The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599

**Study Contact telephone number:** (704) 521-2991

**Study Contact email:** lthorste@email.unc.edu

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#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your parent, or guardian, needs to give permission for you to be in this study. You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to, even if your parent has already given permission. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research study is to learn about the school experiences of high school refugee youth, and their parents' and teachers' perceptions of their schooling.

#### **How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately twenty people in this research study.

**How long will your part in this study last?**

You will be involved in this study for six months to one year. You will partake in one initial interview and one follow-up interview. I will also observe two of your high school classes.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

You will be asked to participate in one interview about your school experiences in the U.S. You will then be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to further discuss your school experiences.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

There will be no direct benefits to the individual subjects. The possible benefits to society include a better understanding of the school experiences of refugee youth, leading to ways to engage refugee communities in schooling, as well as improved parent-school relations. Additional benefits include the development of insights into how to prepare teachers for working with English Language Learners and refugee students in particular.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

There are no known risks for participating in this study. There may, however, be uncommon or previously unknown risks, such as breach of confidentiality or possible discomfort associated with partaking in an interview in English. You should report any problems to the researcher.

**How will your privacy be protected?**

Data collected in this study will be kept secured in the researcher's home. Codes will be used to identify you, and only the researcher will have access to these codes. Teachers or peers may know that you are in the study, however, they will not know what you will have said. Furthermore, what you tell the researcher during the interview will not be reported to your parent(s). In spite of these measures to protect the privacy of all participants in this study, the researcher cannot prevent deductive disclosure. In addition, the researcher will show the manuscript to all participants prior to its submission. In other words, other participants may be able to recognize you by the information you give during the interviews.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Digitally recorded interviews will not include the participants' names or other identifiers. All interviews will be held in a private location and only in the researcher's presence. You may at any time request that the digital audio recorder be turned off. The researcher

will store all digital recordings and subsequent data analyses on CDs in a locked file cabinet.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ OK to record me during the study  
\_\_\_\_\_ Not OK to record me during the study

The researcher will take field notes during classroom observations. Field notes will not include any identifiers, such as names or locations.

Any hardcopies of data transcriptions will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researchers home until the completion of the research one year after receipt of IRB approval.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB\_subjects@unc.edu.

-----  
**Participant's Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature if you agree to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name if you agree to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

**University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill**  
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Adult Participants : *Teacher of Montagnard Refugee high school students***  
**Social Behavioral Form**

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**IRB Study #** \_\_08-0546\_\_

**Consent Form Version Date:** \_\_5/6/08\_\_

**Title of Study:** School Ties: Academic and Social Adjustment of Refugee Students

**Principal Investigator:** Liv Thorstensson Dávila

**UNC-Chapel Hill Department:** School of Education

**Faculty Advisor:** Xue Lan Rong, School of Education, CB 3500, The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599

**Study Contact telephone number:** (704) 521-2991

**Study Contact email:** lthorste@email.unc.edu

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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research study is to learn about Montagnard refugee high school students' sense of school belonging, parents' expectations of schooling, and their teachers' experiences and perceptions of working with refugee students.

**How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately twenty people in this research study.

**How long will your part in this study last?**

You will be expected to participate in one initial interview and one follow-up interview over a period of six months to one year.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

You will be asked to answer a series of questions about your preparation for and experiences working with refugee students and their parents. You will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to further discuss your perceptions and experiences. The researcher will also observe classes attended by the Montagnard student study participants on two separate occasions. She will then ask you questions about your pedagogical choices when working with refugee students.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

There will be no direct benefits to the individual subjects. The possible benefits to society include a better understanding of the school experiences of refugee youth, leading to ways to engage refugee communities in schooling, as well as improved parent-school relations. Additional benefits include the development of insights into how to prepare teachers for working with English Language Learners and refugee students in particular.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

There are no known risks to participating in this research study. There may, however, be uncommon or previously unknown risks, such as breach of confidentiality. You should report any problems to the researcher

**How will your privacy be protected?**

Data collected in this study will be kept secured in the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to individually identifiable data. Codes will be used to identify the participants, and only the researcher will have access to these codes. The file that will link your name to ID numbers will be secured in a computer file on the researcher's computer.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Digitally recorded interviews will not include the participants' names or other identifiers. All interviews will be held in a private location and only in the researcher's presence. You may at any time request that the digital audio recorder be turned off. The researcher will store all digital recordings and subsequent data analyses on CDs in a locked file cabinet. In spite of these measures to protect the privacy of all participants in this study, the researcher cannot prevent deductive disclosure. In addition, the researcher will show the manuscript to all participants prior to its submission. In other words, other participants in the study may be able to recognize you by the information you give during the interviews.

The researcher will take field notes during classroom observations. Field notes will not include any identifiers, such as names or locations.

Any hardcopies of data transcriptions will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researchers home until the completion of the research one year after receipt of IRB approval.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ OK to record me during the study  
\_\_\_\_\_ Not OK to record me during the study

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

There will be no costs for being in this study other than those associated with travel to the agreed upon interview site if outside of your home (e.g. coffee shop, or the interviewer's home) for which you will be reimbursed.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researcher listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB\_subjects@unc.edu.

-----  
**Participant's Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

## **Appendix B. Interview Protocols**

### **Sample Interview Questions for Students**

- Can you tell me about your life in Vietnam?
- Did you attend school? For how long?
- When did you leave Vietnam? Why did you leave Vietnam?
- Did you spend time in a refugee camp? If so, did you attend school there?
- Tell me what you thought about Bankston when you first arrived there?
- Describe your neighborhood.
- Can you tell me about your family?
- What do you typically do after school?
- Is your life at home different from your life at school?
- What do your parents think about your schooling?
- Can you tell me about your school experiences when you first arrived?
- Describe FHS for me.
- Do you like school now? What do/don't you like about school?
- What is your favorite subject in school?
- What is your most difficult subject in school?
- Is school hard/easy for you? How?
- Tell me about a typical day for you at FHS.
- How would you describe yourself as a student at FHS?
- How would your teachers describe you?
- Describe a favorite teacher.
- Are there other people at school that help you (tutor, counselor)?
- Who are your friends in school?
- How would you describe other students at FHS?
- How would other students describe you?
- How would you want teachers and students to describe you?
- Do you see yourself differently in different classes?
- What do you see yourself doing in the future?



### **Sample Interview Questions for ESL Teachers**

- Can you tell me about your background?
- How long have you been teaching?
- How would you describe a typical day in your class?
- How would you describe FHS?
- What are some of the benefits and challenges of being a teacher at FHS?
- What is your experience with working with Montagnard students?
- How would you describe [student participants' name]?
- What are some of his or her challenges in your class?
- How might you compare him or her to other students in your class?
- Do you think he/she will pass your class?
- How do you think [student's name] is doing in his or her other classes?
- Do you think FHS is a welcoming place for Montagnard students?
- What are some of the academic challenges Montagnard students face at FHS?
- What are some of the social challenges Montagnard students face at FHS?
- How do you feel about working with Montagnard students?
- How do you think other teachers feel about working with Montagnard students?
- How do you think other students feel about Montagnard students?
- What do you see [student's name] doing after he or she has graduated from FHS?
- How might schools better serve refugee students and their families?
- How might teacher preparation programs better prepare teacher candidates for working with refugee youth and their families?

### **Sample Interview Questions for Mainstream Teachers**

- Can you tell me about your background?
- How long have you been teaching?
- How would you describe a typical day in your class?
- How would you describe FHS?
- What are some of the benefits and challenges of being a teacher at FHS?
- What is your experience working with English Language Learners?
- How does having ELLs in your classroom influence your teaching?
- What is your experience with working with Montagnard students?
- How would you describe [student participants' name]?
- What are some of his or her challenges in your class?
- How might you compare him or her to other students in your class?
- Do you think he/she will pass your class?
- Do you think FHS is a welcoming place for Montagnard students?
- How do you feel about working with Montagnard students?
- How do you think other teachers feel about working with Montagnard students?
- What do you see [student's name] doing after he or she has graduated from FHS?
- How might schools better serve refugee students and their families?
- How might teacher preparation programs better prepare teacher candidates for working with refugee youth and their families?

### **Sample Interview Questions for Parents**

- Can you tell me about your background?
- Can you tell me about your life in Vietnam?
- Did you attend school in Vietnam?
- Why did you (and your family) leave Vietnam?
- What did you think about Bankston when you first arrived?
- What do you think about Bankston now?
- Do you work? Where?
- What do you think about your child's schooling?
- Have you ever visited FHS?
- Have you ever spoken with a teacher at FHS?
- What do you want for your child's future?

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