Strategic Transformation: Cultural and Gender Identity Negotiation in First-Generation Vietnamese Youth

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This article explores the various ways in which recent Vietnamese immigrant students form cultural and gender identities as they transition to U.S. schooling. Using data from a 2-year qualitative study that tracked the social and academic adjustment processes of recent Vietnamese immigrant youth, this article examines the tensions that students struggle with as they bring their own values and practices into the school site. The findings suggest that gender functions as a complex social category for recent immigrants that shifts across social contexts. The authors argue that accounting for a full picture of gender identity more accurately captures the manner in which recent immigrant students adapt to U.S. schooling.

KEYWORDS: gender, identity, immigration, education, Vietnamese youth

> Thu: Are you married?
> Diem Nguyen (DN): Yes. I have been married for 3 years.
> Thu: You look very young to be married. . . . Do you like being married?
> DN: Yes, I do. I have known my husband for over 10 years. We met in college.
> Thu: He lets you go to school even though you are married? You don't have to stay at home or quit school?
> DN: Yes, I am still in school. There is no conflict. Just because I am married does not mean that I have to quit graduate school.
> Thu: It is nice to be in the U.S. There are more opportunities for women, right? But I don't know. My cousin is 30 also, but her family does not allow her to have a boyfriend at all. Her parents want her to have a profession before she gets married. She is 30 and cannot have a boyfriend. [Shaking her head] My parents are too traditional. They have not progressed. What will I do? (Northwest Newcomer Center, student shadow, January 2003)

   This discussion of future pathways in the United States took shape at the crossroads of immigration, culture, gender, and education for Thu, a recent Vietnamese immigrant student at Northwest Newcomer Center. Thu

explored her future possibilities through her conversation with the coauthor of this article, Diem Nguyen, a 1.75-generation researcher who left Vietnam as a refugee in the mid-1970s.[1] Thu's perception of opportunities was contrasted with her perception of her family's expectations regarding gender roles. Her thoughts about possibilities were shaped by her own position as a 1.25-generation immigrant versus the acculturated position of the 1.75-generation Vietnamese American researcher. Thu's ideas about possible pathways for life in the United States were framed by the dissonant acculturation between her parents' views of the world and the ones emerging for her (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Her conversation with Nguyen offered insight into the ways that gender formation influences the adaptations and school experiences of recent immigrants. In this article, we explore this insight in detail—considering how recent immigrant Vietnamese high school students negotiate between the various cultural norms and expectations they experience to construct their gender identities.

School served as the major place for the development and initial formulation of contrasting ideas and beliefs regarding traditional gender roles and expectations for Thu and the other students in the study. Scholars have long highlighted the importance of school as one of the first and most formative institutional contacts for recent immigrants and have considered how immigrants' academic achievement is related to their status within the school context and to their social position within the larger society (C. Suarez-Orozco, 2004). The manner in which scholars explain the social status and social possibility of immigrant students has been highly influenced by two dominant images of immigrant life in the United States—the assimilationist and ethnic pluralist perspectives. Assimilation and ethnic pluralism are both theories about how immigrants adjust to life in America and assertions about how immigrants should live in America. Assimilationist perspectives highlight the rapid and near-universal shift away from the native language of immigrants to English and the widespread gravitation to American fashion and lifestyles in the second generation as evidence that contemporary immi-

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grants are assimilating (Alba & Nee, 2003). The pluralist perspective points to an impressive body of sociological evidence of a shift toward ethnic identities in the second generation and an increased acknowledgment of discrimination against one's own group as evidence that the melting-pot metaphor does not explain the experience of immigrants in the United States (Espiritu & Wolf, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2001).

Whether explicitly or implicitly, scholarship on immigrants in the context of education has been deeply influenced by the binary of assimilation and pluralism. Several scholars have highlighted the role that the maintenance of cultural and ethnic identities plays in the academic success of students (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, C., 2005; Qin-Hillard, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999b) or the roles that schools play in forcing the assimilation and racialization of students (Lee, 2005; Olsen, 1997). Still, other scholars have argued that linguistic and cultural assimilation facilitates the academic success of immigrant students (Huntington, 2004; Porter, 1990).

To be sure, some authors have moved beyond binaries to offer nuanced views of immigrant student adjustment. Recent scholarship on immigration and schooling has highlighted how gendered analyses might offer a more complete view of immigrant students' experiences. For example, Olsen (1997) and Sarroub (2005) examine how schools serve as liberating spaces for girls to explore aspects of life that tightly controlled community contexts do not permit, Valenzuela (1999b) examines how female students are more likely to preserve and maintain social and cultural capital in subtractive school contexts, and Lopez (2003) has critiqued the scholarship on immigrant adjustment as not accounting for the ways in which immigrant adaptation is shaped by race and gender. In an attempt to connect the immigrant adjustment literature with more nuanced views of immigrant identity in schools, we present a detailed portrait of the way in which gender identity intersects with immigration, schooling, and culture in the case of 1.25-generation Vietnamese immigrants. In doing so, we add to an emerging body of scholarly work that focuses on the important role that gender plays in shaping immigrant student achievement, adjustment, and cultural identity.

Specifically, we consider how 1.25-generation Vietnamese immigrant high school students negotiate the processes of cultural and gender identity formation as they transition to U.S. schooling. By exploring the tensions that students perceive and struggle with as they bring their own values and practices into the school site, we seek to better understand the ways in which the categories of gender and cultural identity are connected to the academic and social experiences of recent immigrant students. To that end, we ask the following questions: In what way does transitioning to U.S. schooling influence how Vietnamese immigrant students negotiate aspects of cultural norms and values related to gender? and How do the ways in which they understand and define gender roles and expectations influence their academic experiences? We situate the examination of these questions in the context of the sociological literature that looks at the initial experiences of immigrants in U.S. society and the education-based research that examines student iden-

tity formation in the context of racialized schooling. In doing so, we build new insights into the ways in which immigrant youth attempt to maintain and elevate social status and power in racialized school contexts. In their struggles to belong and come to terms with their racial, cultural, and linguistic differences, immigrant youth find space to negotiate and create new meanings connected to their future pathways.

Literature Review

Our study is situated in the research literature on immigrant adjustment and on immigration and gender. These broad fields have informed our research by highlighting which aspects of the transition to life in the United States hold salience in the adjustment of immigrant students. To sharpen our analytic lens in examining identity negotiation for the Vietnamese students in our study, we draw upon feminist and sociocultural theory to conceptually define the terms *gender*, *culture*, and *identity*. In doing so, we argue that scholarly examinations of immigration and schooling can be strengthened through analytic stances that examine identity formation through the processes, practices, and discourses of schooling. Using feminist and sociocultural stances allows us to examine what is missing in the current research literature on immigrant adjustment and extend the work of authors who have highlighted the dynamic and multiple aspects of identity negotiation for immigrant youth.

Immigrant Adjustment: Assimilation or Ethnic Pluralism?

Although the United States has a long history of immigration, as a nation we continue to grapple with the question of how to incorporate newcomers into social, cultural, and economic life. The debate between assimilation and acculturation or ethnic pluralism remains ongoing and at times contentious. Numerous scholars examining the issue of immigrant settlement have illustrated not only the ineffectiveness of assimilation as an approach to integrating immigrants but also its inclination to producing racial and economic inequality (Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1991, 2001; Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Rong & Preissle, 1998; C. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999b); yet, assimilation continues to be a popular and conventional strategy for responding to newcomers in many social and public institutions, including schools.

Although many scholars find assimilation to be problematic, they agree that a system of social integration is necessary and important to sustain a sense of unity within the larger society (Banks, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Several scholars suggest acculturation (Gibson, 1988; Rong & Preissle, 1998) or ethnic pluralism (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001) as alternatives to assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003). Rong and Preissle (1998) define *acculturation* as a process that results from two or multiple groups having sustained contact with each other. Many immigrants and scholars view acculturation

as a positive process. They consider acquiring new skills, such as learning English, to be important and additive rather than subtractive to maintaining an ethnic identity (Cummins, 2000; Gibson, 1988). For example, one particular ethnic group examined in the literature is the Sikh Indians of California. Gibson (1988) concludes that Sikhs resisted complete assimilation by pursuing a process of accommodation and acculturation. Sikh Indian immigrants rejected the notion that Americanization meant giving up their own cultural identity. In fact, parents encouraged their children to adopt the "good" ideas and practices of the Americans while maintaining Sikh culture. Gibson's study illustrates that acculturation involves immigrants' actively partaking in the process of redefining cultural practices and participating in the Americanization process, but on their own terms.

Although many scholars make important distinctions between assimilation and acculturation, the work of Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) problematizes the distinction and explanatory power of the two concepts. They define acculturation as an initial step toward eventual assimilation. These scholars pay close attention to the different strands of adaptation and the ways they impact family structures and dynamics. Portes and Rumbaut classify the different strands of adaptation as dissonant acculturation, consonant acculturation, and selective acculturation. Dissonant acculturation occurs when immigrant children's acquisition of language and American culture have surpassed their parents'. This pattern of acculturation often leads to role reversal, where the parents' role as adults is diminished. In consonant acculturation, acculturation between parents and children occurs at similar rates. Consonant acculturation tends to lead to an abandoning of the cultural identity and language. This pattern of adaptation closely connects to the more traditional definition of assimilation, as discussed above. Selective acculturation is the most ideal form of adaptation, which "takes place when the learning process of both generations is embedded in a co-ethnic community of sufficient size and institutional diversity to slow down the cultural shift and promote partial retention of the parents' home language and norms" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 54). Similar to Gibson's notion of accommodation and acculturation, this selective acculturation creates less fragmentation between immigrant parents and their children.

Public schools have been at the center of this debate on assimilation and acculturation because they are one of the most important social institutions for absorbing and socializing newcomers to adapt to the larger mainstream culture (Gibson, 1988; Olneck, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Tyack, 1974). In socializing students to adopt mainstream values and practices, researchers have highlighted how racialization serves as one of the components of the socialization process in school (Lee, 1996, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999b; Waters, 1996). The ways in which race is structured into the day-to-day practices in schools act as a mechanism of social conformity, contributing to the underachievement of many immigrant students (Stritikus & Garcia, 2003; M. M. Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Villenas &

Deyhle, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999b; Waters, 1996, 1999). Portes and Rumbaut (1996) and Sassler (2006) suggest that the underachievement of many immigrant youth eventually leads to downward or segmented assimilation.

Ogbu's (1991, 2001) notion of oppositional identity and C. Suarez-Orozco's (2004) concept of social mirroring are two prominent theories that further explain how immigrants experience segmented assimilation. Ogbu's *oppositional identity* refers to the process of resistance that youth of color, including immigrants, develop against assimilation. In many cases, the youth form attitudes and engage in behaviors that go explicitly against mainstream society. For instance, the West Indian youth in Waters's (1999) study, particularly the male students, often experience overt hostility from mainstream society due to their Black racial background. The stereotypical racial representations of the immigrant youth as suspicious and threatening prevent many people, including neighbors, authority figures, and teachers, from seeing the youth as whole and multidimensional human beings. Although society has reduced West Indian immigrant youth to a series of unfavorable images, they are expected to assimilate to mainstream American culture. In articulating the dichotomy between Blackness and Whiteness, Lee (2005) writes that Blackness is considered "everything bad about being American," whereas Whiteness is synonymous with "all that is ostensibly good about American and 'being American'" (p. 4). Immigrant youth are pressured in various ways from teachers and peers to adopt White mainstream American values. However, adopting Whiteness does not afford the person of color the status of Whiteness (Lee, 2005). As West Indian youth continue to experience hostility and violence on a daily basis, many of them respond by rejecting assimilation and pursuing an identity that works in opposition to White mainstream American culture (Waters, 1999). In constructing an oppositional identity, immigrant youth also dismiss schooling, which they perceive as connected to mainstream culture. While they disassociate with what they perceive as assimilation, the attitudes and behaviors that the youth adopt put them at risk of academic failure and eventual segmented assimilation.

C. Suarez-Orozco's (2004) notion of social mirroring provides another important explanation for segmented assimilation. Social mirroring suggests that the images and beliefs surrounding the students will be absorbed, internalized, and reflected in their behaviors. The low opinions reflected from teachers and others in the environment work to shape many immigrant students' social and academic identities and contribute to their poor academic performances. A study by Valenzuela (1999b) provides an important case of social mirroring. The author argues that the students' general perception of lack of caring on the part of the school and teachers contributes to their negative attitudes toward school. Students become discouraged and disinterested in school as they encounter teachers whom they perceive to lack compassion and a sense of caring. The low opinions reflected from teachers and others work to shape the immigrant students' social and academic identities, which eventually become a form of self-prophecy as students accept these messages to be true and act on them. In this process, they get

caught in the achievement gap and experience downward assimilation.

Immigrant Adjustment and Gender

Increasingly, research shows that immigration is a gendered process (Espiritu, 2001; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999a; Waters, 1996, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). Studies reveal that men and women are received differently by their host society, which leads to different patterns of social interaction and participation in the new host society and in transnational spaces (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005). Yet, only in recent years have scholars begun to bring gender into the core of migration studies (e.g., DeLaet, 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999; Pessar, 1984, 1985, 1999). To gain a fuller picture of the ways in which schooling influences the lives of recent immigrant students, we connect school-based studies of youth with the family- and labor-centered examinations of immigrants' gendered experiences.

Much of the scholarship focusing on the role of gender in immigrant communities is situated in the family context (Espiritu, 2001; Kibria, 1993; Lopez, 2003; Louie, 2004; Pessar, 1984; C. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999a). A common belief regarding men's and women's social status is that women tend to gain higher social status and become more emancipated in the United States (Espiritu, 2001; Pessar, 1984, 1999). However, the shift in social status for immigrant women is not consistent across the different domains of their social and personal lives (Pessar, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). They may gain higher status in one domain, such as at the workplace, but continue to be subordinated in their homes or in their ethnic community. Kibria (1993) found that even though young Vietnamese immigrant women may gain improved status at work, in their homes their roles remain relatively unchanged. Within the Hmong community, Lee (2005) observed a similar pattern developing between men and women. While Hmong women began to work outside of the home and develop a voice within the community, in the home, men continued to have more authority. Thus, workforce participation has not helped to restructure or dismantle the system of patriarchy within the home.

Immigrant men often experience a sense of loss in social and economic status after their arrival but continue to maintain their cultural practices and values in the home and in their community (Espiritu, 2001; Lopez, 2003; Kibria, 1993; Lee, 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). To offset the loss of social and economic status outside of the home, many immigrant men emphasize the importance of cultural norms and practices in the home and community, which helps to maintain systems of patriarchy in many cases.

The structure of patriarchy not only persists for immigrant adults but also is reproduced in their children's lives (Espiritu, 2001; Kibria, 1993; Sarroub, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999a; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) and often creates tension between the different generations within the home (Lee, 2005). Numerous studies show that double standards exist between male and female children (Espiritu, 2001; Kibria, 1993; Louie, 2004; Qin-Hillard, 2003;

Sarroub, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999b; Waters, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 1998, 2001). While immigrant males are afforded more opportunities and freedom to explore life outside of the home, girls' social activities are usually under careful scrutiny because they are perceived as "keepers of culture" (Billson, 1995). Although immigrant families have always been concerned about passing on their culture and traditions to their children, daughters are often expected to preserve these practices for the next generation. In a study focusing on Filipino girls, Espiritu (2001) argues that the Filipino's community-heightened emphasis on female chastity is "a way to counter the cultural Americanization of the Philippines, to resist the assimilative and alienating demands of U.S. society, and to reaffirm to themselves their self-worth in the face of colonial, racial, class, and gendered subordination" (p. 415). While this strategy of elevating female virtue is a way to counter assimilation and to differentiate their own cultural norms from those of the mainstream culture, it also ties girls and women to the traditional patriarchal structures.

While many immigrant families and communities embrace traditional values regarding gender roles and expectations, which tend to restrict women's personal choices and movements, studies consistently show that young immigrant women have been excelling in school (Lopez, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Qin-Hillard, 2003; Rodriguez, 2003; C. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Waters, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). These studies show that within the same ethnic group immigrant girls tend to demonstrate higher educational motivation and achievement than boys do.

Qin-Hillard's (2003) work offers one possible explanation for the gender gap. Using survey data on student attitudes toward school, she finds a positive correlation between the maintenance of ethnic identity and positive attitudes toward school. Strong ethnic identity acts against the downward assimilation facing many first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants. Over time, Qin-Hillard found that boys, whose academic performance continued to slide, were more likely than girls to adopt a hyphenated identity, such as Chinese-American or Dominican-American. In addition to maintaining their ethnic identification, girls also tend to have stronger social networks that help them become more successful at school, such as supportive teachers, parental supervision, and female friends who are serious about school (Qin-Hillard, 2003). Immigrant boys, on the other hand, tend to have fewer social networks that would benefit them in school. At home, parents are less strict with boys and allow them greater personal freedom outside of the home. This personal freedom increases their chances of encountering negative forces on the street (Qin-Hillard, 2003), which decreases their chances of achieving in school. Meanwhile, parents tend to have closer supervision over their daughters' social and personal activities and restrict their chances of having a social life outside of the home. Zhou and Bankston (1994, 1998, 2001) argue that the tight control immigrant parents keep over immigrant girls acts as a buffer to the negative aspects of American life. With few social outlets outside of the home, school not only becomes a place for academic learning

for immigrant girls but also serves as a crucial place for social activities and gatherings.

The pattern of immigrant girls outperforming immigrant boys within the same ethnic group has been found to be consistent in smaller scale in-depth studies (Lopez, 2002; Rodriguez, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999b; Waters, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 1994, 1998). In these different studies, researchers suggest that school plays an important role in shaping and perpetuating gender roles and racial stereotypes among immigrant students. Lopez (2002), Waters (1996), and Valenzuela (1999a), for example, all indicate that female immigrant students, who are often seen by teachers as more approachable, are able to gain access to greater social and cultural capital. Acquiring greater social capital helps female students build a more positive attitude about school than male students do. Meanwhile, male students often elicit feelings of fear, intimidation, and suspicion from their teachers. They internalize these messages from their teachers and begin to dismiss school, fulfilling the teachers' initial perceptions of them as obstructive. In this process, the teachers' actions and inactions reinforce gender roles and racial stereotyping among immigrant students and help contribute to differential achievement patterns between male and female immigrant students.

Research on the experiences of Vietnamese immigrant youth stresses the role that race, class, culture, family dynamics, and gender play in shaping the youths' social conditions and patterns of adaptation (Kibria, 1993; Zhou & Bankston, 1994, 1998, 2001). Zhou and Bankston's (1998) examination of Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans found that refugee youth were able to successfully adapt to aspects of life in the United States despite acute poverty. The authors attributed the academic success of the Vietnamese refugee youth to the existence of a strong and supportive ethnic community. In particular, the authors showed how Vietnamese children were able to attain upward mobility through the strong ethnic community and the maintenance of traditional cultural norms (cooperation, family loyalty, repayment of obligations).

What is clear from the work of Zhou (2001) is that Vietnamese immigrant youth, like other youth, learn to straddle social and cultural spaces. They adopt the language and cultural skills to be able to navigate within the mainstream culture. At the same time, they develop important networks, similar to what Brittain (2002) and Schwartz and Montgomery (2002) define as transnational spaces, within their ethnic community to help maintain their cultural and ethnic identities.

Transnational participation may include connecting with an ethnic and cultural community at both the local and global levels. Through the power of technology, such as the Internet and mass media, immigrant youth find ways to remain connected to their cultural communities (Brittain, 2002; Maira, 2004). Brittain describes transnational spaces within schools to mean "a human collectivity of immigrant students from a particular country where students engage in activities that cross the boundaries of two nation-states . . . and create a sense of belonging that overlaps these two nation-states" (p. 49). *Crossing the boundaries* in this sense refers to a symbolic crossing as opposed

to a physical crossing. As they engage with the two social and cultural worlds, the physical and symbolic boundaries that immigrant youth cross on a daily basis reveal a complex practice of assessing and constructing meanings related to cultural and ethnic identity.

Toward a Process and Practice View of Gender, Culture, and Identity

We draw on feminist and sociocultural theory to frame gender, culture, and identity to offer a full account of the complexity of immigrant student adjustment and the role that initial schooling plays in that process. The research on immigrant student adjustment and on gender and immigration has important explanatory power related to how schools shape the initial experiences of immigrant students. One aspect in which the research literature could offer keener insight relates to how various scholars define, either explicitly or implicitly, *culture* and, consequently, *cultural identity*. In this sense, the research on immigrant adjustment has a great deal in common with the research on the achievement and learning of immigrant students because it has tended to frame culture as "a system of meanings and practices, cohesive across time, which individual members carry with them from place to place. This view characterizes individuals as somewhat passive carriers of culture, where culture is a set of rituals, beliefs, and fixed traits" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 450). A prime example of how this definition gets operationalized is the manner in which shifts in cultural identity are often measured in seminal studies—survey measurements of self-identified shifting beliefs, values, or ethnic identification (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Qin-Hillard, 2003).

We utilize a sociocultural definition of culture forwarded by Nasir and Hand (2006) that "culture is both carried by individuals and created in the moment-to-moment interactions with one another as they participate in (and reconstruct) cultural practices" (p. 458). From this practice-based perspective, socially patterned activities influenced by community norms and values are important contexts through which identity is enacted (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). This perspective allows us to examine the fluidity of culture and the tensions between and within groups (Lowe, 1996; Ngo, 2002). Cultural identity, then, is seen as a social process that is always in development and that finds meaning in social relationships and practices (Hall, 1996; Lowe, 1996).

Through detailed examinations of the way Vietnamese students talk about and negotiate aspects of the cultural and gendered meanings of the communities to which they belong and observe, we attempt to build an emic understanding of American and Vietnamese cultural norms. These terms do not describe fixed essential elements of life but rather sets of values, practices, and discourses that swirl for students as they negotiate and form their identities. Thus, for the purpose of this study, discourses and practices that attempt to "hail subjects into place" (Hall, 1996, p. 5) constitute a meeting site for the processes and practices that shape identities. We use the concept of identity to mean a production that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted

within, not outside, representation (Hall, 1990). For the purpose of this study, we define *norms* as the cultural meanings the Vietnamese immigrant students make from the group expectations surrounding their behaviors and interactions. As rules that are used to control groups and society, norms are closely linked to issues of power (Alasuutari, 1995).

In terms of gender, we also adopt a process-based explanation and argue that it is the construction of roles and expectations related to femininity and masculinity (Sunderland, 2004). Freeman and McElhinny (2001) argue that gender is a "structure of relationships that is often reproduced, sometimes challenged, and potentially transformed in everyday linguistic practices" (p. 221). The ideas and meanings connected to gender roles and expectations continue to be reshaped as they encounter new cultural practices and social discourses. *Discourse* is broadly defined as a social and cultural lens for understanding and guiding social relations and behaviors. Sunderland (2004) writes that discourse is a "way of seeing the world" (p. 7). Discourse can be manifested through spoken or written language or through social interactions among people. Gender identity construction, Butler (1993) writes, "not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration" (p. 373). It is through the process of reconstitution and redefinition that gender takes on meaning and purpose in people's lives.

As an interactive process, people's prior experiences and notions of gender, which may initially be informed by one set of cultural practices, contribute to the construction of new meanings and ideas around gender (Freeman & McElhinny, 2001). Central to the formation of new meanings and ideas are the concepts of culture and identity—terms that take on multiple and often contradictory meanings in research on immigration. In adapting to the school, the Vietnamese immigrant youth began to recognize and engage with other discourses on gender that exist within the institution. The youths' ideas and meanings of gender can manifest in various and contradictory ways as they interact with different cultural perspectives. Framing gender as a process of ongoing redefinition allows us to examine more closely how immigrant youth participate in constructing meanings around cultural and gender identity in school. This article positions gender at the core of its analysis, providing a different angle from which to understand how immigrant youth take part in defining gender as they encounter new social and cultural contexts.

Method

The data for this article are drawn from a larger 2-year qualitative study utilizing ethnographic techniques that focused on the social and academic adjustment of 1.25-generationVietnamese immigrant students. The research project consisted of two phases. The initial phase focused on the immigrant students' experiences at a newcomer center, and the latter phase examined their transition to mainstream high schools. We purposely selected the 22 focal students from the larger pool of 30 participants for this case because we

Table 1
Northwest School District Enrollment Summary:
Number and Percentage of Students by Ethnic Group

	School Year		
Ethnic Group	2002-2003 Number (%)	2004-2004 Number (%)	2004-2005 Number (%)
American Indian	1,216 (2.6)	1,115 (2.4)	1,097 (2.4)
African American	10,706 (22.9)	10.530 (22.5)	10,338 (22.3)
Chicano/Latino			
Latino/Non-White	3,283 (7.0)	3,233 (6.9)	3,186 (6.8)
Latino White	1,841 (3.9)	1,944 (4.2)	2,031 (4.4)
Summary	5,124 (10.9)	5,177 (11.1)	5,216 (11.2)
Asian			
Chinese	2,405 (5.1)	2,405 (5.1)	2,483 (5.3)
East Indian	284 (0.6)	281 (0.6)	287 (0.6)
Filipino	2,133 (4.5)	2,068 (4.4)	2,015 (4.3)
Japanese	799 (1.7)	777 (1.7)	782 (1.7)
Korean	374 (0.8)	349 (0.7)	311 (0.7)
Samoan	448 (1.0)	438 (1.0)	538 (1.2)
Vietnamese	2,347 (5.0)	2,320 (5.0)	2,318 (5.0)
Other Southeast Asian	1,727 (3.7)	1,614 (3.5)	1,516 (3.3)
Other Asian	485 (1.0)	497 (1.1)	538 (1.3)
Summary	11,002 (23.4)	10,808 (23.1)	10.640
(22.9)			
White American	18,917 (40.2)	19.100 (40.9)	19,102 (41.2)
Total	46,965 (100.0)	46,730 (100.0)	46,416 (100.0)

Source. School district demographic information.

were able to continue tracking the transition of these particular students to their mainstream high schools. The experiences of these 22 focal students speak to the complexity and interconnectedness of gender, culture, and academic experiences. In this article, we highlight their perceptions, understandings, and reflections as related to their ideas of and thinking about cultural and gender identity.

Research Context

The research project was conducted over a 2-year period in an urban school district with a substantial Vietnamese student population in the Pacific Northwest.[2] The district is highly diverse, with a student-of-color population of 58% in the 2004-2005 academic year. As Table 1 illustrates, the ethnic makeup of the student population is 22.3% African American, 22.9% Asian, 11.2% Latino, 2.4% Native American, and 41.2% White for the 2004-2005 year. The table also includes demographic information dating back to 2002, when this research project began.

Table 2

**Northwest School District Summary: Number and Percentage
of Bilingual Students in Each Ethnic Group**

	School Year		
Ethnic Group	2002-2003 Number (%)	2003-2004 Number (%)	2004-2005 Number (%)
American Indian	22 (1.9)	21 (1.8)	22 (1.9)
African American	1,492 (14.0)	1,543 (14.8)	1,653 (15.8)
Chicano/Latino			
Latino/Non-White	1,568 (48.0)	1,544 (47.8)	1,562 (49.0)
Latino White	819 (45.0)	935 (47.6)	960 (49.0)
Summary	2,387 (47.5)	2,479 (48.2)	2,522 (49.0)
Asian			
Chinese	1,396 (58.0)	1,404 (56.3)	1,396 (56.0)
East Indian	83 (30.9)	93 (32.9)	88 (31.5)
Filipino	826 (39.1)	827 (40.0)	797 (38.4)
Japanese	83 (10.6)	75 (9.8)	81 (10.5)
Korean	92 (25.1)	70 (22.0)	60 (18.0)
Samoan	134 (29.1)	121 (28.5)	148 (29.0)
Vietnamese	1,851 (79.9)	1,823 (79.0)	1,828 (79.2)
Other Southeast Asian	1,210 (73.0)	1,081 (69.4)	998 (64.0)
Other Asian	127 (27.6)	145 (28.4)	148 (29.0)
Summary	5,802 (53.5)	5,639 (52.5)	5,491 (51.1)
White American	316 (1.7)	318 (1.0)	280 (1.5)
Total	10,019 (21.6)	10,000 (21.5)	9,968 (21.4)

Note. Percentages are based on total numbers of students in each ethnic category.
Source. School district demographic information.

The English-language-learner (ELL) student population makes up 21.4%
of the district's total school-age population. As a whole, Asians make up the
largest ELL group, with Vietnamese students representing the highest per-
centage in the past decade. Table 2 illustrates the numbers and percentage
of ELL students in the school district over the past 3 years. Data collection
took place at three different high schools: Northwest Newcomer Center,
Greenfield High, and Englewood High.

Northwest Newcomer Center. The research project initially began at the
Northwest Newcomer Center (NWNC), a first stop for all immigrants in the
school district with beginning-level English proficiency. In the Northwest
School District, immigrant and refugee students who do not meet the English-
language proficiency level are placed at the newcomer center. NWNC pro-
vides beginning classes in English as a second language (ESL) and helps to
orient students to U.S. schooling. At NWNC, a team of three researchers
recruited Vietnamese immigrant students of secondary school age who had
been in the country fewer than 6 months. We observed students at NWNC for

1 academic year as they began to adjust to school in the United States. After the 1-year period, we followed the students as they transferred to one of two mainstream high schools—Greenfield or Englewood.

Greenfield High School. Greenfield High is located in a predominantly White middle-class neighborhood. It is a comprehensive 9–12 high school. It has a reputation as a good school, and many of the Vietnamese participants wanted to attend this school. Of the 1,672 students that attend the school, 10% receive ELL services. Of the student population, 62.5% is White, 17% Asian, 12% Latino, 7% African American, and 2% Native American.

Englewood High School. Englewood High is a comprehensive 9–12 high school located in a mixed-income neighborhood and serves 1,167 students. It has one of the larger ESL departments in the district, and 15% of the total school population is classified as ELL. The large ELL student population in part contributes to the school's high level of diversity. Thirty-four percent of the student body is Asian, 34% is Caucasian, 22% is African American, and 9% is Latino.

Previous schooling context. In addition to our fieldwork at these three schools, we spent 3 weeks conducting fieldwork in Vietnam—observing two schools formerly attended by select focal students. We visited one school in a small town in Dong Nai Province and one in Ho Chi Minh City. This fieldwork was an attempt to provide a description of what the realities of schooling and cultural context might have been for the students in Vietnam. This previous cultural context helps us to gain insight into the students' transnational spaces, which they frequently invoke as Vietnamese cultural norms. These transnational spaces include physical spaces and those recalled from memory (Brittain, 2002).

Our data collection in Vietnam was influenced by the composition of the research team, which was a 1.75-generation Vietnamese immigrant whose family arrived in the United States as refugees in the late 1970s and a 2nd-generation European American immigrant whose previous work had largely focused on Latino students. In much of the existing literature on Vietnamese Americans, the main points of reference to Vietnam are closely tied to postwar conditions (Cargill & Huynh, 2000; Do, 1999; Kibria, 1993; Rutledge, 1992; Takaki, 1989; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). However, the ways that many of the 1.25-generation Vietnamese immigrant students in our study depict social, political, and economic conditions in Vietnam seem to differ vastly from the existing narratives. As we became more familiar with the focal students, it became clear that the Vietnam that they had left was much different than the Vietnam that Nguyen fled. While many aspects of the beliefs and values of the recent immigrants were familiar to Nguyen, which provided insight into constructing the design and questions for the study, it seemed clear that as a research team we did not have sufficient knowledge

of the modern context of Vietnamese schools. Given this gap in the literature, and our experiences as outsiders to the cultural context of the 1.25-generation Vietnamese immigrant students, we made the decision to go to Vietnam to visit the schools that the former students attended. We visited the schools during winter break of the 2nd year of the study. The visit allowed us to more deeply understand the experiences of the focal students.

Study Participants

The participants for the initial phase of the 2-year study consisted of 30 Vietnamese immigrant students who had recently arrived in the United States (see Table 3). We recruited the participants to join the study when they first arrived at NWNC. Half of the participants were male students and half were female students. They ranged in age from 12 to 21. They all received free or reduced lunches. With the assistance of teachers and Vietnamese instructional aides, we recruited 30 of the 54 Vietnamese immigrant students that we approached to be in the study.

At NWNC, we shadowed all 30 students throughout their core academic subjects including ESL, ESL reading, math, social studies, and science. We conducted 40 observations of classroom periods and spent an additional 150 hours interacting with the youth outside of classroom spaces, through student shadowing and observations during breaks and between classes. If teachers consented, we interviewed all teachers in whose classrooms we spent significant time. While the students were at NWNC, each was interviewed once for a full hour. Informal follow-up interviews were also conducted throughout their time at NWNC. We conducted an additional 60 observations of the students in their advisory periods, which was a homeroom class conducted by Vietnamese instructional assistants. Advisory period was designed to provide primary language support to immigrant students. Nguyen also spent approximately 250 hours observing and interacting with the youth in after-school programs (dance practice and homework tutoring) and field trips (zoo, science center, aquarium, city parks, hiking trip, baseball game, Asian art museum, city art museum, harbor tour, and grocery store).

The analysis in this article highlights the experiences of the select focal (22 of the original 30) students who matriculated to either Greenfield or Englewood high schools. Of the 30 students who were initially recruited at the newcomer center, 22 transferred to the two main high schools, while 5 dropped out due to age and 3 enrolled in middle school. We chose these two high schools because they were the primary destination for the Vietnamese immigrants who attended NWNC. While at NWNC, students were given some degree of choice in selecting the high schools they wished to attend. Many of the Vietnamese students had relatives or friends who attended these schools. Consequently, they became popular choices. All of the students were in ESL programs. At their mainstream high schools, ESL students were also required to take an elective, such as art, music, or gym, which were all considered mainstream classes.

Table 3

Participants by Year and Age of Arrival, Gender, School, Grade Level at Mainstream School, and Highest Grade Completed in Vietnam

Student	Year Arrived in the United States	Age at Arrival	Gender	Length of Stay at Northwest Newcomer Center	Mainstream School[a]	Grade Level at Mainstream School	Highest Grade Level in Vietnam
Dao Do	2003	18	Male	1 year	Englewood	10	8
Duc Do	2003	19	Male	1 semester	Englewood	12	11
Duong Duong	2003	17	Female	1½ years	Englewood	10	5
Hanh Do	2003	15	Female	1 year	Englewood	10	6
Hoa	2002	16	Female	1 year	Englewood	10	9
Kiet Tran	2003	19	Male	1 year	Englewood	12	10
Kim	2003	17	Female	1 year	Englewood	9	6
Loan Lam	2002	16	Female	1 year	Englewood	9	8
Loc	2002	14	Male	2 years	Englewood	9	6
Long Lam	2003	15	Male	1 year	Englewood	10	8
Danh	2003	16	Female	1½ years	Englewood	10	8
Senh Lam	2002	20	Male	1 year	Englewood	12	6
Thai Lam	2002	17	Male	1 year	Englewood	11	8
Trieu Lai	2002	17	Male	1 year	Englewood	10	8
Minh Nguyen	2002	19	Male	1 year	Englewood	12	10
Trung Trung	2002	17	Male	1 year	Englewood	10	8
Hai Nguyen	2003	20	Male	1 semester	Greenfield	12	Graduated
Linh Ngo	2002	15	Female	1 year	Greenfield	10	8
Ngoc Nguyen	2003	18	Female	1 year	Greenfield	11	11
Oanh Tran	2003	20	Female	1 year	Greenfield	10	6
Yan Vo	2003	16	Female	1 year	Greenfield	9	8
Yen Yen	2003	16	Female	1 year	Greenfield	10	6
Hieu Trung	2002	13	Male	1 year	Junior high	7	5
May Lai	2002	15	Female	2 years	Junior high	8	6
Thanh Li	2002	15	Male	1 year	Junior high	8	6
Thuy Nga	2003	12	Female	2 years	Junior high	7	5
Luc Lam	2003	21	Male	1 year			8
Thu	2002	21	Female	1 year			10
Dung Sen	2003	21	Female	1 semester			Graduated
Tri Tran	2003	21	Male	1 year			8

Note. All student names are pseudonyms.
a. Students 21 years of age or older were not eligible to be in the K–12 school system. Most of these students transferred to an English-as-a-second-language program at the community college. Others found work.

We conducted 60 observations of core academic subjects at these two high schools and interviewed ESL teachers and students a minimum of one time during our time at the school. For each of the focal students, we also conducted two informal follow-up interviews during the school year. In

addition, we conducted more than 100 hours of participant observation at Greenfield High and more than 200 hours at Englewood High. Participant observation consisted of student shadowing and observations during lunch, before school, in student clubs (Vietnamese American Student Association), and after school. Over the course of the academic year, Nguyen also conducted more than 250 hours of observations in students' homes and community settings (temple, favorite eateries, and bubble tea shops).

In total, we conducted approximately 1,100 hours of observation, both in school and in community settings over the course of 2 years. We spent approximately 3 days a week observing in the school, home, or community. We conducted more than 50 semistructured interviews and more than 70 nonstructured follow-up interviews. We also spent 3 weeks of fieldwork in Vietnam, interviewing school administrations and students' former teachers.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data for this research project consist of field notes from school and classroom observations, field notes from the 3 weeks of observation in Vietnam, interview transcripts, student work, and curricular materials. Interview data consist of both semistructured and nonstructured interviews with the 22 focal students. Student interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then translated by an interpreter into English during the transcribing process. The interviews were translated by an independent translator. Each translated manuscript was then reviewed by Nguyen. Nguyen read the translated manuscript and listened to the audiotapes simultaneously for consistency and accuracy.

The data analysis occurred in several different stages. In the beginning stages, classification or coding of the data took place. The codes were initially generated from the research questions, existing research literature, and conceptual framework (Thomas, 1993). Drawing on feminist and sociocultural theory allowed us to frame gender and cultural identity as a process of ongoing redefinition. We developed a coding system that allowed us to probe the meanings that Vietnamese youth constructed around the categories of gender, culture, and identity.

These initial codes provided a starting list, which continued to be revised during the interaction with data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We used a software program called Atlas ti, to code the data. Categorizing the data under different codes allowed us to see different patterns and themes emerging (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Consequently, we examined the data for ways that immigrant youth constructed meanings in the day-to-day moments of schooling. These different themes were interpreted within the broader social and cultural contexts of the school (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Socially situated and interpretive examinations of the different school contexts provide an understanding of the social and cultural factors that constrain and enable students, offering a more nuanced perspective on the ways in which school culture informs recent immigrant students' social identities.

Findings

School is one of few social spaces for immigrant youth to interact with their peers, particularly in mixed-gender settings, and emerges as a critical site to make sense of their perceptions of gender. Male and female immigrant youth rarely have opportunities to interact outside of school, as parents tend to have strict rules about their daughters' activities outside of the home (Espiritu, 2001; Sarroub, 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 1998, 2001). School then becomes an important space not only for academic purposes but also for social and cultural exchanges between male and female peers. Olsen (1997) and Sarroub (2005) indicate that schools are liberating spaces for many immigrant girls because they experience a temporary sense of freedom. This study delves into the ways in which different spaces in school provide both male and female youth with opportunities to explore and enact this sense of freedom as they negotiate gender and cultural identities.

While studies show that immigrant men and women have different patterns of social adaptation (Espiritu, 2001; Kibria, 1993; Pessar, 1984, 1999; Zhou, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2001), the analyses tend to frame gender as a static and fixed category. This perspective suggests that the meanings and norms related to gender are already established, and immigrants have little say in redefining gender norms to fit the different cultural contexts and social circumstances in their own lives. A fixed category of gender suggests that as immigrants move from the public to private domains (work and home), they take up the set of gender norms ascribed in each cultural setting. For example, in discussing the two cultural worlds that exist in the lives of Vietnamese immigrant youth, Zhou (2001) suggests that the youth adapt by straddling the different contexts. Thus, Zhou argues that Vietnamese youth are able to maintain and practice both sets of cultural norms by switching from one to the next. This analysis indicates that immigrant youth are the ones who change and adapt, whereas the different sets of cultural norms remain constant and unaltered.

The findings in our study reveal a different pattern among Vietnamese immigrant youth as they actively become involved in the process of defining gender and cultural norms. The youth, in fact, are strategic in the various ways they interpret gender and cultural identity in relation to each other, schooling, and future opportunities. As they learn about and absorb discourses on gender that are different from the ones they already know, the Vietnamese immigrant youth filter in aspects of those discourses (notions of gender equality, freedom of expression and opportunities, relationships and marriage) as part of their social repertoire. In their interactions with each other, they begin to employ their understanding of both the Vietnamese and American cultural norms to define meanings and purposes related to culture and gender. They strategically incorporate the new ideas and discourses that they learn, such as freedom and equality, to create opportunities or build rationales to explain ideas that may not fit with Vietnamese cultural norms and practices. They use the strategy of moving back and forth between their understandings of Vietnamese and American notions of gender as ways to maintain or elevate

their social status with each other. The youth use the different discourses or ideas of gender in their social environments to construct gender identities (Sunderland, 2004) that connect with their beliefs, circumstances, and future pathways.

While language barriers and racialization marginalize them in mainstream cultural contexts (Olsen, 1997), the Vietnamese youth utilize ESL classrooms and transnational spaces to reestablish their sense of identity, status, and power. Cultural and gender norms become important areas where many of the Vietnamese youth feel that they have the power to reshape and form connections with their thinking, social circumstances, and future goals. In trying to establish status and power with each other, gender and cultural identity formation becomes a dynamic process that continues to shift and change across different social contexts.

To understand the tensions that the Vietnamese students encounter as they interpret and make sense of their cultural and gender identities, we begin our findings with a discussion of the data from our fieldwork in Vietnam. Having a sense of the social, cultural, and political contexts of Vietnam provides a better understanding of the ways in which youth perceived and constructed cultural and gender norms previous to arriving to the United States.

The Transnational Context: School and Society in Vietnam

Vietnam is currently undergoing tremendous social, cultural, and economic changes. As forces of modernization and globalization move the Vietnamese people into the new free-market economy, public policies and everyday cultural practices come together through different social and cultural institutions to help steer a sense of balance between the old and the new and public and private spaces. Over the past 30 years, since the end of the Vietnam-American War, Vietnam has shed its war-torn image to become a growing and thriving economic force in the Southeast Asian region.

We observed that from big cities to small villages, the social and cultural life in the public spaces—markets, streets, Internet cafés, and public and religious institutions—was vibrant and lively, constantly brimming with people. In a sense, Drummond (2000) argues, as people congregate and appropriate the public sphere, they help to blur the boundaries between public and private worlds. The blur between public and private worlds seems to come together in almost seamless ways as we encountered situations such as groups of people congregating in front of people's homes to watch television, making the private television set and the neighbor's living room part of the public domain, or when the national anthem and public announcements came over the public address system and into everyone's homes in the wee hours of dawn, disrupting and, in many ways, regulating people's morning routines.

Public schools were an important merging point between the public and private spheres of social and cultural life in Vietnam. The school context was made up of a striking juxtaposition between a Marxist ideologically positioned policy and a long-held Confucian-influenced system of social relationships

and hierarchy (Dalton, Pham, Pham, & Ong, 2002; Hirschman & Loi, 1996). From our observations and nonstructured interviews with different school leaders, we learned that public schools were centrally regulated and highly structured, from staffing appointments to curriculum planning. From one place to the next, the schools exuded a sense of uniformity, as the facilities were similarly structured around a big square courtyard, classrooms were equipped with long wooden benches and desks, and a single portrait of Ho Chi Minh hung above each teacher's desk. This sense of sameness was further punctuated by the students' uniforms—boys in white button-down shirts and black pants and girls in white *ao dai*, or long dresses.

Both the Confucian-influenced social order and the Marxist-ideology-driven educational policy seemed to instill in pupils a general sense of social propriety, orderliness, and responsibility. These qualities connected to the larger goals of the national educational plan to teach youth life skills and proper behavior to uphold the socialist ideals (Nguyen, 1998). We witnessed many instances of students leading and regulating each other, such as upper-class students directing younger ones to class in the morning; older students leading the morning flag-raising procession; students taking responsibility for cleaning their school; and upper-class students reprimanding younger ones to "behave accordingly."

While the Marxist-based ideology seemed entrenched in the school culture, many of the social behaviors were aligned with Confucian values, especially the ideas of personal propriety and strict hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and between peers (Hadley, 2003; Hirschman & Loi, 1996). For example, students practiced a great sense of deference toward their teachers. They formally greeted their teachers by standing up and slightly bowing their heads when their teachers entered or left the classrooms. Students also expressed and performed these Confucian-influenced notions of filial piety toward each other (Hirschman & Loi, 1996). They addressed one another in formal ways, using *anh* or *chi*, or older brother or older sister. Students also seemed to move in gender-segregated groups, maintaining a proper sense of propriety between male and female peers.

The social and cultural contexts that informed how many of the students in the study perceived schooling, culture, and cross-gender relationships prior to their arrival in the United States were guided by a national culture entrenched in Confucian values and Marxist ideology. However, these traditional values and cultural practices were also met with the fast-growing presence of globalization and the free-market economy, altering aspects of popular culture, such as recreation and street life. While we do not contend that there was a one-to-one match between the performances of social identity that we observed in Vietnam and the actual social identity of the students, we do believe that the examination of the actual backgrounds of students is instructive for understanding how students' prior experiences influence their initial transition and their continual process of reconnecting to this transnational cultural context. This prior cultural context provides an important understanding of how the new generation of Vietnamese immigrants might interpret American cultural norms in their first years of schooling in the United States.

NWNC: Constructing Initial Perceptions of America

Prior to arriving to the United States, many of the Vietnamese immigrant youth had already established ideas about the United States. These initial impressions, usually shaped by common media portrayals, influenced the youths' future goals and expectations and were characterized by notions of America as the land of opportunities and material goods. These images can serve as a powerful pull factor for many to immigrate to the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). These ideas also contribute to the way immigrant youth construct their future goals and dreams. However, as they adjust to school, the youths' perceptions of American culture and way of life take on new meaning. For the youth in this study, their schooling experience begins at NWNC.

NWNC consists of two old brick buildings and three portable units. During breaks or between class, the 400 students, representing more than 20 countries of origin, fill the corridors and courtyards. This vibrant multilingual setting is the initial schooling context that greets the new Vietnamese immigrant students enrolling in the Northwest School District. The cultural and linguistic mélange of NWNC contrasts sharply with the uniformity of their previous schools in Vietnam. As the Vietnamese immigrant students carve out space and establish routines at NWNC, they begin to observe and learn about other cultural norms and practices at the school.

> DN: Do you have any friends that are not Vietnamese at this school?
>
> Hanh: Mainly my friends are Vietnamese and Chinese. I don't hang out with Mexicans or other groups because I don't know their languages. Also, the boys are strange. They are . . . [she hesitates].
>
> DN: They are . . . ?
>
> Hanh: Well . . . they like the girls. Vietnamese culture is different. We are not supposed to be so close to boys. We have to keep distance. In Vietnamese culture, there is a saying, *nam, nu, tho tho bat than* [it is inappropriate for (unmarried) girls and boys to have intimate physical contacts]. But other cultures are different. The boys and girls are very close. Like Americans, it is normal for them to have relationships and to be physically intimate with each other. There are some students here who seem to pay more attention to makeup, their dress, and boys than to studying. I watched this American movie, and I was amazed at that American girls spend so much time worrying about boys, makeup, and shopping. I don't understand this. (Interview, May 2003)

While they observe and make sense of the different cultural practices in their new school, the youth compare these practices to the Vietnamese cultural norms. Hanh, for example, begins to understand some of the different cultural approaches to social decorum and accepted behaviors between males and females. Initially, lack of comfort and understanding prevent Hanh from interacting with students from other countries than Vietnam. However, as Hanh and other Vietnamese youth continue to absorb new meanings from their new social and learning contexts at NWNC, their ideas relating to gender norms and expectations begin to change.

The context of NWNC plays an important part in helping students to adjust to school and to learn about other cultural norms and practices. The structure of the school, the curriculum, and cultural diversity all contribute to the Vietnamese students' academic engagement and how they construct perceptions of American culture. One of the main social and learning spaces at NWNC is the advisory period, which serves as a homeroom for each language group. Advisory period is a critical component of the immigrant students' learning experiences at NWNC, as many of them use the time and space to clarify ideas, exchange stories about school, and in general reminisce about life in Vietnam. The supportive environment of the Vietnamese advisory period has lent itself to becoming a transnational space (Brittain, 2002; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). It provides students with a sense of network and safety to be able to explore the meanings and purposes of the different cultural practices they observe from classrooms and other social contexts. The networks created within the advisory period then serve as the basis for other social interactions beyond the advisory period. The following data segments provide examples of the ways in which students utilize their transnational spaces to respond to new ideas that they learn from their other classes.

During the spring semester, Level 3 science classes at NWNC spent 2 weeks on reproductive health and sex education. In a discussion on women's reproductive rights, a group of Vietnamese girls sat huddled together trying to make sense of the discussion.

> Teacher: So girls, when you grow up, you may choose to have children or not to have children. It is up to the woman to decide, right?
>
>> Several students nodded. Hanh seemed confused and asked the other Vietnamese girls in her group quietly, "Every woman has to have children though, right?" Duong explained that the teacher was telling them that women have choices about having or not having children. Hanh replied, "But in Vietnam, most women have children. If they don't have children, people are sad for them." The other two Vietnamese girls in the group nodded after Hanh's comment.
>
> Loan: It is a woman's special right to be able to have children. . . .
> Hanh: I guess it is very different here. Women have more choices here. (Field notes, May 8, 2003)

After each session during the reproductive health and sex education lesson, students found different strategies to express themselves. Male students had various outbursts throughout the 2 weeks regarding the topic. Hieu, for example, could not believe that he had to learn these "embarrassing things. I sat there in class sweating nonstop. Why do we have to learn these things?" Thanh had a similar reaction. He tried to find ways to take his mind off of the class. He said to a group of Vietnamese male students nearby,

> Let's go play basketball or something. I need to get those images out
> of my head. I don't know if I can last. . . . We didn't have to learn
> these things in school in Vietnam. Americans are too explicit about
> these things. (Field notes, May 8, 2003)

While the male students tried to avoid these discussions, the girls congregated in small circles and whispered questions and clarifications to each other during their advisory periods. They continued discussing these ideas weeks after the lessons were over. During a tutoring session one afternoon, the girls brought up the topic of reproductive health. While they were chatting, the girls suddenly burst out giggling.

DN: What was that about?

Duong: We learned about male and female relationships in science class the other day.

DN: What did you think?

Yan: We learned about how diseases are transmitted, like AIDS and AIDS prevention. We learned about different ways to be careful.

Hanh: We also learned about what to expect when we grow up. There are many things that I did not know. I think it is important to learn these things. . . . Americans are very natural about this. In Asian culture, these things are very secretive.

DN: Did you learn about these things in Vietnam?

Loan: No, I did not learn these things. These are things that were whispered by married women.

Duong: If I saw or heard these things, I am told to run far away.

Hanh: In Vietnam at my school, they taught these things. . . . We just learned things on the surface level. We learned that boys and girls should not have too much physical contact because it could lead to certain things. Here, it is more involved and detailed. The teachers were very detailed. I think it is important to have information. . . . In the U.S., children and women seem to have more rights and freedom. . . . There is more protection for women. . . .

Duong: In Vietnam, it is difficult for girls to have an education. Even if a girl finishes high school, she cannot find work easily. You have to have connections. Your parents have to be powerful people.

Hanh: . . . Here, women have choices. Women don't have to just be at home and raise children. We learned this in science class. Girls have choices about what they do with their lives here. (Field notes, June 2003)

As Hanh and her friends engage in different social and learning contexts at NWNC—from academic learning to transnational cultural spaces—they begin to explore different meanings attributed to cultural and gender norms and the implications these meanings have in their lives. The different discourses on gender norms, such as equity and choice, that the youth pick up from their classroom learning contexts, begin to shape their thinking. Initially, Hanh, informed by her understanding of Vietnamese cultural expectations, believes that all women should have children. As she and her friends recognize the choices and opportunities available to women in the United

States, Hanh's perspective on women shifts as she integrates the notion of choice. Her perspective on gender shifts from what she defines as a Vietnamese cultural norm to a perceived American cultural norm. The ways in which Hanh discursively ascribes new meanings to gender identity show a subtle yet strategic form of transformation in gender identity. Realizing that girls and women have more choices in the United States than in Vietnam, Hanh strategically redefines gender expectations to capitalize on these opportunities.

Having the opportunity to engage with her classmates helps Hanh and her female friends explore and exchange meanings on gender roles and expectations. The various social and learning spaces that the Vietnamese immigrant youth occupy within the school present different opportunities for them to discuss, challenge, and negotiate ideas and cultural beliefs, helping them to examine and rethink their social identity. This process of social identity negotiation continues to take place after the youth transfer to their mainstream high schools and engage in new social and learning contexts.

Mainstream Contexts: Interpreting American Cultural and Gender Norms

The ways in which schools structure classroom locations and implement ESL programs impact how new immigrant students interface with the larger school community. These physical and social spaces play a significant role in shaping students' sense of belonging or marginalization (Olsen, 1997). For immigrant students in ESL classes, mainstream contexts consist of spaces that are beyond the ESL-designated areas. At NWNC, the entire school is created for ESL students. There are not specific spaces for mainstream or ESL students. As the Vietnamese immigrant youth transition to their new high schools, they realize that spaces within the school are more defined. In the initial months at their new high schools, their limited language skills keep them in the ESL classes and prevent them from interacting with mainstream culture except on a peripheral level. These different designated social and academic spaces eventually isolate the youth from the mainstream culture. In the portraits of the two high schools that follow, we begin to see the ways in which the Vietnamese immigrant youth adjust to and navigate these various social spaces.

Portrait of Greenfield High School. Greenfield High occupies a recently renovated two-story building. It has a modern feel, with high ceilings and industrial-style staircases with steel beams. Throughout the structure, the doors and walls of public spaces are made of glass, such as the cafeteria and administrative offices. Artwork, both professional and student created, is properly displayed behind glass cases. The library is well stocked with books, computers, and other resources. Every classroom is fully equipped with computers and a high-end media system. Departments are clustered together in different hallways. The building is compact, with many short and narrow hallways connecting different areas of the building. The ESL hallway is located on the second floor between the math and language arts departments.

For most mainstream students, classrooms tend to be dispersed throughout the building, making it necessary for them to become familiar with the entire school. ESL students, since most of classes are concentrated in one hallway, tend to remain in one location. Most of their time is spent in the ESL hallway or in the cafeteria or library—all located near each other, with the library above the cafeteria and the ESL hall around the corner from the library.

During morning break and lunchtime, the cafeteria is often noisy, with every table packed with students. However, the Vietnamese immigrant students' presence in the lunchroom is minimal; they are almost invisible and certainly inaudible. Many of them dread going to the cafeteria and several skip lunch altogether. When they are in the cafeteria, they rush through their meals quietly and make their way to the library or back to the ESL hallway. Yan shares why she does not eat lunch.

> DN: When do you have lunch today?
> Yan: No, I don't eat lunch.
> DN: You don't eat lunch? Why?
> Yan: If the library is opened, I go there and do my homework and meet with my friends. I don't like going to the cafeteria. My friends don't go there, so I don't want to go without them. There are many people here but they are mostly Americans. . . . I don't really know them. There are few Vietnamese. It is just difficult to find friends and to belong somewhere. . . . I find it lonely walking around without people to talk to and laugh with. Americans seem to have fun and laugh with each other but I am not a part of those groups. (Interview, May 2004)
> Vietnamese students are barely visible at Greenfield as they walk quietly in the margins of the hallways and sit unnoticeably in the lunchroom and library, creating feelings of loneliness and isolation. This experience of isolation and marginality is exemplified by Hai Nguyen, who has been at Englewood for 6 months, making his way through the hallways during morning break.

>> After the bell rang for morning break, Hai left his ESL health class and headed out in the already crowded and loud hallway. He was heading toward the cafeteria. DN was walking near him. Hai turned to her and said, "Follow me or you could get lost. In-between class period, students can get really loud and crazy—they yell all the time. I usually take the back way to avoid them." He steered clear of the crowds and walked quietly with his head down. While everyone was heading to the front stairs toward the cafeteria, Hai took the back route, which was less crowded. When he got to the stairs, he stood to one side nearby and waited until the crowd dispersed before heading down. DN asked him if he knew anyone in the crowd. Hai replied, "No, I don't know any Americans. We have different groups. Outside of class, I usually spend time with Vietnamese students. We don't hang out with Americans." (Field notes, October 2003)

The pattern of physical, cultural, and linguistic marginalization that immigrant youth experience at Greenfield is also found at Englewood High.

Portrait of Englewood High School. Englewood High is a sprawling one-story building with six different wings. The entire school and its surrounding property of big green fields, pine trees, and a large parking lot take up three blocks. Space is not an issue at Englewood. Hallways are wide and often serve as spaces where students congregate during breaks, making them the main spaces for social interactions. Between classes and during breaks, hallways are always filled with student activities, from drumming sessions and dancing groups to poetry reading and martial arts practice.

The ESL department consists of four classrooms, taking up one small corner of the southwest wing of the school. While racial diversity is highly visible in most corridors, each racial group occupies a specific space within the school (Olsen, 1997). The Vietnamese youth become aware of these spaces as they adjust to their new school. Dao points out various spaces within the school in the field notes that follow.

> Dao: This is considered the international hallway. . . . There are a lot of languages here, like Vietnamese, Chinese, Spanish, and many other languages from African countries that I don't know. Many of these students are in my ESL classes. Each nationality has its little corner or spot. You know where the Vietnamese spot is [Dao points to the small area near an exit sign where a few Vietnamese students were still hanging around.] That is our spot.
>
> DN: And do you hang out in other spots?
>
> Dao: We go outside when it is nice out but just in front of that door. We have a couple of tables in the lunchroom. All the tables in the lunchroom are for different groups—like White Americans, Black Americans, Chinese, Hispanics. . . . We don't take other people's tables and they don't take ours. Just like our spot in the hallway—other people don't go there too much. (Field notes, February 2004)

The ways in which Yan and Hai navigate the social and physical spaces at Greenfield High and Dao at Englewood High are indicative of the racial, ethnic, and linguistic isolation that the Vietnamese immigrant youth experience in their mainstream high schools. The initial language barrier that separates the immigrant students and their native-born peers eventually leads to a more sustained racial and ethnic divide as few meaningful exchanges take place between the students (Olsen, 1997). As Yan, Hai, and Dao become familiar with the physical and cultural landscapes of their high schools, they learn to identify spaces that are "designated" for students who share their backgrounds. They quickly realize that their racial, ethnic, and linguistic background positions them outside of the mainstream American cultural context. While the racial and cultural diversity at the two schools, particularly at Englewood, is highly visible, the students recognize that each group occupies a separate location within their schools. Consequently, the Vietnamese immigrant students' perceptions of mainstream American cultural norms are usually formed through observations of their American-born peers or their teachers. For example, Yan shares her observations of American students in her mainstream math class.

> Yan was the only Asian student in an algebra class of 25 students. There were two African Americans, while the rest of the students were White. Yan usually sat in a corner to the back of the room. Mr. Kano, a young Japanese American teacher, had an easy manner about him and often joked with the students. Yan had mentioned to Nguyen on several occasions that this is one of her favorite classes because the teacher was so much "fun." Students seemed to have an informal relationship with the Mr. Kano. For example, when the Mr. Kano asked a question, students usually offered answers without raising their hands. Often, before class started, Mr. Kano and the students would carry on conversations about various things, from *American Idol* to football games. Yan perceived these informal exchanges between the teacher and students to be indicative of how "Americans behave in class." During a lesson, the teacher had the students work in groups of four. The lesson lasted for 4 weeks. Yan was placed in a group with three male students (two White and one African American). The boys conversed with each other constantly on various social topics, while Yan sat quietly aside. She occasionally slipped a piece of paper showing her work to the rest of the group. She rarely engaged with the boys verbally. When one of the boys asked her why she was so quiet, Yan replied softly, "I don't have anything to say." (October 2003)

While Yan has an opportunity to engage with the students in her class, lack of language ability prevents her from sustained engagement. She instead observes the teacher and students' behaviors from the periphery. Other Vietnamese students, such as Thai, also shared Yan's peripheral level of exchanges and participation with classmates in their mainstream classes.

Thai, an 11th-grade male student, had been at Englewood for a month and a half. Math and physical education were his two mainstream courses. While Thai mentioned that he liked his new school, he felt that American students were too informal and sometime disrespectful toward teachers. His experiences in his math class confirmed his thoughts about American students' lack of respect. The field notes depict a typical day in Thai's math class.

> When we entered Thai's mainstream math class, a White female student was chasing an Asian male around the room. The Asian male student jumped over several desks trying to get away. The two students were laughing hysterically as they ran around the room. A group of Latino students was eating chicken from a KFC bucket in the back of the classroom. After the bell rang, as the teacher was focusing on trying to get students to settle down, a White female student was standing right behind mimicking her. To the left side of the room, two Latino female students seemed to be practicing some kind of dance or martial arts. Meanwhile two White female students, who sat in front of Thai, ignored the teacher and carried on a conversation about a cheating boyfriend.
>
> Thai sat next to a Sudanese refugee student. They were two of the few students working on the class assignment. They both sat with their heads close down to their desks, seemingly trying to focus on the assignment

> while the noise level in the class rose. Once in awhile, they would ask each other a short question or check to see if they had the same answers, but for the most part, they tried to work through the noise of the class. Thai looked up at one point, and DN asked him, "What do you think about students?"

Thai shook his head and replied, "They are out of control. The teacher is too nice. . . . The students are crazy. I don't think they come to school to learn. They just want to mess around. I don't understand why they do this. It is so loud in here. I can't even hear myself think sometimes. (Field notes, October 2003)

Thai could not understand or relate to his classmates' behavior in his mainstream math class. He tried to focus on his work and ignore the surroundings as best he could. Yan's and Thai's engagement in their mainstream learning contexts remained at a peripheral level.

However peripheral their engagement with the mainstream culture, new cultural practices that the Vietnamese students observe from U.S.-born American students begin to influence how they interpret and define their own social identities. Their appearances become the first signs of their changes. Vietnamese students begin to adopt many American aesthetics, such as clothing, hair styles, makeup, and even using slang English. Many of the boys change their hair color, ranging from streaks of blue to blond, and wear hip-hop loose-style clothing. Girls don tight, revealing clothes and makeup. They drop the *anh* and *chi* (older brother and older sister) in the way they refer to each other while at NWNC and use *you* and *me*. Several students indicate that referring to each other as *you* and *me* made their interactions less awkward, especially across the gender lines.

As they continue to incorporate new cultural norms and practices into their lifestyles, one of the things that made a strong impression on many of the Vietnamese students is American students' behavior toward members of the opposite sex. This notion of students having the freedom to date was a great point of interest for many Vietnamese students. In part of the interview, Hai, a 19-year-old male student at Greenfield High reflected on the two different approaches to relationships between males and females.

> Hai: I think that here [in the United States], boys and girls seem to have closer proximity and relationships. In Vietnam, there is distance between boys and girls that is considered appropriate. In high school, students were not allowed to have boyfriends or girlfriends. Sometimes, the teachers would interfere and prevent those relationships. If the teachers know, they would reprimand you and also report the situation to your parents. Here, teachers do not consider those things a problem.
>
> DN: What do you think about that kind of response?
>
> Hai: Both strategies have their advantages and disadvantages. Here, when students are allowed to have relationships freely, complications can arise. I hear that there are many students who become pregnant. In Vietnam, when the teachers reprimand and tell the parents, they can prevent those complications. However, those teachers' actions can also create a situation for students to rebel or act in secrecy. Here, it is more open.

DN: What do you think about the idea of freely having a relationship?
Hai: If people are able to freely explore those things, they have opportunities to learn about relationships and maybe have opportunities to develop more intimate friendships. But this could lead to many problems. (Interview, May 2004)

As Hai observes the two different cultural approaches to personal relationships, he makes comparisons between the two and weighs the benefits and the drawbacks of each. In Hai's reflection, we see the new ideas and messages about cultural and gender norms getting filtered and reflected in his understanding of gender practices and personal relationships between males and females. Notions of gender, which are situated and dependent on a cultural context, can be altered and recast as that cultural context shifts (Collins, 2000; Lorber, 2001; O'Connor, 2001). Hai begins to incorporate other cultural perspectives of gender norms and practices into his own thinking, actively taking part in redefining aspects of his gender identity. Throughout the study, many students, including Hai, kept referring to the saying *nam, nu, tho tho bat than*, or "it is inappropriate for (unmarried) girls and boys to have intimate physical contacts." The Vietnamese youth describe this phrase as a guiding mechanism for social propriety between boys and girls in Vietnamese culture. As the youth see their U.S.-born peers having the freedom to date and have relationships, they gain an alternative view on how males and females could behave toward each other. Context becomes an important shaping force in the construction of gender norms and practices, particularly related to relations between males and females. In part of an interview, Trung notes how societal contexts influence cultural practices.

Trung: In Vietnam, girls were shy and more timid than boys. . . . There was less interactions between boys and girls. We are not as free with each other.
DN: Why do you think there is a change in how girls behave?
Trung: Well, I hear that a society influences how you behave. Asian societies tend to be more traditional and men seem to have more power. (Interview, April 2004)

The process that Vietnamese immigrant students, such as Hai, undergo in negotiating aspects of gender and cultural norms related to relationship and romance was something that other students also experience over time. As the Vietnamese immigrant students become exposed to other cultural norms and perspectives on gender in their schools, they adopt and incorporate some of these ideas into their own thinking and practices. Over time, Vietnamese immigrant youth, who previously observed "appropriate distance" between members of the opposite sex, become more affectionate and informal with each other across gender lines. By the end of the study, 18 of the 22 focal Vietnamese students in the study had boyfriends or girlfriends. Danh, who had been living in the United States for 4 years, shares her thoughts about dating.

Danh: It is normal among Vietnamese students now. We have more freedom now that we are here [in the United States]. . . . We just want to hang out with each other more. . . . This is America. We have more freedom.

DN: What do your parents think?

Danh: They know that I have a boyfriend. They tell me to be a good girl and a good student. I can be both. I can have a boyfriend and still be a good girl. Dating doesn't mean that you are broken like they believe. My mother always tells me that a broken girl brings shame to herself and her family. I just don't tell them about my boyfriend. They don't say much about this anymore. They are traditional and believe in the old Vietnamese way. Here, every girl I know, except Hoa, has a boyfriend. I think as long as I continue to have good grades, they won't say too much about my boyfriend. And it is not like I go out like the American girls. I don't.

DN: Can you talk a bit more about "being broken?"

Danh: Girls are supposed to be obedient and good students. They should stay in their house and listen to their parents. We are not supposed *di choi* [to go out] too much or do bad things, like partying or hanging out with boys. Girls that *di choi* too much and hang out with boys are considered broken girls. All Vietnamese parents worry about their children becoming broken, especially girls. It is a way that parents try to protect their children, and I understand. But they are too traditional and strict. . . .

DN: Do you get to go out with your boyfriend?

Danh: [Shrugs] We hang out mostly at school. My parents don't allow me to go out unless I go with some girlfriends. My older sister or brother has to drive us. . . . I don't want to go out all the time anyways. I think it is good to have your boyfriend respect you. He knows my parents are strict. His parents are Vietnamese and are strict too. We are still Vietnamese and can't act like Americans. Some of the Vietnamese girls try to do that. Maybe that is why a lot of Vietnamese parents are afraid. They think we will become like the Americans, rebel against them and make everyone lose face.

DN: Would you have had a boyfriend in Vietnam at your age now?

Danh: No! Dating is not something that many people do . . . maybe in the city. In my town, girls and women were either students, married, or about to get married. We didn't have boyfriends. But now that we are in America, my parents think that I am too young to get married. They want me to finish college before I get married. I tell them that I don't want to get married yet. I want to go to college. I want make my own money and help my family. (Interview, October 2004)

Danh redefines her gender identity by incorporating both sets of cultural norms (Vietnamese and American). Her parents, whom she describes as holding a traditional Vietnamese view on gender norms, believe that girls become broken if they hang out with boys. This could bring shame to the girls and their families. According to traditional Vietnamese cultural norms, being a good girl is an important gender expectation that Danh must fulfill. A good girl is understood as someone who is obedient to her parents, stays in the home, and gets good grades. Danh fulfills the role of the good girl by maintaining good grades and not going out "like the American girls." However, she also continues to maintain a relationship with her boyfriend. Her understanding and practices related to gender identity are no longer

guided solely by Vietnamese cultural norms. She incorporates the notion of "freedom in America" to justify her shift in thinking and behavior. As she restructures her gender identity, Danh challenges the dichotomy between the good girl and the broken girl by continuing to receive good grades as well as having a boyfriend. Her gender identity formation connects with what Hall (1996) refers as a "point of suture" between different social discourses and practices. Danh sutures and weaves together meanings from different cultural contexts to create a new gender identity.

While Danh contests the traditional Vietnamese cultural understanding of the good girl and the broken girl, she does not reject everything about Vietnamese cultural and gender norms. She believes that she can have both—good grades and a boyfriend—and strives to make this possible. She strategically redefines and expands the notion of the good girl and challenges the notion of the broken girl, both of which have previously restricted her thinking and actions. And while she is dating, she is not rushing to get married, again challenging the Vietnamese cultural understanding that a female can be only one of three statuses at a time: student, married, or engaged. Danh describes that within Vietnamese cultural norms if she becomes involved in a relationship, she has to relinquish her student status. Danh's newly constructed status as a student with a boyfriend pushes against the limited roles ascribed for girls and women in the traditional Vietnamese cultural context. In this process, Danh establishes a gender identity that provides more opportunities and a sense of freedom for herself. She does not want to give up her academic opportunities, yet she wants to experience "what it feels like to have a boyfriend."

On the surface, Danh's actions seem to fit with the pattern of assimilation as she adopts aspects of American cultural norms by having a boyfriend and aspiring to go to college. However, the theory of assimilation cannot fully account for Danh's maintaining her Vietnamese identity. Instead of relinquishing her Vietnamese identity, she differentiates herself from U.S.-born peers by indicating that she does not "go out like the American girls." Danh does not want to "rebel against her parents" or reject Vietnamese culture. She continues to see herself as Vietnamese and maintains aspect of Vietnamese culture. These actions go against the ideas of assimilation, which suggest that immigrants give up their cultural practices and assimilate into American mainstream culture (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon, 1964).

Danh's gender identity development is also similar to the process of acculturation in that she adopts positive aspects of American culture (Gibson, 1988). What is different is that her parents do not believe that having a boyfriend is a positive aspect of American culture. The difference between how she and her parents interpret dating and relationships places their pattern of adaptation along the lines of dissonant acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). However, dissonant acculturation suggests that there are high levels of conflict and miscommunication between the immigrant child and parents. In the case of Danh, while her parents disagree with her having a boyfriend, she continues to practice many of the Vietnamese cultural norms. Tension between

her and her parents are reduced as Danh continues to remain a good student. This new development between Danh and her parents then directs them away from the dissonant acculturation pattern. In this process, instead of trying to "straddle between two worlds" and moving back and forth between different cultural norms as Zhou (2001) suggests in her analysis of Vietnamese immigrant youth, Danh is redefining the meanings of the cultural practices to accommodate both her academic and social circumstances.

In utilizing aspects of American cultural and gender norms, Danh does not outright reject Vietnamese culture. And while she sees herself as Vietnamese, she does not completely comply with the already ascribed notions of the good girl and the broken girl. Instead of assuming and fulfilling these roles as they exist in each cultural context—home and school—Danh generates new meanings for gender roles by incorporating ideas and practices from both sets of cultural norms. Hanh's strategically constructed gender identity helps to create opportunities for her academic and social life and allows her to maintain good-girl status in her family.

In summary, the different ideas and meanings that Danh, Hai, and other students in this study incorporate into their gender identity construction processes connect to the various social and cultural settings they occupy in school. The mainstream cultural contexts, consisting of regular mainstream classrooms, the hallways, and the cafeteria, play a critical role in providing the Vietnamese youth with opportunities to observe and form perceptions of American cultural and gender norms. Even though much of their engagement in the mainstream cultural contexts takes place on a peripheral and marginal level, the cultural and gender practices that the youth observe in these contexts then interface with their own cultural and gender norms. The Vietnamese cultural norms, including rules of social propriety and hierarchical structures that previously helped to bind the Vietnamese youth as a social group, unravel as they incorporate new ideas and practices into their meaning-making processes. The youth begin to construct gender identities that fit with their own social circumstances, as illustrated by Danh. While the two sets of cultural norms inform how students construct identities that are meaningful on an individual level, the youth constantly struggle with how these ideas play out in group settings, as discussed in the next section.

Peer Group Interactions Among Vietnamese Youth

In peer group contexts, students' understandings of American cultural norms begin to shape their conversations and behaviors. The students' interpretations of cultural, ethnic, and gender identities become strategies to maintain or elevate social status and power within their group contexts (Collins, 2000; Norton, 2000). In particular, for male students, who may feel a sense of displacement and loss of power and social status as they enter a racialized culture (Kibria, 1993; Olsen, 1997), the struggle to regain social status becomes even more urgent. Gender becomes a critical point of difference and tension between the Vietnamese youth. Male students strategically use Vietnamese

cultural norms to exert power in their social groups, while female students strategically incorporate perceived American cultural norms to elevate their own status. An example of how males and females struggle over cultural, gender, and academic identities is illustrated in an exchange between Hai and Linh.

> Hai was trying to pull up his grades on the computer but was unsuc-cessful. He complained out loud about the slow Internet connection, causing Linh to push him aside. When she successfully logged onto the right Web site, Hai made a comment about her luck and timing. This comment launched a heated discussion about who is more capa-ble on the computer. After Hai failed to make Linh agree, he accused her of letting American practices influence her.

Hai: Girls in America are so brave and outgoing. She talks a lot too. Her mouth would not stay shut. All day long she yaps about things.
Linh [immediately replied]: You act like you are nice. I have never met another boy who talks as much as you.
DN: So girls in Vietnam are not as talkative?
Hai: Not the nice girls I know. [Said in a slightly teasing manner:] She talks so much she may not find a husband later. I don't think boys and men like talkative girls. Right, *Co Diem*?
Linh: Girls should learn to speak up because if the boys are wrong, we have to tell them. Boys are not always right. We learn things just like you. We go to school just like you. Sometimes we know more things than you.
Hai: Wow, I give up. I am scared of you. You can out-talk anyone I think. (Field notes, October 2003)

Making sense of gender roles and expectations can create tension between group members (Pavlenko, 2001) as they arrive at different inter-pretations of what it means to be male and female and also Vietnamese and American. Hai, for example, attempts to define and enact gender in ways that curtail females' achievements and abilities so that they do not surpass his. In the excerpt above, instead of acknowledging Linh's efforts in helping him access the Internet, Hai discredits her by attributing her success to luck and timing. When Hai could not persuade Linh to agree with him about males being more capable with computers, he accuses her of being influenced by American cultural norms and practices. He comments that nice girls do not talk as much as Linh and warns that she may not "find a husband." Unable to make way with his academic argument, Hai redirects the exchange to social and cultural norms and expectations. He asserts that Linh's expressiveness is not characteristic of nice girls, which could lead to undesirable consequences for her marriage outlook. Instead of backing down, Linh replies that girls have to respond and speak up because "boys are not always right."

Disagreements and conflicts between male and female students, as in the case of Hai and Linh, often arise from different expectations and inter-pretations of cultural and gender norms. Many of the male students posit that

they can adopt American culture yet maintain their Vietnamese identity. However, they argue that the female students' attempts to redefine their gender identity result in a rejection of their Vietnamese identity. In a conversation among Trung, Minh, and Nguyen in the Englewood High School cafeteria, the two male youth explain the difference between how male and female students change and adapt.

At all the schools in this study—NWNC, Greenfield, and Englewood—Vietnamese girls and boys tend to sit at separate tables during lunch. However, these tables are usually next to each other, creating a Vietnamese ethnic section within the cafeteria. These social groupings are the Vietnamese students' primary group, which they maintain in other contexts.

> As DN was making her way to the girls' table during lunch, Trung asked her to sit at the boys' table instead. He explained that since DN was a "teacher," she didn't have to follow the students' rules and sit with the girls.[3] All the students from both groups quieted down and turned their eyes to DN as she sat next to Trung. DN asked Trung how school was going. He told her everything was wonderful, especially the girls. When Trung finished his comment, Minh quickly added the following:

Minh: I like girls who have the manners and personality of Vietnamese girls—girls who are well brought up—but they don't have to look like they come from Vietnam. . . . I want someone who has respect and elegance but have not adopted too much of the American values.

DN: What kind of American values?

Minh: They are loud, rude, and too expressive. They change their appearances. . . . I like someone who looks natural with long hair.

DN: I see lots of girls with long hair here. . . .

Minh: Yes, but it is not just the appearance. I want someone who is educated and still have Vietnamese values too. I like someone who has not altered too much.

DN: And how about you? You have blond streaks in your own hair.

Minh: Guys are different. They can experiment and do things, but they are guys.

DN: But why is it different for guys and girls?

Trung: Girls should not change too much but guys are like the wind—they should change and adapt like the wind.

DN: Why can't girls be like the wind also?

Trung: Guys follow certain American things but mostly they hold onto Vietnamese traditions. When girls follow American ways, they do not look like Vietnamese. . . .

DN: How do you mean follow American ways?

Trung: Following American values like dressing like them, changing your hair, and acting like them. You see, Vietnamese guys still act like Vietnamese when they are around each other and around the girls, but girls they act American. We still speak Vietnamese and uphold Vietnamese values and traditions. The girls, they speak English and change the way they think about Vietnamese relationship.

DN: How do they act American?

Trung: They have no restrictions—they do what guys can do.

Minh: Mostly, they become distasteful when they turn American. . . . They become American inside and out. (Field notes, November 2003)

Trung and Minh make it clear that they do not like the changes that many of the Vietnamese female students have adopted. They see girls "becoming American" as "distasteful." However, they do not hold the same standards for themselves. When this double standard is raised, the students quickly distinguish the different levels of changes. They express that male students' changes are surface level (appearances, dress, and hair) while the females' transformation, including their thinking about relationship and gender roles, are deep and lasting. Trung and Minh believe that their surface-level changes do not make them American, but they view the girls' transformation as becoming American "both inside and out."

As the students grapple with the meanings of the different sets of cultural and gender norms, their various attempts to position culture and gender are tied to their struggle to maintain and/or elevate social status and power in group contexts. Both male and female students actively take part in interpreting and constructing cultural and gender norms to enhance their social status and future opportunities. The different ways that the students perceive and represent cultural and gender identities have important consequences for how they attempt to adapt to U.S. schooling and life outside of school. In another discussion between Hai and Linh, Hai acknowledges that male students adopt American culture; however, he clarifies that these changes take place only in public not "in the home."

> Linh: Yes, they [boys and men] like the freedom, and they like the opportunities. But they don't want the girls and women to change.
> Hai: For the outside world they change. They want more opportunities, but in the home things don't change. My father is still the same, and my mother is still the same. We are still the same as a family.
> Linh: How are you changing?
> Hai: I can speak English better. I want to learn more skills, but I don't want to become an American. Girls, who come here, are changing too fast.
> Linh: Well, get used to it! You are in America now. We are not in Vietnam. . . . (Field notes, October 2003)

While many female students find the notions of freedom and gender equality critical in reshaping their gender identity, male students believe these changes are permanent, leading to shifts in perspective on relationships between males and females. Assigning traditional Vietnamese cultural and gender roles to females serves as a strategy for males to maintain their social status and power. Within traditional Vietnamese cultural norms, males tend to have higher status and more authority than females do (Kibria, 1993). As girls incorporate aspects of American cultural norms and reposition their gender identity, they often acquire higher social status and power. Perhaps sensing that their power and status will be further diminished, the male students, such as Trung, Minh, and Hai, struggle to keep in tact the Vietnamese social and cultural structures. While they object to females' adaptation process, allowing female students to "do what guys can do," male students undergo

their own social and cultural transformation. Their strategic transformation of learning English and incorporating important social and cultural practices into their lives allows them to benefit from the material goods of their host country while maintaining social power and status in Vietnamese cultural contexts.

In learning contexts, tension between male and female students can be exacerbated when teachers incorporate group work or friendly competition. The following excerpt illustrates an example of how friendly competition can lead to tension and feelings of opposition between male and female students. The project consists of group members competing against each other in a science class. Trung, a male student, and Hoa, a female student, are chosen to be partners by the teacher. Trung expresses some anxiety about having a female partner. When the teacher asks him to leave his all-male Vietnamese group, Trung announces loudly in Vietnamese that as a "man" he could not lose, otherwise "he would lose face"—an important part of social relationships in Vietnamese culture (Nghe, Mahalik, & Lowe, 2003).

> Ms. Young: Ok. You are going to have a contest between you and your partner.
> Hoa: [Softly] I am going to lose.
> Trung: No, you are smarter than me. I am going to lose, but I can't let you win. As a man, I can't let a girl beat me. I will lose face. I will have to try to beat you.
> Ms. Young [repeats]: This is a competition between you and your partner.
> Trung overheard someone said "you are going to die" and said the same to Hoa.
> Hoa: He wants to kill me.

> After several questions about the cell, the teacher wrote the next one on the board: What is the charge of neutron? Trung wrote down the right answer but said something different out loud. DN asked him, "Why did you say that?"

> Trung: Shhhh . . . [Softly to DN] I said that so I can disrupt her thought. Maybe she will listen to me and write down the wrong answer.
> Hoa: I won't fall for your trick.

> In the end, Trung won by 1 point. Trung exclaimed in English, "I really like this game. I am sorry that I won. Gentlemen should never beat up a girl." (Field notes, February 2004)

Trung seems to believe that as a male student he should perform better than girls academically or else he will lose face. While he tries to reassure Hoa that she is smarter than him, he also states that he cannot let her win. During the class exercise, Trung even tries to "trick" and "disrupt" Hoa's thinking process. In the end, when Trung wins, he uses an American cultural notion of chivalry toward Hoa, which he even said in English, "Gentlemen should never beat up a girl." These changes in cultural and gender positions in the male student seem to suggest that the adoption of the new cultural norms and practices are acceptable as long as those new norms,

values, and practices do not threaten or lessen his social status and power. These different interpretations of gender, culture, and ethnicity between male and female students suggest that these social categories are constantly shifting and are reconstituted in ways that serve different functions for different people in their social contexts.

Discussion

This illustrates the multiple levels and complexities that students face as they struggle to explore, make sense of, and negotiate their social identity within a context of competing cultural norms, in particular gender norms. The main findings from this study suggest that how students define cultural, ethnic, and academic identities is influenced by how they interpret gender— a social category that shifts across different spaces and interacts with other social categories in complex and often contradictory ways (Collins, 2000; Lorber, 2001; Sunderland, 2004). Schools provide important sites—cultural and learning spaces—for students to articulate and negotiate social, cultural, and gender identities. In mainstream public spaces, immigrant students are usually rendered invisible and marginal due to their racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Lopez, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999b; Waters, 1996). They become observers of the behaviors of their U.S.-born peers. However, from these observations, Vietnamese students filter in ideas of American cultural and gender norms.

As they move to their social and classroom spaces and engage with other Vietnamese peers, they begin to examine and challenge each other on notions of culture, ethnicity, and gender. The ways in which they take up cultural, ethnic, and academic positions are connected to gender, with power and status as a central part of their struggle (Norton, 2000). Both male and female Vietnamese students employ what we call *strategic transformation*, which refers to the process in which students intentionally define gender or cultural identities as ways to leverage social status and power within specific situations. For Vietnamese immigrant girls, while their racial, cultural, and linguistic background structures them in a low social position, they learn to leverage the notions of freedom and gender equality that they perceive in the mainstream contexts to negotiate higher status within their Vietnamese circles. Female students strategically reflect a gender identity that is more in line with American culture when they are in positions of having to negotiate status and power with male counterparts. Whereas for male students, their racial and linguistic background structures them lower in the new racial hierarchy (Olsen, 1997); however, their gender status continues to place them above girls in their own social and ethnic community (Kibria, 1993; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). While boys may leverage the idea of freedom to alter their personal appearances, they see gender equality as an area where their status will be further challenged.

In their classroom context interactions, how students perceive each other in relation to academic achievement is also gendered. Because Vietnamese

girls have been socialized to view their male peers as superior (Kibria, 1993; Zhou & Bankston, 2001), they can seek out their male peers as potential sources of academic support, increasing their social capital for academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). However, in moments when female students disagree with male students, they can use gender equity as a tool to help them shift power and social status. Boys, on the other hand, see girls who are academically capable as threatening. Instead of seeking their collaboration, boys tend to compete with girls to maintain face. They struggle to hold on to whatever levels of power and status they have. Therefore, they often strategically reflect gender identity that is more closely associated with Vietnamese culture.

The findings from this study have important implications in three specific and interconnected areas related to immigrant student adaptation and academic achievement. The first implication builds upon what other scholars, such as Lee (1996, 2005), Olsen (1997), and Valenzuela (1999b), have found: The ways that schools structure classrooms and programs for immigrant students have important intended and unintended consequences for whether students feel a sense of belonging or marginalization. The initial linguistic barrier between immigrant and U.S.-born students separate them physically, culturally, and socially, but the continual separation eventually renders immigrant students silent, invisible, and marginalized in the larger school context. When immigrant students arrive in spaces where they feel safe to talk and share ideas, the feelings of marginalization begin to unravel, often creating moments of intense conflict as they struggle to regain a sense of self-worth. It is important for schools to plan and structure classrooms and programs to create more opportunities for immigrant students to have meaningful participation in mainstream culture in order to prevent their continual experiences of marginalization. In so doing, schools could more fully embrace and incorporate racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity into the school community.

The ways that gender works among Vietnamese students have important implications for both classroom contexts and future understanding of immigrant student adaptation. Teachers, who are more often female, tend to sympathize more with girls (Kibria, 1993; Lopez, 2003; Qin-Hillard, 2003; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) and may encourage girls to take up the language of gender equity. While this is an important strategy for helping female students, it could send an unintended message to boys that classrooms are another space where they are unwanted, adding to their marginal status in the mainstream context. Ultimately, their process of adaptation is about finding a sense of belonging and connection (Olsen, 1997); teachers' actions may get filtered in and interpreted by immigrant boys as not being wanted in the classroom.

The findings in this study also have important implications for future research on immigrant student adaptation. While language and culture are factors that impact student adjustment and learning (Olneck, 2004; Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; C. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), including a gender analysis adds another important layer to understanding the process of immigrant student adaptation (Lopez, 2003), in particular selective

acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The findings in this study indicate that selective acculturation works differently across gender lines. In addition, the process of negotiating identity for immigrant youth is often relational and connected to group dynamics. While we see both male and female students employing selective acculturation, the ways they interpret and identify culture and ethnicity are strategic, gender-based, and in response to each other's interpretations. How Vietnamese female students recast gender norms helps them to gain access to decision-making opportunities and to achieve in school. And the ways in which Vietnamese male students respond to their situations may lead to a further sense of alienation and exclusion, socially and academically. As this study indicates, including a gender analysis in future research on immigrant student adjustment can more accurately account for the totality of the immigrant student experience.

Notes

[1]We follow the sociological definition of nativity status (c.f., Ricardo & Stanton-Salazar, 2001). We use the term *1.75* to refer to foreign born, arrived in the United States before age 5. We use the term *1.5* to refer to foreign born, arrived between ages 6 and 10. We use the term *1.25* to refer to foreign born, arrived between ages 11 and 15.

[2]All names of students, schools, and places in this article are pseudonyms.

[3]All the student participants called the researcher *Co Diem*, which can be translated as Teacher Diem or Auntie Diem. This is the formal way that a student addresses a female who is not a student. This form of address extends to all females affiliated with the school.

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