

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 130

SP 039 613

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TITLE Teaching Asian American Students: Classroom Implications.
PUB DATE 2000-10-28
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Midwestern Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL,
October 25-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Asian American Students; Cultural
Awareness; *Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences;
*Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Higher
Education; Immigrants; *Parent Child Relationship; Parents
IDENTIFIERS China; Hong Kong; Japan; Korea; Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This study examined the unique learning styles of Asian-American students, noting different Asian immigrants' backgrounds and relating Asian cultures to children's learning. Data came from a literature review; interviews with 19 families from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan who had a total of 33 children ages 6-21 years; and home and community observations conducted during spring 1998-spring 2000. Results indicated that all students came from nuclear intact families of foreign-born parents who were active in their children's academic lives. Students reported that structural teaching and clear expectations helped them focus on content being taught. Half of high school and college students preferred self-directed learning and individual projects. Teachers' approval and encouragement were important reinforcers. Parental supervision and support played an important role in children's learning. Parents provided a safe, supportive environment for their children and usually involved their children in extracurricular activities. They also pressured their children to be not only successful, but also outstanding. These children of East Asian parents adjusted well academically to American schools. They may need teacher and administrator psychological support and understanding to reduce pressure from the home and community. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

Teaching Asian American Students: Classroom Implications

Mid-Western Educational Research Conference

Chicago, IL

October 25 – 28, 2000

By

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Teaching Asian American Students: Classroom Implications

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Abstract

The population of Asian immigrant children has grown rapidly in the past three decades. Public schools need to recognize the cultural characteristics and learning styles of this population in order to work with them effectively. In this study, different Asian immigrants' backgrounds were identified, and Asian cultures related to children's learning were discussed. Literature review, interview and observation were methods utilized in this paper. Nineteen families from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan with thirty- three children, age ranges from 6 to 21 years, were interviewed and observations were made during Spring 1998 to Spring 2000. Classroom implications were recommended.

Key words: Learning styles, Communication styles, Asian Americans

Teaching Asian American Students: Classroom Implications

I. Objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the unique characteristic learning styles of Asian American students. The second purpose of this study was to draw classroom implications for teachers who work with Asian American students. Nineteen families from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan with thirty-three children, age ranges from 6 to 21 years, were interviewed and observed. This study was conducted from Spring 1998 to Spring 2000.

II. Perspectives

The term Asian American represents more than 43 distinct ethnic and cultural groups who differ in language, religion and customs (U. S. Bureau of Census, 1996). The four major groups of Asian Americans include East Asia, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans; Pacific Islanders; Southeast Asia, such as Thai and Vietnamese; and South Asians, such as Indians and Pakistanis. Similarities exist among these groups though differences in their histories and ecological adaptations are evident. In addition, the length of time in the U. S. and reasons these people immigrated to the United States influenced their acculturation process (Rong & Preissle, 1998).

Asian Americans have more than a 150-year history of immigration to this country; about 90% of them are recent immigrants since the 1965 Immigration

Act. The number of immigrants from Asian countries has risen rapidly in the recent decades, 3.5 million in 1980, and 7.3 million in 1990. That is a 108 percent increase (Exter, 1992). For most of these immigrants, the migration process is still a fresh experience and integration of the old with the new is ongoing (Huang & Ying, 1998). Among Asian Americans, two of three U. S. Asians were born in foreign countries. According to Lee (1996) among these Asian groups, 56 percent of Chinese, 71 percent of Koreans, 92 percent of Vietnamese, and 80 percent of Cambodians are immigrants. Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian groups had the highest proportion of foreign birth, whereas Japanese had the lowest proportion. Two of five (40%) Asians entered the U. S. between 1980 and 1990. Three quarters of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong have entered this country since 1975 (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). The Hmong and Cambodians were the youngest Asians with median ages of 13 and 19 (Rong & Preissle, 1998). It is obvious that a large portion of these immigrants will be in American public schools.

Though education is highly valued in Asian countries, the educational attainment of different groups varies widely. Asian children as a whole have the most schooling, the highest grade-point averages, the lowest dropout rates, and an overrepresentation in the gifted programs in almost all states across the U. S. (U. S. Department of Education, 1993).

It has been reported that the success of Asians is due to high intelligence and cultural fitness (Herrnsteen & Murray, 1994, cited in Rong & Pressle, 1998,

127). Among many Asians, family allegiance and respect for parents and family play a significant role in the learning process. In many East and Southeast Asian cultures, Confucian teachings which included respect for elders, value for education achievement, respect for authority, and self-control assisted the educational success for immigrants from these areas. Asian American children tend to be more dependent, conforming, and willing to place family welfare over individual wishes than other American children.

For years many teachers considered Asians as “model immigrants”. Individual differences among Asian students are often overlooked. The stereotype of Asian children as “problem free” and “whiz kids” has hindered teachers in recognizing individual personality as well as cultural difference among Asians. According to Cushner, McClelland, & Safford (1996) the current and future teachers in the U. S. are, and will be, majority White, monolingual, and females. Helping these teachers to set proper expectations when they teach Asian American students is critical for the teachers to be effective.

Pratt and his colleagues (1999) studied Chinese students’ conceptions of effective teaching. They found that the conceptions of teaching effectiveness were deeply rooted in cultural antecedents and social structures. They reported that loyalty, duty, and obedience were common characteristics toward teachers among Chinese students. Teachers need to recognize these characteristics and create environments in which these students will enjoy learning.

III. Methodology

This study utilized research methodologies of literature review, interview and observation. Observations of these families were made during Spring 1998 to Spring 2000. These took place in various settings, sometimes in homes, classrooms, or community gatherings while these children interacted with their parents, teachers, and peers. Interviews were conducted in an informal and conversational manner sometimes with both their parents, sometimes with the child only. Data were collected and transcribed into written format.

Demographic information was tallied into percentages and frequencies.

IV. Summary of the Findings

This researcher interviewed 33 Asian American students from 19 families. Their families were originally from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (see Table 1). Their ages ranged from 6 to 21 years. Among this group nine were in elementary schools, 2 in middle schools, 8 in high schools and 14 in colleges (see Table 2). Ninety-seven percent of their parents had obtained at least a bachelor's degree (37 out of 38).

The demographic data indicated that all of these students were from nuclear intact families. Their parents were all foreign born. These parents (in many families, the mother) usually supervised or accompanied their children while they were doing their homework typically at elementary and middle school levels. They were active in their children's academic and career selection. In the college group all fourteen students were in the fields of medicine, engineering, or other professional studies.

This researcher interviewed 33 students. The participants reported structural teaching and clear expectations helped them to focus upon the content being taught. Among high school and college subjects, 13 out of 22 reported that they preferred self-directed learning. They also preferred individual projects rather than group projects. Individual differences were evident in the same family. In two families, the older brother preferred hands-on activity and self-directed learning, while the younger one needed teachers' clear instruction and close supervision. Teachers' approval and encouragement were important reinforcers since they normally did not get positive reinforcement from their parents. Hard working and high achievement was expected from the family.

Observations made by this researcher found that among many Asian American families, parental supervision and support played an important role in the children's learning. Parents of East Asian Americans provided a safe and supportive environment for their youngsters. These families usually involved their children in extracurricular activities; for example, violin lessons and tennis for boys, and piano lessons and dance for girls, were encouraged most by the parents. Of the nineteen families, children from fifteen families had at least one activity from extracurricular mentioned above. Face saving was important to many Asian Americans. Everything a child does was viewed as a reflection on the family as a whole. This researcher sensed competition and comparisons between parents. This put a lot of pressure on their children to not only be successful, but also to be outstanding among their peers. One nine-year-old boy

was involved in gifted programs. He had violin and piano lessons after school. He was also enrolled in Chinese language school on Saturdays. He ranked number one in his class academically. He won purple ribbons in his music competitions. In one meeting, he sighed and said, "I am so stressed." The most talked about topics among parents (most of the time, the mothers) of the high school group were SAT scores and colleges their children will attend. As a result, most of these high school students did not enjoy participating in community gatherings. Otherwise, when they noticed the topic of the conversation, they walked away.

V. Educational Implications of Working with Asian American Students

Asian immigrants constitute one third of the total immigrants to the U. S. (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Although diversity and variation show among Asian American students, most of them are willing to learn. The following implications may serve as guidelines for teachers working with Asian American students.

1. Recognize students' learning styles. Many studies indicated certain ethnic groups have specific learning styles (see Table 3). However, many teachers lacked the information of how this cultural characteristic impacted students' learning. There was little research which helped teachers to recognize and practice in teaching Asian American students (Chiang, 2000). Teachers who work with Asian American students need to recognize students' different strengths, such as persistence; readiness, such as, English proficiency; need for

structure in learning environment, such as direct instruction; and social learning, such as peer tutoring or teachers' individual instruction. Asian American students are good at remembering because most of their parents learned this way; therefore, they supervised their children to learn in such ways. Teachers need to encourage these students to use creative thinking and imagination in the students learning.

2. Understand communication styles. Asian American students as a whole communicate in an indirect way. They seldom reveal their opinions or abilities voluntarily. They are quiet learners. They normally do not challenge their teachers. Teachers need to encourage them to be more outgoing and to express themselves. A comparison of cultural attitudes toward silence indicated that different cultures perceived silence differently (Buckley, 2000). Asian American students usually are silent in public. They prefer to ask or respond to speakers or teachers in private (see Table 4). They avoid confrontations, therefore, they seldom ask for clarification which could possibly cause confusion and frustration.

Asian American students are often confused with nonverbal communication which is commonly used in the U. S. This is especially true when family values conflict with school culture. Girls were taught to behave properly in public. First-born boys were highly valued. Teachers may find among new immigrants, girls usually dress nicely and cover their shoulders and thighs. Boys normally assume the responsibility to protect their younger siblings. Facial

expression and body movements can send confusing information to these students. They need to be informed about the meanings of these non-verbal cues. For example, Asian girls were taught not to show their teeth when they smile. Belly laughing can be interpreted to mean rude and ill educated to them.

3. Invite parents to participate in school functions. Parental and community support is critical to Asian American students. To understand the experience of Asian American students in this country, it is important not only to understand their child rearing strategies, but also the parents' expectations and attitudes toward education. Among many East Asian Americans, many sacrifice their time and money to provide the best for their children. These parents often live frugally, but their children enjoy brand name clothing, language schools and after school programs. Four of the high school students have summer camps, or attended overseas learning experiences. They respect authority, therefore, they seldom question school policy or teachers' instructions. They normally will not volunteer their talents unless they have been invited or requested. Teachers should recognize the profession of these parents and invite them to share their expertise in school. This invitation not only demonstrates respect to the parents but also gives the child a sense of pride. Teachers may also pay a visit to a student's home or use telephone calls to inform parents about school policies and special functions. These parents also need to be informed of their rights and responsibilities.

This researcher found that youngsters who are children of East Asian Americans adjusted well academically to American schools. However, they may need teacher and administrator psychological support and understanding to reduce pressure from both their home and their community. Compared with East Asian immigrants, South East Asian Americans often experience hardships in many areas. They need more assistance and encouragement from teachers and schools. This study hoped to raise teacher awareness regarding cultural differences. This awareness may help teachers to avoid mistaking the cultural cues of their students. It will take teacher understanding and sensitivity to reach these Asian American students. It has been said, "To teach is to learn twice." In order for teachers to be effective, it is critical that they understand and appreciate the cultural characteristics of Asian American students.

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Table 1

Subjects and Their Original Nations

Nation	Number
China	3
Hong Kong	6
Japan	3
Korea	2
Taiwan	19
TOTAL	33

Table 2

Subjects and Their Level of Schooling

Level of Schooling	Number
Elementary	9
Middle School	2
High School	8
College	14
TOTAL	33

Table 3.

Minority Students' Learning Styles in Schools in the United States

Researcher	Ethnic Group	Learning Styles
Dunn & Dunn (1978)	Mexican-Am.	Authority-oriented Parent-oriented Small group learning
Hilliard (1976) Shade (1982)	African-American	View things in entirety Intuitive, approximate concepts of time, number, & space. Rely on both verbal & nonverbal.
More (1987)	Native American	Reflective Global processing More "watch-then-do" than "trial & error"
Worthley (1989)	Hmong	Group learning Rely on authority
Chiang (2000)	East Asian-American	Prefer structural and direct instruction Passive response

Table 4

Cultural Differences in Communication - Silence

Race	Communication Style
Lakota Cherokee (Dumont, 1972)	Choose not to talk in the classroom
Navajo (Plank, 1994)	Silence indicates something is going on, not to be silent sometimes means disrespect
Puyallup (Guilmet & Whited, 1987)	Silence is acceptable, respected, and sometimes expected.
Blackfoot (Buckley, 2000)	Air concerns publicly, but deliberates on them privately. Do not exchange ideas with a speaker in a public forum.
European American (Berrill, 1991; Emery, 1996; Tannen, 1998)	Interchange ideas openly. Confront with immediate response. Clarify concepts.
East Asian (Chiang, 2000)	Deliberate in private. Avoid confrontation. Verbalize when requested.



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