YOU'RE ASIAN, HOW COULD YOU FAIL MATH?

Unmasking the myth of the model minority

By Benji Chang and Wayne Au
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"Have you ever sat next to an Asian student in class and wondered how she managed to consistently get straight A's while you struggled to maintain a B-minus average?"
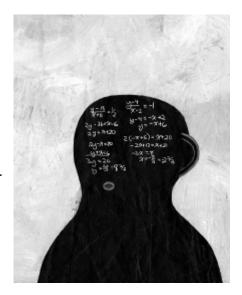-from *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers-and How You Can Too*

Illustration: Jordin Isip

In January 1966, William Petersen penned an article for The New York Times Magazine entitled, "Success Story: Japanese American Style." In it, he praised the Japanese-American community for its apparent ability to successfully assimilate into mainstream American culture, and literally dubbed Japanese Americans a "model minority" - the first popular usage of the term.

By the 1980s, Newsweek, The New Republic, Fortune, Parade, U.S. News and World Report, and Time all had run articles on the subject of Asian-American success in schools and society, and the Myth of the Model Minority was born. The Myth of the Model Minority asserts that, due to their adherence to traditional, Asian cultural values, Asian-American students are supposed to be devoted, obedient to authority, respectful of teachers, smart, good at math and science, diligent, hard workers, cooperative, well-behaved, docile, college-bound, quiet, and opportunistic.

Top of the Class (quoted above) is a perfect modern example. Published in 2005, the authors claim to offer readers 17 "secrets" that Asian parents supposedly use to develop high school graduates who earn A-pluses and head to Ivy League colleges. It's a marketing concept built purely on the popular belief in the Myth of the Model Minority.

However, in both of our experiences as public school teachers and education activists, we've seen our share of Asian-American students do poorly in school, get actively involved in gangs, drop out, or exhibit any number of other indicators of school failure not usually associated with "model minorities."

A critical unmasking of this racist myth is needed because it both negatively affects the classroom lives of Asian American students and contributes to the justification of race and class inequality in schools and society.

Masking Diversity

On the most basic level, the Myth of the Model Minority masks the diversity that exists within the Asian-American community. The racial category of "Asian" is itself emblematic of the problem. Asia contains nearly four billion people and over 50 countries, including those as diverse as Turkey, Japan, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

The racial category of "Asian" is also historically problematic. Similar to those categories used to name peoples from Africa and the Americas, the definition of Asia as a continent (and race) and division of Asians into various nations was developed to serve the needs of European and U.S. colonialism and imperialism.

The category of Asian gets even fuzzier in the context of the United States, since there are over 50 ways to officially qualify as an Asian American according to government standards. Pacific Islanders and "mixed race" Asians are also regularly squished together under the banner of Asian or Asian Pacific Islander (which, out of respect for the sovereignty of Pacific peoples, we refuse to do here).

Masking the Class Divide

The Myth of the Model Minority, however, masks another form of diversity-that of economic class division. As Jamie Lew explains in her 2007 book, Asian Americans in Class, there are increasing numbers of working-class Korean-American students in New York City performing more poorly in schools than their middle-class counterparts.

Similarly, Vivian Louie found class-based differences in her study of Chinese-American students. Her research indicated that middle-class Chinese-American mothers tended to have more time, resources, and educational experience to help their children through school and into college than mothers from working-class Chinese-American families, who had longer work hours, lower-paying jobs, and lower levels of education.

These class differences are sometimes rooted in specific immigrant histories and are connected to the 1965 Immigration Act. The Act not only opened up the United States to large numbers of Asian immigrants, but, among a handful of other criteria, it granted preference to educated professionals and those committing to invest at least $40,000 in a business once they arrived.

As a consequence, some Asian immigrants, even those within the same ethnic community, enter the United States with high levels of education and/or with economic capital attained in their countries of origin. Others enter the United States with little or no education or money at all. These educational and financial heritages make an important difference in how well children gain access to educational resources in the United States.

In other words, whether we are talking about African-American, white, Latina/o, indigenous, or "model minority" Asian-American students, the first rule of educational inequality still applies: Class matters.

Masking Ethnic Inequity

To add to the complexity of Asian-American diversity, many of the class differences amongst Asian Americans also correlate with ethnic differences. According to the 2000 census, 53.3 percent of Cambodians, 59.6 percent of Hmong, 49.6 percent of Laotians, and 38.1 percent of Vietnamese over 25 years of age have less than a high school education. In contrast, 13.3 percent of Asian Indians, 12.7 percent of Filipinos, 8.9 percent of Japanese, and 13.7 percent of Koreans over 25 years of age have less than a high school education.

These educational disparities are particularly striking considering that, for instance, 37.8 percent of Hmong, almost 30 percent of Cambodians, and 18.5 percent of Laotians have incomes below the poverty line (compared to 12.4 percent of the total U.S population). Indeed, the 2000 census reveals relatively consistent high education rates and income amongst South Asian, Korean, and Chinese Americans, and relatively low education rates and low income amongst Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong Americans. Hence, the Myth of the Model Minority serves to obscure the struggles of poor or "under-educated" families working to gain a decent education for their children.

Masking Economic Circumstance

One of the most cited statistics proving the Myth of the Model minority is that Asian Americans even out earn whites in income. What is obscured in this "fact" is that it is only true when we compare Asian American household income to white household income, and the reality is that Asian-Americans make less per person compared to whites. Statistically, the average household size for Asian Americans is 3.3 people, while for whites it is 2.5 people.

Consequently, Asian-American households are more likely than white households to have more than one income earner, and almost twice as likely to have three income earners. When we take these issues into account, Asian-American individuals earn $2,000 on average less than white individuals.

The statistics on Asian-American income are further skewed upward when we look at the economies of the states where the majority live. The three states with the highest proportion of Asian Americans, Hawai'i, California, and New York, all have median income levels in the top third of states. This means that, regardless of statistically higher household incomes, the high cost of living in states with large Asian-American populations guarantees that Asian Americans, on average, are more likely to have less disposable income and lower living standards than whites.

Masking Racism

While the above statistics may be remarkable in the face of the Myth of the Model Minority, they also point to another serious problem: The myth is regularly used as a social and political wedge against blacks, Latina/os, and other racial groups in the United States.

The racist logic of the model minority wedge is simple. If, according to the myth, Asian Americans are academically and socially successful due to particular cultural or racial

strengths, then lower test scores, lower GPAs, and lower graduation rates of other groups like African Americans and Latina/os can be attributed to their cultural or racial weaknesses.

Or, as one high school guidance counselor in Stacey J. Lee's book, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype*, puts it, "Asians like... M.I.T., Princeton. They tend to go to good schools... I wish our blacks would take advantage of things instead of sticking to sports and entertainment."

The Myth of the Model Minority also causes Asian-American students to struggle with the racist expectations the myth imposes upon them. An Asian-American high school student in Lee's book explains, "When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way they see an Asian."

Unfortunately, some East and South Asian Americans uphold the myth because it allows them to justify their own relative educational and social success in terms of individual or cultural drive, while simultaneously allowing them to distance themselves from what they see as African-American, Latina/o, indigenous, and Southeast-Asian-American educational failure.

As Jamie Lew observes, the Myth of the Model Minority "...attributes academic success and failure to individual merit and cultural orientation, while underestimating important structural and institutional resources that all children need in order to achieve academically." In doing so, the Myth of the Model Minority upholds notions of racial and cultural inferiority of other lower achieving groups, as it masks the existence of racism and class exploitation in this country.

The Challenge of Educating Asian America

One of the difficulties of unmasking the Myth of the Model Minority is that the diversity of the Asian American experience poses substantial challenges, particularly in relation to how race, culture, and ethnicity are typically considered by educators.

For instance, Asian-American students challenge the categories commonly associated with the black-brown-white spectrum of race. Many Asian American students follow educational pathways usually attributed to white, middle-class, suburban students, while many others follow pathways usually attributed to black and Latina/o, working-class, urban students.

Other Asian-American groups challenge typical racial categories in their own identities. Pilipinos,1 for instance, don't quite fit into the typical categories of South, East, or Southeast Asian, nor do they quite fit the category of Pacific Islander. Further, some argue that Pilipinos have a lineage that is more closely related to Latina/os because they were in fact colonized by Spain. Consequently, because of their particular circumstances, many Pilipinos more strongly identify with being brown than anything else. As another example, many high-achieving, middle-class South Asians consider themselves "brown," especially after the discrimination endured after 9/11.

Asian-American students also challenge typical notions of immigration and language by blurring the typical dichotomies of native language vs. English and immigrant vs. American-born. Some Southeast Asian refugees, like those from Laos, may develop fluency in multiple languages and attend universities, even as their parents are low-income and do not speak English. On the other hand, there are groups of Pilipinos who grow up highly Americanized, who have been taught English their whole lives, but who have some of the highest dropout and suicide rates.

Asian-American students also challenge popularly accepted multicultural teaching strategies because they are often a numerical minority in classrooms, and multicultural teaching strategies designed to meet the needs of classroom majorities can leave out the culturally specific needs of Asian-American students. These can include the language acquisition needs of students who come from character-based languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese), social and ideological differences of students from majority Muslim nations (e.g., Pakistan, Indonesia), and psychological issues that emerge from student families traumatized by U.S. intervention/war policies (e.g., Korea, Vietnam, Thailand).

From the Fukienese-Chinese student in an urban Philadelphia classroom with mostly Black or Latino/a students, to the Hmong student who sits with two or three peers in a mostly white school in rural Wisconsin, to the Pilipino student in a San Diego suburb with predominantly Pilipino classmates and some white peers, Asian-American youth do not fit neatly into the typical boxes of our educational system.

Unmasking the Myth In Our Classrooms

Despite the diversity and complexity inherent in working with Asian-American populations, there are many things that educators can do to challenge the Myth of the Model Minority. Similar to other communities of color, effective steps include recruiting more educators from Asian-American backgrounds, promoting multilingual communication in instruction and parent involvement, and developing relationships between parents, community groups, and schools.

Within the classroom, teachers can make use of several strategies to counter the Myth of the Model Minority in their own classrooms. The following list offers a starting point to address the realities of Asian-American students' lives.

Don't automatically assume that your Asian-American students are "good" students (or "bad," for that matter), and get to know them.
- Personally get to know students and their family's practices, which widely vary from home to home, despite their "membership" in specific ethnic or linguistic groups. Start by researching the specific histories and cultures of the students in your classroom to better understand the historical and political contexts of their communities. Also, bring the lives of all of your students, Asian Americans included, into your classroom. Have them consider, reflect, and write about how their home lives and experiences intersect with their school lives and experiences.
- Develop strategies to personally engage with students and their communities, whether through lunchtime interactions or visits to their homes, community centers, and cultural or political events. While we recognize the limited resources of all teachers, learning

about your Asian-American students and their communities takes the same energy and commitment as learning to work with any specific group of students.

Rethink how you interpret and act upon the silence of Asian-American students in your classroom.

- Asian-American student silence can mean many things, from resistance to teachers, to disengagement from work, to a lack of understanding of concepts, to thoughtful engagement and consideration, to insecurity speaking English, to insecurity in their grasp of classroom content. Rather than assume that Asian-American student silence means any one thing, assess the meaning of silence by personally checking in with the student individually.

Teach about unsung Asian-American heroes.

- Teachers might include the stories of real-life woman warriors Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, for instance. Kochiyama has been involved in a range of efforts, from working closely with Malcolm X in Harlem, to Puerto Rican sovereignty, to freeing political prisoners like Mumia Abu Jamal. Boggs' efforts have included work with famed Marxist Humanist Raya Dunayevskaya, organized labor, and the Detroit Freedom Summer schools.
- Or perhaps teach about Ehren Watada, the first commissioned officer to publicly refuse to go to war in Iraq because he believes the war is illegal and would make him a party to war crimes. Learning about heroes like these can help students broaden the range of what it means to be Asian American.

Highlight ways in which Asian Americans challenge racism and stereotypes.

- Schools should challenge racist caricatures of Asians and Asian Americans, including viewing them as penny-pinching convenience store owners, religious terrorists, kung fu fighting mobsters, academic super-nerds, and exotic, submissive women.
- One way to do this is to introduce students to stereotype-defying examples, such as Kochiyama, Boggs, and Watada. There are also many youth and multi-generational organizations of Asian Americans fighting for social justice in the U.S. These include Khmer Girls in Action (KGA, Long Beach), and the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence/Organizing Asian Communities (CAAAV, New York).
- These organizations are extremely important examples of how youth can be proactive in challenging some of the issues that affect our communities, and their work challenges the stereotypes of Asian Americans as silent and obedient.

Illustrate historical, political, and cultural intersections between Asian Americans and other groups.

- There are historical and current examples of shared experiences between Asian Americans and other communities. For instance, teachers could highlight the key role of Asian Americans in collective struggles for social justice in the United States. Possible examples include: Philip Veracruz and other Pilipino farm workers who were the backbone and catalyst for the labor campaigns of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s; Chinese students and families who challenged the racism of public schools in the *Lau v. Nichols* case of the 1970s that provided the legal basis for guaranteeing the rights of English language learners and bilingual education; Asian-American college students who in 1967-1969 organized with

Black, Latina/o, and Native Americans at San Francisco State University in a multiethnic struggle to establish the first ethnic studies program in the nation, united under the banner of "Third World Liberation."

Weave the historical struggles, culture, and art of Asian-American communities into your classroom.

- As part of a curriculum that is grounded in the lives of all of our students, teachers can highlight Asian-American history, culture, and art in their classroom practices to help Asian-American students develop not only positive self-identity, but also empathy between Asian Americans and other racial, cultural, or ethnic groups. Teachers might use novels by Carlos Bulosan, John Okada, Nora Okja Keller, Lê Thi Diem Thúy, Jessica Hagedorn, Jhumpa Lahiri, or Shawn Wong; poetry by Lawson Inada, Li-Young Li, Marilyn Chin, Nick Carbón, or Sesshu Foster; spoken word by Reggie Cabico, Ishle Park, Beau Sia, or I Was Born With Two Tongues; hip-hop music by Blue Scholars, Skim, Native Guns, Himalayan Project, or Kuttin Kandi; and history texts by Ron Takaki, Sucheng Chan, Peter Kwong, or Gary Okihiro.

When it comes to dealing with Asian Americans in education, it is all too common for people to ask, "What's wrong with the Myth of the Model Minority? Isn't it a positive stereotype?" What many miss is that there are no "positive" stereotypes, because by believing in a "positive" stereotype, as, admittedly, even many Asian Americans do, we ultimately give credence to an entire way of thinking about race and culture, one that upholds the stereotypic racial and cultural inferiority of African Americans and Latina/os and maintains white supremacy.

The Myth of the Model Minority not only does a disservice to Asian-American diversity and identity, it serves to justify an entire system of race and class inequality. It is perhaps for this reason, above all else, that the Myth of the Model Minority needs to be unmasked in our classrooms and used to challenge the legacies of racism and other forms of inequality that exist in our schools and society today.

Endnote:

[1] Pilipino is a term used by some activists in the Pilipino-American community as means of challenging the way that Spanish and U.S. colonization of the islands also colonized the language by renaming them the Philippines after King Phillip, and introducing the anglicized "f" sound which did not exist in the indigenous languages there.