Asian Indian Students: Moving Beyond Myths and

Adopting Effective Practices

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Abstract

This article describes the Asian Indian population and how the myth of the model minority can influence students' access to support services. It is important for school counselors to understand how this minority group experiences stressors related to academics, career decision making, and personal/social development. Effective interventions and strategies for working with Asian Indian students and their families are discussed.

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The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement

regarding diversity states that, "professional school counselors take action to ensure

that students of culturally diverse backgrounds have access to services and

opportunities that promote maximum academic, personal/social and career

development" (www.schoolcounselor.org, 2009). Furthermore, ASCA contends that

students who come from diverse backgrounds may not have immediate access to

services that support and promote their academic achievement. Consequently, school

counselors are responsible in ensuring that all students, regardless of their cultural,

ethnic, or racial background, receive the same opportunities and services as their

majority counterparts. This standard of practice clearly applies to all students, including

Asians who represent 4.2 percent of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau,

2009).

The Asian population is not a homogeneous group. In fact, the U.S. Census

Bureau (2009) reports, "the Asian population…includes many groups who differ in

language, culture, and length of residence in the United States" (p.1). Lee (2006) also

noted that the Asian population is comprised of approximately 50 ethnic groups. Further

diversity exists in whether Asians are American born, recent immigrants, or refugees.

Religion and language are additional diverse factors related to each ethnic group. Given

the complexity in diversity among Asians, it is an important consideration for school

counselors to have the knowledge, awareness, and skills to meet the needs of this

largely heterogeneous racial group. Kim, Rendon, and Valadez (1998) support this

notion by stressing "counselors should recognize the existence of diversity among Asian students and avoid the myth of cultural uniformity" (p.175).

The Census Bureau defines the Asian race as individuals who live in the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Indians make up eighty percent of the 10 million Asians in America. Of those 10 million Asians, 1.8 million are Indians (2009). Asian Indians began to enter into the United States after the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act. Of all the Asian Indians in the United States, 59.9 percent are in management, professional, or related occupations, 63.9 percent have a bachelor's degree or more, 76.9 percent speak only English at home or speak English very well, and the median family income, which is second to that of the Japanese, is just over $70 thousand (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). These numbers, when compared to other Asian groups, seem to reflect the relative success of this fairly new immigrant population.

However, the caution in assuming that most Asian Indians are successful contributes to the myth of the model minority. This myth, which was first identified in the 1960's, purports that Asians can base all their success on hard work and determination and, therefore, do not require support services. Additionally, the model minority myth suggests that Asians do not experience poverty, mental health issues, barriers related to education, are wealthy, and are high achievers (Doan, 2006; Wing, 2007; Wong & Halgin, 2006). In fact, studies have shown that Asian Indians tend to not seek mental health services (Chandras, 1997). Instead, research has found that Asian Indians do not discuss personal issues outside the family (Das & Kemp, 1997). Research has also revealed that Asian Indians participate less in class discussions due to language

barriers and heavy accents (Bhattacharya, 2000), experience racial prejudice, and are teased often about their appearance (Das & Kemp; 1997).

Research specifically related to Asian Indians has examined factors related to education, mental health, and adjustment (Kim, et. al, 1998). The researchers examined educational aspirations, school characteristics, and student characteristics of six Asian American ethnic groups. The researchers reported that Asian Indian students tended to express higher educational aspirations, have higher math performance, and have parents who have higher status occupations and education levels than the other Asian ethnic groups. Another study examining school adjustment of South Asians revealed that parents believed education was the only means of success for their children and were less likely to participate in school related activities. In addition, students were likely to report having a sense of responsibility to achieve their parents' dreams (Bhattacharya, 2000). When examining mental health related issues of Asian Indians, Das and Kemp (1997) reported this ethnic group does not speak of family or personal issues to outsiders. Instead, the notion is that the family is responsible for supporting each other. The researchers also noted that Asian Indian youth tend to have difficulty living between the Indian and American cultures and are expected to obey their parents regarding issues related to education, career choice, dating, and socializing. In turn, conflicts between parents and their children may arise if the family expectations are not met.

Clearly, Asian Indian students are not immune from personal/social, academic, and career related difficulties. Additionally, supporting the model minority myth is essentially confirming the stereotype that most Asian Indians want to become computer

scientists, doctors, and engineers, are high achievers, excel at math and science, are wealthy, and are free from discrimination and prejudice (Doan, 2006; Wing, 2007; Wong & Halgin, 2006). In turn, these stereotypes may not only influence the type of services Asian Indian student receive, but whether they receive these services at all. Therefore, this article aims to provide strategies that enable school counselors to engage in practices that are culturally sensitive and support the developmental needs of Asian Indian students and their families.

Suggestions for Effective Practice

On the surface Asian Indians may seem to excel academically, not cause trouble in class, or seem highly motivated. However, as previous research suggests Asian Indian students are not immune from personal, career, or academic related issues (Bhattacharya, 2000; Das & Kemp, 1997; Doan, 2006; Wing, 2007; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Therefore, school counselors can engage in counseling practices that transcend the myth of the model minority. School counselors can also utilize effective strategies that support the personal/social, academic, and career development needs of Asian Indian students. Additionally, school counselors ought to create opportunities for parental involvement and establish school wide initiatives that educate all school personnel about the cultural values and beliefs of Asian Indian families.

Challenge the Model Minority Myth

The myth of the model minority suggests that Asians are a racial group that have "made it" and do not need assistance or support. As such, the first step in practicing culturally sensitive and effective techniques is to resist the notion that Asian Indian students need little or no attention. Regardless of whether it appears that Asian Indian

students are excelling in math and science, do not cause trouble in class, or have high parental expectations, this population of students is not exempt from identity issues, stress, anxiety, isolation, or social discrimination. Consequently, school counselors should be aware that Asian Indian students do, indeed, experience issues related to their personal/social, academic, and career development despite whether or not the challenges are transparent.

Supporting Personal/Social Development

When counseling Asian Indian students about personal issues, school counselors can apply several strategies and areas of intervention. First, school counselors should recognize whether or not the student is comfortable speaking about personal issues outside of the family. Students may feel shame admitting to having personal issues and not feel safe verbalizing their problems to a nonrelative (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993). Therefore, school counselors can educate students about the counseling process, rules of confidentiality, and informed consent. Second, the counselor can determine if a language barrier exists which, in turn, can affect the counseling process. One resource to make this determination is through the use of home language surveys that assess whether English is a first or second language in the home. Another strategy that school counselors may use is to help Asian Indian students understand the role of the school counselor. Students from this ethnic background may not have had any experiences with counselors. As such, school counselors can create public relations material that highlight the role of the counselor, explains the group and individual counseling process, and illustrates examples of the services that may be provided. Additionally, if the student is newly immigrated, the school counselor can inquire as to

whether the student is socializing with non-Asian Indian peers. In turn, school counselors can suggest after school activities, clubs, and athletics to help Asian Indians assimilate and interact with their peers. Finally, school counselors ought to communicate with Asian Indian students in a manner that acknowledges their cultural heritage and does not require students to operate individualistically. Instead, it is necessary that school counselors are aware that Asian Indians operate in a collectivist manner and tend to believe their individual issues and decisions can impact the entire family.

Supporting Academic Development

While the notion exists that Asian Indians excel at math and science (Kim, et. al, 1998), school counselors should focus on the entire academic development of this group of students. School counselors are expected to help all students succeed in their academics. However, Asian Indians may have higher parental expectations that require them to study longer hours, socialize less, and focus only on academic related activities (Das & Kemp, 1997). Therefore, school counselors can use interventions that alleviate academic related issues that Asian Indian students may experience.

First, school counselors can examine academic records and ensure that Asian Indians are doing well in all of their courses. Second, if a language barrier exists, the school counselor can ensure that appropriate support services are provided. Third, due to parental beliefs that education is the only means of success (Bhattacharya, 2000), school counselors can speak with students about the potential stress this may place on the student and discuss which courses they are actually interested in instead of courses they feel they are expected to take due to parental expectations. In turn, school

counselors can then support students who have a variety of interests related to areas such as literature, vocational programs, and the arts. The use of career interest inventories and personality assessments are tools that can help students examine their choices.

Supporting Career Development

Given the myth of the model minority, Asian Indians appear to choose careers related to medicine, computers, business, and science (Doan, 2006; Wing, 2007). However, the Census Bureau (2009) reports that 59.9 percent of Asian Indians are in management, professional, or related fields. Consequently, that leaves over 40 percent of individuals who pursue other career paths. As a result, it is essential that school counselors work with Asian Indians to explore career options that include a diverse set of interest, abilities, skills, and training. Bhattacharya (2000) reported that Asian Indian students felt the pressure of achieving their parents' dreams. Furthermore, Asian Indians tend to equate career choice with status. For example, if a student goes on to medical school and becomes a doctor, this reflects positively on the entire family and furthers the family's status and reputation within the community (Joshi, 2005).

Consequently, it is important for school counselors to practice counseling strategies that acknowledge the cultural implications related to career decision-making. This notion is supported by Lowe (2005), whose study revealed that "Asian American participants rated counselors who expressed a collectivist value orientation higher on cross-cultural competence than they rated counselors who expressed an individualist value orientation" p. 140. Therefore, school counselors can also speak with students

about their family expectations related to career choice and make a determination whether the student is supported at home with making independent career decisions.

Inclusion of Parents

Joshi (2005) noted that Asian Indian parents teach their children to view adults as authority figures who ought to be respected and never challenged. Similarly, teachers are to be honored and treated as having higher value than the child's own parents. Asian Indian parents tend to believe that teachers are experts and are trusted to provide a good education to their children. Asian Indian parents generally do not consider interfering with what the teacher does in the classroom. Thus, on the surface it may appear as though Asian Indian parents are not involved in their child's education. However, on the contrary, parents support their children at home with fostering the importance of education, supporting their children, and ensuring the completion of homework.

Asian Indian parents do not believe it is their place to come to the school and volunteer in the classroom. Instead, the parents leave the education component to the teacher and the school (Joshi, 2005). As such, school counselors can find other ways of inviting parents to the school and include them in their child's education. One example is to ask parents to come in for face to face meetings to talk about their child's progress, how to get involved in academic and career planning, and even to educate parents about the culture of American schools. Given that the Asian Indian culture is collectivist, it is also important to include parents on the academic and career decision making process. While school counselors can provide students with an array of choices, it is equally important to understand how the choices fit with the parents' values and

expectations for their children. School counselors can take the initiative to educate Asian Indian parents about the school system and providing opportunities for involvement. This can take place through phone calls, parent conferences, and sending information home. In turn, these strategies can foster a viable relationship between the school, child, and parent.

School Wide Initiatives

School counselors do not stand alone when it comes to ensuring all students are treated with respect, have equal access, and are provided services that are culturally sensitive. Hence, school wide initiatives can ensure Asian Indian student's needs are being met and the population is not ignored. Moreover, if adults in the school buy in to the myth of the model minority, students who need services may not receive the same opportunities as their peers. Thus, there are some strategies that school counselors can put into place to ensure the school is culturally responsive.

Lee (2001) noted that the "culturally responsive counselor can intervene in the educational system on behalf of students in ways designed to eliminate institutional barriers and cultural insensitivities" (p. 259). School counselor can advocate for and create diversity education programs for administrators, teachers, and support staff. The creation and utilization of in-service trainings can educate adults how to acknowledge diverse cultures in the school and provide best practices for serving all students within the school. For example, Asian Indian students do not speak out of turn when adults are present and will not raise their hands in class for fear embarrassment in front of their peers if they have an accent (Bhattacharya, 2000; Joshi, 2005). Rather than assume that the student is not participating, as an alternative, teachers can be informed about

how to include Asian Indian students in class conversations and provide for an

environment that is safe and supportive. School counselors can also introduce school

wide diversity programs which encourage student participation. Classroom guidance,

small groups, and peer helper programs can be used to build tolerance, promote

acceptance of diverse cultures, and cultivate an environment of inclusion.

<center>Conclusion</center>

This article illustrates the need for school counselors to understand the diversity

that exists in the Asian race and to adopt effective practices that are culturally sensitive.

Specifically, this article describes the Asian Indian population and how cultural values

can influence academic success and career decision-making and impede involvement

in school activities. Additionally, it is important for school counselors to understand that

buying into the model minority myth suggests that Asian Indian students do not need

support services. Instead, school counselors can reach out to this minority group and

utilize effective strategies that support students and their families in a culturally

empathetic and competent manner.

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Biographical Statement

Sejal Parikh is an assistant professor in the school counseling program at the University of North Florida. The author also has practical skills as a school counselor as a result of working in an urban elementary school and in a suburban high school. The author's research interests include multicultural counseling, advocacy and social justice, and school counselor training and development.