Awareness Points for Interacting with Asian American Students

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Asian-Americans are generally stereotyped as successful, law-abiding, and high-achieving minorities. The success of many Asian-American students has created a new "model minority" stereotype. They have been described in popular and professional literature as "whiz kids," and as "problem free." Some claim that Asians are smarter than other groups; others believe there is something in Asian culture that breeds success, perhaps Confucian ideas that stress family values and education (Brand, 1987). However, Asian-Americans' educational achievement cannot be attributed to natural superiority or shared cultural and family values, but rather to the interaction of those cultural and family values with social factors (Siu, 1992).

The "whiz kids" image is a misleading stereotype that masks individuality and conceals real problems. If Asian students are viewed as instant successes, there is less justification for assisting those who may need help. The result may be neglect, isolation, delinquency, and inadequate preparation for the labor market among those students. For many Asian children, the challenge of schooling can be overwhelming. Not only may American schooling contradict their own cultural system, but it may also undermine their sense of well-being and self-confidence (Trueba & Cheng, 1993) because the ethnic identity of Asian children is often based on their relation to their group. In contrast, American schooling emphasizes independence, individualism, and competition.

Asian-American children are a diverse group. Not all are superior students; some have various kinds of learning difficulties (Shen & Mo, 1990). Some lack motivation, proficiency in English, or financial resources; others have parents who do not understand the American school system because of cultural differences, language barriers, or their more immediate quest for survival (Yao, 1988). Many children, struggling with a new language and culture, drop out of school. Further, the majority of Asian-American students do not reach the starry heights of the celebrated few, and an alarming number are pushing themselves to the emotional brink in their quest for excellence (Brand, 1987; Trueba & Cheng, 1993).

Although diversity among Asian-American groups makes overall descriptions difficult, there are general cultural characteristics, values, and practices shared by most Asians, particularly East and Southeast Asians, that are different from the mainstream American culture.

In many East and Southeast Asian cultures, Confucian ideals, which include respect for elders, deferred gratification, and discipline, are a strong influence. Most Asian-American parents teach their children to value educational achievement, respect authority, feel
responsibility for relatives, and show self control. Asian-American parents tend to view school failure as a lack of will, and to address this problem by increasing parental restrictions. Asian-American children tend to be more dependent, conforming, and willing to place family welfare over individual wishes than are other American children.

Teachers in Asian culture are accorded a higher status than teachers in the United States. Asian-American children may be confused by the informality between American teachers and students and expect considerable structure and organization. Asian children tend to need reinforcement from teachers, and work more efficiently in a well-structured, quiet environment (Baruth & Manning, 1992).

Self-effacement is a trait traditionally valued in many Asian cultures. Asian children tend to wait to participate, unless otherwise requested by the teacher. Having attention drawn to oneself, for example, having one's name put on the board for misbehaving, can bring considerable distress. Many Asian children have been socialized to listen more than speak, to speak in a soft voice, and to be modest in dress and behavior.

* Base academic expectations on individual ability rather than on stereotypical beliefs.

* Alleviate the disjunctures Asian children may experience between school and home. For example, while a student may be told at school to challenge others' views, the same child may be told at home to be quiet and not challenge authority. To avoid such conflicts, teachers can organize classroom activities around naturalistic interactions that permit the child to take the lead and to build upon modeling.

* Consider peer teaching. Asian-American children who are not fluent in English may feel threatened by having to answer questions in front of the whole class. Peer tutoring can be an effective means of engaging these children in activities that foster language skills.

* Utilize the student's natural support system, including family, friends, and the community. Know who makes the decisions about education in the family, who provides care for the child after school, and, when applicable, who provides translation for the family.
Sociologists Kimberly Goyette and Yu Xie examine how high expectations affect different Asian groups in their academic performance.

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Many studies have demonstrated that Asian-American students typically achieve significant academic success. For example, Asian-Americans tend to score higher than whites on tests of math ability, they often have higher GPAs, and they are more likely to go on to four-year colleges than whites.

Yet this broad picture simultaneously lacks detail and offers few explanations, argue Kimberly Goyette and Yu Xie. In seeking to better understand the reasons for Asian-Americans’ high educational achievement, Goyette and Xie make two important proposals:

1. Research must examine the role of educational expectations on achievement. Specifically, Goyette and Xie ask what role three factors play in producing higher educational expectations: socioeconomic and family background characteristics, demonstrated academic ability, and parents' high expectations.

2. Asian-Americans are not a homogeneous bloc. Differences of educational attitudes and achievement exist among groups such as Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian, and South Asians. In their analysis, Goyette and Xie took these group differences into account.

Socioeconomic and Family Background Characteristics

Scholars have long known that parents with higher levels of socioeconomic status and educational attainment tend to produce children who also achieve at a high level. How does this dynamic play into expectations for whites and different groups of Asian-Americans? Goyette and Xie considered factors such as the father’s and mother’s educational level, the generation of immigrant (whether first, second, or third generation), and the family structure (intact or non-intact).
• All Asian groups have higher educational expectations than did whites. For instance, 58.3% of white students expected to graduate from college, while all Asian groups reported higher percentages, ranging from 67.9% of Southeast Asians, to 84.8% for Japanese and Koreans, up to 95.7% of South Asian students who expected to graduate from college.

• Asian parents tend to have higher educational achievement than whites, although not across the board. 28% of white fathers had graduated from college, compared with 26.9% of Southeast Asian fathers, 38.4% of Chinese, and 64% of South Asian fathers.

• Socioeconomic status is not the only explanation for Asian-American students’ academic achievement. Goyette and Xie point out that some groups (such as Chinese and Southeast Asians) have on average lower income levels than whites yet still outperform white students academically. This translates to expectations as well: although Southeast Asians are poorer than whites, they still reported higher educational expectations than whites. Differences also exist within Asian groups: although the South Asian, Korean, and Japanese families enjoyed the highest socioeconomic and educational levels, it was the Chinese-American students who actually scored the highest on the standardized math test.

Academic Ability

Previous research has found that "children who score high on proficiency tests develop high levels of educational expectations based on positive reinforcements from others and their own perceptions of the feasibility of continuing in school" (Tested Academic Ability section, ¶ 3).

• Goyette and Xie offer further support for that general finding. Students who scored high on reading, math, and science proficiency tests all had high educational expectations.

• However, here, too, findings vary according to the ethnic group. For example, tested academic ability helps explain the high expectations of Chinese, Koreans, and Southeast Asians, but not of Filipino and Japanese students.

• Goyette and Xie’s results also suggest that first-generation Asian-American students tend to maintain higher educational expectations than do third-generation students.

Parents’ Expectations

Scholars have theorized that cultural emphasis on education plays a major role in explaining Asian-American students’ achievement. Asian parents often view education as the main vehicle for upward social mobility, such that academic success can even overcome some of the structural obstacles of being a marginalized minority in American society. John Ogbu has also proposed that as "voluntary immigrants" who actively
wanted to come to the United States, Asians tend to have positive attitudes toward their chances for economic and academic success.

- Goyette and Xie’s research confirms that parental expectations play a major role in explaining Asian-American students’ success. For instance, the parents of all the Asian groups they measured have higher educational expectations for their children than do white parents. At the highest end of the spectrum, South Asian parents on average expect their children to attain a professional or master’s degree, with Chinese parents not far behind on that measure. The data show that white parents, in contrast, expect their children to attend some college but not necessarily to finish with a four-year degree.
- In particular, parental expectations play the largest role for Chinese, Korean, Southeast Asian, and South Asian students. Goyette and Xie’s findings also suggest that parental expectations are highest among first-generation immigrants.