

**“Model Minority” Classrooms: Arguments for and Strategies to  
Recruit and Retain Asian American Teachers in the Context of  
the Racial Achievement Gap**

**Wayne Zhang**

**Yale University, Branford College Class of 2018**

**A Project to Fulfill the Senior Capstone Requirement in Education Studies 410**

**Education Studies Director Mira Debs**

**Advisor Dick Hersh**

**July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

## **Introduction: The Personal Stakes of Diversity**

As a 1.5 generation Asian American student aspiring to become a teacher, the foundations of this capstone project, in which I investigate the stakes of and issues with minority—and specifically Asian American—teacher retention and recruitment, are deeply personal. I was born in Shanghai, China and immigrated to the United States when I was just two years old, my family eventually settling in a large public school district in an Indiana suburb. Consisting primarily of middle and upper class students, the school district was over 80% White, with small amounts of Black, Hispanic, and Asian American minorities. Meanwhile, neighboring school districts contained most of the city’s lower income and Black and Hispanic students—reflecting the city’s racial and socioeconomic segregation.

In our school district, honors and AP courses seemed to be concentrated with other Asian American students. It was not uncommon for fellow students to say remarks such as “he’s only smart because he’s Asian” or “you’re not a *real* Asian unless you’re good at math”—and indeed, these comments were often self-internalized and embraced by teachers. At my high school, despite a student body size of roughly 3,600 and a teaching staff of nearly 200 teachers, there were only three teachers of color.

This lack of a diverse teaching faculty and what I now understand to be “micro aggressions” had never consciously bothered me until I went to university and had more opportunities to ruminate on my ethnoracial identity. As a Yale student, and specifically as an Education Studies Scholar, I had the opportunity to take classes on issues of inequality, be mentored by faculty of color, and engage in conversation with my peers from all over the world. For the first time, I discovered a whole academic literature that was able to contextualize my upbringing, learning the history of my people, and how Asian Americans

have come to be called the “model minority,” a term which seemingly has positive connotations, but often has more insidious and deleterious implications. Furthermore, people of color and other queer individuals taught me about the challenges they faced in the world of education, ranging from segregation, to a lack of representation in staff and curriculum.

My personal investment in issues of race and education came to a head in autumn of 2015. As student protesters at Yale created a national uproar in their quest to push Yale’s administration to foster more inclusive environments for minority students, I saw the issues that my peers and I had talked and read about blow up before our very eyes, beautifully, painfully. Moreover, the success of student protesters in actually achieving reforms—such as more money dedicated to hiring faculty of color, resources for cultural centers, and increased communication with Yale administration—signified to me that the discourse surrounding these issues are not unimportant: they have teeth.

Inspired by such efforts, this project centers on the nexus of studies about the racial achievement gap, Asian American studies, and minority teacher recruitment. Most literature about the racial academic achievement gap aims to explain causes of lower achievement of Black and Latinx students. Meanwhile, where Asian American academic achievement falls into this narrative varies: some scholars buy into the idea that Asian Americans are superior model minorities, others unintentionally ignore ways in which Asian American academic achievement is nuanced, while others intentionally de-prioritize the study of Asian American achievement gaps in comparison to other groups. Meanwhile, most literature regarding recruitment and retention of minority faculty treats minority faculty recruitment as inherently beneficial to all students—without asking the question of how the effects having a minority teacher might be different for students of different groups. That is, if Asian American students

already perform better academically than other racial subgroups and are a “model minority”, why does it even matter if they have a minority or same-race teacher?

As such, my intervention in this field is to put the literature regarding the racial achievement gap and minority teacher recruitment and retention into conversation with literature about Asian American achievement and the “model minority” myth. Key research questions include:

1. What is the racial achievement gap, and what role do minority teachers purportedly have in combatting it?
2. Given that Asian Americans, on average, perform better academically than other racial minorities, where do Asian Americans fit into the racial achievement gap? What obstacles do they face despite being painted as a “model minority”? Why might Asian American teachers be useful in addressing these needs?
3. What are the obstacles to recruiting and retaining minority teachers in general—and what kinds of initiatives and interventions exist to mitigate these problems? How can interventions specifically target recruiting and retaining Asian American teachers?

Using a historical and sociological lens, I first unpack the term “racial achievement gap,” and position Asian American achievement in the context of other racial minorities. I

argue that while Asian Americans do achieve many academic outcomes that are favorable compared to other minorities, the term “model minority” and dominant research about the achievement gap obscure many ways in which Asian American students are actually uniquely vulnerable or underperforming. I contend that while Asian Americans have relative privilege in the United States academic system, they should not be excluded from a larger discourse about the racial achievement gap.

It is in this context that I then argue that higher attention should be paid to the recruitment of Asian American teachers. While Asian American teachers exhibit many of the problems with recruitment and retention that other minority groups do, unique issues associated with culture and success frames require interventions specifically targeted at growing the number of Asian Americans teachers.

### **1a. Defining The Racial Achievement Gap**

The National Education Association—the largest professional employee organization in the United States—broadly defines an achievement gap “as the differences in academic performance between groups of students of different backgrounds” (2018) and state that achievement gaps “have been documented with respect to students’ ethnic, racial, gender, English language learner, disability, and income status” (2018). Furthermore, they claim that the academic achievement gap can be measured through different data metrics. These include measures of accessibility such as access to early childhood education, quality teachers, advanced (e.g., Advanced Placement or Honors) courses, extracurricular opportunities, materials, facilities, and technologies. They also include strict performance metrics such as scores on state, national and classroom exams; rates of tardiness or absences; representation in

advanced courses; high school drop out and graduation rates; college admissions and graduation rates; and employment later in life—and even metrics that indirectly affect performance such as tardiness and absences. *No Child Left Behind*, which was signed under President George Bush in 2002, ushered in a new era of high stakes testing, which resulted in more data collection about the disparities between the achievements of different racial minorities (Ravitch 2013).

Ways of Measuring the Achievement Gap	
Opportunity	Performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to early childhood education</li> <li>• Access to quality teachers</li> <li>• Access to advanced (e.g., Advanced Placement or Honors) courses</li> <li>• Access to classroom materials, technology and facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance on test scores</li> <li>• Rates of tardiness and absence</li> <li>• Representation in advanced courses</li> <li>• High school dropout and graduation rates</li> <li>• College acceptance and graduation rates</li> <li>• Employment later in life</li> </ul>

In light of these many different types of achievement gaps, for the purposes of this study which specifically aims to understand and create interventions for Asian American students and teachers, I define the achievement gap racially: specifically, the differences between Asian Americans, Black/African Americans, and Latinx/Hispanics. Before later examining the implications of Asian American as a racial and ethnic term, and before discussing the racial achievement gap, it is imperative to define as precisely as possible about the terminology. When discussing race, I primarily use the categories “Asian American,” “White,” “Black,” and “Hispanic”<sup>1</sup>. As will be described later, “Asian American” is a racial category that has only recently been used in order to describe various ethnic categories.

---

<sup>1</sup> I choose “Black” as a racial descriptor rather than “African American,” may be seen as an ethnic category that may inaccurately connote that group members are immigrants or first-generation American (Harris 2016). While “Hispanic” and “Latinx” are terms often used interchangeably, “Hispanic” more accurately refers to someone with a Spanish speaking

The National Education Association also states that the achievement gap is often defined as, “the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low income students and the test scores of their White and Asian peers.” By virtually all of the aforementioned metrics, White and Asian students outperform their Black and Hispanic counterparts. One popular method of comparing the achievement of different minorities is through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a non-partisan assessment not tied to any punitive measures administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Ravitch 2013).

Breaking apart this definition, it has several implications for where Asian Americans fit into the common perception of the achievement gap. First, Asian Americans are described as “peers” to minority students and excluded from the category of being minority students. Second, Asian Americans are similarly excluded from being low-income or underperforming students. Later, I will discuss why and how Asian Americans are grouped accordingly.

### **1b. Sources of the Racial Achievement Gap**

Race continues to play such a determining factor in perpetuating inequality in the national education system due to a number of factors, ranging from historical and present day segregation in communities, resource disparity in schools, and implicit biases within classrooms from teachers and administrators. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)

---

ancestry, while “Latinx” refers to individuals from Latin America. Insofar as an individual can come from Latin America and not speak Spanish, and be from a Spanish speaking country not from Latin America—and this term continues to be debated within these communities today (U.S. Census 2018)—I choose “Hispanic” because that is what the U.S. Census and Department of Education uses (2018). Meanwhile, I use “White” to signify “non-Hispanic Whites.” All terms are capitalized to reflect their political significance.

ruled over six decades ago that “separate but equal” schools for racial minorities were inherently unequal, recent studies have shown that schools today have largely resegregated (Brown 2016). Known as the phenomenon of “White flight,” predominantly White, wealthy families have avoided attending school in urban school districts with predominantly Black and Hispanic students (Saporito 2014) by moving away to the suburbs, often aided by the surge in selective choices contexts such as homeschooling, private schools, and school choice voucher systems. Meanwhile, low-income, predominantly minority communities have constrained mobility and choices due to residential segregation, information gaps about school choices, and lack of schools (Ravitch 2013).

There is also evidence that even when K-12 schools districts are integrated, forces can still unwittingly perpetuate segregation within schools. For example, James Rosenbaum (1976) argues in his seminal book, “Making Inequality: the Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking,” that the advent of academic tracking in schools—e.g., “remedial” versus “regular” versus “honors” courses—was designed with the purpose of bolstering the achievement of White students and limiting the achievement of Black students. More specifically, he argues that the metrics used to sort students into different academic tracks—such as teacher recommendations, access to certain materials, and specific ways of speaking—often favor more wealthy White students and disfavor Black students, resulting in the former being more likely to be placed into honors courses, and the latter being more likely to be placed remedial and regular courses. As a result, Black students who may be eligible for upper level courses are dissuaded or prevented from doing so, resulting in nominally integrated schools still have highly racialized hierarchical structures.

Individual school administrators and classroom teachers are also not exempt from bias affecting minority student success. A large body of economics, education studies, and sociology literature documents various ways in which “racial mismatch”—that is, differing students and teachers having different races<sup>2</sup>—affects everything from student achievement, to curriculum, to discipline, to behavior (Bates & Glick 2013, Gershenson et al. 2016). While the majority of teachers would not intentionally discriminate against students of color—that is, show explicit bias—many of these studies aim to measure teachers’ implicit biases, or actions that favor one group over another, which teachers themselves are unaware that they practice.

Implicit bias against Black and Hispanic students regarding discipline has been shown to occur as early as pre-school. Analyzing how teachers observe and discipline students, the Yale Child Study Center has found that teachers of all races are more likely to focus their eye movements on monitoring the behavior of Black male students in comparison to students of other genders and races (Gilliam et al. 2016). Consequently, African American males experience disproportionately high rate of expulsions and suspensions from preschool compared to other students (2016). However, Black teachers are less likely than White teachers to exhibit this implicit bias when monitoring and disciplining. These disciplinary patterns persist into high school: according to another study by Bates & Glick (2013), White and Asian American teachers are more likely to report Black and Hispanic students as exhibiting “externalizing” or disruptive behavior in comparison to how often they report White and Asian American students in the same classrooms.

---

<sup>2</sup> These terms are primarily used to describe underrepresented minorities such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, but can also be used to describe Whites.

Beyond discipline, non-minority teachers also exhibit implicit biases against minority students in terms of how they are taught. Surveys of teachers asking them questions about their students illustrate this point. In the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, for example, researchers surveyed teachers about how much they expected different students to achieve, as measured through metrics such as expected high school graduation, grade point average, and college matriculation. Analyzing the results, Gershenson et al. (2016) have found White teachers on average expected lower educational achievement from Black students, and higher educational achievement for Asian American and White students. Meanwhile, Black teachers reported comparatively higher expectations for Black students, and similar expectations for Asian American and White students. Gershenson et al. (2016) go on to argue that a teacher's expectations are not neutral—rather, teachers' high or low expectations of students shape the time, energy, and willingness to mentor them. Accordingly, perceiving Black students as less capable or White and Asian American students as more capable of graduating or achieving high grades, teachers spend more resources on White and Asian American students and less resources spent on Black students in the same classroom.

Implicit bias even extends to the realm of assessment. Using survey data from the National Education Longitudinal study of 1988 (NELS-88)—which measured different teachers' scoring of one student's test—Ehrenberg et al. (1995) found that the race of a teacher in relation to a student has an impact on student subjective evaluations. On subjective evaluations such as writing and free response mathematics, they found that teachers are more likely to give higher scores to students who share the same race in comparison to student who do not.

### **1c. The Role of Minority Teachers in Combatting the Racial Achievement Gap**

A richer understanding of how the racial achievement gap is measured and manifested is important to help create strategies in order to combat it. In recent years, there have been large campaigns to eliminate the racial achievement gap through numerous strategies including but not limited to: accountability and testing movements such as President Bush's No Child Left Behind and President Obama's Race to the Top policies, school choice policies, the advent of charter and magnet schools, and the creation of new after school programming (Ravitch 2013). This capstone seeks to understand one particular strategy for helping combat the achievement gap: recruiting and retaining minority teachers.

Sometimes overlooked in comparison to other methods of modern education reform, recruiting more minority teachers has long been a method of combatting education inequality (Casey et al. 2015, Ingersoll and May 2016). Nationally, White teachers have always been overrepresented as a proportion of the teaching staff in comparison to the proportion of minority students that they teach. Put another way, despite knowing the benefits of having same race minority teachers in classrooms, minority students are still more likely to be taught by White teachers—and in fact, many go through their K–12 education experiences never being taught by anyone who looks like them. Explaining this deficit in relationship to the achievement gap, Ingersoll and May (2016:1) state, “the minority teacher shortage, it is held, is a major reason for the minority achievement gap and, ultimately, unequal occupational and life outcomes for disadvantaged students.” They go on to conclude, “the minority teacher shortage is a major civil rights issue” (2016:1).

But why focus on teachers as a site of change? Teachers exercise autonomy in their classrooms and are on the frontline of working with students everyday. Therefore, while

teachers are thought of as public servants whose impact is limited to the classroom, they actually directly shape the outcomes of the public education system, creating and redistributing power—in ways that can result in the elimination or perpetuation of an achievement gap between White and minority students (Hayward 2000). As leaders in charge of discipline and order, teachers create classroom environments in which students learn their relationship with authority, giving students the tools to cope with marginalized positions in society, or reifying the school-to-prison pipeline (Rothstein 2004). As designers of curriculum, teachers choose what specific knowledge and skills to teach students, enriching or limiting their understanding about their own familial and racial backgrounds (Hayward 2000). As those who instruct and assess students, teachers play a determining role in students' academic achievement—something that opens or closes opportunities to things such as higher education, the caliber of jobs students are qualified for, and economic mobility. Because of these significant stakes, it is therefore important to examine who teachers are and how they are chosen.

Minority teachers have been shown to have positive consequences for minority students' achievement. Through a randomized experiment in which teachers longitudinally were paired with students in Tennessee, economist Thomas Dee (2004) has shown that White students who were paired with White teachers, and African American students who were paired with African American teachers both increased math and reading achievement on standardized test scores. Additionally, when minority students share a race with their teacher, students are conscious of the effects. For example, using the Measure of Effective Teaching Survey, which measured student attitudes regarding their teachers, Cherng and Halpin (2016) have found that African American and Hispanic students are more likely than White students

to rate African American and Latino teachers as good at managing classrooms, developing individual relationships with students, and explaining and discussing difficult concepts to students.

Explaining the Positive Effects of Minority Teachers Teaching Minority Students	
Teacher Driven Effects	Students/Parents Driven Effects
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers are <u>less likely to bring bias</u> into the classroom:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Not upholding/valuing whiteness</li> <li>b. Recognizing of issues facing minorities</li> <li>c. Being more capable and likely to incorporate culturally relevant into curriculum</li> <li>d. Holding students to a higher standard</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Teachers are able to <u>act as better role models</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Being more likely to want to mentor same race teachers</li> <li>b. Being able to communicate with both students and their families more easily</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students are predisposed to <u>behave better</u> in the company of same-race teachers               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Trusting authority figures more</li> <li>b. Being worried about misbehavior going back to ethnic networks</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Students are likely to <u>experience reduced stereotype threat</u></li> <li>3. Students are more likely to <u>seek mentorship</u></li> <li>4. Parents are more likely to <u>be in communication</u> with teachers and <u>have higher expectations</u> of them</li> </ol>

A myriad of potential theories explain why there are positive benefits for minority students being in classrooms with minority or same race teachers. One theory explains these changes as primarily teacher driven. Minority teachers, having experienced discrimination during their own education, may be more conscious of eliminating implicit bias in their classrooms, removing obstacles to student learning and achievement (Bates et al. 2013, Dee 2004). They may also be more capable of and more likely to practice cultural relevant pedagogy—a curricular tool that aims to engage with diversity by teaching concepts in one’s own cultural context (Casey et al. 2015, Berkholder 2014). Examples of this include using

hip-hop music to engage urban students in mathematics and reading; developing curriculum that emphasizes Black, Hispanic, and Asian American history that is often excluded when teaching history; and using English and Spanish to teach lessons in classrooms with many bilingual Hispanic students. Minority representation in teaching may even lead to increased legislation regarding cultural relevant curriculum: for example, there is evidence that having representatives of the Native American community in either district school boards and administration or local government has coincided with laws mandating the teaching of Native American history curriculum in 10 states (Foxworth, Lui, and Sokhey 2015).

Minority students may also benefit from minority teachers of the same race because they are able to serve as role models who are more in tune with the specific needs and challenges faced by students in marginalized groups (Casey et al. 2015). For example, Spanish speaking students and families may be able to better communicate with a Spanish speaking Hispanic teacher, eliminating language barriers to instruction and creating opportunities for family involvement in education. A first generation Asian American student may benefit from an Asian American immigrant teacher who is able to understand the challenges of cultural assimilation. Furthermore, in these examples, a teacher who understands the struggles faced by a student with shared race or ethnicity may be more likely to reach out as a role model, having experienced similar struggles and wanting to pay it forward.

The benefits of having same race minority teachers may also be student-driven. For example, Cherng and Halpin (2016) argue that the students are predisposed to behave better and pay more attention in the presence of a teacher who shares the same ethnicity, due to fear about incidents of misbehavior getting back to home life through ethnic networks of the

teacher within their community. Meanwhile, converse to the research of Gershenson et al. (2016), Casey et al. (2015) argue that compared to White teachers, minority teachers have higher academic expectations of minority students—causing students to hold themselves to a higher standard in such classrooms. They also argue that students may be more likely to seek mentorship in academics and extracurricular with a same race minority teacher, as they inherently trust or admire someone who shares a racial or ethnic identity, particularly in spaces in which such individuals are usually absent.

Parents may also drive the positive effects of having a same race minority teacher. For example, sharing a common race or ethnicity with their student's teacher, parents may be more likely to be in communication with a same race minority teacher, and accordingly, more involved in their student's education (Cherng and Halpin 2016). Meanwhile, a same race teacher may result in parents holding districts to a higher standard: the presence of a African American superintendent has been correlated with higher expectations of education from minority community members, and a greater expressed belief that schools have responsibility to do things such as eradicate racism and systematic injustice in curriculum and school policies (Mann 1974, Meier and Stewart 1992, Scott 1990).

Lastly, with same race minority teachers, students may also be less likely to experience stereotype threat: a condition which Steele (1997) defines as a student being conscious of a negative stereotype associated with their group, acting to avoid it, and ultimately being impeded in their studies as the result. Steele theorizes that Black students and women face negative stereotypes in spaces where teachers are predominantly white males—therefore, their performances on standardized tests are depressed as a result of meticulous and draining self-regulation. In other words, minority students not in classrooms different race

teachers may need to worry about spending their mental and emotional energy on combatting negative stereotypes—which takes away from energy that they could be devoting to learning. Steele argues that negative stereotypes of a group are more present in the absence of co-racial peers, and less present in the presence of co-racial peers; accordingly, in a situation where teachers and students share a race or ethnicity, students may feel less inhibited by stereotypes to do their work.

Yet despite all of the aforementioned benefits of more minority teachers in the classroom, by and large, minority teachers in the United States are still vastly underrepresented in proportion to the number of minority students. A report from the Learning Policy Institute summarizes, “For the 2011–12 school year, 37% of the nation’s population was minority, and 44% of all elementary and secondary students were minority, but only 17.3% of all elementary and secondary teachers were minority” (Ingersoll and May 2016:2). Put another way, there is over twice the proportion of minority students as there are minority teachers.

However, there have been attempts at addressing these problems. Since 1987, “More than half the states have had some sort of minority teacher recruitment policy or program in place” (2), and between the 1987–1988 and 2007–2008 school years, the overall percentage of minority teachers grew by 97% while the overall percentage of minority students grew by only 77% (Casey et al. 2015). Recently, however, the proportion gap between minority teachers and students has only grown due to the rapid increase in minority children; between 2007–2008 to 2011–2012 school years, the overall percentage of minority teachers grew by 4% while the overall percentage of minority students grew by 9% (2015). Overall, from 1980

to 2012, the number of minority teacher doubled from 325,000 to 660,000 (Ingersoll and May 2016:2–3).

## **2a. “Model Minorities” in the Classroom: Unpacking Stereotypes**

Asian Americans, like all minority groups, are underrepresented in the teaching staff. According to the 2010 United States Census, 5.6 percent of respondents identified as Asian American, whereas only 1.5% of American teachers are Asian (Teach for America 2017). Furthermore, only 0.5 percent of American teachers are Asian American males (Huynh 2017). Between 1987–1988 and 2007–2008 school years, the overall percentage of Asian American teachers grew by 148% while the overall percentage of Asian American students grew by 113%. Between 2007–2008 and 2011–2012 school years, the overall percentage of Asian American teachers grew by 25% while the overall percentage of Asian American students grew by 12%.

But as described earlier, Asian American students do not fit cleanly into the traditional racial achievement gap—and therefore reasons to recruit Asian American teachers for the purpose of combatting this gap are not as straightforward. Instead of being an underperforming minority, a variety of different lenses—high school graduation rates, incidents of misbehaviors and expulsions, scores on SAT, ACT, and NAEP standardized testing, bachelor’s degree attainment—can be used in order to dissect the various ways in which Asian Americans have higher education achievement than other racial groups (Lee and Zhou 2015). Within elite high schools and competitive public and private universities, Asian Americans are also overrepresented compared to White, Black, and Hispanic students (2015). This all begs the question: given these points, do Asian American students have unique needs

at all, and if so, how would Asian American students benefit from same race minority teachers?

Many neoconservative thinkers might look at these trends and conclude that Asian Americans do not need same race teachers, as they are already well off as the American “model minority”: that is, there is something about Asian American genetics or culture that fundamentally pushes students to do well in school, surpassing their Black, Hispanic, and even White counterparts. Supposedly, model minority students are inherently smarter and naturally gifted, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and science. They are also seen as docile, hardworking, disciplined, and economically mobile (*U.S. News and World Report* 1966). This stereotype is reinforced in the media and popular culture, where Asian Americans are rarely portrayed at all, and are portrayed as smart students, if meek and socially awkward nerds, when they are included (Lee and Zhou 2015).

However, what this stereotype and cultural essentialist explanations of success miss is a rich history in which various Asian American ethnic minorities faced hostile political environments and were forced to grapple with issues including but not limited to: government sanctioned immigration exclusion, ineligibility to own land, physical segregation, wartime racial hysteria, lack of urban housing and living resources, and lack of cultural and political representation (Lee 2003, Daniels 2004, Lee and Zhou 2015).

In fact, the “Asian American model minority” myth is relatively recently: only having emerged during and after World War II, a time in which Chinese Americans in particular were underwent a period of rapid racial formation: transforming from inassimilable, cheap foreign labor, undeserving of United States citizenship, to being heralded as wartime allies

against fascism deserving of sympathy and support (Ngai 2004)<sup>3</sup>. In the context of the Cold War and fight against communism, the United States began lifting restrictions on Asian immigration and reducing discriminatory laws—so as to signify to post-colonial Asian nations that their international call for democracy was inclusive of all people (Chan 1991). After the repeal of Chinese Exclusion Act during WWII, the 1965 Immigration Act finally removed all quotas on the migration of Asians to the United States (Lee 2003). Different preference categories—such as for refugees, family reunification, and skilled workers—were created, dramatically changing the possibilities of who could immigrate (2003). Initial migrations then resulted in chain migration, causing immigration levels to increase dramatically because admitted individuals applied for family members to come to the United States as well.

Meanwhile, the emergence of the model minority motif should also be seen within the context of the Black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s: by heralding Asian Americans as inherently more hardworking or better than other minorities, the government aimed to justify discrimination toward Black and Hispanic groups, and discount legacies of Jim Crow and slavery (Chan 1991). Today, scholars refer to this dynamic, in which Asian Americans are pitted “against other ethnoracial minority groups, especially African Americans and, more recently, Latino Americans” (Lee and Zhou 2015:12), as racial triangulation.

---

<sup>3</sup> This, of course, came at the price of Japanese Americans: racist newspaper articles showed Americans how to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese facial features, and during WWII, Japanese Americans were forced into concentration camps under President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 (Daniels 2004).

## **2b. Explaining the Asian American Achievement Paradox—And the Need for Asian American Teachers**

It is important to note, however, that Asian Americans are in fact uniquely vulnerable minorities in many ways, and that the moniker “model minority” obscures real problems in the Asian American community. Just as how Black and Hispanic teachers have been theorized to help combat the academic underperformance of Black and Hispanic students, Asian American teachers can be useful for helping tackle issues of mental health, cultural assimilation, linguistic barriers, and underrepresentation in culture, politics, and managerial positions for Asian American students.

First, Asian American teachers are necessary in schools with Asian American students because not all Asian Americans attain at stereotypically high levels—and indeed, many underperform. It is important to note that Asian American is a racial term that comprises 48 different ethnicities who speak over 300 different languages (Teach for America 2018). Indeed, although East Asians and South Asians do exhibit higher academic achievement than other groups, an examination of all different Asian ethnicities shatters the perception that all Asian Americans are high achieving. When describing Asian American achievement, it is easy to forget that “not all members of even the highest-achieving Asian ethnic groups attain exceptional educational outcomes... Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians are Asian ethnic groups that exhibit lower educational attainment than the U.S. average, and these groups also have higher high school dropout rates than Blacks and Latinos in the United States (Lee and Zhou 2015:186–187).

Asian American students also face issues associated with immigration, cultural assimilation, and language barriers. 69% of all Asian American students are foreign born,

with 11% of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States being Asian American (Teach for America 2018). Thus, there are over 1 million undocumented Asian American people in the United States. Undocumented or not, all Asian American immigrants face the task of learning to exist and grow in a culture entirely different from their family's. Sometimes, there are even more challenges: one in six Asian American students have limited English proficiency in the classroom, and even more of their parents have limited English proficiency when it comes to communicating with teachers and school administrations (2018). In this regard, many Asian Americans share similar needs with undocumented and English language learning Hispanics.

In their groundbreaking book *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou break apart the perception that Asian Americans have something inherently better about their culture or biology that enables them to achieve more than individuals of other races. Their approach to describing Asian American achievement embraces the idea Asian American culture plays a part in achievement, but rejects cultural essentialism—instead, explaining the traits that help some Asian American ethnic groups succeed to be the non-static and ever changing product of American history:

Culture is not an all-encompassing set of values, traits, beliefs, and behavioral patterns that are fixed and intrinsic to an ethnoracial group. Rather culture emerges from unique historical, legal, institutional, and social psychological processes that are linked and that manifest cultural institutions, frames, and mindsets. Most importantly, cultural formation is not static: culture continuously re-forms to adapt to the host-society context, and these adaptations influence opportunity structures, socioeconomic outcomes and assimilation. (2015:180)

By interviewing Chinese and Vietnamese Americans adults about their educational experiences, Lee and Zhou were able to piece together trends regarding how these Asian

Americans described their educational experiences in relation to their ethnicity, social class, and family history. In doing so, they developed an argument that purports that Asian American immigrant students in the United States are successful due to class specific methods of academic achievement which are imported from their parents, who are overwhelmingly “hyper-selected” immigrants. Recalling that the United States has long regulated which immigrants are allowed to migrate, Lee and Zhou (2015) categorized “hyper-selected” individuals as those who are both highly educated and of a high social class relative to other citizens in their home countries.

They argue that because of restrictive immigration laws, and corresponding patterns of migration in the Asian diaspora, for the most part, only “hyper-selected” high achieving, educated upper class individuals from East Asia have the ability to migrate. As such, Lee and Zhou argue that such immigrants import class specific methods of academic achievement—and that Asian American success in the United States is attributable to the fact that their parents prior success and middle class culture (2015:21–50). As the result of their parents upbringing, students are raised with what Lee and Zhou describe to be a narrow definition of success: that is, they feel as if they must get straight ‘A’s, become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, and go to an elite college—otherwise they are deemed failures in their ethnic communities (2015:69–90). In popular culture, these so-called “tiger parents” drill these values and definitions of success into their children so as to ensure their high achievement (Chua 2011).

Additionally, Lee and Zhou argue that Asian Americans benefit from two other things: networks of ethnic capital and stereotype promise. By networks of ethnic capital, they mean that Asian American communities in the United States are able to rely on co-ethnic peers to

help them do things such as learn “pertinent information about neighborhood quality, school rankings, and supplemental education programs that will help to keep their children one step ahead of their peers” (2015:71). Other ethnic resources and strategies include things such as “the belief in effort over innate ability to improve academic achievement, a collective strategy for mobility, and cross-class learning among co-ethnic peers” (2015:71).

Meanwhile, “stereotype promise” benefits Asian American students in a way opposite of how stereotype threat harms Black and Hispanic students: rather than being distracted and hampered by teachers’ low expectations of them, teachers often assume that Asian American students are high achieving or inherently smart (2015:115–138). As a result of this assumption, Asian American students may hold themselves to higher academic standards and force themselves to work harder in order to fulfill these stereotypes. Teachers may also be more predisposed to give them higher marks for their work in class, or sort them into more rigorous academic tracks in their schooling.

Yet, even Asian American students who are nominally successful in academic achievement face unique obstacles. As described earlier, Asian American students may hold themselves to higher academic standards as the result of values imported from their parents, who are predominantly highly educated or upper class. This narrow frame for success, however, often results in students self-reporting lower self-esteem, lower levels of feeling successful, and higher rates of mental illness, depressive episodes, and suicidal thoughts in comparison to other racial minorities (2015:161–179)—especially when unable to reach the nearly impossibly high standards of success. Many Asian Americans who are unable to fulfill these frames of success also report dissociation from their ethnic identities, feeling “not-Asian”, or rejecting their Asian identities (2015:161–179). Indeed, even those who are able to

meet the standard of getting ‘A’s, going to an elite university, and going into a culturally approved profession report “high academic achievement coupled with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and low resilience in the face of setbacks and inability to meet high expectations” (2015:159).

Beyond Asian American students’ mental health, there is also evidence that Asian Americans, despite their overrepresentation in honors programs and elite universities, are underrepresented at the highest levels of management and leadership. For example, although Asian Americans make up nearly 5.5 percent of the population and roughly 15 to 20% of every Ivy League school (2015:133), they “make up only 0.3 percent of corporate officers, less than 1 percent of corporate board members and about 2 percent of college presidents” (2015:133–134). Lee and Zhou speculated that “the positive stereotypes that work to their advantage in school and in the early stages in their careers do not operate as they continue to climb up the professional ladder” (2015:135)—that is, although Asian Americans are seen as hardworking, studious, and smart at lower levels, they are seen as docile, uncreative, and poor leaders at higher levels. Scholars have dubbed this phenomenon the “bamboo ceiling” (2015:134).

In short, Asian American students exhibit a great achievement paradox—which Asian American teachers could play a role in helping address. Not all Asian Americans are overachieving, and many are underachieving due to factors such as immigration status, difficulties of cultural assimilation, and linguistic barriers. Meanwhile, Asian Americans who do fit the high achieving stereotype are not just inherently smarter “model minorities”—rather they import class specific methods of high attainment from their home-countries, and also leverage domestic ethnic capital. Additionally, those that achieve high still have unique needs

worth addressing: facing problems of mental health, dissociation from ethnic identity, and a “bamboo ceiling” later in life. Asian American teachers could benefit Asian American students in all of these regards.

### **3. Interventions for Recruiting and Retaining Minority and Asian American Teachers**

Having defined the need for more minority teachers—and specifically more Asian American teachers—in the context of the racial achievement gap, I now turn to the task of creating recommendations about how to better retain and recruit such teachers. The shortage of minority teachers can be looked at through two different angles: recruitment and retention of teachers. That is, inputs and outputs into the minority teacher workforce: simultaneously, there are disproportionately small numbers of minority educators entering the teaching profession—and once they are there, they are more likely than White teachers to leave the profession.

Regarding recruitment of minority students to teaching in college, Gordon (1994:346) writes: “A shortage of minority teachers is embedded in a context of school desegregation, higher education elitism, racism, poverty, and urban decay. A much larger potential supply of teachers exists among ethnic and urban communities than is evident from the current minority student enrollment in universities with traditionally white student bodies.” Going on to survey 140 teachers of color across the country about their views about minorities entering teaching, she identified three main themes which respondent response fell into: education experience, cultural and community concerns, and social and economic obstacles.

Regarding educational experiences, respondents suggested that minorities were not entering teaching because, among other things, they were not graduating from high school,

lacked preparation for college, had negative experiences in school, and lacked support in college (1994:346–353). Regarding cultural and community concerns, respondents suggested minorities were not entering teaching because there was an absence of same race role models in the teaching profession, a low social status of the teachers, and a view of teaching as unprestigious in certain ethnic communities (1994:346–353). Regarding socioeconomic reasons, respondents also suggested that prospective minority teachers wanted to avoid low pay, poor school resources and conditions, and workplace racism—as well as having the option to pursue more lucrative and prestigious options in other fields (1994:346–353).

To add insult to injury, once recruited, minority teacher experience turnover at a higher rate than White teachers. As Ingersoll and May (2016:6) write, “In plain terms, it makes no sense to put substantial effort into recruiting candidates to teach in schools serving disadvantaged students if those schools are not also desirable workplaces.” For example, in the 2004–2005 school year, 16.1% of white teachers turned over compared to 18.1% of minority teachers; in the 2008–2009 school year, 15% of White teachers turned over versus 18.1% of minority teachers, and in the 2012–2013 school year, 15% of White teachers turned over versus 18.9% of minority teachers (Casey et al. 2015). This turnover is in large part due to the fact that “minority teachers were two to three times more likely than nonminority teachers to work in such hard-to-staff schools” (Ingersoll and May 2016) and schools with predominantly low income or minority students.

Lee and Zhou (2015) argue specifically that Asian American students are discouraged from going into teaching because it is seen as low-paying and seen as culturally unprestigious in comparison to fields such as medicine, law, business, and engineering. Additionally, because AAPI students are seen as model minorities, the

recruitment of AAPI teachers is often deprioritized in comparison to that of Black and Hispanic teachers. Given these findings, I offer two main recommendations for targeting Asian American teachers in the recruitment and retention process:

***1. Recruitment: Include recruitment and retention of Asian American teachers in mainstream dialogues about minority teacher recruitment and the racial achievement gap***

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing the recruitment of Asian Americans to teaching today is the perception that Asian American students do not need any Asian American teachers to represent or help them. The aforementioned “model minority myth” plays a large role in helping describe why, as one Asian American teacher stated, “I think sometimes we’re seen as teachers of color—or teachers not of color” (Brenneman 2016:1). That is, the teacher describes sometimes being seen as coming from a marginalized background, and other times not. Even indirect ways of teaching about Asian American discrimination or underrepresentation might be useful in helping galvanize more Asian Americans to enter the profession.

Because the unique needs of Asian Americans are often not seen, the commitment to recruit Asian American teachers does not always play out, even at a policy level. For example, “Among the many goals outlined by the U.S. Education Department in its 2013 plan under the [executive order signed by President Obama] was to ‘increase the number of AAPI teachers in school as well as train existing teachers to work with the language needs of the AAPI community.’ But by the time the department 2014 plan come out, there was no longer any mention of AAPI teacher recruitment” (Brenneman 2016:3). Here, the government

specifically retracted language from an executive order regarding recruiting Asian American teachers. If the government and education institutions made nominal commitments to hire more Asian American teachers, and made it known the specific needs that Asian American students have, the teaching profession would be made more accessible and attractive to Asian Americans.

***2. Recruitment and Retention: Take steps to make the teaching profession more professional and prestigious (through support and autonomy)***

Another obstacle to recruiting Asian Americans is that because of an Asian American culture that often defines success in very narrow terms, i.e., going to a prestigious university and becoming a lawyer, doctor, or engineer (Lee and Zhou 2015), going into education is seen as a failure professionally. One way to combat this might be to ensure that teacher-training programs exist at elite public/private universities where Asian American students are overrepresented. Another way of making teaching seem more professional and attractive to Asian Americans might be to increase the amount of competitive teaching residencies such as Teach for America and Boston Teaching Fellows. These organizations are at once prestigious, appealing at one to Asian American concerns about respectability, and but also to concerns about accessibility: through these programs, students do not have to go to an undergraduate college with the specific intent of studying to become a teacher in order to get into the classroom.

Teach for America in recent years has been able to have 6% of its teaching core be Asian American—nearly twice the national average—and some teachers suspect that “the organization’s recruitment in AAPI-dense areas and the competitive nature of TFA may be

factors” (Brenneman 2016). Teach for America also started a specific initiative to recruit Asian American teachers in 2014. They state on their website, “We aim to grow the field of AAPI teachers and raise awareness of the academic and socio-economic realities facing many AAPI students. To accomplish this, we collaborate with AAPI leaders and organizations committed to ending educational inequality for all children” (Teach for America 2018).

And lastly, of course, another way of increasing the prestige and professionalism of the teaching profession is simply to increase teacher salaries. However, conventional wisdom for recruiting and retaining more teachers suggests, “salary levels, the provision of useful professional development, and the availability of classroom resources all had little association with whether [minority teachers] were likely to depart” (Ingersoll and May 2016:5). Rather,

The strongest factors by far for minority teachers were the level of collective faculty decision-making in the school and the degree of individual instructional autonomy held by teachers in their classrooms. Having influence and autonomy in the workplace are, of course, key hallmarks of respected professions. (2016:5)

Put another way—more so than pay—imparting the independence and support given to many respected professions to teaching would make becoming an educator more attractive to Asian Americans who care about the social status of their jobs.

### **Conclusion: The Inclusion of Asian Americans in Efforts to Diversify Teaching**

In this capstone, I first examined the racial achievement gap, as it pertains traditionally to Black and Hispanic versus White students—tracing it back from its historical origins in racial segregation, and examining modern ways in which is perpetuated, including through resegregation, racialized student tracking, and implicit bias in discipline, curriculum, and achievement. In this conception of the racial achievement gap, Asian Americans were

assumed to be outperforming their peers in most performance and opportunity metrics.

Ensuing, using sociology, economics, and education studies literature, I argued that minority teachers have the ability to help the achievement of minority students—and that presently, minority teachers are underrepresented in teaching staff despite efforts to recruit and retain more of them. Ensuing, I argued that Asian American students do have unique needs—including but not limited to high levels of undocumented and English language learner students, high levels of mental health issues, and an eventual “bamboo ceiling”—that merit more focus on the recruitment of Asian American teachers.

Lastly, I argued for several methods of recruiting and retaining more Asian American teachers, which essentially boil down to increasing Asian American awareness of the challenges facing their community through curriculum and representation, improving the prestige and accessibility of the teaching profession, and helping teachers find appropriate resources and support when on the job. By shedding more light on the ways in which Asian Americans face challenges in their communities, and calling for Asian American teachers, I envision a future in which all students have access to teachers who are able to understand their unique needs.

## Works Cited

- Bates, L. A., & Glick, J. E. 2013. "Does it matter if teachers and schools match the student? Racial and ethnic disparities in problem behaviors." *Social science research*, 42(5):1180-1190.
- Berkholder, Zoe. 2014. *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954*. Oxford University Press.
- Boser, Ulrich. 2014. "Teacher Diversity Revisited: A New State-by State Analysis." *Center for American Progress*.
- Brenneman, Ross. 2016. "In Efforts to Boost Teacher Diversity, Asians and Pacific Islanders Seek Inclusion." *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/27/in-efforts-to-boost-teacher-diversity-asians.html>
- Brown, Emma. 2016. "On the Anniversary of Brown v. Board, new evidence that U.S. Schools are Resegregating." *Washington Post*.
- Casey, L., Di Carlo, M., Bond, B., & Quintero, E. 2015. "The state of teacher diversity in American education." Washington D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Chan, Sucheng. 1991. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Twayne Publishers.
- Cherng, H. Y. S., & Halpin, P. F. 2016. "The importance of minority teachers: Student perceptions of minority versus White teachers." *Educational Researcher*, 45(7):407-420.
- Chua, Amy. 2011. *The Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Penguin Press: New York, New York.
- Daniels, Rogers. 2004. *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*. Hill and Wang Critical Issues.
- Dee, T. S. 2004. "Teachers, race, and student achievement in a randomized experiment." *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(1):195-210.
- Ehrenberg, R. G., Goldhaber, D. D., & Brewer, D. J. 1995. "Do teachers' race, gender, and ethnicity matter? Evidence from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988." *ILR Review*, 48(3):547-561.
- Foxworth, R., Liu, A. H., & Sokhey, A. E. 2015. "Incorporating Native American History into the Curriculum: Descriptive Representation or Campaign Contributions?" *Social Science Quarterly*, 96(4):955-969.

- Gershenson, S., Holt, S. B., & Papageorge, N. W. 2016. "Who believes in me? The effect of student–teacher demographic match on teacher expectations." *Economics of Education Review*, 52:209-224.
- Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. 2016. "Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions." Research Study Brief. New Haven, CT: Yale University, Yale Child Study Center.
- Gordon, June A. 1994. "Why Students of Color Are Not Entering Teaching: Reflections from Minority Teachers." *Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(5):346–353.
- Harris, Aisha. 2016. "Where I'm From." Slate.  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/07/black\\_american\\_vs\\_african\\_american\\_why\\_i\\_prefer\\_to\\_be\\_called\\_a\\_black.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/07/black_american_vs_african_american_why_i_prefer_to_be_called_a_black.html)
- Hayward, Clarissa. 2000. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huynh, George. 2017. "Recruiting and Retaining Asian American Teachers." Yale Education Studies. <http://debsedstudies.org/asian-american-teachers/>
- Ingersoll, Richard and Henry May. 2016. "Research Brief: Minority Teacher Recruitment, Employment, and Retention: 1987 to 2013." *Learning Policy Institute*, Washington D.C.
- Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era.* University of North Carolina Press.
- Lee, J., & Zhou, M. 2015. *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mann, D. 1974. "The politics of representation in educational administration. Education and Urban Society." 6 (May):297-317.
- Meier, Kenneth J., and J. Stewart. 1992. "Active representation in educational bureaucracies: Policy impacts." *American Review of Public Administration*. 22(3):157–71.
- National Education Association (NEA). 2018. "Students Affected By Achievement Gaps." <http://www.nea.org/home/20380.htm>
- Ngai, Mae. 2004. "War, Nationalism, and Alien Citizenship," from *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, pp. 167-224. (v2)
- Ravitch, Diane. 2013. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of Privatization Movement and the Danger to American Public Schools*. Vintage.

- Rosenbaum, J. E. 1976. *Making Inequality; the Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking*. New York, New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rothstein, Richard. 2004. *Class and Schools*. New York: Teachers College.
- Saporito, S. 2003. "Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty." *Social problems*, 50(2):181-203.
- Scott, H. J. 1990. "Views of African American school superintendents on African American consciousness and professionalism." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59(2):165-172.
- Steele, C. M. 1997. "A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance." *American Psychologist*, 52(6):613–629.
- Teach for America. 2018. "Asian American and Pacific Islander Alliances." <https://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/our-initiatives/asian-american-pacific-islander-alliances>
- U.S. Census. 2018. "Hispanic Origin." <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanic-origin/about/faq.html>
- U.S. Supreme Court. 1954. "Brown v. board of education." *United States Reports*, 347(1954), 483.
- U.S. News and World Report*. 1966. "Success Story of One Minority Group."

### **Acknowledgements**

The intersection of race and education has long fascinated me, and this capstone project was a humbling experience in attempting to contribute to this vast literature in whatever way possible. At times I felt like I had no idea what I was doing, but I was able to move forward with the help of various wonderful, selfless individuals—especially when health and family life became obstacles to getting this project done. I’d like to thank Mira Debs and Lizzy Carroll, the current and previous directors of Yale Education Studies for making the program as amazing as it is; Tayla Zemach-Bersin for inspiring us in the fall colloquium and equipping us with tools to make completion possible; Mary Lui, Lili Johnson, and Albert Fang, for being amazing Asian American educators who showed me what it means to be a teacher; Jack Barry, Christina Drexler, and Brandon Marks for always being there for me; my fellow Education Studies Scholars for inspiring beyond words and providing a constant, thriving, supportive community; Kathryn Blair for constantly reading drafts of paragraphs and thoughts no matter how nonsensical. Last but not least, thank you to Dick Hersh for advising this project—no matter how bumpy the journey was—and for constantly being there, believing in me throughout college, and helping me believe in the promise and practice of transformative education.