
A Literature Review

Focuses on

Asian American Students At Risk

“THE DIVERSITY IN COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, LANGUAGE, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, AND DEGREE OF ACCULTURATION MAKES IT VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICANS,” SAYS CRESPAR RESEARCHER SAUFONG SIU OF WHEELOCK COLLEGE.

Evaluating the current research on at-risk Asian American students, Siu finds that generalizations, especially the depiction of Asian Americans as the “model minority,” mask the problems that many Asian American students face. The lack of comprehensive and reliable data on the academic achievement of Asian American students is one problem in the research. The confusion around the designation of the term “Asian American” is another.

In the United States, seven million people — 2.9% of the population and 3.5% of the students — check “Asian American” or “Asian Pacific” on forms and standardized tests. Yet the term includes over 25 ethnicities; it includes many more languages; it includes U.S. citizens; it includes immigrants, and it includes refugees. And the often combined terms of Asian American and Pacific Islander create more problems in distinguishing very different groups.

The distinct characteristics of the Asian American ethnicities are more often determined by sociohistorical situations,

like terms of immigration and history in the U.S., than by ethnicity. Thus Filipino, Japanese, Northern Chinese, and Asian Indian immigrant groups have higher educational and occupational levels than Southeast Asian immigrants, primarily because of their different social histories.

Southeast Asian Students Are Most At Risk

Siu shows that when “Asian American” data are broken down to compare specific ethnic groups, profound differences in achievement become clear. For example, while 5.6% of Japanese Americans have only an elementary education at most, 61% of Hmong Americans are in the same category. Examining the great number of studies that look specifically at the rising population of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees and the at-risk status of their youths, Siu concludes that “Southeast Asian students are more likely to be at risk of school failure or of dropping out than students of other Asian American ethnic groups.”

What factors make some Asian American students more likely than others to fail in school or not complete high school? Siu examines analyses that focus solely on the student and family responsibilities, but also looks at risk factors that may arise from the classroom/school context and the community/societal context.

Individual and Family

Siu cites history of schooling, reasons for coming to the U.S., and exposure to emotional trauma as some of the individual characteristics that relate to being at risk. An individual’s risk is unquestionably related to family characteristics. Children

in the poorest ethnic groups are most at risk, but Siu holds that it is not only a question of money: “Parents with economic survival needs have related stresses that make it hard for them to provide the supervision and support a student needs to succeed in school.” Parents’ educational level, supervision and support, and family priorities and expectations are among the factors that may be related to socioeconomic status and that do contribute to a child’s risk.

Differences in socioeconomic status are also apparent. Among the Asian ethnic groups, Southeast Asians — particularly Hmongs and Cambodians — are the poorest. In these families, the necessity for the child may become work over study. Also, only 8% of Hmongs have had some formal education in their home land, so they are limited in being able to provide academic assistance or general guidance about schooling to their children.

Classroom and School Factors Related to Risk

Siu finds that most schools cannot adequately meet their responsibility to provide quality instruction by trained and/or bilingual staff (the shortage is particularly great for Mien-speaking, Khmer-speaking, and Laotian-speaking students). Proper assessment and placement into classes is difficult. While some students are pushed into fluent English proficiency (FEP) classes too quickly, others are inappropriately placed into less challenging classes or special education. Schools need to offer adequate orientation and parent involvement programs to bring about parent interaction. But, Siu notes, “School personnel sometimes

inadvertently put up barriers...through cultural insensitivity, no welcome signs, no translation or interpretation, poor outreach and follow-up, and lack of respect.”

The degree of parents’ participation in school activities, such as reading report cards and meeting with teachers, “is a function of parents’ socioeconomic status, literacy in the native language, proficiency in English, pre-arrival educational experience, and knowledge of what schools expect of them,” reports Siu. “It is not unexpected that less affluent, less educated, and less English-proficient parents have fewer interactions with the school.”

Community and Societal Factors Related to Risk

“Educational achievement does not take place in a vacuum but in a community and societal context,” says Siu. Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans have had time to develop social networks and establish community role models. In comparison, newer immigrants — like those from Southeast Asia — have not. Community development of support services such as work-study, recreational, and mentoring programs has not been sufficient to meet the needs of many Southeast Asian students.

Intervention Programs

Siu identifies a range of school intervention programs that have been developed for at-risk Asian Americans, from preventative programs for preschool and kindergarten children to programs that focus on high school students, from programs that focus on families to programs that focus on low literacy. But most of these have not been systematically or vigorously evaluated — a change Siu suggests for the future. And while many of the programs are implemented at the high school level where dropping out occurs, programs which intervene in the middle school, addressing students at a critical and vulnerable age, are as important as they are rare.

On the Right Track, a three-year program for Cambodian, Mein-Lao, and Filipino high-risk middle school students in East Oakland and Union City, California, exemplifies the need for program evaluation, revision, and continued development to meet the needs of at-risk Asian American students. Students were offered year-round tutoring and individual and group counseling with counselors who were college graduates with ethnic backgrounds similar to the youth. As well, ethnic activities in the schools and community were implemented to achieve the program’s “ambitious objectives:” to prevent drug/alcohol abuse and criminal behavior, and to increase school achieve-

ment, appreciation of own ethnicity, and parents’ capability as care givers. The program helped 70% of the participants matriculate but their GPAs fell over the course of the program.

Recommendations for Research

Clearly, the educational needs of Asian American students vary greatly according to their ethnic, economic, and historical backgrounds. It is important, Siu finds, to study all Asian ethnic groups and their variable circumstances in a balanced way. For established at-risk programs that address the needs of at-risk Asian American students, Siu suggests that, “more rigorous research designs need to be employed to evaluate the effectiveness, impact, and efficiency. For fledgling programs...formative evaluation relying on qualitative data has its place.”

Siu concludes that, “This should not be the time to discontinue programs for at-risk Asian American students due to lack of understanding or inadequate research. Rather, to unravel the complexities of Asian American student achievement a n d the lack thereof, we need to build upon and expand the current knowledge base of this population....” ■