



# Equity Dispatch

The State of Education for Asian American Students: Equity Considerations



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## **IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity**

Asian culture is probably the most difficult culture to understand because it has many subgroups. While the subgroups share some general traits, they also have their own distinct values and beliefs.

--Joe Han

## Educate

February/March  
2014

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### Meet the Authors:

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## Equity Spotlight

Asian Americans are a growing ethnic minority group forming 4.8% of the U.S. population; this percentage is nearly double what it was in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This ethnic group is often labeled a “model minority” due, at least in part, to Asian Americans' high average performance on academic achievement tests (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Asian Americans from East Asian countries have been stereotyped as having a strong work ethic, maintaining close family relationships, placing a high value on education, achieving higher grades, and demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice for their children (Min, 2003; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Other Asian American groups, such as Hmong or Vietnamese, have been stereotyped as low-achieving and are more likely to be tracked into lower-level courses (Thao, 2003). More generally, stereotypes influence how adults and peers interact with Asian American students (Zhang, 2010). As a result, some of the special needs that even high achieving Asian American students may have (e.g., a need to understand culturally nuanced language and subject-area content) may be ignored, and assistance they would benefit from, denied (Goodwin, 2010). Others may be counseled away from high-level courses because of low expectations from teachers (Thao, 2003).

In addition to limiting the opportunities of Asian American students, the model minority myth also perpetuates the notion that America is a meritocracy, or “social system where individual talent and effort, rather than inherent traits, determine individuals' placements in a social hierarchy” (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 489). In other words, it may lead to assumptions that if individuals within underserved minority groups simply espouse the correct values, they will get ahead in U. S. society. Both the model minority myth and the meritocracy myth are habits of mind—“a constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6) – that obscure the role of systemic obstacles to achievement by attributing poor schooling outcomes to students' familial backgrounds and value systems rather than the educational system itself (Suzuki, 2002). For multiple reasons, then, it is important to unravel our assumptions about Asian Americans and to maintain a focus on seeking out and correcting systemic inequities.

### **Uncovering the Reality: What Asian American Students Face**

First, it is important to acknowledge that the demographic descriptor “Asian American” encompasses a heterogeneous and dynamic group. For this reason, looking solely at means and averages for all Asian Americans can paint a highly inaccurate picture of the reality for a given student. For example, while the median household income for Asian Americans in 2011 was \$67,885, a Hmong student was more likely to live in a low-income household with an annual income of around \$21,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Perhaps relatedly, while 50% of Asian Americans 25 and older obtained a bachelor degree, more than 59% of Hmong Americans did not finish high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Reasons for immigration also differ among Asian Americans, with some searching for asylum as refugees, some seeking to expand working opportunities, and others trying to attend schools with world-renowned reputations. These statistics reflect pluralistic aspects of Asian American communities that undoubtedly inform students' experiences in schools and in society at large.



Ami Gandhi earned her juris doctor (J.D.) degree from The George Washington University Law School and her B.A. in psychology and cognitive science from Indiana University Bloomington. She now serves as the Executive Director of the South Asian American Research and Policy Institute (SAAPRI), a non-profit, non-partisan organization that serves South Asian communities and leads initiatives on civic engagement, health care, hate crimes, immigration, and education. Under Gandhi's leadership, the organization uses interdisciplinary community engagement and research strategies to advocate for equitable and socially responsible policies. In doing so, SAAPRI's research debunks myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions about Indian, Pakistani, and other South Asian communities.

One area of Gandhi's advocacy is improving language access for limited English proficient South Asian Americans in Illinois. Accordingly, SAAPRI's research empowers children and parents who need language assistance at school as well as community members who need language access at the polls, in hospitals, and in courts. Gandhi also directs SAAPRI's work with the Coalition to Strengthen Local School Councils, which strives to improve the educational experience of students of color in Chicago schools, an important component of school-based democracy. Gandhi explained that when we empower publicly elected local school councils, this improves democracy as well as school performance, particularly in areas where residents face poverty, limited English proficiency, and other

Regardless of income or background differences, many Asian American students face other challenges including a loss of cultural identity, family conflicts, and social adjustment challenges (Hong, Huang, Sabri, & Kim, 2010; Park, Kim, Chiang, & Ju, 2010). Yet, these are not often acknowledged and can affect mental health and academic performance (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Specifically, studies show that Asian American students who have stayed in the U.S. longer tend to adopt more Western values that may conflict with traditional Asian values and lead to family disharmony (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009). The acculturation process may also cause identity crises as students find it difficult to relate to either Asian or Western cultural norms completely. So-called risk behaviors, such as gang affiliation or substance abuse, may manifest under such circumstances (Hong et al., 2010; Lew, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2010). Asian American students may also experience social isolation and/or bullying from peers because other students resent their high achievement and teacher favoritism (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), which can make it difficult for them to stay engaged in school (Hong et al., 2010). Cindy, a Chinese student responded in an interview that people in her school call her “chino, stupid or geek, or anything like that” because she is Chinese (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004, p. 433). Schools, therefore, need to be prepared to assist students with these challenges.

### Key Considerations for Equity and Recommendations

Correcting inequities for Asian Americans begins with educators critically reflecting on biases they may hold about Asian American students. Research shows that teacher expectations make a difference in terms of students’ academic performance (de Boer et al., 2010). “Students who are perceived positively are advantaged in instructional interactions. Those who are viewed negatively or skeptically are disadvantaged, often to the extent of total exclusion from participation in substantive academic interactions” (Gay, 2000, p. 53). Examining the patterns of student placement in educational settings (e.g., asking if particular groups or subgroups systematically denied access to particular courses and programs) is one way to recognize inequities. In light of model minority and meritocracy myths, educators should work to correct such systemic barriers to Asian American student achievement by approaching teaching and learning for all students with high expectations.

Then, educators should build authentic relationships with their students and develop responsive pedagogy and curricula that embrace rather than silence the authentic stories of Asian American students (Samhita, 2012). Curriculum and pedagogy play a role in “defining, silencing, and/or marginalizing” Asian American students (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3103). Nationally, there is a lack of attention to particular histories in what tends to be a Eurocentric curriculum (Goodwin, 2010). To address this, teachers should build curriculum around the cultural heritage of the students, develop understandings of their past social and educational experiences, help them make meaning of school culture, and work with students to bridge new learning with their existing knowledge (Gay, 2000). In addition, teachers should be aware of culture-based learning strengths that Asian American students may draw upon (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). For instance, many Hmong and Micronesian children learn histories and literacies orally rather than in texts (Goodwin, 2010). If a teacher were to place a strong emphasis on reading and to conduct performance assessments only on paper, these students’ achievement may be underrepresented (Goodwin, 2010). Using additional reading and writing performance assessments that tap into students’ experiential knowledge may improve student learning. In such instances, teachers should balance uses of alternative forms of assessment

challenges. Gandhi believes “reaching across racial and religious lines is essential to SAAPRI’s work and to communities of color in the Chicago area. We must reach out and establish coalitions that include diverse population because working together will get us farther than fighting against each other for scarce resources.”

In addition to this work, Gandhi promotes civic engagement amongst students by providing opportunities for them to work at the polls as election judges, particularly if they are bilingual and can use their language and cultural background to help voters who are not comfortable in English. Gandhi proclaims, “It is a way for our community to show that we, too, are Americans and we can give back to our country and our neighborhoods.” Gandhi also believes that getting input from scholars, lawmakers, professionals, low-wage workers, and leaders of diverse community organizations furthers the overall mission of SAAPRI.

In addition to her role at SAAPRI, Gandhi serves on the Advisory Council for the City of Chicago’s Office of New Americans, the State of Illinois Task Force on Language Access to Government Services, and the Task Force on Opportunities for DREAM Act Students at University of Illinois at Chicago. She is a volunteer attorney for Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS), which runs a legal aid hotline for low-income residents of Cook County. To learn more about Gandhi and SAAPRI, please click [here](#).

## Upcoming Events

### Illinois

May 22-23, 2014

[2014 Chicago International Conference on Education](#)

Chicago, IL

### Indiana

with instruction that allows for continued academic growth.

Finally, teachers should consider family practices in their own interaction style with students and develop strong working relationships with families based on mutual understanding (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009). For example, some Asian American students are rarely praised because it is thought to be detrimental to establishing a humble character (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Furthermore, families may believe praising without a specific focus might diminish students' intrinsic motivation and lead to negative consequences (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). This awareness can help a teacher dialogue with families about ways in which authentic, specific praise can support students' learning by providing feedback and encouragement regarding academic performance. Discussing classroom practices and the underlying reasoning for using them can go a long way in developing positive relationships with students and families. Additionally, helping students and parents to connect norms and mores from the American education system with divergent beliefs and practices from their native educational systems can ease the acculturation process for students and their families.

### Conclusion

Asian American students, like other students, have unique strengths, needs, and stories that deserve attention from educators and peers. Looking with an equity lens at within-group diversity and the ways in which educational systems silence or disadvantage members of this group, as well as provide them a space to connect learning with their lived experiences, are relevant to creating conditions for Asian American students to flourish within U. S. school communities.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

## Engage



Under the leadership of Bill Yoshino, the [Japan American Citizens League's \(JACL\)](#) Midwest Office has made excellent strides toward recognizing and advocating for inclusive education, equitable public policy, and civil rights on behalf of the Asian American communities in Chicago. JACL's mission is to preserve Japanese-American history through education and civic engagement. Additionally, JACL staff members coordinate a number of events to respond to defamation and hate crimes.

Through its work with school curricula, JACL educates others about the significance of Japanese-American history. For instance, the organization partners with the National Council for Social Studies to host teacher learning workshops on Japanese-American history at annual conferences. In addition, JACL produced two curricula for high school and K-8 teachers that provide a comprehensive history of the Japanese experience in the United States. The organization also values the preservation of history

March 19, 2014

[STEM-ulating Collaboration: Sustaining Equity and Resources for Indiana Girls \(conference\)](#)  
Indianapolis, IN

April 28, 2014

[Annual Region V State Equity Leaders' Summit](#)

[College and Success Readiness: Advancing Institutional Decision Making Processes to Achieve Equity](#)  
Indianapolis, IN

*Hosted by the Great Lakes Equity Center.*

*Contact [Ed Brown](#) for more information*

May 27-31, 2014

[National Conference on Race and Ethnicity](#)  
Indianapolis, IN

### Michigan

May 5-7, 2014

[The 74th Annual Statewide Special Education Conference](#)  
Grand Rapids, MI

### Minnesota

October 16-17, 2014

[2014 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)  
St. Paul, MN

### Ohio

June 16-18, 2014

[OERC Conference: Connecting Research, Practice, and Policy](#)  
Columbus, OH

### Wisconsin

March 19-20, 2014

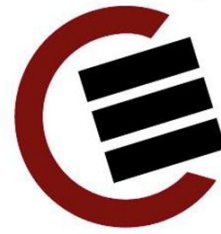
[Multicultural Awareness Workshop](#)  
Eau Claire, WI



through engaging elders in the community; as part of this work, JACL staff make arrangements for members and internment camp survivors to visit schools, colleges, and universities to share personal narratives with educators and students.

More recently, JACL celebrated a victory on its quest to ensure that Americans remain aware of Japanese-American history. JACL's Midwest office, in partnership with various community organizations, requested that the governor proclaim January 29th as Fred Korematsu Day. Korematsu was a Japanese-American citizen who refused to leave the restricted zone on the West Coast during World War II and was later arrested and convicted of evading the orders of the U.S. Army. In January 2014, JACL and others around the state celebrated the 1st annual state-recognized Korematsu Remembrance Day. JACL is using the memory of Korematsu as a bridge to collaborate with other Asian American community organizations. Collectively, these organizations are using the experiences of Japanese Americans to address the hate, racism, and anti-terrorism campaigns targeting other Asian American communities post 9-11. JACL's work is closely connected with our center's mission for promoting equity for all people; therefore, we applaud the work JACL has done to fight racism and preserve history.

## Virtual Equity



Library

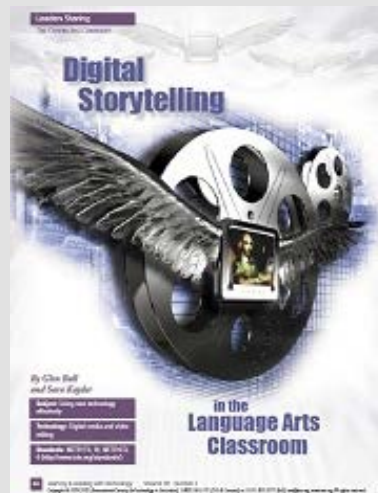


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## Empower

### Something to Read!

Because the experiences of Asian Americans are extremely diverse, it is critical to create ways for students to share their stories. [Digital storytelling](#) is one way Asian American students can be empowered to share their stories. This guide will assist educators in employing digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool. It offers a number of considerations for creators of digital stories, as well as a sequence of activities for developing a digital story.



### Something to Watch!



Watch this [video](#) to learn about the Burmese Community Center for Education's 2013 summer freedom trip. Two groups - Freedom and Independence - present the connections they found when visiting the Lincoln Memorials and the

Martin Luther King Memorials. The Burmese Community Center for Education in Indianapolis, Indiana, offered this trip as a means to help Burmese students establish skills that will enhance their ability to succeed in formal education classrooms. This video is an excellent example of digital storytelling based on a particular learning experience that infuses themes related to the history of oppression and struggle for freedom in the United States.

## Something to Watch!

[Of Civil Wrongs and Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story](#) is a documentary film that explores the significance of Fred Korematsu's fight for justice in the United States. The documentary first aired in 2003 on PBS. However, the story is often left out of American history. This documentary would be a great tool to supplement a class assignment pertaining to equity, justice, law, and civil rights.



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