

# Introduction

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## The Quest for Concepts, Competence, and Connections

### *The Education of Asian Pacific American Children*

We are lightning and justice.  
Our souls become transparent like glass  
revealing tears for war-dead sons  
red ashes of Hiroshima  
jagged wounds from barbed wire.  
We must recognize ourselves at last  
We are a rainforest of color  
and noise.  
We hear everything.  
We are unafraid.  
Our language is beautiful.  
—Mirikitani, 1983, p. 191

**T**eachers often do not understand the needs of Asian Pacific American (APA) students. We present this book in the hope that educators will better understand which concepts and issues are most germane to the APA community, develop competence in providing the best schools for APA students, and make clear connections between culture and education. To many teachers, APA children are invisible; though teachers may notice physical differences, their needs are often overlooked. The APA

population continues to grow by leaps and bounds because of high birth rates and continued immigration. It is estimated that, by the year 2020, Asian Pacific American students ages five through seventeen will make up over 8 percent of the school-age population, 4,382,500 (Ong & Hee, 1993), and as their numbers increase, their needs will also continue to become more evident.

We believe educators must challenge a biased educational and social system which often labels APA children as "model minorities." The label acts as an excuse for schools to avoid addressing the social, psychological, and educational needs of APA youth. Some teachers like having Asian Pacific American children in their classes because "they make me look good and do not cause problems" (M. Nakagawa, personal communication, July 12, 1996); unfortunately this teacher may not be attending to her APA students because they are well behaved and do not question her.

The first quest of the authors in this text is to challenge overgeneralized and unsubstantiated concepts many teachers hold about Asian Pacific American students and their communities and substitute more accurate information. Most teachers believe that Asian Pacific American students are welcomed into schools and society in general. Many also believe that Asian Pacific Americans are successful models. However we argue that there is a system in place which subordinates groups like APA from the majority. Social stereotypes serve to confirm those beliefs and dehumanize Asian Pacific Americans. We believe these beliefs serve as barriers which justify why teachers have not developed comprehensive programs for APA students. Too many Asian Pacific American students have been silenced. They are trapped in schools that do not notice them or are placed in programs where students have not developed critical skills (Darder, 1991; Gay, 1993).

We believe it is a struggle to convince many educators to examine the issues covered in this book. Most teachers are anxious to gather information about cultural rituals and traditions, however few teachers examine critical issues like why special education services are not reaching Asian populations because this will call into question their ability as educators. It is much easier to make origami cranes and teriyaki chicken, than to create programs that address teenage suicide or develop collaboration with parents who may speak languages other than English. In order to develop effective programs, it is crucial for educators to understand which implicit cultural values are operating and how those values shape the beliefs and behaviors of people. Advocates for APA students often must swim upstream against the current in their attempt to bring attention to issues like gang involvement, mental health problems, bilingual education, ethnic identity confusion, and relevant curriculum.

Our second quest is for competence. We hope that this book will assist teachers in developing competence in providing Asian Pacific American

students with culturally affirming and effective educational learning environments. We encourage each reader to examine her/his own views and to find other professionals to discuss the issues our authors share in this text. It is only through dialogue and soul searching that change can occur. Listen to APA parents and listen carefully to your APA students. Get to know them well enough to be able to understand their viewpoint and perspective. Our book can only provide basic knowledge and direction, however real competence will develop when educators listen to their students and find out what they think and observe how they react in schools. At the same time it is crucial to talk with parents and other community leaders in order to make sure that what one is seeing is what one thinks one is seeing. For example a child, as Tran has written in her chapter, may smile, but that smile may not be one of happiness, but rather of embarrassment.

Our final quest is connection; success is based on networking. We feel fortunate to be able to bring to you an interdisciplinary collaboration of various specialists in Asian Pacific American education. The authors represent specializations in psychology, teacher education, counseling, history, communication disorders, bilingual education, special education, sociology, and social work. Their chapters provide you with a comprehensive view of APA children and their needs. We hope the reader will make connections with APA youth in their classroom and develop programs and practices that meet their specialized needs. Students should be encouraged to develop their talents and clarify personal views; APA voices should be distinctive contributors to our democracy (Darder, 1991). Educational programs should teach children that they can make choices about who they are, what they want to do in life, and how they should view themselves. These connections should affirm students as Asian Pacific Americans who have been members of the U.S. family since before the Revolutionary War. Filipinos have made the continental United States their home since 1763 when sailors jumped from Spanish galleons (Cordova, 1983).

The book is divided into three sections. The initial portion of the book focuses on the cultural background of APA communities. In this section, Leung, Flores, and Tran discuss cultural values found in various communities so that the reader can better understand how belief systems shape how people think, behave, and find meaning in life. Flores carefully describes important issues within the Filipino community and presents an intervention program she and her colleagues developed for Filipino American teenagers utilizing cultural heritage as the foundation. The need for cultural role models and guidance in the Filipino American community are crucial issues at a time when violence, gangs, and suicide are increasing at alarming rates.

To bring information about Chinese American, Japanese American, and Korean American children, Leung's chapter discusses the difference

between “macro” or large group patterns and “micro” culture or individual differences within groups. One of the most powerful values in these communities is collectivism; family ties and group harmony are continually encouraged. Leung also pointed to historical differences among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigration and how assimilation levels may correspond with historical experiences. His case studies provide examples of real children and how their lives have been shaped by culture.

In presenting information about Southeast Asian American children, Tran carefully outlined how the true heart of Southeast Asian American children is often difficult for mainstream teachers to perceive. Many Southeast Asians respect and highly value education; however, because of their refugee experiences and forced move to the United States, they face many educational, psychological, and social problems in their adjustment to the mainstream culture. Though none of the chapters can paint a comprehensive picture of any one group, they point to patterns or trends in groups. When reading these chapters, a caution is shared with the reader: though there are group trends, an individual within each group can be extremely different from another member. We also wanted to stress that we attempted to present a wide spectrum of information about many groups, however our text does not have specific sections about many APA groups like East Indians and Pacific Islanders.

The second portion of the book focuses on sociocultural aspects of APA communities. Young described the ethnic identity confusion of many APA students. He found many APA children trying to cope with the confusion of a double consciousness. How do young people maintain a strong ethnic identity while assimilating into mainstream culture? Young believed young people develop different identities—which he labeled as “the golden child,” “the misfit child,” “the good child,” and “the hyphenated child”—in order to cope within a bicultural or multicultural environment.

Ethnic identity confusion is also an issue Chun and Sue identify. In their chapter on the mental health of children, they express concern that little attention is paid to the emotional and psychological development of Asian Pacific American students. Chun and Sue’s chapter explained that they felt depression, lack of interpersonal skills, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder in refugees were the most pressing mental health issues.

Ima and Nidorf share with us a similar viewpoint. They provide critical information explaining why some APA students join gangs. For many students, gangs provide family relationships that they long for and have lost. Many refugee students have come to the United States without their parents and must rely on older brothers and sisters, who themselves have difficulty surviving. Some of these students may seem like a “model minority” in that they are quiet in school and do their homework, however after school they are involved in gang activity.

Many teachers have little knowledge about the conflicts Asian Pacific American children encounter as they are thrust into mainstream schools. Cheng shared numerous examples of how the implicit view and hidden curriculum of U.S. culture can be confusing to some Asian Pacific American children. Using humor and interesting samples of cultural differences, Cheng carefully explained how we all come to situations with cultural glasses. It is through these glasses that we interpret the language and behaviors of others. Cheng believed that educators must move "beyond multiculturalism" to understand the underlying values and beliefs which tangible and outward behaviors represent.

The last section of the book centers on numerous aspects of schooling. First, Nadeau, a former principal, discusses the practices she instituted with her staff in an elementary school that was over 44 percent Asian Pacific American with three major Asian languages, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Lao. Under her leadership, the school staff became highly effective with their students and this led to many awards including an RJR Nabisco grant and U.S. Department of Education distinguished school honor. Next, Watanabe points out in his chapter that Asian Pacific American students are underserved in special education. He explains why parents are often embarrassed or reluctant to allow their children to participate in programs for children with disabilities. For example, some Lao parents believe a child with special needs is a symbol that God is punishing a person for something done in the past. Teachers will need to understand the fears of parents and other community members in order to be effective.

As the second largest APA group, it is critical for teachers to have an in-depth knowledge of Filipinos. Although their legacy in the United States is rich and over 225 years old, few teachers have an understanding of the impact of Filipino American presence in U.S. history. Cordova has provided an in-depth list of Filipino Americans who have contributed to and continue to have a powerful influence on our society. This list is an important resource for teachers.

Moving to the area of curriculum and instruction, Cheng provides an important chapter presenting her views on assessment and instructional strategies for limited English speaking APA students. Assessment is an extremely complicated process and Cheng gives clear guidelines and practical strategies. In order to provide students with comprehensible input, she offers examples of cultural information that she feels educators should cover in their curriculum. Halloween, idioms, and metaphors are several areas Cheng encourages teachers to include in their linguistic program. Her chapter is followed by a chapter by Fung, who presents important curriculum ideas for use in the classroom. These ideas are culturally relevant and highlight the use of carefully selected Asian Pacific American literature as bridges between what children may already know and new concepts

that are being taught. Fung stressed the importance of developmentally appropriate instruction, culturally affirming content, and using multisensory approaches.

Ima shared an ethnographic view of schools. He examined the experiences of secondary Asian newcomer students in one of the largest school districts in the nation. He generally found that schools did not attend to the needs of Asian Pacific American students. Schools fell into four categories: some schools focused on assimilating students into a middle-class, Eurocentric curriculum paying little attention to cultural relevancy, some schools were not equipped or trained to educate newcomer students, other schools focused their attention on "keeping order" though little education occurred, and at some schools parents attempted to become more political in their call for bilingual services however slow the district is to respond.

In Appendix A, Lovelace presents a case study about the media. Her research focuses on creating affirming Asian Pacific American images on Sesame Street. Children's Television Workshop formed an Asian Pacific American Advisory Board to assist them in creating segments that would integrate culturally affirming information. She and her colleagues found APA preschool students responded positively to video segments where Asian cultural activities were presented. Unfortunately, they also discovered that students from other cultural groups did not respond as positively to the segments on Asian Pacific Americans.

The final portion of the book provides recommendations for teachers and other service providers. Kiang has written a powerful chapter describing the importance of guiding and empowering teenage Asian Pacific American students to create organizations that are socially active in society. In this way not only are students able to create their own "voice," but also to develop important participatory skills. He has organized students in calling for culturally relevant curriculum and more sensitivity to Asian issues, and has brought students together in pan Asian conferences. Though students initially felt disempowered by the system, through their collaboration and the direction given by Kiang and his colleagues, APA students realized they could shape their own future.

In the final chapter Pang encourages the reader to focus on the education of the whole child. Too often teachers may channel APA students into math, science, and other technical areas; however teachers should also suggest to students courses in art, creative writing, drama, ensemble, journalism, and sports. She believes it is crucial for APA youth to develop their cognitive talents along with high self-esteem, leadership skills, emotional stability, and interpersonal skills.

To us, Asian Pacific American children are cherished hopes. They represent the hope of their families and communities whether they are immigrants or American natives. We believe educators and other service

providers must examine the impact of culture on Asian Pacific American students because culture is “not simply a factor, or an influence, or a dimension, but it is in process, in everything that we do, say, or think in or out of school (Spindler & Spindler, 1993: p. 27) We know educators can better guide APA children when the implicit messages of culture are understood. Otherwise the voices of Asian Pacific American youth will continue to be absent in society because the potential growth of APA students is not fully developed. Many “fall through the cracks” in their schools and others continue to hit their heads against the invisible but clearly real “glass ceiling” of society. Few leaders have emerged from the APA community, and the hopes and possibilities of their communities continue to lie dormant.

It is our responsibility as educators to guide all students to be the best they can be. It is our intention to see more programs that nurture the potential growth of Asian Pacific American students, involve their parents, and encourage confidence development. We want our youth to become well-educated adults who are able to make connections throughout the global village. As adult citizens, they will live in a borderless world that looks beyond multiculturalism toward global collaboration (Kanter, 1995). We envision a world where Asian Pacific American students become thinkers, doers, and collaborators in the world community. In order for this to occur, we need more educators to become advocates for Asian Pacific American students and to push the educational and social system to better address the needs of APA youth.

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