

Other People's Success: Impact of the "Model Minority" Myth on Underachieving Asian Students in North America

Guofang Li
State University of New York at Buffalo

Abstract

This paper revisits the "model minority" myth and examines how it has become a "destructive myth" for those underachieving Asian children who do not fit the stereotypes. It argues that contemporary "model minority" images promote invisibility and disguise the social realities of many Asian students who are not successful. Therefore, these images are false representations of many Asian students and have posed as a threat to their educational advancement. To further demythologize the "model minority" myth, this paper reveals the academic difficulties of a Chinese student who lived under the shadow of other children's success. The case study demonstrates that among other factors, the "model minority" images contribute to Asian students' underachievement. The stereotypes have enhanced mainstream school's "blaming the victims" approach toward underachieving Asian students; and have heightened Asian parents' "education fever." The analysis suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the individual lived experiences of these struggling learners to facilitate their academic success.

Key words: model minority, underachieving Asian students, education fever, cross-cultural schooling

1. Introduction

Contemporary public perceptions of Asian students in North America have been associated with the label “model minorities” (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 1989, 2002). Asian students are described as intelligent, industrious, enduring, obedient, and highly successful, and have been constructed as “academic nerds,” “high achievers” who are “joyfully” initiated into North American life and English literacy practices (Lee, 1996; Townsend and Fu, 1998). These model minority images are based on reports of Asian students’ high test scores in mathematics and SAT, and higher grade point average in high school in comparison with other minority groups such as African and Hispanic students in the U.S., and Aboriginal students in Canada (Hsia, 1988; Kim & Chun, 1994; Sue & Okazaki, 1991). In recent years, there are also reports that Asians are outdoing whites in test scores, educational attainment, and family income (Min, 2004). These images are further reinforced by reports of only success stories in research literature and in the media.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2001 population survey, in 2050, one of the greatest increases in the U. S. population will be Asian American/Pacific Islanders (from 3.7% in 2000 to 8.9% in 2050). In Canada, Asia/Pacific has become the leading source of immigrants since the 1990s (53.01% in 2001), with China (including Hong Kong) being the No. 1 source country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002). In the Province of British Columbia (B.C.) alone, Asian immigrants accounted for 87.2% of its population growth during 1993-2000. With the increase of Asian population in North America, the number of school age Asian Pacific children also increased tremendously. For example, between 1960 and 1990, it grew about six-fold and it continues to grow at a high rate in the U.S. and Canada.

Are the “model minority” images true to all Asian students? Are the Asian students destined to excel as “model minorities”? The fast growing Asian Pacific population has posed unprecedented challenges to schools that are under prepared for educating students who do not speak English as their first language and who come from a wide range of cultural, political and economic backgrounds. With the increasing number of Asian children in today’s schools, researchers began to see the other side of the “model minority myth.” Contrary to the widely reported success stories, research on recent Asian immigrants began to draw public attention to “an invisible crisis” that many Asian Pacific children face in today’s schools (AAPIP, 1997). More and more Asian children are reported to experience difficulty not only in learning English, but also in achieving academic success. For example, the 2001 results of the British Columbia Foundations Skills Assessment indicated that nearly 37% of the 4th graders (in addition to 21% of whom were excused from taking the test due to their limited English proficiency) in the school had not yet reached the provincial standards in reading comprehension (B. C. Ministry of Education, 2001). In many districts with high Asian concentration (e.g., California, New York, and Chicago), Asian drop out rates are also reported to be increasing (NECS, 2004).

Since most studies on Asian children centered on their success stories and the realization of the invisible crisis that many Asian children face is fairly recent, few studies have addressed the

diverse and complex experiences of Asian children, especially those who do not fit the "model minority" stereotype (Lee, 1996; Li, 2004). This paper revisits the model minority myth and examines how it has become a "destructive myth" for those underachieving children whom the schools are failing. In the following pages, I first present a contextualized understanding of the "model minority" myth—what it is and what it means. I then demonstrate that the myth has been an inaccurate and invalid representation of many Asian students. Following this, I discuss the impact of the "model minority" stereotype on underachieving Asian students' schooling. I argue that the stereotype has posed as a threat to the students' advancement in school (and in society) and it has been a hegemonic device that disguises the challenges many Asian children face in school. In order to illustrate the impact of the model minority stereotypes on individual experiences, I reveal the academic struggles of an underachieving Chinese student who lived under the shadow of other children's success. Lastly, I discuss the implications of his experiences in relation to the "model minority" myth.

2. Model minority myth: What it is and what it means

Historically, Asian Americans, including the Chinese and Japanese immigrants, had been labeled as "yellow peril" or "unassimilable heathens" (Hurh & Kim, 1989). Since the Second World War, public perceptions of Asians had transformed from "cruel, enemy aliens" to industrious, quiet, law-abiding, and successful "model minorities" who can make it on their own (Bhattacharyya, 2001). The term "model minority" was first coined by William Peterson, in his 1966 article for *US News and World Report* in which he praised the self-attained success of Chinese Americans. Peterson wrote, "At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own with no help from anyone" (Peterson, 1966, p. 73, as cited in Lee, 1996, p. 6). When the term was applied to Asian students' schooling, it was a synonym to the Asian academic success myth, which connoted that Asian students were more academically successful than other ethnic minorities. In the popular media since 1960s, Asian students have been praised as "whiz kids" and "high achievers" who could succeed academically on their own (Walker-Moffat, 1995). The model minority label was first used to refer to the Chinese Americans, but later was extended to other Asian groups such as the Japanese and the Korean Americans in 1970s (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Oh-Willeke, 1996). Since the 1980s, the term has been generalized and popularized by the media to include all Asian groups, and it has become a broad brushstroke that masks the diversity and differences among the Asian ethnic and cultural groups.

Oh-Willeke (1996) suggests that the term "model minority" connotes two layers of meanings. First, it means that Asians are minorities acceptable to and yet different from whites in the racial formations of the society. Asians are often seen as "near whites" or "honorary whites." Researchers argue that the danger of this meaning is that such conception often excludes them

from the political discourse on race and inequality as they do not face racism, have no social needs, and have no problems as the other minority groups (Lee, 1996; Lei, 1998). Second, Asians serve as visible models for other less motivated racial groups in proper behaviors and attitudes (e.g., uncomplaining and docile) and proper work ethic (e.g., hard working, persistent, diligent, and self-abnegating). The danger of this implication is that it attributes Asian success to proper work ethic and reinforces the “blaming the victims” approach to those who fail to make it in school or in the society. Implicit in the meaning is that equal opportunity exists and if minorities fail, they have themselves to blame (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Lee, 1996; Takaki, 1995). From this view, When a particular student fails, his/her failure is often considered to lie “not with the schools but with the student whether due to genetics, the home environment or both” (Walker-Moffat, 1995, p. 8). Therefore, although the “model minority” stereotype may appear to be positive, it may be politically used to maintain the status quo in society and it can be potentially damaging to those underachieving students who do not fit the success model. In the next section, I discuss how “the model minority” myth can be a false representation of Asians in North America.

2.1. Model minority as false representation

Since the term “model minority” was coined, many scholars have argued that the term “model minority” itself is invalid and inaccurate. Main arguments include: 1) The methods of statistics analysis that supports the stereotype are often flawed; 2) The myth fails to recognize the increased evidence of Asian underachievement, dropout, and socio-economic gap; and 3) it fails to address the vast inter- and intra- group differences.

Early in 1973, in their historical analysis of the model minority stereotype for the Chinese and the Japanese in America, Sue & Kitano concluded that although there appeared to be some kernel of truth in the stereotype, it was politically charged and highly problematic. They pointed out that the reported success of Chinese and Japanese Americans was a matter of record keeping as the methodology in many studies on Asian stereotypes was flawed. For example, many early studies on Asian stereotypes failed to address particular group characteristics (i.e., Asians tend to have more persons per household) that may influence the interpretation of results. Similarly, several other researchers challenged the “model minority” claim and presented a very different interpretation of the available socio-economic data on Asian Americans. They demonstrated that when the data on Asian Americans were disaggregated and analyzed in more sophisticated methods, the results showed greater disparity between Asians and their white counterparts in terms of educational, economical, and occupational achievement (see Chun, 1980; Suzuki, 1977, 1989, 2002).

Research also indicates that the “model minority” stereotype does not reflect the increased evidence of Asian underachievement, dropout, and socio-economic gap. National Center for Educational Statistics (NECS) (2004) reports that Asians have lower achievement levels in

reading, writing, and mathematics than their white counterparts. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading report card (grade 8) for 1998-2003 indicates that in some states Asians did not necessarily have higher achievement levels than Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians. In states such as Hawaii and Minnesota, the percentage of Asian American/Pacific Islanders at or above basic level in reading can be as low as 45% to 55%. In terms of mathematics, in some states (e.g., Hawaii), the percentage of Asian Pacific Islander students who are below basic level can be as high as 46%. In terms of educational attainment, data revealed that in 1990, 9.8% of adults of Asian Pacific descent had never progressed beyond 8th grade, compared with 6.2% of whites. Among Asian subgroups, the disparity was even greater: 54.9% of Hmongs, 40.7% Cambodians, and 33.9% Laotians had not completed the 5th grade (AAPIP, 1997). These statistics suggest that the "model minority" stereotypes are false representation of Asians as it ignores these intra- and inter-group differences.

The growing Asian dropout rates also do not fit the "model minority" stereotype. Asian dropout rates vary in different groups. Southeast Asians are reported to have higher dropout rates than East Asians. In the Seattle School District in 1986-87, for example, the high school drop out rate of Vietnamese was 11.8% and that of other Southeast Asians was 17.9% compared to Japanese (5.1%) and Chinese (5.3%) (Wan, 1996). In the San Diego City Schools in California, for example, the 2001-2002 dropout rate of Pacific Islander was 13.0%; Indochinese was 9.8%; Filipino was 6.3%; and other Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) were 5.8% (CED, 2004). Because of the "model minority" stereotype, many schools are reported to have not monitored or recorded the dropout rates among Asian Americans. As a result, some school districts do not realize that they are losing many Asian students (Walker-Moffat, 1995).

In addition to Asian underachievement and their growing dropout rates, the increasing socio-economic gap between Asians and whites also made the model minority stereotype problematic. According to U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, in the early 1990s, the poverty rates among Asian Pacific American groups were Hmong (64%), Cambodian (43%), Laotian (35%), Vietnamese 26%, Chinese 14%, and Korean (14%). These rates are much higher than that of the whites (9%) and that of the national average (13%).

In addition to these inter-group differences, statistics also show that there exist vast intra-group differences. Within the highly acclaimed Chinese community, for example, only 30% have achieved middle class status while the majority remain members of the working or lower class, referred to as "downtown Chinese" who are manual labors with little English proficiency and limited education (Siu, 1998). The "model minority" myth fails to reflect not only these intra- or inter-group differences, but also the individual differences. In her ethnographic study of four Chinese families in Canada, Li (2002) revealed that due to different family environments, parental educational backgrounds and occupational choices, social contexts of reception, and interactions with schools, the children and their families achieved different levels of success and failure.

The “model minority” stereotype is therefore a myth that is “a fictitious, unproven or illusory thing that circulates in contemporary society, the false representation and erroneous beliefs” (Min, 2003, p. 192). Many researchers posit that when such a false representation is widely accepted, the consequences become divisive and destructive (Min, 2003; Suzuki, 2002; Walker-Moffat, 1995). Why then does the stereotype still exist? What purposes does it serve for Asian students who do not fit the model? In the following section, I discuss how the “model minority” myth can pose a threat to the advancement of many underachieving Asian American students in schools.

2.2. Model minority myth as a threat

The threat of the “model minority” myth to the advancement of Asians in North America operates at both macro and micro levels. As mentioned earlier, the “model minority” label has two layers of meanings: Asians are minorities acceptable to and yet different from whites in the racial formations of the society; and Asians serve as visible models for other less motivated racial groups in proper behaviors, attitudes and work ethic. At a macro level, these meanings serve two functions. One is that they disguise the fact that Asians experience racism and discrimination (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 1989). According to Lee (1996) and Suzuki (1989), the model minority image places Asians in a precarious position that they do not have any problems and do not need any social services or the system does not need to change for Asians at all. Such silencing often hinders Asian Americans’ collective struggle for social justice and disempowers them from actively fighting for their equal rights. The other function is that the representation of Asians as the model minority maintains the existing social order and racial hierarchy. It is argued that the stereotype has been used to support the status quo of white superiority and the ideologies of meritocracy in that other minority groups ought to be able to succeed as well without affirmative action or any other institutional change. It takes the attention off the white majority by pitting the Asians against the other disadvantaged minority groups such as the Blacks and the Hispanics. As Lee (1996) notes, “while Asian Americans and African Americans are fighting among themselves, the racial barriers that limit Asian Americans and African Americans remain unchallenged” (p. 9). In recent years, it is reported that the term “model minority” created resentment towards Asians not only from other minority groups, but also from members of the majority culture who came to believe that Asian students drive up the grade curve, dominate the competitive honors and scholarships, and crowd out places for whites in the classroom and workplace (Rohrlick, Alvarado, Zaruba, & Kallio, 1998; Suzuki, 2002).

At a micro level, the “model minority” stereotype is believed to have many negative consequences. First, research shows that it misleads policy makers to overlook issues concerning Asian students and their needed services. Studies on instructional support for Asian English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students (e.g., AAPIP, 1997; Rohrlick, Alvarado, Zaruba, & Kallio, 1998; Wan, 1996) found that the model minority myth leads many to believe that Asian students

will succeed with little support and without special programs and services (e.g., ESL support and bilingual education) with which other minorities are provided. Many school districts often do not properly categorize Asian students and therefore do not receive funds that are available to serve their language needs. Most Asian students receive limited amount of English as a second language instruction and are placed in mainstream classes that do not offer special support to help them understand the instruction. According to AAPIP (1997), although 73% Asian Pacific eighth graders were language minorities, only 27% were recognized as such by their teachers.

Research also shows that the popular image of successful, high achieving "model minorities" often prevents teachers and schools from recognizing the instructional needs and the psychological and emotional concerns of many underachieving Asian students. AAPIP (1997) documents that there exists an invisible crisis concerning the educational needs of Asian American students in K-12 system. The most significant barriers include three major areas. 1) Language and literacy. Students' lack of proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking skills is often neglected, and there are insufficient bilingual resources and support for students' first language development and maintenance. 2) School and curriculum. Most schools do not have curricula appropriate to educating multicultural and multilingual student populations; and teachers and administrators generally do not have training to understand Asian cultures and languages. 3) Support for families and for youth development. Schools rarely have ties to Asian community organizations that can help meet students' and families' needs.

The harmful effect of the model minority myth is also evident in higher education. Research shows that the false representation of Asian students has resulted in the reemergence of the perfidious foreigner stereotype that they are a threat to the U.S. and white dominance (Lei, 1998; Suzuki, 2002). The increased racial profiling against Asian students in higher education, for example, is reported to have resulted in adverse learning environments that place them at risk (Yeh, 2002). Recent studies on Asian college students' experiences demonstrate that increasingly, more and more Asian college students are feeling marginalized, misunderstood and disconnected from the college campus and are experiencing institutionalized racism (Lagdameo, Lee, & Ngyen, 2002; Suzuki, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, the "model minority" myth reinforces the "blaming the victims" approach. It obscures the accountability of schools and institutions for students' underachievement. Explanations of Asian success often focus on parental support and cultural traits that lead to success (Barrozo, 1987; Min, 2004; Peng & Wright, 1994). Many attributed Asian success to family background, parental investment in their children's education, and parental emphasis on achievement. However, such analysis often fails to look at the critical role school and societal factors in Asian children's education. As Walker-Moffat (1995) points out, "this perspective shifts the responsibility for the high rate of minority student failure from the schools—and hence the taxpayers—to the students themselves and their families" (p. 21).

Researchers have concluded that the model minority stereotype, true or not, shapes students' intellectual identity and their expected performance (Lee, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996). As

evidenced in several studies on Asian American adolescents' identity formation (e.g., Lee, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996), the "model minority" discourse operates as a very powerful force in their academic and personal lives. For students who are underachieving, trying to live up to the model minority stereotype may result in mental and emotional problems. Many Asian students struggle with cultural dictates that motivate them to embrace high academic achievement and are reported to resent the success myth (Chun, 1980; Goto, 1997; Lee, 1996). In order to measure up the expectations, many students have been pressured into assimilation into the mainstream and rejection of their cultural identity. As a result, they are more likely to have serious psychological and emotional issues (Chun, 1980). In their study on Asian American adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems, Lorenzo, Pakiz, Reinherz, & Frost (1995) revealed that many Asian American adolescents are significantly more isolated, more depressed and anxious, and are more likely to internalize their problems and less apt to be involved in after school activities or seek help for their problems than those from other ethnic groups.

In sum, the consequences of the "model minority" stereotype can be destructive. The glowing image may mask the problems many underachieving Asian children face in and out of schools and prevent us from unraveling the social realities and academic needs of those who do not fit the model. It may promote the "blaming the victims" approach, and lead our attention away from a scrutiny of the role of public schooling. In order to further demythologize the "model minority" myth, in the following, I present the story of a middle class Chinese family whose children do not fit the "model minority" stereotype.

3. Demythologizing the model minority: The Lou family's stories

This case study of a middle class Chinese family, the Lousⁱ, had basis in a larger ethnographic study on Chinese immigrant children's home and school connections. Data for this case study were collected using a variety of ethnographic methods including participant observations of the focal student, Andy Lou, in his school and home settings, interviews with Andy, Andy's mother (Mrs. Lou)ⁱⁱ, and his two teachers (Ms. Dawson and Mrs. Smith), field notes taking, and document collecting. In the pages that follow, I present Andy's learning experiences at school and at home, as well as his teachers' and parents' perspectives on his difficulty to achieve academic success. Such a close look at Andy's lived realities will help us look at the whole child in his own particular socio-cultural contexts (i.e., school, home, and community), examine different factors (including the model minority stereotype) that may have contributed to his difficulty with schooling, and understand his individual needs. As Andy's stories will demonstrate, the model minority discourse could also be seen in the pronouncements, actions, and perspectives of both teachers and parents. For the teachers, the "model minority" images became a frame of reference for assessment. They measured Andy's performance and behavior against other successful Asian students and their conception of "good" Asian students. For

Andy's parents, the "model minority" images heightened their imported "education fever" (i.e., high expectations and pressure to achieve) and they placed overwhelmingly high expectations on Andy, especially on his math performance.

3.1. Andy Lou's learning experiences in school and at home

Andy was ten years old and was the second child of the family. He was in the fourth grade of a combined grade 4/5 class. There were 28 students in his class--21 Chinese, 3 East Asian, 3 Caucasian, and 1 African Canadian. Out of the 28 students, only 4 (three Caucasian students, and Andy who withdrew from the ESL program) were not considered ESL. In Andy's school, about 80% of the student population were second generation Chinese students who were categorized as ESL learners. Although there was a high ESL population in the school, there were only three ESL teachers who also served as special education teachers. The language of instruction in the school was English and all the regular classroom teachers followed a curriculum designed for mainstream children that was student-centered and literature-based.

On the surface, Andy was one of those "model minority" students. He was pleasant and was well liked in class. His parents were first generation immigrants from Hong Kong and were well educated and financially successful. His father had a bachelor's degree from Hong Kong and was in the car business; his mother, who completed a college degree in Canada and had been an accountant for a large firm. They were both actively involved in their children's education. At the time of the study, Andy's mother had quit her job in order to spend more time to help her children's education. However, unlike the popular image of the "whiz kids," Andy performed below his age and peer group level in English reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and all other core curriculum subjects such as Science and Social Studies. The only subject he passed was Math. He was classified as a Level 2 (the lowest level is Level 1 and the highest is Level 5) ESL student when he finished the third grade. Because he could not sit still for a long period of time, his ESL teacher, Mrs. Smith, believed that he might be attention-deficit.

Andy also lived in the shadow of his sister's school failure. His sister was 17 years old, and was in grade 12 in a nearby high school. Facing graduation and the provincial tests, she was struggling academically in school--especially in English writing and Math. Her academic failure had made their parents lose their confidence in the public school system. They tried to learn from their daughter's experiences and wanted to do the right thing for Andy so that he would not repeat his sister's mistakes.

Prior to fourth grade, Andy was pulled out of regular classrooms to receive 45 minutes to one hour of instruction in small groups together with special needs children. Mrs. Lou believed that the school was putting him in an ESL group that was lower than his ability. She viewed that this placement may have blocked his learning because he was not challenged. Unsatisfied with the ESL structure, Mrs. Lou requested the school to take him off the official ESL student list so that

he would not miss regular class instruction. Instead, Mrs. Lou wanted Ms. Dawson “be really on him in class,” but with so many other students in the class, it was hard for Ms. Dawson to do so.

At school, Andy was eager to learn everything including spelling, social studies, and science. He wanted to learn English and French well; and he understood the importance of knowing these two official languages of Canada. His desire to learn English was exemplified by his work for a reading activity called Literature Circle. In the activity, he was required to read a novel with a small group, respond to the reading according to the different roles and tasks assigned, and then discuss his reading. His responses to the different roles, though very short, suggested that he understood much of what he had read, but he and his group members often went off task during the discussions, and they often spoke in Cantonese about funny TV commercials and video games.

Although Andy liked reading in English, he was often discouraged by his limited vocabulary and his inability to pronounce many words. The unfamiliar words often prohibited him from understanding the stories. This reading block also occurred when he read long textbook instructions in math and other subjects. Andy was also a struggling writer. He stated that he did not like writing: “I hate writing because I always get tired of it.” Most of his writings lacked coherence among the ideas, and were less than a page long except for two pieces which were based on movies or TV programs he had seen such as *Spy Kids*, *Star Wars*, and the *Star Trek* series. His writing demonstrated his struggles with vocabulary, tense agreement, paragraphing, and basic grammar.

Andy took pride in his ability to speak Cantonese. He dreamed of visiting Hong Kong to play with his cousin Victor who had a lot of video games and knew how to play basketball. He stressed the importance of knowing how to speak Chinese: “When you go to Hong Kong if you don’t know how to [speak Cantonese]...and they see that you are Chinese, they will start calling me an idiot!” Whenever he had a chance, he would always converse in Cantonese with his classmates. He used Cantonese during unstructured class time (for example, during activities such as folding cubes and other hands-on experiences with different shapes) or when he wanted to get away from schoolwork to talk about *Pokemon* games, TV shows, and movies, to ask questions about the work, or simply to explain something he knew to some of his classmates. Andy’s constant use of Chinese was against the English-only policy enforced in the school and the classroom.

One thing Mrs. Lou decided to do to help Andy’s English was to speak more English to Andy at home. They decided that they would not send Andy to a Chinese school to learn Mandarin because they wanted him to concentrate on English first before he started to learn another language. In order to help Andy read, Mrs. Lou bought Andy different kinds of storybooks. She even bought the popular *Harry Potter* books for him although she knew that he could not read them. In the summer, she took Andy to the community library where he borrowed many books. Mrs. Lou required Andy to read aloud in English every day and encouraged him to write on the computer. She sometimes asked Andy to record his reading

aloud on a tape-recorder so that she could check it later to point out his pronunciation mistakes. Mrs. Lou and her daughter would occasionally help Andy with his weekly spelling quizzes. Sometimes, they pre-tested him several times before quizzes. In order to train Andy's concentration skills, Mrs. Lou sent him to take piano and swimming lessons every week. She also required him to practice the piano for half an hour every day after school.

In addition to these activities at home, Andy's parents also hired a tutor to help him with English and math. Even though Andy was doing ok in math, they set high expectations for his math performance and wanted him to do better so that he would not lag behind other successful students who had been receiving private tutoring for a longer period of time. Following other Chinese parents, Mrs. Lou enrolled Andy in a private tutoring school, Kuman Math School, twice a week, even though it meant extra financial burden on the family. Kuman Math School, which originated in Japan, was very popular in the community for its intense individualized training. Mrs. Lou believed that this kind of training could give Andy more initiative to become independent and to be responsible to his work.

In sum, in addition to attending the regular school, Andy also had a school-like schedule after school. His busy schedule at home made him feel "home is another school." He described: "My mom actually thinks my house is a school. So she taught me everything—15 minutes' recess, then an hour of studying, and then recess, then another 45 minutes, and then recess."

3.2. Teachers' and parents' perspectives on Andy's academic failure

Because of Andy's behaviors and performance in school, he did not fit the "model minority" images that the teachers had had for Asian students. In our first interview, Ms. Dawson reflected that her previous impressions of Asian children were that "very seldom there were behavioral problems or real learning difficulty...they were really well behaved children. They were keen and hard workers...always terribly polite, very, very [polite]; they were respectful." Comparing Andy with other successful learners at school, Mrs. Smith believed that Andy's constant use of Cantonese in school hindered his English development. She explained, "The children who don't speak [Cantonese] learn very quickly; ...the ones who speak Cantonese can spend forever learning it because they always have somebody to speak Cantonese to."

Similarly, Ms. Dawson believed that the main reason for Andy's lack of progress was his "immaturity" in comparison with other students who were more successful. She commented, "Beginning of the year, he was out of his desk constantly, and didn't get anything done. [He] was wandering, was playing with toys. He was really a very young, young child, unable to focus for any period of time." Ms. Dawson surmised that "he's one of those kids that throughout the rest of elementary school the teachers will have to keep an eye on him, and make sure that he is not kind of sliding off the edge there." If his behavioral problems were not corrected, she believed that he could "spend his whole day exploring." Since Andy was off the official ESL list, he was not eligible to receive pullout ESL support as in previous years. Mrs. Smith and Ms. Dawson

believed this was a disadvantage to Andy. Mrs. Smith commented, “He is pretty much on his own, but his mom requested that.”

Different from the teachers who believed that Andy’s academic failure was the result of his behavior and his families’ actions, Mrs. Lou attributed Andy’s low English ability to ineffective instruction. Mrs. Lou told me that it was not Andy’s fault that he did not do well, “It is the class, the environment.” She commented, “A lot of parents don’t speak fluent English. This is why the multicultural kids had difficulty in language, because they didn’t receive proper learning from school. The [teachers] rely on parents instead of rely on [themselves]. This is the big problem. They force the parents go out for tutors, because they cannot help the kids.”

Mrs. Lou believed that the teachers failed to use effective methods to teach skills (e.g., reading and writing) that are important to ESL children like Andy. She commented that the instruction did not have enough reading aloud or choral reading, “[The students] never [read aloud], [there is only] silent reading, you read yourself; and ...every time, [students] get a book in and then [parents] sign it. So [the teachers tell] the parents, you have to listen to your kids to read.” She stressed that it was not a good idea to ask parents like her to read to their children, “If I pronounce it wrong, [he’ll] pick up the wrong thing.” Similarly, Mrs. Lou felt that the teachers did not properly instruct the children how to write: “They ask kids to write, but they didn’t teach how to write... [The teachers] thought from reading the books themselves, I emphasize ‘themselves’, [the students] should know [how to write]!”

Mrs. Lou also questioned the inconsistency between first, second and third grade teachers’, as well as the fourth grade teacher’s approaches to correcting students’ writing. She learned from talking to Andy’s primary grade teachers that they did not correct students’ errors in writing because they didn’t want to “discourage their thinking.” However, she noted that when Andy advanced to fourth grade, the teacher’s expectations of students’ writing were much different, “In grade four, students were expected to be good at spelling and to be able to proofread their own writing.” Mrs. Lou regarded the discrepancy in the different approaches to error correction problematic to children who were not well trained in earlier grades.

Mrs. Lou argued that two other class arrangements were also detrimental to Andy’s learning. One was the group seating arrangement, and the other was the combined class. In terms of group seating, she believed that the small group seating arrangement distracted students from concentrating, especially for students like Andy who needed additional support. Another classroom arrangement issue was the combined grade 4/5 class. Like many other Chinese parents, Mrs. Lou strongly believed that a combined, mixed-grade class was not favorable to the children’s learning, “Because the teachers have only half [of] the time to teach the class, that’s why they need so much so-called assistants...That means the kids going to the school wasting their time.”

4. Understanding Asian children and their underachievement: A conclusion

The case study of Andy Lou's experiences in school and at home presents an example of the how many faceted factors may play a role in Asian children's underachievement. Andy's stories demonstrate that among others, the "model minority" stereotype contributed to Andy's struggle with schooling in at least two ways: 1) it promotes the "blaming the victims" approach among teachers and led their attention away from real barriers that hinder Andy's academic learning; and 2) it heightens parental "education fever" and increases academic as well as emotional burdens on Andy who was already struggling with learning.

As the Andy's stories suggest, Andy did not fit the teachers' assumptions on good Asian students who were often well behaved, obedient, and successful. The teachers attributed Andy's difficulties in learning to Andy himself and his family (i.e., his personality and immaturity, his withdraw from ESL classes and his constant use of Chinese). Such perception may have prevented the teachers from recognizing other school factors that may have contributed to his academic difficulties, such as school-home cultural mismatch, insufficient attention to students' instructional and emotional needs, and politics of schooling (e.g., schools' misconceptions and negligence to immigrant families' pleas for help, insensitivity to parental expectations) (Li, 2003).

Andy's parents held different beliefs on how literacy should be taught. For example, Mrs. Lou believed in more teacher-centered, skill-based methods of instruction that differed from the school's learner-centered and literature-based approach to literacy. She expected the school to teach the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) separately, and to include explicit grammar, reading and writing skills instruction. These expectations are in conflict with the teacher's instructional approaches that focus on language learning through reading authentic texts. However, this school-home mismatch on how literacy should be taught, which is often considered as a risk factor for immigrant students' learning in research (Au, 1998; Li, 2003; Ogbu, 1982), went unnoticed by the school and teachers.

Andy's experiences in school also suggest that there was a lack of attention to his individual academic and emotional needs. In terms of academic needs, there was insufficient attention to his language and literacy needs. First, the curriculum used in school was for mainstream English as first language children and did not fit the needs for ESL children like Andy who came from a different language background (AAPIP, 1997). Furthermore, since the teachers believed that Andy was attention deficit, there was no structural support in school to help him overcome this problem. Second, the instruction did not address his specific needs in developing basic language and literacy skills, such as how to pronounce new words, grammar instruction, and composition skills. Third, the school's "English only" approach did not affirm Andy's cultural identity and validate his ethnic pride (Valdés, 2001). Pedagogically, such an approach might have prevented

the teachers from providing support for students to strategically transfer first language skills to learning the second language (Li, 2004; McCarthy, 1999). Psychologically, it might have had negative impact on immigrant students' attitude toward the target language and culture that often leads to their resistance to learning (Lee, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996; Valdés, 2001).

Unlike the stereotype that Asian parents are docile and submissive, Andy's parents actively challenged schools' practices. For example, they requested for different teaching methods, different seating arrangement, and in order to give Andy more exposure to regular class instruction, they requested to take him off the ESL list. Although the school responded to some of their pleas, it did not address to the parents' expectation for the school to provide more effective measures to support Andy's learning needs (e.g., closer supervision of his work, more culturally relevant and challenging ESL instruction, and more skills instruction). Inattention to these expectations and needs may have adverse impact on Andy's learning experiences.

In addition to these negative influences on school practices, the "model minority" stereotypes also had negative impact on the parents' expectations and hence Andy's learning experiences at home. As Andy's home experiences demonstrate, Andy's parents apparently have brought with them from Hong Kong the wide-spread "education fever"—they had very high expectations and aspirations for Andy's educational achievement and they had strong commitment to and support for Andy's (and his sister's) education. Specifically, their "education fever" was evident in their obsession with getting the best schooling for him, sending him to private tutoring after school, pushing him to exceed other children in math, and establishing a school-like home environment.

Such "education fever" was inevitably reinforced by the existing "model minority" discourse in which Asian children are expected to excel. Like the teachers, Andy's parents also constantly compared him with other successful Asian children who went for tutoring after school and expected him to do well in all areas and become a well-rounded person. Their attitude toward Andy's math performance, for example, was a typical reflection of their attempt to hold up the stereotype that Asian children are superior in math (Walker-Moffat, 1995). Even though Andy was doing well in math, his parents enrolled him in more math tutoring classes. In this sense, the "model minority" stereotype may have enhanced their excessive competition for better grades in areas where Andy was already doing well and hindered their strategic use of time spent on areas that need critical improvement (e.g., Andy's English reading and writing development). Therefore, their "active" parental involvement with unrealistic goals and focus might not have addressed Andy's needs and complemented school practices. Their enhanced "education fever" had no doubt doubled Andy's workload and increased the pressure to achieve; and it might have further widened the distance between school and home for Andy. Such high pressure to achieve might have also lead to some cognitive and affective costs in that it had contributed to Andy's passive and negative attitudes towards learning (Lareau, 2000; Li, 2005).

In conclusion, Andy's stories suggest that the model minority stereotype is a false representation of many underachieving Asian children's social realities. It masks the many

faceted difficulties many Asian children face when trying to achieve success in school. Educators (as well as parents) need to be aware of the threat of the "model minority" myth, and avoid the "blaming the victims" approach toward students' failure. Furthermore, since many Asian students like Andy are not immune from parental "education fever" despite their difficulties in coping with cultural and language barriers, it is necessary to understand that viewing these students from a "model minority" lens will place them in a doubly disadvantaged position. If we blindly measure students against the stereotypes, we run the risk of ignoring their needs and overlooking their strengths at their developmental level.

Andy's stories suggest that each family or child should be understood in their specific learning contexts. Educators need to understand an individual child's lived experiences and address his/her psychological and educational needs so that they can achieve his/her OWN success. Schools and policy makers can help educators to do so by 1) developing appropriate curriculum that is oriented to ESL students, rather than using mainstream curriculum that does not fit the needs of ESL learners. For schools that serve large Asian population, bilingual (e.g., Chinese/English) programs may also be considered. 2) Training teachers to implement classroom strategies (e.g., culturally responsive teaching) that aim to understand students' individual needs and foster students' school-home connections; and 3) Employing bi-cultural paraprofessionals or counselors to facilitate school-home communication and interaction that will help schools and parents listen to each other's concerns and expectations.

ⁱ Pseudonyms are used throughout the case study to assure anonymity of the participants.

ⁱⁱ Since Mrs. Lou was in charge of her children's studies and Mr. Lou was not available for interviews, the case study relies mostly on Mrs. Lou for parental perspectives.

References

- AAPIP. (1997). *An invisible crisis: The educational needs of Asian Pacific American Youth*. New York: Asian American/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy.
- Au, K. H. (1998). Constructivist approaches, phonics, and the literacy learning of students of students of diverse backgrounds. In T. Shanahan and F. V. Rodriguez-Brown (Eds.), *47th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 1-21). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.
- Barrozo, A. (1987). *The status of institutional provisions for Asian ethnic minorities: Lessons from the California experience*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Washington, DC.
- B. C. Ministry of Education. (2001). *British Columbia Foundations Skills Assessment Results Report*. Victoria, BC: BC Ministry of Education.

- Bhattacharyya, S. (2001). *From "yellow peril" to "model minority": The transition of Asian Americans*. Paper presented at the 30th Annual meeting of the Mid-south Educational Research Association. Little Rock, AR.
- CED. (2004). San Diego city schools: Fact sheet. [on-line]. Available: Retrieved April 2, 2004.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2002). *Demographics*. [on-line]. Available: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/>
- Chun, K. (1980). *The myth of Asian American success and its educational ramifications*. New York: ERIC Clearing house on Urban Education. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED 193 411).
- Goto, S. T. (1997). Nerds, normal people, and homeboys: Accommodation and resistance among Chinese American students. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 28(1): 70-84.
- Hsia, J. (1988). *Asian Americans in higher education and work*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hurh, W. M., & Kim, K. C. (1989). The success image of Asian-Americans: Its validity, and its practical and theoretical implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 12(4), 512-538.
- Kim, U., & Chun, M. B. J. (1994). Educational "success" of Asian Americans: An Indigenous Perspective. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 15, 329-343.
- Lagdameo, A., Lee, S., & Nguyen, B. (2002). Voices of Asian American students. *New Directions for Student Services*, 97, 5-10.
- Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education (2nd ed.)*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Lee, S. J. (1996). *Unraveling the "model minority stereotype": Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lei, J. L. (1998). *(Op)posing representations: Disentangling the model minority and the foreigner*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 421 564).
- Li, G. (2002). *"East is east, west is west"? Home literacy, culture, and schooling*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Li, G. (2003). Literacy, culture, and politics of schooling: Counter narratives of a Chinese Canadian family. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 34(2), 184-206.
- Li, G. (2004). Perspectives on struggling English language learners: Case studies of two Chinese-Canadian children. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36(1), 29-70.
- Li, G. (2005). *Culturally contested pedagogy: Battles of literacy and schooling between mainstream teachers and Asian immigrant parents*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Lorenzo, M. K., Pakiz, B., Reinherz, H. Z., & Frost, A. (1995). Emotional and behavioral problems of Asian American adolescents: A comparative study. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 12(3), 197-212.
- McCarthy, S. J. (1999). Identifying teacher practices that connect home and school. *Education and Urban Society*, 32(1), 83-107.
- McKay, S. L., & Wong, S. C. (1996). Multiple discourse, multiple identities: Investment and

- agency in second language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(3), 577-608.
- Min, E. (2003). Demythologizing the "model minority." In E. M. Kramer (Ed.), *The emerging monoculture: Assimilation and the "model minority"* (pp. 191-202). Westport, CT: Prager Publishers.
- Min, P. G. (2004). Social science research on Asian Americans. In J. A. Banks and C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (pp. 332-347). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- NECS (2004). *National center for educational statistics: Dropout rates in the United States 1999*. [On line]. Available: <http://necs.ed.gov/pubs2001/dropout/type0rates.asp>. Retrieved April 2, 2004.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1982). Cultural discontinuities and schooling. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* XIII(4), 290-307.
- Oh-Willeke, S. J. (1996). *Moving beyond the model minority myth: First and second generation Korean women in Buffalo and the culture of succeeding oneself*. Unpublished Masters' thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Peng, S. S., and Wright, D. (1994). Explanation of academic achievement of Asian American students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 87(6), 346-352.
- Peterson, W. (1966, Dec. 26). Success story of one minority group in the U.S. *U.S. News & World Report*, 73-78.
- Rohrlick, J., Alvarado, D., Zaruba, K., & Kallio, R. (1998). *From the model minority to the invisible minority: Asian & Pacific American students in higher education research*. Paper presented at the 38th annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research. Minneapolis, MN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 422 820).
- Siu, S. F. (1998). How do Family and Community Characteristics Affect Children's Educational Achievement? The Chinese-American Experience. *Equity and Choice*, 8(2), 46-49.
- Sue, S., & Kitano, H. H. L. (1973). Stereotypes as a measure of success. *Journal of Social Issues*, 29(2), 83-98.
- Sue, S., & Okazaki, S. (1991). Asian-American educational achievements: A phenomenon in search of an explanation. *American Psychologist*, 45, 913-920.
- Suzuki, B. H. (1977). Education and socialization of Asian Americans: A revisionist analysis of the "model minority" thesis. *American Journal*, 4(2), 23-51.
- Suzuki, B. H. (1989, Nov. Dec.). "Asian American as the "model minority": Outdoing whites? Or media hype? *Change*, 13-19.
- Suzuki, B. H. (2002). Revisiting the model minority stereotype: Implications for student affairs practice and higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 97, 21-32.
- Takaki, R. (1995). The myth of the "model minority." In D. M. Newman (Ed.), *Sociology: Exploring the architecture of everyday life: Readings* (pp. 255-259). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine

- Forge.
- Townsend, J. S., & Fu, D. (1998). A Chinese boy's joyful initiation into American literacy. *Language Arts*, 75(3), 193-201.
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2002). *Population profile of the United States*. [on-line]. Available: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/profile.html>
- Valdés, G. (2001). *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in American schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Walker-Moffat, W. (1995). *The other side of the Asian American success story*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Wan, Y. (1996). *Bearing the image of model minority: An inside look behind the classroom door*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for Multicultural Education, St. Paul, MN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 404 432).
- Yeh, T. L. (2002). Asian American college students who are educationally at risk. *New Directions for Student Services*, 97, 61-71.