Teaching Asianly, Learning Critically: A Contextualized Pedagogy to Teach Asian American Students in US Public Schools

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Abstract

Despite being a small minority, the Asian American population is the fastest growing racial group in the U.S, expected to triple in size by 2020, and grow fivefold by 2050. Despite being labeled as a model minority, Asian American students have struggled with many mental and emotional issues that affect their education and careers seriously. This article deals with finding an effective teaching and learning strategy that may critically benefit Asian American students. The theory and practices of contextualized pedagogy will be addressed along with a three-stage model for teaching Asian American students.

Introduction

While Asians are a highly diverse group, they share similar traditional values and attitudes. This is quite convenient, especially as the number of Asian Americans is projected to increase from 4.3% of the US population to 10.3% by 2050 (Banks, 2009). While often called a model minority, Asians have experienced a lot of discrimination in the United States. This could be partly attributed to the incompatibility of Asian and Caucasian cultural values, which negatively affects Asian American students in U.S. public school settings.

As American society becomes more diverse, public education practices should continue to strive for fundamental fairness, adapting toward each individual student's cultural background and learning style. Teacher knowledge and skills on issues of diversity have become increasingly important in both preparation and practice. A contextualized pedagogy that is built on Asian cultural values will be addressed in this article along with some applicable ideas that may be used by public school teachers.

Asian Americans: who are they?

As the United States becomes more culturally diverse, there is an increased responsibility on the educator to understand the vast array of needs brought by students and individuals in schools. While in 2000 sixty-two percent of public school students were Caucasian, projections indicate that by the year 2020, more than 66% of all school-age children in the United States will be African-American, Asian, Hispanic and/or Native American (Woolfolk, 2004; Marx, 2006). This reversal of "minority status" will bring with it a range of social and educational implications. Educators must prepare to act accordingly for constructive change and development within the classroom, large educational organizations, and the community as these student demographics require new perspectives and present new challenges in pedagogy, curriculum development, teacher preparation and development.

Asian Americans were the fastest growing racial group in the United States from 1980 to 2000 as their population nearly tripled (179%) during that period (Moule, 2012). Studies predict that Asian Americans will go from consisting of 5% of the US total in 2010 to 9% by 2050 (Moule 2012). Asian Americans also have other features in common. Firstly, their immigration began when there was a need for cheap labor, but they were harassed and demeaned, and eventually immigration laws were passed to exclude them. Secondly, they came to the USA seeking the American dream while satisfying important labor needs. Even so, they became victims of anti-Asian movements designed to prevent further Asian immigration into the USA (Banks, 2009, p. 398).

Of course, the term "Asian-American" is somewhat misleading, as it lumps many ethnic groups together by geography. In fact, Asian Americans are one of the most highly diversified ethnic groups in USA, consisting of more than forty-three ethnic groups, including twenty eight Asian ethnicities and fifteen Pacific Islander ones (Moule, 2012). The four major groups of Asian Americans are East Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans); Pacific Islanders; Southeastern Asians, (e.g., Vietnamese, Laotian, Burmese, Thai); and Southern Asians (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Nepali) (Rong & Preissle, 1998). While many differences exist in these four culture's histories and ecological adaptations, many similarities can be found among these groups. Most of these countries are pre-industrial societies with high population density, a long history of feudal societies, and a period of colonization or occupation by Western superpowers. In addition, many of these countries have been influenced by Confucian philosophy and values, such as collectivism, hierarchy, family-centeredness, and harmony (Wang, 2006). Central cultural values that seem present in many Asians and Asian American communities include collectivistic attitudes, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, honoring family through achievement, filial piety and respect for authority (Kim, Atkinson & Yang, 1999).

Understanding Asian American culture is necessary for educators to provide the best educational environment for their Asian American students. Moreover educators need to be aware of the issues Asian American students face in today's schools and classroom.

Characteristics of Asian Culture

All cultures have parameters of behaviors. In order for teachers to successfully cross cultural barriers, they must know and be familiar with its conditions. They must understand that what is acceptable behavior in one culture may not be acceptable in another (Sparapani, Seo & Smith, 2011). Moule (2012, p. 239) identified cultural value preferences among many different cultural groups. The table below summarizes his findings.

Area of relationships	White Americans	Asian Americans	American Indians/ Alaskan Natives	African Americans	Latino Americans
Man to nature/ environment	Mastery over	Harmony with	Harmony with	Harmony with	Harmony with
Time orientation	Future	Past-present	Present	Present	Past-present
Relationship with people	Individual	Collateral	Collateral	Collateral	Collateral

Schwartz (1995) describes the Asian culture as time-being processed with a high-context communication style. Asians perceive time as a process that lets different things happen at the same time while westerners schedule events one at a time. Therefore Asian students' parents may come late for an appointment without apologies or seem to be inattentive when teachers are speaking. In addition, Asian culture is high-context communication styled. It does not require clear, exact verbal expression and relies on interpretation of shared assumptions, non-verbal signals and situations.

Asian culture has been considered to be drastically different than western culture, which is based on individualism. It favors self-definition based on the gratification of the individual's personal needs and desires. Consequently, in this culture, a person's behavior is more likely to be motivated by the quest for personal fulfillment and self-interests rather than group survival. However, in Asian culture, filial piety, the bond between parent and child, is critical (Helms & Cook, 1999). Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1997, p. 10) identify the differences between the western and East Asian cultures in the table below.

Western culture	Asian culture
Supernatural religion	Secular humanism and enlightenment
Belief and faith	Paradigmatic assumptions
Cartesian dualism	The way of complementarity
Value as things	Values as wave-forms
Culture and values (mirror images)	Cultures and values (mirror images)
Pioneer capitalism	Catch-up capitalism
Finite games	Infinite games

Pang (1997) summarizes the cultural values of Asians as: (1) high educational expectations; (2) high affiliation needs; (3) use of guilt and shame; and (4) family obligation. Firstly, Asians have traditionally focused on education and they strongly believe that their academic performance depends entirely on how hard they work (Liu, 2010).

They have difficulty accepting learning disabilities and depression, and believe that psychological distress is an indication of organic disorders and is shameful to both the individual and the family (Scwartz, 1995).

Secondly, Asians have a collectivistic tendency. They are based in extremely homogeneous social contexts. Socialization occurs within the context of an extended family, and family practices promote development in a group or collectivistic consciousness. Respect for authority, obedience to older generations, and obligation to the collective are key factors in Asian societies (Helms & Cooks, 1999)

Thirdly, Asian culture is shame-oriented (Elmer, 2002). Many Asian American students feel that they cannot talk with their parents because their actions would bring shame and dishonor to the family. Success in high school along with entrance to a prestigious university honors the entire family. If not, the entire family is dishonored. In extreme cases students have been known to commit suicide to restore family honor (Pang, 1997). Therefore, Asians have difficulty accepting learning disabilities and depression, and believe that psychological distress is not only an indication of organic disorders but also a source of shame to both the individual and the family (Scwartz, 1995).

Lastly, Asians are family-oriented. Family is the center of all attention. It is the family, not the self, which each person's life centers around. Decision-making in a family is collective. Lee (1996) describes five Asian American family types that differ in levels of cultural conflict;

1) Traditional families are largely untouched by assimilation and acculturation, retain cultural ways, limit their contact with the western world, and tend to live in ethnic enclaves.
2) Cultural conflict families are typified by traditional parents and acculturated, Americanized children who experience intergenerational conflict over appropriate behavior and values, exhibit major role confusion, and lack agreed-upon family structures.
3) Bicultural families tend to include acculturated parents born either in the USA or in Asia who are exposed to Western ways. They are often professional, middle class, bilingual, and bicultural. Family structures tend to blend family styles while maintaining regular contact with traditional family members.
4) Americanized families have taken on the ways of the majority culture; their ties to traditional Asian culture are fading, and they have little interest in their ethnic identity.
5) Interracial families are formed through marriage with a non-Asian partner; family structures often integrate aspects from both cultures.

Understanding Asian Americans' family-oriented culture is critical competency for teachers to educate Asian American students. Lee and Manning (2001) provided recommendations for educators to effectively work with Asian American parents and families. The recommendations are a list of how-to-do ideas that educators may find helpful:

1) Respect both immediate and extended family members
2) Provide opportunities to share differences between U.S. and Asian school systems
3) Understand diversity within Asian ethnic groups
4) Recognize Asian traditions of respect toward teachers
5) Consider Asian parents' English proficiency or lack thereof
6) Understand the importance of non-verbal communication
7) Encourage children to be bicultural and bilingual as Asian parents want their children to keep their ethnic identity and language
8) Eliminate the stereotype that all Asians are automatically smart in academics
9) Prepare education programs for Asian parents (pp. 39-45).

The Myth of model minority

Asian Americans are often called the 'model minority" due to the fact that many of them are well-educated, have a high occupational status, and earn more money than those from other minorities (Banks, 2009). Many believe that Asians are hard workers and that Asian students get good grades, depicting them as star students (Liu, 2010). They have been educationally and economically successful in securing prosperous positions in the workforce. For example, Asian and Caucasian students graduate from high school at the same rate, approximately 90%, but Asian students are more likely than Caucasians to complete two or more years of college and to earn graduate and professional degrees (Moule, 2010). In addition, Asian students outperform whites by an average of 40 points on math SATs (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

However, the model minority argument can divert attention from the racism and poverty that Asian Americans and other people of color in USA still experience. The poverty rate for Asian Americans (12%) is in fact higher than the poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites (9%) (US Census bureau, 2007). Many Asian Americans are wage workers and have difficulties surviving economically (Pang, 1997).

Furthermore, to some extent, the image of the model minority impacts Asian American students' school experiences negatively. It brings a tremendous amount of stress upon them. Lee (1996) stated that both high- and low-achieving Asian American students experienced anxiety to live up to the model minority status. Those who were low performers experienced depression and avoided seeking help to avoid embarrassment. In addition, the model minority image can be difficult to deal with for the students who may not be academically inclined. These students are trying to deal with the powerful process of assimilation, and mixed messages regarding their acceptance into mainstream society can be a heavy burden to carry (Pang, 1997)

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Culture defines a person's thinking patterns, or how they perceive knowledge. The more teachers know about a student's level of identification with a particular culture and the extent to which socialization has taken place within that culture, the more accurately they can predict, explain, and understand the student's behavior in the classroom (Banks, 1997). In order to teach Asian American students effectively, teachers need to understand Asian cultural values and establish a method of teaching based on Asian cultural contexts. Pang (1997, pp. 179-180) summarizes the general Asian American values toward education.

Asian American themes toward education	Educational implications
School is a formal process	Teachers are to be respected and not to be treated casually. Teachers are to be treated formally
Teachers are to be respected and obeyed	Students may not ask or answer questions out of respect for the teachers. They may believe in rules such as "speak only when spoken to." Students may appear to be passive to teachers.
Teachers are important authorities	Students will not question the authority or knowledge of teachers, even if the student believes the teacher has given incorrect information, because that would be disrespectful.
Humility and modesty are important values	Students may be reluctant to volunteer in class and may not offer new ideas to a class discussion in fear of looking like they are 'showing off.'
Cooperation is an important virtue, harmony is valued	Students may help each other on their homework. In addition, students may feel it is important to help each other on class work and may not understand the concept of cheating. Students may also encourage each other by providing answers.
Schooling is a serious process	Students are expected to be on task and work hard at their desk. They may not believe it is acceptable for students to walk around the room.
Teachers have knowledge and should impart it to students	Teachers may be expected to lecture most of the time. Students may not have skills to engage in inquiry, discussion, or Socratic methods because the teacher is expected to explain to students what they should do. Students do not engage in discussions with teachers because that would not be respectful.
Parents trust teachers	Parents may not be active in PTA or other educational groups. They may believe that they do not know as much as the teachers. If the students are successful, then the parents may think that the PTA and parent-teacher conferences may not be necessary.
Parents believe in developing technical skills in students	Teachers believe in a well-rounded person. However, parents and students may see the importance of cognitive development in fields like math, science, and English. Parents may believe other subjects like PE, auto mechanics and chorus should be included only if there is time. In addition, parents may not understand the emphasis teachers place on self-esteem, creativity, and independence.
Students should be obedient	Students will be on task and exhibit behaviors of high achievement. Though they may not understand the lesson, they will not ask teachers for help
Reading for information is important to provide facts and lessons	Students may read for facts but may not have the initial skills to infer, synthesize, and apply information.
Teachers are expected to give students homework	If teachers do not give students work to be done at home, they are not doing a good job.

Based on Asian cultural contexts and values, this section addresses a culturally relevant pedagogy model which consists of three components: (1) a facilitating teacher, (2) a reflective learner; and (3) a contextualized learning process.

A facilitating teacher

The teachers' attitudes and actions can ultimately make a positive difference on the lives of their students. In order to do so, a certain set of qualities and dispositions is needed. First of all, teachers should understand the impact of culture in a discourse of the teaching/learning process. In order to guide Asian American students' through a successful learning process, teachers should take on the role of a cultural worker (Freire, 1998) who mediates learning and teaching through Asian culture. Teachers need to be conscious about Asian cultural divisions in the classroom in order to engage their students in the dialogic process.

To be an effective cultural worker, several characteristics need to be observed. Firstly, understanding Asian culture and values is essential. As noticed in the prior section of this article, teachers should be aware of Asian cultural characteristics, including high expectation toward education; high affiliation needs; use of guilt and shame; and family obligation.

Secondly, the teachers' active and facilitative role is highly regarded. The teacher is a respected and lofty figure in Asian societies who has the authority and primary knowledge resources for the students (Wang, 2006). Teachers are usually responsible for planning, implementing and evaluating the learning that takes place. In Asian culture, the communication is unidirectional, from the teacher to the students, who are required to sit quietly and listen attentively to the teachers' lecture. Therefore, arguing with the teacher is often considered as challenging their credibility and authority (Yuan, 2011). The teacher needs to deliver the content logically and clearly to the student and ask questions to check their understanding.

Thirdly, the teachers' sense of multicultural justice and social action is highly essential. Nieto (2005) identified five qualities that she considers necessary for teachers to explore cultural diversity and social justice issues with an open mind, which include; (1) a sense of mission to serve diverse children to the best of their abilities; (2) empathy and valuing of students' life experiences, culture and human dignity; (3) courage to question mainstream school knowledge, conventional ways of doing things, and assumptions about students; (4) willingness to improvise and be flexible; and (5) a passion for equality and social justice.

Sue and Sue (2003) summarize four Asian values that public school teachers should know to teach Asian American students, including;

1) Asian students and families value a collective focus that emphasizes interdependence, while Western teachers focus on individualism and independent action.
2) Asians tend to be comfortable with hierarchical relationships, in comparison with the Western emphasis on equality in relationships.
3) Asian cultures see restraint of emotional expression as a sign of maturity, while Western culture is more likely to see emotional expressiveness as healthy.
4) Traditional Asian students and families expect teachers to provide solutions, while the Western educational perspective encourages finding one's own solutions through introspection.

Reflective learners

Wang (2006) states that Asian American learning styles focus on reticence, collective learning, deference to instructors, diligence, and high achievements. Firstly, most Asian American students prefer to learn academic skills through handouts, repetitive drills, and practices rather than through discussions or workshops. Thus, in order to teach Asian students, teachers need to provide clear and concise handouts. Asian students usually put an over-emphasis on repetitive learning and concrete examples. They may lack abstract or creative thinking and may be reluctant to ask questions in class in order to save other people's time and to maintain the continuity of instruction. However, Asian students generally like working in groups, relying on capable peers, and following others without critique (Wang, 2006). They understand learning as the acquisition of knowledge or skills from others, a fulfillment of responsibility to society, and a change in understanding of external things and oneself. Teaching is seen as the delivery of content, the development of character, and a type of relationship (Wang, 2006).

Secondly, Asian American students depend largely on the teacher, who is highly respected and directs the instruction process proactively. Because of this, Asian students believe that asking questions or speaking up in class to the teacher may be disrespectful. They believe that class participation is responding to questions, as opposed to actively interacting with peers and asking their own questions. Furthermore, they are hesitant to comment on other students' presentations and prefer direct feedback from the teacher (Nataatmadja, Sixsmith & Dyson, 2007).

Thirdly, Asian students have a high level of expectations toward education. In Confucian tradition, achievement is attributed largely to effort, rather than skills, ability, or individual difference (Wang, 2006). Thus, Asians generally study hard and thus produce a positive societal result, called 'model minorities' by other cultural groups. However, high expectation usually comes from their parents, not themselves, producing low self-esteem and depression because the purpose of learning and studying is to satisfy their parents' desires. The side effect of higher parental expectations and need for approval may be test/achievement anxiety (Pang, 1997). Furthermore, parents' high expectations in education sometimes leads to severe cultural conflict that leads students to contemplate suicide (Pang, 1997).

In a nutshell, Asian students experience two sides of the same coin: on one hand, they are considered the 'model minority', however on the other hand, they are often subjected to fierce competition in their surrounding environments. They are diligent, obedient, and hardworking students achieving a high level of educational and career goals, while experiencing stress to fulfill their parents' expectations. In order to confront this situation, teachers need to shift from a result-oriented education to a process-oriented one, focusing on building healthy and strong personalities. In addition, more cooperative tasks and hands-on work needs to be set up in teaching Asian American students to enhance their creativity and cooperative spirits (Liu, 2010). Pang (1996) summarizes a pedagogical method to teach Asian students which consists of three steps. Firstly, teachers need to explain that students are expected to share. Secondly, teachers should provide students with opportunities to talk in small-group settings rather than questioning students in front of the entire class. Thirdly, teachers can have more verbal students model expected behaviors by having those students present first (pp. 179-181)

Contextualized learning process

According to the research of Bean and Metzner (1985) there are three main strategies that help support Asian American students: (1) peer support in classes as an incentive for their learning; (2) teacher-student intimate relationships; and (3) extra-curricular activities. First of all, Asian American students are relationship-oriented so teachers need to form a collaboration group to support their learning. Many types of collaboration are recommended. However, Asian American students prefer learning in small group settings rather than whole class group activities. Therefore, forming peer-mentoring and small-group tutoring would be an effective strategy.

Secondly, the close relationships between teachers and students are highly recommended. Like Confucius stated, a teacher is not a person who displays knowledge, but rather someone who shows integrity and personality while teaching a content knowledge. Teachers' on-going relationships with students in and out of the classroom would be necessary.

Lastly, Asian collectivistic culture may extend their learning beyond the school setting. In order to make an impact on their learning, extra-curricular activities may be a powerful educational experience. Visiting Asian students' homes, meeting with their parents, along with introducing their culture in class are several possible examples. The schools, in turn, need to develop strategies to help parents take a greater role in the academic life of their children, and to help them learn to be academically self-motivated and persistent. (Liu, 2010)

Conclusion

Education should be contextualized according to students' cultural contexts and situations. In order to teach Asian American students effectively, teachers need to understand the characteristics of Asian culture and values. A contextualized pedagogy model is addressed here along with three components, emphasizing an active teacher, a reflective learner, and a contextualized learning process.

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