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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 7(1)

ISSN

1545-0317

Author

Pang, Valerie Ooka

Publication Date

2009

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Peer reviewed

The Beliefs of Successful Asian American Pacific Islander Teachers: How Culture Is Embedded In Their Teaching

Valerie Ooka Pang

Abstract

Equal educational opportunity is highly dependent on the beliefs and abilities of teachers. However, there is a dearth of research on Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) education and the beliefs of successful AAPI educators. Their contributions have been marginalized in the field of education. This research studied the beliefs of nineteen AAPI educators of a successful low-income (82%), 98 percent minority (75% AAPI and 23% Latino) K-8 school. Student achievement levels are beyond what would be expected with an Academic Performance Index (API) of 860. Any score above 800 is considered exceptional in California. Cultural values are embedded in the belief system of the teachers, and these beliefs result in high teacher personal efficacy and collective efficacy. These then influence teacher behaviors as evidenced by utilized instructional strategies, contributed informal leadership roles, and the long-term stability of the school.

Introduction

Teachers are the most important element in the classroom; their beliefs and abilities determine whether equal educational opportunity is provided in schools. In addition, education is believed to be the crucial avenue for Asian Americans in their quest for economic and social upward mobility, especially when there are few opportunities in other areas such as politics, sports, and leadership (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). However, there is a dearth of research on Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) education (Kiang, 2002) and the beliefs of AAPI educators (Subedi, 2007; Goodwin et al., 1997). Their contributions have been marginalized in the field of education. This research studied the beliefs of nineteen AAPI educators of a successful low-income (82%), 98 percent minority (75%

AAPI and 23% Latino) K–8 school.¹ Student achievement levels are beyond what would be expected with an Academic Performance Index (API) of 860 in 2008. Any score above 800 is considered exceptional in the state of California.

This study is part of a larger school-based research project that aims to describe the culture of achievement that has been created at a particular school in California. Based on a grounded theory methodological approach, the resulting model will explain the role that schools can play in reducing economic and social inequalities and promote equal educational opportunity. For the purpose of this study, interviews and observations of AAPI teachers within their school were utilized in addition to school and district documents.

Central Research Questions

- What are the beliefs and practices of AAPI administrators, teachers, and staff who contribute to the academic success of students?
- How do cultural orientations and values in a school detract from or positively influence the achievement of students?
- Do teachers engage in culturally relevant teaching, and, if so, how effective are those practices?

Literature Review

Most research that has been conducted on AAPI achievement centers regarding issues dealing with parental involvement (Lew, 2007; Kao and Thompson, 2003; Kim, 2002; Chao, 2001; Louie, 2001; Chao, 2000; Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi, 1998; Pang, 1991; Schneider and Lee, 1990; Cabezas, 1981) cultural values (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Agbayani-Siewert, 1994; Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore, 1991), ethnic identity (Lew, 2007; Worrell, 2007; Lee and Zhou, 2004; Lee, 1996), the model minority (Lew, 2007; Pang, Kiang, and Pak, 2004; Yang, 2004; Kitano and DiJiosia, 2002; Louie, 2001; Kao, 1995), and racism in school (Lew, 2007; Kiang, 2002; Lee, 2001; Lee, 1996; Sue and Okazaki, 1990; Rumbaut and Ima, 1988; Kim, 1980; Suzuki, 1977). Though research has been conducted on Asian Americans, few focused specifically on the role that AAPI teachers play in schools or the achievement of students in schools.

Goodwin et al. (1997) utilized an initial sample of twenty-one AAPI educators and then later interviewed a subset of twelve teachers in their qualitative study. They found that when teach-

ers expressed the need for the curricula to include an AAPI presence, their peers were more likely to incorporate information about AAPI communities. The sample also identified the need for teacher credential programs to address the issue of marginality because many Asian American teachers are often treated as “foreigner” and/or not considered members of underrepresented groups like African American and Latino communities. Without addressing these issues, schools and teacher preparation programs were participating in a process that silenced AAPI teachers.

Subedi (2007) had a much more difficult time studying the beliefs and identity constructs of AAPI teachers. Though Subedi approached many teachers, only four were willing to participate in the research project. Several, who decided not to participate, clearly articulated that they felt uncomfortable in sharing their views about racism. Moreover, several other male AAPI teachers were ambivalent about the study because they held temporary teaching positions and did not want to jeopardize their employment.

Nguyen (2008) studied the perspectives and experiences of five preservice Vietnamese American educators. Nguyen found these educators to hold strong ethnic identities as Vietnamese Americans and as “moral agents.” This view of teaching as a moral endeavor reflected the influence of their traditional cultural background from Vietnam. These preservice teachers also felt that many of their own students lacked respect for teachers, and this was in conflict with their own belief systems.

Ramanathan (2006) mailed a survey to 106 AAPI teachers in a midwestern state, 34 of whom responded. One of the important findings was that a majority of the teachers who sent back the survey did not point to a strong sense of ethnic identity, though they indicated they were proud of their cultural background. Ramanathan’s findings indicate that this sample of AAPI teachers seemed to be culturally assimilated into their schools and did not indicate the lack of support from school personnel that was found by Goodwin et al. (1997).

The School

The subjects in this study were teachers who taught at a K–8 school in California. The school was chosen for the study from reviewing achievement data on successful schools as identified by the California Department of Education. The school’s API increased from 760 in 2002 to 860 in 2008. This steady increase in the

API demonstrated the achievement success of the school; it was in the top 10 percent of schools with similar demographics.

The student population was approximately nine hundred in which 82 percent of the children were from low-income families. The school was 75 percent AAPI, 23 percent Latino, and 2 percent other. From 2000 to 2008, the school had had four different principals; this was during the period where the school's academic achievement was rising. This context is important to note as to why teachers were the major focus of the study.

Method

This study utilized the grounded theory methodology through which research seeks to explain multifaceted phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This methodology is based upon the assumption that "preconceived ideas" are to be averted (Dey, 1999). As an inductive and reflective qualitative approach, the researcher initially ignores the work of others so that constructed knowledge emerges from collected data rather than fitting evidence into a pre-determined framework (Dey, 1999). The researcher examined data and identified categories. Next, theoretical sampling was instituted. This refers to a dynamic process in which the researcher identified new data sources; these sources provided comparative data that contributed to the findings (Creswell, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This approach is one in which "the concepts, theories, or models are thus developed from the socially constructed knowledge of participants" (Daengbuppha, Hemmington, and Wilkes, 2006, 369).

Interviews were the primary data sources for this study and were complemented by observations and school documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. In the interviews, teachers were asked to provide information about their teaching philosophy and long- and short-term goals. Following this, they described instructional strategies that work in the classroom, explained needs of students, and discussed how standards are addressed. Finally teachers were asked to identify characteristics of the school that contribute to the academic success of students, explain the role of culture, discuss district support, and describe the role of parents in the achievement process. A line-by-line analysis of the interviews was conducted. In order to understand the context of the school the researcher reviewed school improvement plans, community newspaper articles about

the school, and student products such as history reports and project posters; attended school functions such as a career day and a tea for volunteers; and observed classroom instruction.

Participants

The nineteen teachers in the study were asked to describe their beliefs about the characteristics that contributed to a successful school. All participants were considered teachers in this study and included classroom teachers, a site administrator, an instructional specialist, a librarian, a counselor, and a parent liaison. The participants were comprised of thirteen Chinese Americans, three Japanese Americans, three Vietnamese Americans, and one Hawaiian American; two teachers were interracial individuals. Of this sample, fifteen were women and four were men. The AAPI faculty and staff made up about half of the school personnel. The teachers' experiences at this school ranged from two years to thirty-seven years. In fact, five of the teachers had taught thirty or more years at the school. Two were retired but were working in the school as volunteers. The average number of years of experience of the nineteen teachers was sixteen years.

Each teacher was interviewed from thirty minutes to three hours. The length of the interview depended on the teacher's availability. It was difficult to find time to interview teachers. Though teachers were willing to have the researcher observe at any time, finding the opportunity to interview them was difficult. They wanted to be interviewed during May and June of each year rather than other months, due to the importance of using every period for instruction and preparation for the annual statewide high-stakes tests. Therefore, interviews were held during May and June of 2007 and 2008 after the annual testing periods were completed.

Initially the researcher asked the principal for suggestions as to who were successful teachers in the school. To ensure that the teachers identified would not feel pressured to talk with her because the principal had suggested them, it was important that the researcher asked teachers to volunteer. Therefore, most teachers were approached in the school lounge. Because the school includes grades kindergarten through eighth grade, teachers had staggered lunch periods. This provided a place to meet many of teachers in the school. The researcher initially sat in the teachers' lounge and introduced herself to all of the teachers who ate lunch and took a

recess break in the lounge. Lunch and recess breaks also allowed the researcher the opportunity to receive recommendations from a vast variety of teachers who worked in the school and relaxed in the lounge. In addition, as part of the interview process, teachers made recommendations about successful peers. As a result, nineteen AAPI teachers were interviewed.

Analysis

The study utilized a qualitative analysis research program, HyperRESEARCH. This software program was used to code, categorize, and identify relationships among various categories and groupings. As explained, the codes and categories were created from the data collected through a grounded theory methodology based on an initial stage of open coding and data sorted, followed by a process of axial coding to generate various analytic categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This was followed by selective coding and identification of core categories (Strauss, 1987). The criteria by which a core category is distinguished includes being central to the phenomena, being seen frequently in the data, relates to other categories, can be seen as contributing to the general model, and relates to various conditions, patterns, and or actions (Strauss, 1987).

Results

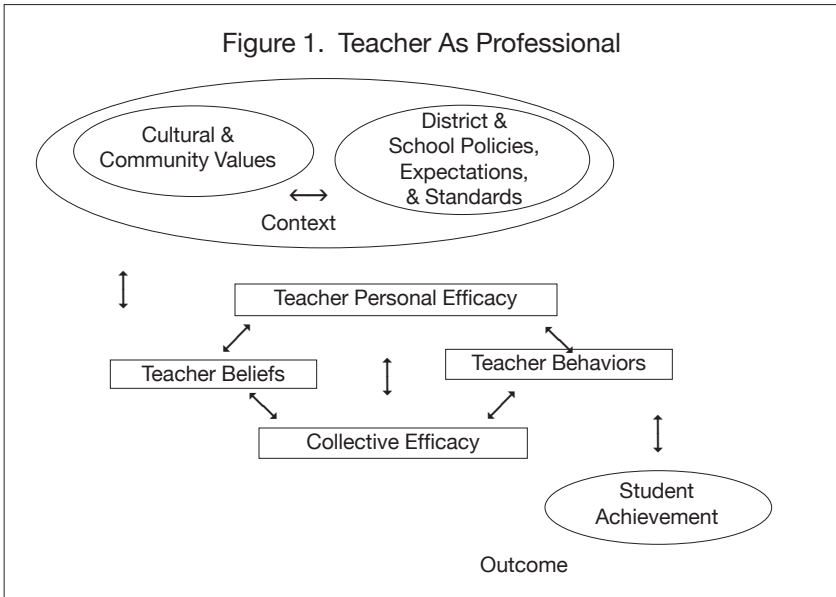
Teacher as Professional

Grounded theory is a methodological approach that can be used to provide a rich description of particular phenomena (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Through this methodology, the researcher tells a story of the phenomena. The grounded theory approach was utilized in this study because no other research could be located that studied the contributions AAPI teachers bring to a high-achieving, low-income school. In addition, grounded theory has been successfully utilized to provide analytic portraits of other successful schools (Pressley et al., 2004; Pressley et al., 2006). The major finding of this study is that the AAPI teachers perceived themselves as professionals, acting in accordance with their visions of that professionalism. The model that arose out of the data to support the major theme of teacher as professional included teacher beliefs, teacher personal efficacy, collective efficacy, and teacher behaviors; the model also accounts for contextual factors such as district policies and practices and community values.

For the participants in this project, teaching is a calling, not a nine-to-five job. They believed in their ability to “make a difference in the lives of their students” and worked hard to do so. They made a moral commitment to students and their families to ensure that children in the school thrived intellectually and socially. The cultural values that the teachers brought to the school influenced their vision of professionalism; they saw themselves as members of the collective and believed in the importance of their common vision of providing excellent education. The teachers focused particularly on student academic achievement from kindergarten through the eighth grade and emphasized all-school themes like mentoring students to think about college. Teacher beliefs were the foundation for the existence of high levels of teacher personal efficacy and collective efficacy. This, in turn, affected their behaviors as teachers and colleagues in the school and neighborhood community. Figure 1 is a model of the teacher as a professional and resulting student achievement. The context of the model takes into consideration the neighborhood in which the school is located. It is a low-income community where many parents work in service jobs such as dishwasher, waiter, factory seamstress, gardener, and casino employee. Numerous parents work more than one job to survive economically.

Figure 1 shows that cultural values from the school community had an impact on the teachers’ beliefs. Teachers were aware of the views parents brought to school about education. Most of the parents believed in education, though the behaviors of families differed. Some parents directed their children to complete their homework as soon as they returned home after school. Other parents were working and not available to insist on homework being completed before children played video games or went outside to be with friends. The model also includes the organizational structure and impact of the district’s central administration. The district was known in the local area to be high achieving. Parents knew that district policies supported and expected high student achievement. The district’s mission statement identified the goal of providing comprehensive educational programs through which students become lifelong learners and productive members of a diverse nation. The district also provided professional development in areas such as reading comprehension, English language development, and differentiated instruction. Teachers were aware of the district’s reputation and standing in the neighborhood.

Teacher beliefs were found to be the underpinnings of success in this school. These beliefs support high achievement and led teach-



ers to believe that they did make a difference in student achievement. Teachers held high levels of personal and teaching efficacy, which was complemented by their collective efficacy. The teachers worked collaboratively and have met in grade-level teams for several decades. This is one of the key elements that teachers instituted; these teams became a major element of the school structure. In addition, as students achieved, the school continued to earn Distinguished California School Awards, which reinforced teacher beliefs and district perceptions of strong school accountability.

The achievement process is complex and includes multiple elements illustrated in Table 1. The next section will describe the elements of the core categories.

Teachers as Professionals:

Teacher Personal Efficacy and Collective Efficacy

Teachers had high expectations of themselves and believed they could reach each student. These beliefs then led to a strong sense of teacher and personal efficacy. Teacher personal efficacy was a vital element in instructional effectiveness. Teacher personal

efficacy is linked to whether teachers believe they produce an effect on student achievement (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The concept of teacher personal efficacy is based on the social learning theory of Bandura (1993) who studied the construct of self-efficacy. Teacher efficacy is a multidimensional construct in which teachers are confident in their personal teaching abilities (Pang and Sablan, 1998; Woolfolk and Hoy, 1990; Ashton and Webb, 1986; Gibson and Dembo, 1984; Berman et al., 1977).

Because the teachers also held a strong sense of community and created strong grade-level teams, collective efficacy was also found to be a key element in the school. Collective efficacy is described as school personnel sharing the belief that they can make a difference in student achievement (Cantrell and Callaway, 2008; Knoblauch and Wolfolk, 2008; Bandura, 1993). Teachers indicated that they were committed and worked hard because they knew they were effective educators. Research has demonstrated that collective efficacy can influence teacher commitment to student achievement, and teachers work as an organizational team (Ware and Kitsantas, 2007; Tschannen-Moran and Barr, 2004). Comments from two teachers identified their dedication to the children they taught. The educators not only worked hard, but they also saw the potential in students.

I think the teachers are very dedicated here and it's like I always told my husband, this was my first home and then the other home was my second. I spent from seven to seven here practically every night. And I think teachers see the needs of students and their desire to learn . . . you want to give them your all. And we all kind of worked together. It was more of a team . . . I think what makes it work here at [name of school] the teachers really care. (Chinese American female, retired)

I'm gonna be a teacher for the rest of my life. This is it. I just had a passion for kids and I just had that, I think, a calling, some people would call that. I don't know what it is. I just had that feeling this is where my life was headed. (AAPI interracial male, worked in retail for 20 years prior to becoming a teacher)

Principals are an important element in supporting the belief of teachers as professionals who make important decisions in their classrooms and are trusted members of the school community. A principal who conveys confidence and trust in teachers also contributes to their sense of efficacy, both personal and collective. One teacher spoke about this relationship of trust:

Table 1: Teacher as Professional

District Policies and Practices	Community Values	Teacher Beliefs	Teacher Efficacy	Collective Efficacy	Teacher Behaviors
Reputation for high student achievement	Education is a priority in the school families	Teaching is a profession not a job	Believes in own competence- (believes can reach each student)	Collective pride	Works hard; believes in individual effort
Provided professional development	Teaching is the responsibility of teachers	Asian cultural values are important & embedded in teacher beliefs; respect for self, respect for children, and honor of family	Can effectively assess academic and social needs of students	Collective mission	Focus on instruction and achievement
District- created standards and benchmarks for teachers to address	Parents believe in teachers	High student expectations	Competent cultural mediator	Strong grade-level teams	Discusses with students importance of high achievement and respectful behavior
Principals support teachers, e.g., homework	Parents attend workshops to understand how to help their child	High teacher expectations ethical commitment; not a job	Confident in integrating state and district standards	Informal leadership roles for the community	Uses English language development methods of instruction
Principals hire wisely	Parents support teachers by volunteering	Ethical commitment to community and children	Utilize homework to support learning	Stability of faculty	Believes in homework; reinforces student discipline, responsibility, and content
	Non-English-speaking parents volunteer	School is home away from home	Believes in ability to teach effectively	Informal mentoring of new teachers	Puts in extra hours

Table 1 (continued)

	Parents send their children to afterschool Chinese school or other ethnic organizations	Believes in hard work	Confident in developing interventional instructional strategies	Socialization of new teachers into the values of the school	Encourages parent participation and parent-teacher partnerships
		Believes in student effort more than ability is key to achievement	Confident in teaching character development	Work collaboratively to monitor and address needs of individual students and class performance	Collective Strategies such as all teachers give homework and focus on college readiness, middle school teachers use Cornell notes.
		Believes in student self-discipline and individual responsibility			Follows district and state standards explicitly
		Believes in innovative instruction			Creates caring relationships with students and families
		Relates to experiences of immigrant students			Place emphasis on writing from K-8
		Believes English learners need strong command of English to survive in society			Uses project-based hands-on learning
		Likes this school and community			Creates afterschool intervention programs

I don't know, I've had a lot of principals and I think I've been very fortunate with my principals. I think there are things, there are requirements that we have to meet, but so far I've been allowed to do it my way. And I think having them feel like, having them think, you know what you're doing, giving me the freedom to do it my way. I think that really helps a lot.
(Japanese American female)

Collective Efficacy

All of the teachers interviewed thought of themselves as part of the school team. They collaborated well and modeled high expectations to their students by working hard themselves, individually and as members of grade-level teams. Another important finding is that educators stay at the school for many years. Of the nineteen educators, ten have been members of the school faculty from ten to thirty-seven years. The others have been at the school ever since earning their credentials. Therefore, these teachers not only developed collective efficacy as a faculty, but also, as part of that efficacy, the teachers provided important stability for the school; they developed relationships with children and families over the years. The families trusted the teachers to be effective with their children. Even though there have been four different principals during the past eight years, students have consistently demonstrated high levels of achievement. Because the teachers at this school typically stayed for many years, they built strong collective efficacy and a long-term sense of professional pride. In addition, the teachers reported assisting new staff to become socialized into the school culture. One teacher shared her views about this aspect of the team environment:

I was speaking to our newest first grade teacher last week and she was telling me how grateful she was for . . . her team because coming in after school had started. . . . She was saying that she doesn't have a lot of resources and, you know, doesn't have a lot of materials, ideas to teach first grade so all the first grade teachers share their ideas with her and some of them will . . . no, most of them will even say, Here, we're gonna do this. This is a sample of what I make. Here, take this. Use this or, you know, they help her, you know, whatever material they have to prepare for the kids to complete an activity, teachers will help her. I see them working together all the time and, you know, they're helping her cut paper and bind books or whatever . . . and the teacher did

tell me that she's very, very grateful. She told me that she doesn't know how she would have made it through this year without the help of her team. (Chinese American female)

Teachers also feel responsible to the collective. They take pride in their work as professionals and want to ensure that they have prepared students for the next grade level.

Every teacher does their job so the next grade level they carry on. Kind of the old school, you know, the kids come up here, the teachers have prepared them, and they're ready for their first grade, by kindergarten, no matter what the standards. We prepare those students so when they go to the 1st grade, they are ready. So each grade level is responsible for the student and makes sure they get up there. I think maybe that's the system. (Chinese American female)

Teacher as Professional:

Willing To Take On Informal Leadership Positions

Because the teachers in this school saw themselves as professionals with a strong sense of collective efficacy, many were willing to take on informal leadership positions; they organized and implemented instructional activities that extended learning after school. Much of the success of the school was due to the informal leadership that teachers took on throughout the school and at various grade levels. Because many of the teachers interviewed have taught in the school for fifteen years or more, their familiarity with the school allowed them to identify student needs; they were willing to take on additional duties. In the middle school team, a teacher agreed to provide out-of-school mentoring in math to students and be the coordinator for the math club, which competed against other local schools. The faculty at this school wanted to place additional focus on math because it is an area in which the United States is trying to increase student achievement. Another teacher took on the role of school yearbook advisor. She proudly shared the yearbook, pointing out student photographs and school activities. The teachers were often not paid for these extra duties they take on.

I think the principal had asked who would volunteer and as far as pay, I don't think it was a big issue for us. (Chinese American female)

Several of the teachers directed the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. Though most AVID programs are for high school students, the middle school team teachers in the seventh and eighth grades decided to provide additional interventions for students with high potential but who may not have had the opportunity to think about college or future careers. One of the teachers took on this added responsibility and taught a section of AVID:

It's a college readiness program, but we select kids who are generally what we consider in the middle range so they're . . . you know, they're not your top, top students and they're not your low, struggling students. They might be struggling, but yet they have the potential to do better. . . . Their writing and math and reading need attention and . . . and to me, more importantly is the motivational activities. We do a lot of things that involve them to reflect about themselves and their beliefs and they get a chance to do things that they probably wouldn't do in the other classes. (Chinese American male)

Teacher Beliefs: High Student Expectations

The teacher participants had common beliefs about schooling and teaching, the most pervasive of which was holding high student expectations. They expected students to be self-disciplined and responsible. Teacher focus on homework, for example, represented not only the importance of developing specific skills and learning particular subject-area content, but also consistent completion of homework exemplified the value of self-discipline and responsibility. Homework was given to kindergarten through eighth graders throughout the school. Though the amount of homework varied depending on the teacher, homework was a collective expectation. The main reason for students being sent to the office was not due to disrespectful behavior in class, but because they had not finished their homework. All nineteen teacher informants identified high expectations of students as a major element in the academic success of the school:

I mean, I just know that individually, as an individual teacher my goal is to have, you know, the high expectations and wanting all the kids to do well and you know, maybe we're just lucky that coming on board here ten years ago, the social studies teacher had the same attitude. The math teacher had the same attitude. The English teacher had the same attitude

and it's just kind of grown from there. . . . And so every time we get a new teacher, I don't know if they feel the need to be in that same mold cause we . . . I mean . . . let's see, one, two, three, four. I mean four of the teachers used to be lower grade teachers. (Chinese American male)

They [students] have high expectations of us as well. 'Cause I probably had half the students here, this is my 13th year, so you know, they've [teachers] either had older brothers or sisters or cousins. . . . We have a reputation of being tough. (Vietnamese American male)

The teachers had strong teaching personal efficacy; they knew they could make a difference in students' achievement. But they also expressed hopes that their efforts were working toward their students' holistic development.

Teachers Believe Students Need to Develop Strong Character

AAPI teachers at this school are dedicated to preparing the whole child, not simply producing high test scores. As part of their high expectations, teachers are working to empower their students to develop as exceptional citizens for a global society. This is extremely important because of the cultural and linguistic diversity within the school and community. The cultural backgrounds of children in this school represent families from China, Taiwan, Mexico, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia. There are also students from African American and white American communities.

It's not just about instruction. It's, you know, teaching them [students] responsibility and our school is based in character building . . . one of them [values] is responsibility. And it's all . . . we prepare them for what's coming up, for high school. (AAPI interracial male)

My dream is to have kids bring up in a better society where everyone respects each other and kids are more tolerant of each other and especially at this school. (AAPI interracial male)

As part of character development, teachers wanted to ensure that students deal with cultural conflict. Like most schools, there were student conflicts that arose out of cultural misconceptions. Several teachers identified a limited number of conflicts between Asian American and Latino students. When this occurred, teachers addressed the issue immediately. They also created activities

that guided students to work with each other to lessen intergroup discord. One teacher recounted a particularly successful activity day. She and other teachers noticed that the children only played with students from their own ethnic communities, partly because of language issues. The educators organized an activity day with games and competitions, and mixed the children up, completely disregarding language abilities and race.

And they had such a great time. They forgot that they were Cambodian. They forgot that they were Hispanic. They forgot that they were, you know, Chinese-American, whatever. And at the end we had a picnic together and they ended up eating with the group they were in and it was so beautiful. (Chinese American female)

Teachers were aware of cultural values and differences. Most of the AAPI teachers interviewed were immigrants. This provided deep understandings of the experiences and needs of many of the immigrant children in the school, which enabled them to communicate with and motivate their students more effectively.

Teachers Understand the Cultures of Many of the Students

Because many of the teachers were immigrants, they were sensitive to the experiences of immigrant students who spoke English as a second language. The teachers were also aware that children may bring different cultural behaviors and expectations from home to school.

When we came here from Vietnam, my family was very much like the students that I teach. You know my parents didn't speak much English, and but education was always emphasized. So that's the background that I'm from. . . . Well they, a lot of the students I have speak Cantonese as well. And I identify with them because when I came I spoke English as a second language, and I struggled in my first few years in the American schools. My grades were below grade level. And so when I see my students struggling as beginning language learners, I can understand that, because I had a similar experience. (Chinese American female)

My parents were immigrants here from China, from Canton, China, and I didn't speak a word of English when I went to school. And I always remembered when the students stood up, I stood up and I didn't know exactly why I stood up and

this was like in first, second grade. And I always remember that I got in trouble because I stood up with the others . . . my friends and I didn't know what the teacher was totally saying and we were sent to the principal's office and I wasn't supposed to be there.

And from that moment on I felt, you know what? I should have a voice and I better work harder to understand. And for that I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted my own personal life . . . education had an impact on me so that I wanted to give back. (Chinese American female)

Though teachers had similar experiences as their children, they also learned about cultural misconceptions that they held. One of the teachers explained how he had a child who kept pushing other children out of the way. The teacher had a difficult time explaining to the young man why he should stop pushing his classmates:

He [the student] was in the habit of pushing and shoving because that's what he's used to doing to survive in China. His father, parents told me they'd be walking on sidewalks and have to push to get through. . . . So that was the same way he reacted here. Recess time he was pushing to get out the door, and just didn't realize it was wrong. He was accustomed to it. (AAPI interracial male)

Another conflict arose due to student expectations regarding proper behavior. This student did not understand the gender role differences often present in the United States:

I have a student. He's not used to girls being in the same classroom with him, but I understand his mother saying back in school in China, girls and boys were segregated for certain subjects. And so because my tables are arranged by boy-girl-boy-girl, he was always between two girls, and he would not behave. He treated them [girls] as if they were boys. He'd pinch them and punch them and . . . those kind of things. . . . I didn't realize until these situations actually come up. . . . I spoke with his parents, and they tell me the situation of where he or she came from. . . . I see what the conflict is." (AAPI interracial male)

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching is an approach to instruction that responds to the sociocultural context of students and seeks to

integrate cultural content into the curriculum (Pang, 2005). Caring teachers see culture as an asset to be built on in the learning process. Two of the teachers explained how they included student experiences in learning how to use an algebraic expression with an unknown element and in teaching about ancient civilizations.

A lot of students play the video games and . . . they're trying to stretch for those clues and I tried to relate to their personal lives. . . . And we [the class] got to the point where we actually were in the textbook and we were doing word problems . . . which is the most difficult for a lot of them. They [students] actually wrote their own algebraic word problems. They came up with their own solutions. Yeah I'm trying to make it relevant to their lives. (AAPI interracial male)

This one group [of students] did a poster on Confucius, Confucianism . . . so they got ideas from their parents who knew about it . . . when we were in the ancient China unit we told Chinese folk tales and read them [students] folk tales, they read, wrote responses. . . . Monkey King was one of them. . . . There's one about a butterfly . . . this year actors came in who did the Monkey King and a Vietnamese folk tale. . . . They did three plays, one Vietnamese folk tale, one Monkey King Story, and then there's a Japanese folk tale and then they kind of tied the three together at the end. . . . And last year we had a group come in and they did the Odyssey with us, hip-hop style and the kids really got into it. It was wonderful . . . and it was so good and they got the kids involved and just so happened that we did the Iliad and Odyssey the week before. (Chinese American male teacher)

Other teachers take a more traditional approach to the inclusion of cultural role models and cultural knowledge in their teaching. They explained that stories about culturally diverse individuals were included in their math and language arts textbooks.

One of the weaknesses this study found, however, was that many teachers did not consciously integrate culturally relevant content into their instruction. If the school was sponsoring a Lunar New Year assembly, for example, the teachers would participate, but they did not consider how to integrate AAPI role models or historical content into their instruction regularly unless specifically cued by district and state standards.

Teachers Adhere to the District & State Curriculum Standards

Teachers were careful to follow state and district standards

for all lessons. A Chinese American male emphatically stated in an interview, “We focus on the standards.” However, sometimes parents do not understand what standards are, so the school provided parent workshops. Many parents came from Asian countries where they learned by rote memorization. Parents may not understand the instructional strategies used in classrooms because much of the curriculum in the United States focuses on higher-order thinking skills and understandings.

Parents didn’t understand our system of math and using the manipulatives. When they came from the other country it was all memorization, memorization, but then after two or three months they don’t remember the . . . they memorize so they didn’t understand the system so we had workshops in the evening and we let the parents be the students for us and they would see, oh, this is the way we’re doing it in America. And this way they had a better understanding of how to help their children. And we always had it open, so if parents had questions they could come to us. (Chinese American female teacher involved in training parents)

Teachers worked to develop strong, trusting relationships with parents. This served as an additional element in their overall dedication to pedagogical caring.

Pedagogical Caring

The teachers in this school engaged in caring-centered education (Pang, 2005). Caring-centered teachers create trusting relationships with students and believe that pedagogical caring forms the foundation for effective learning. These teachers were aware of student-lived experiences, saw inequities in society, and did not use inequities such as social class differences as excuses for not reaching each student. Within this construct, teachers created an affirming environment for students. A teacher described how she believed that to care is a core element of teaching:

Teachers work hard. I think that’s the way maybe, everybody cares about the students. (Chinese American female)

Within the caring construct, teachers also knew how necessary it was to listen to children. One teacher emphasized that communicating with students in open and affirming ways required patience and sincere interest:

Yes. I try to get to know students, I ask questions like what do you like? . . . And then I ask them questions, 'cause I don't kick anybody out, unless they, you know, disrupt the library. . . . And sometimes I'll ask students, what'd you learn about? Or how was school? How, what'd you learn? Nothing. You wasted the whole day here, learning nothing? One thing . . . you tell me one thing that you learned. And they think and then they, they tell me this whole big thing. At first they've learned nothing. And then I try to push it out of them, and then say oh well the anatomy of a pig, I'm like oh, okay. That's not nothing? Kids need someone to listen to them . . . first they seem all, like they don't want to talk. But you know, everyone really does. It's kind of . . . find a door. (AAPI interracial female)

Teachers Believe In Hands-On, Project-Based Learning

Throughout all of the classrooms, teachers involved their students in hands-on, project-based learning. Students were involved in projects that dealt with the history and description of the mathematical notation Pi (π) or a discussion of gender roles in ancient civilizations. One teacher shared a story of her class learning about wool and how wool can be used in many ways in a home:

The wool is kind of the ELD [English Language Development] unit. The book for second grade is *New Coat for Anna*. It talks about this girl who wanted a wool coat, that she needed wool and she went to the farmer and then from there every step of the way . . . to a coat . . . one year I even had them dye yarn. We boiled some pomegranate juice, yeah, but it was very pale. But I like to do these things. I think it's fun. And then we pulled cotton and we twisted and turned it . . . so they [students] actually spun it and they [students] know what spinning is. . . . And I bring wool. . . . So they [children] got to feel it and touch it and see pictures of it. And when I got to the fair I pick up scraps of wool. . . . I save a lot of these things so they can see what you know, wool from a sheep is like. . . . Students weaved a little blanket. There up on the poster. They love weaving. (Chinese American female)

This teacher also taught a baking unit in which her children baked bread and rolls and worked with cinnamon, rosemary, yeast, and other ingredients. Later in the year, on a field trip, students recognized the smell of rosemary right away, demonstrating direct application of their learning.

Conclusion

Teachers enjoyed being at this school and felt validated there; the school was successful, and they believed that their efforts and expertise made a difference in the lives of their students. As a Japanese American elementary grade teacher remarked, "I guess it's like my home . . . I feel comfortable. I have people to work with . . . they are easy to work with." These sentiments reflected not only the teachers' social familiarity with each other but also a sense of shared cultural values that are embedded in what the nineteen teacher participants believed, knew, and did in their daily professional practice.

Cultural values are powerful and complex influences in the lives of Asian Americans as they relate to education and achievement (Ngo and Lee, 2007; Pearce, 2006; Pang, Kiang, and Pak, 2004; Chao, 2001; Leung, 1998; Pang and Cheng, 1998; Chen and Stevenson, 1995; Sue and Okazaki, 1990). For the teachers in this sample whose cultural backgrounds were predominantly Chinese American, Vietnamese American, and Japanese American, it is important to consider how similar East Asian cultural contexts may help to explain the sense of collective educational values that these teachers shared, while recognizing at the same time that such values may not characterize individual AAPI teachers.

Social philosophy of Confucianism, for example, has historical significance in China, Japan, and Vietnam (and other East Asian settings such as South Korea and Singapore) and is known for encouraging individuals to become educated and develop a strong ethical character (Li et al., 2008). In addition, Confucian values encourage hard work, high educational achievement, family honor, and stable, harmonious, albeit hierarchical, relationships (Paik, 2004; 2001). In exploring the relationship between Confucian cultural values and Asian American educational achievement, Chen and Stevenson (1995) found, for example, that Asian American high school students believed that effort and hard work were more important contributors to their academic success than their abilities. Confucianism is patriarchal and places much importance on the family and filial piety, such that children are taught to respect and defer to parents, elders, and other authority figures, including teachers (Ching et al., 1995). Although such a collective orientation in which emphasis is placed on the family or group rather than the individual has many implications for student-teacher relation-

ships, the highly ordered, patriarchal nature of Confucian-based social hierarchies also can lead to the devaluing of women's roles and the lowering of expectations for girls' educational achievement, as Okazaki (1998) has critiqued.

In addition to considering Confucian cultural influences, a complementary cultural philosophical orientation is Buddhism, which emphasizes harmony and interdependence, self-improvement, righteous behavior, and consideration for the consequences of one's actions. Buddhist teachings focus upon compassion toward others and the importance of living life with strong ethics and humility. As part of the belief system, self-discipline is seen as vital in developing a meaningful life. Buddhism stresses the collective and teaches the importance of individuals working together toward positive goals (Rich, 2007).

Research conducted by Kim et al. (2001) found that Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans demonstrated similar understandings of values consistent with Confucianism and Buddhism. Six values, in particular, were identified: collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and humility. The researchers also found variations between groups regarding how these values were emphasized. For example, Japanese Americans in their sample scored significantly higher than the other three groups on family recognition through achievement. The researchers hypothesized this might be due to the lack of recent immigration in the Japanese American community, which may have resulted in preserving a more traditional value system.

Similarly, in this school-based study with nineteen AAPI teachers, Confucian and Buddhist value orientations seemed to be embedded in teacher beliefs and reflected in their behaviors and instructional expectations. For example, they made moral commitments to dedicate their lives to the education of the students in their classrooms and school. All of the teachers interviewed often stayed long after school was over; some could be found working in their classrooms at 6 PM on Friday evenings. The teachers typically assumed a wide range of informal leadership positions, often without additional compensation, that led to improvements or enhancements for the school overall.

The stability of the staff, not only in terms of shared teacher beliefs and values but also in terms of longevity, is another vital

element in the success of the school. Teachers chose to stay at the school, and in this way provided exceptional consistency, even though principals have changed. They also took on the responsibility of socializing new teachers into the school's already well-developed culture of achievement that, based on the findings of this study, was characterized by high expectations of students, high expectations of themselves, the importance of homework, the development of trusting relationships with parents, working on writing in every classroom, and offering instruction that is always focused on district and state curriculum standards.

Using a grounded theory approach, this study is not intended to be generalizable. Rigorous efforts to describe models of social phenomena are extremely complex undertakings because they involve many distinctive elements, including actors, contexts, organizational structures, and value orientations, and because these elements and related social phenomena are continually changing and evolving (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that AAPI teachers played important roles in the academic success of this urban, high-poverty K-8 school. These AAPI teachers held specific cultural beliefs and values that were deeply integrated into their professional practice and aligned well with the strong traditional values of the AAPI community (Zhou and Kim, 2006) where the school is located.

Through their integration of beliefs and actions, the teachers defined their own culturally relevant construct of teachers as professionals. They were instructional leaders, created an atmosphere of caring, reinforced cultural values, and were willing to take on informal leadership positions to benefit the school as a whole. They had high student expectations for all children and for themselves. They mentored students to consider college in the future, were accountable for student learning, were able to develop effective instructional interventions, and provided stability for the students and families because of their numerous years of service at the school. In these ways, there was consistent evidence that the teachers' cultural beliefs and their daily professional practice contributed in significant ways to a model of teacher personal efficacy and collective efficacy that resulted in consistently high educational performance of the school overall.

The purpose of this study was to document the role that AAPI teachers played in schools and to identify if and how culture

shaped student success. The AAPI teachers in this study clearly held strong beliefs about education, and they demonstrated convincingly how cultural values, ethical commitments, and professional identities were interrelated in the complex, day-to-day process of enabling academic success and educational equity in urban, multicultural, high-poverty school environments.

Acknowledgments

The researcher would like to thank the following for their support of this study: the school personnel who were extremely generous in sharing their knowledge, The Freeman Foundation, San Diego State University Presidential Leadership Fund, National Center for Urban School Transformation, Lionel "Skip" Meno, Margie Kitano, Ric Hovda, Joseph Johnson, Lucius Horiuchi, Donald Gregg, Tracy Lai, Gerald Pang, and Margaret Fairfield.

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Notes

1. One of the teachers in the study self-identified as Hawaiian and the school population included less than one percent of Pacific Islander students. To be inclusive in this article, the AAPI designation was utilized throughout. The discussion of cultural values focused on Asian cultural values since the Pacific Islander educator also identified as Chinese American and all other teachers identified themselves as members of Asian American communities.

VALERIE OOKA PANG is a professor in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. Her second edition of *Multicultural Education: A Caring-centered, Reflective Approach* presents theories, issues, and curriculum that are aimed at delivering educational equity through the use of culture. She was senior editor of *Struggling To Be Heard: The Unmet Needs of Asian Pacific American Children*, which was awarded honorable mention by the Gustavus Meyers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights at Boston University. She has published in a variety of journals including *Harvard Educational Review*, *The Kappan*, *The Journal of Teacher Education*, *Action in Teacher Education*, *Social Education*, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, and *Multicultural Education*.