Asian American Resistance to Selecting Teaching as a Career: The Power of Community and Tradition

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In the face of noticeably low interest in K–12 teaching among young Asian American students, interviews first were conducted with undergraduate Asian American students in teacher education programs and then those same students conducted interviews themselves with a variety of Asian Americans in several California communities. Findings suggest the pivotal influence of the traditional Chinese role of teachers in undermining the confidence and interest needed for the choice of a K–12 teaching career by Asian Americans. The main sources of resistance to teaching as a career were identified as: intense pressure from parents to strive for positions perceived as having higher status, greater financial rewards, and stability; a sense of personal inadequacy due to standards set by Chinese culture for what it means to be a teacher; and fear of working outside a comfort zone defined by language, diversity, respect, responsibility for other people’s children, and separation of private from public selves. The majority of informants saw race-matched teaching as not valuable or necessary. Differences in American and Chinese traditions of K–12 education are discussed.

Few Asian Americans choose teaching in K–12 public schools as a career (Rong & Preissle, 1997; Goodwin, 1991; Su et al., 1997). With national concern about the need for broader minority participation in the teaching profession relative to the diversity of K–12 students, greater insight is needed as to the reasons why Asian Americans appear to be resisting careers in teaching (Chin & Wong, 1992). After a brief review of research that speaks to Asian American participation in education leading to careers in teaching, I describe an inquiry that began with Asian American students preparing for teaching and led to those same students carrying the research to their home communities. I present the results as a set of themes identified from prior research with Asian American teachers and articulated in the interviews carried out with students and community members. I discuss the results through a comparison of Chinese traditional views and mainstream American views of the school teacher.

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Increased attention to minority recruitment into higher education and, in particular, into colleges of education over the last twenty-five years has not focused on Asian Americans. This inattention to the needs and potential contribution of Asian Americans and the accompanying lack of identification of many Asian Americans with the status of “minority” or “person of color” have left them in a nebulous, some may say vulnerable, position (Lei, 1998). Locked out of most programs that serve minority youth, Asian American students have been left to their own communities for guidance, resources, and inspiration (Gordon, 1997a; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1995).

While Asian American children accounted for only 3.7 percent of all K–12 students in 1995, the numbers are far higher in many West Coast and East Coast urban communities (Wirt et al., 1998) where school districts are challenged to understand the importance of the varied cultures, languages, religions, and social history collected into an imperfect census category of Asian/Pacific Islander. The influx of Asian immigrants, triggered by the Immigration Act of 1964, has led many urban schools to reconsider stereotypes of the so-called model minority (Hartman & Askounia, 1989; Trueba et al., 1993). The addition of more than one million Southeast Asian refugees and Chinese immigrants since 1975 (Rong & Preissle, 1997) further complicates this mosaic, kindling a new interest in discerning not only why there are so few Asian American teachers to assist these children, but also why there is so little advocacy on the part of Asian American parents to have Asian American teachers teach their children. Although it may be possible to understand the dearth of teachers representing the wave of recent immigrants from South Asia and Southeast Asia, it is far more difficult to understand the absence of teachers representing the cultures of East and North Asia, including the many immigrant generations from Korea, Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These latter countries have long had sophisticated urban cultures of their own as well as extensive contact with European and American cultures while retaining their allegiance to Confucian traditions that confer prestige to teachers as the transmitters of culture and knowledge (Siu, 1992; Halkett, 1991). I am not arguing that more Asian American teachers are needed because there are more Asian American students in our classrooms; rather, that successful Asian American students are one significant source of capable teachers for meeting the needs of diverse classrooms. In order to increase Asian American participation, we must first come to understand the sources of resistance among such students to careers in public school teaching.

Asian Americans’ low involvement in U.S. teacher preparation programs flies in the face of their overall respect for education and academic success. Currently, Asian American teachers constitute from 1 to 1.2 percent of all K–12 teachers and an average of only eight Asian American students each
enrolled in preservice teacher education programs across the country (Goodwin et al., 1997; AACTE, 1994). Education was the least favored field of study for the bachelor's degree by Asian/Pacific Islander students from 1975 to 1996 while the percentage of college students of Asian/Pacific Islander identity steadily rose from 1.8 percent to 5.6 percent during that same period (Wirt et al., 1998). Although low participation in the teaching profession for other minority groups can be partly attributed to low college attendance and graduation rates (Vegas et al., 1998), this is not the case for Asian Americans (Goodwin et al., 1997). In 1992, Asian/Pacific Islander high school graduates had the highest rate of qualification (72.7 percent) for four-year colleges (Wirt et al., 1998) and in 1996 had the highest rate of college graduation for any ethnic group, including Whites (Wilds & Wilson, 1998). Asian Americans' graduation rates from college increased 22 percent between 1989 and 1991 (AACTE, 1994) and they accounted for 8.4 percent of all initial post-baccalaureate degrees and 5 percent of all higher education faculty in 1996 (Wilds & Wilson, 1998). The record of academic success for Asian Americans, in the aggregate, shows that the reasons for their lack of participation in teaching careers must be found elsewhere.

Conventional reasons offered for Asian Americans' low participation in public school teaching usually repeat the same mainstream views that are offered for overall lack of participation by minority students in general, claiming that low wages and multiple career choices are the principal obstacles within a context of continuing racial discrimination throughout the culture and in the teaching profession specifically (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1983). Goodwin and associates (1997) demonstrated that some Asian Americans perceive teaching as a nonintellectual endeavor, while Rong and Preissle (1997) introduced the idea that Asian Americans have a penchant for occupations such as computer science or biotechnology that are supposedly more appealing because of their higher income and prestige. The importance of the “prestige hypothesis” found support from the work of Leung and associates (1994) that showed a preference among Asian American students for careers with a combination of technical expertise and avoidance of racial or cultural discrimination. Rong and Preissle went on to discuss other factors as significant in deterring Asian Americans from teaching as a career, including strong parental influence and disrespectful treatment of Asian teachers in American schools. The pivotal role of parental influence on career decision making was further highlighted by Su and associates (1997) and Yao (1988). Kim (1993) claimed that when Asian children do not meet their parents' career expectations, the resultant frustration and guilt can produce psychological damage. Leong's (1991) earlier work also identified a dependent decision-making style in Asian American students and placed the finding in a context of traditional Asian emphasis on collective and well-structured decision making.
A crucial consideration in understanding the shortage of Asian American teachers is the role of so-called “ethnic enclaves” among Asian immigrants (Gibson, 1988, 1998). While assimilation is the normal experience and expectation of all immigrants to the United States, many communities exist with distinctive cultural qualities that maintain forms of the “home culture” and its beliefs and practices. Ogbu (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) has long pointed out the connection between school success and immigrant beliefs such as that schooling is crucial to life chances and that American schooling is relatively open and fair to its immigrant students. Within these beliefs, immigrant parents do not see their children’s cultural identity at risk if they do well in school. Gibson and Portes refer to such a process as selective (Portes & Zhou, 1993) or additive (Gibson, 1991) acculturation that promotes school achievement while maintaining strong ties to ethnic culture. The resulting reliance on hard work and persistent effort is crucial to the academic achievement attained by most Asian American young people. However, for Asian American students who successfully negotiate such a bicultural identity in K–12 schooling, I suggest that their further pursuit of professional careers often brings conflict between the guidance of cultural traditions and the expectations of individual autonomy in American professional life. That conflict is intensified by the choice of teaching as a profession because public school teaching demands an especially high degree of assimilation into mainstream culture with the risk of losing ties to an immigrant or other ethnic community of origin.

In this paper, I explore how Asian values about education and the teaching profession are both persistent and adaptive once Asian immigrants to America move through schooling toward professional careers. Particularly, I consider why there are so few Asian Americans entering the teaching force in America when, in their home countries, education is perceived as one of the main pathways, if not the only pathway, for success and access to social acceptance and upward mobility. I attempt to describe and to understand the paradox that although Asian Americans have demonstrated their success within America’s educational system, they have the lowest participation in the teaching force of our public schools.

METHODOLOGY

The question for the research was how traditional Asian views on the role of teachers and schools, when situated within the realities of public schooling in the United States, affect the choice of teaching as a career by otherwise academically successful Asian American students. The research process centered on the conflicts experienced by Asian American college students in considering public school teaching as a career. My previous (Gordon, 1994) research interviewing teachers of color on the reasons
students of color are not entering the field of teaching included Asian American as well as Latino, African American, and Native American teachers in Seattle, Cincinnati, and Long Beach. Of the four major ethnic groups represented by the 160 teachers interviewed, only twenty of the informants were Asian American, a result of their scarcity in the teaching force of the three urban districts. They included veteran teachers from four different ethnic backgrounds: Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The reasons given by these twenty Asian American teachers for the low participation of students of color in the teaching profession included the perceived lack of respect for teachers in American classrooms, parental pressure to acquire high status professions, fear of “losing face” or being laughed at either because of accent or making mistakes, and a concern about the ability to teach other people’s children (Gordon, 1997b). This earlier research forms the basis for the current study along with my own study of Japanese and Chinese cultures and languages as well as the experience of teaching and living in Asia on and off over the last 25 years. I brought to this study a crucial understanding of the issues of respect, values, and academic performance within an Asian context as well as an awareness that Asian American attitudes toward teaching in the United States contrast sharply with traditional practices and values “back home,” where the prestige of educators is taken for granted (Smith, 1994).

After initial interviews and reflective writing with the author, a team of undergraduate teacher education students assisted as researchers who interviewed other mostly first-generation Asian Americans in an effort to understand the cultural and personal sources of resistance to teaching as a career among Asian Americans. Their informants included students, professionals, parents, and other community members from a variety of Asian American identities who lived and worked in the San Francisco Bay Area. The experience of dialogue through interviewing allowed the student researchers to explore issues of identity and educational achievement within their own social, cultural, and ethnic communities while developing a broader context for their own decision to become teachers.

Phase 1: Student Informants: How We Got Started

In a dramatic display of resistance, nine of the thirteen Asian American students in my undergraduate education course, “Minorities and the Schooling Process,” decided not to follow through on a class assignment, a critique of Lisa Delpit’s writing about African American children’s learning styles. Instead, they gave an impressive presentation on the variation in English dialects within Asian communities, focusing mostly on the use of Pidgin English in the Philippines. Seeing this act of polite defiance as healthy but perplexing, I inquired as to why these students had waited until
the seventh week of the quarter before expressing their concerns. They had never before spoken openly in this class of a hundred students in which there were thirteen Asian Americans but only five African Americans, each of whom had made their presence felt. The other students included about thirty Latinos with the remainder being of mixed or White ancestry. After their presentation, I met with the nine students as a group and then individually. Although these meetings began informally, a pattern clearly emerged from each conversation, one that reinforced my previous research on Asian American attitudes toward perceived career options. All nine students wanted to become teachers but were unsure of how they could do so without risking the cultural, communal, and familial support needed for their success. In all cases the students believed that they were not in control of their occupational decisions, that there were larger forces at play coming from the community, their families, and their peers. They were committed to the retention of their culture and had volunteered in community organizations. They expressed concern that “Asian culture” in all of its complexity was not given equitable treatment in K–12 schools. When asked how they proposed to change this, they hesitated and acknowledged that they were unsure if they would go into teaching.

Wanting to create a space for them to reflect more carefully on these issues, I invited them to write about the circumstances that had brought them to the point where they were taking undergraduate education courses that were intended to prepare teachers for urban schools. Given that this curricular decision could potentially be in conflict with parental expectations, they were asked to identify key issues relating to their ethnicity and personal identity as relevant to academic performance and career choice. The goal was to provide the students the opportunity to situate themselves, reveal bias, gain perspective, and revisit their own concerns around career choice options. The assignment also served as a way to verify the comments that I first heard in the initial interviews with the students. Ideal images of teachers that emerged from the student essays included patient, loves kids, committed, great person, serves student needs, knows everything, and knows how to get students to understand. The research group that evolved from these discussions used this writing later in the process to reflect on subsequent interviews conducted by the students when they went into the field as researchers in their home and school communities. The students who were involved in the first phase of research included three mainland Chinese, one Chinese born in Vietnam, one Vietnamese, one Japanese, two Filipinos, and one Korean; three males and six females. Three were immigrants themselves; four were first-generation Americans; two were second-generation. All were undergraduates who had taken a series of education courses focusing on linguistic and cultural diversity related to working with large urban school populations. Based on the inter-
views with the nine students and comments from their writings, I created a list of most frequently stated reasons for not going into teaching and compared them with my previous findings with Asian American teachers. I then verified the list with the students as an accurate statement of their overall concerns and used it later in the community interviews to assist the student researchers in coding the information provided by informants.

The student writings and my interviews with them revealed the primary importance of Chinese cultural traditions in influencing young Asian Americans, regardless of nationality. In addition to the four of nine students in Phase 1 who were of Chinese descent, those of Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent also attributed their educational orientation to Chinese culture. As a result, we decided to closely trace the role of Chinese culture in the second phase of interviews.

Phase 2: Students As Interviewers

In the second phase of the research, the nine students interviewed forty-nine Asian Americans of widely varying occupations, perspectives, ages, ethnic identities, and language orientations. Thirty-two of these informants were of Chinese descent, including twenty-one females and eleven males, among whom thirty were first-generation immigrants and two were third-generation Americans. The first-generation immigrants included twelve from Hong Kong, three from Vietnam, five from Taiwan, and twelve from mainland China. The non-Chinese informants included eight Filipinos, two Japanese, one Korean, two Mien, one Vietnamese, one mixed Filipino/African American, and two mixed Asians. The Mien and Vietnamese were first-generation refugees; seven of the Filipinos were first-generation immigrants; and the other non-Chinese were second, third or fourth generation Americans. Each student interviewer selected informants from her or his community and/or family networks.

Students as interviewers offered several advantages for the second phase of the project. First, as Asian American young people interested in teaching as a career, they were enthusiastic to find out how their communities viewed teaching and why others similar to them were not becoming teachers. Second, they had easy access to the population under study. (Several of the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, Mandarin, or other Asian languages and required translation.) Third, student involvement in research was conducive to their academic and professional development. By interviewing other Asian Americans about the choice of teaching as a career, the student researchers provided and provoked thoughtful discussion on critical educational issues, gained insights into aspects of their culture previously left unquestioned, increased their commitment to the teaching
profession, and required their informants to question common assumptions about the profession.

Research Procedures

The interviews were conducted in San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, and Santa Cruz. Student researchers were trained in such qualitative data collection techniques as selection of and access to informants, questions and probes, tape recording, transcription, and confidentiality. In consultation with the students, I developed a protocol for semistructured interviews based on their interviews with me, their written personal reflections, and prior research findings. The interviews were based on the following questions but the students were coached on the importance of flexibility and variation in phrasing questions depending on context and the purposes of the study. As a group, we delineated appropriate probes for the different ethnic and cultural communities under study.

Interview Questions

Male/Female? Age? Schooling?
What generation of immigrant? Where from? When?
Current vocation? Why?
What languages spoken? Parents speak what language(s)?
Socioeconomic standing? Parent occupation?
Why would you go (or not go) into teaching?
What has been your experience with kids?
Are you aware that there are few Asian Americans in the field of teaching?
What are your conceptions/images of teaching?
How are these images different from home country?
Is it important for Asian Americans to have Asian American teachers?
Why do you think that Asian Americans are not selecting teaching as a career?

Data sources included my original interviews of student researchers, written personal reflections of student researchers, transcripts of interviews of informants, and student-researcher written reflections on interviews. Each student was responsible for interviewing at least five individuals, translating
when necessary from the native language, and then transcribing and coding the data. The researchers turned in the interviews every two weeks prior to our meeting in order for the author to read and code the transcripts. At the beginning of each interview transcript the student researcher provided a brief sketch of the informant and context of the interview. At the end of the transcribed interview, the researcher wrote a further reflection on the interview in terms of his or her perception of its authenticity or how it resonated with what the student researcher had found thus far.

Analysis

During the first few months of the research, the group reviewed the content and process of the data collection, discussing the following issues: What's emerging, new, and constant? How might the probes be reevaluated to access more information? How might the interview questions be expanded and tightened up? Who else needs to be included and why? Based on the main themes that emerged from these conversations with the researchers, their written reflections, and pilot interviews, I developed an analytical scheme that reflected the salient issues emerging from the process. The scheme allowed for tracking of variation and consistency across time, population, and region. Frequency of accounts and reasons given for not entering the field of teaching were noted to compare what we found as interesting (and therefore discussed among ourselves) with the popularity of responses among the informants.

As a group we read and matched our coding across all interviews threading back to check for possible cultural misinterpretations and noting paradoxes. We constantly reminded ourselves of the complexity of Asian American identity, noting each informant’s current age as well as time of arrival in the United States, conditions of leaving and arriving, parental status in home country in contrast to current occupation, and obvious factors such as country of origin, languages used, and gender. We met every other week for six months to discuss the process and the content of the interviews as we simultaneously developed and considered interpretations of the findings. Team members understood the problems of operating within the context of the socially constructed rubric of Asian American. We all knew the historical context of antipathy between and among various Asian and, especially, among “Chinese” groups: Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, and other “overseas” Chinese. All of us spoke one or more of the native languages and could compare linguistic variation when discussing in-group/out-group pressures. This commonality of understanding greatly increased our effectiveness in coding and enabled us to look candidly at the complexity and sensitivity of the research results.
RESULTS

While many of the research findings unearthed in this project validated my previous research on Asian Americans’ resistance to entering the teaching profession, the interviews conducted by the student team extended and deepened our understanding. Every attempt has been made to give examples within contexts that qualify any tendency to generalize. Still, cumulative themes echoed in similar, but unique, ways, requiring us to listen to the possibility of connections and, in turn, new ways of seeing. The findings are fascinating, complex, and paradoxical. The protocol we used required that questions be pursued in a variety of ways at different points in time, circling and weaving through the conversations. Had we not done this, the superficial reasons that often bounce from the pages of a survey would have left us ignorant of the deeper and more profound sources of reticence toward K–12 teaching. For example, on the surface, money appeared to be the most significant reason for not pursuing teaching. Usually this was the first response from the informants, yet when we asked them if they would entertain the idea of teaching as a career if the pay were doubled, we were told that money was not the issue.

Our final analysis of all interviews identified four major themes. While we all were aware of the presence of the perceptions and penchants revealed in the themes, none of us were prepared for the intensity of conviction or power that these themes had over the career decisions, and therefore the lives, of the informants. Each of the Asian American student researchers claimed that the findings validated her or his own personal experience. The first three themes came in response to the interview question: “Why do you think that Asian Americans are not selecting teaching as a career?” The three major themes were created by merging sets of the ten reasons given below that we agreed had a common core value:

Most Frequently Cited Reasons Given for “Why Aren’t Asians Going Into Teaching?”

1. Money.
2. Lack of encouragement; parents more interested in kids having high paying, high status jobs.
3. Fear of losing face because of language facility/accent; fear of not being understood.
4. Hesitancy to work with diversity; unable to understand kids’ socialization, unable to control them, and limited exposure with Latinos and Blacks.
5. High expectations for teachers; young Asian people do not see themselves as good enough to be teachers; fear of failure.

6. Too much responsibility; can’t be responsible for other people’s children and prefer one-on-one jobs such as counselor, social worker.

7. Chinese culture; not brought up to talk about self, not inclined to share.

8. Little respect for teachers from students; inability to discipline through corporal punishment, no natural assumption that gives respect for elders.

9. Hesitancy of talking in front of people; fear of loss of face and/or making mistakes, fear of being laughed at.

10. Racism/discrimination; “Kids don’t respect Asian teachers as much as White teachers.”

ORGANIZING THEMES

Theme 1: Intense pressure from parents to strive for positions perceived as having higher status, greater financial rewards, and stability

The first major theme combined lack of encouragement (2) and money (1).

Theme 2: Sense of personal inadequacy because of standards set by Chinese culture for what it means to be a teacher

The second theme combined high expectations for teachers (5), standards set by Chinese culture (7), and lack of respect for teachers (8).

Theme 3: Fear of working outside a comfort zone defined by language, diversity, taking responsibility for other people’s children, and separation of private from public selves

The third theme combined too much responsibility for other people’s children (6), hesitancy to work with diversity (4), fear of losing face because of accent (3), hesitancy to talk in front of people (9), and discrimination (10).

A fourth major theme resulted from answers to the question, “Is it important for an Asian American child to have Asian or Asian American teachers?”
Theme 4: Race-matched teaching was viewed as neither valuable nor necessary

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Theme 1. Intensity of Parental Pressure. “What people want comes from their parents.”

In Asian families, respect for elders, parents, and family can have a constraining effect if it influences career decision making toward the elevation of family status at the expense of individual job satisfaction. Although it might be argued that parents, in general, influence young people, these interviews revealed an almost absolute acceptance of the career expectations, spoken and unspoken, of parents, family, and community. Parental attitudes toward the teaching profession were the number one factor in students not choosing teaching. Parental influence was particularly definitive for first-generation Asian American students. As much of the research on immigrants demonstrates (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Takaki, 1989; Ogbu, 1990), the longer the time spent in this country, the less stringent were ties to traditional cultural values. Even though some of the informants deviated from parental expectations, all knew the cultural norms. Informants who deviated were perceived as anomalies who either rejected familial expectations and selected a lower status professional track such as teaching, social work, counseling, or theatre or had parents who had not prescribed an occupational route. In sharing the findings of one conversation with a woman who was determined to work in theatre, a student researcher fulminated, “She must have come from a very liberal family to be able to think this way.”

High status was intricately entwined with high income. The informants moved easily between the two concepts as if they were synonymous, noting repeatedly that both are very important within Asian culture. As one lamented, “I know that it is a stereotype, but you are pushed in the direction of professions of high status and money, like medicine, law, biz. Teachers don’t have the title of Doctor.” More than half of the informants directly mentioned parental pressure to enter jobs that enhanced the image of the family. Comments such as the following peppered the conversations: “Asians focus on money; it’s a cultural thing”; “Asians want prestige for their kids.” Many of the parents of informants equated teachers’ income with poverty. Comments such as “Money is important; if you don’t have money, you will go hungry” followed as a reason for not allowing their children to even consider teaching as a career. Even when some of us (researchers) countered this preconception with the reality that most teachers live a middle-class lifestyle and earn about the same as or more than university faculty
members, there was no room for negotiation, “The more you get paid, the better you are treated. University teachers probably get treated like gods.”

Similarly, with regards to stability, teaching was not seen as a secure profession even though teachers with tenure are provided with greater security of employment than almost any other profession. Stability was directly connected to money. Parents wanted their children to have financial security. This perception was particularly acute for first-generation immigrants who are looking for stability in their lives and do not want to have to struggle as they may have back home. The perception of impoverished, itinerate K–12 teachers speaks to a cultural naiveté nonetheless effective in guiding career choices. To choose a career in the United States such as teaching that does not bring prestige to the family is to go against familial expectations and aspirations. Within traditional cultures that value above all else family harmony and continuity, going against the grain can have consequences beyond one’s own good intentions. The student researchers were aware of the risk that both they, as future teachers, and their fellow students were taking if they did not defer to parental wishes. Yet some comments led us to believe that change over time in the United States was inevitable. As one young informant commented, “The money issue is an Asian mentality. Maybe after a few generations, that will change.”

**Theme 2. Personal Inadequacy**

*High standards set by Chinese traditions of schooling, “You have to think of yourself as a great person to be a teacher.”* Although many informants began their interviews discussing external factors that work against any inclination to enter the teaching profession, these reasons gained less currency as a personal sense of inadequacy emerged as the second dominant force in curtailing the pursuit of teaching as career. External factors such as low pay, low status, and negative image paled against the fear of incompetence in attempting to educate someone else’s child. Repeatedly, we were told that the source of this concern lay with the exceedingly high standards held by Chinese traditions for those who take the title and role of teacher. This was not simply hesitancy on the part of youth who have not had adequate experience educating others; rather, informants claimed that the title of teacher had to be reserved for those who neared perfection. “If there are ten qualities that a teacher needs and Chinese people do not meet all ten of those qualities, they will consider themselves not being qualified to be a teacher” or “Young Asian people do not see themselves as good enough to be a teacher” were comments sprinkled throughout the interviews. To tell others that you were interested in becoming a teacher verged on hubris, not only because of the assumption that you were qualified beyond reproach but that you had the audacity to assume
that you could teach other people’s children to a standard that would be acceptable to Asian parents. As one young man said, “Being a teacher means you have to be qualified. If I were to tell my parents that I wanted to be a teacher, they would laugh at me and say “ne mo gee gok” [Cantonese for “you do not have the qualifications”]. But in the American sense . . . you don’t have to be totally qualified because you learn as you teach. But in the Chinese way, you have to be perfect to teach.”

There is a strong assumption in most teacher education programs and among teachers themselves that learning how to teach can only truly occur “on the job,” whether this begins in preservice programs or not, and that classroom experience is the best way to negotiate the career of public education. The expectation from the Chinese tradition that the knowledge necessary for high performance in the classroom should be acquired prior to exposure to the practical involvement with diverse school populations leaves most Asian Americans discouraged before they try. As one young informant said, “I expect a lot from myself; I’m a perfectionist. I don’t have the knowledge.”

The characteristics of a good teacher that emerged from these interviews indicated that the informants and their families have high regard for teachers even as they repudiate teaching as a career. Frequently, informants said they did not have the patience that teachers require, or the love of children, the intelligence, the understanding, the ability to make knowledge accessible, or the passion. One young woman said she could not go into teaching because teachers “are important role models; they aren’t suppose to lie; they have to believe that children can learn from the heart not because of duty; they have to make sure that students will learn.” Given these criteria, she said she could never match up. Another added to the list, “Teachers need to be creative; they need patience, need to understand where the kids are at, be able to teach them something so that the student will understand, and they have to know what they are teaching. I don’t think I have all that to be a teacher.”

Another factor that compounds the hesitancy to declare an interest in teaching as a career, and therefore risking support from family and community, is the fear of failure. A young woman revealed this concern in saying, “I am afraid to tell people that I want to be a teacher in case I fail.” Combining the fear of losing face if one fails with the potential hubris in assuming a claim to the title of teacher, it is not surprising that so few Asian Americans take the risky step into the field of teaching.

Respect. “Parents really respect teachers because kids are educated by teachers; parents need teachers to educate their kids.” Closely allied with the Chinese concept of teacher is the assumption of respect from students and the
community. In traditional Chinese culture, the teacher is a model of perfection who is given prestige based on knowledge and status within the Confucian social hierarchy. Prestige provides income through a range of perks within a closely knit community where status is dependent on the quality of education a child receives and, hence, on the teacher who is responsible for that education (Su et al., 1997). Respect in the Chinese model is associated with structure, order, discipline, and reverence, all of which are dubious expectations for Asian Americans considering a career in teaching in America. The likelihood of entering a situation where respect is conferred on the basis of performance rather than position frightened many of the informants. They argued that respect for elders, and thus for teachers, is an inherent Asian characteristic: “Respect for elders has nothing to do with fear or authoritarianism; it is just natural for Asians to be respectful.”

Theme 3. Fear of Working Outside a Comfort Zone

Overwhelming task. “I don’t want to ruin a student’s life.” As seen in the previous section, most of the informants saw teaching as a career with overwhelming responsibility, a task for which few could qualify. Ironically, the high regard for teaching and the standards set by Chinese culture for teachers weighed against most of the informants moving into the profession. Acknowledging the powerful role that teachers play in a child’s life, and indeed that teachers had had for most of them, they realized that “I will have a big effect if I do anything wrong.” No one mentioned that the effect could possibly be positive. Comments such as “I don’t want to be responsible for the education of other people’s children” reflected this preoccupation. The few informants considering a helping profession as a future career claimed they could possibly entertain the prospects of becoming a counselor or social worker, but not a teacher. The reasoning held that one-to-one contact was more manageable and less intimidating than group work. The prospect of a lone teacher standing before a group of unruly students who did not share similar orientations to learning and protocol overwhelmed the informants. The expectation that they would have to deal with the personal problems of students and their families was more than most could abide: “I am not prepared to deal with crises in schools related to fighting, mediations, or rape.”

Hesitancy toward diversity. “If I have to work with different students, I won’t know their thoughts.” Many informants candidly perceived themselves as unable to relate to people from backgrounds different from their own,
claiming that they would not be able to understand the students’ backgrounds, and the students wouldn’t be able to understand the teachers’ meaning. “In China everyone is Chinese so it is easier to communicate.” When pressed on how they thought teachers currently teach children who are from a range of backgrounds, some hedged and commented, “Well, maybe I could teach immigrants.” The reasoning for this was the greater degree of shared values and experience, and the assumption that immigrants were from older, traditional cultures where education is seen as a privilege rather than a right, where elders and teachers are respected, and where discipline and structure are expected.

The hesitancy expressed by the informants toward having to work with diverse populations fell into three categories. First, they would be unable to understand their students’ backgrounds and therefore be unable to teach them in ways compatible with their cultures. Second, they would not know how to control students who were operating from different norms. Last, because of limited exposure to Latinos and Blacks, many first-generation Asian Americans said they felt they would enter the classroom with a high degree of fear and prejudice. “We live in very tight-knit communities; we are very sheltered.” For a few of the informants the hesitation was toward working with White students rather than with students of color. As one informant commented, “Diversity is not a problem for me; I feel less comfortable with White kids than with minority.” The individual did not elaborate on her feelings so we were unsure as to whether this sense was due to perception of discrimination or assumptions around dominance. Another quote offered a slightly different, but related, view on this sense of discomfort: “It would be intimidating for a minority to teach majority White students.”

Control and discipline. “There are too many restrictions on punishment here. You can’t touch kids.” Safety emerged as a related theme in working with diverse populations. The perception held throughout most of the interviews that “students in [the] U.S. cause trouble; you can’t control them; you won’t get respect.” Students were described as unruly, undisciplined, and gang oriented. Student aggressiveness fed the informants’ “fear of offending people or saying the wrong thing.” This fear extended to students’ parents with whom most of the informants felt they would have difficulty relating unless they could draw on an underlying moral authority similar to that which exists within most Asian American communities. They believed that if teachers knew the culture and customs of the children, teachers could control most of their behavior by making them accountable to the larger ethos of the community. For those who could not be controlled through shaming or praise, corporal punishment was often seen as an alternative. The legal constraints placed on corporal punishment in the United States left many
of the informants baffled. “In the Philippines you could really punish kids; you knew their culture and customs. Parents give you permission to punish kids. In the U.S. they [the parents] would be waiting for you on the corner.”

Language. “Language is a major issue for Asians.” Lack of English proficiency and the presence of accent played major roles in discouraging the informants from considering teaching as a career. Many perceived themselves unable to deal with diversity based on their limited English skills. The preoccupation with language as an obstacle to teaching took several forms. They feared making a mistake in modeling pronunciation for their students; they feared being misunderstood; they saw their lack of fluency as an inhibition to fluid communication; they felt angered at an inability to speak their thoughts clearly; and last they cringed at the thought of possible ridicule. As one informant said, “There is no respect in the United States, especially for minorities with a language problem.” This is the reason, according to the informants, that many Asian Americans opt for careers in science and technology such as computer science or engineering that require math skills rather than language skills.

Separation of private and public selves. “We don’t talk about ourselves; we don’t share with others.” An extension of language is voice. The vast majority of informants believed they had not yet found a voice to present their ideas or themselves to a strange audience. Often we heard not only that Asians do not like to talk in front of other people but also that they are not accustomed to talking about themselves. The notion of sharing outside of one’s own kinship group appeared related to the multiple demands placed on teachers that require strong interpersonal communication skills. Again this was not just an individual disinclination toward interaction but rather a cultural assumption that is passed down and reinforced by the Asian community. As one informant said, “Parents do not want kids to get involved with other people. Chinese do not get into other people’s lives.” Although some may question this response as feeding a stereotype, many of the informants claimed that indeed they, as a group, reflected many of the images that exist, perhaps not as individuals but as a cultural entity. As one informant said, “Few Asians challenge the stereotype of being quiet with an accent.”

Many informants commented on being shy, as a people, and not wanting to be placed in a position where they might be embarrassed or lose face. One quote clearly reflects this concern: “We are afraid of being laughed at. Kids can be very mean.” To counter kids’ vindictiveness, teachers were perceived as needing to take on an intrusive role. One young informant said it this way, “Teachers have to be mean, yell at kids.” The required
transformation of American teachers into aggressive combatants struggling to force students to listen and learn was seen as essential for this context but as unacceptable to the Chinese model for a teacher. When the researcher suggested that teachers could also be nice, the informant responded forcefully, “No, no they [teachers] can’t be; then they [students] will pick on you; I see this everyday.”

Theme 4: View of Race-Matched Teaching as Neither Valuable nor Necessary
Paradoxically, although our informants said that they would not be as good at teaching a child from a different background as would a teacher from the child’s culture, they largely dismissed any benefit that an Asian American child might gain from being taught by an Asian American teacher. Most of the informants failed to see race-matched teaching as valuable or necessary and thus not a motive for their joining the teaching force. In response to “Would you have liked more Asian teachers and would this have made a difference?” the overwhelming majority said that Asian teachers would be useful only for immigrants who needed assistance in language translation. Once students grasped English, the important factor was quality of pedagogy not ethnic background. Even this concession, however, assumed a great deal, in particular that the Asian teacher speaks the same language as, and understands the culture of, the Asian child. For the majority of Chinese informants, a Mandarin-speaking teacher was not seen as useful to a Cantonese-speaking child even though both were ethnic Chinese. One young man interrogated the whole assumption around race-matched teaching: “What could a Cambodian refugee possibly have in common with a third-generation Japanese? That they are both ‘Asian’?”

A few of the informants were visibly upset by the thought of race-based teaching and feared that Asian teachers would reach out to Asian students in a different way, thereby stigmatizing, isolating, or favoring those students. The focus was on not wanting special assistance or consideration. One could argue that this supports the traditional Japanese wisdom, Deru kui wo utareru, “A tall tree catches much wind,” but it could be based on the desire simply to be accepted as “normal.” One young informant expressed it this way: “I never had an Asian teacher. I had good teachers who treated me like everyone else. They didn’t discriminate.” A couple of the informants related negative experiences with Asian teachers; one concluded that she would not have wanted more, “They were too Chinesee [sic]; they expected too much.”

The support for bilingual transitional assistance was mixed. Some said that their experience in bilingual classes or ESL classes benefited them; others were angered that the classes, “did not use English enough and therefore delayed [their] access [to the dominant language].” Several anec-
dotes highlighted the problems of misplacement in bilingual classes. Filipino students were put in Spanish-speaking classes because their surnames were derived from Spanish heritage even though they had never spoken a word of Spanish and perceived themselves to be Asian. Students from Hong Kong whose first language was English and second language Cantonese were placed alongside Mandarin-speaking students from mainland China and could not understand a word the teacher was saying. Overall, the consensus seemed to be that although we do not need to match kids and teachers from the same culture or ethnicity, we do need teachers who are culturally sensitive and aware of the needs of their individual students.

Most of the student researchers as well as their informants were unaware and/or unconcerned that there was a shortage of Asian American public school teachers. This was due to several factors. Most of the researchers grew up in ethnic enclaves where the presence of Asians of common ancestry was strong. In their youth, some attended Saturday Asian identity schools. At the time of the study, some worked in ethnically based bilingual or community educational programs that employed Asian instructors. Two of the student researchers worked at schools in San Francisco that catered to large Asian populations. One of these was a Chinese Christian school, the other a Chinese bilingual program for Mandarin and Cantonese speakers within a public school setting. And last, they did not subscribe to the assumption that it was better or necessary to have an Asian teacher in public schools to succeed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In general, the interviews provided portraiture of perceptions, reasonings, and musings on why Asian Americans might not be entering the field of teaching. In many instances it appeared that Chinese-based cultural norms work against the requirements for teaching in the United States. Asian Americans are trained through community and cultural mores not to be outspoken, not to intervene in other peoples’ lives, and not to assume they have the qualities necessary to teach others. Rather, they are raised in a community that is hierarchical and deferential where respect for elders along with a code of moral discipline is an ideal if not a reality.

That Asian Americans are not going into teaching because of a preoccupation with professions that receive higher pay may appear insignificant or unsurprising. However, the degree to which informants and the student researchers believed that this preoccupation with status overshadowed their individual preferences in career choice was notable. Although several researchers have noted the role of Confucian ideology in setting high standards for educational success (Yang, 1991; Sue & Sue, 1991), none have mentioned how the internalization of these traditional values has resulted in percep-
tions of personal inadequacy whereby few Asian Americans feel they have the right to claim the title of “teacher.” Furthermore, there is little mention of the numerous factors that lead Asian Americans to shun classroom teaching, such as hesitancy to work with children from non-Asian backgrounds, fear of losing face, and resistance to taking responsibility for the education of other people’s children. Language and accent as barriers to teaching often are cloaked in terms of discrimination against Asian Americans rather than a perception on the part of Asian Americans of their inability to provide clear and understandable instruction. Perhaps the difference in findings is because of the composition of the sample of informants. Many of the samples in other studies are composed of graduate students or teachers. The informants in this research range in age from five to seventy-five. Although the nine student researchers were all potential teachers, only three of the fifty-two people they interviewed were currently educators.

A focus on the relationship between respect for teachers and the perception of one’s ability to seek a career in teaching suggests a comparison between American and Chinese views of the teaching vocation. At the risk of taking an overly general viewpoint, one might characterize the role of American public schooling as a social service mission that enlists the largely female teaching force in the task of bringing the unwashed offspring of immigrants and workers into an acceptably middle-class consensus of values and literacy (Clifford, 1989). The Chinese tradition, in contrast, brings schooling to the local community with preexisting hierarchies largely maintained by male teachers whose status rests on the maintenance of strict intellectual standards by which the elite justify their authority (Domino & Hannah, 1987). In this tradition, the Chinese schoolmaster is first of all an expert, a scholar who deigns to tolerate the local children while screening the few capable entrants for further schooling. American teachers, mostly female, meanwhile rest their status on support of basic schooling for all the children of the community (Strober & Tyack, 1980). The stern task of screening is assigned to testing experts; the demands of scholarship are reserved for the more likely male practitioners at the secondary level (Rury, 1989).

The task of social discipline is still of primary importance in the American classroom. The Chinese teacher has prestige based on continuing hierarchies that preserve the local culture and its traditional community; the American counterpart finds her mission in the difficult task of social discipline of the newcomers with her scholarly skills consigned to the background (Herbst, 1989). Facing such a situation, the young Asian American who would be a teacher experiences the confusion of moving successfully toward the role of expert while alienated from the role of teacher by the discrepancies between her varied cultures, both in how schooling is valued and in the degree of respect given to teachers. As students in the United
States, Asian Americans gain from the educational mission of American schools to both welcome diversity and reward achievement. As potential teachers, they fear that the combination of disrespect for teachers and the daunting variety of students renders their academic expertise inadequate for the role of teacher as understood in Chinese tradition. Paine (1990) has provided a compelling account of contemporary Chinese teachers and their reliance on both subject-matter knowledge and a virtuosity of performance as well.

Limitations

The interviews of the present study are layered with unquestioned assumptions about Asian cultures and traditions, assumptions widely shared within Asian American communities but which require careful questioning in the preparation of teachers for work with Asian American students. The present study concerned largely first-generation immigrants, and their acceptance of traditional patterns was very much in evidence. The interview results suggest that the traditional patterns are significantly mediated by time in the United States, and status as immigrant (whether documented or undocumented), unskilled laborer, family member, or refugee. The latter set of factors is heavily confounded with socioeconomic class, educational background, and language skills. Further research directed to these factors would inform our understanding of the obstacles Asian Americans face in considering teaching as a profession.

CONCLUSION

This study reflects the voices of both Asian American teacher education students and the community members they interviewed on resistance to public school teaching as a career among Asian American students. We found that factors contributing to Asian American academic success in the United States have, at the same time, impeded Asian Americans in extending their educational influence to the teaching of children, including their own. The three most salient sources of resistance to teaching as a career were: (1) Intense pressure from parents to strive for positions perceived as having higher status, and greater financial rewards and stability; (2) Sense of personal inadequacy due to high standards set by Chinese culture for what it means to be a teacher; and (3) Fear of working outside a comfort zone and thus subject to issues of language competence, diversity, lack of respect, speaking in front of a group, and responsibility for other people’s children.

From the interviews it became clear that Asian Americans resisted teaching as a career choice largely because of personal feelings of inadequacy
when operating within an unfamiliar heterogeneous context and when measured against their image of teacher perfection within Asian culture. The Asian American informants as well as the student researchers did not seem to see themselves as part of the diversity equation and used neither “minority” nor “people of color” to refer to themselves. The “Other” usually meant all non-Asians, but when speaking to Chinese groups, it meant all non-Chinese including other Asians. In the current set of dialogues, “Other” mostly signified urban, rowdy kids who were not clued into the norms set by the Asian American community.

The paradoxes resulting from the findings are twofold. First, while the majority of the informants held teachers in very high esteem and attributed their own success to the quality of their education, they did not see the need for reinvestment of their talents and perspectives in aiding the next generation. Second, by alleging that the criteria for a teacher neared perfection and that stating one’s interest in teaching could result in an accusation of hubris, informants were guided by unrealistic standards that prevent many talented Asian Americans from even considering teaching in the United States.

If large numbers of academically successful Asian American students are to contribute to the supply of capable and committed teachers needed for American classrooms, Asian cultural traditions must be recognized within the recruiting and preparing of these students. Misconceptions of the intellectual and material rewards of teaching that were common among our informants need to be addressed with parents through programs in public schools. Richer integration of Asian cultural materials in K–12 curricula could provide a relationship between cultural identity of Asian Americans and public schooling. Introductory teacher education courses could address the conflicts identified in the present study while gradually introducing Asian American students to the range of K–12 settings available to new teachers. All of these efforts must be attempted in full recognition of the truths contained in Asian perceptions that teachers in the United States are not provided the respect or the remuneration that is appropriate to their responsibilities. Addressing that issue requires a larger political and economic adjustment that will encourage capable students of all identities to choose public school teaching as their vocation.

References


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