Impacts of the Model Minority Stereotype (MSS) on Asian American Students

Asian American students face a complex challenge with regards to education. Traditionally, Asian American students have been overrepresented in gifted and talented programs while underrepresented in special education. This unique problem for Asian American students has been explained by the Model Minority Stereotype that overgeneralizes the traits and qualities of the Asian American population.

The Model Minority Stereotype (MMS) portrays Asian Americans as “super-bright, highly motivated overachievers.” In addition, more recent studies have found that Asian American college students are perceived by their peers as soft-spoken, reserved, intelligent, hardworking, pleasant, artistic, and high in academic motivation and performance. Although these are “positive” stereotypes, a study by Rosenbloom & Way, 2004 found that Asian American high school students feel the MMS is restrictive, inaccurate, and damaging to social relationships.

Apart from overgeneralizing, stereotyping, and marginalizing Asian American students, the MMS may pose further difficulties for Asian American students in both Special Education and Gifted and Talented programs. This may cause pressure for Asian American teens to perform up to standards placed by society and cause bias in teachers’ selection process for Gifted and Talented Education Programs.

Another implication of the Model Minority Stereotype may be the underrepresentation of Asian American students in Special Education Programs. According to the Office of Special Education Programs, Asian American students are less than half as likely than other groups to receive special education services in any disability category. In particular, Asian American students are 61%, 74%, and 51% less likely than other students to be identified as specific learning disabilities, emotional disability, and cognitive impairments, respectively.

The MMS may also contribute to emotional and mental health problems within Asian American students. A study by the University of Maryland School of Public Health research team in 2007 on 174 Asian Americans aged 18-30 years old found that two major sources of stress were parental pressure to succeed in academics and pressure to live up to the model minority stereotype. The study also found that Asian Americans did not wish to seek professional help due to the taboo of discussing mental health concerns among the Asian community.

More research is needed among the Asian community to counteract the effects of the MMS. There is scant research in Asian American students in gifted education. As a result, little information about whether the type of services provided are meeting the needs of Asian American students. On a larger scale, although the Asian population in the United States has increased over the last 25 years, only 0.17% of National Institutes of Health (NIH) supported research has focused on Asian Americans.

Resources:

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