

Beyond Underrepresentation: Constructing Disability with Young Asian American Children to Preserve the “Model Minority” Stereotype

Soyoung Park¹⁾

Bank Street College of Education

Abstract

Decades of disproportionality research has consistently documented underrepresentation among Asian Americans in special education. Often the “model minority” stereotype is faulted for this trend. Underlying this argument is the assumption that the few Asian Americans who do receive special education services are properly identified. In this study, I resist this assumption by exploring how the model minority stereotype contributes to cultural and racial biases in the special education identification process for Asian Americans. Using an ethnographic case study, I follow two Asian American kindergartners through their special education eligibility determinations across one academic year. The findings from this study reveal that educators’ internalization of the model minority stereotype led them to jump to the conclusion that Asian Americans who deviated from this image had disabilities. This study suggests that the social construction of disability among young Asian American children essentializes the model minority stereotype and contributes to maintaining racial hierarchies.

Key words : Asian American, model minority, special education

Corresponding author, ¹⁾spark2@bankstreet.edu

Introduction

Despite recent debates surrounding scholarship that – in an oversimplified way – questions the long history of research on disproportionate over/underrepresentation of children of color in special education (e.g., Collins, Connor, Ferri, Gallagher, & Samson, 2016; Morgan et al., 2015, 2017, 2018; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016), one finding has persisted across all studies and remains uncontested: the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Cooc, 2016; Donovan & Cross, 2002). This underrepresentation is said to begin in early childhood and continue through secondary school (Cooc, 2019). Very often, the *model minority stereotype* is regarded as a primary reason for this trend (Doan, 2006; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Sileo & Prater, 1998).

The model minority stereotype characterizes Asians as hardworking, compliant, upwardly-mobile immigrants who achieved the American Dream without any special assistance (Hartlep, 2013; Wu, 2014). This image masks challenges within the Asian community (e.g., academic struggles among Asian American youth with disabilities), leading to their invisibility (Goodwin, 2010). An underlying assumption of underrepresentation literature is that those few Asian Americans who *are* determined eligible for special education are properly identified.

This narrative, however, contradicts decades of research on inappropriate identification among culturally and linguistically diverse children (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Klingner et al., 2005). Further, investigations by the Office for Civil Rights (2016) found that special education referrals were “the subjective exercise of unguided discretion in which racial biases or stereotypes may be manifested” (p. 11). Despite this consistent documentation of bias, research has yet to consider how racial biases might contribute to schools’ inappropriately identifying – not just failing to identify – disability among Asian Americans.

This study aims to explore how the model minority stereotype colors the special education identification process for young Asian American children who *are* identified for services. I focus on students in the early childhood years, as this is when Asian Americans are most likely to be determined eligible for special education (Cooc, 2019). Using

participant observation methods, I examine the identification process for two young Asian Americans. In so doing, I uncover how the model minority image contributes to the co-construction of Asian identity and disability in children's earliest years of school.

Asian American Underrepresentation in Special Education

Asian American underrepresentation in special education (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Cooc 2016, 2019; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014) has been consistently found when disaggregating by ethnicity (Cooc, 2019), grade levels (Morgan et al., 2015), and disability categories (Cooc, 2016; Morgan et al., 2015; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Underrepresentation also persists when controlling for socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and other family and school-level characteristics (Cooc 2019; Hibel, Morgan, & Farkas, 2010; Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2017). Cooc (2016) explains that these patterns exist regardless of whether data are analyzed at the national, district, school, or individual levels, and with or without statistical controls. For Asian Americans in early childhood, research suggests that their likelihood for special education identification is significantly lower than white students (Delgado & Scott, 2006). This likelihood decreases over time, with kindergarteners being the most likely to receive services (Cooc, 2019).

A common interpretation of underrepresentation is that there are Asian Americans with disabilities who are not receiving the services they need and deserve (Doan, 2006; Hui-Michael & García, 2009; Pang, 2006). While this argument exposes a critical problem for Asian Americans, it also presumes that those children who *are* identified for special education undergo an appropriate, accurate process. For example, Cooc (2019) found that Korean students in one district had higher odds of receiving services for learning disabilities than white students. Cooc posits that this is because Korean families tend to have higher socioeconomic status and thus know how to pursue services their children need. While reasonable, this assumption that Asian American children who do get identified are properly discovered may mask cultural/racial bias in Asian Americans' special education identification.

Cultural and Racial Bias in Special Education Identification

Despite recent empirical efforts to argue that bias does not play a role in the special education identification process for culturally and linguistically diverse youth (e.g., Morgan et al., 2015, 2018), decades of literature reveals prejudice and bias in this process (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles et al., 2010; Klingner et al., 2005; Sileo & Prater, 1998). Bias can seep into every stage of the identification process, as manifested in culturally unresponsive prereferral interventions, faulty referral decisions, invalid assessments, and other systemic and individual-level problems (Poon-McGrayer & García, 2000; Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002; Sileo & Prater, 1998). Such bias has severe consequences for children of color identified for special education, as they experience more suspension, seclusion, separation, and physical restraint than their white counterparts (Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Special education identification for Asian Americans is just as subject to racial and cultural bias as for any other minority student group. Hwa-Froelich and Westby (2003) found in their study of a Head Start program in a Southeast Asian community that educators did not believe that any of the children had learning problems because of their respectful and obedient manner. Another study by Chang and Sue (2003) looked at teachers' perceptions of overcontrolled (e.g., anxious to please, afraid to make mistakes) and undercontrolled (e.g., disobedient and easily frustrated, disrupting the class) behavior among hypothetical children of different races. The authors found that overcontrolled behavior was viewed as typical for Asian American children, but it was not regarded as serious enough to warrant referral as undercontrolled behavior was.

These studies highlight how bias might influence how teachers approach special education referrals for Asian Americans. The focus of such research, however, is on under-identification. Little is known about how biases might influence Asian American children who *are* identified for special education. If bias influences teachers' inappropriate referral of culturally and linguistically diverse children more broadly, then why should we assume that Asian Americans are not similarly subject to such bias?

The Model Minority Stereotype and Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

The primary source of bias emphasized in the literature on Asian American underrepresentation is the myth of the "model minority" (Cooc, 2016; Poon-McBrayer & García, 2000; Sileo & Prater, 1998). The model minority stereotype attributes the success of Asian immigrants to culture, essentializing characteristics like hardworking, well-assimilated, and upwardly-mobile (Hartlep, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). It emerged in public media during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (Goodwin, 2010; Lee, 2009) to discredit social justice efforts of the black community (Suzuki, 2002), as the purported success of Asians indicated that the status quo was working (Chun, 1995; Hartlep, 2013). This divide and conquer function maintains white privilege by diverting attention from systemic racism (Li, 2005; Ng et al., 2007). The myth also obscures Asian Americans' economic, academic, and social challenges (Goodwin, 2010; Pang, 2006). Subsequently, socio-political, health, and educational institutions neglect to provide services to Asians in need (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Suzuki, 2002).

As such, the model minority myth does play an important role in Asian American underrepresentation. It contributes to a vicious cycle where Asian Americans with disabilities are rendered invisible, perpetuating the image that Asian Americans only experience educational success (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Sileo & Prater, 1998). Under-identifying Asians for special education is not the only way that the model minority image is essentialized, however. When Asian children do not conform to the stereotype, teachers draw on the model minority image to blame the victim, attributing students' difficulties to biological differences and classifying and isolating children who do not fit racialized expectations (Hui-Michael & García, 2009; Li, 2005).

The model minority stereotype thus contributes to the social co-construction of race and disability. According to DisCrit theory, disability, race, and their intersections are created within particular social and cultural contexts that reinforce racism and ableism (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). Children are not labeled as disabled because of deficits that exist within themselves, but because of the cultural norms in schools that force the labeling and isolation of children who do not fit those norms. In this process, racism and ableism are

interconnected, as the construction of dis/ability relies heavily on race and serves to marginalize students of color (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). For young Asian American children, their dis/ability is contingent on the model minority myth just as their Asian identity is contingent on ableist notions of appropriate academic growth and behavior.

This study provides a grounded, qualitative look at how the model minority stereotype shaped the construction of disability for two young Asian American children. Using participant observation methods, I followed the young children through the special education identification process to explore the research question, *How are Asian American early childhood students in one school identified for special education eligibility?*

Methods

Study Design

This study was part of a larger year-long ethnographic research project on the special education identification process for immigrant youth in an urban district. The larger study involved two elementary schools and 16 English Learners (ELs). This paper focuses on two young children in one school and involves a multiple embedded case study design (Yin, 2009). The case studies relied on interpretive participant observation (Erickson, 1986) and triangulation among multiple data sources including field observations, interviews, and documents (Patton, 1990).

Setting

The school, Elaine Chau Elementary School (ECES)¹, was selected using purposive sampling (Marshall, 1996), as it met the criteria of having a large immigrant student population and at least a few children referred to special education every year across three years prior to data collection. Of the over 800 students at ECES, about 90% were of

¹ All names of schools, personnel, and students are pseudonyms.

Chinese descent and over 80% were considered ELs. The majority of students, including the two in this study, spoke Cantonese at home. Most of the ECES faculty and staff were also of Chinese descent and spoke Cantonese.

Participants

I used purposive sampling to recruit individual students. To identify participants, I attended a regular meeting called the Student Assistance Program (SAP) Team meeting. Teachers referred students about whom they had academic, behavioral, or socio-emotional concerns to the team of specialists who determined appropriate interventions and assessments. I specifically recruited children considered for special education, as my objective was to follow the children through the entire identification process from the SAP Team referral through the final eligibility determination. The parents of all children provided informed consent and no participants were offered rewards or incentives for participation.

The two focal children in this paper are kindergartners, Andy and Leo. They were both considered ELs at the time of the study. Information on each child and their individual classroom contexts is provided in Table 1. All adults working with the students and any other school staff who consented also participated. This amounted to 33 school staff members – ten of whom were directly involved in the identification processes for Andy and Leo; the rest provided insight on the overall ECES process – and two parents. Recruitment of participants was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of appropriate agencies and the participants.

Table 1. *Asian American Student Participants*

Pseudonym	Grade	Classroom Teacher	Classroom Type	Disability Categorization
Andy	K	Ms. Ma	Cantonese-English Bilingual	SLI
Leo	K	Ms. Rodriguez	English Only	OHI (ADHD)

Note. SLI = speech and language impairment, OHI = other health impairment, ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

Data Collection

I used Erikson's (1986) framework for interpretive participant observation research to collect data for the school and student cases. At the school level, I observed in general education classrooms, attended the schools' SAP Team meetings, sat in on faculty meetings, observed interventions, and visited community events and assemblies. I conducted fieldwork for two full days per week, completing 79 days at ECES (about 460 hours of fieldwork). At the student level, I observed the two children during general education instruction, interventions, assessments, and special education services. I also observed relevant meetings, including parent-teacher conferences, SAP Team meetings, and Student Study Team (SST) meetings. This amounted to about 20 hours of targeted observations per child. All observations were documented in field notes and memos.

In conjunction with my field observations, I interviewed all adults involved in the special education identification process for the two children: school administrators, school psychologists, classroom teachers, social workers, intervention specialists, resource specialist (RSP) teachers, related service providers, and parents. Each interview lasted about an hour. For the school-level case, I also interviewed the remaining school staff on their perspectives of the special education identification process.

Finally, I gathered documents on the individual children, as well as on school-level procedures. The school-level documents were generic forms used school-wide. Student-level documents included cumulative files, containing report cards, test scores, work samples, health records, meeting notes, and previous referral forms; SAP Team referral forms; SST meeting notes; evaluation reports; and individualized education programs (IEPs).

Analysis

Using the data collected, I developed case study reports detailing how the identification process played out for Andy and Leo. I first used ATLAS.ti qualitative software to deductively code all field notes, interview transcripts, and documents with the names of the students and the different stages in the special education identification process. I pulled up

all coded excerpts relevant to a given student, triangulating among the field notes, interview transcripts, and documents to write detailed, comprehensive descriptions of each child's journey through the process. I looked across all case reports to first open code them, then used axial coding to refine and generate fewer, more comprehensive categories.

I analyzed the remaining interview transcripts and field notes using the scheme developed for the student cases. Additional emergent categories were also applied to the transcripts and field notes. I used all categories to develop a school-level case report, which I confirmed with the ECES SAP Team members during "member check" meetings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

The Model Minority Stereotype and Special Education Identification at ECES

"Our school has the highest reclassification rate in the district," the ECES principal boasted regularly. It was no secret that the school's large number of ELs reached English language proficiency within impressively short periods of time. In fact, the district frequently praised ECES for having high achievement across standardized assessments. The school even received a national award for its academic excellence in closing achievement gaps, specifically for ELs.

The ECES faculty and staff attributed the school's high achievement to the students' Chinese cultural background. One teacher said in her interview:

Most of the students have a Chinese background. They are from a low-income population and a lot of the families are immigrants and so [the school] has a pretty heavy Chinese cultural influence. . . . I would say compared to other schools, the students in this school I would consider them as having pretty good behavior and most of them are pretty respectful because I think probably from the family or cultural influence.

Teachers and administrators alike frequently explained the lack of academic and disciplinary problems at ECES as due to families' instilling positive Chinese values regarding work ethic, respect, and behavior in their children. As one teacher said about

ECES families, “They really care about education, even though they don’t make a lot of money they place a high value on education.” Another shared, “I think it is a community which is hopeful for their children, and many of them are immigrants coming with a vision for a better life.”

Across my interviews and observations, school staff described ECES students as “hard working,” “value[ing] education,” “nice,” “good behavior,” “respectful,” and “wanting to be here.” ECES students excelled so quickly that, in the words of one teacher, “newcomers are so comfortable speaking English that I wouldn’t even know they were newcomers.” Another teacher emphasized how ECES students surpassed others in the district in terms of their behavior, which facilitated their academic success: “I always tell people it’s a good school. I know there are schools where there are a lot of [behavioral] things that interfere with student learning and we don’t really have that here.” Teachers regularly praised the children’s behavior and work ethic specifically “in comparison to other schools.” These characterizations positioned ECES students as a model minority in the district.

My observations at the school confirmed the staff’s descriptions of the students. Children walked in straight, silent lines through the hallways sometimes with their hands clasped behind their backs. During carpet time, they sat in rows facing their teachers, intently watching their every move. When teachers asked questions, students’ hands shot up in the air, their eagerness to comply and share their knowledge palpable. Children also worked intently during independent or small group tasks. Transitions between various activities happened quickly and seamlessly. If a child was “wiggly,” disruptive, or off task in any way, that student stood out. These children became candidates for potential special education identification.

For such students, the special education identification process officially commenced when a general education teacher or specialist submitted a referral to the school’s SAP Team. The SAP Team gathered biweekly to discuss the referrals and determine next steps for the target child, such as interventions; SST meetings with the social worker, classroom teacher, parent(s), and other relevant specialists/administrators; or psychoeducational evaluation. Across the 19 SAP Team meetings I observed over the course of the year, only 52 children of the over 800 were referred, which was, according to district administrators, an unusually small proportion of students. Of the children referred, 18 were kindergartners.

Their general education teachers referred them because they were either considered to be disruptive in class or perceived as needing additional academic support, typically in language and literacy. Only two of these children were ultimately evaluated for special education services: Andy for speech and language difficulties and Leo for behavioral concerns.

The general education teachers played a critical role in the special education identification process for ECES students. If the teacher expressed enough worry about a child's academic or behavioral development, those students could be pushed to a special education evaluation without first undergoing interventions. This countered district policy, which stated that children should receive 6-8 weeks of intervention and have at least two SST meetings before special education referral. At ECES, however, children who performed below grade level or behaved in a disruptive manner were so rare that they stood out in an alarming way. They contradicted the expectations of the model minority that staff had of ECES students, and subsequently became prime candidates for special education.

Andy and Leo were two kindergartners who did not fit the norms of academic development and behavior prevalent at ECES. The teachers working with these children quickly determined that they *must* have disabilities. In what follows, I offer portraits of each student case, detailing how teachers' expectations of the model minority shaped the children's ultimate eligibility for special education.

The Case of Andy

When EL students at ECES demonstrated slow English language development, this became immediate cause for concern because of the school's high rates of reclassification to English proficient. Teachers who referred ELs to the SAP Team for academic reasons told me that they developed concerns because their students were not "excelling as quickly" as other ELs they had previously taught. They said things like, "I had a lot of experience with ELs and they are usually further along in their progression at this point" or "I've been teaching ELs for years. I know when it's language or disability." For these teachers, when ELs did not develop their English language at the expected rate, they were assumed to have disabilities.

This was true for Andy's kindergarten teacher, Ms. Ma, who told me in her interview, "I know when something's off" because of her close to 30 years as a teacher of young ELs. Ms. Ma first referred Andy to the SAP Team because she was concerned that his "speech is unclear" (Andy's SAP referral form). When I asked her about her referral, Ms. Ma told me, "other kids are getting it. I can understand them just fine" (Field Notes). Ms. Ma did not take into account that ECES students tended to be on the higher performing side for the district. Andy may have been average in his English language development compared to other ELs, but Ms. Ma only compared him to the model minority expectations she had developed while working at ECES for three decades.

At the SAP Team meeting where Andy's case was discussed, the speech language pathologist (SLP) Ms. Jiao agreed to administer a speech and language evaluation and scheduled an SST meeting with Ms. Ma and Andy's mother to launch the assessment. At the meeting, Ms. Ma expressed additional concerns about Andy's speech. The following is an excerpt from the field notes for this meeting:

Ms. Ma said that she often tells Andy to slow down or repeat himself, but even then it's difficult to understand him. He also talks kind of with his mouth closed. . . . Ms. Ma said that when he is talking with his friends, he is very loud. During instructional time, Andy is "a quiet mouse." He also rushes when he talks. Even in Chinese, she has a hard time understanding Andy.

The SST meeting launched the assessment process for Andy. Ms. Jiao pulled Andy for two short evaluation sessions in which she administered several standardized tests. The assessment materials and administration were all in English. Whenever Andy answered incorrectly in English, Ms. Jiao restated the item in Cantonese and gave him another opportunity to respond. Ms. Jiao also told Andy that he could provide answers in Cantonese, but he never did. The linguistic limitations of the assessment and the ad hoc solution Ms. Jiao used put into question the validity of Andy's evaluation. Ms. Jiao also collected a language sample by simply recording the assessment sessions and observing Andy during a read aloud in his classroom. This was atypical practice, as the district recommended that oral language samples involve children narrating a story using a wordless picture book (District Special Education Handbook).

The final evaluation report for Andy's showed that he scored average across assessments with the exception of expressive vocabulary, which was below average but still "within

State and District Guidelines of accepted variation" (Andy's Evaluation Report). Nonetheless, Ms. Jiao determined Andy eligible for speech and language impairment. This determination was based solely on the language sample. Below are some of the examples from the speech sample presented in Andy's evaluation report:

1. I like to pay (play) with Raymond and Lucas.
2. Boder (brother)
3. Sisder (sister)
4. Dose (those) two.
5. De (the) bear can't go in de tub because him's too big.
6. And de (the) bear build de (the) things and de (the) goat (boat) foo (flew) away.

The report stated that Andy made 1-5 word utterances when he should make 5-6 word utterances. His speech was reportedly 50-60% intelligible, when he was supposed to be 100% intelligible at his age (Andy's Evaluation Report). Andy was determined to have mild articulation disorder, making him eligible for special education under speech and language impairment.

The patterns that Andy demonstrated in his English speech sample, however, were typical of speakers of Asian languages (Sileo & Prater, 1998). For example, Chinese speakers often struggle with blended sounds like "th" turning it into /d/ or /z/, because these sounds do not occur in Chinese (Chang, 2001). It is possible, therefore, that Andy's differences in articulation were due to his being an EL, not mild articulation disorder. Furthermore, the limitations with the assessment that potentially compromised the validity of the scores were never addressed. These potential confounding factors were ignored because Andy's articulation differences stood out at a school where children achieved English proficiency at rapid rates. In this way, the model minority stereotype colored the special education identification process for Andy by amplifying concerns surrounding his English development and causing educators to ignore other possible sources for his linguistic patterns.

The Case of Leo

For the kindergartners at ECES, behavior that deviated from the norm was considered

especially indicative of disabilities. When a child demonstrated disruptive behavior, such as calling out, moving too much, or hitting others, teachers immediately referred them to the SAP Team and began talking about them as “clearly hav[ing] something” (Field Notes). Kindergartner Leo exhibited behaviors that ECES staff considered to be some of the most concerning across the school. The regular teacher for Leo’s class was on leave, so the students had long-term substitutes for the first half of the year and did not have consistent routines in place. Leo was one of several children in the class who demonstrated “disruptive” behavior, hitting other children and running around the room as if he were playing games. At the beginning of October, Leo held a pushpin to a classmate’s eye. Leo was immediately sent to the principal’s office and was officially referred to the SAP Team, flagged as a priority concern.

In the October SAP Team meeting where Leo was first discussed, the school psychologist hesitated to recommend special education evaluation due to his young age. She said, “We should really wait a couple of years before we test to make sure it’s not just that he hasn’t really been to school” (Field Notes). The psychologist felt this was especially important for Leo since he was the youngest kindergartner in the school and had only attended one year of preschool, when other ECES kindergartners had attended two. She also wondered if his behavior was tied to his classroom context.

For the next several weeks, however, the SAP Team continued to receive reports of his behavior. Leo also frequently came up in conversations among school staff. I once sat in on a lunch-time conversation with the kindergarten teachers during which they spoke about an incident where Leo took the pieces of a class-wide behavior chart, placed them in the sink, and turned on the water. One teacher said, “How terrible. It was so intentional, you know?” (Field Notes). Words like “intentional,” “bad,” “terrible,” “mean,” and “immature” were often used to describe Leo’s behavior (Field Notes). One teacher informally told me that she felt Leo “clearly” had disabilities: “It’s not natural. We work with so many kids every day and for so many years. We know” (Field Notes). Others also spoke of Leo as though his special education classification was inevitable, saying things like, “when he gets tested” or “once [the RSP teacher] starts pulling him” (Field Notes).

After hearing so many reports of his behavior, the assistant principal brought in a consulting psychiatrist at the end of October to formally give Leo a medical ADHD

diagnosis. The school psychologist then agreed to a psychoeducational evaluation, even though the school had not attempted any interventions with Leo. Within two months of his initial SAP Team referral, Leo was identified as eligible for special education services for Other Health Impairment – ADHD. Leo's psychoeducational evaluation results, however, were not obviously indicative of special education eligibility. The school psychologist told me that Leo should only qualify if his ADHD significantly impacted his academic performance. Leo scored average in all areas except for phonological awareness. Based on this, as well as Leo's context, age, and school experience, the school psychologist and RSP teacher initially decided that Leo should not qualify for special education services. His classroom teacher, however, pushed for qualification and the psychologist complied because "she seems really concerned about his learning" (Field Notes).

In the case of Leo, teachers' perceptions of Leo's behavioral differences drove his disability construction. Their concern over Leo's behavior was amplified because of the model minority expectations they had developed while working with ECES students. School staff did not consider Leo's particular circumstances, nor did they try to provide any individual support before he was qualified for special education. They simply jumped to the conclusion that he must need special education services because his behavior deviated from the ECES norm.

Discussion

This study explored how the model minority stereotype shaped the special education eligibility determinations of two young Asian American children. The findings reveal that ECES general education teachers' ideas about proper academic development and behavior were largely shaped by the expectations they held of the model minority. These educators saw their students as children who, because of their Chinese culture, were "well behaved" and "hard working." As such, even those learning English were expected to attain academic achievement at rapid rates and demonstrate compliant, obedient, and studious behavior. Because Andy and Leo did not fit the expectation of the model minority, they were flagged as needing special education. The educators working with these children assumed disability

based on their deviations from the ECES student norm. The evaluators took the general education teachers' concerns very seriously; they were inclined to identify the children for special education because kindergarten teachers at the school were so rarely concerned about their students.

The case of Andy demonstrated how ECES teachers' view of the model minority was associated with faster linguistic assimilation. Asian American ELs have been found to attain English proficiency at faster rates than other ELs of different racial backgrounds (e.g., Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, & Chien, 2012; Kieffer & Parker, 2016). This was especially true at ECES where ELs became proficient in English quicker than ELs at other schools. Children like Andy who did not fit this norm were immediately labeled as deviant, even though their so-called deviations were typical for Asians learning English (Chang, 2001).

Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that this type of otherizing is consistent with the raciolinguistic ideologies that exist to maintain white supremacy. The predominant ideology in U.S. society is what they call a "monoglossic language ideology" where becoming monolingual in Standard English is the norm to which all should aspire. This raciolinguistic ideology converged with the model minority stereotype for Andy, making it such that his linguistic patterns were construed as disability. Blinded by model minority expectations, educators failed to consider English learning and faulty assessment procedures in Andy's case. Subsequently, they positioned Andy as unusual for Asians who should develop English in a more monolingual Standard English way, as the other ECES children did.

Leo's deviations from the model minority stereotype were related to his perceived "bad" or "disruptive" behavior. Researchers have found that teachers' discomfort with perceived behavioral noncompliance leads to high rates of extreme disciplinary actions and special education referral among young black children (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Lee, 2017; Morrier & Gallagher, 2012), suggesting that teachers react strongly when school-based behavioral expectations converge with racial bias. For Leo, the strong reaction to his behavior was influenced by the racialized behavioral expectations that ECES teachers had of their students. Compared to the compliant, well-behaved kindergartners that filled ECES classrooms, Leo was an unusually "difficult" child. All of the general education teachers

who came into contact with Leo presumed that he needed special education because of their internalization of the model minority stereotype, which shaped the evaluators' ultimate eligibility determination.

In both cases, the model minority image may have caused teachers to over-interpret seemingly deviant behavior as disabilities even when there were confounding factors and little evidence of actual disabilities. The educators in this study were driven by an "ideology of the normal" (Annamma, Boelé, Moore, & Klingner, 2013) deeply connected to the making of Asian racial identity (Wu, 2014). Such construction of young Asian children with disabilities objectifies and essentializes Asian Americans as the model minority. Goodwin (2010) explains that even when children resist the model minority image, they are measured against the stereotype and are thus colonized and otherized. When Asian American children who do not fit the norm are labeled as disabled, it reifies the model minority and contributes to the exploitation of Asian Americans as "proof of an equitable and non-racist America" (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3126). Young Asian American children classified as disabled are, therefore, instruments of control, their special education eligibility used to maintain whiteness as supreme.

In order to prevent this stereotype-driven labeling and exploitation, schools must engage in critical analysis of their special education identification processes with Asian American youth. No longer can we assume that Asian American underrepresentation means that those children who *are* identified for special education are properly classified. The findings from this study demonstrate how schools serving Asian Americans should critically examine their biases about these students. One approach would be to integrate culturally sustaining pedagogies and universal design for learning (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Such praxis supports multilingualism, multiculturalism, plurality, and fluidity, allowing children to fully embrace their multiple identities and fostering critical consciousness in students and teachers alike (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). Teachers may then be able to resist practices that oppress Asian Americans and essentialize them as the model minority.

References

- Annamma, S. A., Boelé, A. L., Moore, B. A., & Klingner, J. (2013). Challenging the ideology of normal in schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(12), 1278-1294. doi:10.1080/13603116.2013.802379
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, C., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1-31. doi:10.1080/13613324.2012.730511
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968-2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children*, 76(3), 279-299. doi:10.1177/001440291007600303
- Artiles, A. J., & Trent, S. C. (1994). Overrepresentation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *The Journal of Special Education*, 27(4), 410-437. doi:10.1177/002246699402700404
- Chang, D. F., & Sue, S. (2003). The effects of race and problem type on teachers' assessments of student behavior. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71(2), 235-242. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.71.2.235
- Chang, J. (2001). Chinese speakers. In M. Swan & B. Smith, *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (pp. 310-324). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511667121.022
- Chun, K. (1995). The myth of Asian American success and its educational ramifications. In D. T. Nakanishi & T. Y. Nishida (Eds.), *The Asian American educational experience: A source book for teachers and students* (pp. 95-112). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, K. M., Connor, D., Ferri, B., Gallagher, D., & Samson, J. F. (2016). Dangerous assumptions and unspoken limitations: A disability studies in education response to Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015). *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 16(1), 4-16. doi:10.5555/2158-396X.16.1.4
- Cooc, N. (2016). Examining the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in special education: New trends from California school districts. *Exceptionality*, 26(1), 1-19. doi:10.1080/09362835.2016.1216847

- Cooc, N. (2019). Disparities in the enrollment and timing of special education for Asian American and Pacific Islander students. *The Journal of Special Education*, 1-14. doi:10.1177/0022466919839029
- Delgado, C. E. F., & Scott, K. G. (2006). Comparison of referral rates for preschool children at risk for disabilities using information obtained from birth certificate records. *The Journal of Special Education*, 40(1), 28-35. doi:10.1177/00224669060400010301
- Doan, K. (2006). A sociocultural perspective on at-risk Asian-American students. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 29(3), 157-167. doi: 10.1177/088840640602900302
- Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (Eds.). (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 119-161). New York, NY: MacMillan.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149-171. doi: 10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149
- Goodwin, A. L. (2010). Curriculum as coloniser: (Asian) American education in the current U.S. context. *Teachers College Record*, 112(12), 3102-3138. Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=16091>
- Halle, T, Hair, E., Wandner, L., McNamara, M., & Chien, N. (2012). Predictors and outcomes of early versus later English language proficiency among English language learners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 1-20. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.07.004
- Hartlep, N. D. (2013). *The model minority stereotype: Demystifying Asian American success*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing
- Hibel, J., Farkas, G., & Morgan, P. L. (2010). Who is placed into special education? *Sociology of Education*, 83(4), 312-332. doi:10.1177/0038040710383518
- Hui-Michael, Y., & García, S. B. (2009). General educators' perceptions and attributions about Asian American students: Implications for special education referral. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 12(1), 21-37. Retrieved from

<https://multiplevoicesjournal.org/doi/abs/10.5555/muvo.12.1.q36304n404g50740?journalCode=muvo>

- Hwa-Froelich, D. A., & Westby, C. E. (2003). Frameworks of education: Perspectives of Southeast Asian parents and Head Start staff. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 34*(4), 299-319. doi:10.1044/0161-1461(2003/025)
- Kieffer, M. J. & Parker, C. E. (2016). *Patterns of English learner student reclassification in New York City public schools* (REL 2017–200). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2017200.pdf.
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., ... Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(38), 1-40. doi: 10.14507/epaa.v13n38.2005
- Kunesh, C. E., & Noltemeyer, A. (2019). Understanding disciplinary disproportionality: Stereotypes shape pre-service teachers' beliefs about black boys' behavior. *Urban Education, 54*(4), 471-498.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 74-84. doi:10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751
- Lee, K. (2017). Making the body ready for school: ADHD and early schooling in the era of accountability. *Teachers College Record, 119*(9), 1-38. Retrieved from <https://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=22037>
- Lee, S. J. (2009). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Li, G. (2005). Other people's success: Impact of the "model minority" myth on underachieving Asian students in North America. *KEDI Journal of Education Policy, 2*(1), 69-86. Retrieved from <https://msu.edu/~liguo/file/KEDI%20Journal-Guofang%20Li%202005%5B1%5D.pdf>
- Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice, 13*(6), 522–526. doi:10.1093/fampra/13.6.522
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and*

implementation (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss.

- Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Cook, M., Strassfeld, N. M., Hillemeier, M. M., Pun, W. H., ...Schussler, D. L. (2018). Are Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or language-minority children overrepresented in special education? *Exceptional Children, 84*(3), 261-279. doi:10.1177/0014402917748303
- Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Maczuga, S. (2017). Replicated evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 46*(6), 305-322. doi:10.3102/0013189x17726282
- Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., Mattison, R., Maczuga, S., Li, H., & Cook, M. (2015). Minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in special education: Longitudinal evidence across five disability conditions. *Educational Researcher, 44*(5), 278-292. doi:10.3102/0013189x15591157
- Morrier, M. J., & Gallagher, P. A. (2012). Racial disparities in preschool special education eligibility for five southern states. *The Journal of Special Education, 46*(3), 152-169. doi:10.1177/0022466910380465
- Ng, J. C., Lee, S. S., & Pak, Y. K. (2007). Contesting the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes: A critical review of literature on Asian Americans in education. *Review of Research in Education, 31*, 95-130. doi:10.3102/0091732X06298015
- Ngo, B., & Lee, S. J. (2007). Complicating the image of model minority success: A review of Southeast Asian American education. *Review of Educational Research, 77*(4), 415-453. doi:10.3102/0034654307309918
- Pang, V. O. (2006). Fighting the marginalization of Asian American students with caring schools: Focusing on curricular change. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 9*(1), 67-83. doi:10.1080/13613320500490754
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93-97. doi:10.3102/0091732X07300046095
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 85-100. doi:10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury

Park, CA: Sage Publications.

- Poon-McBrayer, K. F., & García, S. B. (2000). Profiles of Asian American students with LD at initial referral, assessment, and placement in special education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 33*(1), 61-71. doi:10.1177/002221940003300109
- Rosenbloom, S. R., & Way, N. (2004). Experiences of discrimination among African American, Asian American, and Latino adolescents in an urban high school. *Youth & Society, 35*(4), 420-451. doi:10.1177/0044118X03261479
- Salend, S. J., Duhaney, L. M. G., & Montgomery, W. (2002). A comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing issues of disproportionate representation. *Remedial and Special Education, 23*(5), 289-299. doi:10.1177/07419325020230050401
- Sileo, T. W., & Prater, M. A. (1998). Creating classroom environments that address the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students with disabilities: An Asian Pacific American perspective. *Remedial and Special Education, 19*(6), 323-337. doi:10.1177/074193259801900603
- Skiba, R. J., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Losen, D. J., & Harry, E. G. (2016). Risks and consequences of oversimplifying educational inequities: A response to Morgan et al. (2015). *Educational Researcher, 45*(3), 221-225. doi: 10.3102/0013189X16644606
- Sullivan, A. L., & Artiles, A. J. (2011). Theorizing racial inequity in special education: Applying structural inequity theory to disproportionality. *Urban Education, 46*(6), 1526-1552. doi:10.1177/0042085911416014
- Suzuki, B. H. (2002). Revisiting the model minority stereotype: Implications for student affairs practice and higher education. *New Directions for Student Services, 97*, 21-32.
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 civil rights data collection: A first look*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *Dear colleague letter: Preventing racial discrimination in special education*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201612-racedisc-special-education.pdf>
- Waitoller, F. R., & King Thorius, K. A. (2016). Cross-pollinating culturally sustaining

pedagogy and universal design for learning: Toward an inclusive pedagogy that accounts for dis/ability. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(3), 366-389. doi:10.17763/1943-5045-86.3.366

Wu, E. D. (2014). *The color of success: Asian Americans and the origins of the model minority*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods. Applied social research methods series* (4th ed., Vol. 5.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Zhang, D., & Katsiyannis, A. (2002). Minority representation in special education: A persistent challenge. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(3), 180-187. doi: 10.1177/07419325020230030601

Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A., Ju, S., & Roberts, E. (2014). Minority representation in special education: 5-year trends. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23(1), 118-127. doi:10.1007/s10826-012-9698-6

Zhao, Y., & Qiu, W. (2009). How good are the Asians? Refuting four myths about Asian-American academic achievement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(5), 338-344. doi: 10.1177/003172170909000507