The “Asian” Category in MCAS Achievement Gap Tracking: Time for a Change

by Philip Lee

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Data gathered on Asian American students in public school by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is aggregated into one general “Asian” category, which may skew the results, both perpetuating an enduring myth and masking any true gaps that may exist for certain Asian American subgroups. As explored in this article, achievement gap tracking for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is an apt example.

The MCAS was implemented to meet the requirements of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1993). The Education Reform Act specifies that the testing program must:

- Test all public students in Massachusetts
- Measure performance based on the Massachusetts curriculum learning standards
- Report on the performance of individual students, schools, and districts

As required by the Education Reform Act, and for school accountability purposes related to the No Child Left Behind Act, students in Massachusetts must pass the grade 10 tests in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics as one condition of eligibility for a high school diploma (in addition to fulfilling local school requirements) (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1993).

In a November 7, 2008, memorandum to members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell D. Chester distributed information
regarding MCAS achievement gaps from 2002 to 2008. The analysis detailed racial and gender score discrepancies in the ELA and mathematics tests (Mass.Gov 2008). Chester’s graphical display of the MCAS racial achievement gap places Asian American students well above the proficiency line and above most other groups of students (see Figure 1). Similar aggregate Asian American data can be seen on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Web site (www.doe.mass.edu) in school-specific graduation rates, grade retention, dropout rates, plans of high school graduates, and student exclusions reports. Indeed, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education broadly defines “Asian” as follows: “A person having origins in any of the

Figure 1 — Gender disaggregated: Race and ethnicity
original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent” (Mass. Gov 2010).

In this article, I posit that this aggregation of many subgroups into one general “Asian” category perpetuates the myth of Asian Americans as a model minority while downplaying any achievement gap that exists for certain Asian American subgroups. I conclude with a policy recommendation—a call to track information on the Asian American subgroups—to address this concern.¹

ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES AND METRO BOSTON

Asian Americans Nationally

According to national census data reported in 2000, 11.9 million people (i.e., 4.2 percent of the U.S. population) reported that they were Asian. However, significant differences exist between the subgroups of this “Asian” category. Educational attainment is one example. Approximately 80 percent of the total U.S. population, twenty-five years and older, had at least a high school degree, while the percentage for all Asian Americans was around 85 percent (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Focusing on certain subgroups within the Asian category, we see that the corresponding percentages for Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong were much lower than the total population and the total Asian numbers, at about 62 percent, 50 percent, 47 percent, and 40 percent, respectively. Furthermore, in 1999, the poverty rate for the total U.S. population was 12.4 percent, while the rate for all Asian Americans was 12.6 percent (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Again, focusing on the same Asian subgroups as we did for high school degree attainment, we see the poverty rates for Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong were much higher than for the total population and total Asian category, at around 16 percent, 19 percent, 29 percent, and 38 percent, respectively.

Differences between Asian groups can also be observed in educational outcomes. For example, in a 1988 study that compared eighth-grade students in a nationally representative sample on scholastic aptitude tests, Vietnamese and Filipino students were similar in math scores to White students, whereas Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South Asian students scored much higher than any of the other racial and ethnic groups (Sakamoto and Xie 2006). Further, Vietnamese students were the only Asian American group whose average verbal test score was below the national average. Finally, Vietnamese students were the only group among native-born Asian Americans less likely to complete high school than African American students (Sakamoto and Xie 2006).

Given the national data, it is reasonable to believe that substantial variation in Massachusetts among Asian American subgroups exists, particularly in educational outcomes; however, by classifying the many subgroups into a single category, these disparities are difficult to detect. Thus, in order to uncover any hidden achievement gap that is not evident from the way that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education requires school districts to collect and report their students’ race data, I propose a disaggregation of the data as a first step in uncovering any disparities. I turn my analysis to metro Boston—a large area in
Massachusetts in which a number of distinct Asian groups reside—to illustrate my point.

**Asian Americans in Metro Boston**

In 2000, the Asian American population of metro Boston was 223,424, comprising more than 4 percent of that area’s total population (Watanabe et al. 2004). The Asian American population grew more than 70 percent in this area in the 1990s, as compared to a growth rate of less than 6 percent for the overall population.

Fifteen Asian ethnic subgroups had at least 500 members in metro Boston, including Chinese (78,415), Indian (41,240), Vietnamese (31,511), Cambodian (18,890), Korean (15,615), Japanese (9,699), Filipino (7,415), Laotian (3,576), Thai (1,969), and Hmong (1,038) (Watanabe et al. 2004).

Paul Watanabe, Michael Liu, and Shauna Lo (2004, 4) recognize:

The histories and experiences of these groups are as diverse as their number and much too difficult to ably summarize in a short space. The Chinese, for example, have been a presence in this region for several decades, and they have been influenced by several immigration regimes stretching back prior to the Chinese exclusion period well over a century ago. Indians immigrated to this region in significant numbers only after passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. Southeast Asian groups, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thai, and Hmong, began arriving in substantial numbers, many as refugees, less than thirty years ago. The Japanese and Korean communities are each comprised of a large number of college and graduate students.

In addition to the differing histories of immigration into the area, other intra-group differences among Asian American ethnic groups are mostly consistent with national data. For example, Asian Americans in metro Boston had an aggregate poverty rate of 12.3 percent, but there was substantial variation within the category (Watanabe et al. 2004). While South Asian Indians and Laotians had the lowest poverty rate, both at about 5 percent, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodians had some of the highest rates at around 17 percent, 21 percent, and 24 percent, respectively. Adding another level of complexity to the analysis, Vivian Louie (2005, 70) observes:

For immigrant children of working-class backgrounds [e.g., many Southeast Asian students in Metro Boston], the stakes are arguably complex. On one hand, they face the social stresses common to migration across social class, such as loss of status and cultural markers and transitions around language. On the other hand, they confront the additionally daunting task of having a single generation to make the dramatic leap up the educational ladder far beyond their parents’ relatively low levels of formal schooling [citations omitted].

Therefore, the varied Asian American groups may have different educational outcomes because of significant differences in immigration history, socioeconomic status, and cultural capital that are not being acknowledged by the current racial category of “Asian.”

These intragroup differences suggest that it makes good policy sense to disaggregate the Asian American groups in Massachusetts’ achievement gap analysis to determine if the schools are
allocating resources to those groups that need the most assistance. However, as illustrated by MCAS achievement gap tracking, most educational institutions do not track race data in this way. In fact, doing so would cut against the grain of a widely accepted myth that Asian Americans are a monolithic model minority. In the next section, I explore some theoretical frameworks for understanding the history and current perpetuation of the myth of the model minority.

LINKING THE “ASIAN” RACE CATEGORY TO THEORY

Asian Americans as the Monolithic “Model Minority”: Social Reproduction and Power/Language in Historical and Political Context

Jay MacLeod (2008) explains, in the context of socioeconomic inequality, that social reproduction theorists “show that schools actually reinforce social inequality while pretending to do the opposite.” Further, Samuel Bowles (1977) draws attention to the ways schools utilize a hidden curriculum to reproduce and legitimate modern inequality. Finally, Michel Foucault (1977) focuses on the ways in which the very categories and labels that are imposed on others by experts and authority figures can be forms of social control. Informed by social reproduction, hidden curriculum, and Foucaultian perspectives, I argue that the Massachusetts Department of Education (indeed, most American educational institutions) by uncritically grouping and labeling Asian groups under one comprehensive category is engaging in patterns of social reproduction (i.e., reproducing educational inequality by making certain Asian groups invisible) by perpetuating the myth of the model minority and making it difficult to track any achievement gap that exists for subgroups within this larger group.

The category of “model minority” has been imposed on Asian Americans since the 1960s. During the heart of the civil rights movement, a number of articles praised the successful assimilation of Asian Americans into American society as compared to that of other minorities. For example, sociologist William Petersen (1966), in a New York Times Magazine article entitled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” lauded the efforts of Japanese Americans who avoided becoming a group of “problem minorities” despite widespread racial discrimination. Petersen (1966, 21) wrote:

“They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story.

Later that same year, a U.S News and World Report article entitled “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” said: “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own, with no help from anyone else” (1966, 6).

Subsequent articles reflected a mainstream perception that Asian Americans were a minority group that, through sheer effort and determination, made itself impervious to the effects of racism and succeeded in America (“Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites,” Newsweek, 1971; “Asian Americans: ‘A Model Minority,””
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This perception is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the model minority myth serves to justify the status quo by creating a false dichotomy: model minorities versus problem minorities. The model minority provides an example of a minority group that can “transcend” race and racism through its own hard work while the problem minorities are to blame for their own failures. This blame-the-victim reasoning is too simplistic to account for the complicated racial barriers arising from the effects of hundreds of years of legalized racial oppression that continue to exist today. Similar to MacLeod’s (2008) analysis of the role of schools in reproduction theory, proponents of the myth that Asian Americans are America’s model minority are engaging in patterns of social reproduction by reinforcing racial inequality while pretending to do the opposite. In other words, while claiming that they are celebrating the decline of racism, they are actually reproducing racial inequalities by perpetuating a myth of a minority group that can be presented as an example that race is not a significant obstacle to success in this country. Further, this false dichotomy downplays the long and painful history of White supremacist laws, policies, and actions against Asian people in the United States.3

Second, aggregating all Asian Americans into a “success story” category makes certain Asian American subgroups unlikely to get the assistance they need if they are struggling in school or other areas. Since the data will be analyzed in its aggregate, any subgroup-specific achievement gap will be rendered invisible. As a parallel to Bowles’s (1977) critique of schools and the hidden curriculum within them, the way in which the racial categories (e.g., “Asian”) that schools use to track their students are presented—as normal and fixed instead of as constructed and otherwise problematic—is serving to reproduce and legitimize racial inequality.

Third, the imposition of a “model minority” label by the majority onto a relatively powerless minority divulges the asymmetrical power relations inherent in such a labeling. Indeed, as Foucault (1977) reminds us, this very process of labeling becomes a form of social control. In other words, to call another group a “model minority” is not an empowering self-definition by those being so defined. Instead, it is an identity imposed on Asian Americans by others (e.g., see the articles mentioned above) who are attempting to downplay the very real effects of racism in this society by creating a supposed exception to racism.

Although relying on a single Asian category to track the MCAS achievement gap may make it appear that one minority group is succeeding in America, this classification does not capture the significant intragroup differences that may exist between the various Asian American subgroups. In the final section, I propose a way in which the Massachusetts Department of Education can track these differences.
POLICY RECOMMENDATION

A Modest Policy Proposal: Collect Accurate Data by Disaggregating the “Asian” Category

For the reasons set forth above, I would suggest that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education require that school districts disaggregate the “Asian” category to capture the true diversity of this large umbrella category and reallocate resources to subgroups in which any achievement gaps can be identified.

While I would not completely eradicate the “Asian” category, in order to comply with current federal government demographic race tracking policies (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education requirements) and to foster a pan-Asian American political identity, I would propose to track the subgroupings when the schools gather racial background data through additional check-boxes capturing the largest Asian American populations in the state of Massachusetts:

[ ] Asian
Please specify:
[ ] Cambodian
[ ] Chinese
[ ] Filipino
[ ] Hmong
[ ] Indian
[ ] Japanese
[ ] Korean
[ ] Laotian
[ ] Pakistani
[ ] Taiwanese
[ ] Thai
[ ] Vietnamese
[ ] Other Asian (please specify:__________________).  

Or, as a simpler alternative, I would propose that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education require the use of an open-ended response after the “Asian” identifier:

Asian (please specify:__________________).  

Either of these approaches would be the first step in keeping track of any achievement gap that exists within the broad “Asian” category. After the data is collected, resources can be reallocated in a way that assists the groups that need the most help.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the way in which the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is collecting its race data for purposes of tracking achievement gaps makes it difficult to observe differences between Asian subgroups. I propose that the Department of Education require the state’s school districts to disaggregate the “Asian” category into its subgroups in order to more accurately track how the separate subgroups are performing. While acknowledging that the very identification of struggling Asian groups would cut against the popular myth that Asian Americans are a monolithic model minority, I contend that this first step is necessary in order to deliver resources to those with the most need.
REFERENCES

ENDNOTES
1 Note that I do not advocate for the eradication of the “Asian” category altogether. For federal government reporting (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education counts), this category is currently required. Furthermore, as I mention later in the article, the Asian American political movement has been historically based on pan-Asian American unity; starting in the 1960s, the different groups have come together
as an assertion of collective political power. So instead of eliminating the “Asian” category, I suggest that we keep it and further track Asian subgroups for the specific purpose of identifying any hidden achievement gap that is not being addressed.

2 Paul Watanabe, Michael Liu, and Shauna Lo (2004, 1) define metro Boston as “the census geographic area defined as the ‘Massachusetts (part); Boston-Worcester-Lawrence-Lowell-Brockton-MA-NH New England county metropolitan area.’ This area includes Bristol, Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, Suffolk, and Worcester counties, and 192 cities and towns.”

3 Examples of such actions include racist immigration and naturalization laws like the Whiteness requirement for naturalization from 1790 to 1952, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the widespread lynching of Chinese people throughout the American West during and after the Gold Rush, the legalized educational segregation of Asian American school children until 1954, the internment of more than 110,000 Japanese American citizens during World War II, and the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982.

4 William Wei (1993) explores the Asian American political movement and highlights the ways in which pan-Asian American unity was essential in Asian Americans’ struggle for civil rights.