

Generational Conflict and Southeast Asian Immigrant and American Students' Problems at School

Both the model minority myth and the widespread failure to differentiate subgroups of Asians have been harmful to efforts to address problems manifested by Southeast Asian immigrant and American students. Many of these students are off-spring of refugees who came to the U.S. from Southeast Asian countries to escape political and social crises. Among other stressors, these youngsters have had to deal with the effects of their parents' negative experiences prior to and after arriving. And differences in acculturation to the U.S. have exacerbated the generation gap in many families (Hsu, et.al, 2004). The focus of this brief document is on student problems arising from generational conflicts.

Some Historical Background

Many Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, have had considerable political instability. With specific respect to Vietnam, war and the implementation of the Viet Cong communist regime resulted in many people fleeing the country (Hsu, et.al, 2004).

There were 2 specific waves of refugees. The first wave involved those who had financial stability and support in their migration. The second wave included those with few resources and who experienced major hardships and dangers (Ying & Han, 2007). In their study of South East Asian refugees, Nicassio and colleagues (1986) reported that over 88% of participants had seen their homes destroyed during war, 56% dealt with the death of at least one family member, and a large majority had experienced hunger and malnourishment. The second wave seeking entry to the U.S. typically had difficulty establishing sponsorship. Many "settled into lower-income neighborhoods..." and were "unable to put the skills and training obtained in their home country... because most U.S. employers did not recognize work experience from their homeland" (Maffini & Pham, 2016). As a result, many refugees were relegated to a life of hardship, with a negative impact on the next generation.

South East Asians, the Generation Gap, and Mental Health

Second generation youth often have developed values that don't align with those of their parents. For example, immigrant families from South East Asia generally believe their children should meet family needs and decisions, rather than pursuing personal interests and goals (Ying & Han, 2007). With acculturation in the U.S., however, many youngsters come to value independence over meeting family expectations. This can produce conflicts that lead to emotional, behavioral, and learning problems.

Rumbaut and Ima (1988) have highlighted that some immigrant parents "place added pressure on their children to excel academically to ensure a better life for the entire family," and that this pressure often can be so overwhelming that the youngsters feel obligated to pursue career paths that are inconsistent with their personal values and interests.

With respect to emotional development, Nguyen and colleagues (2020) report that the parents of Southeast Asian children tend to use authoritarian-like and controlling parenting practices. As a result, too often their children internalize feelings of resentment, self-loathing, and disconnection from their parents, and generational conflict is exacerbated. In contrast, they stress that "adolescents

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who receive autonomy support from their parents develop higher self-esteem, experience fewer internalizing symptoms, and have better academic performance and closer relationships with their parents compared to their peers who receive less parental autonomy support."

Research suggests that many of the problems manifested by South East Asian American youth can be attributed to the failure of their parents to face their own past and current traumatic events and their failure to acknowledge their children's emotional struggles (e.g., Spencer & Le, 2006; Waldorf & Hunt, 1995; Ying, & Han, 2007). Lee and colleagues (2015) report that Southeast Asians are more likely to have mood and anxiety disorders compared to East Asians and South Asians.

Despite the many mental health concerns experienced by South East Asian immigrant families, negative emotional reactions are rarely discussed and pursuit of mental health help is stigmatized. This all contributes to problems at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

SEA Students and Schooling

Whatever the family's mental health status, many South East Asian youngsters have demanding family obligations that interfere with their schooling. For example, Ngo and Lee (2007) note that "Vietnamese students must juggle responsibilities in the home with household chores and as translators and cultural brokers for parents and other relatives." The responsibilities related to the household can become more of a priority than their education, to the point of some dropping out of school. More generally, their options and opportunities too often are limited by insufficient family finances, inadequate academic and health supports, and negative interactions with people who are culturally insensitive and even hostile (Museus, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007)

"SEA students face multiple barriers and challenges in school: language barriers, insufficient support for parent engagement, gaps in mental health treatment, race-based bullying and harassment, and socio-economic barriers that prevent students from accessing and completing higher education. Only 14% of Laotian, 17% of Hmong and Cambodian, and 27% of Vietnamese Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 54% of Asian Americans overall. In California and across the country, SEAA students face cultural invisibility, lack culturally relevant support, and experience intergenerational educational challenges that create marginalization in schools and further educational disparities."

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
<https://www.searac.org/programming/national-state-policy-advocacy/education/>

Earlier data indicated that Southeast Asian Americans had the lowest high school graduation and bachelor degree rates (lower than both Latinos and African Americans). Data from 2010 report that "34.3% of Laotians, 38.5% of Cambodians, and 39.6% of Hmong adults in the U.S. do not have a high school diploma. The 2006-2008 American Community Survey showed that 65.8% of Cambodian, 66.5% of Laotian, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college" (in Ng, Chan, & Chen, 2017) .

Ng and colleagues (2017) stress: “When Southeast Asian Americans get grouped into the stereotypical category of “Asians”, they are not able to receive the necessary support needed because societal expectations propose that all Asian Americans are more than capable of graduating high school and college. For example, Southeast Asian Americans are denied access to financial and academic support because they have checked the “Asian” category box.”

Due to financial instability, community college often is a more feasible option for Southeast Asian students than a university. At the same time, research indicates that SEA students are much more likely to drop out and not obtain degrees from college. Family difficulties and generational differences play significant roles when students don’t succeed in higher education.

A Note about Excessive Parental Pressures to Succeed

Museus (2006) reports that “earlier research suggested that, for some Vietnamese students, pressure to succeed for the family and inability to do well in school can lead to an immense sense of failure (Conchas, 2006).” He then notes that the findings from his study suggest that excessive parental pressure can also lead some SEA students to feel unable to please their parents and that they are “doomed to fail, ultimately resulting in a diminution of motivation to succeed.”

Museus emphasizes that in his study:

Only two participants discussed cases in which the pressures from parents became excessive and adversely influenced success. Anna, for example, discussed how her mother's expectations were so high that she could not be pleased, which was associated with a diminution of Anna's motivation to succeed:

My mom she never seemed happy enough . . . Every time I did well at something, she never really seemed to care. It didn't make a difference. So, for a while . . . I just didn't have any motivation and I didn't really care about college then. I knew it was important, but you don't have any motivation. So that was a negative influence, I guess.

Patricia felt that parental pressures ultimately led to her brother dropping out of college and, since they learned from that experience, her parents put less pressure on her to succeed:

I guess they learned from earlier with my older brother . . . They learned that it could be stressful and all the pressure would get overwhelming. It didn't really work out with my brother because my dad had high expectations . . . He ended up becoming a dropout. My dad became disappointed, and I guess he learned from that that he didn't want to force any of that on anyone else.

Besides parental factors, Ngo and Sablan (2019) note that "SEA students also cite the lack of representation of other SEA students and faculty, cultural differences on college campuses, and racial discrimination as persistent challenges in postsecondary settings."

Some General Implications for Schools

In addressing the needs of South East Asian immigrant and American students, schools have a general role to pursue, and student support staff have a specific role to play. The ways in which parents are involved also can be critical. Schools always need to help educate and encourage families to support a positive approach to learning and avoid inappropriately pressuring youngsters. Participating with culturally-based organizations also is recommended as a way to address problems.

To create a school environment in which SEA students feel understood, appreciated, and included, there must be activities and the curriculum that are a good fit with their interests and capabilities. Examples are South East Asian clubs, South East Asian faculty on the staff, ethnic studies that include South East Asian history and experiences, and staff development that accounts for student diversity. In addition, for those who need mental health help, schools must play a role in enhancing access and referral to appropriate assistance. As always, equity concerns are especially important for students who have limited access to healthcare or financial barriers. And with respect to social justice and prevention of problems, school must do more to counter factors that stigmatize and negatively affect the well-being of any student.

Our Center extensively has delineated the school's role in addressing emotional, behavioral, and learning problems (e.g., see *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html).

A Personal Comment from Jordan whose Parents are From Vietnam

My mom and dad grew up in Vietnam. They were part of the 2nd wave of Vietnamese refugees. When my parents were finally able to successfully escape, they still had to wait for sponsorship in order to gain entry into U.S. After separation from their family members for an extended period of time, the lives and homes that they had spent so much effort and time building up in Vietnam became a just a painful memory. The trauma they have experienced persists into the next generation and contributes to intergenerational conflicts that affect overall well-being and success at school and beyond. There is a need for more research on this, and more discourse and support systems must be generated for Southeast Asian American students and families.

Concluding Comments

Schools must always be sensitive to students' problems and work to enhance supports that effectively prevent and respond to problems. This clearly includes every student as is the intent of the *Every Student Succeed Act*.

At the same time, our Center emphasizes that advocacy for a *special initiative* focused on mental health problems among any specific group will just add to the fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to support all students. Rather than establishing another problem-specific initiative, our Center provide a blueprint for how schools can embed their focus on mental health concerns for all students into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>).

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A Few Other Related Resources from the Center

- > *Underrepresented Minorities: Making it to and Staying in Postsecondary Education* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecond.pdf>
 - > *Cultural Concerns in Addressing Barriers to Learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cultural/culture.pdf>
 - > *International Students: Understanding and Addressing Problems Experienced During the Pandemic* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/internat.pdf>
- For more links to resources from the Center and others, see the Centers' Quick Finds. For example:
- Immigrant Students and Mental Health* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/immigrantkids.htm>
 - Cultural Competence and Related Issues* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cultural/culture.pdf>

And here are two relevant agencies:

- National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA)** <https://www.naapimha.org/>
- The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)** <https://www.searac.org/>