

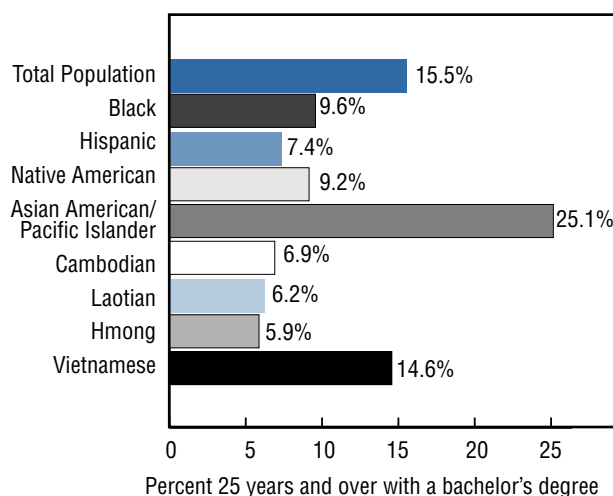
Southeast Asian American Children: Not the “Model Minority”

KaYing Yang

Although an impressive number of Americans whose ancestors are from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (“Southeast Asian Americans”) have achieved tremendous success in education,¹ a disproportionate number have found it difficult to succeed academically.² Yet their difficulties are largely invisible to policymakers, who tend to look only to the aggregate data on Asian Americans—data that suggest that, as one large undifferentiated group,

Asian Americans are doing quite well.³ They are considered to be doing so well, in fact, that they are called the “model minority.” For example, in 2000, 25.2% of Asian Americans aged 25 and over held bachelor’s degrees or higher, compared with 15.5% of Americans overall.^{4,5} In contrast, among the various Southeast Asian American groups, the percentage with bachelor’s degrees ranged from 5.9% to 14.8%—proportions that more closely resemble those of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, than those of Asian Americans in aggregate. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1
Educational Attainment, 2000



Source: Based on data from U.S. Census Bureau, American Factfinder, Census 2000 Summary File 4; and U.S. Census Bureau, Current Populations Survey, March 2000, Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch, Population Division (Internet release date: June 18, 2003).

Significant numbers of Southeast Asian Americans now live in the United States. According to the 2000 Census, 1,814,301 people in the United States reported that their heritage was Southeast Asian: 206,052 from Cambodia, 384,513 from Laos (including 186,310 Hmong), and 1,223,736 from Vietnam. Southeast Asian Americans accounted for approximately 15.2% of those reported to have an Asian/Pacific Islander heritage, and 6.4% of the total U.S. population overall.⁶ Given the profound contributions of Southeast Asian Americans to U.S. history, their present community development efforts, and most importantly, their current indications of need, it is essential that decision-makers focus added attention on the education of this particular group of Asian Americans.

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Most Southeast Asian Americans arrived in the United States as refugees after 1975, or are the children of refugees. Parents in these communities endured tremendous hardship for the sake of their children, and for the most part, they promote their sons' and daughters' success in school to the full extent of their ability. Yet nearly three decades after the beginning of their refugee flight from Southeast Asia to the United States, many of their children continue to struggle with formal education due to a variety of factors including limited English language skills; discrimination; systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers; and widespread feelings of alienation from mainstream schools. With small infusions of external support to help overcome these barriers, it is likely that the enthusiasm and commitment of Southeast Asian American parents and their children could produce great academic success within a short period of time.

Limited English Skills

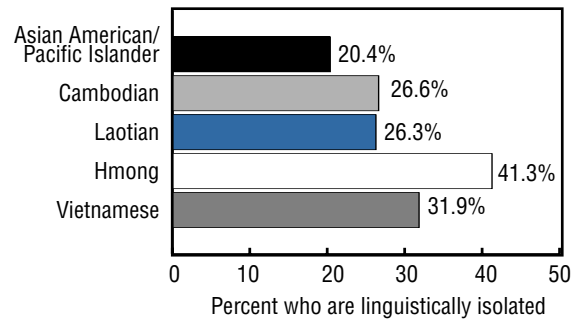
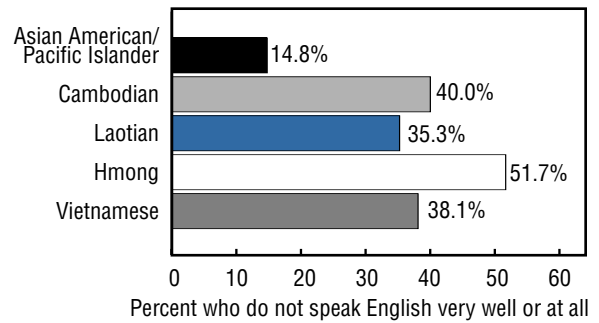
According to the 1990 Census, a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans had severe problems with the English language. Figures from the 2000 Census show improvements in this area, but it is clear that a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans remain "limited English proficient" (LEP). (See Figure 2.) These difficulties endure, in part, because many community members arrived in this country unable to read and write in their native languages, and many suffer from trauma-related illnesses. Also, many people lack the time and energy to participate in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes as a result of their long work hours.

Even Southeast Asian American children who were born in this country often have difficulty with the English language when they first arrive at school. For example, in 1998, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported that in 1998, 7,706 Khmer (from Cambodia) and 5,712 Vietnamese students did not speak English as their primary language.⁷ In 2000, California public schools reported having 93,908 LEP students who primarily spoke the Southeast Asian languages of Hmong, Khmer, Lao, Mien, and Vietnamese in their homes, 6.2% of the total LEP population in the state.⁸

Efforts to decrease or eliminate assistance directed specifically toward LEP students are troubling for Southeast

Figure 2

Southeast Asian American English Language Abilities, 2000



Source: Based on data from U.S. Census Bureau, American Factfinder, Census 2000 Summary File 4.

Asian American communities, especially in light of the proliferation of "standards" and "high-stakes testing." The debate about whether these are useful tools to improve education is complex. Nevertheless, most researchers and practitioners believe that high-stakes testing will have the greatest consequences on minority students, English-language learners, and students with disabilities, and will result in these students being disproportionately retained in grades and denied high-school diplomas.⁹ Critics have argued that schools do not expose these students to the knowledge and skills that are necessary to pass the tests. They point out that simply instituting such tests does not address the concern about how to improve learning. Furthermore, research has shown that increased retention increases dropout rates. As a result, high-stakes testing will likely create an increasingly large class of students who are

at increased risk of dropout by virtue of having been retained in a grade one or more times. Moreover, such initiatives have the potential to make otherwise well-qualified students who are English-language learners ineligible for graduation and eventual attendance in their only affordable institutions of higher learning: state colleges and universities.

Systematic Miscommunication between Students, Parents, and Teachers

Southeast Asian American parents and children often have trouble communicating with each another, and people in both groups often find it difficult to communicate with teachers and school personnel. Consequently, many parents have limited knowledge of, and impact on, their children's educational development. Lacking the support and guidance they need from their parents, many students rely heavily on advice from their peers. Although their peers may share their challenges, they generally lack the maturity and understanding to provide wise guidance.

Communication gaps between parents, children, and school personnel are more complex than they may first appear. Most obviously, language barriers often keep the groups separate. In addition, as noted above, relatively high percentages of Southeast Asian Americans lack extensive experience with higher education (or formal education of any sort). For this reason, Southeast Asian American parents are often poorly equipped to serve as educational mentors to their children and to communicate with teachers. For example, as described in the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue, immigrant parents are often unaware of opportunities for college financial aid, and sometimes they are unaware of the specific roles teachers play in our society. Furthermore, students, parents, and teachers often have conflicting communication styles. Teachers generally expect parents to come to them with questions about their children's educational future. But Southeast Asian American parents often are shy, and therefore reluctant to engage intimately with others. Also, their lack of English skills makes it difficult for them to learn new things. Many suffer from trauma-related illnesses resulting from their experiences of persecution, displacement, and war in Southeast Asia, and some remain more focused on life in Southeast Asia than in the United States.¹⁰

Southeast Asian American students also often have communication styles that contrast with those of their parents and teachers. Many students are not fluent in their native language or unable to speak in ways that their elders consider polite, while at the same time they want their parents to show expressions of affection and encouragement that they have grown accustomed to seeing in their "American" friends. Furthermore, the dress, attitudes, and Americanized assertiveness and individuality of young Southeast Asian Americans can sometimes give others the impression that they are belligerent gang members. Such communication difficulties and negative stereotypes contribute to the impression among some teachers that Southeast Asian American students are poor prospects for academic advancement. These factors also contribute to feelings of powerlessness among some Southeast Asian American families about the ability of their children to achieve academic success.¹¹

Many Southeast Asian American parents and children also find it difficult to communicate with each other because they have very different conceptions of healthy parent/child relationships. Surrounded by a multi-cultural environment with many perspectives on family values in the United States, some Southeast Asian Americans have become confused about what is "American" and what is "traditional cultural practice." Young people have adopted more typically American ideas that emphasize the rights of children to make decisions for themselves. These ideas often conflict with parental convictions, brought from Southeast Asia, that parents should be strong authority figures who play a central role in shaping the child's future.¹² In fact, many parents see their children as their caregivers during retirement and feel it is the child's responsibility and obligation to carry out this role. This kind of expectation is planted early on, creating a sense of burden that is difficult for a young child to understand within the American context.

Community-based organizations—including mutual assistance associations and other organizations (such as temples and churches)—have been proven to have the ability to provide environments in which Southeast Asian Americans flourish academically, in part by fostering healthy communication between students, parents, and teachers.¹³ These organizations provide

supports that help validate the cultural and historical context of Southeast Asian Americans as they adjust to U.S. society. Unfortunately, most communities lack such programs.

Discrimination

Policymakers on the state and national levels tend to overlook the specific educational needs and assets of Southeast Asian Americans and to remain under the influence of the “model minority” myth. But at the local level, some educators and school administrators take a different view that is equally damaging and unrealistic—that Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American students are incapable of first-rate academic achievement. Accounts of teachers telling their students they should not consider going to college are commonplace. Some teachers discourage their Southeast Asian students from taking advanced courses or pursuing scholarship opportunities.¹⁴ Indeed, a study conducted in 2000 by Santa Clara County, California, found that 11.5% of Vietnamese Americans in the sample (the only Southeast Asian Americans studied) felt that teachers discriminated against them.¹⁵ This was the highest for any refugee or immigrant group studied, and was more than twice the percentage for Asian Americans overall (at 5.0%).¹⁶

Southeast Asian American students are placed in a difficult position. On the one hand, policymakers neglect to acknowledge their academic plight and to give them access to the educational resources and institutional support they need to overcome the barriers to success. On the other hand, many of the people who structure their daily academic environment—teachers, peers, and others—treat them as if they are incapable of succeeding, and in various ways convince them that they should give up on school. Research findings from over a decade ago, focused on Hmong Americans in California, may still hold true for large numbers of Southeast Asian American students. The authors of the study concluded, “The most disturbing finding of our research was that some children have stopped trying to learn and have accepted and internalized their [learning] ‘disabilities’ as their own personal attribute, not as a consequence of historical circumstances and dysfunctional instructional arrangements.”¹⁷

Widespread Feelings of Alienation from Mainstream Schools

Southeast Asian American students often feel alienated from their schools—they feel as if they do not really “belong” in them. In part, this is because not enough of their schools tailor curricula specifically for them, and in part because there are not enough Southeast Asian American teachers and staff in educational institutions. Some schools have begun to address these shortcomings by, for example, giving their students the option of taking Southeast Asian language classes to fulfill foreign language requirements by teaching about Southeast Asian history and culture, and by recruiting more Southeast Asian American teachers and staff.¹⁸

Courses acknowledging the value of Southeast Asian cultures and languages can help motivate students to succeed.¹⁹ Courses in Southeast Asian studies can also counteract the negative stereotypes teachers often have of their Southeast Asian students.²⁰ Teachers are more likely to be genuinely growth-encouraging when they hold positive views about their students, and when they understand the challenges Southeast Asian Americans face in historical and cultural context. In addition, non-Southeast Asian American students benefit from courses that enable them to become global citizens who appreciate the historical legacies, cultural contributions, spiritual commitments, and political lessons of Southeast Asia.²¹

Finally, courses in Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American studies can help young people better understand their own lives and the lives of their parents, and thereby assist with intergenerational reconciliation. Because of their trauma-related illnesses and the difficulties they experienced while adjusting to U.S. society, many parents do not teach their children about the challenges they faced to survive in their homelands, arrive in this country, and build better lives for their families. As a result, many children lack gratitude for their parents. They also often lack understanding not only of the depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) many of their parents face from the past, but also of the struggles with discrimination and hardship that families continue to confront in the United States. Learning about the histories and cultures of Southeast Asians in the United States and overseas can help children to feel

compassion and love for their parents and other elders, while developing values and visions of healing and social justice for their communities. (See Box 1.)

Just as many Southeast Asian American students feel alienated from their schools because curricula do not reflect their heritage, many also feel alienated because few schools have sufficient Southeast Asian American representation on staff. Even in California, the state with the largest number of Southeast Asian Americans, policymakers neglect to ensure that Southeast Asian Americans have access to the educational support they need from bilingual staff. For example, one study found that in 1997, California had only 72 certified bilingual Vietnamese teachers for 47,663 Vietnamese-speaking students (ratio: 1:662), 28 certified bilingual Hmong teachers for 31,156 Hmong-speaking students (ratio: 1:1,113), and 5 certified bilingual Khmer teachers for 20,645 Khmer-speaking students (ratio: 1:4,129).²² According to the study's author, "The fundamental problem is a blatant lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of schools and teachers concerning the needs of Southeast Asian students." Others might add that teachers of all ethnic groups are in short supply, and that programs for training Southeast Asian American bilingual teachers are too rare. In all likelihood, all of these factors (and others) contribute to the longstanding shortage.²³

It is important that Southeast Asian American students have access to teachers and other staff of their own ethnicity for several reasons. They can understand and negotiate the family, cultural, and personal dynamics of their students in ways that are rare among other teachers. They can also share knowledge of Southeast Asian cultures with their peers, and thereby create school-wide changes. Furthermore, they can provide inspirational examples of academic achievement for their students, many of whom would not otherwise personally know people of their own ethnicity who have graduated from college.²⁴

Recommendations

Policymakers, educators, and community leaders must recognize that Southeast Asian Americans are not part of some fictional "model minority" that succeeds easily in the United States. At the same time, most Southeast

Asian Americans, like most other Americans, have deep respect for academic pursuits, and they seek educational advancement with all of the resources available to them. By supporting their commitment and enthusiasm in relatively modest ways, as outlined below, the educational trajectories of Southeast Asian American children could be significantly improved.

1. Disaggregate and disseminate more data. Policymakers, teachers, and other decision-makers need better information on Southeast Asian Americans in education in order to make better-informed decisions. Research institutions and agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau should disaggregate data for particular Southeast Asian American groups, and then release their data in a timely and widely accessible fashion.

2. Promote Southeast Asian American studies, courses, and personnel. Colleges and other educational institutions with significant community representation should integrate Southeast Asian language,

Box 1

A Cambodian American Perspective

One group of Cambodian Americans in Philadelphia expressed views that might also apply to other communities:

- ▶ Our people need to come together to build a stronger community and we still need to work on that. Education on cultural awareness is needed to help families stay together in peace. It's good when family members know two cultures, but when two cultures are practiced in the same household, but the members don't understand each other, there can be conflict.
- ▶ Asian studies are too limited in the American educational system. Hardly anything is taught about Cambodian culture and history. Some teachers don't even know where Cambodia is and who we are. We feel ignored and left out. Some Cambodians are not proud of their own race because of what they have been through and what they have experienced in life as Cambodian, and don't want to be identified or tell others that they are Cambodian.

Source: As told to a SEARAC staff member in 2000.

history, and culture components within their mainstream curricula, and train and hire more Southeast Asian American teachers and personnel. By taking these steps, schools can motivate students to succeed, foster better communication with communities and parents, and diminish dangers of discrimination by providing non-Southeast Asians with accurate information about their neighbors.

3. Support community organizations. Community-based organizations, such as mutual assistance associations and faith-based organizations, promote academic success by facilitating healthy communication and information-exchange between groups separated by language and culture. They also provide students with environments that enhance academic achievement. These types of community organizations should be supported in their promotion of academic success by providing them with technical assistance, funding opportunities, and access to models of best practices.

4. Create new systems for financial and technical support. To make the American educational system more equitable, greater financial incentives should be provided to Southeast Asian American students and the institutions of higher learning reaching out to them. Current legislative efforts,²⁵ as well as efforts now underway to establish an Asian and Pacific Islander American college fund (or group of funds), similar to those of African, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Ameri-

cans, have the potential to significantly aid in Southeast Asian American quests for educational success.

Despite their tumultuous and tragic history within the last 30 years, Southeast Asian American families have demonstrated a resilience that has resulted in many success stories. Many have rebuilt their lives and have instilled great hope and aspirations in their children. Their achievements have been remarkable. Yet, many Southeast Asian American families continue to struggle with unmet needs. The “model minority” myth that is still so often applied to Asian Americans of all backgrounds, regardless of their distinguishing characteristics, must be overcome. Only by recognizing the educational disparities for Southeast Asian American children can their barriers to success be addressed and their academic potential realized. If this vital segment of the next generation of Americans is provided with access to quality and equitable educational opportunities, it is without a doubt that their productivity, strength, and resiliency will continue to grow by leaps and bounds.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, in one 1990 study of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the high school dropout rate among American-born Vietnamese aged 16 through 19 was lower than the rate among whites: 5% versus 8%; and college entrance rates among the Vietnamese cohort were higher than among whites: 50% versus 38%. See Zhou, M., and Bankston, III, C.L. *Straddling two social worlds: The experience of Vietnamese refugee children in the United States*. Urban diversity series no. 111. New York, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse for Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, 2000, p. 33. Also see Cheng, L., and Yang, P.Q. The “model minority” deconstructed. In *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader*. M. Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, eds. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 459–482; and Rumbaut, R.G. Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans. In *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader*. M. Zhou and J.V.

Gatewood, eds. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 175–206.

2. For example, see Rumbaut, R.G. The new Californians: Comparative research findings on the educational progress of immigrant children. In *California’s immigrant children: Theory, research, and implications for educational policy*. R.G. Rumbaut and W.A. Cornelius, eds. San Diego, CA: The Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1995, pp. 17–69.
3. For example, in 1999, the influential College Board released a report, *Reaching the top: A report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*, that neglected to examine any disaggregated data for Asian/Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs). As a result, the report neglected to recommend that special efforts be targeted to any APIA group. The report is available online at

- <http://www.collegeboard.com/research/abstract/0,1273,3876,00.html>. Spurred to action by this report, in May 2001, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), under the leadership of Congressman Robert Underwood of Guam, collaborated with SEARAC to gather community scholars together for a “Summit on the Status of Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian-Americans in Higher Education.” Information from the summit and other related materials are available online at <http://www.searac.org/highedsummit.html>.
4. Census 2000 data available on the U.S. Census Bureau Web site at <http://www.census.gov>.
 5. See also Rumbaut, R.G. *Transformations: The post-immigrant generation in an age of diversity*. JSRI research report no. 30. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, The Julian Samora Research Institute, 1999, pp. 6–7. Accessible online at <http://www.jsri.msu.edu/RandS/research/irr/rr30.html>; Um, K. *A dream denied: Educational experiences of Southeast Asian American youth—Issues and recommendations*. An issue paper based on findings from the first national Southeast Asian Youth Summit. Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2003, p. ii. Accessible online at http://www.searac.org/pryd-3_11_03.html; Frisbie, W.P., Cho, Y., and Hummer, R.A. Immigration and the health of Asian and Pacific Islander adults in the United States. *American Journal of Epidemiology* (2001) 153(4):372–380; Taylor, E.H., and Barton, L.S. *Southeast Asian refugee English proficiency and education in Texas*. Austin, TX: Texas Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs, (no date provided); Texas Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs. *Vietnamese, Laotian, Ethiopian, and former Soviet Union refugees in Texas: Findings from the Texas refugee study*. Austin, TX: Texas Department of Health and Human Services, OIRA, (no date provided); and Hobbs, R., ed. *Bridging borders in Silicon Valley: Summit on immigrant needs and contributions*. San Jose, CA: Santa Clara County Office of Human Relations, Citizenship and Immigrant Services Program, 2000, p. 93.
 6. Total U.S. population: 281,421,906. Total number of people who reported Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage: 11,898,828. See Census 2000 data, available on the U.S. Bureau of Census Web site at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf>.
 7. Massachusetts Department of Public Health. *Southeast Asians. In Refugees and immigrants in Massachusetts: An overview of selected communities*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Family and Community Health, Office of Refugee and Immigrant Health, 1999.
 8. These data were drawn from the R30 Census of California’s Department of Education, accessed online at <http://www.searc.org/pages/demogr.html>, and from the California Department of Education Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/>. See also note 2, Rumbaut, p. 32.
 9. See Heubert, J.P. *High-stakes testing: Opportunities and risks for students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum, Center for Applied Special Technology, 2000. Available online at <http://www.cast.org/ncac/index.cfm?i=920>.
 10. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime and people who were imprisoned in reeducation camps (such as recent arrivals from Vietnam under the Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Refugees Program) are particularly likely to suffer from trauma-related illnesses, which are appropriately treated by only a small number of clinicians operating in a few areas. These illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and head injury, impair their sufferers’ abilities to relate intimately with others, take on new life challenges, and learn new skills. See note 5, Um, p. 34.
 11. See note 5, Um, pp. 7, 17–19.
 12. See note 1, Zhou and Bankston, pp. 66–67.
 13. Zhou, M., and Bankston, III, C.L. *Growing up American: How Vietnamese children adapt to life in the United States*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998, pp. 73, 107, 222, and 237. See also Olsen, L. *An invisible crisis: Educational needs of Asian Pacific American youth*. San Francisco, CA: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 1997. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) is a national “affinity group” for grant makers who are particularly concerned with the welfare of Asian and Pacific Islander American communities. For more information, see the AAPIP Web site at <http://www.aapip.org>.
 14. See note 5, Um, pp. 6–8.
 15. See note 5, Hobbs, p. 100.
 16. See also note 5, Rumbaut, 1999, p. 10. In this 1992 and 1995 study in Southern California and South Florida, Rumbaut found further confirmation that Southeast Asian American students in these sites were more likely than most other refugees and immigrants to experience discrimination, and to expect to be discriminated against in the future.
 17. Trueba, H.J., Jacobs, L., and Kirton, E. *Cultural conflict and adaptation: The case of Hmong children in American society*. New York, NY: The Falmer Press, 1990, p. 104.
 18. Acknowledging the importance of curricula that address the particular linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics of student populations, AAPIP recommended that fellow grant makers “Promote research, development, and staff training in the use of multicultural curricula that portray the history and culture of Asian Pacific Americans, and of anti-racism curricula that support direct and honest dialogue among students.” See note 13, Olsen, p. 35.
 19. Saetern, M.K. *Iu Mien in America: Who we are*. Oakland, CA: Graphic House Press, 1998, p. 92.
 20. See note 17, Trueba, et al., p. 106.
 21. See, for example, Kiang, P.N. Pedagogies of life and death: Transforming immigrant/refugee students and Asian American studies. *Positions* (1997) 5(2):529–555; Kiang, P.N. Writing from the past, writing for the future: Healing effects of Asian American studies in the curriculum. *Transformations: A Resource for Curriculum Transformation and Scholarship* (1998) 9(2):132–149; and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Long-term effects of diversity in the curriculum: Analyzing the impact of Asian American studies in the lives of alumni from an urban commuter university. In *Diversity on campus: Reports from the field*. Washington, DC: NASPA, 2000, pp. 23–25.
 22. Chu, N.V. Re-examining the model minority myth: A look at Southeast Asian youth. *McNair Journal* (Winter 1997) vol. 5. Available online at <http://www-mcnair.berkeley.edu/97Journal/Chu.html>. Also see note 2, Rumbaut, pp. 33–34, for figures on bilingual educators in California in 1993.
 23. Personal communication with Dr. Serec Weroha, Education Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, in April 2002. Dr. Weroha noted that one reason for the shortage of Southeast Asian American teachers is that not enough Southeast Asian American professionals take the initiative to lead and recruit Southeast Asian Americans who may want to become teachers.
 24. See, for example, Johnson, T., Boyden, J.E., and Pittz, W.J. *Racial profiling and punishment in U.S. public schools: How zero tolerance policies and high stakes testing subvert academic excellence and racial equality*. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center, 2001, p. 21. Available online at <http://www.arc.org/erase/index.html>.
 25. See, for example, legislative efforts such as H.R. 333, which would “amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to authorize grants for institutions of higher education serving Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.” H.R. 333 is available online at <http://thomas.loc.gov>.