A Comparison of Family Characteristics of Asian-American and Anglo-American High Achievers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in family characteristics of Asian-American and Anglo-American high achievers. Sixty matched parents were interviewed concerning four areas. The findings suggest that the family life of Anglo-American students tends to be less structured and provide less formal educational experience for children after school and on weekends. Similarities between these two groups include high parental expectation, concerned parents, stable family environment and close-knit family relationships.

During the past few years, the academic achievements of Asian-American children have been recognized not only by classroom teachers, school counselors, and administrators, but also by the general public via the mass media. Successful stories of Indochinese refugee children are frequently presented to the public as, for example, on such occasions as the GOP national convention in 1984. Their high achievement is reflected by their numbers as recipients of Merit Scholarships, Westinghouse Science Talent Search Awards, and scholarships from leading universities, and has attracted the attention of many educators and psychologists who are focusing on the potential variables contributing to these accomplishments.

Facts regarding the academic commitment of these Asian-American students and their high scores in math and science tests have been well-documented. Asian-American students frequently scored higher than other students, particularly in the areas of math and science (Frechtling, et al, 1983; Hsia, 1981; Okada, 1984; and Peng, et al, 1984). Even immigrants who had been in the United States less than six years performed well on the math and science tests in spite of their lack of proficiency in English (Peng, et al, 1984). Several variables have been considered by researchers investigating this phenomenon: attitude toward school, parental expectation, cognitive development, gender difference, extra-curricular activities and parent-child relation-
ships (Campbell, et al. 1984; Hsia, 1981; Okada, 1984; Peng, et al, 1984; and Yao and Prator, 1984). Many educators and laymen have speculated that the accomplishments of Asian-American students are contributed to by their unique cultural traits in the above-mentioned areas and their traditional value system which stresses the significance of education. Some characteristics of the learners, their parents, and their lifestyles have been examined by researchers (Peng, et al, 1984; and Yao and Prater, 1984). Yet, the cause-effect relationship has not been investigated.

In order to determine whether the high achievements of Asian-American students are related to their cultural heritage, especially in the area of family life, the researcher compared the family characteristics of high achievers of both Asian and Anglo-American students. The hypothesis of this study is that the process behaviors of Asian families producing high achievers are different from those of comparable Anglo families in some manipulable family variables.

Literature Reviews

There is a large body of research literature that addresses the topic of academic achievement and its relationship to various factors including motivation, family environment and intelligence quotient. As the United States becomes more culturally varied, questions arise as to whether these relationships are consistent across cultures. This particular aspect of academic achievement research is still in its infancy. Most of the studies focus on either black or white subjects and their results and conclusions are confined to one ethnic group with little control on the variance of cultural force. Thus, a cross-culture study would be desirable to yield more valid information on the factors contributing to children's academic achievements.

Since influences at home are greater than those at school in effecting achievement (Comer, 1984 and Dolan, 1983), the researcher has narrowed her scope of study to the family characteristics of high achievers. Based on the reviewed literature, some familiar elements are found to be influential on high achievers, especially in those studies of low-income black families.

The attitude of parents toward education and the expectation of school teachers have made quite an impact on the learning results of their children (Gabel, et al, 1977). Based on Feldman and Theiss' study (1982), the more parents and students expected from school, the higher achievement the students attained. The more the parents expressed concern for their children's progress in school, the more the teacher matched that attitude (Goldman, 1973). Furthermore, the parents belief in the use of schooling as enhancement for the child's future also contributed to his chances of success in school (Durkin, 1984). Parents often kept close contact with their children's teachers to insure children's achievement. The awareness of parents concerning the school program, no matter what their income, is conducive to high achievement (Scheinfeld, 1983, and Shade, 1978). This parental contact with the