Challenging the Politics of the "Model Minority" Stereotype: A Case for Educational Equality

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This article examines the political rationale of the "model minority" stereotype about Asian Americans and its ramifications on education. Created by white elites in the 1960s as a device of political control, the model minority stereotype continues to serve the larger conservative restoration in American society today. By over-emphasizing Asian American success and misrepresenting it as proof of the perceived equal opportunity in American society, proponents of the stereotype downplay racism and other structural problems Asians and other minority groups continue to suffer. The theory that Asians succeed by merit (strong family, hard work, and high regard for education) is used by power elites to silence the protesting voices of racial minorities and even disadvantaged Whites and to maintain the status quo in race and power relations. In education, the model minority thesis has always supported conservative agendas in school reform. Now it goes hand in hand with the meritocracy myth and promotes educational policy that emphasizes accountability, standards, competition, and individual choice, while trivializing social conditions of schooling and unequal educational opportunities facing different student groups. It is the responsibility of educators to deconstruct the "model minority" stereotype and any other stereotypes or myths prevailing in education discourse, and seriously challenge racism, class division, and other structural problems. Social justice and equality must become a guiding principle for school reform and educational policy.

Since its origin in the 1960s, the "model minority" narrative has remained an important part of the public discourse in the United States. This stereotypical view of Asian Americans has had profound influences in areas such as race relations, social policy, and educational reform. Although the revisionist critique of the model minority thesis seems to have dominated the scholarship for the past two decades (Min, 1995; Spring, 2001), the need for more in-depth critical studies still remains. Such critical studies may be especially important now that the public discourse on social issues, such as education, is characterized more saliently than ever before by a "conservative restoration" (Apple, 1996). There is a strong correlation between the model minority stereotype and the standards-based, test-driven school reform movement that emphasizes individual values and efforts but trivializes social injustice and educational inequalities, characteristics that make up the core of the model minority thesis.

Echoing the extant critical literature, this article examines the politics of the model minority stereotype and its ramifications on education. It begins with an overview of the model minority thesis, focusing on the inherent flaws in its argument. The article then goes on to examine the social background and political rationale behind the model minority narrative. The article attempts to reveal the larger, visible and invisible relations of power that the model minority narrative functions to serve and maintain by investigating who the narrator has been, for whom, and what effects this has had on different racial groups. Finally, this article explores how the model minority stereotype has formed an alliance with the conservative-oriented school reform of today. The analysis targets the individualist nature of the current school reform movement and reveals how the model minority thesis reinforces the conservatism underlying educational policies that moves school reform away from its commitment to social justice and equity.

THE STEREOTYPING OF ASIAN AMERICANS: FROM "YELLOW PERIL" TO "MODEL MINORITY"

Like other racial and ethnic minority groups, Asian Americans have historically been the target of stereotyping. Quite uniquely, they have been the focus of both negative and positive stereotypes. Negative stereotypes

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about Asian Americans have persisted since Chinese laborers first immigrated to the gold mines of California in the late 1840s. Chinese immigrants were seen as "nothing more than starving masses, beasts of burden, depraved heathens, and opium addicts" (Chan, 1991, p. 45). These prejudicial stereotypes resulted in acts of discrimination and violence, and led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which outlawed the immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States. (A similar Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in Canada in 1923.) Stereotypes and discriminatory measures were not limited to the Chinese. They also were directed toward other Asian ethnic groups such as Japanese, Filipinos, and Indians (Min, 1995).

From the late 1800s to the 1940s, in the public discourse, Asian Americans were generally portrayed as an invading "yellow peril," depraved, uncivilized, and threatening to the American way of life. Fair and just portrayals of Asians were rare and Asian immigrants' huge contributions to America, for example, building the transcontinental railroad, went unacknowledged. The continuation of this negative stereotype is evident today as Asian Americans are still viewed, more often than not, as foreigners, not as full-fledged citizens, who are either obsequious, slavish and subservient, or treacherous, deceitful, and untrustworthy (Suzuki, 2002).

Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, a different narrative about Asian Americans emerged and became popular in the U.S. media (Peterson, 1966; "Success Story," 1966). This new narrative portrays Asian Americans as a phenomenally successful and "problem free" minority group. Similar stories continued to circle around the media and also scholarly discussions in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Bell, 1985; Brand, 1987; Hamamota, 1992; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Oxnam, 1986; Peterson, 1971; Ramirez, 1986; "Success Story," 1971). These stories suggest that Asian Americans function well in American society, being somehow immune from cultural conflict and discrimination while experiencing few adjustment difficulties. Asian Americans are said to possess diligence, frugality, strong family ties, and a high regard for education. These perceived superb character traits and behaviors are linked to the perception that Asian Americans have overcome disadvantages and attained more upward social mobility compared to members of other racial minority groups.

How did this narrative of "model minority" come into vogue? By aggregating data on all of the Asian subgroups, early researchers showed that Asian Americans as a combined group appeared to be doing relatively well in comparison with other groups (Peterson, 1971; Urban Associates, 1974). For example, they found that Asian American families had a higher median annual income than U.S. families in general and that the median number of years of schooling completed by Asian Americans was higher than the U.S. population as a whole. Such analyses are rather broadly based and simplistic in nature, and yet they became the basis for the "model minority" concept. Subsequent studies have shown that when the socioeconomic data on Asian Americans were disaggregated and more sophisticated analyses conducted, a very different picture emerged (Chun, 1995; Crystal, 1989; Suzuki, 1995, 2002; Tsukada, 1988; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1988; Wong, 1982). Such analyses showed that the annual per capita income of Asian Americans was considerably less than their white counterparts who had the same level of education, and the disparity was even greater when level of education and geographical area of residence was kept consistent. And the proportion of Asian Americans living below the poverty line was considerably higher than that of the white population. These findings clearly reveal that Asian Americans were still struggling to achieve income parity with their white counterparts.

Despite these critical findings, the "model minority" stereotype continues to exert its influence. The proponents of the model minority narrative join the American popular imagination about Asians, and they focus on the fact that a large proportion of Asian Americans graduate from college every year as the overall socioeconomic status of Asian Americans continues to rise. The domestic Asian American success also coincides with the phenomenal rise of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and most recently, Mainland China, as major economic powers. The growing immigration of economically well-off Asians from those regions to North America may have reinforced the model minority view of many Americans toward Asian immigrants. What many Americans may not know is that U.S. immigration laws in the 20th century gave unprecedented preference to those who had skills, education, and resources and resulted in a dramatic increase in well-educated professionals from Asia (Yin, 2001). Nevertheless, all of these factors seem to have contributed to the perception that Asian Americans are better off economically than Whites. But more in-depth analyses of the data, again, tell a different story (Cabezas & Kawaguchi, 1988; Chan, 1989; Koo, 2001; Lawler, 2000; S. M. Lee, 1989; Shin & Chang, 1988; Tang, 1993). These critical studies clearly indicate that Whites consistently gain a substantially higher return on education than any of the Asian American groups and that the poverty rate for Asian Americans is still considerably higher than that for Whites. Moreover, Asian Americans have not yet achieved full equality and participation in American society. Although many are well educated and gain relatively easy access to entry-level jobs, they continue to face inequities in income and upward job mobility.

The purpose of this article is to reveal the political rationale behind the model minority narrative and to discuss its implications for race relations and education reform. It is true that many

Asian Americans have indeed realized the American dream—a prosperous middle-class life—and their historical achievement certainly deserves recognition and encouragement. However, the model minority thesis is more than a benevolent compliment about Asians. We must demythologize the many popular claims and smoke screens surrounding the stereotype, and deconstruct its complex dimensions and root ideologies, which are often ignored or concealed by the popular claims.

Before examining the root ideologies and power relations that have shaped the model minority stereotype, we should call attention to one problem of the model minority concept, to show the inherent flaw in its argument. As many critics have rightfully pointed out, the model minority stereotype is an overgeneralization about the extremely diverse Asian American populations. To discredit the assumption of a homogenous Asian American group, Min (1995) compares Asian Americans to people of Hispanic origin, who, despite their many differences, seem to share more cultural similarities than Asian ethnic groups. For example, as a result of Spanish colonization, Hispanic ethnic groups have at least two important cultural commonalities: the Spanish language and Catholic religion. Asian Americans, however, have no common language or religion, and are characterized by varying ethnicities, value systems, and life styles. Similarly, Teranishi (2002, 2004) points out that Asians are arguably the least homogeneous of all racial groups and Asian Americans possess an unusually wide range of social characteristics marked by diverse ethnic, social class, and immigrant experiences. Hmong refugees certainly have a different experience in the United States than, say, Chinese urban middle-class professionals. The success story attached to the model minority concept is hardly a story of Asian Americans as a group.

Especially, the proponents of such a stereotype ignore the reality that the Asian American community, like any other community, has always been polarized, and in recent years, such polarization has increased. Census reports reveal that today Asian Americans, socioeconomically, are divided into two distinct groups: the "uptown" and the "downtown." The former are well-educated professionals who reside in suburban areas and are well integrated into mainstream society; the latter are predominantly working-class immigrants struggling to survive in isolated and poor urban ghettos (Yin, 2001). The huge median-income gap among different Asian American groups is stunning in the light of mainstream perceptions about Asian American success. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), among Southeast Asian Americans, 49% live in poverty, compared to less than 10% of Japanese and Chinese Americans. Some Southeast Asian American communities face economic hardship that exceeds that of other communities of color (Teranishi, 2004). While the "models"—the economically well-off Asians—are being touted, the poor, the weak, and the powerless within the community are paid no attention. When the mainstream society chooses to focus on and laud certain Asians' American-style success story, it coldly turns its back to numerous Asian workers who are being brutally exploited under the current system. One only needs to pay a careful visit to the workplaces, such as Chinese buffet restaurants and Manhattan sweatshops, to witness the everyday survival struggles of those less fortunate Asian workers, and realize how the model minority narrative does not fit them. Those who embrace the stereotype show no interest in this reality.

In short, the model minority thesis is a stereotypical overgeneralizing representation of the diverse Asian American populations. Such representation silences the multiple voices of Asian Americans. "By painting Asian Americans as a homogeneous group, the model minority stereotype erases ethnic, cultural, social-class, gender, language, sexual, generational, achievement, and other differences" (S. J. Lee, 1996, p. 6). Yet, silencing Asian Americans is not what this stereotype is really about. The implications of the model minority stereotype go well beyond Asian Americans and reach deeply to the center of race and power relations in America. The stereotype serves a larger political purpose.

"MODEL MINORITY": DEVICE OF POLITICAL CONTROL

As J. Lee (1998) notes, the term "model" in "model minority" directly involves relations with other racial and ethnic groups. "In this sense," Lee argues, "the model minority is a racist discourse, which categorizes, evaluates, ranks, and differentiates between groups" (p. 165). A closer examination of the history of the model minority stereotype will reveal the nature of this racist discourse and its political rationale. The model minority stereotype emerged during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (S. J. Lee, 1996; Spring, 2001; Suzuki, 2002). That was not simply a coincidence. Demanding equal rights and economic opportunity, African Americans led the Civil Rights Movement that seriously challenged white supremacy and institutional racism deeply embedded in American society. To fight back, the racist power elite realized that simply responding by saying "there is no racism" would not help; it would make more sense to show an example of minority success. Then, they could claim that racism or social injustice is really not an issue because Asians have made it, why not you, too? "'If,' these European Americans seemed to say, 'the black population acted like the Asian population they could achieve economic success without criticizing the white population'" (Spring, 2001, p. 104). Thus, "Model minority" became a political instrument used to bash other minorities, African Americans in particular. Such political

motive behind the narrative was no secret. Consider the December 1966 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* story titled "Success Story of One Minority in the U.S." The article contended, "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" (p. 73).

Thus, the seemingly benign intention of the powerful group who created and spread this positive narrative about Asians becomes questionable. Obviously, the recognition of Asians was not meant for Asians only. Remember, the model minority image stands in stark contrast to the previous stereotypes of Asians as "yellow peril." Changing the narrative about one minority group serves a larger purpose to maintain the hierarchical race relations. Alleviating open discriminations, the ruling group granted Asians acceptance on the surface and used the model minority stereotype as a hegemonic device. Asian Americans were being promoted as the model minority to discredit the protests and demands for social justice of other minority groups (Suzuki, 2002). This political purpose of the model minority narrative has been maintained since the civil rights era through to today, as the New Right and neoconservative movements have continued to project Asian Americans as the "good" race and African Americans the "bad" race (S. J. Lee, 1996; Sleeter, 1993).

What does this model minority narrative mean for Asians, the very people being touted and praised? Many Asian Americans may have indeed embraced this seemingly positive label. S. J. Lee (1996) states, "Asian Americans who seek acceptance by the dominant group may try to emulate model minority behavior"(p. 9). Many Asian Americans, especially immigrants and their children, may lack a strong sense of ownership and belonging in America. They see themselves more like outsiders trying to get into the society to gain legitimate membership. This is particularly true for those Asian immigrants who have escaped the economic hardships and/or political persecution in their home countries and been drawn to the promise of free land and equal opportunity in the new world (Chan, 1991; Koo, 2001). With a genuine appreciation of any opportunities (no matter how small) offered to them, they fall into voluntary submission to the dominant power relations and follow the safe path of hard work and education. For them, being obedient and productive *is* the normalized way to survive. Reluctantly or not, these Asians realize the importance of assimilation—accepting the established social order and continually working on personal character and behaviors to adapt to existing norms and mores. Avoiding conflicts with dominant social groups, they accept "model minority" as an incentive and a compliment—it is certainly more desirable than the yellow peril kind of rejection. Their acceptance of

"model minority" usually comes along with a denial of their own cultural identity, a sacrifice they are willing to make.

Richards (1996) observes, "Asian Americans were deeply aware of the dominance and sovereignty of Whites in America and the world; they gave this dominance a wide berth, and did not really understand those who did not" (p. 138). Throughout history, the Asian American representation on the upper rung of the power ladder has been insignificant and the political activism within the Asian American community has been almost inconsequential (Min, 1995). This political inaction of Asian Americans was exactly what the powerful group wanted. S. J. Lee (1996) points out that the influential 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article singled out Chinese Americans as "good citizens" precisely because the ruling class saw them as the quiet minority who did not actively challenge the existing system. Filipina writer Jessica Hagedorn reflects on the characterization of Asian Americans this way: "In our perceived American character we are completely nonthreatening. We don't complain. We endure humiliation. We are almost inhuman in our patience. We never get angry" (cited in S. J. Lee, 1996, p. 7). Conformity, passivity, and nonresistance became the hallmark of the model minority. It is unfair to blame Asian Americans because they are indeed extremely hard working, industrious, and self-sacrificing. However, it is tragic that many Asian Americans overlook the politics of the model minority narrative and voluntarily participate in a larger political conspiracy that aims to silence, marginalize, and oppress all minorities, including themselves.

Being accepted or not, this ostensibly positive stereotype only works against Asian Americans. Particularly, the stereotype functions to de-legitimize Asian Americans' concerns and protests about racial inequalities. Asian Americans still face serious discriminatory barriers in society, yet their complaints about discrimination are often not taken seriously. Asian Americans were initially not included as a protected minority group under federal affirmative action regulations (Suzuki, 2002). Today, for example, they are still excluded from the considerations of many universities in constructing categories for minority scholarship and in recruiting minority students for admission (Takagi, 1992). Asian Americans in need of assistance are often ignored because of the perception that they have few, if any, problems; that they are self-sufficient; and that they can "take care of their own." Such stereotypical images of Asian Americans make it difficult, particularly for those underprivileged Asians, to seek support from the larger society. These Asian Americans are largely forgotten, and in many cases totally written off by society.

On the other hand, for the economically well-off Asians, from whom the stereotype has been drawn, ironically, "model minority" is nothing but a cheap and

disingenuous compliment. For example, awakened by the highly publicized Wen Ho Lee case in which the U.S. federal government falsely accused the Taiwan-born American scientist of espionage for China and kept him in solitary confinement for nine months, many Asian American researchers at national laboratories decried their status as nothing but "high-tech coolies" (Lawler, 2000, p. 172). These well-educated and loyal American citizens realized that hard work and being humble are simply not enough to earn them what they deserve and what their white colleagues enjoy. An irreplaceable source of top-notch recruits in the nation's high-tech industry, they suffer egregious salary and managerial inequities. Model minorities are still treated as second-class citizens. I think it is time for *all* Asian Americans to wake up and resist the stereotyping of them by the dominant groups. Asian Americans must realize that to embrace the "model minority" stereotype is to accept the "racist love" (Chin & Chan, 1971) and that not to challenge the stereotype is to contribute to the oppression of themselves.

The only group who benefits from such stereotyping is undoubtedly white elites. It was Whites who created and spread the model minority stereotype. Being the dominant social group, Whites realize the importance of control: Power flows not only from the control of economic production and governmental functioning but also, and even more importantly, from the control of the superstructure of a society, namely its culture, or value system. Gramsci (Hoare & Smith, 1971) informs us, a ruling class forms and maintains its hegemony and political power by creating cultural and political consensuses through political parties, the media, schools, and other voluntary associations. That is exactly what the powerful Whites have been doing in America. They have attempted to make the model minority concept, along with the more widely accepted meritocracy theory, one of the cultural consensuses that serve their hegemonic control. They overemphasize the seemingly commonsensical belief in hard work and education, and pick one particular racial group—Asians in this case, as the role model for its practice. Justifying their ideologies of morality, character, and values, they create official definitions of human conduct and establish normative frameworks for others to follow. The "model" as illustrated by Asians is a particular behavioral model, which emphasizes certain individual character traits: hard work, frugality, strong family, and high regard for education which are hailed as *the* path to individual success and personal salvation. These values are distinctly nonresistant and conservative as they emphasize passivity and conformity to established social order while devaluing critical thinking and active participation in social change. The message is clear: Societal problems such as racism and inequalities are insignificant; what really matters is the display of virtuous personal character traits and behaviors. Therefore, po-

litical struggle is not necessary; individual perfection is the answer. Asian Americans make it, so can everyone; as long as you fit into "the system."

Thus, the model minority narrative reflects the sociopolitical interests of the dominant white group and serves as a tool of their ideological control. As a device of political control, the stereotype silences the voices of Asian Americans, other racial minorities, and even disadvantaged Whites (J. Lee, 1998). Through silencing, the stereotype marginalizes these minority groups' places in society, and meanwhile, it maintains the dominance of powerful Whites in the racial hierarchy. The model minority stereotype is used to deflect people's attention away from social and structural problems, such as racism and class division, and to perpetuate a highly unequal social system. This political function of the model minority stereotype is well reflected in education.

BEYOND THE ASIAN: EQUAL EDUCATION FOR ALL

The influence of this model minority stereotype is widespread in education. The success of Asian American students can serve as a valuable lesson for all Americans, declared former U.S. Undersecretary of Education Linus Wright (1988). Wright, who had been Secretary of Education William Bennett's choice to succeed him upon Bennett's resignation, said that the educational achievements of Asian Americans demonstrate the importance of values, particularly those of close ties between parents and children. Like-minded politicians and educators, who promote conservative social and educational reforms, often express similar views.

Let us first examine the effects of the model minority stereotype on Asian American students. Since its inception, the model minority rhetoric has been discredited for its monolithic treatment and mistaken stereotyping of Asian students as uniformly successful academically. When the model minority narrative first received attention, James Coleman (1966) conducted a comprehensive study of "Equality of Educational Opportunity." The famous Coleman Report found that Asian American students as a group were not succeeding academically, certainly not "outwhiting the Whites" ("Success Story," 1971, p. 24). The subsequent influential works of Charles Silberman (1970), Colin Greer (1976), and William Ryan (1976) all showed similar findings about the school failures of minority students, including Asian American students. The major lawsuit over English immersion, "sink or swim" instruction, which went all the way to the Supreme Court in 1973–1974, with *Lau v. Nichols*, was brought on behalf of the Chinese American students suing the San Francisco school system for not providing them equal educational opportunities. The plaintiffs' briefs are filled with statistics about the academic failures and difficulties faced by Asian American

students. More recently, both the 1990 and 2000 censuses show that academic success is not universal across Asian American groups. For example, in 1998, the percentage of Southeast Asian adults with less than a high school diploma was 64%, which far exceeded the national average for all Asian Americans (23%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Asian American subgroups, such as Hmongs, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, all rank far below the national average in education (Yin, 2001). Although the enrollment number of Asian Americans in the nation's prestigious universities is highly notable, the proportion of enrollment by students from different Asian American ethnic subgroups ranges widely. For example, in 2000 Chinese Americans were nearly seven times more likely to attend University of California—Berkeley than Filipino Americans, although Chinese and Filipino American populations in California were of equal size (Teranishi, 2002, p. 144). Disregarding all of these facts, politicians like Wright generally accept a stereotypical portrait of Asian Americans. In doing so, they simply turn their backs on so many Asian American students who are victims of the education competition. These Asian American students are totally left out by the politicians who are used to overgeneralizing issues driven by their political agenda. These students are the students who need assistance; and yet, the assistance is purposefully denied under the rhetoric of the model minority narrative.

The impact of the model minority label on the so-called Asian American "high achievers" is also significant and, very often, negative. One such negative impact is that it causes and/or reinforces people's indifference and ignorance toward these students' needs and problems. Since Asian American students are generalized as super-bright, highly motivated overachievers who come from well-to-do families, it is inconceivable that they could encounter any serious learning problems. Contrary to this popular misconception, however, Asian American students are just like any other minority students who may experience difficulties in school. They perform just as poorly as other minorities when schools do not come to their aid (Toppo, 2002). Because of the model minority label, they may encounter more difficulties and problems than expected. They are often subjected to unrealistically high expectations by their parents, their instructors, and even their peers. The pressures could be so great that their academic performance and personal well-being suffer as a result. Thus, the model minority label has created a mental trap for these Asian students. They have no other choices but to internalize the oppression imposed on them by the society. In addition, as Asher (2001) points out, internalized by many Asian American parents and their children, the model minority concept turns out to be a hegemonic force that contributes to the damaging of young Asians' academic and career choices, playing a detrimental role in the development of their identities. For example, Asian American parents overwhelmingly lead their children to pursue "safe" careers in science-and business-related areas, the tangible professional careers, curtailing their representation in the social sciences and humanities. This further marginalizes Asian Americans in society.

Ignoring these actual harmful effects on Asian American students, conservative politicians and educators sell the model minority myth to everyone. The core message of the model minority concept, namely, individual efforts matter more than structural change, has become an integral part of their overall educational reform package. A closer examination of the current educational reform movement will reveal this point more clearly. Two major trends characterize current national educational reform: the privatization/commercialization of education and the standardization of teaching and learning. Within the privatization/commercialization trend, education is increasingly viewed as a business and students as consumers. Economic principles reign supreme: Efficiency and cost-benefit analysis become the rules; consumer choice and free competition are the norms. Voucher plans and other choice programs are hailed as the solution to help poor children and make declining schools work. Supplementary to the market mechanisms and initiatives, other policies are proposed, which emphasize the standardization of curricula and assessment, the restoration of Western tradition, and a return to traditional "morality." Driven by the impulse to control both knowledge and values, political establishments push for higher academic standards, high-stakes testing, and virtue-centered character education.

These reform agendas have been under serious challenges by thoughtful critics since their origin (see Apple, 1996, 2000, 2001, for example). Connected to the larger conservative restoration in American society, these educational reform policies do not attempt to challenge the fundamental school structure and culture based on the capitalist system, which is the root cause of all school problems we face today. One of the major problems of the reform movement is its individualist orientation. Freeman (2005) points out that the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) keeps school reform a largely idiosyncratic process separated from wider social and environmental contexts. While suggesting that educational improvement be effectively pursued independent of external material realities and emphasizing academic competition among schools and individual students, policymakers seriously ignore the social conditions of schooling while disregarding the close correlation between school outcomes and social problems such as racism and poverty. Freeman (2005) argues, as colorblindness permeates educational policies, the salience of race in American education is rendered invisible. Not only is race denigrated in educational policy, other critical issues such as ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, and language also are

trivialized. This leads to a fundamental problem of the current school reform, namely, the de-emphasis of social justice and educational equality. Apple (1996) points out, "Behind the educational justifications for a national curriculum and national testing is an ideological attack that is very dangerous. Its effects will be truly damaging to those who already have the most to lose in this society" (p. 24).

As Apple does, we must ask this question: Who are the benefactors in the reform movement and who are the overlooked? Studies of school choice programs, past and present, reveal their unequal effects on different student groups (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Scott, 2005; Wells, 2002). Vouchers are promoted as a method of helping disadvantaged students; however, Mathis (2004) notes that vouchers programs can only be practically available in the same resource-poor district, and the money given cannot possibly buy poor people a fraction of good education. Besides, with the flowing of funds from public schools to private schools, racial and cultural segregation is exacerbated, which in turn will further marginalize disadvantaged people. The losers in the accountability race are predetermined. Dilapidated urban schools and poor and minority children will surely lose the high-stakes competition. As we see, test scores have been used not to determine what students are taught, but to punish failing students and schools (Kohn, 2000; Sirotnik, 2004).

We must ascertain that the biggest problem facing American education is the unjust distribution of social resources in schools and the resulting unequal educational opportunities for children from different groups. The historical pattern of unequal educational opportunity has been well-documented. Colin Greer's (1976) comprehensive historical study indicated the fundamental failure of schools in America that served poor and ethnic minority students. He therefore declared "the great school legend"—the time-honored faith that schooling effectively paved the way to future economic mobility and social status, the faith that lies at the core of the model minority narrative—largely mythical and absolutely illusory and disastrous for poor, minority kids. Jonathan Kozol's (1992) qualitative investigation showed the deplorable conditions of the inner-city schools that poor, black, and Latino children attended; schools that had leaking roofs, overflowing toilets, overcrowded classrooms, outdated textbooks, and unqualified teachers. Today, no one can declare that the situation has changed significantly. Kozol argued convincingly then, the "savage inequalities" in the public school system were mainly caused by the shocking differences in educational spending between wealthy suburban schools and poor inner-city schools. And today, we know "our educational funding systems are [still] inequitable or inadequate. Education spending has gone up, but not for all children" (Mathis, 2004, p. 49). Stuck in poverty-stricken schools, children of African Americans, Latinos, and many Asian American subgroups suffer low academic achievement. Reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress constantly reveal the significant achievement gap between white and minority students in key subject matters (Perie, Grigg, & Dion, 2005; Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).

In the midst of such an educational reform movement that increasingly pushes poor and minority people to the brink, the model minority concept continues to be promoted, to inspire the predictable losers, and to deceive everyone. It must be noted that politicians may not always overtly embrace the model minority concept. For example, in his remarks to Asian American community leaders in 2003, then Secretary of Education Rod Paige admitted that the model minority theory is a myth. Nevertheless, Rod Paige and the Bush administration he served continue to promote the reform agenda that places emphasis on accountability, standards, testing, and choice—an agenda that is fundamentally in accordance with the spirit of the model minority stereotype. Cast within the conservative restoration in education, the model minority narrative now goes hand in hand with the cultural value of meritocracy deeply embedded in American society and emphasizes individual choice and efforts while devaluing the need for structural reform. Former Education Secretary William Bennett (1994) claimed, "There is no systematic correlation between spending on education and student achievement" (p. 83). During his tenure as Secretary of Education, Rod Paige complained many times that test scores had not improved despite record levels of spending on education over the last decade. A consistent message sent by both is that resources and money do not help schools, *values* do. Bennett (1993) was an early pioneer campaigning for the modern character education movement. Rod Paige, carrying on that tradition, was active in implementing the Bush administration's policies to expand character education and involve religion-based organizations to participate in after-school programs. Strengthening family ties, instilling hard work in children, while encouraging self-control and discipline, the power elites prescribe the paths of personal salvation and individual success for struggling schools and poor children.

Given the severe lack of educational resources and opportunities, it might be extremely difficult for the majority of poor, racial minority children in urban schools to achieve academic success. Actually, academic success is rarely expected of those poor children and youth by the school authority (Kozol, 1992). Yet, politicians continually emphasize the isolated and publicized success stories of particular individuals, like some Asian students. Their theory is: Since some children are willing to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them and succeed, then there must be something inherently wrong with those who are not succeeding. Because of fundamental deficiencies in them, such as family breakdown and the lack of motivation, some people just cannot solve their problem. This kind of ethnic, genetic, and racial

hypotheses is increasingly advanced to explain away the school failure of the poor during the current reform movement (see Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, for example). However, missing from this rhetoric is any mention of educational inequalities prevailing in the school system and the social and structural problems, such as racism and class division, that perpetuate the inequalities. By blaming the victims, the power elites relieve themselves from the responsibility of doing anything to provide an equal education for all.

It is amazing how all of these have been purposefully mixed together: the privatization of schools, vouchers, standards, get-tough accountability schemes, character building, moral boosting, and the "model minority" stereotype. However, it is not difficult to figure out that the core of the agenda is the emphasis on meritocracy and ignorance of educational equality. The predictable effect of these reform moves is the continuing marginalization of the disadvantaged. This reality must be honestly faced: American schools are unequal, just like the larger American society; poor and minority children have fewer opportunities to learn and to succeed. Inequality does matter. The case of some Asian Americans is only an exception. Some minority children can always rise above the odds; however, most cannot—due to the lack of social and educational conditions and opportunities they need and deserve.

AN ENDING NOTE

As I was finishing writing this article, another season of the Fox TV's hit show "American Idol" came to end with all of the media frenzy surrounding it. Watching another African American girl win the singing competition and become a superstar overnight and hearing, again, the uplifting messages, such as "Hard work paid off" and "Don't give up your dreams!" I knew for sure the preachers of the model minority stereotype had happily found another success story. The mainstream media have always been complicit in perpetuating the equal opportunity myth. It was in such popular media as *The New York Times*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Newsweek* that the model minority stereotype was first created and spread. The challenge, however, is posed for all of us who are genuinely concerned about the troubling conditions of American society and education. I have argued in this essay, the model minority stereotype emphasizes individual values and efforts while trivializing social problems and educational equity. It functions as a device of political control to maintain the marginalization of minorities and the dominance of powerful groups. It is our responsibility, then, to deconstruct the model minority stereotype and any other stereotypes or myths that fundamentally conceal truths and realities while perpetuating social injustice and educational inequalities. Education for social change must become an enduring theme of school education.

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