HARD WORK AND NO PAY:
Achievement Gaps Present Throughout the Asian American Experience

The Asian achievement gap typically refers to the disparity in academic performance between Asian American students and their non-Asian peers. Despite facing similar socioeconomic and cultural challenges as other minority groups, Asian Americans consistently outperform other racial groups in various academic measures, such as standardized test scores, high school graduation rates and college attendance rates.

While this gap may seem like a positive outcome for the Asian American community, it doesn't always translate to success in the real world. There are important questions about the root causes and implications of this. Let's dig into some of the possible explanations for the Asian achievement gap and its implications for education, corporate America and society as a whole.

Causes of the Asian Achievement Gap

One of the most significant factors contributing to the Asian achievement gap in educational attainment is the cultural emphasis on education and academic achievement in many Asian countries. In countries like China, Japan and South Korea, education is highly valued, and parents often push their children to excel academically. As a result, many Asian Americans from families with roots in those countries prioritize education and expect high levels of achievement from their children.

But that experience is not uniform across the diaspora of Asian Americans. The experience of people with Chinese, Japanese and South Korean roots is in part due to a history of immigration policies that have favored highly skilled immigrants from those countries. As a result, these groups tend to have greater representation in corporate and professional positions, reflecting a long history of successful assimilation and integration into American society.

On the other hand, Southeast Asian Americans, such as Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese Americans, tend to have lower levels of educational attainment and income compared to other Asian American groups. A history of immigration policies that have allowed for fewer skilled immigrants from those countries contributes to this. These groups have often faced significant discrimination and prejudice, particularly in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

South Asian Americans, such as Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Americans, also have unique experiences, with a long history of immigration to the United States and a relatively high level of representation in professional and technical occupations. However, these groups have also faced discrimination and prejudice based on their religion and customs and have at times been mistreated in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

The stereotype threat is another contributing factor of the Asian achievement gap. This refers to the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group. For example, the stereotype that Asians are good at math can create pressure on Asian American students to perform well in math classes, leading them to work harder and achieve higher grades.

A recent study published in the journal Sociology of Education, titled "Stereotype Promise: Racialized Teacher Appraisals of Asian American Academic Achievement" shows that teachers often hold higher expectations for Asian American students and are more likely to recommend them for advanced coursework.

Implications of the Asian Achievement Gap

The Asian achievement gap has both positive and negative implications for education and society. On the one hand, it highlights the potential for academic success among minority students and challenges racist stereotypes that minorities are inherently less intelligent or less capable than their white counterparts.

However, the Asian achievement gap can also contribute to the perception of Asian Americans as a "model minority." This stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are a group that has overcome discrimination and achieved success through hard work and perseverance despite facing similar challenges as other minority groups. This stereotype can be harmful because it ignores the systemic barriers and discrimination that many Asian Americans face.

The emphasis on academic success can put a significant amount of pressure on Asian American students, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety. In some cases, this pressure can lead to mental health issues or academic burnout.

The Drop Off in Asian Americans at the Executive Level in Corporate America

The achievement gap changes in a different way as Asian Americans age and move into the corporate world.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health, Asian Americans make up roughly 6% of the U.S. population and have high levels of educational attainment (54% have bachelor's degrees). Despite this, Asian Americans are often underrepresented in leadership positions in corporate America. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the drop off in Asian Americans at the executive level, highlighting the need for increased representation and the elimination of bias.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Asian Americans make up 6% of the overall U.S. workforce, however, they are overrepresented in STEM careers. They make up roughly 13% of all STEM careers and 20% of computer science workers, according to the latest data from Pew Research Center.

Despite the success in STEM, Asian Americans' success does not equate to ascending the organizational ladder. Only 4.4% of director-level or above positions at Fortune 1000 companies were occupied by Asian Americans, according to Ascend, a national organization that promotes Asian American corporate professionals.

Additionally, Asian Americans are less likely to be promoted to managerial positions than their white counterparts, even when they have similar qualifications and experience.

In 2021, McKinsey's Women in the Workplace study examined 400 large organizations across the U.S., revealing that Asian Americans make up just 9% of senior vice presidents, but only 5% of promotions to the C-suite. For Asian women, the picture was more bleak as they make up less than 1% of those promotions.

The Model Minority Myth Strikes Again

The model minority myth is another explanation for the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in executive positions. This stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are high-achieving, hard-working and successful, and as a result, they do not face the same barriers to advancement as other minority groups. This stereotype can create a perception that Asian Americans are not in need of support or advocacy in the workplace, leading to less attention and resources being devoted to their advancement.

Bias at the executive level is another factor affecting Asian Americans in the workplace. This can take many forms, including unconscious bias, which is often unintentional and can be difficult to identify. For example, Asian Americans may be perceived as lacking leadership skills or being less assertive or communicative than their non-Asian peers, leading to being overlooked for promotions and leadership opportunities.

The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in executive positions has significant implications for both the Asian American community and corporate America as a whole. From a business perspective, diverse leadership teams have been shown to lead to better decision-making and increased innovation. By excluding Asian Americans from executive positions, companies are missing out on the benefits that come with the perspective that stems from their experience.

From a societal perspective, the underrepresentation of Asian Americans reinforces the notion that certain racial groups are not capable of leadership, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and discrimination.

SOLUTIONS

To address the drop off in Asian Americans at the executive level, companies can take steps to promote diversity and inclusion, including implementing policies and programs that specifically target the advancement of Asian Americans. This may include mentoring programs, unconscious bias training and leadership development programs.

It's also important to recognize the unique challenges that Asian Americans face in the workplace and to ensure that they are not overlooked in diversity and inclusion efforts. This includes challenging the model minority stereotype and addressing unconscious bias against Asian Americans in leadership positions.

Challenging bias across the talent lifecycle should be a part of a company's DEI initiatives. The success of those initiatives often hinges on whether the company has created an effective and impactful executive diversity council. All companies in the DiversityInc Top 50 have EDCs driving or monitoring their efforts to:

✓ **Achieve a proportional racial representation in management by a specific timeframe**

✓ **Combat unconscious bias**

✓ **Promote cross-cultural competence**

✓ **Detect and correct pay inequity**

✓ **Educate employees on anti-racism**

Leadership can address this issue through their own actions and foster a culture of inclusion and belonging by pairing Asian American employees under their wing via mentoring and sponsorship relationships. This can help to provide Asian Americans with valuable guidance and support, as well as opportunities for networking and career advancement.