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AND PACIFIC ISLANDER ACHIEVEMENT

Critically Examining the Discourse of Urban, Asian American and Pacific Islander Achievement

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### Abstract

The practice of critical discourse analysis examines the relationship between language, institutions, and power. This capstone essay critically examines the bimodal, culture-bound, racialized discourses to describe both high and low academic achievement in urban Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and institutionally position them using deterministic and oversimplistic stereotypes in school and society. As it currently stands, the discourse of urban AAPI education relies on dichotomous identities of the model minority or the urban delinquent to explain achievement. These identities are embedded in racializing discourses that are critiqued for emphasizing anthropological explanations of culture clash and assimilation-opposition typologies. The underlying ideologies, pervasiveness in urban school culture, and disempowering impacts of this discursive positioning on the racial and academic identity development of urban AAPI youth are explored. Furthermore, culturally responsive practices are proposed as potential teaching strategies to create dynamic, diversified discourses that accurately represent urban AAPI academic experiences.

In recent years, critical discourse analyses have examined the disempowering conflation of race with dialogic representations of the urban educational experience.<sup>1</sup> For example, Milner (2012) challenged misconceptions about the term “urban education” as it was used interchangeably with the education of delinquent, poorly performing Black males living in poverty. He clarified that “urban” discourse should refer to the characteristics of large metropolitan cities, not categorization by race, socioeconomic status, or other identity factors.

Challenging the highly racialized discourses used to discuss urban students is essential if racial “colorblindness” is to give way to the cultural sensitivity, appreciation, and responsive pedagogy associated with academic achievement (DePouw, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis, 2011; Ngo, 2009). Discourse analysts contended that race-based discussions about urban education carry damaging messages about the social value of the implied racial groups. Additionally, these discourses disguise the unique needs of urban ethnic minority students who do not fit within these prescribed discourses (DePouw, 1989; Milner, 2012; Vaught, 2012). The need for discursive reframing is especially prescient in instances where the largely stigmatized discourse of urban education conflicts with other racialized educational discourses, as in the case of urban Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student populations.

Examination of the discourses used to describe AAPI students recognized an overreliance on “model minority” stereotypes that assumed high academic and professional achievement based on membership with the Asian race group (DePouw, 2012, Teranishi, 2010). These stereotypes were built into many educators’ perceptions, descriptions, and expectations of AAPI

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<sup>1</sup> Gee (2008) conceptualized *little “d” discourses* as the words (both verbal and written) adopted and employed in everyday conversation, popular culture, media, and academia to construct language that “makes sense.” *Capital “D” Discourses*, on the other hand, describe the pairing of certain linguistic and communicative symbols (i.e., little “d” discourses) with their constituent cognitive and affective representations to create “socially recognizable identities” that reflect a certain reality (Gee, 2008). For convenience and overall readability of this essay, I use the term discourse with a lowercase “d” to refer to the language and socially constructed representations and values Gee referred to as capital “D” Discourse.

students across a variety of ethnic Asian American subgroups, socioeconomic statuses, and immigration histories (Goto, 1997; McGinnis, 2009; Teranishi, 2011; Vaught, 2012).

Problematically, researchers found that the educators who employed model minority discourses failed to develop a discursive frame to discuss urban Asian American students whose low academic achievement deviated from these expectations (Chhuon, 2014; Ngo, 2009; Vaught, 2012). More often than not, these educators folded these students into the discourse of “urban dysfunction,” inaccurately describing the social and historical experiences that influenced their academic needs and ultimately stunting the healthy racial identity development related to high academic achievement and long-term positive educational outcomes (Chhuon, 2014; Vaught, 2012).

This capstone essay originally sought to challenge tenets of the model minority discourse by outlining the variability in academic outcomes for AAPIs of certain ethnic subgroups. Deeper investigation, however, revealed that the research consistently confined representations of AAPI students to two overwhelmingly simplistic and race-conscious discourses – one of academically successful, culturally assimilated model minorities or another of poorly performing oppositional immigrants (Ngo, 2009; Chhuon, 2014). This capstone seeks to uncover the disempowering properties and damaging effects that emerge from unexamined overreliance on these discourses. By challenging preconceived notions and majoritarian discourses on race, ethnicity, and culture as they relate to underperforming, urban AAPI students, this capstone will address the “invisibility” of low AAPI achievement in urban education and provide suggestions for culturally responsive pedagogies to educate this growing and dynamic student population (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997; Teranishi, 2010).

By illuminating the historical and social misconceptions underlying these marginalizing discourses, alternative discourses that appropriately celebrate cultural diversity and support the healthy racial identity development that contributes to academic success are explored. The urban AAPI educational experience is differentiated from rural, suburban, or other AAPI experiences to explore the influence of social and macroeconomic situations characteristic of metropolitan cities (usually positioned negatively in the discourse and centered around issues of poverty, racial minorities, violence, and other problems) on urban AAPI academic achievement.

This attempt to identify the interconnected relationships between institutional discourses in the urban student's immediate environment, influences of these discourses on student racial identity development, and the complex characteristics of racially diverse learners within urban educational settings is both an interdisciplinary and admittedly incomplete investigation of just a few among many factors in academic achievement. A host of other environmental, pedagogical, and student identity factors (such as the availability and quality of economic and social resources, teacher preparedness and instructional ability, gender, sexuality, motivation, etc.) are recognized as vital influences on student performance, though the scope of this investigation does not allow sufficient exploration of these factors.

### **Terminology, Theoretical Frameworks, and Scope**

The practice of *critical discourse analysis* seeks to unpack the values underlying discursively enacted and socially constructed representations and identities, focusing on those members of society who may be disenfranchised by the use of these discourses (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2008). Critical discourse analyses situate language in its social context and recognize the relationship between ideologies and language in its various forms, emphasizing the fact that language itself is socially constructed (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2008). The institutions shaping

these social constructs are viewed as inherently “value laden” (Gee, 2008, p. 4), carrying the weight of broader ideologies that confer and/or strip “modalities of power” to or from majority and minority groups (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Thus, discourse analysis investigates the social realities created and legitimized by the use of specific linguistic and representational ideas (i.e., discourses) to demarcate inclusion or exclusion of minority groups from dominant, mainstream society (Ngo, 2009; Ong, 1996).

This capstone essay employs a critical lens framework that challenges those discourses created and used by institutions that support representations of hegemonic White America as ideologically neutral, meritocratic, and the standard of moral and intellectual superiority and “goodness” while non-White ethnic minorities, on the other hand, are discursively positioned as “bad,” illiterate, deficient, and held in positions of powerlessness and disenfranchisement compared to the normative, White ideal (DePouw, 2012; Fine, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lei, 2003; Milner, 2008 & 2012; Solorzano, 1997; Vaught, 2012). This discursive positioning was viewed as having a significant negative influence on racial identity development, self-esteem, and cognitive-affective filters in such a way that stunted educational motivation and outcomes of urban AAPI students (Chhuon, 2010; Vaught, 2012). The following section clarifies and defines these problematic discourses as they are commonly used in the urban learning context.

### **Defining Problematic Discourses:**

#### **Culture-Bound, Bimodal, Racializing Discourses of AAPI Student Achievement**

Anthropologists analyzed the prevailing majoritarian discourse of AAPI student achievement (such as model minority discourses employed by some teachers, researchers, and policymakers) as relying primarily on *culture-bound*, *bimodal*, *racializing* explanations

(DePouw, 2012; Ngo, 2008; Teranishi, 2010). Each of these characteristics and components of the discourses are defined below.

### **Culture-Bound Characteristics of the Urban AAPI Discourse**

Culture-bound explanations refer to those explanations derived from perceived anthropological differences between AAPI and hegemonic American ideals. Culture-bound explanations of high AAPI academic achievement, for example, focus on positive cultural values such as avoidance of conflict, respect for authority, filial obligations to fulfill parental expectations, belief in hard work, and patient withstanding of inevitable discrimination (Goto, 1997). Culture-bound explanations of low AAPI academic achievement, on the other hand, conflate economic and social conditions such as limited English proficiency, a lack of financial resources, or immigration from communist or war-torn countries with cultural deficiency, especially in contrast to the idealized American cultures that are assumed to lead to school success (DePouw, 1989). The relationship between academic achievement and purportedly profound cultural differences between immigrant and U.S. mainstream cultures form the basis of culture-bound discourses (Ngo, 2008, 2009).

The roots of culture-bound discourses were traced to involuntary vs. voluntary immigrant typologies first set forth by cultural-ecological anthropologists such as John Ogbu (1978). According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities (such as East and South Asians) willingly immigrated in search of economic opportunity and thus endure discrimination as part and parcel of the integration process. Involuntary and refugee minorities (such as those from some Southeast Asian American subgroups), on the other hand, were driven to immigrate against their will and thus resist White institutions, view acculturation as a threat to their ethnic identities, and form oppositional identities. Proponents of this typology argue that assimilation into White American

culture (i.e., “acting White”) is necessary for school success, but involuntary ethnic minorities are more likely to resist assimilation and adopt deviant academic identities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1987; Gibson, 1997; Ogbu, 1978).

### **Binary Characteristics of the Urban AAPI Discourse**

These culture-bound explanations for low AAPI achievement diametrically oppose immigrant and American cultures in such a way that restricts AAPI identities to two main archetypes: oppositional “gangsters and delinquents” or assimilationist “academic superstars and model minorities” (Ngo, 2008, p. 5). Dominant culture-based discourses have been criticized for operating in oversimplified and deterministic voluntary-involuntary, assimilationist-oppositional, and successful-unsuccessful dichotomies; categorization into each mistakenly determined by race as a proxy for culture (DePouw, 1989; Gibson, 1997; Ogbu & Simons, 1998).<sup>2</sup> These binary, culture-bound discourses presented a static framework through which AAPI academic achievement was explained: AAPI students who performed well in schools were representative of an upward, linear path of assimilation into White American culture (i.e., the path to “model minority” status) while AAPI students who struggled academically were conceptualized as following a path of downward assimilation into resistant, oppositional cultures (Gibson, 1997; Ong, 1996).

### **Racializing Characteristics of the Urban AAPI Discourse**

The binary assimilationist-oppositional typology of urban AAPI student behavior became the basis of dominant and socially accepted model minority discourses while “dysfunctional” AAPI students became the subjects of socially stigmatizing “racial othering” (Goto, 1997, p. 72;

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<sup>2</sup> DePouw (1989) problematized the conflation of race and culture in AAPI discourse as students who were perceived as sharing physical characteristics of certain racial groups were assumed to have specific cultural backgrounds and experiences. Vaught (2012) further expanded on this conflation in the context of critical discourse analysis by criticizing the reduction of race to phenotype and “a typology of degraded genetics and innate, fixed, depraved cultural characteristics” as they were compared “against a neutral, objective norm of Whiteness” (p. 557).



Ong, 1996). According to Ong (1996), “racial othering” is a mechanism that upholds Whiteness as the cultural and moral standard of citizenship and “Blackens... less desirable immigrants” (p. 742) as racial “others.”<sup>3</sup> Nonwhite immigrants such as urban AAPI students are thus subjected to “Whitening” or “Blackening” processes through discourses that position them in degrees of proximity to the idealized White standard (Ong, 1996, p. 751; Vaught, 2012). This racialized typology alarmingly restricts ethnic minorities to two “modalities of precarious belonging:” Blackened “problem” minorities or Whitened “model” minorities (DePouw, 1989; Ong, 1996; Vaught, 2012); neither of which indicates acceptance into mainstream society as participants in the majority “American” culture. In the context of academic achievement, conceptions of urban AAPI students were categorized into either the discourse of “the promise of education” or the discourse of “urban dysfunction” and delinquency, marginalizing those AAPI students who may be undecided about their identities or fall somewhere in the middle (Ngo, 2009).

### **The Enactment of Culture-Bound, Binary, Racializing Discourses in the Urban Classroom**

In order to study the relationship between culture-bound, binary, racially pathologizing discourse and the low academic performance of urban AAPI students, researchers qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed the discourses used by teachers, administrators, and students at secondary schools in large cities (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Chhuon, 2014; Ngo, 2008, 2009). The results were incriminating: not only did teachers and administrators uncritically use the discourse of urban dysfunction to frame their attitudes toward low AAPI academic achievement, but these attitudes and expectations were clearly communicated to their underperforming AAPI students. In turn, underperforming AAPI students viewed schools as hostile educational

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<sup>3</sup> “Blackening” in the context of racializing AAPI discourse can refer to generalized “badness” and social ostracism or to those characteristics and representations discursively associated with African American or Black culture (Ngo, 2008 & 2009; Ong, 1996; Vaught, 2012). Unless otherwise noted, I use the term “Blackening” in regard to perceived or ascribed negativity rather than race.

environments that threatened their ethnic identities, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of poor urban AAPI educational outcomes. Three important findings were represented across a number of studies: (1) teachers' use and student salience of bimodal discourses, (2) the disorienting and disenfranchising properties of bimodal discourses, and (3) the need for reconceptualization of bimodal discourses. Each finding will be expanded in the sections to follow.

### **Finding 1: Teachers' Use and Student Salience of Racialized Bimodal Discourses**

Several discourse analysis pieces found evidence that teachers used bimodal discourses to discuss their urban AAPI students and students were aware of these discourses. Regardless of academic achievement, the Southeast Asian American students in Lei's (2003) and Vaught's (2012) studies were described by their teachers as "bad Asians" based on suspected criminality, illicit behavior, and gang involvement (Lei, 2003; Vaught, 2012). Other teachers primarily employed urban dysfunction discourses that projected archetypes of the SEAA "dropout," "homeboy," "troublemaker," and "gangster" (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Goto, 1997). In her qualitative study on urban educators and administrators, Vaught (2012) observed a "discursive collapsing" of students from an AAPI ethnic subgroup associated with poverty and low academic achievement into the discourse of urban Black delinquency. Teachers, administrators, and even the superintendent discursively collapsed urban AAPI youth into their conceptions of Black students by responding to explicit questions about the outcomes of their AAPI students with discussion about Black children (p. 568). Vaught and others concluded that Blackening of underperforming AAPI students was based on the perceived adoption of dress styles associated with Black subcultures (2012, p. 567), disassociation from normative expectations of classroom participation (Lei, 2003), and residence in the same geographical areas as their Black classmates (Vaught, 2012). The predominance of negative, urban dysfunction discourse was traced to

educators' fears of "Americanizing in a bad way" (2012, p. 567) and overreliance on binary explanations of academic achievement.

Across the board, urban AAPI students demonstrated salience of the model minority and urban dysfunction discourses. All of the urban AAPI students interviewed by DePouw (1989) recognized that their teachers held lower academic expectations and provided less information about college and other postsecondary options compared to their White peers. Additional research showed that students recognized teachers' use of the discourse of urban dysfunction. Students perceived teacher insensitivity to issues of diversity, administrator unwillingness to confront verbal and physical discrimination and harassment, social alienation and isolation, and generalized hostile educational environments stemming from the aforementioned discursive categories (Cummins, 1997; DePouw, 1989; Gillborn, 1997).

Perhaps most prescient, however, was the internalization of social values implied by teachers' discourse and utilization of these discourses of deficiency amongst the urban AAPI youth who were interviewed. The academically struggling urban AAPI students in Lee's (1994) qualitative study, for example, described teachers who employed "anti-Asian" discourses and viewed them as Asians who had "gone wrong" (p. 425) or were "mutant Asians" (p. 426). When questioned about possible sources of this mistreatment, students cited their poor performance in math or science classes, drawing connections between stereotypes prevalent in the model minority discourse and the incompatibility of their own performance with this socially recognized identity. Whether these student observations accurately reflected teacher beliefs or not, researchers noted that the students were sensitive to the implied acceptance or rejection from the idealized model minority (Lee, 1994; Vaught, 2012).

**Finding 2: The Disorienting Effect of Bimodal Discourses on Racial Identity Development**

A second finding that emerged from these studies concerned racial identity disorientation that arose from teachers' use of bimodal discourses to describe urban AAPI youth. As bimodal discourses restricted the range of urban AAPI student identities to either model minorities or delinquents, students who expressed characteristics from both, neither, or parts of each archetype experienced stunted racial identity development and disorientation. This disorientation was exemplified by Ngo's (2009) observations of Chintana, an ambitious Lao American student who struggled to identify with either her family history with gang involvement or her desire to be the first college graduate in her family. Teachers who were familiar with Chintana's family background and academic aspirations failed to schematically organize her membership within both model minority and urban dysfunction discourses, and throughout the course of the study, Chintana enacted the expectations embedded in both.

Racial disorientation is especially problematic as teacher beliefs about AAPI ethnic identities influence students' academic identities. Culture-bound discourses position culture as a roadblock to academic achievement, and given the bimodal, assimilationist-oppositional discourse used by the teachers studied, urban AAPI students were required to choose between retaining their traditional cultural values or assimilating into White American culture (DePouw, 1989; Fordham & Ogbu, 1987; Goto, 1997; Ngo 2008; Robinson, 1999; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). This conflict threatened positive racial identity development by creating cognitive and affective dissonance and raising affective filters that impeded academic performance (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; DePouw, 1989).

Gibson (1997) expanded on the dynamics of "dissonant acculturation" (p. 439) in underperforming AAPI students who appeared to conform to urban dysfunction archetypes.

Because racialized discourses restricted ethnic identity options, urban AAPI students who wanted to identify as “American” but simultaneously wished to preserve their ethnic identities were expected to assimilate into oppositional subcultures of other marginalized minorities (Gibson, 1997; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1996). Educational anthropologists reinforced dichotomous assimilationist-oppositional discourses by asserting that ethnic minority students who felt forced to choose between school and home cultures would be more likely to resist authority and rules of the school (Fordham and Ogbu 1987; Gibson 1982; Matute-Bianchi 1991).

Critical discourse analysis offers an alternative explanation for this behavior. Precisely *because* schools and teachers established preset academic identities for certain AAPI racial subgroups through the use of binary discourses, students with low academic achievement rejected the disenfranchising hegemonic culture of schools in order to preserve their ethnic identities. In one example, Chhuon and Hudley’s (2010) study on the relationship between self-selected ethnic identifiers and academic achievement concluded that students who preferred Cambodian identifiers (i.e., identified themselves as “Cambodians” or “Cambodian Americans”) were less likely to hold negative attitudes toward Cambodian culture, less likely to be enrolled in academically rigorous magnet classes, and more likely to disengage with school to protect their self-worth than were Cambodian American students who preferred panethnic identifiers (i.e., identified themselves as “Asian” or “Asian American”). Chhuon and Hudley suggested that panethnic identifying students instrumentally rejected their Cambodian identities to adopt the positive associations and social rewards of being a model minority. Problematically, Cambodian identifying students expressed feelings of invisibility, vulnerability, and hopelessness, mirroring the increased risk of depressed academic aspirations, school failure, and poor economic outcomes demonstrated in similar studies on urban oppositional students (Chhuon & Hudley,

2010; Chhuon, 2014; DePouw, 1989; Goto, 1997; Ngo, 2008; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005).

### **Finding 3: The Need to Discursively Re-Conceptualize the Urban AAPI Experience**

As evidenced thus far, the urban AAPI educational experience is more complex than can be reduced to accommodating-oppositional and high-low academic achievement typologies found in discourses used by teachers. The variability of urban AAPI academic and ethnic identities that fit into both, neither, or some of each typology requires “a [reconceptualization] of urban, immigrant identities beyond binaries that focus on stories about dysfunctional ‘bad’ identities or ‘good’ stories depicting triumph over hardship” (Ngo, 2009, p. 215).

Critical discourse analysts cited several reasons for a discursive re-conceptualization of the urban AAPI experience, all of which deserve investigation beyond the scope of this capstone essay. Put simply, the overreliance on media-driven binaries immigrant and dominant U.S. cultures creates an undue overreliance on “culture clash” explanations of differential minority academic achievement (Gibson, 1997; Ngo, 2008, 2009). Culture clash explanations were argued to essentialize, exoticize, and aggregate AAPI communities into one monolithic unit (DePouw, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000); emphasize and thereby marginalize the “otherness” of Asian American culture (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007); and absolve American institutions from responsibility for discriminatory practices by creating a preoccupation with generational conflicts and other “private” issues of the home (Ngo, 2008, 2009; Ong, 1996).<sup>4</sup>

Backlash against re-conceptualization of the urban AAPI discourse includes an emphasis on the social recognition of model minority characteristics. Critical discourse analyses, however, revealed that the net impact of model minority discourse on urban AAPI students was negative

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<sup>4</sup> While each of these criticisms provide insights into the marginalizing properties of existing culture-bound, binary, racialized urban AAPI discourses, this capstone essay does not address each of them in their entirety. See references for more information.

because of the previously mentioned disenfranchising ideologies behind culture-bound explanations (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Chhuon, 2014). In fact, culture-bound explanations of the model minority discourse were criticized for excluding AAPI students from majority in-group participation by reinforcing the “forever foreigner” and immigrant identities despite length of immigration history, attainment of academic and economic success, or assimilation to American culture comparable to White Americans (DePouw, 2012; Lei, 2003; Lowe, 2006; McGinnis, 2009; Tuan, 1998). Taken into consideration with studies that found the highest levels of ethnic minority related stress (Park, 2011) and lowest likelihoods to utilize student counseling services (Kiang, 1992) in AAPI student populations, the need for dynamic re-conceptualization of urban AAPI discourse is clear.

These findings in the research on teacher utilization and student salience of bimodal discourses, the disorienting effects of culture clash explanations for low AAPI academic achievement, and the need for re-conceptualization of urban AAPI discourses suggest a profound misconception of and misuse of culture-bound discourses used by teachers in the urban classroom. A critical question remains: If these discourses are as deeply enmeshed with societal ideology as was argued by the critical discourse analysts above, what can be done to challenge them? A second question follows: Who will be the one to do it? Culturally responsive pedagogy is proposed in the following section as just one among many possible solutions for urban teachers to re-conceptualize urban AAPI discourses in the context of urban classrooms.

### **Proposing Culturally Responsive Discourses:**

#### **Implications for Pedagogy in the Urban Classroom**

Given what is known about the damaging effects of culture-bound, bimodal, racializing discourses on racial identity development and academic achievement, critics of the traditional

urban dysfunction discourse urged teachers to be proactive, culturally responsive educators (Chhuon, 2010; Ngo, 2009; Vaught, 2012). As mentioned previously, culture clash explanations and the discourse of urban dysfunction caused dissonant acculturation as underperforming AAPI students were torn between pressures to retain their ethnic identities or abandon them to adopt model minority identities. Culturally responsive pedagogy, on the other hand, encourages students to maintain cultural integrity while achieving academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Best practices in culturally relevant pedagogy range in their various forms and functions, but this capstone essay specifically describes those overarching values adopted by culturally relevant teachers.

First and foremost, culturally responsive teachers are invested in critically examining and challenging dominant discourses (Freire, 1973; Gibson, 1997). Colorblind attitudes that deny the influences of race and institutional racism are just as damaging as culture-bound typologies that overemphasize and problematize membership with certain ethnic groups (Lewis, 2011; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Cummins (1997) identified culturally responsive teachers as those who are able to identify unequal and disenfranchising power relations in the classroom and thus work to shift those relations toward equity. Culturally responsive educators are actively engaged in personally and pedagogically identifying contradictions in students' work to "avoid complacency about students we perceive to be 'good' or pass judgment... on those who are 'bad'" (Ngo, 2009, p. 217; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Critical race consciousness also empowers those underperforming urban AAPI students who are disadvantaged by the existing discourse of urban dysfunction to understand how racial and academic identities are prescribed for them without resulting in shame, self-hatred, rejection of ethnic identities, or internalization of negative stereotypes (DePouw, 1989).



In regard to urban AAPI racial identity development, culturally responsive teachers recognize that student identities are not “simply located in minority status (i.e., voluntary or involuntary),” but are instead negotiated through lived experiences (Lee, 1994, p. 427). These lived experiences include brushes with racism and discrimination such as those that underperforming, urban AAPI students traced back to deterministic, culture-bound discourses (Chhuon, 2014; Spencer, 1995; Vaught, 2012). According to Stoughton & Sivertson (2005), students respond to prescriptive discourses by either internalizing and adopting the identities constructed for them or repositioning themselves against those identities. As such, culturally responsive teachers should present their students with a “wide range of options between ‘Oreo’ and ‘ghetto’” (i.e., assimilationist and oppositional identities, respectively) (p. 292) and allow students to be engaged with their own identity development rather than prescribing academic and ethnic identities for them.<sup>5</sup> Simply acknowledging that identities are fluid, negotiable, and constructed from multiple layers that may intersect, overlap, and even contradict each other is one way of opening students to dynamic ethnic and racial identities (Hall, 1996).

Additionally, culturally responsive teachers adopt pedagogical practices that reflect additive acculturation rather than subtractive assimilation (Gibson, 1997; Ogbu, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Additive acculturation includes those strategies that honor students’ cultural beliefs and practices while also providing access to the wider, dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006) whereas subtractive assimilation includes strategies that replace “bad” heritage beliefs with “good” American culture (Ogbu, 1998). Ogbu suggested that culturally responsive teachers use neutral discourse that legitimizes and honors immigrant cultural practices in their appropriate contexts while Joshi (2004) and Gibson (1988) suggested that teachers tailor

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<sup>5</sup> The term “Oreo” is discursively linked to assimilationist identities – students are perceived as looking Black on the outside but acting White on the inside (DePouw, 1989; Vaught, 2012).

curriculum, focusing on deliberate preservation of heritage cultures. Avoiding the use of stereotypes and urban AAPI discourses and creating classroom environments that allow for collaboration and additive learning are also best practices that may be used to reshape the discourse of urban AAPI achievement.

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Closing Thoughts**

As with many discussions in the field of urban education, the conclusions and implications set forth in this capstone essay are not without limitations. It should be noted that many of the studies mentioned within this review intentionally sought to illuminate negative AAPI experiences within the existing discursive models. As such, the collection of data from students who perceived that their teachers, administrators, and school culture effectively challenged racialized discourses was not prioritized. Nevertheless, these nonrandom studies showcased urban AAPI students who internalized both socially celebrated and socially marginalizing discourses. The previous examination of model minority discourses that are associated with the conferral of racial privilege discussed indicate that both positive and negative discourses have damaging effects on students.

Another limitation of this study also serves as an area of future study. This discussion on urban AAPI discourses specifically focused on the contours of race, ethnicity, and culture. Student identities, however, are comprised of multiple intersecting identity factors. Future areas of study include the interaction of racialized urban AAPI discourses with other identity factors such as class, gender, sexuality, religion, and generational status. Preliminary study on these individual factors has yet to incorporate the ways racial identities factor into identity development (Joshi, 2006; Kiang, 1992; Kumashiro, 2001; Lei, 2003, Ngo, 2009). More specifically, study on identity development that applies critical race frameworks that focus on

power-laden representations and minority positioning as they relate to urban student identities are needed.

Lastly, this capstone specifically sought out the racialized experiences of urban AAPI youth. Urban education, however, encapsulates more than just issues of racial diversity. Schooling in large, metropolitan areas entails unique political and macroeconomic situations that are not necessarily presented in rural or suburban schooling districts. Housing policies, attendance zones and segregation, bilingual education, academic tracking, community engagement and disengagement, marginalizing curriculum, and the lack of highly qualified teachers all influence the urban educational experience. Interactions between these factors, positive attributes of the urban educational experience, and the urban AAPI community deserve due investigation in order to open up the discourse of urban dysfunction.

The purpose of this capstone essay was to critically examine the underpinnings and consequences of using culture-bound, binary, racialized discourses to describe the academic achievement of urban Asian American and Pacific Islander students. Across the board, the enactment of these discourses in teacher and student language was viewed as having negative effects on the academic and ethnic identity development of both high and low achieving students. A focus on the discourse of urban dysfunction used when communicating to and about underperforming urban AAPI students and resulting negative impact on ethnic identity development suggested a need to re-conceptualize the binary typology of assimilationist model minorities and oppositional ethnic minorities. Culturally responsive practices should be employed as potential teaching strategies to create dynamic, diversified discourses that accurately represent urban AAPI academic experiences.

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