



The Pygmalion Effect on Low-Income Asian Americans in the U.S. Education System

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Abstract

The Pygmalion effect, a psychological phenomenon in which high expectations lead to improved performance, is commonly seen as a positive force in educational settings. However, when applied broadly and stereotypically, it can create harm—particularly for low-income Asian American students in the U.S. education system. While the "model minority" myth describes Asian Americans as universally high-achieving and economically successful, this stereotype creates economic disparities among Asian subgroups. As a result, low-income East and Southeast Asian students are often overlooked for need-based financial aid and educational support, facing pressure to meet unrealistic standards without the proper resources. This paper explores how the Pygmalion effect contributes to income-based educational inequalities. It also highlights the need for complete data collection and policy reforms to ensure that low-income Asian American students receive equal access to educational opportunities and support systems.

Introduction

The Pygmalion effect, a psychological phenomenon where higher expectations lead to improved performance, can have negative and positive outcomes. Ulrich Boser, former senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, explains that while the Pygmalion effect can encourage growth, it has caused many economic inequalities among low-income students in the U.S. education system, particularly Asian Americans from East and Southeast Asia (Boser et al.). Asian Americans are commonly perceived to be economically prosperous and pushed by their families to succeed. However, this stereotype ignores the economic diversity within subgroups in the Asian community, leaving low-income students struggling. The Pygmalion effect reinforces this economic misinterpretation, limiting access to educational opportunities such as scholarships and financial aid. According to Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, the president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and researcher Maya Kurani at the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, many Asian Americans are not properly accounted for in data collection, making it difficult to assess whether they have adequate access to services, leaving many in need without proper support (Asante-Muhammad and Kurani). What is beginning to be questioned is how the Pygmalion effect creates economic challenges for low-income Asian American students in the U.S. education system. By exploring the financial challenges created by stereotypes, economic disparities, and unequal educational opportunities from the Pygmalion effect, we can better understand how these students are impacted in the U.S. and identify potential ways to reduce its effects.

Asian Stereotypes

The idea that all Asian Americans are "whiz kids" or "musical geniuses" comes from the "model minority myth", a form of the Pygmalion effect, which imposes high expectations and influences how they perform (Blackburn). According to Sarah-Soonling Blackburn, Learning for Justice's associate director, speaker, and educator, the myth characterizes Asian Americans as



naturally gifted, highly successful, and having greater family expectations and support (Blackburn). This creates stereotypical social expectations that are placed on students by both society and their families. Wealthy Asian students may benefit from the Pygmalion effect, as higher expectations push students towards prestigious universities their families can afford. However, this pressure creates economic strain for low-income Asian students as they are held to the same high standards. A 2022 to 2023 study conducted by Pew Research Center and discussed by research analysts Neil Ruiz, Carolyn Im, and Ziyao Tan, saw that 54% of Asian adults pursuing an education and earning over \$150,000 say they have heard the term “model minority”. In contrast, just 29% of Asian Americans earning less than \$30,000 say they have heard of the term. The percentages are even higher for Asian Americans born in the U.S. from immigrant families (Ruiz et al. 1). Families with higher incomes often have highly educated parents who emphasize academic achievement and support their children's education, making their kids more influenced by the Pygmalion effect. This creates a general stereotype that all Asian Americans are exposed to higher expectations, leading to the false assumption that they are bound to be financially well-off, while low-income students and families are compelled to keep up.

Income Inequality

Income inequality is a constant challenge faced by Asian Americans subgroups in the United States. Researchers Neil Ruiz, Ziyao Tian, and Shannon Greenwood, from Pew Research Center specializing in demographics and social trends, have found “about one-in-ten Asian Americans live in poverty. Asian Americans also have the most income inequality of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States” (Ruiz et al. 1). While some Asian Americans are some of the wealthiest in the group, there are many others who live in poverty, yet the economic struggles of low-income Asian Americans are overlooked in the U.S. education system. For marginalized Asian American students, this means that many lack the same opportunities as their wealthier peers. Stella Yi Ph.D., an expert researcher and publicist from New York University, found that over the past “50 years”, income inequality among Asian Americans has grown more than any other racial group, widening the economic divide between wealthy and low-income Asian Americans (Yi). This gap creates long-term financial and educational consequences such as limited career and intellectual growth. Building on Yi's findings, data equity expert and researcher Natalie Truong explains that the K-12 education system has completely ignored low-income students of color by unfairly allocating resources, enforcing ineffective reforms, and setting strict ideas of success (Truong). As a result, the Pygmalion effect strengthens unrealistic expectations, causing the challenges faced by low-income Asian American subgroups to be underestimated. The continued reinforcement of stereotypes not only hinders educational progress but also makes it harder to improve economic standing. Consequently, overlooked economic disparities, unequal education, and limited academic potential, affects long-term success.

Effect on Education

The Pygmalion effect has led to limited access to financial aid, scholarships, educational resources, and academic support for Asian Americans, as they are expected to be economically stable and high achieving. This prevents many low-income Asian American students from reaching their full potential in higher forms of education. A report by senior policy analyst Lauren



Walizer from the Center for Law and Social Policy observed that, Asian American students have the “greatest amount of unmet need regardless of the institution they attend” along with them being the most “income-stratified” (Walizer 7). Low-income Asian Americans are often denied of need-based opportunities such as financial aid or are told that funds are insufficient, forcing them into student debt or pushing them to attend colleges that meet their financial need. In addition, program director and vice president of research for the American Council on Education, Lorelle Espinosa et al., collected data for the American Council on Education’s *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* report. Their findings show that in every income quartile, even the low-income ones, “Asians were at least 20 percentage points more likely than others to be enrolled in very selective institutions” (Espinosa et al. 55-56). Overall, regardless of economic background and unaddressed financial needs discussed by Walizer, Asians usually feel the need to get into a top university due to the pressure from the Pygmalion effect, so they don’t get left behind. The pressure from these expectations can force low-income students into costly educational expenses, such as expensive tutoring, prep courses, and extracurriculars that wealthier students can more easily afford. This creates an economic burden for families already struggling to make ends meet, especially when educational institutions in the United States fail to accommodate low-income Asian American students.

Conclusion

In summary, the Pygmalion effect causes economic disparities to be overlooked as low-income Asians are being excluded from the stereotype. This makes it difficult for these students to receive an equal and proper education because they can’t afford top education or resources, but they still lack those opportunities since the U.S. education system disregards the economic inequality issue. Based on the report formed by the team at Asia Society Education, an organization that supports learning and leadership in the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, a practical solution to combat this issue is to reform funding strategies to reflect the diversity of Asian American economies in educational institutions (“Equity and Quality in Education” 4). Implementing need-based funding models that account for income disparities can ensure that low-income students receive adequate resources and support. Additionally, improving financial data collection on Asian American subgroups can increase financial aid eligibility and better allocate funds. However, some limitations include major governmental policy changes in figuring out how funds should be efficiently distributed. In addition, many policy makers rely on stereotypes, making them resistant to change. Despite these barriers, slowly working to improve funding and recognizing the effects of income inequality caused by the Pygmalion effect can give low-income Asian American students in the U.S. the support they deserve.



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