

Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories

By Robert C. Johnston

In 1998-99, Asian-Americans accounted for just 8 percent of California's K-12 enrollment, yet represented 40 percent of the student body at one of the state's most highly regarded institutions of higher education, the University of California, Berkeley.

Such success stories among this small but growing minority of the U.S. population abound. "It is more advantageous to be Asian than to be wealthy, to have non-divorced parents, or to have a mother who is able to stay home full time," writes Laurence Steinberg, a researcher at Temple University in Philadelphia, in his 1996 book *Beyond the Classroom*.

Not every Asian group performs equally well, however. The stunning numbers can overstate the success of low-performing and high-poverty subgroups, such as Cambodians and Laotians, that get lumped into the broad category of Asian-American.

Experts see an important lesson there: The simplifications used in creating such categories can mask more complex issues and confound attempts to recognize and respond to different educational needs.

In the same vein, above-average performance by other ethnic subgroups, such as Caribbean blacks, can be missed.

The way to avoid such generalizations, many policymakers and educators say, is

to recognize the complexities and make better data available to educators.

The more detailed the information, the more useful it is, said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of urban districts based in Washington. "Disaggregating performance data by race is extremely helpful for most school districts," he said.

The Seattle school district, for example, breaks out its annual test scores into 18 categories, thus allowing officials to track and address the educational needs of specific groups.

Such detailed reporting reveals, for example, that students of Japanese and Korean descent tend to outperform their Asian peers from China, the Philippines, and Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

"It's important for educators, but also for the community, to know these things," said Lynn Steinberg, a spokeswoman for the 47,000-student district.

San Francisco uses nine ethnic groups in most of its reporting, including four for students of Asian ancestry. "If there are different achievement gaps, we want to know about it," said Frank Chong, the vice president of the San Francisco board of education. "The Asian-American community is not monolithic."

When data are separated in detail, interesting differences can show up. Not

only can those differences help educators tailor school needs and resources, but they also can help alter stereotypes and dangerous overgeneralizations.

Diversity Within Groups

For example, all Hispanics are not heading in the same direction when it comes to college readiness. Nationwide, college-bound students of Puerto Rican descent increased their average SAT verbal scores 18 points, to 455 on an 800-point scale, between 1989 and 1999, while the same average score for Mexican-Americans fell by 9 points, to 453, according to trend data published by the College Board.

Another subgroup whose achievement is hard to track is that of Caribbean-born blacks, who are believed to perform at higher levels than African-Americans who are born in the United States, according to a recent report by the College Board. While there are many references to such trends in education research, specific data are hard to find, however—leaving educators with little to go on in explaining or dealing with the different groups of students.

When large-scale reporting data are available and broken down in detail, some commonly held beliefs come into question.

Ruben G. Rumbaut, a Michigan State

University sociology professor and education researcher, was one of three scholars who studied the school performance of 5,262 children of immigrant parents from 77 different nationalities, most of them in the Miami or San Diego areas, from 1992 to 1996.

One of the researchers' major conclusions was that Cuban-American students from the most recently arrived parents made up the lowest-achieving group of immigrant children in the study—a stark contrast to the conventional wisdom that Cubans outperform their Hispanic peers.

"The discrepancy may be labeled the Cuban-American paradox," the researchers write in a forthcoming book, *Legacies: The Story of the New Second Generation*. They attribute the difference in part to a less welcoming attitude toward recent Cuban refugees, combined with their lower socioeconomic standing compared with that of Cubans who arrived in the years immediately following the 1959 revolution there.

Mr. Rumbaut argues that including Cubans with all Hispanics has helped educators miss the problems of newer Cuban families whose needs get overlooked. "This research absolutely underscores the absurdity of lumping scores of national-origin groups from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and elsewhere into 'made-in-the-U.S.A., one-size-fits-all,' racialized categories," he said.