

PATTERNS OF PERFORMANCE OF CHINESE AMERICAN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A PILOT STUDY

By Xiaodong Niu

In the last 20 years, volumes have been written about students with learning disabilities from different perspectives. Although there are some studies about minority students with learning disabilities, a majority deal with Hispanics. Literature on Asian students, including Chinese Americans, is rare.

While there is a need to study Chinese American students with learning disabilities, research about this population is limited because of a lack of standardized instruments which are both reliable and valid. Neither educational nor psychological instruments normed on Chinese American students are available. Instruments normed on the general American population usually contain small numbers of Chinese Americans but may not reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all Chinese American students. Therefore, we face a dilemma. How can we use standardized instruments to conduct quantitative studies without being biased? Alternatively, informal tests may be utilized to avoid some biases, but informal tests are more suitable for qualitative studies which will provide descriptions and analysis for a few cases but not the general patterns of performance.

This pilot study was designed to examine the patterns of perfor-

mance of Chinese American students with learning disabilities by using standardized instruments supplemented with an informal test. The researchers are highly aware of the issues of reliability, validity, and non-biased assessment mentioned above. Practically, the students in this study were administered standardized tests as well as informal tests before being placed in special education programs. However, only the quantitative data from standardized tests will be discussed in any detail here.

Procedures

Forty-one Chinese boys and fourteen Chinese girls classified as learning disabled in the public schools of metropolitan New York participated in this study. Their mean age was nine years four months. The selection criteria for the participants were a) they were either born or started their formal schooling in the U. S., b) they were enrolled in public school from second to seventh grade, c) they were LEP students, d) their home languages were Mandarin or Cantonese, and e) the evaluations reported here were the result of initial referral for special education services.

Social histories were reviewed by the researchers in order to understand family backgrounds, developmental

milestones, home languages, and previous schooling. The researchers used informal observations to determine the language skills and the language for formal testing. Informal testing in Chinese was conducted to evaluate literacy skills. The Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery was administered to students bilingually or in their stronger language. This measures scholastic aptitude and academic achievement. Then the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children was administered. This battery of tests evaluates intellectual abilities.

Summary of Results

The social histories of the students revealed that the birth and developmental milestones of all students were within a normal range. Students were either in general monolingual classes or in general bilingual classes. All spoke Cantonese or Mandarin at home most of the time but had no Chinese literacy skills due to the lack of formal instruction in Chinese. Their parents had from six to twelve years of schooling in China and either spoke no English or a little social English.

The Woodcock-Johnson Battery revealed that the students in this study were significantly delayed in reading. Their mean



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
MUTSUKO TANOUCHI

I was invited to speak about bilingual education to the parents and teachers at the Japanese Weekend School in Philadelphia. As many other groups have done, Japanese parents got together to form a language school in order to maintain their language. At the start, only a few families banded together to teach each other's children and to provide them opportunities for socializing. As the number of children increased, they hired people who were native speakers of Japanese and interested in teaching. Getting people with teacher training, teaching certification, or teaching experience would have been a luxury. When a school such as this one has over one hundred students, it is eligible to receive some assistance from the Japanese Ministry of Education. Textbooks can be sent to families if they request them, and the school can ask for teachers' manuals and other teaching materials from the Ministry. Often, an experienced teacher is sent for a three year assignment to supervise and advise the locally-hired teachers. This teacher is called a principal but he (usually the person is male) may or may not have training in school administration. The Philadelphia school is at the stage where the first government-assigned principal is about to finish his three year term.

Compared to Japanese weekend schools in the New York metropolitan area, the Philadelphia school is small and has a short history. Perhaps because of this, the school is very vibrant. Basically, parents run the school and do things such as renting a school building for Saturday classes, hiring teachers, running a reading library, selling school supplies, and fundraising to supplement income from tuition. The school is unique because it has a section for students whose first language is not Japanese. This section is called the "bilingual" section. It exists because of a woman, Mrs. Batta, whose innovative leadership is noteworthy.

A friend of mine had asked me to speak at the Philadelphia school because her son was in the school's fourth grade and was struggling to keep up with the Japanese curriculum. The curriculum in this school, like that in many other Japanese schools, is based on the assumption that the students will return to Japan. Such schools try to teach the same Japanese language material in three hours on one day that Japanese children in Japan will cover in one week. However, the number of children who are long-term or permanent residents in this country is increasing. Also there are a number of children who have only one Japanese-speaking parent. I had thought that the "bilingual" section would be ideal for these children, but the parents had some reservations because their children would have less chance of socializing with native Japanese speakers.

During my visit, I explored with parents various options on how to maintain and improve their children's Japanese language skills. Over fifty mothers and fathers attended the workshop, which lasted two hours. I was so impressed by their dedication. Some children traveled up to one and a half hours with their entire family every weekend to

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Not all Asian Americans are as uniformly educated, acculturated, and financially successful as the myth of the "model minority" would suggest. Like other communities, Asian Americans need health and social services for their children's well being. Here are some facts to contradict the myths compiled by the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families at New York City.

In the United States:

- 17% of Asian American boys in grades 5 through 12 reported physical abuse, as compared to 8% among white boys, in a survey by the Commonwealth Fund (The Health of Adolescent Boys: A Commonwealth Fund Survey, The Commonwealth Fund, 1998)
- 30% of Asian American girls in grades 5 through 12 reported depressive symptoms, as compared to white girls (22%), African American girls (17%), or Hispanic girls (27%), in a survey by the Commonwealth Fund (The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, The Commonwealth Fund, 1998)
- Asian Americans are twice as likely to be poor as non-Hispanic whites. (1990 Census)
- The illiteracy rate of Asian Americans is 5.3 times that of non-Hispanic whites. (1990 U. S. Census, Social and Economic Characteristics)
- Asian American women have the highest suicide mortality rate among all women between 15-24 years of age. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention)
- 73.3% of Asian Americans speak a language other than English. (An Invisible Crisis: The Educational Needs of Asian Pacific American Youth, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 1997)
- 14% of Asian Americans live below the poverty line, compared to 13% of the U. S. population. (An Invisible Crisis: The Educational Needs of Asian Pacific American Youth, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 1997)

In New York City:

- 48% of Asian American births are paid for by Medicaid, indicating that their mothers are poor or near poor. (1996 Housing & Vacancy Survey)
- 24% of Asian Americans over age 25 do not have a high school degree. (1996 Housing & Vacancy Survey)
- 36% of Asian Americans students in public high schools drop out or do not graduate on time. (Class of 1996 Four Year Longitudinal Report and Event Drop Out Rates, NYC Board of Education)
- 96% of Asian American children are immigrants or children of immigrants. (1996 Housing & Vacancy Survey)
- 46% of Asian American households do not have anyone over age 14 who can speak English well. (Toward a More Responsive Government, Asian American Federation of New York, 1994)
- 17.6% of Asian American households have incomes below the poverty line but only 7.2% receive public assistance. (1996 Housing & Vacancy Survey)

Patterns of Performance

Continued from page 1

scores on word attack skills (measured by their ability to sound out nonsense words), sight vocabularies (measured by their ability to recognize real words), and passage comprehension (cloze passage) were low. Interestingly, these students showed mastery of computation skills and their scores on applied problem solving skills (verbal math problems) were within the average range.

On the Wechsler Intelligence Battery, the students in this study overall had low-average full-scale IQs. Their verbal IQs were low but their performance IQs were within the normal range. A detailed analysis indicated that they performed poorly on the subtests requiring language skills and general and social knowledge. However, their performance on the subtests of arithmetic and digit span were within the normal range, and they did better on the subtests requiring visual-motor skills and spatial ability.

Discussion Summary

This pilot study suggests that the performance patterns of these Chinese American students were similar to the general patterns of students with learning disabilities. Students in this study demonstrated an average ability in mathematics, even with mathematic verbal problems. Their primary weaknesses were in reading skills. In a detailed analysis, their reading difficulties were closely related to their phonetic skills in terms of deficits in decoding. These deficits may have hindered the development of their sight vocabulary and reading comprehension.

The factors related to these deficits may be familial and instructional. The parents of these students had no formal English education in the U. S. and often had limited English proficiency themselves. As a result, the parents might have been unable to perform important reading activities, including word play, nursery rhymes, and story-reading. Furthermore, these parents probably had limited ability to teach English language skills to their children. Little or no exposure to English at home may underlie a delay in the development of speech and language in these children and may contribute to difficulties learning to read in their early school years. Further, the students in this pilot study might not have been systematically taught appropriate reading and writing skills at school.

Although this pilot study provides some valuable information, more questions than answers remain. These questions fall into two categories: questions about the appropriate assessment of

students from non-English language backgrounds and questions about the suitability of current theories of learning disabilities for such students. In regard to the latter, the problems of the students in this study seem to be more related to their family and social situations and their instructional backgrounds. Hopefully this study and similar lines of inquiry will encourage more research on prevention and remediation strategies for students from non-English language backgrounds.

Facts and Myths

Continued from page 3

- The number of Asian American youths arrested for major felonies increased 38% between 1993 and 1996. (NYPD, Office of Management Analysis and Planning)
- Asian Americans live in the most overcrowded housing of any broadly defined ethnic or racial group: nearly one-fifth of all Asian households in the city are overcrowded. (1996 Housing & Vacancy Survey)

Moments in America for Asian American Children:

(From a publication of the Children's Defense Fund, Special Report: Sizing up the Odds, CDF Reports, March 1999, Volume 20, Number 3)

- Every 13 hours, an Asian American baby dies.
- Every 1 hour, an Asian American baby is born to a mother who had late or no prenatal care.
- Every 5 hours, an Asian American baby is born at very low birth weight (less than 3 lb., 4oz.).
- Every 45 minutes, an Asian American baby is born at low birth weight (less than 5 lb., 8 oz.).
- Every 1 hour, an Asian American baby is born to a teen mother.
- Every 21 minutes, an Asian American baby is born to a mother who is not a high school graduate.
- Every 19 minutes, an Asian American baby is born to an unmarried mother.
- Every 16 minutes, an Asian American child is arrested.
- Every 7 hours, an Asian American child is arrested for a violent crime.
- Every 6 hours, an Asian American child is arrested for drug abuse.
- Every 2 hours, an Asian American public school student is corporally punished.
- Every 1 minute, an Asian American public school student is suspended.

BOOK REVIEW

By Janet Lu

A Thousand Peaks: Poems from China
By Siyu Liu and Orel Protopopescu
Illustrated by Siyu Liu

A Thousand Peaks is a collection of 35 poems organized around three themes: traditional life and social structure (10 poems); poets as government officials and the scholarly examinations that tested their skills (12 poems); and the role of nature in aesthetics and philosophy (13 poems).

Of the 35 poems, 25 were written by famous poets in the Tang Dynasty. The others were written from Han Dynasty to the modern era. The poems are presented in both English and Chinese. The Chinese versions of the poems are written in simplified characters. Students who learn Chinese using traditional characters might have a little difficulty reading the poems in Chinese. It is not easy to translate these poems from Chinese to English. A valuable feature of this book is that the authors/translators included texts (in English only) describing the background of the poets and what inspired them to write the poems. This will help students better understand the poems. Also, this book is good for English-language speakers who want to learn about Chinese traditional poetry and culture.

Even though this book is intended to introduce young readers to the beauty of China's traditional poetry, it is also suitable for adult Chinese language learners who can learn the profound meaning of these poems, which are popular among the educators both in Chinese speaking lands and abroad. However, readers must understand the art of poetry in order to appreciate these poems.

The book contains illustrations such as beautiful watercolors done in a traditional Chinese painting style and pen and ink drawings with Chinese calligraphy.

On a whole, this is a very attractive publication by Pacific View Press. The book will be available on February 15, 2002 in hardcover at a cost of \$19.95. For ordering information, contact:

Pacific View Press
2864 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94110
Tel: 415-285-8538, Fax: 415-285-2620

President's Message Continued from page 2

attend the school. Many questions were asked about how to balance or integrate an American lifestyle with the maintenance of the Japanese language. I shared some of my personal experiences teaching Japanese to my son. I was not so successful in this venture and his Japanese was limited, but now we both appreciate and learned from this experience.

With the teachers, I discussed ways to deal with the wide range of language skills within the classroom. They have the daunting and often impossible task of teaching much material within a three hour period. I had taught at a Japanese school in New York many years ago, so I could sympathize with their struggles.

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NAAPAE
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24th Annual National Conference: April 10 – 13, 2002
Chicago, IL

Overview

What

- ▶ The 24 Annual National Conference of the National Association for Asian & Pacific American Education.

Why

- ▶ This year's theme is "One Vision: Asian Voices in Leadership." We will explore the history, current events/initiatives and accomplishments, and future challenges to Asian/Pacific American leadership in the fields of education, business, government, and the public/private sectors.

When

- ▶ Wednesday, April 10 – Saturday, April 13, 2002

Where

- ▶ Chicago, Illinois

Who

- ▶ Hosted by the Illinois Chapter of NAAPAE
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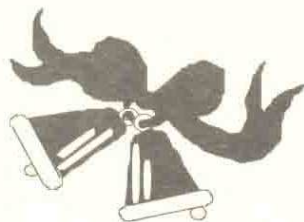
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