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# Dropout Prevention and the Model-Minority Stereotype: Reflections from an Asian American High School Dropout

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**Abstract** A recent review of the research by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences has resulted in the recommendation of six promising practices to ensure that *all* students are actively engaged in school and on a path to post-secondary success (Dynarski et al. in Dropout prevention: A practice guide (NCEE 2008–4025)). The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perspective of an Asian American high school dropout and the extent to which his story aligns with dominant thinking, including the six recommended dropout prevention practices and the model minority myth (MMM) of Achievement Orientation, a common belief that Asian Americans exhibit greater success than any other minority ethnic group. The adolescent dropout was interviewed on eight occasions. Findings revealed that the MMM may have contributed to the lack of intervention provided to this student and that the most worthwhile recommendations from his perspective include: assigning adult advocates to at-risk students, the use of a systematic data-tracking system to target and individualize interventions, and the ability of the school to provide academic support and a personalized learning environment.

**Keywords** Dropout · Prevention · Intervention · Engagement

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## Andy's Perspective: Thoughts from a High School Dropout

High rates of school dropout have influenced legislation such as The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 which has placed a renewed emphasis on the issue of school dropout. This legislation requires school systems to be held accountable for the graduation rates and academic performance of *all* students, regardless of ethnicity and ability (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] 2007). Pressure from accountability legislation, as well as the grim reality of the consequences of dropout (e.g., crime related costs) makes confirming effective methods to *measure* dropout rates, determine *who* is at risk (e.g., risk profiles) for dropping out and *why* certain students are more at risk than others, as well as *how* to intervene with at-risk students a priority for our nation (Alliance for Excellent Education 2007; Belfield and Levin 2007).

For some students, the process of school disengagement, which can ultimately lead to school dropout, begins as early as kindergarten through a phase known as "withdrawal" (Tyler and Lofstrom 2009). Withdrawal can intensify during fourth through seventh grade with a "disengagement" phase, resulting in students dropping out of school by grade 10 (Finn 1989, 1993). These students may exhibit common risk indicators early in their school career (i.e., academic failure, poor rates of attendance, high rates of behavioral infractions) which serve as "warning flags" that schools can use to intervene, making it necessary for a systematic data tracking system to be in place to identify at-risk students in a timely manner (Balfanz et al. 2007).

Disengaged at-risk students do not always see the connection between school and the "real world" and many students face great challenges academically, socially, and personally that can pose competing factors that interfere with school engagement, success, and completion. Other responsibilities such as earning money to help support their families or temptations outside the walls of a school building can seem much more important and relevant to at-risk students, leading to school disengagement (Cameron and Heckman 2001).

Some at-risk students' parents or guardians do not impose graduation or post-secondary expectations on them and some students' parents do not model and express the value of staying and excelling in school, typically resulting from their own uncomfortable school experiences. In fact, the children of parents who did not finish high school are more likely to perform poorly in school and eventually dropout themselves, creating a self-perpetuating intergenerational dynamic (Orfield 2006). Others may place unrealistic expectations on students without modeling or teaching students skills to be successful. First generation student are at even greater risk for dropping out if they lack adult, school, and community support and some of their parents face additional challenges such as unfamiliarity with the school system, making it difficult for them to advocate for their children and teach their children how to advocate for themselves (Perreira et al. 2006).

Despite this recent attention to school dropout and the knowledge we have thus far regarding the identification of at-risk students, we still have a lack of rigorous research addressing the issue of school dropout, including the most effective ways to intervene appropriately with students who come from many different racial and

ethnic backgrounds and who exhibit a variety of needs (Lehr et al. 2004). Most research conducted in the area of dropout prevention has been in the form of correlational and descriptive studies (Christenson et al. 2008; Tyler and Lofstrom 2009). In fact, only four dropout prevention interventions studies (Kemple et al. 2005; Kemple and Snipes 2000; Larson and Rumberger 1995; Sinclair et al. 1998) have shown positive or potentially positive effects for staying or progressing in school, as reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (2008) which reported best practices from high quality research.

Although we have limited research in regards to dropout prevention intervention, we do know some ways to target specific factors (i.e., academic, behavioral, cognitive, psychological) in an effort to support school belongingness (Finn 1989). We also know that some effective of these factors such as academic (e.g., time spent on homework) and behavioral factors (e.g., rates of behavioral infractions) are more malleable than cognitive factors (e.g., students' perceptions of the relevance of school) or psychological factors (e.g., feelings of identification or belonging) which can guide where we place our resources, making it even more important to identify at-risk students so that we can intervene appropriately (Appleton et al. 2008). In addition, in a recent review of the literature commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, experts in the field systematically reviewed rigorous studies of dropout prevention programs and identified several program characteristics with various levels of evidence to support their effectiveness (Dynarski et al. 2008). Using evidence from the reviewed studies, the panel identified six practices that have the potential to effectively reduce school dropout (see Table 1). Each of the six recommendations plays a critical role in preventing dropout, but the extent to which the recommendations are sufficient (whether implemented in concert or alone) and whether schools have the human, organizational, and structural capacity to implement these kinds of changes uniformly has not yet been confirmed. The review suggests that it is essential to accurately identify students at risk (Recommendation 1) to allocate appropriate resources to provide the necessary targeted interventions (Recommendations 2–4) and school-wide interventions (Recommendations 5–6).

**Table 1** IES recommendations for dropout prevention (Dynarski et al. 2008; see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/ for a copy of the IES guide)

| |
|---|
| 1. Utilize data systems to support the identification of students at high risk of dropping out |
| 2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out |
| 3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance |
| 4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills |
| 5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process |
| 6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school |

## Dropout Prevention and a Commonly Misunderstood Group: Asian Americans and the Model Minority Myth of Achievement Orientation

Recent statistics show a disparity between the graduation and overall success rates of different racial and ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Latino, Asian American). Because achievement is so closely linked to race, and because much of this evidence stems from aggregated statistics, researchers and educators often form expectations for different racial and ethnic groups based on false conclusions, stereotypes, and the oversight of sub-sets or individuals within particular ethnic groups that struggle and require intervention (Kiang and Kaplan 1994; Wing 2007). Asian American students are one group of students who are at the heart of this issue.

Between 1972 and 2008, trends in high school dropout and completion rates showed that Asian American students exhibited the highest rates of school completion (95.5 %), comparable to Whites (94.2 %), while our Black and Hispanic students fared less well at 86.9 % and 75.5 %, respectively (Chapman et al. 2010). More recent evidence regarding *the status dropout rate*, the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential, has also shown a disparity by race/ethnicity. In each year during that period, the status dropout rate was lower for Whites and Blacks than for Hispanics. In addition, the rate for Asians/Pacific Islanders was lower than that for Hispanics and Blacks every year between 1989 and 2009 (Lee et al. 2007). As some of our highest ranked students, students from Asian American descent appear to be some of our greatest success stories (Chow 2011).

At first glance, these trends are encouraging regarding the overall success of Asian American students; however, the reality is that these trends are tied to the Model Minority Myth (MMM) of Achievement Orientation, a common belief that *all* Asian Americans exhibit greater success than any other minority ethnic group and are overall, the superior racial minority group excelling in academic, social, and financial facets of life (Lee 1996; Wong and Halgin 2006). Those who believe this myth perceive Asian Americans to be harder working and more likely to persevere when faced with adversity, originating from an image of Asian American immigrants arriving in the United States determined and ready to fulfill the American dream (Gym 2011; Wu 2002). This belief can lead to society drawing false conclusions, stereotyping and "lumping" all Asian American students into one homogeneous group, resulting in an oversight of the individual needs of Asian American students, despite the fact that many Asian American students' needs may mirror the needs of students from other racial and ethnic groups (Wing 2007; Yu 2006). This stereotype can also lead to added pressure, feelings of inadequacy, and ultimately the sabotage of Asian American students' success through a denial of services (Gym 2011; Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997).

The Model Minority Myth, therefore, is simply that: a myth. First, it would be inaccurate to label an *entire* group of Asian Americans as this group is far from a homogenous group (Lee 1994). In addition, despite the fact that researchers have documented, from Asian Americans themselves and several other ethnic groups, a common view that Asian Americans have better overall academic performance and motivation to succeed, there is no empirical evidence to support this myth (Wong

et al. 1998). The truth is that Asian Americans experience difficulties in school just like all other ethnic minority groups, especially when schools do not provide the appropriate services based on student need (Toppo 2002; Yu 2006).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perspective of an Asian American high school dropout and the extent to which his story aligns with dominant thinking, including the MMM and the six dropout prevention practices recommended by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (Dynarski et al. 2008). Just as others have used case studies to illustrate a broader story (Lee 1994; Wolcott 1983), we present Andy's story to gain important insight into the plight of an Asian American high school dropout to guide future intervention efforts with other at-risk students from the same (or different) ethnic background who demonstrate similar struggles. Through Andy's story, interpreted through the context and explanation of the six IES recommended dropout prevention practices and his own reflections and experiences of school disengagement, we addressed the following research question: What are the perceptions of an Asian American high school dropout about the six IES dropout prevention recommendations?

## Method

### Participant

Andy, a 19 year old Asian American male who dropped out of school when he was in 12th grade, originally contacted the first author via an e-mail after a close friend of his found the author listed as the Director of a Dropout Institute via the web. Through email and eventually phone conversations, Andy expressed interest in the author's work and his desire to tell his story in an effort to help other students who face similar challenges as he did with school. Andy is the son of first generation immigrants from Korea. His mother worked in the local high school cafeteria and his father worked for the U.S. Postal Service. Like other Korean family immigrants (Lee 1994), Andy indicated that his parents had a positive view of education in regards to the effect it can have on future opportunities, and they ultimately came to the U.S. to provide better educational opportunities for Andy and his older sister. We see through Andy's reflections that early in his school career, he struggled with trying to succeed in school to meet his own and his parent's expectations, but he soon became frustrated and disenchanted with what he describes as "a sloppy teaching staff and assignments that can only be described as busy work with no real influence on learning real-world lessons". By the time Andy was in second grade, his family had moved to a middle-class suburban neighborhood as part of a governmental housing assistance program. Although this move placed distance between their old neighborhood that was plagued by gang fighting and violence including the death of Andy's sister's friend in a gunfight between rival gangs, Andy now faced another set of problems in his new community. Andy recalled a lack of

diversity with only three other Asian American students in his entire grade of approximately 150 students in his new school. He describes it as a "very cliquish school where none of the kids lacked anything". Without owning a working computer or an internet connection, Andy faced challenges with school assignments beginning as early as first grade as compared to his middle-class suburban (mostly Caucasian) peers.

Andy attended two high schools; the first school was a nationally ranked magnet school and the second was a local high school in his district after struggling in the magnet school – both schools represented a large, middle-class area in the Northeast. Despite his growing disengagement, Andy still noted that he had a desire to learn and often skipped school to spend the day in nearby museums and participating in local political events. When the research was conducted, Andy was working as a waiter at a local restaurant and tutoring fellow high school dropouts through a General Education Development (GED) program he previously attended after dropping out. Like other at-risk students who have dropped out, Andy withdrew from school early on, continued to disengage in middle school and finally terminated his own struggle by dropping out of the second high school he attended.

## Student Interview Protocol

A systematic interview format using the six IES dropout prevention recommendations to guide the interviews was used with the goal of framing the conversations with Andy to adequately describe and share a complex case; a marginalized student's story. Specifically, responses were elicited from Andy in the following three areas: (a) if he experienced the implementation of each of the six IES recommended practices at each of his two high schools, (b) the quality of implementation of each practice in his opinion, and (c) the importance of each practice, in his opinion, for other students who faced similar challenges (see Table 2). Knesting (2008) stated that "understanding the problem of high school dropout requires looking beyond the limited scope of individual student characteristics to include school factors in students' decisions to stay in or leave school" (p. 3). To take a deeper look into Andy's story, we also address school factors related to his actions. Specifically, we consider whether the IES recommendations (Dynarski et al. 2008) were present at each high school Andy attended, and how the absence or presence of each recommendation impacted his desire to engage in school. To disentangle the "active key ingredients" about what ultimately contributed to his disengagement and what might have helped re–engage him along the way, we take a closer look at his experience through the implementation, or lack of implementation, of each recommendation. This personalized account provides insight into an emic perspective and essentially gives voice to students who have been "historically silenced or marginalized" (Brantlinger et al. 2005).

## Procedure

Eight semi-structured interviews over the course of a year were conducted with Andy via phone, email, and student blogs in response to an evolving set of guiding

**Table 2** The presence and absence of the IES recommendations at school 1 and 2

| IES recommendation | High school 1 | High school 2 | Is this a good recommendation? |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1: Use data systems | Absent | Absent "My counselor didn't even know my name until the 4th or 5th time I saw him." | "Yes. No clue on how to improve it." |
| 2: Assign adult advocates | Present (only informally) | Absent | "Yes. This recommendation alone could have prevented me from dropping out…in my 1st school it was tremendous help and kept me in school for so much longer. In my 2nd school nobody knew who I was so I didn't have a single person that I had to report to." |
| 3: Provide academic support | Present (only informally) "This essentially kept me in math and chemistry for three quarters." | Absent "Nobody cared if I failed classes." | "Yes. This was so important for me." |
| 4: Improve classroom behavior and social skills | Absent "It was hard for me to communicate my problems and I felt misunderstood by the school staff." | Absent "Communication almost seemed to be discouraged…everyone was treated like a mix between a felon and a 4 year old." | "Yes. A lot of stress and other issues come out of falling behind in school, and larger issues could be behind why people fall behind." |
| 5: Personalize the learning environment | Present "We had a classroom within a classroom which made me feel engaged." | Absent "I didn't want to try because of the treatment I received." | "Yes. Personalized instruction is such an effective tool…it would help to set up a program with tutors and struggling students." |
| 6: Provide rigorous and relevant instruction | Present "I can say 'yes' in hindsight, but I was too overwhelmed at the time to realize this point." | Absent "We mostly just watched videos in class." | "Yes. I don't have any ideas on how to improve this though." |

questions. Phone interviews took place during a time convenient for the participant and lasted approximately 60 min each. All notes were read through several times in the process of coding. While reading the interview data thoroughly, the authors categorized responses and then coded the data to identify the absence or presence of each recommendation. Findings were shared with Andy to ensure accuracy (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

### Data Analysis

All phone interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The quotations in this manuscript are verbatim transcriptions from interviews with Andy. Interviews revealed themes related to each IES recommendation which guided further interview questions. Themes were compared to subsequent interview answers and categories were developed which aligned and interpreted his experiences (Lichtman 2010). Therefore, a systematic sorting of data occurred and conclusions are supported by quotations (Brantlinger et al. 2005). Credibility of data was ensured by structuring the interviews over the course of a year and the use of different data collection methods allowed for frequent first and second level member checks (e.g., having the participant review transcriptions prior to analysis and then having him review analyses for validation of researcher conclusions). Finally, the second author participated in several interviews and assisted in a peer debriefing process to confirm that the data collected and interpreted was reliable and valid.

## Results

The interviews revealed strong opinions from Andy regarding the importance of the implementation (and lack of implementation) of each of the six recommended practices. We next provide an explanation of each IES recommendation as well as an interpretation of Andy's reflections from the data analysis regarding the absence or presence of each recommendation that impacted Andy's desire and ability to engage in both of his two high schools, as well as how these issues contributed to the ultimate outcome for Andy: dropping out of school. Implications are also discussed.

### IES Recommendation 1: Utilize Data Systems that Support a Realistic Diagnosis of the Number of Students who Dropout and that Help Identify Individual Students at High Risk of Dropping Out

The first recommendation suggests schools use data systems to identify students at risk of dropping out and then continue to use the data as a form of progress monitoring. The guide recommends that districts use data to identify new and transitioning students who have exhibited at risk behaviors and consistently monitor academic and social performance to call attention to changes in at-risk behavior.

Andy reported that there was no such process in place at either high school he attended (that he knew about), and therefore no systematic way to identify students who were in need of further support. In his first high school, he felt ignored, which contributed to his disengagement. When Andy transferred to his second high school, he slipped even further through the cracks. He noted that:

> It is easy to slip through the cracks in a new environment, as I did when I switched high schools. The lack of counselors' and teachers' knowledge at my second high school about my case was the last thing I needed. I recently went

> back and looked at my student file and nothing on my transition from my first high school to my second was noted. By the time my new teachers realized what was going on, I was already in the process of officially withdrawing.

Andy recognized that his at-risk status heightened when he transferred to his second school in his junior year, but because no one was monitoring risk indicators, such as attendance, tardies, and grades, his grades deteriorated and he began to flirt with the idea of dropping out even more seriously. He noted what a shame this was because he and his parents viewed the move as an opportunity for a fresh start and instead, this move was unfortunately more damaging and "hurtful" than helpful.

This recommendation is of necessity if school personnel are going to be able to track all students and determine who shows signs of disengagement. Andy believed that the lack of a systematic data tracking system allowed him to "fall through the cracks" as he entered his second high school. The implementation of this recommendation alone may not have impacted Andy's decision to drop out, but it may have been instrumental in identifying Andy as an at-risk student in a more timely manner and may have allowed school officials to intervene on Andy's behalf by targeting his individual risk factors.

### IES Recommendation 2: Assign Adult Advocates to Students at Risk of Dropping Out

When students feel connected, or that they have consistent, ongoing relationships with adults, they are more engaged in school (Sinclair et al. 2005). Out of three rigorously implemented interventions reviewed in the IES guide that used adult advocates as their primary intervention, two showed promising results in improving student engagement (Larson and Rumberger 1995; Sinclair et al. 1998). Advocates can consistently monitor at-risk students on their caseload based on data, provide students with support and guidance, and connect with parents. Andy credits his counselor, Mrs. Smith, at his first high school with going out of her way to try to support him when she discovered he was a student in need during an informal conversation with Andy. Unfortunately, as noted above, as Andy entered his second school with no indication that he qualified as at-risk for drop out and with no adult advocate present or aware of his needs, he was at an even greater risk. He noted that "Nobody knew who I was at my new school so I didn't have a single person that I had to report to which let me do or not do whatever I wanted to."

Andy whole heartedly endorsed this recommendation and credited having at least one adult advocate as one of the biggest reasons he stayed in school as long as he did. He does, however, provide several caveats regarding implementation of this crucial intervention component. As Andy pointed out, it is important for students to trust their advocate(s):

> At both of my high schools, my counselor, my tutor, and two educational psychiatrists were my advocates. These services were brought about by the personal efforts of my counselor and I suspect that she met a lot resistance from her colleagues and the administration. I encountered many "day supporters," who would inquire as to how school was going, offer quick tips,

> and then bring up the situation randomly and with no apparent reason than to get their fix of good-willed charity or alleviate some kind of guilt felt by the existence of my situation. These short term supporters were more hurtful than helpful. A staff member taking a long term interest in me would have been a reason for me to try harder and stick around. Most often, I felt like I had no supporters, and as if the whole school was trying to run me out and tear me down in the process.

While Andy felt that having an adult advocate is a crucial element of dropout prevention, he cautioned us that students are not always receptive at first and advised a dedicated adult to persevere. He stated that:

> Choosing committed adult advocates is essential because most students would be against the idea of such a figure when first introduced. The first couple weeks of my own adult advocate relationship involved a lot of effort on Mrs. Smith's part and it was some time before I reciprocated. Advocate burnout is another 'potential roadblock' that I encountered. After intensive efforts on behalf of one or two overloaded individuals, I often saw frustration and a sense of hopelessness on my supporters' faces.

Andy took this recommendation a step further and recommended that an adult advocate should engage the family of the student to open a channel of communication. He cautioned that:

> The effort of re-engaging a student requires an enormous amount of manpower and support, and it is essential that every member of the team (family, friends, teachers, administration) be on the same page. I would often tell my parents one thing, and tell a completely opposite thing to Mrs. Smith, in order to avoid completing homework or studying. There needs to be an open line of communication between interested staff and parents, as the student needs constant supervision and support.

Overall, Andy credited having an adult advocate for at-risk youth as one of the most crucial aspects of dropout prevention. The fact that Andy had a counselor in his first school informally connecting with him to some extent likely kept Andy from dropping out earlier than he actually did.

### IES Recommendation 3: Provide Academic Support and Enrichment to Improve Academic Achievement

Many students who are disengaged are also concurrently experiencing academic difficulties, and due to the MMM, students of Asian American descent are more frequently overlooked as students in need of academic support (Wing 2007). Poor academic performance can lead to high rates of drop out (Balfanz et al. 2007; Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Bost and Riccomini 2006; Goldschmidt and Wang 1999). By providing enrichment courses or extra opportunities for study time, credit recovery, and acceleration programs, we create opportunities to improve students' academic outcomes and consequently, potentially re-engage at-risk students in school.

Andy had access to private tutoring during his first few years of high school in the magnet school he attended; however, he noted that again this effort was credited to Mrs. Smith. He said that he "… did benefit from private tutoring, especially in math and chemistry, and that assistance did help tremendously. This is definitely a boost that many potential dropouts could use. I found extra study time in school to be very helpful." Andy felt that this private tutoring essentially kept him in math and chemistry for three quarters. In his second school, academic tutoring was not offered to him and he felt that:

> Nobody cared if I failed classes; teachers only cared about my progress if I was already failing and even then showed no interest in offering any kind of help. It was every man for himself. If you passed, you passed. If you failed, too bad, you failed.

The academic tutoring that he recommended, besides actually providing help in the academic areas a student is struggling in, offers another chance to foster a mentor/mentee relationship as recommended by IES recommendation 2.

### IES Recommendation 4: Implement Programs to Improve Students' Classroom Behavior and Social Skills

One IES recommended way to impact engagement and overall school belonging is through improving classroom behavior by teaching problem solving and life skills to enhance relationships which can also result in a feeling of belonging with peers and staff. A lack of belonging may even contribute to misbehavior and therefore, by simply ensuring that students feel like a part of a community at school, behavior may improve (Knesting 2008). The assigned adult advocate can work with students to meet behavioral expectations and can model and reward appropriate behavior.

Andy did not experience help or guidance when it came to appropriate behavior, problem solving, and social skills in either school he attended. In fact, he noted that he did not even have the skills to communicate what his problems were, felt he shouldn't communicate his problems for fear of embarrassment, and he often felt misunderstood by most of the school staff and administration. Andy stressed the importance and power of just one adult recognizing appropriate behavior and accomplishments. He said that:

> When I was disengaging from school I was only noticed and remembered for my negative behavior or poor grades. All the negative attention drove me away from class and prevented me from seeking assistance from teachers which was NOT what I needed. I was honestly desperate for some kind of positive recognition. Even shallow or hollow positive remarks would have been extraordinarily lifting and motivating. Every call I received from school was negative and so I was programmed to associate school contact outside of the school environment as negative and alarming. This is hurtful as it eliminates possibilities of viewing school as something good and so it became impossible to see school as a necessary or even relevant part of my life.

Andy recognized the importance of this recommendation and added that a type of psychological help may be beneficial to some students as well. He noted that "A lot of stress and other issues come out of falling behind in school, and larger issues could be behind why people fall behind; taking a two pronged approach [academically and behaviorally] could be very helpful to students."

### IES Recommendation 5: Personalize the Learning Environment and Instructional Process

The authors of the guide suggest that large high schools need to do what they can to create smaller school environments to provide more personalized attention. For example, schools can create small learning communities that emphasize a specific curricular focus, career path, or smaller classes. Also, schools can implement schedule changes that lengthen classroom time or provide flexible scheduling in general so students have the option to obtain employment or participate in work-study/community-school partnership programs. Andy had some experience with this in his freshman year at his first high school and agrees that this recommendation helped him learn more and feel engaged. He said:

> I have experience with small learning communities and found it to be an excellent way to learn and interact. In my freshman year I was in a "school within a school" and I had a very easy time transitioning and meeting new friends. Teaching was more personalized and thus more effective. My sophomore year, we were no longer in small learning communities and I began to slide tremendously. Also, I benefited greatly from team teaching my freshman year and would have continued to benefit had it been available my sophomore and junior years. I developed much closer bonds with teachers than I would have otherwise and this was strategic in helping me have a mildly successful freshman year.

Andy cautioned us, however, against a potential roadblock for this recommendation. He felt that:

> One potential roadblock is poor execution of good ideas. At my second high school, I experienced a block schedule that dulled enthusiasm and opportunities for deeper learning. Many teachers were not prepared to present 90-min lessons, so all too often we sat around for 20 min or watched bits of movies to pass the time. This hampered the pace of the day and also made it easy to instantly forget the days' lessons.

Another example of a powerful execution of this recommendation is to engage students in some sort of extra-curricular sport or club to create a sense of belonging and cultivate students' personal learning interests. Andy is supportive of this idea. He agreed that:

> Extracurricular activities helped me make a connection with a school that I often felt at odds with. I ran cross country and track my freshman year and it became my adopted community. I quit the team my sophomore year and I

> believe that I lost my sense of belonging to the school completely. The school actually had an excellent system set up, where there were periods in the school day just for extracurricular activities. Every single person in school was in at least one club. I skipped this period every chance I got my sophomore year and that too affected me negatively. I did not join any clubs or athletic teams in my second high school and I had almost no sense of belonging. I did not attend games or any events the school held and felt like a ghost in relation to the student body. It was much easier for me to leave my second high school than it was for me to leave my first where I was more involved freshman year. Clubs and teams are great tools in making withdrawal a hard decision.

Sports, clubs, speakers, community partnerships, service groups, resource centers, and field trips can foster a sense of belonging for students (Finn 1989). In fact, having a strong peer network can lead to greater self-esteem and engagement in school, both of which are critical to student success in school (Berndt and Savin-Williams 1996). Additionally, through peer feedback and support, at risk students can enhance their engagement in school (Richman et al. 1998). Because all students were required to be involved at his first school, Andy was significantly more engaged compared to his second high school.

## IES Recommendation 6: Provide Rigorous and Relevant Instruction to Better Engage Students in Learning and Provide the Skills Needed to Graduate and to Serve Them After They Leave School

The authors use Recommendation six to suggest that to make educational reform a reality we need to increase high school academic content to prepare students for post-secondary opportunities. In order to do this, we should provide ongoing opportunities for professional development for teachers, integrate academic content with career based themes and ensure that teachers are able to use effective instructional design and delivery as a focus for keeping students in school (Bost and Riccomini 2006). Students need a better understanding of high school requirements and options as they pursue a career. Andy reported that these services were available to him in hindsight, but unfortunately he was so overwhelmed at the time that he was not in a place to recognize this. He noted that:

> I always enjoyed field trips or summer camps where we talked about real world issues and that showed real world connections to the material we learned in class, and this is a good way to encourage students to continue their education. I've always had a hard time imagining myself as an adult. This was especially true when I was 12–16, as my most pressing concerns were not with money or a stable future, but the cute girl in Latin class or that jerk in math. The future, while only being a couple years away, seemed much more distant.

Andy's perception of the value of relevancy is shared by other students who have dropped out (Bridgeland et al. 2010). Issues of boredom, motivation, and gratification could be addressed more explicitly by making connections to assist students to meet their education and careers goals.

At his second high school, Andy felt that rigorous and relevant instruction was not available to him and noted that the classes "were often taught by teachers who had no knowledge in the subject matter and/or were teaching the courses for the first time." He noted that he mostly watched videos in these classes and provided an example that his philosophy teacher was an assistant basketball coach with minimal experience teaching the content. Inadequate school and personnel resources have shown to be evident in other studies of students at risk for dropping out (Fine et al. 2003; Lew 2007). To better engage students in learning, Andy reinforced the need for teacher effectiveness and relevance of materials. This was also a common theme from at risk students interviewed by Bridgeland et al. (2010).

One of Andy's best experiences related to his exposure to relevant instruction ironically occurred post-dropout in his GED class. He noted that:

> [My] GED class was great. It was only twice a week so there wasn't any time to sit around or waste time and we were always learning new things. We learned how to fill out 1040's and computer programs, stuff I never would have learned in school.

There is no guarantee of a more positive educational outcome for Andy had he received the necessary supports he needed to excel in rigorous and relevant curriculum, though Andy confirmed that this recommendation is critical to motivate students to attend school for purposes of achieving their future goals.

## Discussion

Compounding the difficulty of conducting research on the issue of school dropout and with school dropouts themselves is the *typical* nature of many at-risk students: disengaged and often unwilling and/or unable to reflect upon their experiences. Furthermore, Asian American students are typically not prone to voicing their struggles, as culture dictates that exposing weaknesses can lead to family embarrassment and shame (Lee 1994). While research has provided numerous descriptions of students who drop out, it is a rare opportunity to encounter a dropout, and especially an Asian American dropout, who represents so many of the common risk factors in the literature (i.e., academically struggling, poor attendance, high rates of behavioral infractions), *and* who is willing, invested, and able to reflect and verbalize his perspective about his experience. In fact, it is not often that we even give students a voice to explain why they make certain choices such as dropping out of school. The subject of this study explained that preventing a student from dropping out can begin with asking an at-risk student one enlightening question: *"Why do you want to dropout*?" When asked to reflect about this, Andy stated that:

> I was never really asked why I wanted to leave school and so the issues were never addressed. Naturally, my case did not progress. The root of the problem was never discovered because no one forced me to answer that one important question.

Previously conducted studies have revealed that dropouts from a variety of ethnic backgrounds have blamed a multitude of reasons for their disengagement including:

un-welcoming school environments, poor student teacher interactions, disciplinary procedures, and difficulty with academics (Allenbaugh et al. 1995; Fine 1991). Andy faced all of these challenges *and* exhibited common risk indicator data that the school system only "accidentally" recognized and for the most part, only "casually" intervened upon using methods that were less than systematic and not individually targeted. Responsibility for students dropping out of school often falls primarily on the school (vs. the individual or parents) and it is therefore essential that schools have an adequate data tracking system to identify students of all cultural backgrounds based on risk indicator data as well as personnel to intervene in targeted, appropriate ways based on this data. It is possible that commonly held misconceptions due to the MMM contributed to the oversight and lack of intervention Andy received; however the fact of the matter is that a student, regardless of his ethnic background, was clearly demonstrating common risk indicators that was consistently not attended to.

In a previous study about the MMM, Lee (1994) revealed that out of several Asian American groups (e.g., Korean, Asian-identified), students' perceptions regarding future opportunities and attitude toward schooling were typically linked. For example, many students perceived education as the mechanism to achieve social and economic advancement and therefore maintained positive attitudes toward schooling. Despite the fact that Andy was facing so many challenges and looked negatively upon traditional schooling, he still maintained the desire to learn as long as the learning reflected what he felt was relevant for "real world" success. His experiences, however, led him to the belief that traditional schooling was not, in fact, the link between him and a bright future. Still, while he struggled with school and did not ultimately feel that it was the mechanism to provide him the learning opportunities he craved, he did try to live up to the expectations set forth by the dominant MMM belief (and by his parents) until school became unbearable in 12th grade. His perceptions toward educational advancement, therefore, did not align with his view of the value of schooling which contrasts findings from previous case studies of Asian Americans and the MMM (Lee 1994).

Despite the fact that Andy had such a negative experience with school, we are able to use Andy's perspective about his experience and reflections on the IES dropout prevention recommendations, to "tease out" the "active key ingredients" of dropout prevention as recommended by the Institute of Education Sciences. Overall, Andy agreed that at least some element of each recommendation, when implemented effectively, may provide support for at risk students which can lead to an increase in school engagement and the prevention of school dropout. Standing out as particularly important, Andy agrees with the recommendation that providing an adult advocate is a key ingredient in the prevention of dropout. As previously stated, having a caring and persistent advocate who will help guide a severely disengaged student on a path to success is essential (Sinclair et al. 2005). A primary responsibility of this adult advocate is to be able to closely monitor and interpret data regarding at-risk students' risk factors so that the advocate can intervene by targeting these areas. Andy also agreed that providing some sort of academic and behavioral intervention in a personalized manner, depending on student need, is an essential element of dropout prevention. As outlined by Dynarski et al. (2008), a

subset of secondary students who are identified as at-risk require more individualized interventions and/or school re-structuring to enhance overall engagement. Although none of these recommendations alone are likely to impact dropout, it is possible that when implemented effectively, a multi-component, targeted, intervention may deter more at-risk students from dropping out of school.

In addition, while many of these school factors are malleable (Appleton et al. 2008), there may be factors that contribute to the demise of a student's school career that are less malleable, but worth considering for future intervention. The fundamental question, therefore, that begs to be asked is: *Could the educational system alone have prevented Andy from dropping out?* In other words, *are there factors or circumstances related to Andy's decision to drop out that are beyond the scope of the educational system?* If these factors are equally responsible, if not more responsible for a student losing interest and dropping out of school, then focusing only on more malleable school disengagement related factors (e.g., grades and attendance) and ignoring other less malleable factors related to disengagement (e.g., family and cultural expectations, school and community racial homogeneity) may not have as great an impact on the decision to drop out that is necessary (Tyler and Lofstrom 2009).

Asian American students often face unique challenges related to family, a factor related to dropout that might be less malleable than others. On one hand, they may face high expectations and pressures from their family and the dominant MMM belief. On the other hand, they may face similar challenges as other students who have parents (possibly immigrants from a low SES background) who are ill-equipped to advocate and communicate adequately with the student's school (Zhou and Bankston 1998). Balancing pressure from society, as well as from their own parents who may not provide adequate support, can be daunting for many at-risk students, as illustrated through Andy's story. Andy, for example, referenced possible difficulties stemming from his home life, heightened by the fact that he had immigrant parents who were unfamiliar with the school system and structure, as well as their role as advocates in their son's education. Aligned with other Asian American students' experiences, he noted that:

> Lots of students have little support or shared knowledge of what is going on in school, and it's hard to concentrate when there's so much going on at home. So many of my problems stemmed from my house, my lack of accountability, lack of communication, steep expectations and the heightened burden of that pressure. I often couldn't sleep until three or four in the morning [because of this pressure], so it was hard to concentrate. And there is a cultural rift in ideology…in Korea, if your school's awful, that's too bad, you'll have to deal with it.

A student's family background has proved to be a highly correlated risk indicator of student dropout (Gleason and Dynarski 2002). Family disengagement, such as inconsistent involvement and lack of communication in decision-making, is common among other Asian American dropouts as well (Lew 2007). Andy's beliefs parallel research that indicates that parent engagement in their students' success can be a strong influence on student (dis)engagement (Balfanz et al. 2010).

Another potentially malleable, but difficult factor to influence may be the overall school climate. Andy was the first to attribute some of his difficulties to the "competitive and cut throat" nature of his first high school and the homogeneous nature of his elementary school. Previous research has also suggested that ethnic minority students may experience other challenges in school such as discrimination. For example, interviews and participant observation in other studies have documented that Asian American students have noted physical and verbal harassment by peers, while African American and Latino students have reported discrimination by adults such as teachers (Rosenbloom and Way 2004).

## Implications

Especially in the case of Asian American and other minority students, determining risk factors and intervening on some of the less malleable factors that contribute to dropout such as family and school climate may be worth exploring in the future. In the meantime, however, while some factors contributing to dropout may be out of the realm of our ability to change as educators, what we can do is intervene on more malleable factors related to the IES recommendations. By implementing these recommendations, we may simply be "scratching at the surface", but evidence from Andy's story, as well as the synthesized literature on dropout prevention, indicates that it is essential that we intervene by using a data tracking system to identify at-risk students and then implement intervention components that can increase overall academic and behavioral student engagement in school. After all, Andy undoubtedly, consistently exhibited predictive risk indicators (see Gleason and Dynarski 2002). He exhibited academic struggles throughout his schooling, disengaged from participation in extra-curriculars, exhibited poor rates of attendance and high rates of skipping classes. Each of these factors contributed to his overall disengagement, and needless to say, they could have been more easily recognizable with a data tracking system in place and possibly preventable if the school had been implementing interventions in an intensive, systematic manner.

The structure of the school can also promote active learning through relevant and personalized instruction. To this end, school engagement, participation, performance and identification with school, the relationship with the school and the personnel are all critical pieces to prevent students from dropping out (Finn 1989). Overall, Andy endorsed the idea of assigning an adult advocate to at-risk students (Recommendation 2), utilizing a systematic data-tracking system to identify and personalize targeted interventions (Recommendation 1, 5), and provide academic support and "real world experiences and lessons" when possible (Recommendation 3, 6).

Andy's explanation about why he eventually dropped out points to the critical need to provide early prevention for at risk students. He explained that, "All I can say is that a lot of important decisions were made in a very short span of time by a very confused kid…and all of this has affected my life in tremendous fashions". Andy's perspective and experiences, as an at-risk Asian American student, are illustrated through the presence or absence of the IES recommendations and his voice offers a concrete sense of how the implementation of each could have influenced his experience and his decision to drop out of school. Finally, Andy

shared one last piece of advice in regards to the importance of educators implementing dropout prevention. Simply put, he reminded us that, "Getting fully involved in students' lives is a necessary step if you really want a permanent improvement for at risk students."

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