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Practitioners' Essay

Community-based?

Asian American Students, Parents, and Teachers in the Shifting Chinatowns of New York and Los Angeles

Benji Chang and Juhyung Harold Lee

Abstract

This article examines the experiences of children, parents, and teachers in the New York and Los Angeles Chinatown public schools, as observed by two classroom educators, one based in each city. The authors document trends among the transnational East and Southeast Asian families that comprise the majority in the local Chinatown schools and discuss some of the key intersections of communities and identities within those schools, as well as the pedagogies that try to build upon these intersections in the name of student empowerment and a more holistic vision of student achievement. Ultimately, this article seeks to bring forth the unique perspectives of Chinatown community members and explore how students, families, teachers, school staff and administrators, and community organizers can collaborate to actualize a more transformative public education experience.

Introduction

Popular discourse has long been fascinated with the metropolitan Chinatown, a potent cocktail of culturally vibrant stimuli—real and contrived—that has often lent an air of ethnicity to the modern U.S. city (Anderson, 1987; Luke, 2009). Yet the actors in these scenes are far from props; Chinese and other Asian Americans continue to live, work, and struggle in Chinatowns large and small across the country. They also pursue diverse modes of community engagement in their efforts to provide opportunities for their children to develop knowledge and skills for socioeconomic mobility. This practitioner article critically examines the experiences of Asian Americans in terms of where they choose to attend

public schools in the Chinatowns of New York and Los Angeles. In so doing, we make use of our own participant observations from within the schools and communities, as well as our conversations and semistructured interviews with more than sixty Chinatown students, parents, and community organization staff, from 2010 to 2011. In addition, we employ existing institutional data to discuss the impact of the schooling institution on these families in the New York City Department of Education and the Los Angeles Unified School District and to consider some of the key issues that arise around the identities, attitudes, and achievement of Asian immigrant and refugee families. As classroom teachers, we are most interested in how Chinatown community members have attempted to carve out a more transformative educational experience for their families from shared community institutions, and how their choices and experiences can inform and complicate models of critical and culturally relevant approaches to pedagogy.

Framing

The general framework of this article is grounded in the historical legacy of Asian American studies to “serve the people,” especially those most marginalized in our communities (Tachiki et al., 1971). This foundation privileges grassroots approaches to engaging with students, families, and communities, which are cognizant of intersectionality and multiple forms of oppression. With this critical lens toward community engagement and “meeting people where they are at,” our framework aligns with the education literature on critical and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009). With an overarching concern for praxis, our framework is mindful of the material conditions of urban families of color, the power dynamics and dehumanization apparent in public schooling and standardized testing, and the liberatory potential of education—particularly when it calls on the cultural backgrounds of students and teachers. Here culture is looked upon through a sociocultural lens and is seen as a dynamic and evolving body of practices that immigrants, students, and others have the power to shape and revise over time (Lee, 2007). A final piece to our framework incorporates interdisciplinary literature from ethnic studies on ethnic groups and neighborhoods (Logan, Zhang, and Alba, 2002; Zhou, 2009). It is our intention to marshal these diverse critical approaches to community, education, and social

change; foster a greater understanding of the plight of students in Chinatown schools; and generate ideas for a praxis that advances all of our communities (Omatsu, 2003).

Demographics and Histories of Communities and Schools

New York

Long the dominant subset of New York City's Asian population, Chinese Americans lay claim to a history that places it firmly alongside the Jews, Irish, Italians, Poles, and enslaved Africans as pillars of nineteenth-century immigrant New York. The area of New York's traditional Chinatown in Lower Manhattan—although once the indigenous domain of the Lenape—first began drawing Chinese residents during the mid-to-late 1800s, when viral anti-Chinese sentiment scattered laborers from the West Coast as they pursued new employment opportunities (Zhou, 2009). Chinese Americans who call the five boroughs home today remain a community of immigrants; estimates from the last five years by the Asian American Federation of New York (2009) suggest that nearly three-fourths were not born in the United States, with the majority having arrived after 1990. Relatedly, more than half of New York's Chinese consider themselves to speak English with limited proficiency; 33 percent of Chinese New Yorkers never received their high school diplomas, compared to 21 percent of all New York City residents; and the per capita income for Chinese is \$22,270 compared to \$28,610 citywide (Asian American Federation of New York, 2009). Aside from the oft-referenced traditional Chinatown in Lower Manhattan, New York's Chinese population also maintains two substantial satellite Chinatowns in the Flushing neighborhood of northeastern Queens and the Sunset Park neighborhood of southwestern Brooklyn, in addition to numerous smaller residential and commercial clusters throughout the city.

Although Chinese residents of Chinatown have typically hailed from Taishan (Toisan), Guangdong (Canton), and Hong Kong, recent years have witnessed an influx of Mandarin-speaking immigrants from mainland China, particularly from Fujian (Fukien) (Kwong and Mišćević, 2005). Undocumented immigration continues to disrupt a truly representative demographic analysis of New York's Chinese. Today's Chinatown—where 94 percent are renters (Asian American Federation of New York, 2004)—is a

rapidly changing community that has not been immune to gentrification and luxury development (Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and the Urban Justice Center, 2008). Recent years have witnessed a dramatic uptick in the issue of new building permits and liquor licenses as shops, bars, and restaurants targeting the more affluent residents of surrounding areas, such as SoHo and Nolita, infringe upon Chinatown's distinct borders. Subsequently, the area's subsidized housing stock, upon which many elderly residents and working-class families have historically relied upon, decreased from 17,696 in 2003 to 16,236 in 2006 (CAAAV and UJC, 2008).

Although greater numbers of Chinese actually make their homes in Queens or Brooklyn, Manhattan Chinatown remains a significant hub for Chinese New Yorkers (Asian American Federation of New York, 2009). Recent population estimates place the number of Chinatown residents at approximately ninety-five thousand, two-thirds of whom are of Chinese origin (Asian American Federation of New York, 2004). Chinese-owned small businesses, particularly in food service and retail, dominate the Chinatown landscape. The garment industry—while still struggling to combat the effects of the economic downturn and alterations to public-space use as dictated by the events of September 11, 2001—continues to employ some low-wage Chinese workers who commute from their homes in Brooklyn and Queens. The daily movement of outer borough residents to and from Chinatown is facilitated by the six subway lines that serve the area as well as the handful of private bus operators that ferry commuters from the commercial strips in Sunset Park and Flushing directly to the heart of Chinatown. Roughly two-dozen employment agencies connect new immigrants with low-wage jobs not only within the five boroughs but also along the Eastern Seaboard and beyond (Dolnick, 2011).

Within the loosely defined borders of New York's Manhattan Chinatown, no fewer than seven New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) elementary schools serve more than 5,500 students (New York City Department of Education, 2011). Children whose parents or guardians identified them as Asian American form the dominant racial group at all seven of these schools, and all but one school maintain populations comprised of at least two-thirds of Asian American students. More than 75 percent of the families at all seven schools claim eligibility for free or reduced

lunch. Students classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) comprise a significant portion of students in Chinatown, with the number of students enrolled in either English as a Second Language or Transitional Bilingual Education classes comprising anywhere from one-fifth to nearly half of the student population at six of the seven Chinatown schools. The lone exception is a specialized elementary school that offers an English-Mandarin dual-language setting from prekindergarten to first grade and after-school Mandarin instruction beyond the first grade.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles Chinatown is located just north of downtown, west of the Los Angeles River and the communities of Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, east of the communities of Echo Park and Pico Union, and south of Chavez Ravine and the Los Angeles Dodger Stadium. After the indigenous Tongva peoples, what is currently Chinatown has historically been a place of refuge or a port of entry for those deemed necessary for their cheap labor but undesirable for their race, class, culture, or language (Ling, 2001). During the first half of the twentieth century, much of Chinatown's Asian population came from the Pearl River delta region in Guangdong Province, mostly speaking southern Cantonese dialects from areas like Xinhui (Sun Wui) and Taishan (Takaki, 1998). Following the 1965 Immigration Act, immigration stemming from the Vietnam conflict, and resumed diplomatic relations with China in 1979 (Takaki, 1998), Chinatown has become home to many Southeast Asian families of ethnic Southern Chinese descent (e.g., Chaozhou or Teo Chew) from Southeast Asia, as well as from mainland China and Hong Kong (Dela Cruz and Patraporn, 2004). Other Asian groups also began to come at this time, including many Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. Similar to many urban areas in Los Angeles (Davis, 2006), Chinatown has also experienced a large increase in the number of immigrants from Mexico and Central American countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Chinatown is approximately 55 percent foreign-born and noncitizen (Apissakkul et al., 2006), although the number should actually be higher due to undocumented immigration from China, Mexico, and Central America.

Out of Chinatown's fourteen thousand or so residents, the majority appears to be working class. About 43 percent of China-

town households make less than \$15,000, and about one-third live in poverty according to federal standards (Chang, 2009), although a more realistic estimate would place poverty levels at double this standard (Anyon, 2005). This poverty indicator is congruent with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) statistic that 85 percent of local school families are eligible for free or reduced lunch (2011a, 2011b). In addition, U.S. Census data shows that there is a 14 percent unemployment rate, with 59 percent of adults not finishing high school and about 90 percent living in apartments (Huynh, 2005). Many parents work in food-service sectors, such as restaurants, donut shops, or casinos, as well as garment work.

Chinatown encompasses two elementary schools with some 970 students. About 70 percent of the current school-age population is from China and Southeast Asia, 25 percent is of Mexican or Central American heritage, and the population of African Americans is approximately 3 percent (LAUSD, 2011a, 2011b). Some 50 percent are indicated as ELLs, although the mark should probably be higher as Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) staff, post-Proposition 227, have been observed encouraging families to sign up for English-Only designation and instruction. There are also a growing number of families of mixed-race groups, such as Chaozhou and Mexican, and Cantonese and Black (Chang, 2009). LAUSD data does not reflect this well; a common observed practice by school staff is to put “mixed” children in the same category as their biological father in cumulative records. Another layer adding to Chinatown’s diversity is the increasing amount of upper-middle-class whites moving into newer luxury and market-rate developments geared toward the hipster arts scene and downtown business (Hsu, 2003). This gentrifying process uproots the long-standing low-income and family housing in the community that has catered to student families. A number of developers have built, or are building, thousands of luxury housing and corporate retail units in and around a half-mile radius of Chinatown (Lin, 2008). Avant-garde art galleries and bars increasingly light up the night on weekends, illuminating a mostly white and upscale clientele (Kwok, 2008). Reflecting this issue is the decreasing enrollment at the schools, as the more affluent hipster and professional crowd tend to have fewer children or none at all. Between the two local schools, total enrollment dropped about 15 percent from 2005 to 2010 (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2011). When one of the

authors began teaching in 2000, the school population was almost one thousand, which is more than the total combined enrollment of the two Chinatown schools now.

Common Themes

Despite significant differences in population size, density, and racial and ethnic subgroups, there are marked similarities between the Los Angeles and Manhattan Chinatowns. Although many students who attend Chinatown elementary schools in both cities are residents of the corresponding neighborhood zones, interactions with students and parents suggest that a significant number do commute from parts of town outside of the local feeder neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, home visits with more than fifty student families revealed that some of them live in outlying neighborhoods in the urban core like Glendale, or in more suburban San Gabriel Valley communities like Alhambra. Similarly, in New York, many students live in other parts of Manhattan and the outer boroughs, particularly Brooklyn and, to a lesser extent, Staten Island and Queens; such commutes typically average well more than an hour each way. It also appears that many of the outer borough parents who send their children to Chinatown schools do not live in the traditional ethnic enclaves of Flushing or Sunset Park, where schools are also generally well regarded and tend to be similarly dominated by Asian American students. Some Brooklyn- and Staten Island-based youth who attend Chinatown schools have specifically attested to the presence of mostly “all American people” where they live, suggesting that they live outside of the environs of major satellite Chinatowns.

Through conversations with students, parents, teachers, and staff members of local community-based organizations in both cities, it was learned that local parental employment contributes to the daily movement of schoolchildren to Chinatown, as parents drop off and pick up their children on their way to and from jobs in the area. In Manhattan Chinatown, a number of outer borough students claim at least one locally employed parent, and it is not uncommon for these students to remain on campus after school through programs that offer tutoring and child care while their parents finish their workday. Some parents also maintain familial connections in Chinatown that facilitate the care of children after school by grandparents or other relatives until the primary caregivers are able to pick up their children after work.

Also significant in parents' decisions to enroll their children in Chinatown elementary schools is the perceived quality of such campuses. "My mom says this school is better [than the schools in my neighborhood]," acknowledged one Chinatown fourth grader from southern Brooklyn. Students and parents have indicated that Chinatown elementary schools are held in high esteem among the Chinese as safe institutions in which their children will be afforded reasonable opportunities to achieve academic success. This appears to hold true even among some Chinese and non-Chinese families who live in slightly more affluent parts of the city, such as Fresh Meadows in New York, or Silver Lake in Los Angeles. In speaking with a diverse group of parents who own their homes in Los Angeles (e.g., Cantonese, Pilipino, Korean, Shanghainese/ Japanese, and African American), they also expressed their willingness to drive from other parts of the city to a Chinatown school where they feel their children will have a solid education. One Korean parent explained, "The scores in the newspaper are higher, so the teachers must be better."

Annual data collected by the NYCDOE and LAUSD appear to corroborate parents' perceptions. On 2009–10 NYCDOE school progress reports—which measure student progress on standardized tests, school performance on standardized tests, and parent and teacher responses to school environment surveys—six of the seven Chinatown elementary schools received A grades while one received a B. In Los Angeles during 2009–10, Chinatown schools received Academic Performance Index (API) rankings of seven or ten with ten being the highest score, compared to an average API ranking of three at the closest neighboring schools. Certainly, ethnic-specific structural supports within the Chinese American community—such as in-language school support, enrichment centers, and after-school programs—contribute to the academic performance of students at these schools (Zhou, 2009). So too, in Manhattan Chinatown, does the public perception of the local district as a cutting-edge and successful network of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse schools attract greater resources and outside investment (Ravitch, 2010). At the very least, the relative success of Chinatown schools in generating high standardized test scores among its students can be attributed to a combination of factors, including intersections of culture and structure and the selectively biased nature of immigration (Zhou, 2009).

What Does This Mean for Students and Families?

The practice of school choice—where parents have the opportunity to choose from a menu of schools beyond just their geographic zone—often has the tendency to splinter local communities by sending children to disparate schools rather than to one central neighborhood institution (Ravitch, 2010). Yet, in many ways, it seems that the daily migration of schoolchildren to and from Chinatown allows families to maintain vital links to a community that they have either voluntarily left or avoided in order to pursue housing or employment opportunities elsewhere, or involuntarily left or were denied access to due to rising housing costs and gentrification (Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and the Urban Justice Center, 2008). Based upon anecdotal evidence of children’s actual places of residence, and their provincial and linguistic backgrounds, the school choice that many Chinese parents employ redefines the neighborhood school as a community school—one that does not simply serve a set of particular geographic boundaries, but rather an ethnic community that transcends physical location.

Chinatown student bodies are primarily comprised of peers who share common ethnic backgrounds. Many children participate in loosely shared cultural traditions that are celebrated schoolwide, such as giving and receiving lucky red envelopes and performing the lion dance, especially around the Lunar New Year. Throughout the school organizational structure, students are exposed to significant numbers of staff and faculty who share similar ethnic heritage and cultural practices. For example, parent coordinators are more likely to be Chinese and fluent in the *lingua franca* of most parents (e.g., Mandarin and Cantonese), school materials are likely to be distributed in English and Chinese, and parents see themselves reflected in the Parent Teacher Associations and other school leadership bodies.

Yet the cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between more recent Chinese immigrants and the second- and third-generation “old guard” should not be discounted, as Chinese America encompasses a large and diverse cross-section of communities across ancestral homelands, dialects, migration histories, and socioeconomic status. Although schools have long been viewed as one of the primary institutions through which

immigrants are assimilated into “American culture” (Olneck, 2004), it would be more apt to suggest that Chinatown schools, by broadly representing Chinese culture through culturally relevant curricula and programs, can mesh students of differing diasporic backgrounds into a somewhat monolithic Chinese American culture. Within the classroom or playground, the distinctions that may have stymied closer relationships between their parents or grandparents appear less pronounced, especially as they share the common academic language of English, and as more nonnative Mandarin-speaking children develop their skills in the modern Chinese *lingua franca* (Semple, 2009).

Chinatown schools also facilitate increasing contact among coethnic community members and thus strengthen the community’s social networks (Zetlin, Ramos, and Chee, 2001). During field trips and gatherings in Lee’s Manhattan Chinatown third-grade classroom, parents of varying linguistic and provincial backgrounds shifted frequently among English, Cantonese, and Mandarin as they compared notes regarding the educational and extracurricular experiences of their children. The informal network formed by these early exchanges later facilitated the grassroots mobilization of parents in response to the threat of teacher layoffs during the spring of 2011. In Los Angeles, the majority of parents and students from Chang’s third-grade classroom built upon their initial classroom-based interactions and went on to participate in various out-of-school programs and a grassroots community group. These spaces brought together a multigenerational group of residents and addressed local issues ranging from health to the lack of resources for arts and sports, within a setting of culturally relevant education and consensus decision-making.

For non-Chinese Asian students in Chinatown schools, students and parents attest to the importance of attending a campus that is at least somewhat sensitive to the plight of Asian and immigrant families and attracts faculty, staff, and services that understand some of the community’s issues. A Japanese couple from Los Angeles, one born in Japan and another in the United States, remarked, “The neighborhood that we lived in for years doesn’t have Japanese people any more. So we wanted to come to Chinatown where our kid can go to school with different people, including other Asians. Plus a lot of the teachers are Asian, and there’s a lot of community groups here.”

It is important to note here, however, that Chinatown schools do not serve as *de facto* ethnic ghettos in which Chinese American and other immigrant families purposely stow their children away for fear of exposure to mainstream culture or norms. Rather, the schools represent one of the crucial structures embedded within a dynamic immigrant neighborhood through which diverse members of a shared ethnic background pursue opportunities for socio-economic mobility (Zhou, 2009). As Hum (2002, 33–34) suggests, the continued existence of immigrant neighborhoods such as Chinatown “may indicate the capacity of ethnic solidarity and social networks to facilitate economic mobility, community life, and culture continuity.” By serving majority Chinese populations, building a sense of community through a commitment to culturally relevant teaching and high levels of parental engagement, and providing a structure through which children can develop the knowledge and skills for social and professional success, Chinatown schools can operate as ethnically bounded spaces of opportunity.

Enrollment in a Chinatown public school on either coast also facilitates access to community-based organizations that have traditionally improved the experiences of immigrant adults and children (Cho, 2009; Zhou, 2000, 2009). Historically, these have encompassed a range of organizations, including advocacy groups such as the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in New York, service providers like the Chinatown Service Center in Los Angeles, and a host of religious organizations and benevolent associations. In recent years, groups focused on youth and community-organizing issues, like the Southeast Asian Community Alliance in Los Angeles and the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV): Organizing Asian Communities in New York, have further complemented the social change work of community-based organizations (Chang and Martínez, 2009). For Chinatown students, this is especially true for those enrolled in after-school programs, which are offered by local community-based organizations and run by Asian or immigrant staff members that are familiar with the struggles of urban families of color. Through these programs, students are more able to relate to the sometimes dissonant cultural practices and experiences of their parents and families and foster bonds with other immigrants and the broader community (Adger, 2001).

Although we have outlined some of the benefits of students attending Chinatown schools, we point out that access to

these schools is not equitable amongst Chinese, non-Chinese Asian, and other working-class or immigrant families. It should also be noted that current structures that exist for parents to pursue alternate schooling options place an inequitable burden upon those with limited capital, especially with regard to English proficiency and established social capital and networks. The landscape of public schooling often requires a nuanced understanding of the policies and politics that govern their children's educations, and sending children to nonzoned schools means navigating a murky string of registration forms, admissions applications, proofs of residence, and waiting lists.

Implications for Policy Makers and Educators

The efforts of many parents of Chinatown students to exercise their own, homegrown version of school choice have diminished the immediate relevance of neighborhood schools for families. On a larger scale, as the United States moves closer to a market-based system of public education in which parents have increasing options from which to choose schools for their children, teachers must redouble their efforts to develop an understanding of the unique paths by which their students arrived in their classrooms in order to more comprehensively serve the students' needs. Although many skillful teachers may already understand the value of developing a culturally relevant pedagogy and inclusive community in their classrooms (Genishi and Goodwin, 2007), educators should additionally be aware of the unique position they play in normalizing relations among children of distinct linguistic, provincial, neighborhood, and class backgrounds. This is particularly significant in addressing the possible detachment of Chinese American students from their zoned schools and how this influences relations with the non-Chinese and non-Asian children and families from the neighborhoods in which they actually live. This is a partial twist to a traditional dilemma in ethnic enclave literature; the challenge concerns how ethnic groups can maintain healthy levels of intraethnic solidarity through their participation in geographically distinct ethnic enclaves while developing interethnic solidarity with their geographically similar yet ethnically distinct neighbors. A second challenge concerns the non-Chinese American students who nonetheless find themselves in a Chinese American-dominated school. A third chal-

lenge is the perception that Chinatown schools are better than students' zoned schools, which may contribute to increased racial discord between distinct ethnic communities and lend further credence to the model minority myth (Lee, 1996).

In all three challenges outlined in the preceding text, teachers can play the most direct role in mitigating some of the negative outcomes of school choice by practicing a more dynamic culturally relevant pedagogy that understands culture not as heroes and holidays, but rather as a collection of historically situated practices that change over time depending on the dialogical relationship between local community and society. This includes critically and actively engaging students, families, and community workers to develop an understanding of children's home lives and migration patterns to foster a more culturally relevant and community-based pedagogy. Through such a pedagogy, the diverse experiences of how students came to be in a particular classroom are explored (Howard, 2010). Challenges also emerge to school-based reifications of static, compartmentalized, and stereotypical views of where families come from and to what they can aspire. In addition, addressing the shared histories and struggles of the students and their families are key building blocks in laying the foundation of where the school is trying to go and how it is trying to engage the community.

In Chang's first-grade classroom, a key theme was a critical negotiation of "difference" within a class whose home countries were largely in Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean. One unit plan included a people's history version of a family tree, where students tackled the question of "How did our families get to Chinatown?" and interviewed their families. Looking beyond just race and language, they discovered similarities in family experience, including war, employment, and U.S. intervention in their home countries. When these shared histories were applied to a classroom mission of teamwork and helping their families and shared community through transformative education approaches, students and parents were highly engaged. In Queens, students in Lee's predominantly Chinese American fifth-grade classroom confronted questions about their cultural and national citizenship while critically examining the experience of Japanese Americans during internment. They interviewed family members to author collections of personal narratives, poetry,

and visual art, documenting their families' immigration to the United States. This situated their families' experiences within the U.S. history of antiimmigrant legislation, and the contemporary movement for comprehensive immigration reform. Such pedagogies of classroom-community engagement take on an added importance as gentrification and the economic crisis force families to splinter for employment in other cities, states, or countries. In this context of destabilized parental and family support, teachers and schools can take a more significant role in developing a healthy ethnic and cultural identity and a sense of agency (Campano, 2007).

In suggesting a more culturally relevant and community-based pedagogy, we urge schools to more proactively draw upon the strengths and experiences of the students' families and school community in order to apply them to pedagogies that address issues of the neighborhood's constituents (Allen, 2007). More specifically, schools can encourage teaching that embraces the different forms of knowledge, ideology, and social networks that marginalized families use to survive and thrive in their material conditions (Moll, 1998). These funds of knowledge can subsequently inform curriculum and instruction to help students build multiple literacies, empower themselves, and address the lived conditions of their families and neighbors. One of Lee's fifth-grade classes in Queens engaged in a small-group collaborative study of gentrifying neighborhoods in Queens (Flushing and Willets Point) and Manhattan (Chinatown and the Lower East Side). After examining newspapers, blogs, local organizational reports, and photos on gentrification trends, the students participated in a teacher-led "gentrification walking tour" of Chinatown and the Lower East Side, which was curated by a staff member of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. As a culminating project, the students learned how to write formal letters before drafting their own pointed missives to New York City Council members, calling for more stringent protections for renters and further development of affordable housing units. Throughout this month-long study, which translated their learning into political action, students learned to name and place their previously casual observations of rapidly changing urban landscapes and to build upon their experiential knowledge with primary source materials from communities in which they either lived or frequented.

Certainly, some detractors may claim that culturally relevant pedagogies overromanticize the plight and forms of capital that immigrants and working-class families bring to the table and that such sociocultural approaches do not adequately address standardized testing and the neoliberal realities of achievement and success. Yet nearly two decades of scholarship show otherwise, with diverse communities demonstrating that they can learn to master the dominant codes of power in the schooling system, while developing a critical consciousness around their sense of culture, identity, and community (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008). For example, as a rookie first-grade teacher, Chang was assigned the “bad class” of low-tracked students in Los Angeles Chinatown. This cohort of multiethnic and multilingual students was recognized as a low-achieving “problem” class across the faculty. Assigned this same cohort of students year after year, Chang took the opportunity to develop a pedagogy that was informed by critical, culturally relevant, and sociocultural pedagogy, along with grassroots community organizing. Despite high-stakes testing and prescribed curricula (e.g., Open Court Reading), he incorporated teaching practices such as home visits with all students’ families, remediations of student hybrid language and cultural practices (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda, 1999), and partnerships with local organizing, labor, and social service groups to holistically support student development. By fourth grade, the students had the highest average standardized scores in math and language arts in their grade level and demonstrated critical competencies through narratives, sports, and spoken word (Chang, 2009).

The high performance of students enrolled in Chinatown elementary schools on standardized tests remains a great draw for many parents, irrespective of the cultural familiarity that these schools offer. However, as increasing and undue emphasis is placed upon standardized test scores as an indicator of student achievement and school quality, parents may consider any future declines in Chinatown school scores—instead of other factors such as teacher pedagogy, parental engagement, and community ties—as cause to seek placements in perceived higher-performing schools that may be culturally isolating and not fully meet the needs of their children. Moreover, the individualistic nature of standardized tests tends to pit students, teachers, and parents against each other instead of mobilizing them around collective

goals and power toward a more transformative school community (Schutz, 2006). An overreliance on standardized testing data thus has the potential to devalue community-based and culturally relevant education, and subsequently rob more community-oriented schools—such as those in Chinatown—of some of the very assets that allow them to contribute to the social and economic mobility of their students.

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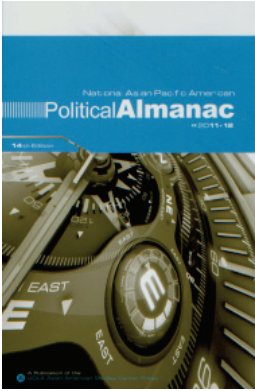
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