

ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER

LEADERS IN SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGY



Trainers of
School
Psychologists

EST. 1972

2023

Yi Ding, PhD

Professor and Director of School Psychology Program,
Fordham University



What was your initial exposure to school psychology, what led to your entrance into the field?

I was originally trained as a special education teacher. I always wanted to explore psychology, thus school psychology is a perfect fit for me.

What advice would you share to the next generation of AAPI scholars and practitioners entering the field of school psychology?

School Psychology is a very rewarding field for me. It is largely unknown in the Asian community. I wish more people are aware of this profession and are willing to make a positive contribution to the field of school psychology.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. YI HERE.](#)

Prerna G. Arora, PhD

Associate Professor, Teachers College,
Columbia University



My initial exposure was through an internet search while looking into child psychology programs to which to apply. That I am in this field is by happy chance! I am pleased that we are doing more to publicize our field, especially among students of color.



Just because you don't see people studying something you're interested in, it doesn't mean it isn't needed. Pursue the questions that you have. There is nothing wrong with "me-search;" I would argue almost all research is to some degree.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. ARORA HERE.](#)

Stephanie D'Costa, PhD

Assistant professor, St. Mary's College of California



I always wanted to work with children, but the thought of working with a classroom sized number overwhelmed me. When I found school psychology, I realized that I would get to work with kids for whom the traditional education system was not meeting their needs. I started working and thinking about educational disparities and am now moving towards empowering historically silenced groups to engage in their own collective healing.

You belong here. When I first started in the field there were so few people who looked like me and shared my experiences. I was taught to silence my cultural ways of knowing for "objective" institutional knowledge. I encourage you to learn from both research articles and your amma's wisdom. Many of our communities have crossed oceans and languages to arrive here and the resilience of that journey has much to teach us.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. D'COSTA HERE.](#)

Karissa Lim, MA, MPhil

Ph.D. Candidate, Teachers College, Columbia University



I found out about school psychology through a Google search of graduate programs in psychology! The field resonated with me because after graduating from college, I wanted to continue studying psychology from a systems-level and social justice lens, so that I could give back to my community (that is, BIPOC, AAPI, and immigrant youth and their families).

You belong. Your existence in this field is inherently resistance, which can be empowering AND exhausting. Give yourself grace as you navigate this space. You belong, and you are enough!

[LEARN MORE ABOUT KARISSA HERE.](#)

Andy V. Pham, PhD

Associate Professor of School Psychology,
Florida International University



My first initial exposure to school psychology was at Tufts University. Before starting their graduate program, I worked at a school for individuals with behavioral and developmental disabilities. Some of the approaches that the clinicians used to address problem behavior did not seem to be working for these individuals, so I looked into graduate programs to learn more about effective practices in managing disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Through this search, I stumbled on school psychology.

My advice to AAPI scholars and practitioners is to take advantage of any resources and opportunities provided by your institution, NASP, APA, or other professional organizations to become a mentor and/or become a mentee. It is a rewarding experience to build connections while learning from and supporting others no matter what stage of career you are in. Although some mentorship programs may take more formal approaches, it is perfectly fine to develop informal ways to connect as mentors/mentees.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. PHAM HERE.](#)

Tara Kulkarni, PhD, NCSP

Assistant Professor, California State University,
Monterey Bay



My initial exposure to school psychology happened when I was working as a school counselor in India. I noticed disproportionate numbers of children from disadvantaged castes and communities being referred to SPED with a "specific learning disability." I was shocked to discover our government hospitals were using English monolingual western norms of the WJ IV to make their eligibility determinations [our students were multilingual]. After some research, I came across response to intervention and decided to implement an adapted version in the school where I worked. The outcome was so positive, I knew that I had found something I truly loved to do.

Keep engaging in anti-racist work, challenge the anti-Blackness in your communities, and develop strong relationships with fellow AAPI school psychs that will support you throughout your career.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. KULKARNI HERE.](#)

Shereen Naser, PhD

Associate Professor, Cleveland State University



As one of the only Arabs in my Texas high school I always felt out of place, particularly in the post 9/11 environment. At the same time, my parents who were forcibly displaced from their homeland, saw the school environment as one of the most important places in my life. A place where I could get an education and find success for me and for my family. I knew that whatever I did in my future I wanted to support other youth like me who felt excluded and othered in schools, a place with such potential to empower students. I took psychology classes in high school and in college as a way to better understand the people and systems around me. I struggled to figure out how I would apply that knowledge to my goal of working in education until I found a research lab in college headed by a school psychologist. The rest is history!

School psychology is a field where AAPI, including MENA, School Psychologists can make a big impact. Many AAPI and MENA youth struggle to access important support services for many reasons including stigma around special education and mental health, a lack of cultural nuance and a social justice orientation in typical educational practice, and lack of knowledge on how to navigate school systems. AAPI and MENA school psychologists can help to break down some of these barriers for youth and their families.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. NASER HERE.](#)

Sujay Sabnis, PhD

Assistant Professor at Miami University



I was first exposed to school psychology while doing an externship for a school psychologist as part of my master degree in clinical psychology. That was where I started learning about the profession. I liked that it seemed to have less pathologizing focus than clinical psychology, and that it was intertwined with the field of education which had been always something that had interested me. I was also very interested in research so it made sense for me to seek a Ph.D. in school psychology.

For AAPI students entering Ed.S. or Ph.D. programs, my advice would be to advocate for yourself. Many school psychology programs can be excessively structured, and may even require certain 'elective' courses. But the faculty might let you take other elective courses instead that align with your interests more so feel free to ask, and explain why the other electives make more sense for your career trajectory. Be proactive in creating your dissertation committee. Meet with multiple faculty, look at their CVs, and have short meetings with them to get a feel of your compatibility with them. Your dissertation is your baby so you should get a say in who serves on the committee. Basically, you want a committee that gets along with you in addition to bringing in the expertise you need. Finally, there are many faculty in other departments and programs who are also doing interesting work. Do not feel nervous about reaching out to them; most faculty are happy to talk to you about their research and help you come up with ideas for your dissertation. Your dissertation is a huge commitment so make sure you are doing something you actually enjoy.

Stacy L. Bender, PhD

Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and School Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston



My first exposure to school psychology was through the McNair Scholars Program when I was an undergraduate psychology major. While in the McNair Program, I was contributed to several research labs and learned that I was most drawn to those where I worked with youth. The experiences I had in schools implementing interventions with students were so impactful and from there I knew I wanted to support kids' social-emotional and behavioral health in the education environment.

- 1) Remember that you belong! Your knowledge, intuition, and lived experiences will help influence the field for the better.
- 2) Surround yourself with mentors, collaborators, and colleagues who uplift and support you (and do the same for them!). Not only will this network be supportive and provide you with guidance as you navigate your career, but it also makes the work more meaningful and fun.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. BENDER HERE.](#)

Sruthi Swami, PhD, NCSP

Assistant Professor, California State University,
Sacramento



I was a middle school math teacher working with students in special education and I also worked with students who were suspended and up for expulsion (engaging in informal counseling without the training). I realized that I needed more skills and knowledge, and school psychology was the perfect field for me.

Community is important! Find the people who support and nourish you personally and professionally as they are the ones who will continue to motivate you throughout your career. You will come face to face with people who don't understand you or your identities, but don't give up. The people who have your back are out there!

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. SWAMI HERE.](#)

Samuel Y. Kim, PhD

Assistant Professor, University of Denver



As a freshman in college, I entered my first course, not knowing what to expect. I inadvertently started playing the "what if game" in my head. What if they discover that I don't belong here? What if I make a fool of myself? What if my high school counselor was right, I couldn't make it at a school like this? As the social disasters grew in severity in my imagination, I was instead met with kindness and gentleness by an instructor, who was also an assistant dean at the school. When I met with her during office hours, she wanted to know how my first year of college was going. I eventually ended up doing work study in her office and began receiving odd little tasks, such as reviewing articles about School Psychology or opening up a brand new WAIS kit and inventorying the contents. NASP happened to be in the city one year, and she paid for my registration fee to attend the conference. I never imagined that my first college instructor would mentor me into the field of School Psychology.

The main piece of advice I have for future AAPI school psychology scholars and practitioners is to build a strong social support system. Having people you can trust and depend on is going to help build resilience as well as help you see the meaningfulness of your work. And this is not just professional colleagues but build friendships with people who appreciate you for who you are. I know that I could not have made it this far in my career and life without the support of family, friends, and colleagues.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. KIM HERE.](#)

Samuel Song, PhD

Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas



After being discouraged by Psychology professors, I realized the potential of our field in an education class. After first starting in counseling, I was "saved" and stumbled upon school psychology! (haha) I chose school psychology due to having grown up with hard immigrant experiences; and because, a family member was pushed out of school. I became driven by how to prevent this from occurring to kids and families.

Welcome to the field! It is an exciting time to be in school psychology. You are here for a reason. Follow your passions and be an advocate. You are not alone. Reach out to me as needed!

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. SONG HERE.](#)

Eui Kyung Kim, PhD

Assistant Professor of School Psychology,
University of California, Riverside



During my time at Boston College, I pursued a master's degree in counseling psychology and completed an internship at a private autism center where I facilitated social skills groups for children aged 5 to 13. Although I found the experience to be rewarding, I noticed a lack of diversity among the client population, which limited my ability to connect with and support underrepresented children and families. Additionally, since interactions with children occurred only in weekly one-hour group sessions, I had limited exposure to observing and learning how educational inequities were embedded in students' lives. To broaden my understanding of the field, I reached out to faculty and students in the school psychology program at Boston College. Through this exploration, I learned about the diverse experiences, skills, and responsibilities of school psychologists and became increasingly intrigued about this as a future educational and career path.

AAPi individuals often learn to prioritize education, but the lack of AAPi professionals in schools creates a noticeable gap between AAPi students and those who play a significant role in shaping their learning, development, and sense of belonging. I encourage the next generation of AAPi scholars and practitioners to recognize their crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive environment for AAPi students. It is essential to appreciate and value ourselves, our roles, and our perspectives, which may be lacking among some AAPi scholars and practitioners. While I do not intend to generalize, as an international scholar from a culture that values humility, I've had to learn hard to appreciate and share the strengths and assets I bring into the field. I hope we all can appreciate the work we do and have more confidence in our abilities.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. KIM HERE.](#)

Jina Yoon, PhD

Professor and Faculty Chair, University of Arizona



As a junior in college, I volunteered at a vocational training program that served young adults with Down Syndrome in South Korea. Without much training I ended up leading music classes and offering individual sessions on life skills.

Through this experience, I became very interested in disability and special education, particularly the idea of early intervention, which led to pursuing a master's degree in early childhood special education. As I explored my options for doctoral level training, I found myself wanting to learn about theories and principles that help me understand how to serve children and their needs. One of the professors I talked to during that time recommended the field of school psychology. I feel very lucky to have become a member of this wonderful field.

Intentionally build a community of support early in your career; a network of supportive colleagues and mentors is an incredible asset that carries us through the development of professional identity beyond graduate training. Reach out to other AAPI scholars and practitioners in the field. Many are so thrilled to meet you and learn about the work you are doing. I have found that these professional relationships often lead to meaningful collaborations, but also they serve as thought partners, confidants, and co-conspirators. State and national conferences offer great opportunities to build and maintain these relationships.

Active involvement in the state and national organization requires time and effort and may seem intimidating at first, but it is wonderful to work along with leaders and learn from them. I wish I could do my early career again. :)

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. YOON HERE.](#)

Cliff Yung-Chi Chen, PhD

Associate Professor of School Psychology,
Queens College of CUNY



When I first I started graduate school in the United States, I was enrolled in an experimental psychology program conducting research on social cognition with a focus on risk perception and decision making. As much as I enjoyed the experience, it did not satisfy my deep-seated desire for becoming a licensed psychologist who provides behavioral health services to individuals experiencing life and mental health challenges. While searching for graduate programs that would further achieve my career goals, I stumbled upon school psychology. For someone like me who grew up in Taiwan, school psychology was a foreign concept. It is embarrassing to admit that I did not know much about the field until I actually got into the School Psychology Track in the Educational Psychology Program at The Graduate Center of CUNY. I remember stating in my graduate application that I was particularly interested in understanding the cognitive profiles of different neurological disorders, such as ADHD, autism, and learning disabilities, through assessment. I am forever grateful for the faculty who took a chance on me as this turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me, leading to a fulfilling career.

Your AAPI heritage is an asset, not a liability. Your existence and presence in the field of school psychology are valued and appreciated, although sometimes you may not feel like it. Only you can define you. Create your own space in the profession of school psychology by connecting with people who are your allies, and do not be afraid to reach out for support.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. CHEN HERE.](#)

Dieu M. Truong, PhD

Assistant Professor, Sam Houston State University (Aug. 23')



The initial reason that I joined my training program is because I really appreciated the opportunity to work and have an impact across different systems. My motivation at the start of my training journey was from working with autism families in the Vietnamese community in Houston, Texas. Seeing how many of their challenges could have been alleviated if all systems of services worked together or if someone can work to make this happens --- and that's what school psychologists do! Therefore, being a school psychologist is incredible as it is part of our training and identity to work with and support systems in working together to better serve our children and families. Throughout many opportunities to work in different settings (etc., schools, community mental health centers, hospitals) and the privilege to serve many different families in the U.S., and in Vietnam, I can see how incredible and versatile the training of the field is, especially how versatile our skills are when it comes to cross-setting and interprofessional collaboration.

I want to start out by sharing this Vietnamese idiom, Nước Chảy Đá Mòn, which can be directly translated as "the flow of water will dull down rocks over time." To me, this saying serves a powerful reminder for self-preservation as advocacy across systems and is part of who I am as an Asian American school psychologist. The intersectionality of the Asian American experience and the field of school psychology often puts us in a unique position that often includes the experience of being invisible and muted when it comes to advocacy.

Hence, being flexible (as the states of water), being patient over time, and being strengthened from building solidarity and community with others, are the three important components that have been helpful for inspiration and self-preservation. And self-preservation is critical in our field. I hope that you could give yourself unconditional positive self-regard and empathetic self-understanding so that you could give yourself kindness when things get difficult. Lastly, our field has a lot of mentors who love to mentor future school psychologists. Mentorship and mentors have been the biggest part in my professional growth. It is my mentors (Samuel Song, Angela Mann, and Ruth Schumacher-Martinez) that have been my rock and guiding compass on my journey towards becoming a more socially just and disability affirming school psychologist.

LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. TRUONG HERE.

Oanh K. Tran, PhD

Professor and School Psychology Program Coordinator,
California State University, East Bay



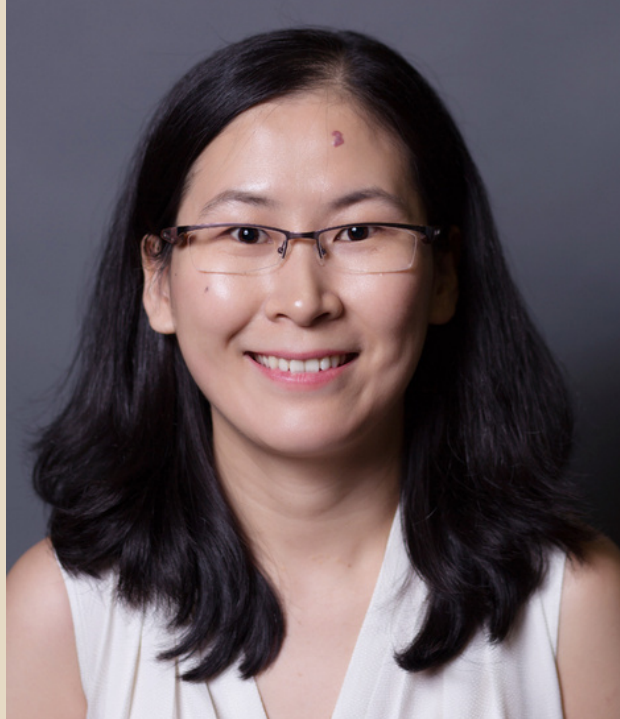
From the start of my undergraduate studies, I've had a burning passion to work with children and youth from culturally diverse and at-risk communities in mental health and education. I thought a clinical private practice was my only option. It wasn't until I received the Sally Casanova Pre-doctoral Scholarship during my master's program that my world opened up. The scholarship pushed me to be out of my comfort zone and make connections; it allowed me to travel and participate in a research internship at a prestigious university of my choice, where I had the honor of connecting with a faculty mentor who gave me an amazing research experience and introduced me to school psychology. I was amazed and never knew this field existed, but it was a perfect fit for my goals, the population I wanted to work with, and how I could make the most impact! Through this internship experience, doors opened that allowed me to meet incredible mentors who helped me accomplish my dreams of being an Asian-American scholar and practitioner. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself, seek out mentors, and embrace opportunities that come your way.

To the next generation of AAPI school psychology scholars, practitioners, and students... Firstly, I advise you to challenge yourself and step out of your comfort zone. This will help you develop new skills, gain valuable experiences, and broaden your perspectives. Don't be afraid to take risks and embrace new opportunities. Tolerance for ambiguity is one of the key dispositions for success. Secondly, find the true you and be transformative. Identify your passions, values, and strengths and align your work with them. Being true to yourself will help you be more authentic, fulfilled, and impactful. Also, strive to be transformative in your work by questioning the status quo, challenging biases, and advocating for equity and social justice. Finally, make connections. Networking and building relationships with peers, mentors, and stakeholders will help you learn, grow, and advance in your career. Seek out opportunities to collaborate, learn from others, and share your expertise. Overall, always remember to be passionate, curious, and resilient in your work, and seek to make a positive difference in the lives of the students, families, and communities you serve.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. TRAN HERE.](#)

Chunyan Yang, PhD

Associate Professor of School Psychology,
University of California, Berkeley



I was trained as a science teacher in China during my undergrad. When doing practicum as a student teacher, I realized that I really enjoy understanding and supporting students' development and learning as a whole child, instead of focusing on the academic aspect only. I first learned about the field of school psychology through a child psychopathology course I took with Dr. Marika Ginsburg-Block during my first semester as a doctoral student in Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. After talking to more professors and students in the field of school psychology, I was convinced that school psychology was the field I wanted to pursue for my future career, although I was not sure if I would end up being a practitioner or a professor at that time.

I think it is important to intentionally reflect on and embrace the collective assets, strengths, and resilience we have as AAPI scholars and practitioners as we climb the mountain.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. YANG HERE.](#)

Stephanie Campbell, PhD

Postdoctoral Trainee and Emergency Department Liaison,
HI DOH Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division



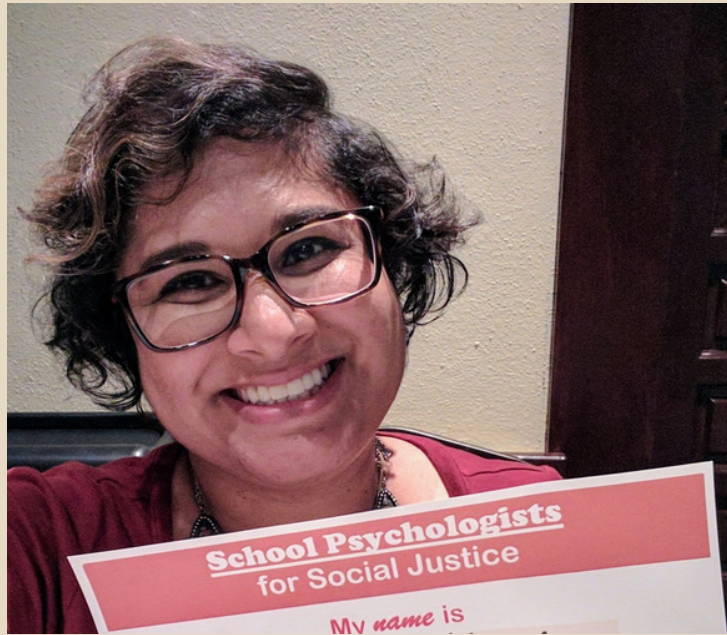
I wasn't sure what I wanted as a career. Grad school felt necessary following a degree in psychology and music, but I knew music cognition was not my forever place. I loved working at summer camps and leading team-building games, so I (hilariously & briefly) thought I/O psychology might be a good fit for studying teams and leadership. I planned a visit to meet with some I/O folks at Appalachian State University to learn more. I happened to notice that they also had a school psychology program. I had never heard of SP before, so I set up a meeting to meet with a professor there as well. I learned in that fateful visit that the I/O vibes were not a match, but better yet, I stumbled into a way of combining my love for working with youth and psychology. After graduation I completed a service corps year in Richmond, VA working with east end kids doing outdoor education and adventure. Seeing the effects of complex and racialized trauma solidified my interest in school psychology. I wanted real tools to work with trauma that would have a longer impact than singing fun songs to distract.

Unfortunately, it's easy to feel lonely and othered as a minoritized scholar/practitioner. Psychology has been and continues to be overwhelmingly white, and only some of its subfields care to do anything to address problems/oppression that persist. Fortunately, school psychology is a place where I've found hope, community, and somewhere to flourish. Social justice is a stated goal and a mechanism of action in school psychology (despite what you will likely face in your textbooks). If you want to be a part of liberatory change, my advice is to lean on the structures, policies, practice model, and—most importantly—scholars who have created inroads to do so. Find your community, lean on them, and build something beautiful together.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. CAMPBELL HERE.](#)

Devadrita Talapatra, PhD

Associate Professor of School Psychology, Department of Teaching and Learning Sciences, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver



I found school psychology through frustration. Both as a special education teacher working with students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) and as a family member of individuals who had both ASD and ID, I felt helpless. I was disheartened by the lack of engagement school psychologists had with my students and my family. We needed social-emotion interventions, transition services, and family support. We needed a partner to help us navigate the school system, not push us out. I was determined to learn more about this profession that was supposed to help children, so I could help children. I was committed to training practitioners that would advocate and not alienate. I wanted the field to know about ID. Although my introduction to the field was negative, I have had multitudes of positive experiences since entering the profession.

Build relationships - My colleagues are warm, caring, and always willing to help. The work of my peers inspire me; their friendships sustain me. I would not be in the field now, if not for the connections I have made and the supports I have received. Engage in research and service that speaks to you - At times, doing the work that you want to do may seem insurmountable. Persist, because your voice and lens is important. And slowly but surely, you will see the change you want to create.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. TALAPATRA HERE.](#)