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Challenging the invisibility of Asian Americans in education

Betina Hsieh  and Jung Kim 

The term “Asian American” is a complicated and contentious one. Encompassing over 30 different nationalities and ethnic groups and speaking hundreds of different languages, Asian Americans are often seen as a monolithic group despite their vast diversity. Goodwin (2010) talks about the “vertical” and “horizontal” diversity found within the group, acknowledging not just the linguistic, national origin, and ethnic diversity (the “horizontal”), but the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) differences stemming from socioeconomic status, gender, religion, education level, immigration status, and political perspective (the “vertical”) to name a few. For these reasons, some activists within the community prefer the more inclusive though not wholly unproblematic—Asian American and Pacific Islander American (AAPIA) or Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) labels. However, even monikers like these, which are meant to be inclusive, can be tokenizing and marginalizing when the unique needs and experiences of Pacific Islanders and Desi Americans are not truly centered. For this reason, we choose to use the term Asian American in this issue, explicitly acknowledge the diversity it encompasses, and highlight a variety of Asian American perspectives and experiences in this special issue. Given the differences within the Asian American community, representing a specific Asian American experience in education would itself be a “misrepresentation” that oversimplifies the diverse experiences of members of the Asian diaspora in America.

Comprising just under 6% of the country (López et al., 2017), Asian Americans are often overlooked in discussions of diversity and race within this country—particularly within education (An, 2016; Goodwin, 2010; Hartlep & Scott, 2016). Even when they are included in curriculum, they are often misrepresented, marginalized or seen only in relation to oppressive circumstances (e.g. Japanese American incarceration, the Chinese Exclusion Act) erasing the contributions, activism, and contemporary experiences of many Asian American youth (Endo, 2012; Goodwin, 2010; Hartlep & Scott, 2016). Curricular representations also tend to center East Asian (particularly Chinese and Japanese) perspectives, leading to the lack

of awareness and visibility of other Asian American subgroups (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018).

Stereotypes of Asian Americans

Often imagined as quiet and docile, yet also hard-working and successful, Asian American students are often rendered invisible in classrooms and society. They are underrepresented and under-studied in the literature base examining students of color (Goodwin, 2010), and their assets and challenges are largely ignored (Pang, 2006). As the fastest growing immigrant group, though (with 74% of adults born abroad), and an expected doubling of Asian American public school students between 1990 and 2020 (Budiman et al., 2019), it is critical that this “invisibility” be addressed. It is particularly critical at this historical moment, where (East and Southeast) Asian Americans have seen an increase in scapegoating and racist attacks due to the COVID-19 global health crisis and the accompanying racist language used repeatedly by civic leaders in response to this pandemic (Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2020). This is reminiscent of the misplaced scapegoating that Arab Americans and South Asian Americans experienced following the attacks on September 11, 2001 or the extreme anti-Japanese sentiment in the 1980s that resulted in the death of Vincent Chin. We must acknowledge the complex and unique challenges, as well as the many broad resources, Asian Americans deal with and bring into schools.

Perceived as only dealing with “positive” stereotypes, the racialized experiences of Asian Americans are often diminished, forced to fit into a Black-White binary within schools, or “racially triangulated” in comparison to Black-White racial histories and dynamics (Kim, 1999). Traditional academic successes or failures get attributed to various ethnic groups as “acting” White or Black. Most often Asian American ethnic groups that have immigrated with higher socioeconomic resources and educational attainment (e.g., Koreans) are seen as being White or more assimilated (Tran & Birman, 2010), while those ethnic groups that have come to the United States as refugees and with less economic and educational resources (e.g., Hmong) are seen as “Black” (Ngo & Lee, 2007) or Brown—if they are even acknowledged as Asian American at all. There is little recognition of the ways in which Asian Americans from distinct ethnic subgroups within the large Asian diaspora may struggle with stereotypes, histories, and other experiences unique to them.

Asian Americans, in fact, are almost universally lumped together as being similar in culture and in educational outcome, even though differences may be stark. As a result, many Asian Americans do not get the appropriate services and help they may need (Pang, 2006) and their racialized

experiences are ignored or misrepresented (Endo, 2012; Lee et al., 2017). Because of this and a host of other reasons, there have been calls by activists and educators to disaggregate data (e.g. Paik et al., 2014; Pang et al., 2011). To claim that a child coming from a refugee camp, displaced for a generation, with parents lacking much formal education, is similar to a child coming with college-educated, professional parents for more opportunity is inappropriate. To this end, the understanding of Asian American identity as hybrid or intersectional is particularly pertinent, and disaggregation of data begins to unpack some of these ideas.

The two most predominant stereotypes associated with Asian Americans both in and out of school are that of the “model minority” (MMM) and “forever foreigner” (FF). Both stereotypes also presume a docile, quiet character, although the “forever foreigner” stereotype can also be twisted into Asian Americans seen as being secretive or sneaky. The MMM, with its emphasis on Asian American “character traits” of hard work and high achievement, is used to discredit claims of structural racism, particularly those of Black Americans (Poon et al., 2016). The MMM perpetuates a colorblind ideology which ignores the individual and systemic racism Asian Americans undergo, obscures their individual and collective needs, serves as a “racial wedge” to pit them against other racial minority groups, and positions them as the “good minority” group (Poon et al., 2016).

By painting all Asian Americans as the same, the MMM does not allow for an understanding of the disparate difficulties and challenges many Asian Americans confront in schools and systems of education, whether or not they are able to successfully navigate these institutions. Wing (2007) discusses the failure to see Asian students’ struggles in schools as a form of racial violence. This racial violence leads to a range of consequences of Asian American students. Because of the stronghold the MMM has in schools, Asian Americans may be offered fewer services and resources in schools and even go under-diagnosed for special education services (Pang, 2006). This lack of supports are correlated to high drop out rates among several Asian American subgroups. For example, in California, 20% of Pacific Islanders drop out of school and 45% of Hmong have less than a high school education (Chang et al., 2010). Conversely, for those who are seen as perpetually high-achieving, the MMM allows little room for failure. Some (Noh, 2007) have even proposed the idea that high levels of suicide rates, particularly among Asian American women, may be attributed to the pressures stemming from the MMM and the lack of supports provided to deal with these pressures.

The FF stereotype presumes that individuals of Asian descent are always first-generation immigrants, new to the United States, and English Language Learners (ELLs). This discourse positions Asian Americans as

never fully American and culturally distinct, even if native-born for several generations and/or despite attempts to culturally assimilate (Ng et al., 2007; Takaki, 1998). The FF discourse is reflected in focusing on cultural differences of certain groups (e.g. Southeast Asian) as explanatory factors for lack of success in American schools (Ngo & Lee, 2007); highlighting cultural differences in parenting styles (Byun & Park, 2012; Jeynes, 2003; Li, 2006; Sy et al., 2007); and by only discussing Asian American challenges in education as based on their status as ELLs (Fan, 2015; Han & Scull, 2012; Townsend & Fu, 2001; Yau & Jimenez, 2003). Echoes of the FF stereotype can also be heard in problematic calls for Asian Americans to demonstrate their “American-ness” in order to avoid being perceived as Asian, and thereby prevent anti-Asian violence perpetrated against them (Fang, 2020).

Cultural difference arguments ignore persistent, structural factors related to inequality for Asian American students and fail to acknowledge Asian Americans as Americans. They effectively erase the contributions of Asian Americans throughout history to the development of the United States (Goodwin, 2010; Ng et al., 2007) perpetually casting them as a culturally distinct population living in America. Cultural arguments also limit our understanding of how Asian Americans adopt certain adaptive strategies to deal with racism and how education is seen as one of the few means to gain social capital (Ng et al., 2007). Further, while approximately 24% of the Asian American student population are ELLs (Goodwin, 2010; Redondo, 2008), much of the current literature on ELLs shows a lack of understanding of the language learning and multilingual needs specific to Asian immigrant populations, particularly for students coming from oral cultures (e.g. Hmong students) (Goodwin, 2010). While some studies have looked at Asian subgroups of ELLs and how to support the literacy strengths of struggling Asian American ELLs (Fan, 2015; Han & Scull, 2012; Townsend & Fu, 2001; Yau & Jimenez, 2003), there is a continued need to center the perspectives of multilingual Asian Americans in education.

From the margins to the center: Amplifying Asian American voices

The articles in this special edition of the *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* center voices and perspectives too often pushed to the edges of conversations about education, pedagogy, and culture, and—in some cases—even in discussions of Asian Americans in education. The authors in this issue advocate for the inclusion of a variety of Asian American perspectives in curriculum, higher education, and regional contexts which help to both challenge the stereotypical discourses placed upon Asian Americans and speak to the diversity of Asian Americans in the United States. These perspectives include examinations focused on diversity

among Brown Asian Americans, the agency of Asian international students, anti-Asian curricular violence, and Asian American invisibility in regional and educational contexts.

In Identity Reshma Ramkellawan-Arteaga (2020) discusses the importance of recognizing the diversity within South Asian American communities through her focus on the complexities of Indo-Caribbean identity. Ramkellawan-Arteaga explores the ways that diversity within the South Asian American community, particularly those that come through the islands, is often erased by those on the outside and can be a source of tension by those within the community. Through constructs of diaspora and hybridity, she explores the ways in which constructions of her own Indo-Caribbean and American identities and those of others across generations of her family are impacted by tensions from within and outside of the South Asian American community. Moving from history to praxis, she then offers a framework for educators to help their students explore their identities through their histories.

In Participation Joanne Yi (2020) reconsiders notions of participation through the perspective of two Korean female graduate students. Yi's article positions her non-native English speaking participants as active agents and reveals their processes of negotiation, resistance, and disruption. While silence and reticence, in the context of mainstream White (male) normative society, are perceived as signs of weakness, Yi's participants present alternative perspectives of their rhetorical choices and strategies, as reflective of their own cultural norms and cultural negotiation, which they choose in the face of pressures to conform. Yi also highlights the importance of structural mechanisms that can recognize and support unique participatory structures like those of her focal participants and other (Asian) international students.

In Curriculum In Sohyun An's article (2020), she advocates for more inclusive Asian American representation as a way to disrupt the "curriculum of violence" (Cridland-Hughes & King, 2015) that has been perpetrated against Asian Americans, particularly in relation to K-12 social studies curriculum. She highlights the consequences of this curriculum of violence, in the form of physical and psychological anti-Asian racism that many Asian Americans carry around, beginning at a young age. An discusses the importance of moving beyond curricular exclusion or histories that only feature Asian American oppression and toward featuring Asian Americans who have contributed significantly to American society. An challenges deficit-framed notions of Asian Americans, including the FF stereotype, by highlighting the historical and current efforts of Asian Americans to lead within their own communities and beyond. Curricular inclusion is essential to affirming Asian American's existence and identities, but also more broadly to help non-Asian Americans consider that the history of America includes Asian Americans.

In Society Finally, Noreen Naseem Rodríguez (2020) reminds us that Asian Americans have rich histories in regions outside the West and East coasts. She highlights the experiences of five second-generation Southeast Asian Americans in central Iowa, all of whom discuss the challenges of negotiating school contexts in which their identities were unrecognized, misunderstood or dismissed, and their histories were invisible. She and her participants offer several suggestions for educators to support their Southeast Asian American students: attend to their specific needs and circumstances, draw from their histories and identities, and affirm their identities. While this may require going beyond the canon of pedagogical resources, Rodríguez notes that there are rich cultural resources in Asian American communities which remain largely unrecognized and under-utilized to enrich the curriculum for all students.

Across each of these articles, the authors bring forth rich stories from across the Asian diaspora in America that largely have been silenced or ignored. The articles demonstrate Asian American resilience, agency, and advocacy in the face of oppression, psychological (and threats of physical) violence, and attempted erasure. These voices, with their stories of resistance and action, are ones we must recognize, listen to, and consider when thinking about Asian American representation in education, pedagogy, and cultural studies.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Betina Hsieh is an associate professor of teacher education at California State University, Long Beach. Her teacher education work is informed by her urban middle school teaching and literacy coaching experiences, work as co-director of the Bay Area Writing Project, and mothering. Current research interests include Asian American teachers, MotherScholars, identity-informed mentoring in teacher education, and teacher and teacher educator identity. At the heart of Dr. Hsieh's work is the exploration of how who we are shapes what we do (and the choices we make) as teachers and teacher educators. Her recent publications include articles in *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, *Literacy Research and Instruction* and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

Dr. Jung Kim is a mother, teacher educator, runner, school board member, and researcher. A former high school English teacher and literacy coach, she is currently an associate professor of literacy at Lewis University. She is strongly interested in issues of equity and inclusion, particularly in regards to representation in curriculum. Her second book on teaching with graphic novels is forthcoming. Kim has also written on hip-hop, out of school literacies, and the racial identities of Asian American teachers.

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