



Moving Asian American History from the Margins to the Middle in Elementary Social Studies Classrooms

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an Assistant Professor of Teacher Learning, Research, and Practice in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. My ultimate goal is to support pre- and in-service educators in teaching so-called difficult histories to young learners, particularly through engagement with diverse children's literature and primary sources. I am interested in the pedagogical practices of teachers of color, Asian American histories, and critical race frameworks. My own professional development efforts have been focused on how pre- and in-service teachers analyze the educational resources they find online and local Asian American histories. Outside of my professional pursuits, I love karaoke, decorating cakes and cookies, and spending time with family. Before becoming a teacher educator, I was a bilingual elementary teacher in Austin, Texas for nine years.



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INTRODUCTION

Although it is often widely used as a simple racial category, the term Asian American was created by college students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka to indicate an anti-racist and anti-imperialist sociopolitical identity (Maeda, 2012). The many histories and experiences that fall under the umbrella of Asian America are complex, diverse, and demand far more attention than they currently receive in schools. Unfortunately, Asian Americans are rarely included in K-12 textbooks and curriculum; when they are taught, their stories are often

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very limited in scope and told through superficial approaches that reinforce dominant narratives of American exceptionalism, progress, and meritocracy and ultimately situate them as outsiders rather than citizens (An, 2016; Rodríguez, 2018; Suh et al., 2015).

For example, the Chinese were the first and only group to be denied entry to the United States on the basis of race, yet little attention is paid to the particular ways that Asian Americans have been racialized throughout U.S. history. Popular tropes like the “Yellow Peril” and “Dusky Peril” about East Asian and South Asian immigrants respectively first emerged in the 1800s and early 1900s and can still be seen today in the form of violent attacks and murders against these groups due to their perceived racial differences. Furthermore, Asian immigrants were denied access to citizenship through naturalization until 1952 (Lee, 2015). These historical details are essential to understanding the Asian American experience but are rarely taught in school.

THE RESEARCH

My research centers on the significance of race and racism to the Asian American experience and considers how these factors impact Asian American access to citizenship and education in the past and present. In this article, I describe how three Asian American elementary teachers in Texas reflected on the absence of Asian American histories in their own educational experiences, which later inspired them to teach Asian American histories in their classrooms. Because they were teaching content that was missing in the district-provided curriculum and that they had not learned in school themselves, they sometimes struggled with their content knowledge and pedagogical approaches. However, they also made powerful connections with students and felt a great sense of pride in being able to share stories from their own cultures and experiences.

The three teachers taught at different campuses in the same large, urban school district in Texas. Krishnan is an Indian American whose family immigrated to the United States from Kenya when he was a toddler. Elyse is a Vietnamese American whose refugee family immigrated to the United States from Germany when she was in kindergarten. Krishnan and Elyse are considered “1.5 generation” immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) as they arrived in the U.S. as children; they also illustrate the breadth of the Asian diaspora and the impact of imperialism and militarism, as their parents came to the U.S. from nations other than their homelands. Virginia is Chinese American and was born in Texas, which makes her part of the second immigrant generation. All three teachers were educated in the United States and had between six and ten years of teaching experience.

During the spring of 2016, these teachers invited me into their classrooms to observe their lessons on Asian American history and participated in multiple interviews and pre- and post-lesson debriefs. Given the lack of available curriculum, the teachers relied heavily on children’s literature and primary sources to teach about Asian immigration and Japanese American incarceration during World War II.

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FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The teachers' lessons about Asian American history required them to first define the term Asian American with their students. Elyse, Krishnan, and Virginia found that their students commonly equated Asian with anything Chinese or Japanese and frequently had little understanding of other Asian nations or cultures. Consequently, they tried to define what it meant to be Asian American by using themselves as examples and finding opportunities to disrupt students' stereotypes and misconceptions.

For example, during one lesson I observed, Virginia explained to her students, "I am Chinese American. I was born in Houston, Texas... My parents are Chinese, my grandparents are Chinese, we are all Chinese. I'm also American. So I'm Chinese and American" (Rodríguez and Kim, 2018, p. 546). This was an ongoing clarification that Virginia regularly took the time to describe to ensure that her students clearly understood the distinction between Asian and Asian American. Virginia was the only Asian American teacher on her campus; as Asian American teachers only make up 2% of the public school teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), it is quite likely that she and the other two teachers in this study will be the only Asian American educators that their students will have.

During the course of their work teaching Asian American histories, the teachers also redefined what it meant to be American. Krishnan and Elyse described feeling "in between" the Asian cultures of their families and the white cultural mainstream. In U.S. society, Americanness is often equated with whiteness (Morrison, 2007) and the hybridity experienced by Asian Americans is quite common. Regardless of how many generations their families have lived in the United States, Asian Americans are viewed as exotic, perpetual or forever foreigners who are incapable of assimilation (Chang, 1993; Tuan, 1998). Therefore, given these personal experiences, the teachers were mindful of the need to consistently remind students that the category of American (citizen) was not limited to whiteness.

All three teachers taught lessons about Japanese American incarceration during World War II. This history offered the educators an opportunity to explore the tremendous harm that can emerge from assumptions of foreignness. Virginia's second grade students were able to make connections to the marginalization of other racialized groups and Krishnan facilitated comparisons between the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II and Muslim youth post-9/11 (Rodríguez, 2017). For each of them, their own hybrid experiences were essential factors in their work to dismantle student assumptions that whiteness and citizenship were interchangeable.

Ultimately, the teachers promoted what scholars refer to as cultural citizenship, which is more inclusive and critical than traditional forms of citizenship that are defined by individual acts like voting and following rules. Cultural citizenship promotes difference as a resource; Virginia, Krishnan and Elyse included culture, ethnicity, religion, and language among the examples they regularly referenced. Cultural citizenship emphasizes the need to respect and humanize others, and therefore views citizenship as an ongoing process instead of a static state of being. It also includes the voices, experiences, and perspectives of People of Color; these two characteristics of cultural citizenship most often manifested in the

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teachers' selections of children's literature. Lastly, cultural citizenship emphasizes human rights and agency. In a final example, Virginia offered her students a range of examples of civic identity and agency over the course of the spring 2016 semester. At semester's end, her students recorded podcasts as a form of civic action to share their knowledge about injustice with others.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

A major component of the teachers' practice was centering Asian American perspectives and histories. In most classrooms, these stories are rarely presented, which is why the teachers saw few examples that mirrored their own experiences when they were growing up. Krishnan, Elyse and Virginia were determined to change this and drew from their own experiences to do so.

All three teachers used Asian American children's literature to disrupt exclusionary histories and notions of citizenship as equal to whiteness. They also engaged students with primary sources, which evoked rich conversations about the past and present, and shared stories about their families' experiences with immigration and racism. Most importantly, they made clear that no ethnic or racial group is a monolith: within any group, there is tremendous diversity of thought, culture, language, and experience. Often, educators of young children relegate stories about Latinx, Black, Indigenous, and Asian Americans to a single book or within the scope of a celebratory month. Such marginalization decontextualizes those experiences and histories and further distances them from the central narrative of what is considered important in U.S. history and society. Educators must recognize how exclusionary traditional social studies curriculum is and how this exclusion fails to prepare young learners for the pluralistic democracy in which they live, then take deliberate steps to educate themselves in order to improve their pedagogy.

Fortunately, there are more resources available now than there were for Elyse, Virginia and Krishnan five years ago. Two excellent starting points for developing your own content knowledge about Asian American history are historian Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America* (2015) and the PBS documentary *Asian Americans* (2020). An abundance of Asian American children's literature has been published in the last two decades. Educators should be mindful to seek #OwnVoices and diverse books (Dahlen, 2020; Duyvis, 2015) since most texts center East Asian American stories and continue to marginalize Southeast and South Asian Americans (Rodríguez & Kim, 2018; Rodríguez & Kim, 2021). Steps like these can move Asian Americans from the margins to the middle and support better teaching about U.S. history and democracy.

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Q & A WITH NOREEN RODRÍGUEZ

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

When we talk about Asian American, many people think of places like Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Malaysians, etc. White teachers often think only of the Pacific Rim. But Indians, Persians, Afghans, Arabs, Israelis, and Mongolians and many others are Asian. Where and how do scholars make distinctions about who is included under this umbrella?

Noreen Rodríguez's Response:

Typically, the term Asian American only encompasses East Asian (of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Tibetan descent), Southeast Asian (of Bruneian, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Laotian, Malaysian, Mien, Singaporean, Timorese, Thai, and Vietnamese descent) and South Asian (Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Indian, Maldivians, Nepali, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan descent) Americans. This is the standard umbrella of nationalities/ethnicities included in Asian American Studies. While Central and West Asia are the geographic homes of many other peoples, they do not necessarily self-identify as Asian. West Asians are more popularly known as Middle Easterners, which in academia is its own field of study. However, it's important to recognize that the very term Middle East came from the British, not those who live in the region, who might better be described as the Arab World. See <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/census-data-api-identities/> for a detailed list of categories.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Teachers often feel like curricular change is above their pay grade. How can teachers like me advocate for curricular change to be made that reflect inclusive and diverse histories?

Noreen Rodríguez's Response:

This is such a context-specific issue, but quite simply, one of the biggest jobs a teacher has is to deliver (and sometimes create) curriculum. For a wide range of reasons, some schools/districts allow teachers a larger hand in curricular design and development while others do not, so there is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, all teachers are expected to meet the needs of their students. If your students are disengaged or actively complain about not understanding the connection of the content to their lives and communities, that is one strong rationale for including more diverse narratives and histories into your curriculum. If your students are ethnoracially and/or socioeconomically homogenous, they need to be exposed to life experiences and histories other than their own in order to better understand the diverse democracies in which we live. For some educators, it may be relatively easy to replace a canonical text with a more recently published book or text by and about mem-



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bers of a marginalized group. For others, perhaps a problematic or dominant text must stay in place. In that case, consider what my friends in literacy describe as reading against the text. Can students identify which voices dominate the narrative? Which voices are missing? How particular individuals/groups are attached to the active voice in the text while others are described in the passive voice? Are primary sources available to supplement and add nuance to the text?

Above are classroom-level actions educators can take, but we need to also think about how to effect structural and systemic change. Are leaders, from principals to superintendents and members of boards of education, aware of the psychological damage that research has demonstrated results from exclusionary histories and the subsequent need for more inclusive histories? Will funds be allocated to diversify classroom libraries and to offer educators professional development to support curricular shifts? And at the local and state levels, educators can work with community members to ensure that ethnic studies courses are offered in schools and take inspiration from the U.S. state of Illinois which recently became the first state in the nation to mandate Asian American studies.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How can other Asian American teachers as well as non-Asian American teachers who share a similar educational experience as your study be better prepared to teach inclusive US history? Does it just take reading? Are there concerns of perpetuating stereotypes or not being able to recognize biases without training?

Noreen Rodríguez's Response:

I first want to clarify that I'm urging teachers to teach US history more fully – not necessarily in the name of DEI, but because what is being taught is deeply flawed. Naming it “inclusive” softens the many problematics of the dominant narrative and erases the role of power. It's important that we recognize that most people, regardless of their ethnoracial identities, have been taught dominant narratives of history in school. There is a great deal of unlearning to do but this is not new – James Loewen famously wrote about the egregious errors in U.S. history textbooks in the 1990s in his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Today we have more resources than ever before to learn diverse histories, and increasingly there are also young reader adaptations out there so that our students can learn with and alongside us. For books, check out the *ReVisioning History for Young People* series, *A Different Mirror for Young People* by Ronald Takaki adapted by Rebecca Stefoff, and *One Person, No Vote: How Not All Voters Are Treated Equally* by Carol Anderson with Tanya Bolden. Two of the most robust online resources are the Zinn Education Project and Teaching Hard History. And when people try to argue that such approaches are “too political,” this set of resources from NCTE is helpful: <https://ncte.org/blog/2017/08/there-is-no-apolitical-classroom-resources-for-teaching-in-these-times/>



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Question #4

Teacher's Question:

I am wondering if there are connections you can make between other groups who may be seen as perpetual foreigners, like Arab Americans or Latinx Americans, and how teaching Asian American histories might be ground for building solidarity between these groups?

Noreen Rodríguez's Response:

The notion of perpetual foreigners is the direct result of nativist racism and white supremacy – who is seen as belonging (usually white, U.S.-born, Christian, English monolingual) and who is not. The idea of who is “American”/citizen needs to be troubled by teachers beginning in the early grades, with a clear interrogation of who benefits when certain groups are othered and viewed as foreign. Once that’s established, the need for solidarity becomes obvious. Young people, particularly Indigenous people and People of Color are often already aware of these ideas but are not offered opportunities to understand them in school spaces.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

What role, if any, should there be for explicitly training teachers and students how certain behaviors further alienate Asian Americans? How do you help students deconstruct where this curiosity about the “other’s identity” comes from?

Noreen Rodríguez's Response:

Similar to the answer above, we simply have to have explicit conversations about who/what is normed in our society in order to then determine how we can disrupt those norms in our particular contexts. This needs to occur in teacher preparation and in classrooms. In the United States, 83% of K-12 teachers are white. Most of them are women. Most of them are Christian and English monolingual. If that’s the norm, they need ongoing support to understand those who hold identities that they may not be familiar with or understand. Again, young people often already know and understand these things — they are not uncomfortable talking about it, but adults frequently are. If kids are singing songs or making hand motions that stereotype Chinese and Japanese people, adults need to intervene immediately. If kids use racial slurs on the playground, adults need to recognize they are probably echoing language they hear at home or elsewhere and make it clear that such dehumanizing words are not acceptable. It’s when adults don’t say or do anything that those stereotypes then become ingrained and viewed as “normal” rather than harmful and in need of interruption.

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