



Examining (Re)Constructive History through the Experiences of Asian American Teachers

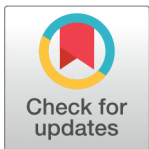
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Betina Hsieh

I am currently an associate professor of teacher education at California State University, Long Beach on the lands of the Tongva indigenous peoples in Southern California and formerly a middle school Social Studies, English and Math teacher in the SF Bay Area (on Ohlone tribal lands). At the heart of my work is the exploration of how who we are shapes what we do (and the choices we make) as teachers and teacher educators. I am deeply committed to creating more equitable spaces as a teacher educator that promote the success, sustenance and empowerment of teacher candidates from marginalized subgroups both through credential programs and as they enter classroom spaces. My professional development work focuses on supporting and sustaining teachers of color, with a particular focus on Asian American teachers. Outside of work, I am a wife and mother who loves delicious food and taking pictures of it. I'm actively involved in my faith community's social justice ministry and gospel choir, and recently, I've been trying to cultivate more rest and balance in my life.



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Keywords Keywords: Asian American Social Studies Reconstructive History AsianCrit Pedagogy Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans are too often rendered invisible in mainstream American historical narratives or positioned in ways that reinforce racialized stereotypes of Asian Americans as oppressed others (e.g. Japanese internment; Chinese Exclusion Act); hard-working foreigners (e.g. Chinese transcontinental railroad workers), and model minorities (e.g. contemporary affirmative action debates). Traditional curricula essentializes and erases Asian

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American stories, and may directly harm Asian Americans through the perpetuation of discourses that have led to both historical and contemporary anti-Asian violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2020; An, 2020). Within Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), the tenet of (re)constructive history (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) addresses these damaging and exclusionary portrayals of Asian Americans in mainstream narratives, and pushes for critical representation of Asian American histories and perspectives. Through (re)constructive history, all people can develop an understanding of Asian Americans' contributions to the United States and the roles of Asian Americans in civil rights struggles and resistance. Asian Americans also have an opportunity to see themselves reflected in community-grounded struggles for progress, intra- and inter-racial solidarity, and coalition-based resistance. This article summarizes a case study of three Asian American teachers and their experiences in integrating Asian American perspectives into their social studies teaching. Through examining these teachers' experiences, the importance of teacher dispositions, teacher knowledge of Asian American histories, and access to ongoing professional learning opportunities that centered equity emerged as critical to integrating Asian American perspectives into the curriculum.

THE RESEARCH

Study data were drawn from a larger collaborative qualitative research project (N=45) of Asian American educators. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, the research team conducted a single 45-120 minute interview with each participant. Interviews were audio-transcribed and read by each researcher, with attention to the tenets of AsianCrit framework outlined by Museus and Iftikar (2013). After a process of initial theoretical memoing, case study participants were chosen to highlight specific tenets of AsianCrit.

This article focuses on the tenet of (re)constructive history, the work of Asian American teachers to incorporate the contributions, voices, and histories of Asian Americans into K-12 social studies curriculum (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). The three focal participants chosen for this qualitative case study shared critically reflexive stances and strong desires to include Asian American perspectives in the classroom, but enacted these commitments to varying degrees. Following the selection of the focal participants, the author reread each individual transcript and highlighted excerpts focused on Asian American curriculum in relation to teaching and/or leadership experiences, creating a chart to examine each participants' experiences over their educational careers. After highlighting salient findings in each individual's experiences, a cross-case analysis was done to consider contexts that supported or limited each participants' ability to enact Asian American (re)constructive histories. The table gives a summary of salient information about each focal participant:

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

With her Asian American studies background, Jeni seemed best positioned to integrate critical Asian American perspectives into her curriculum. However, despite her knowledge and



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Table 1 Focal Teacher Information

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Region	K-12 Teaching	Additional Information
Bernadette	2 nd generation Chinese American	CA	5 th g. bilingual Chinese pathway Urban, multiracial, working-class public school district; site was 70-80% Chinese/Chinese American	Teacher education program explicitly focused on social/ racial justice. Teaching site w/ a large Asian demographic
Jeni	2 nd generation biracial Japanese/white American	CA	7 th -9 th grade teacher/ Teacher Support Provider Urban, multiracial, working-class, diverse public school district (65% Latinx, 18% AAPI, 8% African American)	Asian American studies major/African American studies minor (undergraduate)
Tina	2 nd generation Pilipina American	East Coast	K-12 teaching, administration, Elite, private schools, predominantly wealthy, conservative white & Asian American and Asian immigrant students; a few bussed in Black students	Site director of diversity. Doctoral work focused on Asian Americans

commitments and a fairly large minority of diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander students in the district, Jeni struggled to integrate Asian American perspectives into her curriculum, partly because of her own sense of marginalization at her school site. As an alternatively certified teacher who had experienced racial marginalization in her district (which had gone from predominantly white to predominantly Latinx over 30 years) as both a student and a teacher, Jeni hesitated, when she was in the classroom, to deviate from curriculum she was given and from district pacing guides. While Jeni collaboratively designed and implemented a unit on immigration through Angel Island, she felt unable to fully bring her ethnic studies background into her curriculum during her time in the classroom because of fear of the reactions of students, colleagues and administration.

Similarly, Tina, while comfortable pushing discussions of race (generally) into curriculum and the classroom, also struggled to integrate Asian American perspectives in ways that reflected her commitments. Tina particularly struggled with her sites' undervaluing, under-recognition, and ignorance of Asian Americans in curriculum in ways that honored rich Asian American histories, spanning over two centuries in the United States. While there were a large number of Asian immigrant students, these families did not necessarily see their experiences represented in Asian American history, and the rest of the school, including administration, felt that token acknowledgments of Asian Americans during Asian American Heritage Month were sufficient. Both Jeni and Tina emphasized their presence as Asian American women who challenged racial stereotypes (e.g. visible displays of racial solidarity with Black communities and speaking against anti-Black affirmative action stances by



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other Asian Americans), and relationships they built with students as important ways their identities and community backgrounds impacted their students' understanding of Asian Americans.

Of the focal participants, Bernadette most explicitly integrated Asian American stories into the curriculum. For example, Bernadette brought Chinese American experiences into a Civil War unit, doing independent research to find this information. She noted the challenge and intentionality necessary in bringing in diverse perspectives when teaching social studies, particularly those which extend beyond a Black-white racial binary. Like Tina and Jeni, Bernadette saw her role as bridging her students' understandings of racial solidarity between Black and Asian communities in contemporary society and historically. In discussing her classroom's participation in Black Lives Matter at school week, Bernadette connected the rights, interests and solidarity of Black and Asian communities throughout US history. She did this by affirming the Black community's central role in the Civil Rights struggle without erasing Asian Americans' presence alongside Black Americans. Bernadette included and unpacked Asian American voices in her classroom and through her curriculum in contexts of larger equity work. In doing so, she created inclusive spaces for Asian American students and exposed non-Asian American students to Asian American histories and counterstories. Bernadette positioned a central part of her role as understanding diverse Asian American histories and perspectives in order to challenge the "white narrative" of history. In many ways, Bernadette was able to enact the commitments that all three focal teachers shared, a commitment to developing spaces of (re)constructive history.

All three focal teachers had strong equity stances and described how they built relationships with students that helped foster cross-racial solidarity and understanding. The focal teachers shared knowledge (and a desire to build knowledge) of diverse Asian American experiences. They also all worked explicitly to develop their own racial and ethnic identities, and to recognize and discuss their positioning in relation to other racial groups in society. However, (re)constructive history work through infusing critical Asian American perspectives in curriculum was much more challenging. Although each saw the importance of integrating Asian American voices in the curriculum, they struggled to find models, and design or implement curriculum to do so, resulting in only Bernadette being able to integrate Asian American perspectives on an ongoing basis. Bernadette was able integrate resources she found into her curriculum given layered supportive contexts. She, uniquely among the focal teachers, had both teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning opportunities focused on and supporting critical, race and justice-centered teaching.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

These teachers' stories indicate a need for supportive site environments and teacher professional learning focused on supporting educators to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate diverse Asian American experiences into social studies curriculum. Educational and curricular leaders must learn about and create conditions to foster the successful integration of not only Asian American histories into the curriculum, but those of



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other underrepresented minoritized groups. When structural conditions that support curricular (re)construction do not exist, more widely available (often white-centered) histories will predominate. While the presence of racially conscious Asian American teachers is an important factor in challenging some students' stereotypes about Asian American communities, it does not negate the importance of curriculum that highlights Asian Americans' presence, experiences and resistance throughout a larger American historical narrative and environment which empower the teachers to bring their knowledge into the curriculum. For teachers to integrate Asian American (re)constructive histories in their classroom, motivation and knowledge of these histories themselves are prerequisites but not sufficient. Educators must also have access to curricular resources, site environments and professional learning that support integrating Asian American voices into curriculum.

While this study focused on Asian American teachers' experiences, the voices of Asian diasporic peoples in social studies curriculum should be an important focus for all social studies teachers, particularly in light of historical and contemporary anti-Asian racist and xenophobic acts of violence. Possible avenues for this type of professional learning could come through intra- and interracial Asian American curricular affinity spaces or working groups, where teachers committed to integrating Asian American perspectives into curriculum could come together to support one another in designing and implementing such curriculum. Virtual working groups could expand access to Asian American curriculum for educators who are in spaces where they may be the only advocate for developing such curricula. Curricular resources such as those created by critical Asian American educators and centering often silenced voices (Chen & Omatsu, 2006; Rodriguez, n.d.; Learning for Justice, 2013) can be explored and adapted together in such groups, and become the subject of lesson study and revision for teachers committed to (re)constructive Asian American narratives in K-12 classrooms. This professional learning model could further be implemented and extended to bring a variety of diverse voices to the center of a more authentic and representative social studies curriculum.

Q & A WITH BETINA HSIEH

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has come under a lot of fire lately, which might make some teachers recoil from the approach you are advocating for. How would you explain CRT generally, and Asian CRT specifically, to a parent who might only know what network news has told them about it?

Betina Hsieh's Response:

While as a scholar, I know that these curricular revisions are connected to principles of CRT and Asian CRT, I wouldn't bring these terms up, as a teacher, in contextualizing my work. Instead, I would explain the curricular revisions under a larger umbrella of human-

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izing pedagogies. I would explain to parents that it's important for all students to see a full view of the histories of all people in the Americas, including both those that represent their own racial/ethnic histories and those of others. In order for us to recognize one another's humanity, we must be familiar with one another's struggles and histories. This is part of developing historical empathy and stronger civic engagement. And we must know the histories of these events from the perspectives of those who have lived them, meaning that it's important to bring in multiple voices, not just one perspective around key historical events. Finally, we have to understand the institutions, groups, laws, and policies that impact our histories so that we can better advocate for ourselves as citizens. I think it's much harder to get behind dehumanization and to critique civic engagement (at least explicitly) than it is to critique CRT based on a lack of understanding of the theory.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

In your article you mentioned that one teacher struggled to integrate Asian American perspectives into their curriculum due to her sites' undervaluing of Asian Americans in curriculum. Given that under-recognition of Asian Americans in curriculum is prevalent in most of U.S. school contexts, what suggestions would you give to teachers who want to create curricular space for Asian Americans but do not know where to start?

Betina Hsieh's Response:

The current moment is a time in which an argument can and is being made about the importance of connecting histories of foreignization, racism and xenophobia to the very public rise in Asian American hate crimes and violence, which unfortunately, allows for an opening to incorporate more perspectives on Asian Americans into curriculum. In Social Studies, I would start with some of the resources that I listed in the final paragraph of the article (Chen & Omatsu, 2006; Rodriguez, n.d.; Learning for Justice, 2013) as well as looking at some of the resources from Facing History and Ourselves around Asian American histories and SAADA (the South Asian American Digital Archive). Beyond this, I think that primary source documents, many of which are open access through universities that house Asian American studies programs, can support bringing in actual Asian American voices and perspectives into the classroom. There are so many resources out there on the internet now that I didn't realize I could access when I was teaching social studies myself 15 years ago.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

You mentioned that all three teachers emphasized their efforts to build relationships with students that helped foster cross-racial solidarity. Could you elaborate how the teachers built these relationships and how their cross-racial relationships impacted their teaching?



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Betina Hsieh's Response:

Yes, all three teachers gave specific examples of active advocacy and support, particularly of Black students and their families. Jeni, for example, spoke of the way her collaboration with a Black male student and his family helped to ameliorate a relationship he had with a white disabled female student. Jeni was aware of the various layers of complexity within the situation because of identity markers (race, gender, ability), but did not dismiss the student or his family's perspectives even after initially having challenges reaching the family. Once they were in contact, Jeni listened and responded to the family and the student and trusted the student to change his behavior (which he did) without referring the problem forward to administration. She noted that other teachers at her site would have likely jumped to assumptions about the student, and his family, or automatically escalated the situation without making an effort to understand it.

Tina's form of cross-racial solidarity came first in the form of active representation of solidarity (e.g. Black Lives Matter signs) and active efforts in working in solidarity with the Black community (particularly with Black faculty members) at her site, advocating for them, and using her position as a diversity, equity and inclusion administrator to push back against antiblackness in school contexts, including comments made by Asian and Asian American students who expressed disappointment that she was so focused on Black students. While Asian American parents were confused by some of Tina's actions, she used her Asian American identity to help families understand affirmative action and the importance of conversations about race.

Finally, for Bernadette, I mentioned lessons for Black Lives Matter at school week curriculum, but she also spoke specifically about an incident in which two Chinese American girls from her class had a conflict with two Black girls from another class. In this incident, Bernadette drew connections between Chinese parents' fears about their children playing with Black students and similar ways in which Chinese and other Asian American students were discriminated against in predominantly white spaces. Here she confronted the anti-Blackness being expressed by some parents by helping them to understand similar experiences of discrimination that their children might face in situations where they were not the dominant racial group.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

In your article the school contexts of three teachers seem different, especially in terms of the racial population of the student body. How do you think community backgrounds, students' racial backgrounds, and teacher's own backgrounds would or should impact teachers' approaches to teaching Asian American histories?

Betina Hsieh's Response:

Interestingly, although all three teachers taught in very different environments, and were able to incorporate Asian American histories to different degrees, they all returned to



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schools near the area they grew up in, with Bernadette and Jeni teaching in the school districts they attended as students. I think that's important because local contexts are really important to consider when thinking about Asian American histories. Asian American histories look different regionally and depending on what the predominant Asian American ethnicities are in the local area. So knowing the community in which one teaches is definitely important in that respect.

But Asian American histories might also be discussed and explored differently based on whether Asian Americans are a majority in a school site (e.g. Bernadette's), a significant minority group in a school site (e.g. Jeni and Tina's sites) or whether there are few to no Asian Americans at a site. While it's always important for Asian Americans to be represented in the curriculum, in a majority Asian American site, particularly when considering local histories, oral history projects and drawing from students' families and communities can provide an additional layer of significance to Asian American histories. In multi-racial, multi-ethnic schools where there are significant Asian American subpopulations, it's really important for the history curriculum to reflect the diversity of the classroom and community as well as including perspectives with which students may not be familiar in the community. However, care must be taken to avoid essentialization of the Asian American experience (i.e. assigning the experiences of a particular historical or contemporary ethnic subgroup to all Asian Americans) and expecting Asian American students to automatically identify with Asian American histories. Connections should also be drawn to the experiences of other ethnic and racial groups as well as other non-dominant groups to help students see the interconnections between the experiences of Asian Americans and other Americans. Finally, in schools with very few to no Asian Americans, it's critical to avoid and/or unpack stereotypes of Asian Americans and/or foreignization (e.g. where Asian medieval histories of China and Japan or Asians as the "foreign enemy") of Asian Americans. I would say that it's almost more important in these settings that students are exposed to diverse Asian American histories since students are less likely to have connections with Asian Americans that can help them challenge problematic social discourses around Asians/Asian Americans.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

You argued that the voices of Asian Americans should be an important focus not only for Asian American teachers but also for all social studies teachers, particularly in light of anti-Asian violence. How would teaching about Asian American histories contribute to reducing anti-Asian violence? What could and should social studies teachers do in their classroom to fight against anti-Asian violence prevailing these times?

Betina Hsieh's Response:

I return here to the importance of histories as humanizing stories from the past that connect to the present. When we can understand the current waves of anti-Asian violence as part



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of a repeating cycle of xenophobic scapegoating, we can begin to see the injustices in this violence. When we see Asian American histories as connected to other American histories, we begin to relate to the humanity of Asian Americans and I hope that this recognition of humanity will lead to reducing anti-Asian violence.

To fight anti-Asian violence in these times, social studies teachers can play such a huge role. First, in teaching and centering the stories of Asian Americans, not just as victims but as contributors, resisters, allies and Americans. These counterstories challenge narratives of Asian Americans as trying to “steal” American jobs and wealth or those which cast them as harmful, diseased foreigners. But, more than this, social studies teachers can teach advocacy, protest, histories of solidarity and why it’s important to advocate in support of Asian Americans, to stand against anti-Asian violence (as well as other forms of racialized violence), to intervene and to report or record when we see such violence happen. Finally, by unpacking the reasons for the rise in anti-Asian violence and situating it historically, social studies teachers can help fight anti-Asian violence and empower students to understand and challenge injustice in times of escalated violence and beyond.

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