

Asian American Teachers: Do They Impact the Curriculum? Are There Support Systems for Them?

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Introduction

The significance and importance of global education and a culturally relevant curriculum have been thrown into relief by the events of Sept. 11, 2001, emphasizing the urgency to understand and be accepting of diverse cultures. This has a strong bearing on the "enculturation" role of schools, as agents of cultural reproduction.

The traditional curriculum transmits Euro-American norms that are seen as the primary American culture. The possible positive effects of a culturally responsive and diverse curriculum (CDC) have been detailed, including affirming the value of cooperation, helping students and teachers build an identity by comparing what they have learned in the classroom with their own experiences, and the importance of a caring community (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992b; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1984).

There is little doubt that schools should be more inclusive and that school-based personnel should appreciate and affirm what minority teachers bring to facilitate the development of a culturally relevant curriculum that is academically rigorous (Quiocho & Rios, 2000) but there is no systemic effort to genuinely shift from a Western perspective to include other perspectives and materials (Foster, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Gay, 2000).

However, adopting CDC or culturally

congruent approaches to teaching has its own pitfalls. They can render teachers suspect by the broader school community since such approaches do not conform to the mainstream (Conner, 2002; Foster, 1994; Lipka, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Further, race and race-related pedagogy are not considered appropriate topics for discussion among faculty members, and issues regarding them are not raised in faculty forums (Foster, 1994, cited in Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

Where there is no self-examination, there is unlikely to be an expectation of overt support. The result is that the voices of minority teachers have been silenced and many of them do not have a role as decision-makers beyond the everyday decisions that teachers make in the classroom (Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, & Woo, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

These issues as they relate to Asian Americans have other features that complicate the matter. The term "Asian American," classed as one group for purposes of census and political policy, embraces sub-groups that differ widely in matters of language, religion, and cultural practices and beliefs. This multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-literate profile engenders a lack of coherent cultural identity so that only a narrow slice is represented in the broad spectrum of the curriculum (Gay, 2000).

In the past three decades, the Asian-American population has been overlooked in terms of the demographic profile in spite of a dramatic increase of about 63%. Of Asian Americans, nearly a fourth is under 17 and of school-going age, accounting for about 3% of the total K-12 student population (Smith, Rogers, Alsalam, Perie,

Mahoney, & Martin, 1994) while accounting for only 1.2% of the nation's teaching force (Snyder & Hoffman, 1994). Their low visibility is compounded by the fact that they are not evenly represented across the country in all regions; clustered along the East and West coasts, they are largely "missing in action" in the Midwest and South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Unlike other minority communities, there is no scarcity of qualified persons in this community in which 37% aged 25 or older is college educated. Yet, specifically among Asian-American women who hold degrees, only 1% goes into teaching, a profession still dominated by women. Many of the rest opt for jobs in technical and scientific fields which are higher-paying and where discrimination is perceived to be less of a barrier to advancement (Rong & Preissle, 1997; Su, Goldstein, Suzuki & Kim, 1997).

Emerging literature on Asian Americans shows that perceptions about the community are often at odds with reality. Asian Americans desire to be 'normal,' to fit in (Gordon, 2000). Whether it is to be accepted as "honorary Whites" so as not to remain "forever foreigners," or to get by in a racist society by staying quiet and behaving so that nobody would bother them (Tuan, 1998), Asian Americans indicate a desire to assimilate and to nullify their Asian roots. Their integration seems to depend on how mainstream they are, which argues for assimilation not accommodation.

Viewed as a "model minority," self-esteem issues that are cited in support of African-American and Hispanic profiles in the curriculum may not appear to be applicable to Asian-American students. While

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it is true that Asian-American students by and large are academic achievers and the Asian-American community appears to be successful economically, second- and third-generation Asian-American students in schools have to contend with cultural, social, and emotional issues like any other minority group (Siu, 1996).

Among all ethnic groups, the extremely limited research that is available on Asian-American teachers is a matter of deep concern (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). The available data focus on issues of motivation, explaining why Asian Americans are drawn to teaching and what may keep them in the profession (Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, & Woo, 1997; Gordon, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1997; Su, Goldstein, Suzuki, & Kim, 1997). There are few studies that address the effect Asian-American teachers could have on the curriculum or the issues they may have to deal with in their work environment (Gay, 2000; Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, & Woo, 1997; Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

The purpose of this descriptive study was: (1) to understand problems Asian Americans may face as minority teachers; (2) to examine any impact they may have on curricula and academic experiences at the building level; and (3) to identify support systems available to them to implement desired changes.

Methodology

A survey of 23 items based on the research questions was designed. Of the 15 of these items that dealt with issues of identity of the Asian-American teachers and other professionals in the building, five explored the respondents' perceptions of the effect of their ethnicity on the curriculum and related activities in school. Seven items focused on how peers, administrators, students, and their parents related to issues of acceptance of their identity, and support that was or could be offered. Three items questioned the respondents about their awareness of and membership in professional ethnic support groups. Since the sampling frame of Asian-American teachers available was small, the survey was piloted with African-American teachers to test for a minority perspective.

The Midwestern state chosen for study mirrored the changing national demographics with regard to the Asian-American population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). A list of all Asian-American teachers, obtained from the state Department of Education, provided an initial

sampling frame of 106. Deletion of those no longer teaching and additions of names suggested by respondents defined a final sample of 96.

The final survey, with a cover letter and a stamped envelope for returning the completed survey, was mailed to all participants. Reminders over a period of two months included postcards, phone calls, and duplicate surveys. Forty participants responded to the survey for a return rate of 41.7%. Four of them declined to participate; they felt their ethnic identity as Asian Americans was not relevant to their identity as teachers. Another respondent stated that since he was mistaken for a Caucasian, his responses were not relevant. A sixth respondent chose not to complete the survey since the questions dealt with "delicate issues." Eventually 34 surveys were deemed useable. The data were coded and categorized by the researcher using open coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings and Discussion

Curricular Issues

The presence of Asian-American teachers appears to have little effect on the curriculum or the academic experiences of students, and core content courses are not affected by the presence of Asian-American teachers in schools. Given that five of the respondents stated that they did not see themselves as Asian American, it is likely that their curriculum is not affected by ethnic perspectives.

Of the 34 usable responses, only three related their ethnicity to the content formally. Two taught Japanese and Chinese languages in their schools, supporting Ladson-Billings' (1992a) statement that there is a distinct ethnic-specific cultural preference for language that teachers bring into the classroom. The Japanese language teacher was also in charge of an after-school Japanese club. A music teacher incorporated a few Japanese songs into the repertoire.

Three other respondents brought their experience and knowledge of "otherness" into the curriculum informally, reflecting the findings of Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, and Woo (1997). They referred to world literature and global issues while discussing their content; this was not a requirement of the curriculum but was made possible by their wide experience. For example, a teacher from India compared Third World conditions to the U.S. to illustrate differences in life styles and to inculcate sensitivity to environmental issues.

Any other references to the ethnicity of the Asian-American teachers were sporadic and "add-ons." Four respondents said they incorporated activities related to their culture in their classroom but were not specific about the purpose or the learning expected from the students. Eight of the 34 responded that they had been used as resource persons by other teachers in the building.

In a scenario that is easily recognized, they were invited to talk to other classes about their culture, ethnicity, and country of origin or affiliation. The topics most often included the "visible" features of culture such as food, festivals, customs, and rituals, especially of marriage. On a more personal and serious note, a Japanese American was invited to talk about the experiences of Japanese Americans interned in concentration camps in the U.S. during World War II.

Decision-Making

Asian-American teachers are curriculum deliverers (Twisleton, 2004), not involved in defining the curriculum and with no opportunity to influence either the structures or the people in their working environment.

The Japanese language teacher stated that he wished that he were included in decisions regarding establishing or abolishing a foreign language department or offering Japanese but seemed to have no belief that his wish would be granted. A second respondent was both skeptical and cautious about her presence on any decision-making body. She believed that there was a danger of "being tokenized or less than appreciated because the teachers may have little understanding of non-mainstream experiences."

With the exception of one school building which had three Asian-American teachers, all the other respondents were the only Asian Americans in their schools. This lack of critical numbers may preclude their having an impact on decision-making at the building level.

The teachers were cautious about establishing an alternative culturally-responsive pedagogy and curriculum, unlike those studied by Su (1997). Except for two respondents, none of the others expressed a desire to be involved in re-designing the curriculum with a view to incorporating Asian-American elements. Rather than see schools as sites for diversity, anti-racism, social justice, and transformation (Feuerverger, 1997; Foster, 1994; Klassen & Carr, 1997, cited in Quiocho & Rios,

2000), most of these Asian-American teachers appear to want to maintain the status quo.

Issues of Support

Administrators and Peers

Asian-American teachers appreciated the support they receive from both administrators and their peers and detailed generic teacher needs in the areas of teaching, curriculum, and discipline.

Of the 34 usable responses to this set of questions, 15 respondents stated that they were supported by their peers in two areas—professional and personal—while 12 felt that they were not. Like all teachers, they looked to the administration for help with planning and implementing their teaching responsibilities and with student discipline.

Peripheral experiences of sharing information related to their ethnicity were seen as acknowledgement by peers and administrators of their uniqueness. Thus, most of the support they asked for was not curricular re-alignment, representation in the curriculum, or cultural mores of expectation and behavior that might distinguish them from their 'mainstream' peers.

Students

Asian Americans are proud of their ethnicity and yet wish to blend in with the dominant group (Gordon, 2000b). This dichotomy of appearance and perception was clearly noticeable in their interpretation of student appreciation. Asian-American teachers were pleased both when students noticed their ethnicity and when they did not. They welcomed being treated like all other teachers regardless of their ethnicity. On the other hand, they enjoyed the attention students paid to their different cultural background.

Fully a third of the respondents indicated that their ethnic identity did not impinge itself on the students. They believed that they were successful teachers because they were like any other teachers and exhibited the same characteristics of concern and caring. As one respondent colorfully phrased it, "I could be purple and still (the students) would enjoy my class, hopefully because I teach with caring and love." Another respondent commented,

More than 80% of my students and parents like and appreciate the things I'm doing to help my students learn. I use my lunch hour to help the slow students. I always find time to help my students.

Yet students were not entirely blind to their teachers' differences. Their curiosity was piqued by their teachers' ethnicity and the respondents saw this as an indication of a positive attitude. Students questioned their teachers about their personal background and culture. The respondents felt that sometimes students "look(ed) to me as a source of information about Asia." Students are also curious about the country of origin of the Asian-American teachers. "They love to see some real samples from China/Taiwan and hear about the Chinese zodiac."

Some respondents were also subliminally conscious that students' perceptions of race and ability are influenced by the teacher's ethnicity. Beyond seeing the teachers as sources of trivia, two clear statements made by the respondents point to their belief that minority students are conscious and appreciative of the teachers modeling a minority status. They "appreciate the fact that (the teacher) can connect with them in different ways ... can talk about skin color and speaking languages other than English with a certain depth of understanding."

As another respondent said, "My students realize that teachers don't just come in Black and White background. Anyone with the right qualifications (education) can become a teacher."

Professional Support Groups

Eighteen of the respondents indicated that they would join a group that addressed Asian-American issues related to teaching and teachers while nine did not wish to be part of any group. There are two professional organizations already in existence that are based on Asian-American ethnicity: the Chinese Language Teachers Association and an organization for music teachers founded by one of the respondents.

Yet, except for two respondents who each identified one organization, the others were unaware of the existence of these organizations. However, respondents felt the need for such support systems that would help them in their professional life, which are not available to them at present.

Role as Interlocutors

Falling outside the "color lines" of traditional racial discourse provides Asian-American teachers a role not obviously available to African-American or European-American teachers in a school building: interlocutors in a racially-charged

incident. Being neither Black nor White, they are seen either as neutral, "colorless," or as either color, as may suit the students. "I can be seen as White by White students and as Black by Black students," a participant stated.

At the very least, Asian-American teachers see themselves as a "bridge between worlds and between people." This seems to be a great advantage with parents who are not hostile or wary of their 'allegiance.' As one respondent said,

I'm in a high-minority population school and being non-White is an advantage with African Americans, Hispanic, and Asian parents. I don't sense the immediate mistrust that I see directed towards White educators. I've been asked to sit in on conferences where the educators were all White and the parents were non-White, for that very reason.

Their strength is derived from their being perceived as impartial. As mediators, they have been able to explain grading issues to minority students, defusing potential problems. Since they do not "belong" to the "other side," their words have veracity and carry weight with all stakeholders in a school building. As two respondents said,

(Being an Asian American helps) with my students simply because it aids me in discussing fairness of rules, policies, treatment of minorities, or any related issues from a minority perspective.

Some of my African-American students have accused other White teachers of giving out low grades to Black students because they are prejudiced. Since I'm not White, I was able to play neutral ground and explain to them how mistaken the students were, since grades are *earned* and not *given* by the teachers.

Non-Responses

Four respondents declined to participate; they felt that their ethnic identity as Asian Americans was not relevant to their identity as teachers. Another respondent stated that since he was often mistaken for a Caucasian, his responses would not be relevant. A significant third of them are either not conscious of their ethnicity or choose not to bring them into play. Their claim to be Caucasian or mainstream distinguishes them from those who would like to see their ethnicity as a strength and would like to have active support from their peers to explore it.

A sixth respondent chose not to complete the survey though she was repeatedly assured that her anonymity and that of

the school would be maintained. As she explained in a telephone conversation, the questions dealt with "delicate issues" that she did not want to talk about.

Discussion

Asian-American teachers in this study appear to be well-integrated into the school system with regard to a teacher's life, role, and responsibilities, unlike the teachers in Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, and Woo (1997). They feel accepted and supported by peers and students and believe that their concerns are heard. Their problems relating to issues of curriculum, student discipline, and professional support are no different from other teachers in U.S. schools in most respects. Thus, the Asian part of their identity does not seem to count with them at all or to be an issue, and they do not seem to be overly concerned about being underrepresented in their schools or in the curriculum.

For change to be effected a critical mass has to be achieved. The desire on the part of Asian-American teachers to maintain the status quo may be prompted by a lack on numbers in their school buildings. In most cases, as the sole representative of their community, the desire to make a change in the curriculum may not seem feasible to them and therefore may not be entertained.

Calls for a wider, more multicultural curricula have not gone unheard. It is clear that students of today will need to know more about Asia than was required of the previous generation. The economic growth of India and China make it apparent that in the future students will have to be more familiar with the present histories and cultures of such countries.

With this in mind, schools should be more deliberate about diversifying the curriculum. It should be apparent that teaching Asia in two weeks in a high school Social Studies class will not meet these needs, and that a more equitable distribution of time, addressing various cultures, is necessary (Conner, 2002).

Content teachers should become more knowledgeable about Asian cultures and a growing body of Asian literature in English. It seems natural that Asian-American teachers would be more intentionally involved in such curricular decisions about internationalizing the curriculum and making it more globally focused.

Recent world events have shown the need for foreign language expertise in this country and that promoting a func-

tionally monolingual education is totally inadequate. Schools could offer an Asian language as part of its curriculum. Apart from the need for students to become well-rounded adults with knowledge of the world, the growth of India and China as global economic forces make it important for them to learn about Asia. It then would seem to follow that Asian-American teachers would be a rich resource.

With minority teachers a rarity in the teaching force and growing scarcer, attracting Asian Americans into the teaching profession will require that certain features such as salaries be amended (Su, 1997). Perhaps they could be offered inducements and bonuses and differentiated contracts as is offered to math and science teachers in some school districts. Calls for increasing teacher pay have come from a wide spectrum of society (Blair, 2001; Bond, 2001; Johnson, 2000). Whether this will come to pass is a question but until the monetary benefits are appreciably increased, Asian Americans are unlikely to enter the teaching profession in any substantial numbers.

The variety of roles that teachers play in a school in providing support for each other could be limited if they are not aware of their own strengths. The ability to offer differing viewpoints and perspectives on issues so that they can act as interlocutors in race-related matters could be significant to the well-being and growth of school and society. For example, Asian-American teachers could mediate in racially-charged situations where trust is challenged and communication lines are broken. They could explicate to minority students the nuanced perspectives of the educational system and, on appropriate occasions, advocate for the perceptions of beleaguered minority students.

The larger question is about teacher professional identity in which ethnicity is assimilated or absorbed. The most common way minority groups address conflicts in identity is either by adopting the dominant mode of identification and ignoring or relegating to the background their own ethnic features.

Ethnic organizations may exist in part because of the desire of the community to maintain its identity (Barth, 1969; Gordon, 1964). The case in point of a teacher being unwilling to respond to an anonymous survey is deeply disturbing and is a telling comment on the insecurity that some Asian-American teachers deal with in their work environment. The reluctance to address what is probably an unpleas-

ant situation may indicate a peer group or administration that could be deliberately vindictive at being portrayed in unflattering terms.

Professional support groups could help Asian-American teachers identify and retain their cultural and ethnic features without jeopardizing their career or professional persona. Exploring and affirming their identity, and in turn finding ways of understanding and valuing it, will mitigate the marginalization of Asian-American teachers. However, the practically non-existent research on the formation of an ethnic professional identity precludes a detailed discussion in an empirical study.

Conclusion

It is increasingly apparent that the conversations about race in the U.S. cannot continue to be a Black-White issue but must include Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans. The violence inflicted on Asian Americans in the aftermath of Sept. 11 was only one in a long line of attacks on them. The incidents by the "dot-busters" in Jersey City dating from the 1980s to the ransacking of Korean shops in 1992 were unfortunately not isolated occurrences (Zia, 2000).

Asian-American teachers appear to be an untapped resource; they should recognize that they are a "salient marker" (Tuan, 1998) to their students and other stakeholders, making it essential for them not to make their ethnic identity a private affair.

The U.S. perceives itself as a unique multiracial and multiethnic society. Schools claim to help their students value and celebrate diversity. Raising the profile of the largely invisible Asian-American teachers in schools is a viable starting point in achieving these objectives. It remains to be seen what the map of a school would look like if Asian-American teachers were to emphasize their ethnicity and not conform to the generic role that a teacher is expected to play in a school.

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