

## Learning from Asian American High School Students' Voices

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative study explores perceptions of Asian American high school students in social studies. The study finds that students interpret their experiences of learning social studies in various ways. The different perspectives of students on social studies are influenced by beliefs and practices of social studies teachers in curriculum and instruction, along with interplay of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of Asian American students. The findings of this study suggest the need for comprehensive, diversified curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies.

**KEYWORDS:** Multicultural education, teacher education, Asian American studies, social studies, culturally relevant pedagogy

[Literature Review](#)  
[Conceptual Framework](#)  
[Methodology](#)  
[Findings](#)  
[Discussion](#)  
[Limitations](#)  
[Conclusion](#)  
[References](#)  
[Author Contact](#)  
[Appendix](#)

Globalization implies that many aspects of political, economic, and social activities are becoming interregional or intercontinental in scope, and there has been an intensification of levels of interaction and interconnectedness within and between states and societies (Held, 2000). Globalization deepens patterns of communication and weakens the nation-state boundaries by increasing immigrant population. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), the population of the U.S. has increased and become more diverse over the past two decades. Between 2000 and 2017, the Asian American population increased at a faster rate than the populations of other racial/ethnic groups, by 74% from 10.5 million to 18.3 million, and the percentages of the population who were Asian Americans increased from 4% to 6% regarding the racial/ethnic composition of the U.S. population. The racial/ethnic distribution of the

school-age population in the U.S. changed during this period with the percentage of school-age Asian American children increasing from 3% to 5%. The diverse and complex features of the Asian American population include ethnicity, language, culture, socio-economic status, religion, education levels, and political views.

The changing demographics toward greater diversity in American society and schools have challenged educators on how to be prepared to work with diverse students. Researchers have found that school curricula with an emphasis on cultural diversity have a positive influence on the identities and self-perception of minority students, along with their academic achievements (Byrd, 2016; Choi, 2013; Dickson et al., 2015). However, Euro-American experiences and worldviews have traditionally structured the mainstream curricula, particularly history and social studies texts, and continue to appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating narratives and accomplishments, and downplaying racial and ethnic minority groups' representation in history and contemporary ethnic experiences in American society (Rodriguez, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Minority students have experienced the invisibility of race and race-related issues in the social studies curriculum, leading to marginalization of their identities and further impeding their learning of history and government (Busey & Russell, 2016; Suh et al., 2015). For Asian American students, their self-concepts, well-being, and school experience have greatly been influenced by the more subtle discrimination and racism in the U.S. society. Prejudicial and stereotypical images have shaped the education of Asian Americans through American history, and Asian Americans are marginalized and invisible in American schools (An, 2016; Lee et al., 2017; Pang, 2006; Rodriguez, 2019).

This study investigates how Asian American students perceive and interpret the social studies curriculum in two American high schools. This study identifies challenges and opportunities regarding Asian American students' learning in social studies, with the goal of developing knowledge and understanding of Asian American history and culture, creating and implementing an optimal school experience for Asian American students, and cultivating all students' respect towards global diversity and cross-cultural awareness.

### **Literature Review**

School curriculum and culture have privileged the perspectives and experiences of European Americans and marginalized the perspectives and experiences of minority people in the U.S. society. The dominant Eurocentric core curriculum keeps a single interpretation of culture and identity specific to a particular group, with selective content addition from minority groups' knowledge and experiences pertinent to that particular group (Rizvi, 2005). Textbooks as an important part of the curriculum in schools tend to reinforce the domination of European Americans' perspective and maintain stereotypes of minority groups whose perspectives are also often ignored and distorted (Kim, 2013). An (2016) finds minimal attention paid to the history of Asian Americans, along with the invisibility of Asian Americans and their experiences, in the review of 10 states' K-12 U.S. history standards. When the history of Asian Americans is not taught as part of the school curriculum, the implicit message that Asian Americans are not legitimate members of the nation is conveyed, thereby contributing to the stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). It leaves students ill-equipped to

understand and strive for a multicultural/global society (Rodriguez, 2019). The discourses of authenticity, by regulating everyday schooling practices based on White middle class values and identities in American schooling context, subsume the value of differences, which has negatively impacted students who negotiate their non-mainstream identities (Subedi, 2008). Asian American students' identity construction and negotiation at schools has been affected by prejudicial beliefs about Asian Americans being the model minority and perpetual foreigners, and consequently these biased perceptions and expectations from the mainstream society have caused excessive pressure on Asian American students and have been negative to their welfare (Gao, 2017).

Few schools have integrated precise and comprehensive information related to incorporating Asian Americans into the existing social studies curriculum to prepare all students to be citizens in a multicultural democracy. Many social studies teachers draw little upon the students' diverse backgrounds and understandings when they teach social science concepts or interpretations (Busey & Russell, 2016; Goodwin, 2010; Halagao, 2004). Research has consistently noted that teachers do not address race and race-related issues, nor do they undertake critical dialogues about race in classrooms (Howard, 2004; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Rios et al., 2015). Teachers often consider race as the most controversial topic and may avoid discussions of race in classrooms (Chandler, 2015). Peck (2018) indicates that students from diverse backgrounds find it difficult to make connections between their family and/or ethnic histories and those that are taught in schools when teachers don't make attempts to establish such links. Students' historical understanding and knowledge have been greatly shaped by their family and life experiences relative to their historically and culturally constituted racialized identities (Epstein, 2009). Peck's (2010) study with an ethnically diverse group of Canadian high school students found that students' ethnic identities are a powerful influence on their understanding of the nation's history and their place in it. Epstein (1998, 2000, 2009) explored historical perspectives that both African American and European American students brought to historical inquiry in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade history class. The findings show that the differences in the historical understandings of African American students compared to those of European American students stem from race-related differences in their life experiences and family members.

The increasing diversity in both American educational settings and society has brought forth challenges to curriculum organization and classroom pedagogy in schools. All students need to be exposed to a variety of experiences, practices, and worldviews that can be found in a multicultural society. The social studies curriculum should examine the issues and concepts of culture, ethnicity, identity, roles and functions of ethnic groups in U.S. history and culture, ethnic stereotypes and racism, ethnic group contributions, and acculturation/assimilation of ethnic individuals and groups (An, 2016; Gay, 2002; Pang, 2006; Sleeter, 2011). Teachers can find ways to integrate precise and comprehensive information related to incorporating Asian Americans into the curriculum to promote Asian American students' learning and development of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Teachers can include the experiences of Asian Americans in their own words and voices in classrooms to make Asian American history visible to students (Rodriguez, 2019). The diversification of the curriculum and instruction to represent the knowledge and experiences of Asian American communities can promote democratic free thinking, along

with increasing both students' and teachers' knowledge and positive interactions among different culture groups.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study draws from culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006, 2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.18). It promotes minority students' academic achievement and cultural competence, as well as developing their socio-political consciousness and abilities to promote equality and social justice. Paris' (2012) theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy requires that teaching be more than relevant to cultural experiences and practices of students. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to foster students to sustain their own cultural and linguistic competence while simultaneously acquiring access to dominant cultural competence for cultural pluralism and equality. Building on culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), Ladson-Billings (2014) remixes her original theory. Ladson-Billings indicates that pedagogy should change and evolve to meet the needs of each generation of students and dynamic scholarship. Instead of focusing on one racial or ethnic group, this framework pushes researchers to consider global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, athletics, and film (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Culturally relevant pedagogy incorporates the histories, life experiences, and views of diverse learners into the school curriculum and makes them an essential dimension of curriculum for academic success, not merely vehicles for explaining the dominant culture (Choi, 2013; Coughran, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Marri, 2005). Culturally relevant teaching not only integrates minority groups' histories and experiences into the curriculum; it also affirms minority people as agents and individuals or collective actors in history and society (Epstein et al., 2011; Martell, 2013). Including and validating minority students with diverse backgrounds encourages students to build up positive racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural identities to go beyond the negative effects of the dominant culture, not being denigrated but accepted and respected (Martell, 2013; Robbins, 2001). Students are honored for their humanity, held in high esteem, expected to be high performers, and helped to fulfill their expectations.

Culturally relevant pedagogy frames my study. The perspective assists me in understanding how Asian American students perceive social studies instruction, how teachers' beliefs and practices influence students' learning experiences, and how students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities interact with their social studies learning. My study gives voices to Asian American students by examining their current learning experiences, along with the reality of challenges and opportunities encountered in social studies classrooms. It leads to a discussion on how social studies teachers can make the curriculum and instruction culturally relevant and meaningful to Asian American students for their needs, interests, and motivations.

## Methodology

As part of a wider piece of research, this qualitative study examines how Asian American students perceive and interpret their social studies instruction at two Midwestern American high schools. This study helps students and teachers to think more deeply about the students' beliefs, values, and identities in relation to what is being learned and how these connections affect student engagement and academic success. All names are pseudonyms to protect the research participants and confidentiality of the research sites.

### Sampling

I used purposeful sampling in this qualitative study. Patton (1990) indicates that qualitative inquiry generally focuses more on fewer, *purposefully* selected respondents, even single cases, in more depth rather than a large number with little depth. Purposeful sampling allowed me to locate the information-rich student participants and try to interpret the findings in depth in this study. I selected eight Asian American students and two social studies teachers at two high schools in a Midwestern city. The criteria for the selection of student participants included students who came from diverse Asian American backgrounds, students who were taking social studies, students who gained the informed consent of their parents to participate in the study, and students willing to participate in the study. The criteria for the selection of teacher participants included teachers who were teaching social studies to the students selected for the study, and teachers willing to participate in the study.

Jefferson High School and Franklin High School were two research sites in this study. Jefferson High School is a small and intellectually vibrant early college public high school focusing on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) in the community of Richmond. Richmond has an urban core, member communities in a city, and some quite rural areas. During the time of the study, there were 350 students enrolled in grades 9-12 at Jefferson High School. Students were 60% White, 25% African American, 6% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 4% of other races. Around 35% of students in the school were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 70% of students came from urban areas. Franklin High School is a public high school rated as "One of America's Best Schools" by the U.S. News and World Report and awarded as a Blue Ribbon School from the U.S. Department of Education. Franklin High School is located in the suburban community of Lexington. During the time of the study, approximately 2,200 students attended grades 9-12 at Franklin High School, and student demographics were 88% White, 10% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 1% African American. Both schools had a relatively high Asian student population compared to other schools in the area.

In this study, Nicole, Annie, Kanan, and Pushpa were sophomores taking Mr. Smith's World Studies and American Government classes at Jefferson High School, while Jun, Qiang, Yung-ching, and Chien-fu were seniors in Mrs. Wills' AP American Government class at Franklin High School. Students all identified as high academic achievers from middle or upper-middle class family backgrounds. Annie and Kanan are first-generation immigrants, meaning "they were born elsewhere and immigrated with their parents to the U.S. at a young age" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 5), while the others are second-generation, meaning that they are the children of immigrants. All the student

participants have been learning their ethnic language, culture, and/or religion at home and in the community. Even though most students understand their home language, only some can speak their language, with Qiang as the sole student deemed proficient in his home language, Chinese. Students have traveled with their parents to their home Asian countries and enjoyed their experiences there. The students' background information is listed in the Appendix.

Mr. Smith, about 30 years of age, is a White American social studies teacher at Jefferson High School. He has been teaching two full years at Jefferson. Before, he taught at multiple places and has always enjoyed teaching. Mr. Smith describes himself as an American high school social studies teacher whose goal is to create both knowledgeable, capable American and world citizens. At Franklin High School, Mrs. Wills is a White American social studies teacher in her mid 40s. She has 22 years of teaching experience in different schools. She thinks that her specialty is American History and American Government, yet she has also taught World History, Geography, and other social studies courses. Mrs. Wills explains that her teaching philosophy is to make students feel curious, think, and ask questions, with a focus on preparing students in their knowledge, capability, and skills to be successful when they go to college. The teachers' background information is listed in the Appendix.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

During my study, I used the qualitative methods of interview and observation to investigate Asian American students' perceptions on their learning of social studies over three months. Interviews offer the advantages of focusing on the specific experience and perceptions of individuals engaged in different relationships and contexts in the area of research interest. Different individual experiences, values, beliefs, and feelings can be better understood and interpreted through personal narratives (Chambers, 2003). I interviewed each of the students four times to learn about their background, work, interests, motivation, and interpretation of content. I interviewed each teacher three times to understand their background and beliefs about teaching, learning, goals, and perceptions of social studies instruction relevant to the study. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Face-to-face with open-ended questions, the interview was semi-structured to cover particular areas but to leave room for potential feedback. I recorded all of the interviews on audiotape. I then transcribed and converted them into Word document format within one to three days, finally sending the copies of my transcribed interviews to students and teachers for member checking. The sample interview questions are listed in Appendix.

Observation is used to gain knowledge of students' experiences and perspectives through understanding what is meaningful to them in actions and events within school and classrooms settings. I observed the students' participation in Mr. Smith's 10<sup>th</sup> grade World Studies and American Government classes and Mrs. Wills' 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP American Government class for three months. Each student was observed twice a week. During my observation, I paid attention to the content topics, teachers' instructional methods, whether/how teachers engaged students in learning, and how students interacted and responded to teachers' instruction. I took field notes to record what happened during instruction and prepared transcripts to teachers for member checking. My classroom

observations generated new interview questions that were asked after class to further explore participant thoughts on instruction.

### **Data Analysis**

I used inductive data analysis in a process of self-reflexivity in this qualitative study. As soon as the data were collected, I began to analyze the data daily and implemented a constant comparative method in my data analysis. I coded all the written text of the transcribed notes line by line from interviews and observations. After analyzing and comparing, I sought out relationships and differences between the data. Then I identified concepts from different events in the data. When the relevant concepts were constantly identified and compared for similarities or differences, I grouped them into categories. I further explored the categories in greater depth for understanding these categories and their interaction through subsequent interviews and observations. While this process carried on, major categories and themes emerged, leading to meaningful findings.

The conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy shaped my data analysis. It helped me to develop concepts and themes and test them with student and teacher participants through analyzing and interacting with the collected data, while also transcribing and coding the texts. The conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy assisted me in understanding and explaining how the different practices of social studies teachers have played significant roles in perceptions of Asian American students in social studies. It helped me to interpret how racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of Asian American students have interwoven and interacted with their perspectives on social studies.

### **Positionality**

As a Chinese/Asian immigrant, I have taught students from diverse racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds in U.S. secondary public schools for many years. My identity, background, and professional experiences have motivated me to examine how Asian American students perceive social studies instruction, how they see themselves, and how their social studies learning experiences interact with their racial, ethnic and cultural identities. My cultural background has given me an opportunity to understand the complex and multifaceted identities of Asian American students and how students might encounter struggles and challenges within different social contexts such as families, schools, and communities. My teaching and research experiences have helped me become aware of histories and knowledge about Asian Americans that have been largely omitted from the school curriculum and portrayed in distorted and stereotypical images in social media and the school curriculum. There is a lack of culturally relevant teaching practices in American classrooms that support diversity. In this study, I argue for the importance and urgency to include the histories, cultures, and life experiences of Asian Americans in the school curriculum, and to make classroom learning relevant and meaningful to Asian American students.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in my study. Eight Asian American students in two Midwestern high schools do not represent the heterogeneous Asian American groups in the U. S. More students from other places would provide more complex perspectives and experiences in social studies. The limited time for conducting this study is another limitation. A longer period of time spent on the research sites would provide more depth on the experiences of learning social studies.

### **Findings**

In this study, Asian American student participants interpreted their social studies learning experiences in various ways. Several major themes emerged from my data analysis. To start with, Jefferson High School students all value the inclusion of diversity and culturally relevant teaching practices in social studies. They are passionate to learn about Asian countries and the world. In contrast, for Franklin High School students, there is a lack of reflection on diversity issues in social studies. They barely reflect on their social studies learning experiences through a racial/ethnic lens.

#### **Value on Inclusion of Diversity in Social Studies at Jefferson**

Jefferson students all value the opportunity to learn about diversity in the social studies curriculum. Annie and Kanan both think that social studies encourages them to become aware of and interested in different perspectives in various situations, along with developing their own opinions and explaining their reasons after understanding and analyzing these viewpoints. Kanan describes:

They sometimes can completely be opposite because that's the way history has been about why people think that they are right. So it's interesting to see what types of stories to hear. And then it's up to you to pull it together and see what happened.

Students consider social studies as the study of understanding developments that take place in a diverse society and globalization. In world studies class, the students are excited to be studying human patterns and trends, comparing similarities and differences among nations, and learning both American or westernized points of view and views from other people around the world. Annie states:

You can't learn about American history not wanting to learn about the world history because it's now like one place. --- I like it. I just think it's cool to learn. Like it's just history of different countries and how the world, it's kind of the same, but after that it's kind of different, and how like some are different governments, what they believe, and what they don't believe, and what people think the right. It's just really interesting to see what the same is and what the difference is.

Students express that learning about Asian countries in social studies has developed their own cultural knowledge. They also bring their cultural expertise to enrich the study of diversity when they study their home countries and cultures that are included in school curriculum. Kanan feels interested when seeing that what Mr. Smith taught about India is exactly what happens there. It has made him more knowledgeable and open-minded. He

shares his personal knowledge and experience in India with his classmates in the unit of India. He explains, "I have been there every three or four years. I know a good bit about how different they are." He has offered his insights on some important topics under study, such as the religions of Hinduism and Islam, the caste system, and partitioning in India. Kanan thinks that it is also helpful for the mainstream American students to know more about the world and to resist their unexamined stereotypes about other people who are different from themselves. Likewise, Pushpa likes classroom discussion on India and wants to hear how other people, as outsiders, perceive India and Indian culture. She points out the outdated materials about India at American schools and helps peers to identify updated and useful resources. She says, "A lot of books that we have are about ancient India, not about the culture today because the culture today is way different. It's like not recognized." Students' cultural inclusion has enhanced their ethnic pride and developed their cultural competence, leading to a positive perception of social studies.

### **Compliments on Teacher's Culturally Relevant Practices at Jefferson**

All the Jefferson students give credit to Mr. Smith for their positive learning experiences in social studies. Nicole explains:

I would like to make the comment that our teachers are amazing! They are not your average social studies teachers. They make you want to be a part of it and learn because it's something you're interested in, not just something you have to do. I love that about the class. The teachers somehow find a way to make it interesting to every student.

Nicole's narrative mirrors Mr. Smith's beliefs and decision making in teaching social studies. Mr. Smith believes that the purpose of social studies is to develop students' critical thinking skills and to create both knowledgeable and capable American and world citizens. He thinks that the social studies curriculum is very U.S.-centric or Eurocentric, so he has created units to incorporate human diversity and the expertise of all his diverse student learners.

Mr. Smith sees all his Asian American student participants in this study as high academic achievers and great students at school: being motivated, diligent, and possessing higher levels of critical thinking skills. He is concerned that as a minority group in the U.S., his Asian American students might completely be assimilated into the mainstream American society or almost become outcasts for being who they are and retaining their cultural properties. Mr. Smith discusses the need to validate and embrace their cultural identity in the classroom. He wants Asian American students to be able to see themselves as having a lot of similarities with mainstream Americans while possessing unique and special Asian American backgrounds, so they can celebrate both cultural identities. Mr. Smith broadens the curriculum to connect with the cultural and life experiences of Asian American students, values their first-hand knowledge and experiences that they have brought in from their own cultural backgrounds, and appreciates their contribution to the diversity of his social studies class. He believes his mainstream students have also benefited from different worldviews and cultures.

Mr. Smith likes to teach about stereotypes with cultural sensitivity in social studies and guides students to be reflective of stereotypes, "not to buy into the stereotypes." Nicole comments positively on Mr. Smith's attitudes and efforts to not allow stereotyping

and, in contrast, create an open classroom environment that respects and promotes cultural diversity:

They are really thinking about different cultures and they don't stereotype on it. The rule in our social science class is like you don't stereotype. You don't make jokes about that, and you respect people. And that makes it a more open, more fun environment.

Mr. Smith has employed a variety of teaching strategies to engage his students' learning in social studies class, such as lecture, discussion, group work, simulation, dramatic inquiry, reflection, guest speakers, research projects, and presentations, etc. His teaching practice, rooted in culturally relevant pedagogy, has brought significance and meaning to all of his students' learning in social studies.

### **Passion to Learn about Asian Countries and the World at Jefferson**

Jefferson students show their interest and excitement in learning more about the world, especially Asian countries. During my classroom observation on the unit of globalization that Mr. Smith taught in world studies class, students were assigned to work on an inquiry-based research project, Design a Sustainable World (DSW). They needed to choose one of the World Health Organization's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to learn about related issues, obstacles, and current solutions, along with proposing a plan to the MDG. Mr. Smith shares that this DSW project has been designed for incorporating his students' diverse background and allowing them to use their own knowledge and experience as cultural experts. Asian American students all perform well in their projects. They work on the topics that they feel interested in and make connections to their cultural background, with a focus on the issues and problems in developing Asian countries. For instance, Nicole's project topic is MDG 8: to develop a global partnership for development. She studies the effects on landlocked countries, small island countries, and new developing countries, attributing her research interest to her Asian background:

Which I like, because it is something I can relate to and have a good deal of information on, because my mom is from Malaysia, and I have been to both Malaysia and Singapore. Also, a lot of my friends have Taiwanese parents or parents from small island nations as well, so I know a bit more about how those countries are doing than the average person.

Nicole shares that this project has opened her eyes to see different professions and people that are needed in the workforce to ensure the sustainability of the world. After students finish their project presentations, Mr. Smith asks them to reflect upon their learning experiences in the DSW project. Some excerpts from my classroom observation notes are as follows:

Mr. Smith: Was this a personal project for you?

Nicole: Really personal. My mom comes from Malaysia. They suffer from this problem (of water). When I went to her hometown, I drank the bottle of water because the water was not clean. But doing this project, I mean it is not just a smaller country. It is about the world that needs to be done about that. It worries about me. I couldn't handle it.

Mr. Smith: What do you think about Asian tigers? How would it be if something

happened to Asian tigers?

Nicole: That would be really really bad. A lot of stuff are from Asian tigers. Here goes the world.

Nicole has apparently developed her world-mindedness through making connections with her background knowledge and experience, studying the issues from local, national, to global levels, being aware of world interconnectedness, and committing to a global ethic. My findings reveal that Mr. Smith's incorporation of students' cultural heritage into the social studies curriculum has contributed to engaging students as active learners, enhancing their appreciation of the relevance of their cultural heritage, building up their positive social and cultural identities, and enabling them to gain the knowledge and skills required in today's global society.

### **Lack of Reflection on Diversity in Social Studies at Franklin**

My findings show the unwillingness of Franklin students to reflect on diversity issues in their social studies learning experiences at school. Instead, they are in favor of how Mrs. Wills has engaged them in discussion on the topics under study. Jun says, "I just like the discussion really because the people in our class are pretty active like Sarah, Peter." Chien-fu adds, "I like our class right now because it's sort of small and there are a lot more discussion which brings out a lot more passion in people for what you are doing." During my classroom observation, Mrs. Wills frequently involves students in discussions on certain content topics, encourages different opinions on some issues, and facilitates their debates and arguments, without incorporating their background knowledge and cultural strengths into the learning process.

My finding indicates that Mrs. Wills' fostering classroom discussion is consonant with her belief about teaching social studies. She thinks social studies is not just about memorization of historical events and facts. Instead, it is to make students be curious, think, and ask questions. Her government class is test-driven, mostly for content topics and writing skills. She focuses on preparing students in their knowledge and skills to be successful when they go to college. Mrs. Wills sees the social studies curriculum as already inherently designed for diversity. She states that there has been much emphasis that the U.S. is a melting pot and everybody has contributed to its cultural diversity in the social studies curriculum:

We joked around in the American History [course] a lot when we started working on this, 'as Americans, we are thieves.' We have stolen from all the other cultures because we are only two hundred years old. You know we were swiping until one hundred years into the development of America when we actually started to develop our own literature styles. Up to that point, we were stealing from other people. We stole the ideas of the Constitution from Europe, from France. We joke around about how we would be without being influenced by other cultures, and how often Americans probably appreciate other cultures more because of the understanding of our history. So from my perspective, I think that social studies has to become much more focused on diversity of education and diversity of social studies curriculum.

When talking about having Asian American students in her classroom, Mrs. Wills shares that it has not made a difference in her instruction. Occasionally she connects some topics under study to their personal knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. The issues of cultural diversity are brought forth for discussion when it is appropriate to the course context. She explains:

Sometimes we are talking about Pearl Harbor and perceptions of dropping atomic bombs in history class. Sometimes we talk to Japanese kids about what you learn about it, and what your parents learn about it.

As their homeroom teacher, Mrs. Wills has known these students for four years and taught AP American studies to them before. In her opinion, they are all strong in academics, bright, hard-working, and possess different strengths and personalities. The students participate in their own cultures and try to balance their bicultural identities, but they have to overcome the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans. She states, "I think that their major challenges are overcoming that stereotype. They are perceived to be better because they think that they are better than everyone else."

### **Lack of Reflection between Identity and Learning at Franklin**

Franklin students are mostly reluctant to identify themselves as Asian Americans within the school setting, lacking reflection on social studies learning through a racial and ethnic lens, although they learn and participate in their own cultures. For the lesson of China's development in modern world history class, Yung-ching shares, "I just learnt it." Qiang doesn't feel passionate about it either: "I guess it's something like the region because I wasn't born and raised in China. It's kind of distance." Jun likes that lesson because he knew more than everyone else in class. He thinks that it was actually the only thing that he felt happy and really good about in the class: "It's just like another learning topic because I still love that familiarity about it. It wasn't like the sense of Asian pride. No, I like developing some new interests."

Interestingly, Chien-fu at Franklin, claiming his white-core identity, shares the powerful impact of his ethnicity on his learning in the same lesson on China. He was more involved in the class and showed his ethnic pride when learning about positive aspects of Chinese culture: "Like when they say Chinese people invented paper, that's just a simple statement, but it brings more pride to me than it would for someone who is not Chinese." He also challenged the authority and critiqued the stereotypes that portrayed Chinese people as crazy victims of opium in the textbook of *Modern World History*. He explains:

I think when you learn things you can't believe it's absolutely true. When you learn things, you also have to question why they put it there. If that's not really true, why did they put it in there? So in the case of like I know, I was working on this book [*Modern World History*], and there is a chapter on European westernization on Asian people, especially China, and how they do this whole thing, and how Chinese people were crazy victims of opium. That was one of those things that is like, oh, I find that my grandparents were not victims of opium. So it's sort of like 'wow, hold on, why did they put like all Chinese people, you know?' But then so I looked into that. And it's like, one of the things is like because I am an Asian, I would question that. If I were white, if I were black, I would just read it and like

‘okay, let’s keep going.’ Because this is related to my ethnicity, I feel that those words have more meaning.

Chien-fu’s recognition of and critique on secondary interpretations of Chinese people history reveals that his historical understanding has been significantly influenced by his family and life experiences. Relate to his racial and ethnic identity as an Asian American, Chien-fu questions the standpoint of the authors in the textbook and acknowledges his family as sources of his historical knowledge.

### **Discussion**

This study explores how Asian American high school students perceive and interpret social studies instruction. It finds that the social studies learning experiences and various perceptions of social studies of Asian American students have been greatly influenced by their teachers as gatekeepers in their determination of curriculum. This finding is consistent with the previous research indicating that the teacher makes crucial decisions and plays the primary role in constructing the social studies curriculum that determines students’ social studies learning experiences. According to Thornton (2005), teachers are curricular-instructional gatekeepers who ultimately make decisions and implement curricula in the classroom. Teachers’ beliefs are associated with their classroom practices (Zheng, 2009). My findings in this study reveal how the beliefs of Mr. Smith, at Jefferson High, and Mrs. Wills, at Franklin High, regarding society, the curriculum, students, and instruction have shaped the way they teach social studies, and show that there are significant variations of their values and instruction from teacher to teacher.

Well aware of Eurocentric social studies curriculum and challenges that Asian American students as a minority encountered in their school experiences, Mr. Smith advocates and embraces cultural diversity and culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies. He designs a culturally relevant curriculum where ethnic cultural heritage and identities of Asian American students are validated and celebrated in the classroom. He strives to teach all his students by being exposed to different worldviews and cultures with an open mind, as he believes that the purpose of teaching social studies is to create both knowledgeable and capable American and world citizens. As revealed in my findings, Mr. Smith’s culturally relevant teaching practices have considerably enriched the learning experiences of Asian American students and promoted their cultural competence. Culturally relevant teachers perceive students’ diverse backgrounds as strengths, support students to bring their knowledge to school, and have students use their knowledge for academic success (Coughran, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). They create an environment where students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds are not denigrated, but cared about, accepted, and respected (Martell, 2013; Ortega, 2003). They promote cultural competence to recognize differences and appreciate students’ diverse backgrounds, cultural experiences and knowledge as resources of diversity learning, and communication among different cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2011; Robbins, 2001).

However, most teachers are not prepared for the complexities of diverse student population in American classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Gay, 2010). In the U.S.,

the teaching force is mainly White (Sleeter, 2001; Snyder & Dillow, 2019), and the teacher education program remains rooted in traditional White ways of preparing teachers “peppered with some discussion of race or culture” (Cross, 2005, p. 266). Mrs. Wills at Franklin thinks that the social studies curriculum has already been designed inherently for teaching diversity, with much focus on the U.S. as a melting pot. Having a relatively high percentage of Asian American students in her class doesn’t make a difference in her instruction in social studies. Students’ different knowledge and perspectives are only brought into class discussion when those cultural issues fit into the curriculum content. Mrs. Wills’ melting pot belief on social studies ignores Asian American students’ identities as individuals who have various cultural backgrounds and lacks a critical reflection on the diversity in school and society. The metaphor of the U.S. as a melting pot is “a fundamental contradiction at the heart of American exceptionalism as the welcome mat is removed and racial minorities are denied full and equal membership in the family that is America” (Chang, 1999, p.102). Mrs. Wills’ beliefs and practices on cultural diversity in the social studies curriculum and instruction have reinforced the domination of the European Americans’ perspective and stereotypes of Asian Americans to be perceived as outsiders and perpetual foreigners. The history of Asian Americans is minimized in school curricula, and occasionally when Asian Americans are discussed, they are described as “outsiders who are decidedly more Asian than American” (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 533). As revealed in my findings, the lack of opportunity to include and validate diversity and cultural heritage of Asian American students at Franklin High School has led to scarce reflection of the students on their social studies curriculum experiences. Apparently, it has not brought forth positive impacts on the development of Asian Americans students’ cultural knowledge and identity as well as their cultural competence. Therefore, it is important to examine teachers’ values and beliefs on the purpose of social studies education. Instead of melting students into the homogeneous mainstream culture, the inclusion of Asian American narratives, such as respecting and encouraging culture and identity of Asian American students developed in social studies, can prepare them for being competent and capable citizens for a diverse society.

The interplay of Asian American students’ identities with their social studies learning in my finding reflects that students’ racial, ethnic, and cultural identities are not inert. Instead, “these identities and affiliations influence if, how, and how much young people engage with social studies teachers and texts in schools and how much they learn from school subjects” (Epstein & Shiller, 2009, p. 95). Jefferson High School students’ positive perceptions on diversity in the social studies curriculum have been influenced by their identities as members of families, communities, and nations, along with their affiliations with racial, ethnic, and other groups. On the other hand, Jefferson students’ positive identities have also been reinforced and promoted by the culturally relevant teaching practices of their social studies teacher that validate students’ cultural background knowledge, legitimize their real life experiences, and link their histories and worlds to the subject matter. However, students at Franklin High School are provided few opportunities to explore their cultural knowledge, histories, life experiences, and perspectives in social studies, as a result of the students’ lack of reflection on curriculum experiences through the lens of their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Only Chien-fu critiqued the stereotypes of Chinese people in the textbook and its credibility, which echoes previous studies finding that students’ historical perspectives have been greatly

shaped by families' life experiences, relative to their racial and ethnic identities. As Peck (2018) indicates, students filter and negotiate historical interpretation taught at school through their own identities and backgrounds.

### Conclusion

This study enriches the current literature on Asian American students' learning in social studies, adding to the limited research in this area. It adds new insights into our understanding of how Asian American students perceive and interpret knowledge and experience in social studies, how teachers construct social studies instruction that determines students' learning experiences, and how students' culture and identity affect their interest, motivation, and learning achievement in social studies. My findings strongly suggest a comprehensive, diversified curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy for educators to meet the complexities of language, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, and nationality of Asian American students in today's multicultural/global society.

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### Appendix

#### Interview Questions for Students

1. Please tell me something about your background? Your family? The people who are significant to you? Schooling? What generation of immigrant? Where from? When?

What languages spoken? Parents speak what language(s)? Parent Occupation?

2. Please describe your typical school day?

3. How do you identify yourself? (could include as a poet, an athlete, a scholar, a musician, a gamer, as well as racial, ethnic or religious identity --as a Tamil, as a Korean American, as a Buddhist, etc.)

4. What's it like being an Asian American student here?

5. How have your identity, values, and beliefs affected your learning in social studies curriculum and school experiences?

6. What do you study here in social studies? What do you like best in social studies classes? What would you change in social studies curriculum if you were to?

7. How culturally diverse is your school?

8. Has your learning in social studies influenced your own or other people's perception on yourself? If yes, please explain.

9. Have you experienced the situations of cultural conflict, e.g. at home and school? If yes, how did you learn it?

10. How did you negotiate your identity when encountered with challenges and opportunities in school?

11. How do you see your experiences in social studies classroom as they relate to your education?

12. How do you see your education connected with your future career plan?

#### Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Please tell me about your background.

2. How did you come to be a teacher? How many years have you been teaching? At which grade level have you taught? Have you taught subjects other than social studies? If yes, what subjects?
3. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching? What do you believe about how to help students learn? What other ideas guide your teaching?
4. What did you learn in your teacher education program to help you teach students of diverse cultural backgrounds?
5. What is social studies? How is it significant to new immigrants?
6. What are major topics in the social studies curriculum that you are or will be teaching this year?
7. What's special about Asian students in your classes? How has it made a difference in your instruction?
8. How important is it for Asian students to learn to critically reflect their beliefs, values, and identities in their learning in social studies?
9. Do you think American History and World Studies curriculums are diverse? Please explain.
10. How are cultural issues talked about in classrooms?
11. What are some of the lessons you have taught about human diversity and the world that students enjoyed?
12. What is the best way to help students develop better understanding of other cultures?
13. What are materials you have to support your teaching for diversity and equity? What else would you like to have?
14. What are extra-curricular events beyond the courses taught that also relate to developing students to understand/interact with people of diverse backgrounds?
15. How do you teach about stereotype?
16. What do you see as the major challenges and opportunities in Asian students' school experiences?