2D1. “You Can Be a Bridge”: Toward Cultural Citizenship in Elementary Classrooms

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“You can be a bridge”: Toward cultural citizenship in elementary classrooms

Dr. Noreen Naseem Rodríguez
Iowa State University
Defining Asian American

- My positionality as a teacher/researcher
- Not just a racial category (1980 Census)
- Panethnic terms mask incredible diversity in class, language, culture, religion, immigration, and more (Espiritu, 1992)
- Ethnic vs. racial self-identification
- Sociopolitical history
- Captures similar historical experiences and contemporary issues
- Political-racial identifier – return to the roots of the movement (Philip & Curammeng, 2015)
Asian American Citizenship

- Distinct disenfranchisement on the basis of citizenship
  - Naturalization Act of 1870: “Aliens ineligible to citizenship”
  - Legislation crafted specifically to exclude Asian entry over time (Page Act of 1875, Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, “Asiatic Barred Zone” in Immigration Act of 1924)
- Asians viewed as racially unassimilable
- Denial of many basic rights (public schooling, testifying as witnesses in court, owning property, marrying outside of race)
Asian American History in Schools

- Communities of color generally absent from history/social studies curriculum except when relevant to Anglo-European experiences or actions (Cornbleth, 1997; Wills, 2001)
  - Chinese in the 1800s (railroad, Chinese exclusion)
  - Japanese American incarceration during World War II
- Elementary focus on holidays continues to exoticize Asians/Asian Americans and situate them as foreign others (Hartlep & Scott, 2016; Pang, Colvin, Tran & Barba, 1992)
Critical Race Theory (CRT)

- Resistance to oppressive aspects of society to foster societal & individual transformation
- Racism as normal part of U.S. society that permeates every aspect of social life (Delgado, 2013)
- In education, CRT can deepen understanding of educational barriers faced by people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2002)

Asian Critical Race Theory

- Call for Asian American legal scholarship (Chang, 1993) to address issues of discrimination unique to Asian Americans
- AsianCrit in education centers racial realities at the core of the Asian American educational experience (Museus, 2014)
  - (Re)Constructive History
  - Story, Theory & Praxis
Instrumental Qualitative Case Study

Spring 2016
Major city in Texas
Large urban school district

Three veteran Asian American teachers willing to diverge from traditional elementary social studies curriculum

- ELYSE
- KRISHNAN
- VIRGINIA

Data Sources: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, teacher and student artifacts
# Teacher Participants: Professional Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade(s)/Subject(s) Taught</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Degrees/Teacher Preparation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elyse Huynh</td>
<td>3rd Grade, All Subjects</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>B.A. in Sociology, Post-baccalaureate in Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishnan Kamath</td>
<td>3rd &amp; 5th Grade Spanish Language Arts &amp; Social Studies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>B.A. in Architecture Studies, Texas Teaching Fellows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Ye</td>
<td>2nd Grade, All Subjects</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>B.S. in Elementary Education, M.Ed. in Language &amp; Literacy</td>
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</tbody>
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# Teacher Participants: Asian American Intra-Group Diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Immigrant Generation</th>
<th>Languages Spoken</th>
<th>Religion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elyse Huynh</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>English, Vietnamese</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishnan Kamath</td>
<td>Indian American</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>English, Hindi, Gujarati, Spanish</td>
<td>Hindu/Jain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia Ye</td>
<td>Chinese American</td>
<td>U.S. (Texas)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>English, Cantonese</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FINDINGS

- (Re)Defining Asian American
- (Re)Defining What It Means to be an American (citizen)
- Promoting Cultural Citizenship
Cultural Citizenship

- Process of “claiming membership in, and remaking, America” (Rosaldo, 1997)
- Emphasizes the agency of marginalized groups in establishing and asserting human, social, and cultural rights to enfranchise themselves (Flores & Benmayor, 1997; Kang, 2010)
- Distinct from traditional discourses of “kinds of citizen” that focus on formal processes of civic action (following rules, voting)
- Initially focused on Latinx populations but has expanded to other groups, limited use in education
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

Aspects of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1997) present in the three teachers’ enactment of Asian American histories:

1. Presenting difference as a resource
2. Recognizing citizen construction as dynamic
3. Including the voices, experiences, and perspectives of students of color
4. Speaking the language of rights and agency
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

PRESENTING DIFFERENCE AS A RESOURCE, NOT A THREAT (Flores & Benmayor, 1997)

Cultural citizenship is “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense... even when such differences... potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others” (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 402)
I definitely wanted to open their minds to people who are immigrants, or people who don’t know English very well... helping them understand that the norms are different in different cultures. And with kids, they’ve only been alive for either or nine years. Sometimes they don’t realize they have norms until they’ve been taken out of their norms... You learn about yourself when you read or learn about someone else’s experience.
If you’re purposely putting a bunch of words together and saying that that’s part of a language, that’s pretty much like making fun of another language... when I was little and people would find out that I was Chinese, they would just say a bunch of random words to me that didn’t make sense, they weren’t even real Chinese words, and that was very hurtful because my language is important to me... So can we try to say (the Japanese phrase) correctly? That’s us trying to learn to say words correctly. Same with Spanish, when I’m trying to learn Spanish, I’m going to try my best to say it correctly. So we can be respectful.
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

PRESENTING DIFFERENCE AS A RESOURCE, NOT A THREAT (Flores & Benmayor, 1997)

- Deliberate emphasis on culturally and linguistically diverse groups in social studies curriculum
- Develop historical empathy toward the Other to broaden understandings of diverse citizens
- Drew on own experiences as the Other to foster student empathy
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

RECOGNIZING CITIZEN CONSTRUCTION AS DYNAMIC (Rosaldo, 1997)

Respect as a defining demand of cultural citizenship, which is an ongoing, contested and urgent process

- Addressing the roles of (dis)respect and dehumanization in lessons on Japanese American incarceration
“A dark, dirty horse stall that still smelled of horses. And the linoleum laid over the dirt was littered with wood shavings, nails, dust, and dead bugs” (Uchida, 1996, p. 17)
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

RECOGNIZING CITIZEN CONSTRUCTION AS DYNAMIC (Rosaldo, 1997)

- Highlighted that Japanese Americans were indeed American citizens who were denied their fundamental civic rights.
- Lessons on immigration: Shared stories of own immigrant experiences, revealing themselves as both immigrants and citizens, disrupting normative depictions of citizen.
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

INCLUDING THE VOICES, EXPERIENCES, AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

- Selection of Asian American children’s literature with Asian American child narrators
- Brought family artifacts as primary sources to supplement texts
When my mom came here, she had an accent and people thought she was dumb.

SOFIA, Elyse’s Student

I think that the quieter kids like Sofia connect in the sense that they empathize with being different or the cultural struggles, but just aren’t ready to talk about it and share and have the attention on them.

ELYSE
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

INCLUDING THE VOICES, EXPERIENCES, AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR

• Elyse’s descriptions of her own family’s journey to the U.S. created moments for her students to share their families’ stories and experiences related to culture, discrimination, acceptance, and civicness.

• Beyond traditional assimilation stories with a happy ending – assimilation isn’t pretty.
Promoting Cultural Citizenship

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF RIGHTS AND AGENCY (Rosaldo, 1997)

Respect as a defining demand of cultural citizenship, which is an ongoing, contested and urgent process

- Presenting diverse representations of civic identity and civic agency
You might not be able to go to the voting booth and vote, but you can use your words. You can make posters, you can make signs, you can write notes, you can write letters - those are all things that you can do. What I want you to realize is that you have a voice and you can say something about all of these things that you see are unfair.
Centering Asian American Perspectives and Histories

Using more inclusive approaches to elementary citizenship education

- Reveal racism and discrimination in the past and present beyond the Black/white binary
- Embody agency and broader representations of what it means to be American (citizen)
- Interrogate student misconceptions about who is citizen and what citizens do
Counterstorytelling as Praxis: Toward Cultural Citizenship Education

(Solorzano & Yosso, 2002)

- Counternarratives disrupt the multiple conditions and realities of oppression
- Can lead to transformative understandings of the past and present
- Place marginalized experiences at the fore rather than as a side note or afterthought
Implications for Iowa Classrooms

Asian Americans in Iowa

2000: 1.25% (36,635)
2010: 1.74% (53,094)
2016: 2.5% (78,368)

- Citizenship is more than following rules and voting
- Not all groups have equal access to citizenship and students need to see an array of models of who can be citizen and what citizens can do
- Students are increasing in diversity (in Iowa and nationally) but teacher diversity is not keeping pace – how can you represent all of your students in your instructional resources?
Implications for Teacher Educators

Teach citizenship beyond “personally responsible” citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)

- Need to infuse historical examples of (in)justice and agency into all classes
- Social studies methods: critical historical inquiry projects and teaching difficult histories
- Collaborate with history and sociology departments, museums, and community organizations to provide an array of diverse local engagement & resources