

Creating Professional Learning Spaces Through Collaborative Partnerships to Support Teachers in Teaching Asian American Students

A Commentary

Wenli Jen

Integral Prudence Solutions

Nicole Gilbertson

University of California Irvine

Thuy Vo Dang

University of California Los Angeles

Stacy Yung

University of California Irvine

Naehee Kwun

University of California Irvine

Introduction

While national and state-wide policies have a major impact in American schools, the implementation of policy that provides research-based and relevant

Wenli Jen is a senior consultant at Integral Prudence Solutions. Nicole Gilbertson is director of the UCI Teacher Academy at the University of California Irvine. Thuy Vo Dang is an assistant professor in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California Los Angeles. Stacy Yung is an academic coordinator in the Master of Arts in Teaching and Credential program at the University of California Irvine. Naehee Kwun is a teacher network facilitator with the Calteach Science & Math Program at the University of California Irvine. Email addresses: wenlijen@integralprudencesolutions.com, gilbertn@uci.edu, thuyvodang@ucla.edu, syung@uci.edu, & nkwun@uci.edu

© 2024 by Caddo Gap Press

Issues in Teacher Education

teacher support and training is paramount in developing effective pedagogy in teaching Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) studies. As of March 2022, there were seven states that required AAPI studies to be taught in K-12 schools. Fifteen states introduced bills that require AAPI studies in the K-12 curriculum (Committee of 100, 2022) with more states developing policies to implement AAPI studies (*The Hill*, 2024). At the same time, AAPI studies content must be integrated into Ethnic Studies curriculum. Meanwhile, California, with its racially-diverse student population, is the first state to require all high school students to complete a semester-long course on Ethnic Studies. High schools are required to begin offering these courses in the 2024-2025 academic year. These policies were created in the context of amplified discussions of contrasting perspectives and attitudes about the dearth of AAPI histories and narratives taught in K-12 educational settings. Additionally, it was an active response to the rise of anti-Asian hate, violence towards Asian Americans, an increased need from educators and students demanding schools be conducive spaces for social justice and cultural awareness. In fact, students were found to have increased grade point average and attendance after being exposed to culturally relevant pedagogy in Ethnic Studies (Dee & Penner, 2017).

At the front lines are teachers who will be responsible for meeting these requirements. Teacher professional learning and curricular resources to support learning are vital for educators to receive the support they need to foster positive student learning outcomes. Teacher experience and teacher context are essential in developing teacher self-efficacy (Wray et al., 2022). It is imperative to provide K-12 teachers the content knowledge, pedagogical instruction, resources, and community network to support the instructional shifts required, so they can successfully engage in and implement AAPI studies instruction. In teacher credentialing programs, teachers may have exposure to multicultural education but not necessarily Ethnic Studies. In California, despite the legislation mandating Ethnic Studies instruction, there is no single-subject teaching credential in Ethnic Studies (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2024). Educators responsible for teaching Ethnic Studies and AAPI studies often have to develop their own resources and pedagogical expertise as a result of the lack of infrastructure to support teacher professional learning.

Teaching for Justice

In response to the growing need for pre-service teacher education and continued professional development for K-12 educators, the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Teacher Academy through the Center for Educational Partnerships and School of Education, in collaboration with Educate to Empower and other representatives from California state universities, worked together to create the first two-day conference to provide a learning opportunity for educators interested in deepening their understanding of AAPI Studies. Aptly named “Teaching for

Justice,” the conference featured the expertise of Asian American researchers, educators, and community organizers to create a unique learning opportunity for educators, both nationally with our online conference (day 1) and local educators with the in-person conference in Orange County, California in spring of 2022 and 2023. Educators participated in workshops and plenary sessions, and they increased their content knowledge of Asian American history, learned about literature that explored Asian American lived experiences and perspectives, engaged in pedagogical practices that foster student agency, and considered resources to bring into the classroom, such as Asian American biographies.

One of the specific examples of how the conference aimed to be inclusive in its design is by integrating educators and youth presenters in workshop sessions in 2022 and 2023 conference proceedings, modeling the impact of AAPI pedagogy and student agency. In the 2023 closing keynote, the Asian American Youth Leaders (AAYL) 2.0 Program, a collective of AAPI High School students across Los Angeles and Orange counties who are learning to contribute to the social dialogue in developing just and equitable solutions to social challenges and needs in the AAPI community, shared their experiences in the PhotoVoice project. In the “Love in the Time of Hate” PhotoVoice project, they documented the stories and memories of love and care in AAPI communities in Orange County and beyond amid the rise of anti-Asian violence. Workshop session speakers and presenters were from K-12 schools, higher education and community-based organizations. This concentrated effort to be mindful in curating speakers to represent perspectives of educators engaging in leadership in AAPI Studies implementation was an intentional action for the conference committee organizers. Another example is hosting a plenary session at the end of the 2022 conference that sparked discussion about policy and implementation with stakeholders, such as parents and students, in conversation with elected officials. Workshop session speakers also included teachers, Nancy Chung, Maya Le and Staci Yamanishi, who were spotlighted in sharing how they integrated Asian American studies in their grade levels in the workshop titled, “How 3 Teachers Use Storytelling to Incorporate AA Voices in K-8 Classrooms.” By doing so, there was an increased buy-in and recognition of effective implementation already taking place. In learning from each other, these teachers who were also workshop speakers were allotted time to share best practices.

Born out of need, and fueled by the organic, positive, working relationships among the conference committee members, the Teaching for Justice conference brought to center stage the issues in teaching Asian American Studies. First, there was a dearth of content knowledge for K-12 teachers, who relied on traditional avenues of accessing information and were not always prepared from their teacher credentialing programs for specifics in Ethnic Studies instruction. In many American history books, one paragraph stood lonely and insignificant in the pages of history taught to American schoolchildren. In fact, the same teachers, currently working in classrooms, did not obtain the knowledge about AAPI studies when

they were in primary and secondary school. In comparison, Ethnic Studies professors at the collegiate level were specialized in their respective fields and concentrated in AAPI studies and Ethnic Studies. Even then, the number of academic degree programs for Asian American studies were few and far between across the nation with less than 100 colleges and universities offering Asian American studies programs (Association of Asian American Studies, 2023). The connection to be made between K-12 teachers and college professors would certainly enhance the sharing of content to develop dynamic and integrated lessons. Third, teachers needed to be trained and provided the necessary support in order for them to successfully integrate and implement policy changes. In doing so, the community-at-large had an abundance of resources, mainly those that served the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, also needed to be a part of the conversation in support of teachers who are teaching AAPI studies in K-12 schools.

For many of the conference committee planning members who met solely on Zoom every two weeks, they built a community of practitioners, researchers, and educators. The first year of the conference yielded more than 200 attendees, who exhibited their deep, emotional reactions to the conference workshops and sessions. The resulting evaluation and feedback proved true that the conference was much needed. Many workshops resonated with attendees, and the call to act and plan for a second year was highly anticipated. The coordinating, planning and debriefing sessions for the conference committee was often described as “magical” because of the sense of purpose, solidarity, and commitment to service among its members.

Extending the Magic

In its second year, the theme of community and sense of belonging were introduced. The momentum of the conference committee’s charge to produce the conference yielded the natural direction of the second year’s theme, where educators would have a shared space to discuss lesson plans, learn content and pedagogical knowledge, and engage in conversations about implementation and evaluation. A concerted effort was made to increase the focus on Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian populations. It was also a clear directive for the committee members to ensure that ethnicities that were not highlighted in the first year were highlighted in the second year. The commitment to be more conscientious and thoughtful was important to all committee members.

Parallel processes of community building (Minkler, 2012), networking, and resource sharing were important to the conference’s core objectives. In order to build community with those who are already teaching AAPI studies, the conference committee invited stakeholders, university professors and community educators into the space where interactive and experiential learning exercises can be unpacked for implementation in K-12 settings.

The feature of virtual and in-person conferences allowed for geographically

and culturally responsive practices in the context of COVID-19 pandemic times. Accessibility and availability were discussed with the two modalities. The approach to changing mindsets begins with the recognition that AAPI studies were not traditionally integrated with intention and easily accessible content. The new approach was bridging the technological advances of emerging research and getting the resources for AAPI studies into K-12 educators' hands, all the while creating and fostering a community of like-minded educators. This was particularly important in pandemic times, where the return to the new "normal" proved to be challenging and exciting with virtual and in-person formats.

Connecting Policy, Practice, and Research

Conference committee members Wenli Jen, Nicole Gilbertson, Thuy Vo Dang, Stacy Yung, and Naehee Kwun saw the need for a mixed methods study that included K-12 educators in Southern California school districts as a way to enhance the practical applications by conducting research for self-efficacy in teaching Asian American studies among K-12 educators. The *Teaching for Justice: Increasing Teacher Self-Efficacy in Teaching Asian American Studies* research study aimed to bring a new model of understanding the intertwined research and practice for teacher support and training. While there are studies about teacher self-efficacy, there is little known about self-efficacy in teaching Asian American studies among K-12 educators, particularly in response to the new California state and federal policies requiring Ethnic Studies in school curriculum. The study addresses teacher support needs that increase teacher self-efficacy when teaching Asian American studies. As we review the data, initial themes emerge, such as challenges of preparation, limited integration of AAPI Studies, and lack of content knowledge. It is vital that professional development for teachers in a multicultural space increases teachers' self-efficacy, resulting in more relevant, crafted lessons for students (Choi & Lee, 2020). In addition, educators rely on support from peers at their school site and in the community to successfully implement AAPI Studies and we seek to foster belonging among educators and their students through the Teaching for Justice conference in a variety of methods. This includes community participatory action research (Burns et al., 2011). The research team engaged 2023 conference participants in collecting community knowledge, feedback, and analysis in the process of the study. By providing a way to assess and evaluate the feedback from the 2022 conference and centering the research around teacher support, the research team hopes to explore the aspects that will enhance, modify and uplift the existing and future programs for teacher support and training.

Uncovering the Hidden Histories

AAPI studies are at a pivotal moment in American education, where the general acceptance of the once-invisible histories are now seen or can be seen through

intentional efforts to ensure Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians are recognized for their roles in the making of America. In resisting erasure and silence, AAPI studies presents our heterogeneous communities in their full complexity, through their hardships and exclusions from the mainstream as well as through their agency and mobilizations for justice and equity. More AAPI history is unfolding with more shared narratives that were previously dismissed, disregarded or shortchanged. As the single, lonely paragraph about AAPI in a history book is in the rearview mirror, the future course that drives authentic change will be in the hands of school leaders and educators to fill the pages of history books with the hidden histories among Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiians with purpose, intention, and collaboration. With the policies implemented in K-12 schools, it is important for teachers, administrators, staff and community leaders to note that this is an opportunity to do more than just meet federal and state policy requirements. It is imperative to support teachers in their work to address attrition and promote retention (Kim & Cooc, 2021). Much like how progressive educators in higher education believe that “another university is possible,” we also believe that another, more democratic public education is possible and we are continuing to support those positioned at the front lines of this work—the teachers.

References

- AB 331, California Legislature, Reg. Sess. (Calif. 2020). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB331
- Association of Asian American Studies. (2023, July 18). *Asian American Studies Programs & Centers*. <https://aaastudies.org/>
- Burns, J. C., Cooke, D. Y. & Schweidler, C. (2011). A short guide to community based participatory action research: A community research lab guide. Advancement Project. Editors: Bonilla, T. & Farris, T. (Eds.). Los Angeles, California.
- Choi, S., & Lee, S. W. (2020). Enhancing teacher self-efficacy in multicultural classrooms and school climate: The role of professional development in multicultural education in the United States and South Korea. *AERA Open*. doi:10.1177/2332858420973574
- Committee of 100. (2022, September 12). *Committee of 100 publishes new research on the status of K-12 AAPI curriculum adoption across the United States*. https://www.committee100.org/press_release/committee-of-100-publishes-new-research-on-the-status-of-k-12-aapi-curriculum-adoption-across-the-united-states/
- Committee of 100. (2022, September 12). *K-12 Asian American and Pacific Islander and ethnic studies in the United States*. <https://www.committee100.org/initiatives/aapi-curriculum-project/>
- Cruz, R. A., Manchanda, S, Firestone, A. R., & Rodl, J. E. (2020). An examination of teachers’ culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 43(3), 197-214. doi:10.1177/0888406419875194
- Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127-

166. doi:10.3102/0002831216677002
- Kim, G. M., & Cooc, N. (2021). Recruiting and retaining Asian American and Pacific Islander teachers. *Urban Review*, 53, 193–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00571-1>
- Kolluri, S., & Edwards, L. (2022). Ethnic studies: From counternarrative to curriculum. *Urban Review*, 55(1), 50-69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-022-00640-7>
- Minkler, M. (2012). *Community organizing and community building for health and welfare* (3rd ed.). Rutgers University Press.
- Stop AAPI Hate. (2023, June 8). *Data and research*. <https://stopaapihate.org/>
- Wray, E., Sharma, U., & Subban, P. (2022). Factors influencing teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education: A systematic literature review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103800>