



# An educator's guide to equity for Asian American and Pacific Islander people

BY VIRGINIA NGUYEN AND STACY YUNG

**T**ake a moment to reflect on your knowledge of Asian American and Pacific Islander people and their contributions to history.

Can you list three or more famous Asian American and Pacific Islander people and their contributions? Now, can you list three more? Compare that to your knowledge of white men. Most of us can list six famous white men and their contributions far more easily.

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing American population (Budiman

& Ruiz, 2021), covering more than 20 ethnicities and 20 million citizens. Yet their contributions to the U.S. and the world are often left out of school curricula and cultural consciousness. Asian American and Pacific Islander people commonly report feeling invisible and considered perpetual foreigners in the United States. Where does that leave us in efforts to build educational equity and in educators' commitment to antiracism?

As Asian American women and history teachers, we feel a responsibility

to advocate for our community by helping educators improve representation of Asian American and Pacific Islander people and fight racism against the community. This need has never felt more urgent in the wake of the murders of eight people in Atlanta, Georgia, six of whom — Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, and Yong Ae Yue — were of Asian descent. This horrific incidence of violence brought attention to the anti-Asian hate the Asian American and Pacific Islander

community has been facing since the start of COVID-19.

In response, we began hosting #STOPAAPIHATE Educator workshops, sharing lesson plans, and creating resources to empower educators with tools to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities that build allyship and challenge stereotypes about Asian American and Pacific Islander people.

## **UNDERSTANDING ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER EXPERIENCES**

Asian American and Pacific Islander people are often called the “model minority,” declared exemplars of upward mobility in American society. In fact, we are diverse people with diverse cultures, histories, and experiences. This model minority myth has been used to drive a wedge between Asian American and Pacific Islander people and other marginalized communities, but like many of our fellow Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, we face challenges that include discriminatory hiring practices, high poverty rates, mental illness, abuse, and lack of resources and power. We are only given access to white spaces and allowed proximity to whiteness when it is convenient and beneficial to the white-dominated status quo.

Also like members of other minoritized groups, we face racism. In recent decades, racism and discrimination against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community have mostly surfaced as daily microaggressions. Yellow peril, model minority myth, perpetual foreigner, these are a few of the harmful stereotypes that come up in our daily interactions.

Now, though, we also fear verbal and physical assaults. Since March 2020, when COVID-19 became news in the United States, anti-Asian racism and violent attacks have spiked an alarming 150% (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021). Amid a year that has a list of ongoing loss and sadness, we face hate crimes, racial slurs, and jokes about the “kung flu” or “China virus.” In May, President Biden signed a bill addressing the proliferation of assaults and other violent crimes against Asian Americans, but there is much more work to do.

The murders in Atlanta and the shooting at an Indianapolis, Indiana, FedEx facility that killed members of the Sikh community were just some of the examples of violence and racism. We have experienced verbal attacks ourselves. Members of our community commonly express fear, sadness, anger, rage, loneliness, trauma, and depression.

We know that our students are experiencing these feelings and traumas. As teachers in a district with almost 50% Asian Pacific Islander Desi American student population (Education Data Partnership, 2021), our advocacy has resonated with many. Inspired by our participation in a town hall-style discussion about anti-Asian hate in Irvine, California, students have felt compelled to share with us their experiences as Asian American and Pacific Islander students.

For example, in early May, two high school students shared their experience of being Asian American students in an almost two-hour long interview. The interview started with the question, “What is it like to be an Asian American and Pacific Islander

student?” Both students said that they had never been asked to talk about their identity. They talked about feeling invisible, scared, facing racism, and wanting to be seen as more than the stereotype of being good at math or being associated with the Vietnam War.

After the conversation, one of the students immediately emailed, “I feel so full inside. My chest is bursting with energy. I feel so, so heard and seen. I am so excited — I went downstairs and spilled my juice because my hands were shaking so much.”

They expressed appreciation for the conversation and declared it one of their most meaningful experiences as students. It left them feeling inspired and empowered to do more for their Asian American and Pacific Islander community and other minoritized people. This interview moved us as well.

It was disappointing to hear they were facing similar struggles we had when we were kids. They rarely learned about Asian American and Pacific Islander history, they faced the challenge of being considered the “model minority”, and they yearned for more Asian American and Pacific Islander stories in their schooling. It was also powerful hearing these two young women reflecting on their experiences and building community together.

## **LEARN AND TEACH ABOUT THE COMMUNITY**

In our work, we encourage educators to teach about Asian American and Pacific Islander history. Represent our history and stories in your curriculum alongside others in America, including our stories of racism. Since as early as the 1800s, Asian Americans have faced hate and

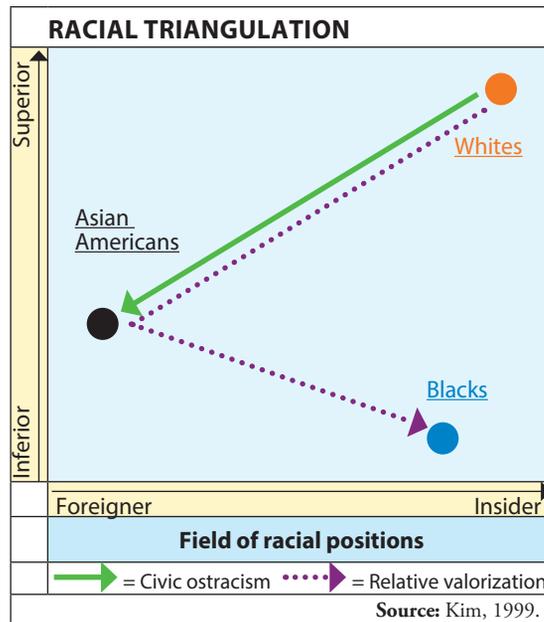
violence, including examples like the Rock Springs massacre in 1885, the 1886 Seattle riots, the mass lynching of 19 Chinese immigrants in 1871 in Los Angeles, California, and the 1982 killing of Vincent Chin in Highland Park, Michigan.

Our students must be taught this history alongside the history of violence against the Black community, Latinx community, Indigenous peoples, women, and LGBTQ+ communities. This inclusive teaching will help combat the way that white supremacy divides Asian American and Pacific Islander people from other marginalized communities of Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.

According to Claire Kim’s (1999) racial triangulation theory, Asians are viewed differently than both whites and Blacks along two different dimensions. On the “relative valorization” dimension, Asians are viewed as superior to Blacks but inferior to whites. On the “civic ostracism” dimensions, they are viewed as outsiders, whereas Blacks are viewed as insiders. (See figure above.) These superior-yet-inferior stereotypes help to fuel the “model minority” myth (Xu & Lee, 2013), and they also divide Asians from Black people and other marginalized groups, limiting the potential for solidarity.

The history of Asian American and Pacific Islander people should be taught as part of the wider story of racism in America. One example of what we do in our history classes is how we teach the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The xenophobia experienced by Chinese immigrants in the 1800s is taught alongside U.S. immigration policy today. Learners are assigned primary sources of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and current immigration policies to examine.

Learners examine these sources and respond to open-ended questions such as “What do you see, think, wonder?” This invites learners to make



observations, make connections, and ask questions. Opportunities such as these connect the lived experiences of multiple marginalized communities into a shared experience that can help unite us. The goal is to acknowledge the shared humanity in us all.

Of course, educating about Asian American and Pacific Islander history and experience should not only center on experiences where Asians and Asian Americans are victims. It should also include joy. Highlighting Asian American and Pacific Islander achievements builds deeper understanding and centers on contributions.

One resource for doing so is our *Little People, Big Dreams* book proposal lesson plan. This lesson is adaptable for grades 3 and up. Teachers assign students a project in which they research the contributions of Asian American and Pacific Islander people and write a book proposal. We use the book series *Little People, Big Dreams*, in which young children discover the lives of outstanding people, artists, scientists, activists, etc., as the model for our end product.

Together, learners explore Asian American and Pacific Islander achievements and contributions, choose an Asian American and Pacific Islander

person to become an expert on, and write a convincing book proposal for their book.

For example, learners might be introduced to Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress who later sought a presidential nomination (Alexander, n.d.), and Dr. Feng-Shan Ho, who saved Jews in Austria by issuing visas to fleeing Jews against the orders of his superiors (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.).

This lesson has flexibility with where the teacher would like to take it. It can end with learners sharing their book proposals in small groups and having fellow learners provide feedback. Some teachers may be inspired to have

the students take the next step and create their book, ending with a book fair in which learners can present, teach, and learn about the contributions of Asian American and Pacific Islander people. The lesson can also be expanded to include other outstanding people from minoritized communities and their contributions.

Here are some other ways we recommend learning and teaching about the Asian American and Pacific Islander community:

- Host a community viewing and discussion of Asian Americans streaming on PBS: [www.pbs.org/show/asian-americans/](http://www.pbs.org/show/asian-americans/)
- Invite your school or district community (educators and families) to read and discuss one or a combination of the following Asian American and Pacific Islander community experiences:
  - Amanda Nguyen’s interview on NowThisNews: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TijyKX30VAA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TijyKX30VAA)
  - *We Are Not a Stereotype: Breaking Down Asian Pacific American Bias*: [smithsonianapa.org/learn/not-a-stereotype/](http://smithsonianapa.org/learn/not-a-stereotype/)
  - “The long history of U.S. racism against Asian Americans,

from 'yellow peril' to 'model minority': theconversation.com/the-long-history-of-us-racism-against-asian-americans-from-yellow-peril-to-model-minority-to-the-chinese-virus-135793

- "America's long history of scapegoating its Asian citizens": www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/asian-american-racism-covid
- "The Atlanta shootings fit into a long legacy of Anti-Asian violence in America": time.com/5947723/atlanta-shootings-anti-asian-violence-america/
- Download unit and lesson plans, books, articles, videos, podcasts, and other resources about the Asian American history and experience from our website: linktr.ee/edu\_to\_empower

## EMPOWER THE COMMUNITY

Create opportunities and encourage your Asian American and Pacific Islander community to speak their truth. Invite all community members to learn from the lived experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander family, friends, classmates, and educators. Demand representation to break the common stereotype of Asian American and Pacific Islander people being invisible, unworthy of attention, and not having leadership capacity.

- Send a letter to your district, school, grade-level, or subject team. Find a template to get you started at: linktr.ee/edu\_to\_empower
- Invite Asian American and Pacific Islander community members to a community meeting dedicated to sharing their experiences, hopes, and wishes for the school or district.
- Examine the school curriculum and look for opportunities to engage students in Asian American and Pacific Islander

history, art, and culture. Highlight Asian American and Pacific Islander contributions and achievements: www.zinnedproject.org/materials/asian-americans-and-moments-in-peoples-history/

- Create leadership development programs targeted towards Asian American and Pacific Islander people at all levels: student, educator, parent.
- Include Asian American and Pacific Islander experiences in your antiracism and diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning.

## COMMIT TO ANTIRACISM

As K-12 educators, you have the power to shape the definition of American. Through who and what you teach, our students form an understanding of America and what it is. You can make changes in your classrooms, schools, and districts to include the Asian American and Pacific Islander community's history and lived experiences.

Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. We end our call to action with the following quote from the inspiring Grace Lee Boggs: "You cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it" (Harewood & Keefer, 2009).

Continue to learn and reflect on how best to serve the Asian American and Pacific Islander community. The following resources are an ongoing curated collection of lived experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander people and ways in which to support the community. Find more resources at linktr.ee/edu\_to\_empower.

- Resources that highlight the history and experiences of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community as well as unit plans and lessons for teachers: wakelet.com/@edu\_to\_empower

- Anti-Asian Violence Resources: anti-asianviolenceresources.carrd.co/
- "Mari Matsuda: Critical Race Theory is not Anti-Asian": reappropriate.co/2021/03/mari-matsuda-critical-race-theory-is-not-anti-asian/

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