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# Asian American Teachers in Predominantly White Education Systems

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Asian American Teachers in Predominantly White Education Systems

Candis Lee Eckert

Spring 2019

University of Washington Tacoma

Supervisory Committee:

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### **Abstract**

In the current teacher retention crisis across the nation, Asian American teachers face an additional set of challenges around racism and stereotypes. This study explored how four Asian American elementary teachers viewed racism based on their upbringing as well as their experiences with racism in the teaching profession. The findings focused on six themes that exemplified how their perspectives shaped their abilities to not only identify racism in their workplaces but also how it impacted their retention. The six themes that were identified are: Asian American culture and work ethic; perceptions around racism connected to childhood neighborhoods; Anglicization of names; navigating Whiteness in teaching; fighting racism in education; outlying experiences. Recommendations address potential changes needed in teacher certification programs as well as the public K-12 system. These recommendations include support cohorts for teachers of color and continuous anti-racist trainings and curricula across the K-12 school system and teacher certification programs.

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### Overview

In the United States, the difficulty in retaining teachers has been an ongoing issue (Kohli, 2018). While teacher retention is an issue across the nation for many schools and districts, there are specific challenges around race and identity that Asian American teachers face in a profession comprised primarily of White women (Pang, 2009). The challenges that Asian American teachers face are only recently beginning to emerge in literature as a separate entity from teachers of color as a whole (Ramanathan, 2006).

The focus on Asian American teachers in this study stemmed from various reasons. First, there is already a sparse population of Asian American teachers, disproportionate to the rapidly growing number of Asian American students in the K-12 system (Lee, 2009). In order to create a teacher workforce that mirrors the Asian American student population, there needs to be more Asian American teachers that both enter and stay in the field (Menon & Gyagenda, 2016). Second, Asian American teachers who stay in the profession reported how stereotypes displayed from White colleagues added pressure to uphold the projected racialized image (Kiang et al., 2016). These stereotypes include perceptions of Asian Americans being model minorities and perpetual foreigners (Kiang et al., 2016). Asian American teachers reported that racism and racial microaggressions from White individuals diminished their identities and ultimately influenced their decision to leave the teaching profession altogether (Endo, 2015).

This study highlights the stories of four Asian American teachers affiliated with the public elementary school system in Washington State. They shared their childhood and cultural upbringing, and how these experiences shaped their initial perceptions around race and racism. They then shared their own experiences with racism in the teaching profession and how that

influenced their retention in the field. Recommendations in the study address potential changes needed in teacher certification programs as well as the public K-12 system.

### **Critical Race Theory and Asian Critical Framework**

Critical Race Theory and Asian Critical Framework were two theoretical frameworks used to frame this study. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that developed out of legal scholarship in response to the unwillingness of the legal field to meaningfully respond to the role of race and racism (Kohli, 2016). It is utilized as a theoretical lens to observe how dominant systems of racial oppression shape the lives of people of color (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). In CRT, the concept of racism is beyond prejudice and discrimination of racial groups (Delgado et al., 2017). Rather, racism is a means by which society allots privilege and status (Delgado et al., 2017). Privilege and status is distributed through a racial hierarchy with working-class White individuals ranked at the top and people of color at the bottom (Zamudio et al., 2010). Essentially, these racial hierarchies determine who gets the opportunities and benefits in life (Delgado et al., 2017). Racial inequality arises from the economic, social, and legal differences that the dominant group of working-class White people create between races to maintain elite White interests (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In addition to CRT, the Asian Critical Framework (AsianCrit) was applied to this study. AsianCrit emerged from the recognition of a need for a conceptual framework that involves the racial realities of Asian American experiences (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). It intertwines the core philosophies of CRT, but is not intended to replace the tenets of CRT. Rather, AsianCrit implements both CRT and the existing knowledge of Asian American experiences to offer a unique set of tenets that can further contribute to the conversation around racism and Asian American identities (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Like CRT, AsianCrit centers on the effects of

racial oppression and hierarchal privilege but specifically for Asian Americans (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). AsianCrit also focuses heavily on Asian American identities within the social paradigm that race relations involve only the experiences of those who are White and Black (Kim, 1999). The following CRT and AsianCrit interdisciplinary tenets were used for this study:

*Racism as Normal* from CRT suggests that racism is a regular and permanent fixture of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) due to being historically engrained to the point where it appears normal (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The idea of White individuals being superior has been a longstanding notion due to the White population being the dominant racial group, which has shaped societal perceptions on race from a White lens (Matias et al., 2014). Privilege and opportunities have been and continue to be more readily available for working-class and elite White individuals, with fewer opportunities available for individuals of color (Delgado, et al., 2017). Some liberal stakeholders in the conversation around race argue that the United States is in a post-racial and colorblind era (Zamudio et al., 2010). According to this view, race no longer is considered and everyone is to receive equal treatment regardless of skin color (Matias et al., 2014). However, colorblindness fails to consider that the United States has been historically built on White norms, values, and culture (Zamudio et al., 2010). White people have created the institutions, authorized laws, systems, and leadership of the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Therefore, when society works through a colorblind lens, it sees White rather than color-neutral since Whiteness has historically been the default cultural standard (Zamudio et al., 2010).

The education system in the United States similarly continues to work in favor of the White population. Rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board* paved the way for the idea of racism being a normal fixture in the education system (Delgado et al., 2017). The segregation of schools enforced the idea that White people were superior and educational



opportunities were not equal based on race (Zamudio et al., 2010). Even with the desegregation of schools, these beliefs persisted and are still evident today (Matias et al., 2014). The diversity of the teacher population has not shifted drastically from being predominantly White, and the curriculum used in schools still highlights a distorted glorification of White history and culture (Matias et al., 2014). Schools that promote a colorblind culture ultimately ignore the experiences of individuals of color in an attempt to create an equal playing field, which results in further highlighting the default White values (Zamudio et al., 2010).

In addition to racism as a permanent fixture in society, different racial groups are racially interpreted through a White perspective (Delgado et al., 2017). The tenets of *Differential Racialization* from CRT and *Asianization* from AsianCrit center on the idea that racial groups are categorized and treated in disparate ways according to how society defines them (Delgado et al., 2017), and the same racial group can also be racialized depending on the situation (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Similarly, the tenet of *Transnational Context* refers to the importance of historical contexts for Asian Americans and the shaping of societal perceptions on their identities (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). In order to understand how racism shapes Asian American experiences, there needs to be critical analyses of how historical processes within the United States shape current conditions (Chang, 1999). For instance, the question, “Where are you from?” is often encountered by Asian Americans and stems from a historical perception that Asian Americans are not a legitimate part of the country (Lu, & Wong, 2013). Through the AsianCrit tenet of *(Re)Constructive History*, the consequences of these stereotypes are viewed as a contributing factor to the exclusion of Asian Americans in the work towards societal change. Instead of being included as participants in the conversations around race, Asian Americans are perceived as outcasts who are unable to assimilate to the dominant White culture (Chang, 1999).

In addition, within AsianCrit, there is recognition that the labeling of Asian American is monolithic and erases the various differences and uniqueness of multiple ethnicities (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). There are over 40 countries in the continent of Asia and even more ethnicities than there are countries (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence, 2018). This does not include the multiple Pacific Islander ethnicities that are also often lumped into the Asian American racial group. The labeling of Asian American is too broad to recognize and honor all ethnicities that are grouped into this category (Kim, 1999). For the purposes of this study, the term Asian American was used because all participants self-identified as Asian American. Participants believed recognition of their ancestral roots originating in East and Southeast Asia was important to their identities. They shared how they were not only Asian based on their familial roots but also American based on their birth origin in the United States. Thus the categorization of being Asian American was their preferred terminology. However, that this label is extremely limiting is recognized as a study limitation.

To combat the ignorance of Asian American experiences, *Counter Storytelling* from CRT is a powerful tool to challenge the dominant White narratives. Counter storytelling aims to expose how White privilege reinforces unequal relations between White individuals and people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It is a method of sharing the stories of people whose experiences are often untold and stand in opposition to the narratives of the majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through racism, the Black-White binary, and stereotypes, Asian American voices are often ignored or deemed as irrelevant (Chang, 1999). Counter storytelling allows Asian Americans to name the discrimination they face and attempt to begin a process of correction in the dominant system of beliefs (Delgado et al., 2017). The findings of this study thus share the stories of four Asian American teachers.

## **Literature Review**

The outlined CRT and AsianCrit tenets were used as a framework to observe how the experiences of Asian American teachers in a predominantly White profession (both demographically and structurally) affected their retention in the field. To provide context for the purpose of this study, the following core topics are outlined in this section to further frame the findings: teacher of color recruitment, Asian American teacher recruitment, teacher retention in the United States, teacher of color retention, Asian American teacher retention, and Asian Americans in a Black-White Binary. Retention on a national scale was reviewed to observe national trends that are impacting the teaching population as a whole. The retention of teachers of color was reviewed in order to differentiate the additional challenges that teachers of color face. Recognizing that the teachers of color demographic was still extremely broad, Asian American teacher retention was also reviewed to observe the challenges that Asian Americans specifically faced. In addition, the majority of participants shared how they felt invisible in a predominantly White system. To further gain insight into their feelings of invisibility, further literature was reviewed to explore the Black-White binary and how Asian American identities are diminished. Lastly, because one of the participants identified as multiracial, specifically Asian and White, additional literature was reviewed to highlight how their experiences were different than the rest of the participants.

### **Teacher of Color Recruitment in the United States**

Because this study focuses on the experiences of teachers of color rather than those of White teachers, teacher of color recruitment was researched to observe how many teachers of color are entering the profession in the first place. The number of teachers of color entering teacher certification programs is extremely minimal (Kohli, 2018). There predominant

contributing factor towards the difficulty in teacher of color recruitment is the fact that the majority of teacher certification programs are structured in a way that further promotes White privilege and White teachers (Chung & Harrison 2015). The students who are entering teacher certification programs are primarily younger, White, and middle-class (Matias & Liou, 2015). They also have the privileges of external support and resources, financial means, and additional time beyond coursework that many students of color do not have access to (Chung & Harrison, 2015). These factors are confirmed in the findings of this study.

Students of color who do not have access to external resources look towards other professions that may offer more financial and professional support which results in a smaller pool of teacher candidates of color (Robinson et al., 2003). For instance, due to the high demand of the STEM career field, there are additional financial and professional resources for students of color such as scholarships, professional support, and guarantees of higher paying jobs which teacher certification programs lack (McCoy et al., 2017). Economically disadvantaged students of color also tend to avoid teacher certification programs due to limited financial aid opportunities, costly commitments beyond tuition, and the anticipated smaller salary once they graduate (Robinson et al., 2010). The cultural pressures to look for more financially stable professions are confirmed through multiple stories that are told in this study.

Many traditional teacher certification programs also require additional time commitments beyond coursework in addition to the financial and academic obligations (Chung & Harrison, 2015). These programs require students to fulfill a student teaching practicum during school hours on a consistent basis (Chung & Harrison, 2015). Students are not only required to be present during traditional work hours but also provide their own means of transportation to these school sites (Robinson et al., 2010). There is little flexibility for non-academic commitments

such as full-time jobs or familial responsibilities (Chung & Harrison, 2015). Overall, the structure of teacher certification continues to promote White privilege, which is evident based on the demographic of students choosing teaching as a profession (Robinson et al., 2010). As a result, the White teacher population continues to stay dominant in the education field, and the teacher of color population continues to be minimized (Chung & Harrison, 2015).

### **Asian American Teacher Recruitment in the United States**

More specific than teacher of color recruitment, Asian American teacher recruitment was reviewed as many of the participants reported that they almost did not choose the teaching profession. Therefore, the difficulties of recruiting Asian Americans into the teaching field were explored. Like other teachers of color, the population of Asian American teachers is scarce to begin with and difficult to recruit into the teaching field. Asian American teachers only account for 2% of the total population of teachers in the United States, compared to 9% of Hispanic teachers and 7% of Black teachers (Taie & Goldring, 2017). In addition, the representation of American teachers is disproportionately smaller than the overall population of Asian Americans in the United States (United States Census, 2017). For instance, there are about 21.6 million Asian Americans in the United states (United States Census 2017), but only around 88,000 are currently in the teaching profession (Taie & Goldring, 2017). If there are minimal Asian American teachers to begin with in the field, then retaining them will also be a struggle (Nguyen-Lam & Alfonso, 2002). Therefore, while this study is focusing primarily on retention, the difficulty in recruitment needs to be observed to see the correlation to the impacts on retention.

In addition to the various reasons why it is difficult to recruit teachers of color in general, one explanation of the difficulty in recruiting Asian American teachers specifically stems from the idea of ethnic-enclave occupations. Ethnic-enclave is the idea that people from the same

racial group are more likely to cluster in occupations that have a long-term trajectory of being financially successful (Rong & Preissle, 1997). Engineering, computer sciences, medicine, and nursing are fields that more recently been identified as career fields that garner interest from the Asian American population due to the perception of higher status and well-paying salaries (Rong & Preissle, 1997). In some Asian cultures, teaching is viewed as a profession with fewer rewards and less prestige compared to other careers, which contributes to the smaller population of Asian Americans pursuing the field (Rong & Preissle, 1997). In addition to the idea of ethnic-enclave, pressure from first-generation family members to seek higher status positions also deter Asian Americans from choosing teaching as a promising career field (Brown, 2014). Many first-generation Asian families who have immigrated to the United States have had to start over financially, professionally, and academically (Brown, 2014). To avoid experiencing similar hardships, many first-generation families encourage their children to pursue high-power and high-paying careers, which does not reflect the field of teaching (Rong & Pressle, 1997). The minimal number of Asian Americans pursuing teaching is inevitably the first challenge towards their retention in the profession (Brown, 2014). Multiple participants share similar experiences of how their families echoed similar disapproval of the teaching profession due to the lower pay and prestige.

### **Teacher Retention in the United States**

This study not only focuses on the experiences of Asian American teachers but how these experiences impact the participants' retention in the teaching profession. Teacher retention on a national level was researched to compare the participants' experiences with the overall teaching population. On a national level, teacher retention in the United States has been an ongoing struggle for many school districts across the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). There

are many contributing factors to why current teachers leave the profession. One of the most significant factors affecting teacher retention is salary (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Numerous studies have shown evidence that salaries affect both teacher recruitment and retention (Lavonen, 2010). The overall low salaries of teachers compared to other professions contribute to the negative prestige of teaching which as a result affects both recruitment and retention in the profession (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). For instance, the national average starting teacher salary with a bachelor's degree in 2013 was \$38,490 and with a master's degree was \$45,240 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In stark contrast, the overall average salary for graduates with bachelor's degrees entering the work field in 2013 was \$45,000. Graduates with a bachelor's degree earned an average starting salary of \$66,123 in the STEM field and \$54,000 in the business field (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013). There is limited evidence to suggest this gap has closed since 2013. Teachers with a bachelor's degree are still earning well below the national salary average (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). To earn a salary even close to the national average, teachers must invest in more schooling and earn a graduate degree. Even then, their starting salaries are below other prominent job fields. Thus, many teachers are leaving the profession for other career paths that have a higher salary return (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

The working conditions of teachers is another factor that greatly affects teacher retention. Unrealistic time commitments, minimal support from administration, overall lack of support from students' families, and poor social perception of the teaching profession have shown to contribute to the burnout of teachers, which then affects retention (Buckley et al., 2005). In terms of unrealistic time commitments, many teachers have left their positions due to expectations of achieving extremely high levels of success while working beyond their

contracted hours of employment (Hewitt, 2009). For instance, many teachers were obligated to attend various departmental and district meetings and trainings outside of their work hours with no additional compensation (Simos, 2013). There was also an expectation that teachers were to work beyond the 8-hour school day to plan and prep for their classroom both before and after school (Hewitt, 2009). This contributed to rapid burnout and overburdening of current educators (Simos, 2013). Therefore, when the day-to-day became challenging, support from administration was critical to the retention of teachers (Hong, 2012). In several studies, teachers who felt most supported by their school administration and who had positive relationships with colleagues were more likely to be retained (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Higher levels of administrative support established stronger sense of efficacy in teachers (Hong, 2012). In addition, support from administration created a sense of a safer environment for teachers, which increased comfort in being able to confide and rely on the support of school administration (Hong, 2012). Teachers who were not given support by school management felt a lack of advocacy during challenging times and desired a new work environment (Lindqvist et al., 2016).

A lack of respect from students and families is another factor that influences a teacher's decision to leave the profession. Many teachers report that a negative relationship with the families of their students resulted in more difficulty navigating their jobs (Lindqvist et al., 2016). For instance, a lack of support from a student's family can result in more disagreements and hostile feelings around the teacher's capabilities (Lindqvist et al., 2016). The lack of support from families contributes to the overall climate around teachers and the prestige of the teaching profession. There is a present-day anti-teacher climate where the work of teachers is viewed with a minimal respect (Sedivy-Benton & Boden-McGill, 2012). Blame is easily pinned on the teacher rather than flaws in the education system and as a result, there is an increase in anxiety,



self-doubt, and confidence for teachers (Sedivy-Benton & Boden-McGill, 2012). Many teachers as a result search for other professions with less scrutiny (Simos, 2013). Overall, school environment and culture, supportive school leadership, relationships with families, and social perception of the teaching field are some of the many reasons why a teacher may leave the field (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014).

### **Teacher of Color Retention in the United States**

Once national teacher retention issues were observed, teacher of color retention was reviewed. All participants were teachers of color who shared different causes that impacted their retention. The teachers of color who are currently in the field face uniquely different obstacles as opposed to their White colleagues due to the added layers of racial inequity, which results in them leaving the profession at a higher rate (Kohli, 2018). These additional layers of obstacles are confirmed in the majority of stories told in the findings of this study. Surrounded by White teachers and confined to an education system rooted in White values, teachers of color are often pedagogically questioned, silenced, overlooked for advancement opportunities, and viewed less competently compared to their White peers (Dingus, 2008). With only 20% of the total teacher population identifying individuals of color (Taie & Goldring, 2017), the current voices speaking on behalf of educational change to stakeholders (such as administration, parents, and students) are primarily White (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). The voices of teachers of color are lost in this majority and as a result, teachers of color do not have as many opportunities to be stakeholders in critical conversations around change (Ramanathan, 2006). With fewer opportunities for contributions compared to their White colleagues, teachers of color do not feel valued or recognized amongst the dominant White voices (Pour-Khorshid, 2016) and are leaving the field at a rate 24% higher than White teachers (Ingersoll & May, 2016).

The lack of autonomy to implement curricula that better highlights the experiences of people of color is another reason why teachers of color are frustratingly leaving the field (Gorski, 2009). Because America and American culture was founded and established by White individuals, the education system still aligns with White interests (Matias et al., 2014). Whiteness and White culture permeates into many of the curricula used in schools, is then used as a tool for schools to maintain a White master script (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The cultural and historical experiences that both teachers and students of color bring do not align to the mainstream White education system (Ramanathan, 2006). Teachers are directed by administration to implement lessons that may exclude the historical and social context of individuals of color, which then creates a disconnect from the social reality of living in a diverse world (Matias et al., 2014). Even the more recent curriculum that attempts to highlight culturally responsive teaching is sometimes implemented through a colorblind lens, which loses the experiences of individuals of color in an attempt to create an equal playing field (Zamudio et al., 2010).

Minimal professional development and mentorship opportunities specifically for individuals of color is also a reason why teachers of color ultimately leave the profession (Gorski, 2009). Because many schools and districts in the United States are primarily White dominated, the need for mentorship, community, and professional development aligned with the experiences people of color is crucial (Gorski, 2009). Many will face hostile racial environments, and therefore teachers of color need the skills and support network to effectively navigate schools and enact change (Kohli, 2018). A safe space for discussions around inequity as well as structures to support and sustain the work of teachers of color are critical to maintain their retention in the profession (Kohli, 2018). Without these safe spaces, teachers of color

continue to feel isolated and unable to relate to the culture of their schools (Chung & Harrison, 2015). Overall, a dominant White workforce, curriculum aligned with White interests, and a lack of professional development opportunities are some of the prevalent factors that influence teachers of color retention (Au et al., 2016).

### **Asian American Teacher Retention in the United States**

While it is valuable to observe the retention issues for all teachers and even more specifically teachers of color, all participants in this study identified as Asian American. They shared how their challenges around racism and racial microaggressions added even more layers of obstacles that impacted their retention. For instance, Asian American teachers face constant racialization and stereotyping of their identities, which is identified as the primary and rampant reason for leaving the teaching profession (Kim, 1999). The most prevalent form of racialization that Asian American teachers face is around stereotypes of their character (Kim, 1999). Asian Americans are often viewed as both model minorities as well as permanent foreigners (Kim, 1999). The model minority image is often associated with academics and career professions (Chang & Demyan, 2007). Through a model minority lens, their White colleagues and colleagues of color view them as intelligent, persistent, hardworking, and successful in both school and the career field (Louie, 2004). Within the model minority lens, Asian Americans are viewed as quiet, respectful, and obedient (Kiang et al., 2016). While these attributes maybe considered positive, literature on the model minority stereotype warn of the destructive effects of a presumably affirmative image (Lee, 2009). As CRT postulates, racism stemmed from minority discourses gives individuals insufficient opportunities to be heard (Choi, 2014). For instance, due to the positive attributes affiliated with the model minority image of Asian Americans, they are sometimes hired as the token person of color even if their behavior may not align with the

model minority stereotype (Endo, 2015). The model minority stereotype also creates pressure for Asian American teachers to uphold a certain image, which can create unrealistic and inaccurate expectations (Wong & Halgin, 2006). These pressures can cause Asian American teachers to feel stressed and depressed, which ultimately influences their decision to leave the teaching profession (Pang, 2009).

In addition to the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans are also perceived as permanent foreigners who are unable to assimilate to American culture (Chang, 1999). Even Asian Americans whose families have been in the United States for generations experience such classification (Lee, 2005). Since Asian Americans are viewed as outsiders, they are often not included in the discussions around diversity issues in the United States (Lee, 2009). For example, one study showed that Asian American teachers were perceived to not be “American enough” (Subedi, 2008) to teach in American schools. Choi’s (2014) study also revealed how Asian American teachers were viewed to be unqualified to teach subjects such as social studies due to the assumption that they would never understand American history as a foreigner. As a result, Asian American teachers need to constantly prove themselves and their expertise (Goodwin et al., 1997). Thus, the constant expectation of upholding a specific image as well as the questioning of their expertise ultimately drives many Asian American teachers to leave the profession (Choi, 2014). Overall, the lack of Asian American teachers and the stereotypes imposed on Asian American teachers ultimately influence some to question and/or leave the teaching profession (Endo, 2015). This is confirmed for two of the participants that share their story in this study.

### **Asian Americans within a Black-White Binary**

The various challenges impacting the retention of Asian American teachers all stem from society's view of Asian American identities, which ultimately influences Asian American self-perceptions (Lee, 2009). In addition, Asian American identities and experiences are compared to those who are White and Black due to the paradigm of the Black-White binary, where race is perceived to be comprised exclusively of White and Black. Some research even speculates which side of the White/Black line Asian Americans fall (i.e., closer to Black or White) (Omi & Winant, 1994). As a result, Kim (1999) poses a theory of racial triangulation that explores how Asian Americans have been triangulated relative to White and Black individuals. Racial triangulation observes how Asian Americans continue to be confined in a Black/White discourse rather than being understood for their distinct ways and cultural context (Ng, et al., 2007). In addition, within racial triangulation, Asian Americans are deemed by White individuals to be the closest demographic to White but are not allowed the privileges (Kim, 1999). At the same time, Asian Americans are viewed above Black individuals in the racial hierarchy which creates a lack of belonging to the overall people of color demographic (Omi & Winant, 1994).

The Black-White binary also silences multiple racial configurations and the existence of different Asian identities. Multiracial Asians face similar levels of racial triangulation and hierarchy. Multiracial Asians whose identities are also White have dual minority status in the sense that they have certain accesses of privilege as a White individual as well as certain adversities as a person of color (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Some contributing factors to this dual minority status can be attributed to the phenomenological aspect of physical appearance (Root, 1997). Racialized identification from others through physical markers such as facial features, hair color, and skin color stem from historical issues around colorism where White features were viewed as the desired and dominant features (Root, 1997). In addition, when

bringing the concept of colorism in, multiracial White/Asian Americans may have even more access to privileges associated with being White when compared to darker skinned multiracial White/people of color due to lighter skin tones that are more closely affiliated with White skin tone (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

The Black-White binary does not allow for the huge range of what stereotypically fits within the term “Asian” and thus does not allow for multiple positionalities such as race, sexuality, gender, class, and other experiential identities. This binary further removes Asian American teachers and ultimately silences their voices and experiences in conversations around educational change (Lee, 2009). Overall, the Black-White binary further removes the voices of Asian American teachers by neither categorizing them as White nor as a demographic of color (Kim, 1999), which solidifies to their counterparts that their experiences hold no clout (Ng et al., 2007). As a result, those that stay in the teaching profession continue to be cast as interlopers, forever bouncing back and forth within the White/Black paradigm (Kim, 2004).

### **Research Methods**

The spark that peaked my interest and focus for this qualitative study stemmed from a conversation that I had with a student in April 2018. Aiko was a teacher candidate in her last year of her teaching certification journey. After attending a local teaching job fair, she visited my office feeling exasperated and in tears. Aiko explained how her feelings of excitement about prospective teaching positions were eliminated the minute she stepped foot through the banquet hall doors. Principals and assistant principals seemed to scan her up and down before dismissing Aiko completely. She soon observed prospective candidates around her receive on the spot interview offers or even letter of intents. She also observed how all of these prospective candidates were White. Aiko frustratingly shared how she felt burnt out by the teaching field

before she even became a part of it. She commented how she had always felt that Asians were an ignored race and she never felt more ignored than that day. Thus, began my focus on the experiences of Asian American teachers in to hopes to highlight their voices in a dominantly White career field.

My own identities also shaped this study. I identify as Asian American and more specifically, Korean American. Up until I entered my master's program, I was not sure of who I was or how I identified. Unlike my participants, I grew up in predominantly White communities in California, Louisiana, and Washington. My parents were aware that the White population was the dominant racial group and believed that White neighborhoods equated to more resources and overall safety. My parents encouraged adopting whatever seemed White or American and overall assimilating to White cultural norms. To my parents, being White and American were one in the same. Consistently surrounded by White people and encouraged to adopt White values, I began to perceive my identity as White rather than Asian or Korean. I tried to conceal any part of me that seemed Asian. My long dark hair was soon dyed to a light brown and my dark eyes were covered with colored contacts. I replaced speaking Korean for English. I awkwardly laughed along with my classmates as they cracked racist jokes. I believed that the more I tried to blend in with my White colleagues, the more White I would become. In the dark corners of my mind, I truly believed that Whiteness equated to happiness and some form of success.

It was around my master's program when I realized that my misery stemmed from my attempts at trying to drastically change who I was for the approval of White people, which I never could gain. It took another number of years to break down the false identity I created for myself and figure out who I was. I credit various Asian American mentors who I met in

adulthood that modeled and showed me how embrace my racial and ethnic identities. They brought to light the reality that White people would always hold more privilege over people of color, and that I did not have access to those privileges. More importantly, they helped me realize that race and ethnicity were not traits that could be changed and were permanently a part of who I was and am.

In addition to identifying as Asian American and Korean American, I also identify as a second generation child to immigrant parents. Both of my parents identify as Korean and were born and raised in Seoul, South Korea. My father believed that America held better opportunities for the future given the political climate in South Korea in the 1980s. To expedite the process of becoming a U.S. citizen, my father joined the U.S. Army knowing that he would be granted citizenship. My mother was granted U.S. citizenship shortly after through her spousal relation to my father. They laid their roots in Anaheim, California and opened a small sandwich restaurant. After I was born, my father accepted a less labor-intensive job for a company that was a materials supplier for a large hotel chain. Because of this new position, we bounced between various states, depending on what headquarter location he was needed.

As I grew older, my parents always emphasized the importance of education. As I approached my high school years, they knew that stability was important to best prepare me for college. As a result, when I was sixteen we laid permanent roots in Washington, a state they believed to hold a strong public education system. My parents once again became small business owners and owned various teriyaki restaurants around Western Washington. After graduating high school, I began my postsecondary education towards becoming a teacher by earning my bachelor's degree in early childhood education and my master's degree in K-8 education. When



I entered the teaching profession, I was starry-eyed and ready to make a difference in my students' lives.

What I was quickly faced with was the difficulty of navigating a microaggressive work environment in which I felt a great sense of isolation. Colleagues and administration were quick to throw around racist comments but slow to take the time to get to know who I was as an individual. The lack of relatability to another human being in an environment in which I spent the majority of my day was exhausting and isolating. When I began to continuously wake up with severe anxiety at the thought of the work day ahead and interacting with my colleagues, I knew that I finally hit my burnout level. After months of hoping these feelings would dissipate, I realized something needed to change. As a result, I ultimately left the teaching profession.

Currently, I am a faculty member for a bachelor's in teaching program at a professional technical 2-year college. I still feel the sense of aloofness from the lack of racial diversity and relatability but having the colleagues of color who understand and relate to my experiences has made a positive difference in my career outlook. While I was and continue to be surrounded by predominantly White people, I recognize that Korean Americans are an overrepresented group in the Asian American community (Espiritu, 1993) which serves as a limitation for this study as I am relatively privileged to be part of a largely represented ethnic subgroup of the Asian American population. I also am privileged compared to some of my participants who have experienced the effects of imperialism and war as I have not had these experiences. However, I can relate to study participants in that I am a second generation Asian American from an immigrant family. In addition, I also can relate to the majority of participants that I was typically the sole Asian American or person of color in the classroom and professional settings. The participants and I also parallel in the identities of being female and a woman. I fully recognize

that I will not fully understand the various and complex experiences of the four teachers interviewed for this study as I have not personally walked in their shoes, but I hope to center their experiences. I do recognize, however, that my own experiences put into context how complex the intersectionality of identities are for all participants involved.

### **Study Design**

Because the population of Asian American teachers in Washington is relatively small, I utilized a snowball and convenience sampling method to recruit Asian American teachers from various subgroups in Washington State. Recruitment strategies primarily consisted of word-of-mouth communication from one of the participants in this study, Rebekah Kim (pseudonym). The selection criteria for the study included: 1) self-identifies as Asian American, 2) current or former K-5 teacher (if a former teacher, must have left the field within 5 years), and 3) willingness to participate in the study. The focus on K-5 teachers stems from recent data suggesting that K-5 teachers leave the profession at a higher rate than middle and high school teachers (Goldring et al., 2014). In addition, I chose to interview both current and former teachers because those who left the teaching profession may have faced certain experiences that ultimately impacted their decisions to leave compared to those who chose to stay in the field.

A total of four female Asian American teachers agreed to be a part of this study and all narratives are included. The participants' self-identified ethnicities are: Korean, Vietnamese, multiracial (Vietnamese, Japanese, Indian) and multiracial (Caucasian, Korean, and Okinawan). They all identified as second-generation individuals whose families immigrated to the United States from an Asian country. Each participant presented diverse perspectives about their race and ethnicity and how intersectional oppression impacted their experiences as teachers. The table below outlines each participant's characteristics.

| Teacher name<br>(pseudonym) | Ethnicity                          | Age | Grade(s)<br>Taught                                  | School<br>Region | Years of<br>Teaching | Teaching?<br>Y/N |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|---|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Ashley Davis                | Caucasian,<br>Korean,<br>Okinawan  | 39  | 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> | Rural            | 9                    | Y                |
| Donna Huynh                 | Vietnamese                         | 40  | 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> ,<br>ELL          | Urban            | 11                   | Y                |
| Julie Luu                   | Vietnamese,<br>Japanese,<br>Indian | 29  | K, 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup>                | Urban            | 7                    | N                |
| Rebekah Kim                 | Korean                             | 32  | P, K, 3 <sup>rd</sup> ,<br>5 <sup>th</sup>          | Suburban         | 7                    | N                |

## Procedures

This qualitative study was conducted through snowball sampling, given the small number of Asian American teachers in the state of Washington. After completing institutional requirements and approvals for collecting data, I scheduled an initial interview with my first participant, Rebekah Kim, who was a colleague. The primary form of recruitment was through word of mouth starting from Rebekah. Rebekah identified Donna and Julie as potential participants. Donna was a colleague from Rebekah's undergraduate years and Julie was a friend. Ashley was referred by a friend of Donna's when Donna shared that she would be participating in this study. I reached out to Donna, Julie, and Ashley on Facebook and all prospective

participants agreed to participate in the study. Then, a time to meet in a public location was set up with each participant.

Once I met with each participant, I first introduced the following research questions as the foundation for the study:

1. What are the challenges that Asian American teachers experience in a White dominated system?
2. How do Asian American teachers attribute their experiences with racism to their retention as teachers?

I then detailed a description of the study to the participant, along with time and space for any questions the participant had. Once the participant agreed to be a part of the study, a consent form was signed by both the participant and me. A copy of this form was also emailed to the participant. Then, we began the first interview which lasted 60-90 minutes. Initial interview questions were adapted from Atkinson (1998), and included topics such as family, cultural setting, social factors, education, and work experiences. Interview questions also asked participants about experiences around racism such as, "Have you experienced racism after becoming a teacher?" and "How have others subtly expressed stereotypical beliefs about you?" (see Appendix 1). Follow up interviews were scheduled once the initial interview was finished. Follow up interviews allowed participants time to process their answers, add additional thoughts, and follow up with their previous statements (see Appendix 2). Follow up interviews lasted 30-60 minutes.

After follow-up interviews, the data was analyzed in three stages. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed through the online transcribing company, Rev. Transcriptions were prepared by the third-party company and were sent to me through a password protected account.

Then, I reviewed each prepared transcription to ensure that the transcription text accurately reflected the language, vocabulary, and voice of each participant. Finally, I organized transcription data into coded themes. I began with broader themes such as childhood experiences and cultural backgrounds and arranged transcription segments from all participants under parallel categories. Then, within these larger categories, I identified more specific themes and rearranged the data into the more specific themes. All participants noted that their early years shaped attributes such as their work aspects as well as their own perceptions around racism. In addition, some of the themes identified by the participants were around their adult identities as Asian Americans, teachers, and passionate advocates in the name of systemic change. Based on the participant interviews, six themes emerged from this analysis: perceptions around racism connected to childhood neighborhoods; Asian American culture and work ethic; Anglicization of names; navigating Whiteness in teaching; fighting racism in education; outlying experiences.

### **Limitations**

This study focuses on the experiences of four Asian American teachers who are either current or former K-5 public school teachers in Washington State. Middle school, high school, early childhood, private, and charter school teachers were represented in this study. Participants also identified as women and female. Thus, their experiences may not reflect Asian American teachers who do not identify as cis-gendered female. In addition, the interview questions posted to participants did not address topics around sexism or gender and as a result, these topics are not addressed in the findings. The participants all identified as second-generation individuals from immigrant families. They all shared experiences that may differ compared to first generation Asian American teachers who more recently immigrated to America or others who may not have

experienced the direct impacts of immigration. In addition, participants in this study racially identify as East or Southeast Asian, as well as multiracial. Within these racial subgroups, that there are various ethnicities from different cultures and not all were represented. Lastly, because this study only focuses on a small sample size of four Asian American teachers, many experiences were not represented in the study. However, a small sample size allowed for in-depth analyses of their stories as an application of CRT's tenet of storytelling.

### **Introducing the Participants**

In order to put each participant's story into context, it is important to introduce who they are not only as Asian American teachers but also as unique individuals.

#### **Rebekah Kim**

Rebekah Kim is a second generation, thirty-two-year-old woman who currently works for a private corporation as a trainer for new employees. Born to Korean immigrants, Rebekah was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Her father was a high school teacher and her mother was a nursing assistant in Korea. They chose to leave their well-paying and stable jobs and moved to America in the hopes of providing a better quality of education for their future child. Because their education was discounted in the U.S., Rebekah's parents could no longer pursue careers teaching and healthcare unless they attained more education. Financially, this was not doable for them. With limited career options that did not require additional education and training, Rebekah's parents opened a small deli mart instead. Owning a small business was no easy task as they were not only the owners but also the employees. They worked seven days a week for over ten hours a day. They continue to be small business owners today. Rebekah recalled living in an extremely racially diverse neighborhood that was comprised of primarily Asian and Hispanic communities. She would hear a blend of Spanish and Korean being spoken,

smell a mix of tamales and Peking duck, and see store signs in Vietnamese and English. She recalled thinking how her neighborhood was a beautiful melting pot of individuals from all backgrounds who were all working towards the common goal of achieving the American dream. Rebekah's childhood was what she described as simple. She was often biking down the street to a small tienda to use her weekly allowance on candy bars or playing catch with neighborhood kids. She remembered how everyone seemed to easily get along.

Because her childhood neighborhood was comprised of a wide array of people and languages, Rebekah stated how this was her rationale for not thinking about racism. However, when she moved to Washington State to pursue a bachelor's degree at a university, her perspective changed. She attended a large, predominantly White public university where the racial demographic was predominantly White. She felt the jolt of being pulled out of a diverse community into one where she quickly felt the strains of being minoritized. She recalled the first moment where she began thinking about the idea of her racial and ethnic identity:

I lived at home, so it was already hard enough to go out and meet new people. I tried to put myself out there whenever I could to meet new people and new friends. I didn't know anybody in Washington since my whole life was LA. There's all these clubs that had tables set up in the courtyard. And there's these two stands – Korean Students Association and Korean Students Union. So I walked over because I'm like, 'Hey, I'm Korean too!' Apparently, people joined KSU if they were like fresh off the boat Korean and joined KSA if they were known to be like banana Korean. You know, like *American* American. After talking to both booths, I could tell neither really thought I fit. I wasn't Korean enough but like I wasn't White enough. Next thing I know they're suggesting

some book club because I mentioned I liked reading. I walk over to the book club stand and it's just a bunch of hipster White kids talkin' about Dickinson or some other pretentious author like that. And one of the girls sitting their kinda snootily asked if I was familiar with the classic texts and I shrugged. And she freaking suggests that I go check out KSA or KSU! What the hell man! I'm not Korean enough, not American enough, and now I'm being told I have to go check out the two ethnic clubs I identify with – which again who rejected me - because that's all I am – Korean? Like all you see is Asian? Yea it sucked. I never thought about my race or like racism until that day.

Struggling with the desire to belong to her school community, Rebekah's pressures heightened as her parents pushed her to pursue a degree in engineering or pre-medicine in the hopes that she would attain a high-paying career. To ensure Rebekah stayed on track academically, her parents moved with her to Washington so that they could directly follow her studies. Rebekah instantly felt lost and overwhelmed. The sense of isolation on a large campus, coupled with continuous familial pressures to pursue a high paying career, pushed Rebekah to take a break from her undergraduate studies. She was shortly afterward diagnosed with depression which added additional layers of stress:

You don't talk about mental health in Korean culture. If you even mention the word 'depression' your parents think you're like loony and broken and they'll like shun you. 'Cause I self-diagnosed I had depression, I actually signed up for a depression study just to get officially diagnosed and free anti-depressants. We didn't have health insurance. My parents moved with me to Washington and opened a dry cleaning business. That doesn't exactly come with health insurance.



And I didn't want them to find out. I was just desperate. I need to regain control of my life so that's why I went to the study. And my parents still don't know. But it was like the best decision I made.

After getting the help she needed, Rebekah returned to school and decided to pursue the field of education based on the school credits she had earned thus far. Her parents were disappointed at first. They wanted her to pursue a high paying career. However, eventually her parents supported her decision because teaching is a well-respected career in Korea. Rebekah recalls focusing less on friends and more on her studies to just survive and graduate. In her studies, Rebekah realized how much she enjoyed supporting students. Thus began her journey towards teaching.

Overall, Rebekah shared that it was important to know these pieces of her life in order to understand her full story. Her diverse L.A. neighborhood, cultural upbringing, move to Washington, familial pressures, and academic struggles were all contributing factors that pointed her in the direction of the teaching profession. She stressed that in order for readers to understand why she left a profession she loved, they needed to know what life experiences shaped her into becoming a teacher in the first place and how these experiences shaped her lens of the world.

### **Donna Huynh**

Donna Huynh is a second-generation, forty-year-old woman who has been an elementary and ELL teacher for 11 years. Her parents were born and raised in Vietnam. They met and began dating while living in Vietnam. Her father ran from the Vietnam War and fled to the U.S. when he was twenty-one years old. Her mother stayed in Vietnam until she was around seventeen years of age and eventually joined her father in California. A few decades later,

Donna was soon born and their family moved to Washington State four years later. Donna's father obtained a job working for the railroads while her mother earned her certification to become a Pre-K teacher. Donna is the oldest of three; her two younger brothers are also pursuing the field of teaching and are in the process of completing their teaching certification programs. Her family is thus a family of educators. Growing up, Donna's family was what she described as a traditional Vietnamese family who also balanced non-traditional views:

My dad was very old-fashioned, so he's still very like a male patriarchal kind of family, but both my parents were like the typical Asian parents, where they were expecting us to be doctors or anything. They always left the question open-ended, like, 'Whatever you want to do.' Even when I was going through college they never asked me what I was going to major in or do anything. They just were kind of like, 'As long as you graduate and you get a job.' And so I was never pressured. The only time I felt pressured was probably because the school was like, 'You gotta declare a major.' And that's about it. But never from my own parents. We're not a very emotional family but I know that they're proud of me even if they don't say it, but they just so say it. That is the one thing I'm grateful for is that there was never really a lot of pressure. They're just like, "As long as you make a living and you can take care of yourself that's all that matters."

Donna and her family moved from California to a racially diverse neighborhood in Washington state. Her neighborhood was primarily comprised of Black, Hispanic, and Asian families. White individuals were in the minority. Her neighborhood had many children and she recalled everyone playing together. Neighbors would often hold potlucks with a large spread of food including everything from bánh mì to collard greens. When Donna entered the 5<sup>th</sup> grade,

her family moved to another neighborhood in Washington that was a predominantly White neighborhood which did not have the same welcoming environment. It was at this moment she recognized that she and her family stood out because no one looked like them. As Donna grew older, she began to wrestle with her own identity:

Like, I'm Asian American but I didn't fit in with the Vietnamese culture because they spoke a lot more fluent in Vietnamese than me. Like, you know, coming from Vietnam, they'll always be a lot more fluent. I mean I can speak Vietnamese better than my brothers, but I couldn't fit in. And then American culture. Like my brothers really loved American culture. Like, I don't really like mashed potatoes and all that, you know? American food, fast food, greasy ... There's so many things that they do from there that I didn't really like. Or even when I hung out with a friend who were White, like, gosh the way they talked to their parents made me really uncomfortable. They were so blunt. I mean, they wear shoes inside. And then I was weird so I took off my shoes but I was like, 'I feel really weird being in your bed with my shoes on.' Basically, friends and I were never the same. They didn't understand what I'm talking about, I didn't understand what they're talking about.

Donna viewed the shaping of her identity and her experiences as a student to be pivotal factors in becoming a teacher herself. She continued to grow an awareness around racism and the need for culturally responsive teachers during one instance in an art class:

I remember this one time at school. This is why I don't like art. We were coloring and the teacher had these baskets and there was one crayon that was glitter crayon. And I was obsessed with it 'cause I always wanted this crayon.

And so we were doing a project and I got to use it, but I know that when we were done, we needed to go put it away. I went to put it away and at the end of the day, I think somebody else used it, but they didn't clean up. And so, my teacher was yelling like, 'Who used this glitter crayon? Go clean it up. Put it away.' So everybody just assumed that it was me, because I always used it. But I was like, 'No, it wasn't me.' And she didn't think I understood what she was saying and then, she yelled at me. She screamed at me. And then I went to the bus stop crying. And then my ELL teacher caught me and said, 'Why are you crying?' And I told her about the broke crayon, and how my teacher didn't understand me.

Donna stated that there were more teachers in her lifetime that were like her art teacher than her ELL teacher. She felt her teachers were quick to judge her and put forth little effort to connect with her. Because she couldn't identify with the majority of her teachers growing up, she hoped to be that figure for the future generation.

### **Ashley Davis**

Ashley Davis is a second-generation, thirty-nine-year-old woman who has been teaching in the public K-5 education system for nine years. Ashley's father and mother grew up in an urban city in Washington and met in middle school. They got married right after their high school graduation. Neither of her parents obtained postsecondary degrees. Ashley's father joined the U.S. military and her mother found a career in the administrative and clerical career field. Despite Ashley's parents not pursuing higher education, they instilled in their children that postsecondary education was critical to obtaining successful careers.

Ashley's context is more complex than that of the other three participants, in part because her parents identify as multiracial. Her mother was born in Okinawa to an Okinawan mother and

a White father. Ashley's father was born in Korea to a Korean mother and a White father. She thus identifies as multiracial Caucasian, Korean, and Okinawan. She physically presents more White than she does Asian in terms of facial features, skin tone, and hair color. Features such as light brown hair, gold colored eyes, and double eyelids sets her features apart from the typical Asian features such as black hair, dark brown eyes, and mono-eyelids.

Ashley is the oldest of three children. Her younger sister is a thirty-two-year-old cosmetologist and her younger brother is a thirty-year-old engineer and Air-Force member. Ashley holds the highest level of education in her family with a master's degree. Her younger sister holds a cosmetology license and her younger brother has a bachelor's degree. Ashley is extremely close to her parents as well as her siblings. Regardless of their separate adult lives, Ashley and her family congregate regularly at their parents' home for regular family dinners, sports viewing parties, and game nights. Overall, she views her family as a close-knit American family with hints of Asian cultural influences. Growing up in a multiracial household, Ashley felt as though her exposure to Korean and Japanese cultures were surface level:

I feel like it's kind of a superficial cultural level, more like focusing on food and some holidays, like when you think about the Asian food and holidays. But primarily we were just always kind of thinking about being an American, living in America, having those rights and freedoms. You know, it was like a 'salad bowl' experience.

Ashley's childhood also consisted of many moves due to her father's service in the Air Force. She and her family primarily lived on base in military housing. She recalled that all of her neighborhoods on base diverse in terms of race. She could not recall a moment where she thought about or experienced racism:

So I lived in many different places. From with my grandparents, their first home was a mobile home, like a trailer, to living on base. Maybe every two to three years, we were moving to different places. We lived in Washington, California, or Utah. We lived in California twice, actually. When you're on base you don't really feel that different-ness, so to speak. When we were off base, I would say yes, there was more of that notice of, 'These people don't look like me. They don't reflect me.'

Growing up, Ashley knew from an early age that teaching was the career field she wanted to pursue:

When I was little, I wanted to be a teacher. I'd play school and all that stuff. And then I went to school and I got my bachelor's degree in English Literature 'cause I've always enjoyed reading and writing. And one of my best friends was overseas teaching English in South Korea. And she was like, 'I know you've always talked about being a teacher when we were younger. You should come out here and see if you would like it.' So I did and I realized, 'Oh, this is what I think I'm supposed to do.' So I came back and then I started the teaching program a few months after coming back to Washington.

Ashley's primary motivation for being a teacher was knowing that she would have an impact on the future generation. She stated that if she could leave the world a little better today than it was the day prior, she did her job. She credited this philosophy to her family who always encouraged her to make a positive impact on the world. She tries to instill these same values into her students as well.

**Julie Luu**

Julie Luu is a second generation, twenty-nine-year-old who has been a K-2 teacher for seven years. She is currently utilizing the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and is taking a leave of absence from teaching to focus on her health. She is undecided about whether she will return to the teaching profession at the end of her FMLA. Much of her indecision stems from earlier regrets of pursuing the teaching profession as it was not her original intended path. Julie identifies as multiracial – specifically Vietnamese, Japanese, and Indian. Julie’s mother grew up in Vietnam and then moved to Hawaii. She identifies as Japanese and Vietnamese. Julie’s father also identified as multiracial – specifically Vietnamese and Indian. Growing up in Hawaii, Julie recalls her family being close-knit:

I lived in the city. Five minutes away from Waikiki. But kind of in the inside streets, so it wasn't so busy like Waikiki is. So it was still pretty relaxed. We lived in a small apartment. I lived in a small two-bedroom apartment, with three generations. It was mom, dad, my sister and I, living in a small room, sleeping on the ground with a futon. My grandma and grandpa, they were the eldest. They had their own room. They had a nice bed. My uncle, he was like a wandering spirit. He ended up sleeping outside on the couch. He was always like ‘I'll sleep on the couch. I'm fine. I'm fine.’

While living in Hawaii, Julie was used to seeing the dominant race being Asian. Race was not something that crossed her mind because everyone around her looked like her. The possibility of being in the minority did not cross her mind until she moved to Washington for college. Her college years were also her first experiences with racism:

Asians dominate the islands. Hawaii was a melting pot of Asians so I didn't experience racism 'till college. I remember this one time going to Hawaii club

because my college's Hawaii Club was pretty big. We were talking about growing up in Hawaii and this one person raised his hand and said 'Yea this one time I had a teacher. He asked me a question and I answered. But when I answered I don't think I used the correct vocabulary or whatever, you know pigeon words, pigeon lingo. And the teacher was like 'Oh, are you stupid or something?'' Growing up in Hawaii, I think it is common for us to not have grown up with that kind of sophisticated vocabulary that people in the mainland might have. I think a lot of people from Hawaii struggle. I struggle too, feeling not good enough or stupid.

Julie's feelings of inadequacy made her realize how deeply she was struggling with internalized oppression. She stated that the experience in her college's Hawaii club was the beginning of a continuous cycle where she has questioned her skills and her worth. This influenced her career choices that ultimately led her to teaching. Julie struggled with familial expectations and pressures that she felt many Asian Americans faced. Her family had hopes of Julie pursuing a career with a higher paying salary which started her academic journey of pursuing nursing. She was well into nursing school when a mixture of self-doubt and an overall lack of interest in the field drove her to quit. Instead, she found a newfound interest in working with children. With this realization, Julie switched her academics towards teaching. Despite her successful entry into the teaching profession, Julie still questions whether she made the right choice. Without a doubt, she felt more happiness in teaching than she did in nursing. However, she still felt something was missing and frequently wonders about what other career paths he would have taken if she could do it all over again:



Teaching doesn't look as successful. When I grew up, my mom was like 'Be a nurse, doctor, lawyer. nurse, doctor, lawyer. Do something that is going to give you lots of money.' My family had other desires for me. My family still loves me for being a teacher. They're proud of me. Especially because I am getting paid better than if I were in Hawaii. It just wasn't the first route, not for myself or for my family. If I had the right mindset then I would want to try nursing again. I used to be in nursing school, though I don't care for the medical field, so maybe not.

Despite all participants sharing the commonality of being second-generation and Asian American educators, they all shared unique stories that have woven the tapestries of their life stories. Their childhood, cultural upbringing, and family dynamics played a large part in shaping their identities as individuals. These experiences have also shaped their identities as teachers and educators. Rebekah, Donna, Ashley, and Julie all grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods during their childhood. Growing up in racially diverse neighborhood was a positive memory for all participants, but they also recognized the privilege they have had to originally be unaware of racism. Ashley and Julie shared the common familial pressure of pursuing higher-paying careers, which both participants acknowledged was an influential factor in their career choices. Ashley and Donna also shared lingering feelings of self-doubt about whether they made the right choice when they decided to be teachers. Donna and Ashley didn't feel such familial pressures and instead chose teaching based on personal interests and happiness. Donna's drive towards becoming a teacher was a combination between a genuine love of supporting students as well as negative memories of unsupportive and culturally insensitive teachers. Ashley knew from an early age that she wanted to be a teacher, and this desire did not waver once she entered

adulthood. All participants all agreed that their childhoods and cultural upbringings influenced their perspective of the larger world in terms of racism and racial microaggressions.

### **Findings**

During the interviews, Rebekah and I had a sense of ease and trust because we were colleagues. She felt comfortable and excited to dive in right away and share her story. When I met with Ashley, there was a sense of nervousness and slight discomfort at first. She was unsure of how much to share and it took some initial relationship and trust building to get her to open up a bit more. She remained more reserved than the other participants throughout the multiple interviews. Donna and Julie, who I did not know before the interviews, immediately felt comfortable sharing the details of their stories, and it quickly felt as though we knew each other for a long time. Both Donna and Julie were just excited and grateful for a safe space to reflect and unpack their own experiences.

Through participant interviews, multiple themes emerged, including: perceptions around racism connected to childhood neighborhoods; Asian American culture and work ethic; Anglicization of names; navigating Whiteness in teaching; fighting racism in education; outlying experiences. These themes focus primarily on how childhood experiences framed the participants view of racism, the influence of culture on work ethic, experiences with racism as a teacher, and the impact racism has on retention in the teaching profession. In addition to these key themes, a few differences emerged and are addressed in a separate section. Ashley, who was the only candidate who identified a part of her identity as White, shared a differing perspective on experiencing racism compared to the other participants. Indeed, unlike the three other participants, who clarified racist treatment in detail, Ashley did not believe she experienced or

witnessed racism in her childhood or as a teacher. In what comes next, participants highlight their childhood, experiences with racism in teaching, and the impacts to their retention.

### **Perceptions around Racism Connected to Childhood Neighborhoods**

All participants revealed how their neighborhoods growing up shaped their awareness or lack of awareness around racism. Each participant shared how they grew up in neighborhoods where White individuals were in the numeric minority, ultimately creating a perception that the participants were a part of the majority world. However, the perception of being in the majority quickly shifted as the participants grew older and moved to more homogeneously White communities. It was the sense of being different than the larger community that sparked a deeper look into their own identities.

Ashley shared how her childhood neighborhoods were predominantly on military bases in multiple states. Her neighbors were from various racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Living on military bases and surrounded by diverse military families, Ashley felt as though topics around race and racism weren't on the forefront of her mind until adulthood since she was living in what she called a "melting-pot":

We were military, so you kind of had that military feel, where it's pretty diverse in the military. When you're on base you don't really feel that different-ness, so to speak.

However, it was the moments that Ashley was off-base that she grew a sense of awareness that she was a part of the minority in terms of race. When Ashley was off-base, she was immersed in predominantly White neighborhoods. In addition, she recalled a moment where her parents experienced racism at one point when they were running errands off-base. Instead of blaming the restaurant for the act of racism, she recalled her parents' race being the issue:

I remember when we were in Utah, where it is predominantly White and Mormons. When we were off base there was more of that notice of, 'These people don't look like me. They don't reflect me.' I didn't experience racism, but my parents did actually have an incident when they were in Utah and were refused to be seated in a restaurant because of their race. And that was in the mid '90's, so it wasn't even a long time ago.

Donna also viewed herself as a part of the majority until she was removed from a racially and culturally diverse environment. Her lively and warm old neighborhood was replaced by one where she felt unwelcome and out of place:

We lived in an apartment till right when I was around fifth grade. So, from first through fifth grade we lived in an apartment. The apartment had all sorts of kids playing there. So my neighbors were all different colors. I think we had Iranian kids next store. Every kid played together so it was great. But then when we moved into a house, and they were all White. Everybody was white. The street we lived in was like a dead end and it just happened to be, I think, mostly older retired people or just older white people. Then I didn't know neighbors very well.

The shift to a predominantly White community shattered many of Donna's early perceptions that the world was an equal place. Donna and her siblings went on and attended schools in their K-12 and postsecondary years that were also in close proximity to their predominantly White neighborhood. Her perspective of racism and the sense of being in the minority only continued to grow through multiple racist experiences in her community:

My brother was graduating and at graduation we had this one White lady who was trying to be nice, at least I thought she was, and then she just kept talking to us

and my mom. And then she asked my mom a really inappropriate question. She asked my mom like, 'Is there a reason why Japanese women always walk behind their husbands? Because my ex-husband's wife did that all the time.' And my mom looked at her like ... I don't think she understood the question but I was so angry. Like I had my fists balled up, ready to take her down at graduation. And my friend that was there, our close family friend, had to hold me down and tell her, 'We're not Japanese. We don't know.' And then we walked to another section and I was like, 'Why didn't you let me hit her? Why didn't you let me fight her?' And they're like, 'No one needs to get arrested today.' And I was like, 'But that was so inappropriate. Because then, later on, that lady showed up again and she was just like, 'Asian people are so little.' And blah, blah, blah. Eventually her husband showed up later and he was like, 'Stop talking to them.' And she was like, 'I'm so curious about their culture.' And I think he knew that she was not being appropriate so he was just like, 'Just stop talking to them.' He didn't apologize though.

Donna grew angrier at this White woman who ultimately still had the power to evoke anger years later. In addition to inaccurately assigning ethnic identity to her family, this White woman perpetuated racist stereotypes through an arrogant belief that she was simply learning about another culture. Donna noted that the most frustrating aspect of this experience was that this White woman was oblivious to her ignorance and saw no error in her comments.

Rebekah's childhood experiences closely mirrored Donna's in the sense that she also first grew up in a racially and culturally diverse neighborhood. She noted how it was a privilege to

not realize or think about being a minority group since her neighborhood was predominantly comprised of people of color:

I was born and raised in L.A. pretty much until I moved to Washington for college. And we grew up in the same neighborhood. Everyone in my neighborhood was like some form of Asian or Hispanic. It was like the best memory thinking of being a kid. I'd bike down to the tienda down the street, buy those watermelon lollipops covered in chili paste, bike back, and play with the neighborhood kids. And you know what's hilarious? A lot of my friends didn't speak English but somehow, we were all friends and played and got along. And that was my life. My schools were super diverse. Race wasn't something I really thought about until I was removed from that environment.

Rebekah's perception of race hammered into her when she moved to Washington for college. While she noted that Washington wasn't completely White, compared to her prior environment she felt an isolating sense of being different:

I mean don't get me wrong. Like I know Washington isn't like White White. Like there's Asians and Blacks and Latinos. But have you been to L.A.? At least where I grew up, you didn't really see White folks. And then I move up here for college and it's like 80 something percent White and the remaining 20 something percent is everyone else. Then the racism hit me like a truck. And all the White folks here are so passive about their racism! You know how many 'friends' I had here that would start off by saying 'No offense but...' Like bitch, you mean to offend me but you're trying to be polite about it. Like this one time, a no longer current friend and I were shopping, and she laughs when she saw me put on

something and said, 'No offense, but like you look super Asian wearing that.' Like bitch! First off, why's it bad too look 'super Asian?' And secondly you mean to offend me. Just because you put a no offense does not give you a free pass to say whatever the hell you want. It was a huge shock for me moving here. I never experienced racism I think up until that point. And I never got insulted for my race until I was surrounded by White people. It really made me think differently. Like this world isn't so great after all.

Like Donna, Rebekah shared a moment where a White person perpetuated stereotypes through the arrogant belief that framing racism with "no offense" actually meant no offense. Starting the dialogue with the phrase "no offense" was a way for White individuals to be racist in a passive aggressive way. Her former friend used the phrase when she commented that Rebekah looks "super Asian" based on articles of clothing. This was a racist framing of Asian being something bad.

Julie's neighborhood growing up was unlike Ashley, Donna, or Rebekah's but still shaped her perception of race and identity after she no longer was in the environment. Julie grew up in Hawaii, specifically Oahu, until she moved to Washington for college. While the other participants grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods, Julie's neighborhood was comprised primarily of many Asian ethnicities. However, similar to the other participants, Julie grew up feeling a sense of being a part of the majority. As a result, Julie didn't think about being different or being singled out for her race until she left this environment:

We were all different types of Asian, on the street. Were we different? When we moved into our townhouse I might have felt like, some of the other houses were a little bit older than ours. Sometimes I'd feel like we had a little more money

compared to the people living around us. That's about it. We weren't different in terms of race.

Similar to other participants, Julie's perception of her identity shifted when she moved to a predominantly White community:

There was one moment in college when we were walking around in this one city here, which I believe is a more Caucasian community. I was walking with my friends and their mom. We were walking and there were three guys, maybe just hit their twenties, three white boys sitting outside at a bar. We were walking, and this was my first experience with racism against me ever. One of the boys said "Ching, chong, wing, wong." Or something like that. I didn't, at the moment, recognize what was happening but as we were walking, my friends were upset. I asked them what was wrong, and they're like "That guy, what he just said that out loud." And when we looked at him, he was looking at us but his friends were looking away. So they knew what he had done. This was my first experience. And I didn't realize how to react. But it changed my outlook on things.

Similar to Donna and Rebekah, Julie was harassed with racism and perpetuated stereotypes. The White individuals in Julie's story mimicked what they believed to sound "Asian." Then, they hurled these slurs as an insult, as if there was something wrong or derogatory with Asian languages. Like Donna's offender, Julie's offenders felt the power and privilege to spew their racism without fear of consequence.

All participants shared how their earliest neighborhoods and childhood memories shaped their initial view of race and racism. All participants grew up in fairly diverse neighborhoods. All participants also shared how their perception of race shifted once they were removed from



such diverse neighborhoods. Rebekah, Julie, and Donna recalled how they realized they were actually in the minority once they moved to more homogeneously White neighborhoods. They also shared how their experiences with racism greatly increased once they were in these predominantly White communities. While Ashley shared that she didn't experience racism, she noted how she became more aware of the dominant White population when she was off military bases and in more homogeneous neighborhoods. Perhaps the most alarming commonality that emerged from this theme was how the majority of participants recalled memories of White people hurling racist remarks around being Asian. Donna, Rebekah, and Julie all shared very different accounts that had the same ending – White people who continuously harassed and perpetuated racism onto them. In addition, their stories showed how White people felt enough power and privilege to exert their racism without fear of any consequence or retaliation.

### **Asian American Culture and Work Ethic**

Another commonality that emerged from the participant interviews was around work ethic and the stereotypes they faced as teachers. All participants shared how their families instilled in them the concept that working hard was the only way to be successful. This commitment to work ethic stemmed from the difficult immigration journeys that their families navigated to provide better opportunities for the participants. These traits were passed onto the participants, influencing their roles as teachers.

Julie learned from her grandparents the importance of strong work ethic. Attributes such as being responsible and trying her best were skills that were crucial to be successful in life. Julie's family defined success as having a prestigious career, high levels of education, and a high paying salary. She credited her work ethic for her educational advancement and the doors that

opened with it. In turn, she noted that she tries to instill hard work ethic into her students so that they see the value of education:

Responsibility was something my Grandpa drilled into my brain. You need to be responsible for this, for that, in order to get far in life and make a good salary. Then, from my Grandma, and my family, always doing your best. Like literally everything you try to do, you do your best, which I've learned that's not something that people try to do. Because of this, I definitely feel the weight of the importance of education for my kiddos. Their values are in my hands and I'm responsible get them up to the next grade level. I'm preparing the next generation, so I teach them the same work ethic I got taught.

Ashley learned from her parents that without hard work and dedication, it was impossible to succeed. Similar to Donna's family, Ashley's family perceived success as having a prestigious career, high paying salary, and education advancement. The high expectations that she was held to were translated to her students. She believed that the traits and skills she inherited shaped her into a stronger teacher:

My parents taught me that it takes effort and things just aren't handed to you. And if you want something, that you need to work for it, and both of them did a pretty good job of showing me that. Things don't come easy all the time, but that doesn't mean you give up. You really have to work for what you want. I kind of got maybe the seriousness and maybe professional aspect from watching my dad. And I think maybe the friendliness from my mom, I would say. This translates to my kids too. They know that I'm there for them, and that I want them to do their best and I show them and shape them to see what hard work looks like. And that it's

okay if they make mistakes but they're learning from those mistakes. They know that I'm consistent and that I'm fair, and that I don't give everyone the same, but I give them what they need based on what they've shown me.

Donna also shared that her family taught her the importance of hard work, which she stated that she has tried to instill in her students:

I remember when I was young, my parents would tell me almost repeatedly, these are the three things I remember the most. 'You need to be respectful. You need to be responsible. You need to work hard.' They took a lot of pride in being people that can take care of themselves. That's really important to them.

Donna also saw her work-ethic as a double-edged sword, which has impacted her work negatively due to model minority stereotypes that she has faced as a teacher:

To my school, I'm a model minority. I'm the one that is a really hard worker and I feel like I get taken advantage of, especially through admin. Like this year we had like nine brand new teachers, like literally brand new. And what I didn't appreciate was, they were like 'You should go look after them.' And I'm like, 'I'm not even in the classroom anymore since I'm in ELL.' And this was a new role for me too that year so even if I used to be a teacher there, I was in a new role and I'm learning myself. And admin was like, 'Oh, you should just help them model this or you should help them do this.' And I'm like, 'Anybody else who is new in their role, you wouldn't put this on them. But you put this on me because I'm just so "good" at it.' I just didn't appreciate it. It happens a lot.

While she is proud of her hard work ethic, the high expectations and pressure from school administration became a downfall because her work ethic was translated into an opportunity to add additional work responsibilities to her load compared to White colleagues.

Rebekah similarly was taught from a young age that hard work equaled better opportunities for her future. Her parents continuously reminded her the hardship they faced to immigrate to America in the hopes of a better life. Her mother taught her that nothing in life comes for free and the price of success is quality work efforts. Like Donna, Rebekah viewed her work ethic as both a desired skill as well as a downfall for others to take advantage of her. For Rebekah, the constant expectation from her administrators to go the extra mile compared to her colleagues was a large influential factor of wiping her hands from the teaching field completely:

My mom and dad worked hard and I always witnessed it growing up. They immigrated here and opened a deli from nothing. And they always told me how it didn't happen overnight. It took a lot of sacrifice, hours of work, and dedication. They taught me that I needed to have the same outlook in life to be successful. So like I took this viewpoint with me when I started teaching. And my students really thrived as a result in my opinion. But my admin saw it as a golden opportunity to put more on my back I guess? Sorry, I don't mean to sound bitter, but when you see treatment be so different between colleagues, it's frustrating ya know! Like this one time, I was at full capacity in my class while my 3 colleagues had space in their classrooms for new students. But when a new student came, my principal put the kid in my class. And when I asked why, she was like 'Oh you're just so great with kids and I knew you could handle it.' So what? My colleagues aren't great with kids and they can't handle it? One kid

may not seem like a lot but when you're already up to 30 kids, every additional kid is additional hours of work. Or the time when my principal wanted me to create a multicultural night because I was 'just so amazing at my job.' It was always some fake compliment that translated to 'I know you'll do it because you have to work hard.' And I got sick of it.

All four participants were raised with the mindset that a hard work ethic equated to future success. In turn, they all tried to instill the same sense of work ethic into their students. Donna and Rebekah shared an additional layer of how their work ethic was seen as both their strength as well as an area for others to take advantage of them. They specifically identified how they were taken advantage of and experienced higher workloads compared to White colleagues.

### **Anglicization of Names**

Another critical theme that arose from the participant interviews was around the concept of names and their identities. Many of the participants shared how their names were Anglicized and corrected to fit White standards. They further shared how a White narrative and mispronunciation of their physical name shaped their personal view of who they were as individuals and as teachers.

Rebekah experienced how powerful her physical name was when she had been searching for teaching positions. This first experience created some hesitation around whether this was the right career path for her and ultimately foreshadowed her end decision to leave the teaching field:

You know based on my name, a lot of people would guess I'm Korean – Rebekah Kim. Kim is a pretty common Korean last name. But I had a name prior to this name when I used to be married. So when I was married once upon a time, I

married a White man and my name became Smith. And get this. So before I got married, I was applying for a bunch of teaching jobs after I got my certificate. And I kept hitting dead ends. Like not even a call for an interview. I happened to get married and changed my name within this job searching process. And mind you, I'm still applying for the same level positions. It's not like I'm applying for jobs out of my league. And when I started applying for jobs as Rebekah Smith, suddenly I'm getting all these calls. But when I showed up to the interviews, I would see everybody's eyebrows raised. Like someone with the last name Smith shouldn't look like me. Whether they meant it or not, it just shaped in my mind that there was some profiling of race based on name in the teaching career.

Rebekah couldn't help but question the sudden surge of her job interview requests. Nothing had changed on her resume except her last name. The increase of requests coupled with the physical reaction of surprise from various interview panels created a perception in Rebekah's eyes that the hiring committees were both expecting and desiring a White individual.

Similar to Rebekah, Donna experienced Anglicization of her own name on two different occasions. Earlier in her years as a student, Donna recalls a moment where her school community tried to dictate who she was, which ultimately made her question her own name:

In middle school, I went to the office to get my schedule change and the counselor who was White was like, 'Okay just give me your name.' And then I said, 'Oh my name is Donna Huynh.' He goes, 'Huh-yoon?' And I went, 'You mean Hwin?' 'Cause I was really confused, I thought he didn't hear me. And he does, 'Oh so no you mean Huh-yoon.' And I didn't say anything. And I'm like, is he tryna correct me? Or is this really my name? And it just threw me off. That day when I

went home and asked my mom, 'Is our last name pronounced Hwin or Huh-yoon?' And my mom is like, "Oh every word in the Vietnamese language is one syllable. So it's pronounced Hwin.' And I was like, okay. But I just remember being like, so stupid. Like, am I saying my own name wrong? And that really impacted me and after that, I never let people correct me again.

Disturbingly, her White counselor had enough power over Donna to make her question her own name. Rather than correct himself, her counselor tried to determine the final say by stating that his pronunciation was the correct way. While Donna hoped in that moment that this experience was a one-time experience, she had a similar experience of the dictation of her identity by a White person in her teaching certificate program. Donna's teaching certificate program was predominantly White in terms of students and staff. The only other Asian candidate and candidate of color quit the program early on. Donna questioned where the diversity was and how the homogenous group would impact the overall racially diverse K-12 student population. To Donna, she was not an individual in the program. Rather, she was the Asian face that had no individual identity in the eyes of her professors:

My professor mixed me up with this one Chinese girl a lot. I remember coming in dead tired and my professor kept saying 'Mandy. Mandy?' And I'm like, 'God where the fuck is Mandy? Can she just answer the question? I'm so tired!' And she was actually talking to me. And someone goes, 'Do you mean Donna?' And the professor goes, 'Oh that's Donna?' And I'm like, 'Why do you keep calling me Mandy? She quit the program a while ago.'

Once again, a White individual tried to dictate Donna's name. In this case, her professor completely erased Donna's identity by assuming she was another Asian student, one who had

quit a long time ago. Her professor was not even able to differentiate this change. Donna vowed that she wouldn't let this happen to her own students of color. While her experience in her teaching certificate program was not a positive one, she utilized her experiences to be the advocate that she longed for as a student.

Julie also shared an experience around the importance of names based on an experience she had as a teacher. This experience wasn't directed towards her, but rather one of her students. In her school, Julie had a colleague named Peter who identifies as a White male. Peter created a narrative for a student that was not their own:

There was this kiddo who was new. I was having a hard time saying his name but I was trying to practice it. I was telling Peter about it one day and he was like 'Oh, yeah. I just call her Jen.' You know, a shortened Anglicized name? And I was like 'But shouldn't you be practicing her full name, like how they say it?' And he was like 'No, it's harder.' I was like 'Ugh' because he was deciding for the kiddo what her name would be. But I didn't know how to explain to him at that moment that, that's not the right thing to do. That name and identity is so important and you want to try to put effort into saying their name, not Anglicize it. That's who they are. And you're a White person changing who they are.

While Julie didn't personally experience White washing of her own name, she viewed the impacts it had on the student who was referred as "Jen" by Peter for the remainder of the year. Even more concerning to Julie was the lack of understanding or recognition from Peter around impact of his actions. To Julie, having one's name reformed by a White individual was an extremely colonial form of racism, similar to what White settlers pushed upon Native Americans.



Ashley experienced questions around the connection to her name and identity as well at an early age. Ashley not only identified as multiracial but she also perceived her own identity to be Asian and White. Physically, she recognized that she neither looks fully White or fully Asian in the eyes of others.

I remember having teachers call out your name, and my name is a very White name, and I don't look fully White. So to have a very White name and then to be like, 'Oh, here,' I remember just shocked looks maybe? I don't think that's racism, maybe it is. And again, at the time, I didn't think anything of it. But when you start exploring as an adult and you think, maybe.

Similar to Rebekah, Ashley's name created a specific image of what she should look like, specifically in the eyes of White individuals. The shocked looks that Ashley and the rest of the participants experienced were due to the fact that they were affiliated with an Anglicized name despite their non-White appearance.

Ashley, Rebekah, Donna, and Julie all shared experiences where either their physical names or the names of their students were butchered by White individuals. Rebekah shared the blaring discrepancy in the number of job interview offers when she had a non-White sounding name compared to her married and more Anglicized name. Ashley similarly shared how her White sounding name was met with surprise when it was connected to her non-White physical features. Donna shared how she was continuously mistaken by her White professors for another Asian student despite that student no longer being in her teaching program. She also shared how a White teacher tried to dictate and tell her how her last name should be pronounced. Julie shared a similar dictation of the changing of one's name when she witnessed a colleague try to erase and replace a student's native name. Many participants also shared how they at one point

second-guessed who they were based on how a White individual dictated their name. Rebekah questioned whether her strengths and teaching skills mattered if she was merely judged initially by how her name sounded. Donna recalled how she had to ask her mother if they were the ones pronouncing their last name incorrectly because a White individual said so. Ashley wondered why she was met with looks of surprise when a teacher matched her to her own name. Julie felt shock at how a colleague could try to Anglicize a student's name and thereby erasing that child's true identity. All participants ended in agreement about the power of one's name and its connection to identity. They also shared how easily names could be changed, dictated, or influenced once a White voice took over.

### **Navigating Whiteness in Teaching**

All participants shared that they work in schools that are demographically diverse in terms of student population but predominantly White in terms of teachers and staff. Rebekah, Donna, and Julie all shared experiences with racism in the teaching profession within such white-dominated school systems.

Rebekah both experienced many racist instances, and observed her students experience racist incidents. After seven years and not seeing any improvements, she made the decision to ultimately leave the teaching field as a result of the continuous acts of racism in predominantly White spaces. Rebekah's own experiences involved fellow colleagues, the administration, and even parents:

Wow where to begin! Would you like me to start with my principal who always turned a blind eye when people said racial comments to me? Or the parents who comment on my English skills? Or putting me on the math committee because everyone thought I fit the Asian stereotype of being good at math. By the way, I

failed calculus in college. Where to begin...I truly don't mean to sound sarcastic but when you've had the ridiculous number of racist experiences that I've had in a singular school setting, you can't help but find the humor in it to survive. I had a colleague flat out call me the token non-White person so that the school could check that box off. I was alerting my principal about such comments eventually like once a month. But she would just say something like 'Oh I'm sure their intention wasn't that...' and that would be the end of the conversation. I had multiple parents walk in to parent teacher conferences, see me, and have a look of dread in their eyes until I open my mouth and they realize I speak perfect English. One parent even told me that my English was 'so perfect without an accent.' Like really? These things are still happening?

Rebekah was not the only recipient of these racist experiences. She observed her few students of color also receive similar treatment:

The town my school was in general is really white in the beginning of my time there, so a lot of students of color that came in, they would get microaggressive comments like...I still remember I had one kid, thank goodness he didn't understand a word of English, so he didn't know what was being said to him. He moved here from somewhere in South America and I think the first question he got asked by the teacher next door was, 'Are your parents farmers?' Then on the flip side, you see students of color like my black students who always say to the white students, 'Oh, I wish I had pretty blond hair like you.' And my White students would say, 'Yeah, I know' as if they knew they were somehow above my Black students. It was a pretty microaggressively charged environment. I tried to

be there for my students of color in the hopes that at least if they see me they would feel better. But even I couldn't last in the end.

What Rebekah found the most frustrating was the justification around these comments from the commentators or her administration. To her, the justification was trying to prove that her mentality was in the wrong and that all of the comments pushed upon her were correct:

Like I said, it's the 'no offense' comments that people said. Or my principal saying that someone didn't mean what they said. But she wasn't even there when it happened. So how could she know what that person meant to say or not say? You start to ask yourself if you're the crazy one or think maybe you're overreacting. And whether you're just supposed to take these comments, even though you don't see any White people getting these comments.

Rebekah stated there were multiple moments where she questioned if she was overreacting but realized that her moments of doubt were due internalized oppression. She stated how she tried to justify these acts for so long that she stopped believing in herself. Even more so, she no longer recognized who she was:

The day I quit, I didn't recognize myself. Maybe I was just a bad teacher. Maybe what everyone said about me was true, and I just had to accept it. Maybe there wasn't anything wrong with being a token. Or maybe it was okay that parents assumed English wasn't my first language. I started to do all these 'maybe's' in my head that I didn't know who I was anymore. I began to wonder if I was the person who all the White folks painted me to be. And whether I was in the wrong for pushing it.

The continuous trauma of being on the receiving end of racism not only impacted Rebekah's retention in the field but more importantly her sense of self-worth. Rebekah admitted that her justification of racism was her way of survival. Making excuses for the actions of her White colleagues softened the blow and gave her a false sense of security of safety. What further validated her justifications was the lack of acknowledgement and support from her administration. The moment Rebekah could no longer differentiate her justifications from reality was when she knew that she could not continue in such an unsafe environment.

Julie also was on the recipient of racism as a teacher despite her school community having a multiple language immersion programs. For many of these instances, she did not realize that she was the recipient of racism or microaggressions until reflecting afterwards. Even after her reflection, she couldn't help but second guess whether she was overreacting or if she was somehow in the wrong:

My colleague Pete actually got me my job at the school I was recently teaching at. I don't think he means to hurt me in any manner but, maybe? Anyways, we started working with each other - me as a reading specialist and he was an ELA specialist. And he would use an Asian accent sometimes around me. Maybe he didn't realize it? Or one day we were talking about his favorite movie Kung Pao and he didn't realize the movie is actually very racist. I'm like 'You know that movie's really racist, right?' And he's like 'No it isn't. That's my favorite movie.'

Similar to Rebekah, Julie found herself justifying the actions of her White colleague. She questioned whether she was overreacting when in reality, she was the recipient of racism. When she called out her colleague on his racist remarks, he disagreed. Julie recalled how his matter-of-fact disagreement to her calling him out made her ultimately second-guess herself. However, she

wasn't alone in these experiences. Some of her non-White colleagues as well as students of color also faced difficulties navigating a White education system:

This one wasn't a big conflict but it was still a microaggression. There was an assembly going on and there was this elderly woman and man. They were both White and they wanted to know how to get to the gym for the assembly. I said, 'Oh yeah, you just go down the stairs and take a right and go through the door and there's the gym for the assembly.' She commented, 'Oh yeah, that's what the Spanish lady in her cute little accent said.' Or another one was, I had a student – Niko. We were having a talk and she felt there was this specific girl who would always look at her and then look away. I think there were a few racist comments here and there from that girl. She felt like people in the school were looking at her differently because she was Black.

Again, Julie tried to justify a microaggressive experience by stating how it wasn't a "big" issue. By second guessing her own experiences with racism, Julie found herself questioning acts of racism she saw imposed on others as well.

Donna continued to feel the weight of the aftermath of continuously navigating White spaces, and it continued to add to her burnout in the field. She also observed her colleagues of color be on the recipient end of racism:

I guess where do I start? Like the year all the non-White teachers were grouped in the same grade level. Or when I became the ELL teacher, one of the comments I heard was that, 'Oh, she just became an ELL teacher because she speaks another language.' And I was like 'Wow that's misinformed.' Oh and when it was Black history month and the school couldn't see the value of celebrating it so we ended

up not doing anything for it. Or then I go into some teachers' classrooms and they're like 'Oh you're just really good at working with those Asian students because you're like them.' Or someone at work called me oriental and I finally just said, 'I'm not a ramen packet flavor, so if you're going to call me a name I'll let you call me Asian, but if you really want to, call me Vietnamese.'

Like Rebekah and Julie, Donna also not only experienced racism but also observed her students experience racism as well:

I would hate it when White teachers asked the ELL kids why their parents don't do something as if they know what their parents are thinking. They would be like, 'Well why didn't your parents give you this? Or why didn't your parents help you with your homework?' I'm like, 'Don't ask an eight-year-old that, they don't know. It's not their fault. It's not fair to them because they may not have the support. They don't have the language support at home.' It's that assumption like, 'Oh, their family sounds like that because they're these ethnic people.' That's what it is. It's just all the assumptions the White people in the school make about non-Whites.

Donna pointed out how the racist lens of her White colleagues negatively impacted not only Asian American teachers such as herself but also her students. Her White colleagues made largely inaccurate assumptions about support levels at home based solely on the students' racial and ethnic backgrounds. This not only impacted the level of support that was offered by the White teachers but also created negative assumptions of the students and their families.

Rebekah, Julie, and Donna also faced racism specifically around the stereotype that Asians are viewed as perpetual foreigners. Many of these experiences stemmed from

assumptions around their language skills and citizenship, despite the fact that all participants were born and raised in the U.S. and identified English as their first language. Donna for instance faced the perpetual foreigner stereotype during initial interactions with the parents in her class. Many have assumed she is a non-native English speaker or extremely young based on their projections of her physical appearance. More concerning, these traits were tied to her teaching:

I really, really love it when White parents look at me the first time, ‘What is she going to do with my kid at the end of the year?’ Some of them even told me, ‘Wow, I really didn't think my kid would learn so much from you. You're so young.’ Or they assume I speak a certain Asian language because I look Asian. Or they're surprised I speak English.

White parents made assumptions around Donna's English speaking skills before she spoke. They also attributed her English-speaking skills as well as their projection of her age to be contributing factors to her skills as a teacher. The fact that Donna was met with surprise at the end of the year based on how much her students learned showed that parents doubted her skills from the beginning.

Rebekah faced similar stereotypes during parent teacher conferences and reflected on how the appearance of being a foreigner was viewed as something negative to parents:

I got used to parents walking in during their first conference with a look of nervousness. But when I open my mouth and I start speaking, the relief that washed over their face was almost comical. You know, I actually had one parent say, ‘I'm so glad you speak English. We were a little worried.’ I know they weren't trying to be malicious, just ignorant. But since when is being non-American born equivalent to bad teaching skills? Or I had another parent who



asked me if I missed Korea. I had to let them know that I had never been because I was born and raised in L.A. I guess all Koreans in the U.S. are automatically born in Korea and immigrate to the States I guess?

Like Donna, Rebekah faced inaccurate parental perceptions and the assumption that she would lack teaching skills based on the fact that she was Asian. White parents also assumed her to be a foreigner and it was never even a thought that she could be a U.S. born citizen. Even more concerning, there is an underlying parallel that somehow being a foreigner is also perceived as something negative. White people have never been the minority in the U.S., and as a result, many navigate through a deficit lens where anyone who is not White is somehow less than or beneath those who are White.

Julie also faced the perpetual foreigner stereotype, but experienced judgment for not being a native mainlander:

People on the mainland are viewed to have sophisticated vocabulary. ‘Cause of this, I’ve struggled feeling stupid. You know, you say pigeon words and White people on the mainland think you’re stupid or something and definitely not from the mainland.

Julie shared how even in present day, she is self-conscious when she speaks for fear of others thinking she is unintelligent based on her accent. As she pointed out, there is an assumption that the vocabulary and language of those on the mainland are on a higher level than those from Hawaii. Similar to Donna and Rebekah, Julie’s skills were questioned based solely on her accent. In addition, she too was assumed to have a deficit in teaching skills.

When Rebekah, Donna, and Julie spoke about navigating predominantly White spaces, I sensed heavy hearts and repressed anger. Rebekah was eager to dive in and share the racist

actions of her administration and colleagues. It was her way of releasing heavy burdens that were weighing on her soul. The continuous trauma of the racism she received broke her to the point of questioning whether it was her and not them. She experienced the lowest of lows by wondering if she should begin justifying these racist actions and realized at that moment that she did not recognize herself. Donna shared how the constant racist remarks changed her to be more direct towards the colleagues who loosely shared them. She shared that she would snap at individuals often and call them out because she was tired of staying silent. Julie was disappointed and at a loss for words when she shared the anecdote of her colleague continuously using an Asian accent around her. She shared how she knew it was wrong and found herself trying to make justifications in defense of her colleague. In the end, she realized that there weren't justifications for such actions.

Another layer of racism that these women experienced was the perception from White individuals that they were somehow foreigners. Ranging from assumptions of their English-speaking skills to perceptions from parents about their teaching skills, Rebekah, Donna, and Julie shared their disappointment how they were viewed as foreigners in their own home. In addition, there was a parallel racist stereotype that being Asian meant having less skills than someone who was White. Many of the colleagues and parents that these they interacted with automatically assumed some form of deficit towards the participants. To many of the White people around them, not being White meant not good enough.

### **Fighting Racism in Education**

After participants shared multiple experiences around racism and microaggressions while navigating White teaching spaces, Rebekah, Julie, and Donna shared similar stories of teaching related to fighting for acceptance. Because Ashley had a different set of experiences, her story is

shared under the Outlying Experiences section. Rebekah, Julie, and Donna all mentioned the idea of continuing to stay in teaching to fight for their students. Teaching was affiliated with the concept of combat in their eyes. The question that arose was whether this perception was a healthy mindset and how it influenced their retention in the teaching field.

For Rebekah, her seven years in the teaching field was ongoing trauma and combat. However, the driving force to push onward and stay in teaching was to shield her few students of color and create teachable moments for her moldable White students:

I mean yeah, the environment for me sucked. I felt isolated and different. And I was like, 'This sure is a racist world in which we live.' What I made sure was to try my best to shield my students. I didn't have that many students of color. And in my whole teaching career I had one student who was Asian. And I still remember to this day, the look on her face on the first day of school when she saw me. She immediately ran over and made a comment how I was like her. And I saw how much it meant to her. That year, I was peaking in my burnout. But seeing how much it meant to her to see a teacher like her made me determined to stay and fight.

Rebekah knew that representation was important for the few students who looked like her. This was the primary source of motivation to stay and teach. When asked what exactly she was fighting, Rebekah believed her presence was fighting against the homogeneous environment, racism, and traditional education systems:

What was I fighting? Hmm, I guess I was fighting against the sea of White people. When you're White, you don't have to think about being White because you are the norm. But when you're not White, you notice. And my students who

weren't White, took notice that I wasn't White. And it mattered to them. They would ask me about my culture and then open about their own. I saw a sense of pride in them when they shared. And I guess I was fighting against the racism. It was like my middle finger to everyone who thought they could drive me away with their hate. Like, they could keep hating but I wouldn't budge. Education was built by White people for White people. I thought despite my treatment, if I stayed, I would be shaking that system to change somehow.

Despite her motivation to stay for her students, Rebekah reflected that having a combat mentality in teaching was detrimental. She admitted that she struggled with extreme anxiety and trauma longer than she should have. She felt nausea and fear daily on her commute to work. All the while, Rebekah was on her own in her fight for more representation against a predominantly White teaching population. However, Rebekah observed minimal, if any, change. Instead, the change occurred within herself:

It's funny, ya know? I keep saying 'Fight for my students! Fight the system! Me staying is a big F you to those who are trying to push us out!' But after a while, there's trauma that builds up. I really tried to stay. I saw hope in my students. For my White students who were so open-minded and innocently not realizing what allies they were to my students of color. And for my students of color who saw a teacher that was racially different like them. And I really tried to stay. But by my last year, I didn't want to wake up in the morning. I used all my sick and vacation days because I couldn't be there. And I realized that I was doing a disservice to my students in the end. If I wasn't there 100% mentally, I couldn't teach them to high standards. Keep in mind, I had no one to talk to or confide in

at work. I was alone. It sucked to quit. I felt like in the end I failed. And everyone who said racially insensitive things won. I'm only now realizing that I left to preserve my sanity and that's okay. I mean, would you be able to withstand being called a token or banana or the wrong ethnicity or every Asian stereotype on a regular basis for seven years? If you can I applaud you. But not me. So I left.

Despite being targeted by racism, Rebekah still felt as though she had failed in the end. She felt committed to her students and to enacting change for more representation in her school. She, like many other people of color felt it was her duty to try to teach guide her White colleagues in anti-racism work. Being in the fight for change alone, however, Rebekah stated that she could no longer carry that responsibility or burden.

For Donna, the racist experiences she faced fueled her fire to keep going for her students. Rather than weigh her down, she armored herself. But unlike Rebekah, Donna had a safe space to vent her frustrations to other teachers of color. Instead of questioning if she was the one overreacting or at fault, she had a support system who validated that what she was feeling was real:

I was lucky because there was a teacher of color cohort in my district. We got to vent our frustrations there. Like what we do, how do I deal with a situation when someone was racist to me? And just an overall support system. Like it helped me stay in the teaching because at the end of every session that we vented what we were angry about, the facilitator, she always brings it back. What does this mean for you when you go back to work now? How will you keep fighting?

Donna credited her cohort for her current retention in the teaching field because she is still experiencing racism in the workplace. Without some form of outlet, she knew that she would not have lasted as long in the teaching field. Coupled with the support of her cohort, Donna echoed similar thoughts to Rebekah around fighting for her students. However, Donna viewed the idea of fighting in teaching as necessary for the future of her students:

I keep staying in teaching because, well, I want to stay and fight. I want to be there for my students. I want to help them get through this because if I'm facing racism as a teacher imagine these kids and how they must face it. I at least have the knowledge to defend myself. But these kids, who is going to teach them how to fight?

Donna shared how she believed that she could contribute to anti-racist systemic change by beginning with her students. Her presence as a teacher of color was her first step as she recognized the importance of more teachers of color in the field. In addition, she shared how she has made mindful decisions in her teaching and classroom environment to promote an anti-racist environment. Examples included filling her classroom library with books that are representative of multiple demographics, posters and classroom décor in various languages such as Arabic and Chinese, and implementing social/emotional curriculum that promotes racial awareness rather than colorblindness. Until she feels she can no longer wake up and go to work happy, Donna intends to stay in teaching and continue to try to push for anti-racist change in the education system.

For Julie, her fight was for more racial representation among the teaching staff. She recognized the impact that racial representation has on her students. Rather than viewing the

idea of fighting as something negative, she sees it as a positive aspect. Fighting is a sign of representation and she is proud of representing the Asian American community in teaching:

The majority of the teachers are White. The majority my kiddos were Somali, Vietnamese, Chinese. Basically, the children came from a variety of racial backgrounds. And I'm currently on leave for familial reasons, but I'll be back. I need to stay and fight for diversity in teachers. I remember a kid coming up to me and he was like 'Are you Asian?' And I was like "Yes", and he threw his fist in the air and said, 'Yes!' He wanted to see someone who understood his cultural values and his culture and who he was. He wanted to see someone who looked like him as a teacher. So I am proud that I'm Asian American. That I am Asian and that I am a teacher and that I can represent Asian Americans as teachers. I am proud of that, especially when I can simply make someone feel more, I don't know, safe, comfy, in terms of connecting with their teacher. But there needs to be more of that.

Donna, Julie, and Rebekah shared this concept of fighting racism in education and how emotionally draining it could be. In addition, they shared how each of their fights were more of an attributing factor to their burnout than teaching itself. All three women fought for acceptance and racial representation in their school communities. Yet in the end, their retention differed. Rebekah came to the conclusion that it was not her sole responsibility to try to teach her White colleagues about anti-racism and ultimately left the profession. Donna credited her colleagues of color for continuing to stay in the teaching profession. She plans to continue to teach until the day comes where she no longer can wake up and fathom thinking about her job. Julie however is currently undecided. She left the teaching field on FMLA to take care of her health. While she

had every intention to return, her time away from teaching gave her the space to reflect on her experiences. At the conclusion of interviews, Julie was undecided if her heart is still fully in teaching and was contemplating pursuing a different field.

### **Outlying Experiences**

While the majority of themes that emerged from the participant interviews focused on racism in the teaching profession, Ashley denied experiencing racism at any point in her life. Ashley is the only participant who identifies as being a multiracial Asian American where part of her identity is White. As a reminder, Ashley physically presents as more White than she does Asian in terms of facial features, skin tone, hair color, and eye color. Similar to the other participants, Ashley grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods, but on military bases. In addition, her school community is also predominantly White in terms of staff and students.

When reflecting on her own experiences with racism growing up, Ashley ultimately denied experiencing any form of racism: “You know, for me personally, I don't think I have experienced racism. Growing up, I didn't. I heard about my parents experiencing it but I never saw it. I don't think I have?” During our interview, Ashley paused numerous times while speaking, and it was evident that she was not fully sure of her responses. On multiple occasions she would end her comments like the one above. There was a pattern of her stating a firm comment and then ending her thoughts with questions contradicting what she had said. It was as if there was a part of her that was doubting herself.

The uncertainty, frequent pauses, and conflicting questions occurred again when she shared her thoughts on whether she experienced microaggressions or stereotypes as a teacher:



I've never been treated differently at work I don't think, but no, I've never felt that moment of a feeling that I assume you would get when you feel like something's not right. I've never felt that. I don't know, I don't so?

Ashley's second-guessing increased, as did her asking me as the interviewer, to confirm or deny her experiences. Her hesitation and unsureness was only in relation to questions about racism, and grew as the interview progressed. Her hesitation and unsureness popped up once more in our interview when she was asked if she had ever experienced racism or if she had observed her students experience racism. She paused, and finally stated, "I would say no. But again, perhaps? I don't think so."

As the interview continued, Ashley continued to express a lack of comfort, displayed through an increasing shortness in her answers, hand fidgeting, and lack of eye contact. Her pauses became more frequent and the constant fidgeting of her hands suggested she was feeling anxious and confused. There was more intrinsic reflection, but Ashley was not ready to unpack that. At the follow-up interview a few weeks later, her responses stayed short and unsure. For instance, when asked whether she felt her White identity brought a privilege of not experiencing racism, Ashley displayed a similar pattern as in her previous interview:

I don't think being biracial has brought forth any privileges. Honestly, growing up I never really thought about being biracial. At least I don't think so? I mean probably not.

She continually displayed the pattern of stating her thoughts and then ending her statement with a contradictory question. Shortly afterwards, her pauses became more frequent and responses once again grew short. Her body language again showed discomfort and it was evident she no longer wanted to discuss race or racism. She was, however, much more comfortable answering

questions not related to race or racism, such as those around teaching or her students. By the end of our series of interviews, it appeared that Ashley was aware that she had a lot more to reflect on around her identity and her lens of the larger world. She shared occasionally that she had more to think about on her own. However, in those moments, she was not ready to fully unpack and wrestle with these thoughts. Ashley ultimately seemed to deny structural racism and view racism as solely as personal attacks and thus, did not seem to see racism, privilege, or the impacts on her own identity within the classroom.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Through the various stories that the participants shared, many commonalities around experiences with racism arose. In particular, their stories highlighted everyday frustrations and trauma faced when working in predominantly White and microaggressive environments. This cumulatively impacted their retention, and in some cases, health. In addition, all of the participants admitted during their interviews that White people were a part of the dominant culture who held more privilege compared to people of color. Their perceptions validated Critical Race theory and the tenet that racism is a means by which privilege and status are distributed based on race. The majority of participants also shared how many of their racist experiences were specifically rooted in Asian stereotypes which further confirmed the tenets of Asian Critical Framework which critically analyzes the consequences of such stereotypes on Asian Americans. All of the participants' stories are often ones that we do not hear about among dominant White voices. Through counter storytelling, all participants were able to name the discrimination they faced.

For Rebekah her experience with racism in the teaching profession was traumatic and despite her love for the field, she ultimately quit. She acknowledged that she had the initial

privilege of growing up in a racially diverse neighborhood where she didn't have to think about being in the minority. It was only when she moved to a predominantly White community where her lens began to shift. When she entered the teaching profession, Rebekah felt unequipped with the tools to combat the immediate racial hostility she faced. She noted how she felt unprepared by her predominantly White teaching certification program to address racism in the workplace as a person of color. Unwelcome smirks, comments about her being a token person, continuous inaccurate perceptions rooted in stereotypes, and the lack of administrative support were the norm for Rebekah's seven years as a teacher.

Rebekah viewed these years as a constant battle where she was constantly in both fight-mode and survival-mode. She fought for racial representation through her presence to disrupt the whiteness in her school. She was surviving the continuous verbal abuse through self-talk to build herself back up mentally. In addition, through these years Rebekah did not have a cohort or even an individual in her school community who she could lean on for support. Eventually, the racism, isolation, and lack of validation of her experiences became too heavy a weight on her shoulders. The day these factors began to impact Rebekah's ability to teach her students efficiently as well as her ability to get out of bed was the day she knew she needed to step away.

Despite all that Rebekah had endured, she still felt as though it was somehow she who had failed and not her school system. Her mind was still in survival mode as she made justifications for her former community to soften the blow of their actions. Rebekah's current lens of racism is rooted in the idea that racism is unescapable. Despite changing her profession, she still experiences racism continuously in present day. She feels as though her previous experiences have made it easier for her to recognize when it's healthy to step away when feeling

re-traumatized. In addition, she has found a small cohort of colleagues whom she has been able to lean on for support when she hits a breaking point.

Donna also acknowledged the privilege of growing up in a racially diverse neighborhood, which eliminated any idea of being in the minority. Like Rebekah, her lens began to shift once she moved into a predominantly White neighborhood that was unwelcoming. The isolation she and her family faced changed her perspective to realize that the White community was the dominant majority. This concept did not change once she entered her teacher preparation program. Continuously mistaken for another student of color who had left the program months prior, Donna observed how her White colleagues did not experience such identity mishaps. In addition, she recalled how her program was extremely White centric in terms of pedagogy, teaching strategies, and cohort demographics. She felt unprepared and unsure of how to advocate for herself and respond to the racism she experienced.

Early into her teaching profession, Donna began to experience constant acts of intentional and unintentional peer racism. She was continuously perceived to be a foreigner by the school community, questioned on her credibility as a teacher by families based on her race, and judged for how well she spoke English. Donna shared how she was surprised that she lasted as long as she did in teaching. Eleven years later, she still chose to stay in teaching despite the continuous impacts of racism and the toll it has taken on her mental health. She credited her cohort of fellow teachers of color whom she was able to lean on a regular basis. Through this comradery, she felt her frustrations were validated to be real and not overreactions. Most importantly, she felt heard and not alone. Donna admitted that when she had hit rock bottom of racial trauma and fatigue, she was faced with two choices – leave the profession or fight back. She credited her stubborn nature to fight back with her words. Through the support of her cohort and years of

practice speaking up, she now verbally challenges and pushes back on the racist experiences she faces. She views her words as power to educate her White colleagues and the opportunity to confront their racist actions. Donna's current lens of racism is that racism is a part of everyday life, and she chooses to challenge it head on. She recognizes the power and privilege she holds as a teacher and until the day she feels too tired to challenge inequity, Donna plans to stay in teaching to fight against dominant White voices.

Julie was the only participant who grew up in Hawaii, where Asian Americans were in the numerical majority. She too had the privilege of not having to think about her race or how she was different than the majority. Moving to Washington for her postsecondary studies exposed to Julie just how dominantly White the rest of the U.S. was. Her school community also reflected the same demographic in terms of staff and students. During the interviews, Julie had taken a temporary leave of absence through FMLA to attend to her health. At the end of the participants' interviews, she was undecided about whether to return to the teaching profession. While she originally had every intention to return, she no longer was sure. Her indecision stemmed from two different factors. First, she was growing tired of the ongoing microaggression not only towards her but her students as well. Many of her experiences with racism were more subtle and passive aggressive compared to the more blatant comments that Rebekah and Donna experienced.

She noted how many of her experiences stemmed from the oblivion and unconscious biases of her school community. To Julie, the unconscious acts of racism were worse than blatancy because it revealed the lack of awareness and ignorance of her colleagues and families. She argued that unconscious acts of racism were more difficult to call out and change because the offender usually believed that they were incapable of being racist. Whenever she called out

acts of racism in her school, she was often met with the excuses of “that’s not what I meant” or “no, that isn’t actually racism.” She grew tired of constantly feeling as though she were wrong.

Julie also reflected on how teaching may not be her true passion or desire in terms of a career choice. She admitted how familial pressures to pursue a high paying and high prestige job affected her outlook. She regretted forgoing the nursing field despite the fact that she left in the first place because she didn’t enjoy it. Julie pointed out the low salaries and lack of recognition or appreciation as key factors that gave her a negative view on the teaching field. She admitted that if there was a reset button, she would not have taken this same path for herself and her family. Because of these reflections, Julie wondered if it was worth it to return to teaching or instead seek out that reset button. In terms of her current lens on racism, Julie believes that everyone is racist or at least a “closet racist”. She attributes Washington’s culture of passive aggressiveness as a common trait of “closet racists”. What she means by “closet racists” are the individuals who proclaim their dedication for equity and inclusion but their words and actions do not align with their self-proclamation. Overall, Julie is at peace if she ultimately decides to not return to teaching.

Ashley echoed Rebekah, Donna, and Julie in terms of the privilege she held growing up in various diverse neighborhoods where she did not think about race. She was thankful for her military upbringing and the opportunity to continuously live in a community that was not represented by a particular dominant racial group. She viewed her nine years as a teacher to be a positive experience and has no desire to leave the profession. She denied experiencing structural racism and believed that her treatment as a teacher was positive. Throughout Ashley’s interviews, her responses seemed to define racism more as personal attacks or wrongdoings from an individual.

Ashley differed from the other participants because she was the only participant to identify a part of her identity as White in addition to her Asian identity. During her interviews, she denied feeling any oppression or holding additional privilege over individuals who solely identify as Asian. She admitted that her identity was simply something she never thought about or felt she needed to think about, which mirrored the essence of White privilege. To not have to think about her identity was a privilege she did not recognize. As Ashley shared her story, there were many times in her interview where she appeared unsure or second-guessed her beliefs. Talking about race and racism visibly made her uncomfortable and when she felt anything internally that was different than her verbal words, she was not ready to unpack these feelings or ideas during our interviews. Ashley's current lens around racism is that there has been progression for more equity and inclusion, but more work needs to be done. She does, however, believe that teachers need to be equipped with more skills and training on how to support the ever-growing population of diverse learners.

The stories that the participants shared highlighted how the K-12 education system and teacher preparation programs still have a lot of work to do in terms of racism and inclusion. While the public K-12 education system and teacher-preparation programs have been increasingly focusing on incorporating culturally responsive teaching, these adaptations have not addressed the needs of future teachers of color to address racism and microaggression in their current workplace environments. Rebekah's story highlighted how her school lacked a safe space and community of other teachers of color that she could lean on for support. Donna in contrast had such a community and credited their presence for her retention in the field. Rebekah's story emphasized how lonely teaching could be, especially when in such a racially hostile environment. She attributed the isolation she felt to be a major factor in her decision to leave the

teaching profession. Therefore, school districts need to provide space and time for their teachers of color to connect and build support systems.

The majority of the participants' experiences with racism in their schools also demonstrated the need for more antiracism education and training for school communities. Antiracism focuses on highlighting people's differences across multiple measurables such as race, ethnicity, and culture. These differences are acknowledged and honored rather than ignored. Antiracism work also needs to be further implemented in teacher certification programs as well. Many of the participants noted that they felt unprepared by their teacher certification programs to address racism once they became teachers.

In addition to foundational antiracist training, the K-12 system and teacher certification programs need specific training for supporting Asian American teachers and even students. Antiracist curriculum does not dive deeply into the specific struggles that Asian Americans face around Asian stereotypes and the struggle of always being perceived as foreigners. Teacher certification programs should either implement more program courses around supporting Asian American teachers and students or address this in their multicultural education courses. Principal certification programs also should implement similar changes. Many of the participants shared that they felt a lack of support from their administrators and believed this was either due to their administrators simply not caring or being unsure of how to support the participants' specific experiences. Future principals need to be trained on how to support their teachers. At the K-12 level, specific professional development opportunities should be offered for both staff and principals that focus on Asian American culture and the racist challenges that Asian American teachers and students face.



Beyond training and more academic courses, there needs to be a systemic change in terms of the number of Asian American teachers in the teaching profession. All participants admitted that they were either the only, or one of the only, teacher candidates of color in their teacher certification programs. Rebekah shared that she was the only Asian teacher in her district while Donna, Julie, and Ashley shared they were one of a small handful of Asian teachers in their districts. They all echoed the necessity for a teaching population that reflected the racially diverse student population. Therefore, teacher preparation programs, Human Resource departments at the K-12 level, and principals need to review their recruitment and program policies to address the lack of Asian Americans amongst incoming teacher candidates and the retention of current Asian American teachers.

At a larger systemic level, state and national education agencies should examine whether they have data readily available around the number of Asian American teachers in the profession as well as the number of those who are not retained. When conducting research for this study, the statistics around Asian American teachers was non-existent or extremely difficult to find. If data around Asian American teachers entering the field, currently in the profession, and leaving teaching are not available, state and national agencies need to begin collecting this data to track the trends of Asian American teachers.

When I focused on the retention of Asian American teachers for this study, I specifically focused on whether they were staying in the field or leaving due to racism. Many districts, state education systems, and national agencies define retention based on tenure. For instance, in Washington State, teachers achieve tenure after being a teacher for three years. At the end of three years, Washington State teachers are tenured and considered to be “retained” in the field regardless of whether they leave immediately afterwards. In many other states, tenure is met

after just two years. There needs to be a reframing in the definition of retention because the majority of teachers who leave the profession often leave within the first five years. All of the participants in this study served as teachers for over five years and would be considered retained teachers, despite that Rebekah and Julie were no longer currently teachers. Even more importantly, the data would not show why they left the classroom. Rebekah left due to the extreme racism she faced on a daily basis from her colleagues and families. Julie was unsure at the end of the interviews as to whether she would return to teaching for similar reasons. Retention thus needs to be defined beyond simply earning tenure, but for a longer time frame and in relation to why teachers leave.

Overall, Rebekah, Ashley, Donna, and Julie's voices have contributed to and expanded the literature around Asian American teachers. The literature around Asian American teachers is minimal to begin with. However, the participants' stories confirmed the various issues that current literature outlines, specifically around racism, Asian stereotypes, and the challenges of remaining within the classroom. Their voices add new contributions as well. Ashley's story suggests a needed focus on multiracial Asian American teachers who identify as both Asian and White. Julie's story introduces the complexities in terms of when an Asian American teacher is at a crossroads in their career. All of their stories challenge the constant stereotype that Asian Americans are quiet and meek, as their voices courageously, fearlessly, and unapologetically challenged how the education system has a long way to go in terms of systemic change.

## **Conclusion**

When I left teaching permanently, I still held a small glimmer of hope that anti-racist change would occur in the teaching profession. The results of this study revealed that the same challenges I faced as a teacher are still present. Just recently, I was sitting in a meeting with

faculty and administration from all postsecondary institutions that offer teaching certification programs in Washington. The demographics of the 50+ individuals in the room were unsurprisingly White, aside from myself and four other people of color. We began discussing the current teacher shortage and the difficulty in retaining teachers. When I spoke and shared possible suggestions specifically around antiracism education, the first response I received was an accusatory question around who I was exactly and what my credentials were. Everyone who had spoken up until that point was White, and no one else who spoke had their position or credentials challenged. The fact that I had to prove my skills and right to be in that room is no longer shocking to me. This racism is what I faced as a teacher of color years ago, and what I continue to face today as collegiate faculty of color. However, this racism serves as a reminder that the teaching profession still has a long way to go in terms of basic treatment of students and teachers of color.

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### Appendix A: Interview Guide – First Interview

Interview questions were directly taken from Atkinson (1998). Any additional questions I have added are denoted by \*\*\*.

Interviews were 60-90 minutes in length. Each participant was interviewed in two sessions to build rapport and gain deeper reflection. Multiple interviews with participants allowed participants to reflect on their responses and share either follow up or additional information. In addition, any information not addressed in the previous interview session was covered in the follow up interviews.

#### Birth and Family of Origin

1. How would you describe your parents?
  - What do you think you inherited from them?
2. What was going on in your family, your community, and the world at the time of your birth?
3. What is your earliest memory?

#### Cultural Setting and Traditions

1. What are your parents' ethnic and/or cultural background?
2. What cultural values were passed on to you, and by whom?
  - What beliefs or ideals do you think your parents tried to teach you?
3. What was growing up in your house or neighborhood like?
4. Was your family different from other families in your neighborhood?
5. Was religion important to your family?

### Social Factors

1. Did you feel nurtured as a child?
2. What were some of your struggles as a child?
3. What clubs, groups, or organizations did you join?
4. What was the most significant event of your teenage years?
5. Did you make friends easily?
6. Have you ever experienced racism in your childhood?\*\*\*
7. Have you ever witnessed your parents/family experience racism?\*\*\*

### Education

1. What are your best and worst memories of primary school?
2. What are your best and worst memories of high school?
3. What do you remember most about undergrad?
4. What was the most important course you took in college?
  - What has been the most important book you've read?
5. What was your teaching certification program like?\*\*\*
  - Was it a positive or negative experience?\*\*\*
  - How well did it prepare you to teach?\*\*\*
  - Did you feel as though you made the right decision choosing teaching?\*\*\*
6. What has been your most important lesson in life, outside of the classroom?
7. What is your view of the role of education in a person's life?

### Additional/Other

1. Is there anything further you would like to share?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide – Second Interview

Interview questions were directly taken from Atkinson (1998). Any additional questions I have added are denoted by \*\*\*.

Interviews were 60-90 minutes in length. Each participant was interviewed in two sessions to build rapport and gain deeper reflection. Multiple interviews with participants allowed participants to reflect on their responses and share either follow up or additional information. In addition, any information not addressed in the previous interview session was covered in the follow up interviews.

### Follow Up of Previous Interview

1. What were your initial thoughts/emotions after we concluded our first interview?
2. After reflecting on our last interview, is there anything additional you would like to elaborate on or share?

### Work

1. How did you end up in the field of education?
  - Has your work been satisfying to you?
  - What is important to you in your work?
  - What comes the easiest in your work?
  - Have you ever changed anything about you for work?
  - What is most difficult about your work?
  - Why do you do this work?
2. How long have you been a teacher?\*\*\*
3. What grade(s) do/did you teach?\*\*\*

4. How many schools have you taught at and what types of schools were they? (i.e. public schools, large school population, rural school community, etc.)
5. Describe the demographics of your school and district. How diverse is the district as a whole in terms of race? How diverse is the teaching and staff population in your school? How diverse is the student population?
6. (If they are a current teacher) What are the highlights of being a teacher and what does your day to day look like? What are the challenges of being a teacher, and do any of these challenges relate to your race, ethnicity, or gender? (If they left the teaching profession) What influenced your decision to leave the teaching profession? Did any of your reasons relate to your race, ethnicity, and gender?
7. How did your teacher certification program prepare you to address racism you may have faced as a teacher?
8. Have you experienced racism after becoming a teacher?
9. Have you witnessed your students experience racism?
10. Think about the stereotypes that exist around Asian Americans. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?
11. What are some ways you have dealt with challenging experiences around racism and stereotypes?
12. Have these experiences influenced your perspective on a being a teacher or staying in the teaching profession?

#### Additional/Other

1. Is there anything further you would like to share?