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## Voices of the Invisible: Education Policy Promoting Asian American Youths

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**Abstract:** The objective of this commentary is to call attention to the importance of education policy that promotes Asian American (AA) communities. I argue AA communities have not received enough attention in the domain of education policy primarily due to the stereotypes embedded in the dominant “model minority myth” and “perpetual foreigner ideology.” Furthermore, I discuss how the exclusion and misrepresentation of AA communities lead to civic and political alienation of AA youths, in addition to physical and psychological violence toward these populations. I conclude by proposing research questions related to promoting AA actors in education policymaking.

**Keywords:** Asian Americans; educational policy; curriculum; minority groups

### Voces de lo invisible: Política educativa que promueve la juventud asiático-americano

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este comentario es llamar la atención sobre la importancia de una política educativa que promueva las comunidades asiático-americanos (AA). Argumento que las comunidades de AA no han recibido suficiente atención en el ámbito de la política educativa, principalmente debido a los estereotipos incrustados en el “mito de la minoría modelo” dominante y la “ideología del extranjero perpetuo”. Además, discuto cómo la exclusión y la tergiversación de las comunidades de AA conducen a la alienación cívica y política de los jóvenes de AA además de la violencia física y psicológica hacia estas

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poblaciones. Concluyo proponiendo preguntas de investigación relacionadas con la promoción de actores de AA en la formulación de políticas educativas.

**Palabras-clave:** asiáticos americanos; política educativa; plan de estudios; grupos minoritarios

### **Vozes do invisível: Política educacional promovendo a juventude ázio-americano**

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste comentário é chamar a atenção para a importância da política educacional que promova as comunidades asiático-americanas (AA). Argumento que as comunidades de AA não receberam atenção suficiente no domínio da política educacional principalmente devido aos estereótipos embutidos no “mito da minoria modelo” dominante e na “ideologia do estrangeiro perpétuo”. Além disso, discuto como a exclusão e a deturpação das comunidades AA levam à alienação cívica e política dos jovens AA, além da violência física e psicológica contra essas populações. Concluo propondo questões de pesquisa relacionadas à promoção de atores de AA na formulação de políticas educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** asiáticos americanos; política educacional; currículo; grupos minoritários

## **Voices of the Invisible: Education Policy Promoting Asian American Youths**

The number of hate incidents targeting Asian Americans (AAs) has significantly increased during the pandemic (Horse et al., 2021). Despite the World Health Organization’s new recommendation to avoid casting blame by attaching geography to the virus, former President Trump continued to use the phrase, “Chinese Virus” in public, which resulted in the othering of AA communities. An empirical study found there was a significant increase in anti-Asian hashtags associated with #chinesevirus, compared to #covid19, immediately after former President Trump’s tweet using the phrase “Chinese Virus” (Hswen et al., 2021). There has been a noticeable upsurge in Americans’ negative sentiments toward China since 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2021a). According to Stop AAPI Hate, a national coalition addressing anti-Asian racism in the United States, hate incidents reported from March 2020 to June 2021 often included components (e.g., racial slurs and xenophobia) blaming China or Chinese people as a source of the coronavirus (Horse et al., 2021). Shootings at Atlanta spas in March 2021 that claimed the lives of eight people, including six Asian American women, occurred amid an escalation of hate incidents toward the AA community. In the upsurge of anti-AA violence, one question to consider is how education policy can effectively address this issue to promote AA youths.

In this commentary, I call attention to the importance of education policy promoting AA communities. Even though AA communities, specifically Asian Americans, are the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021b), these populations often are omitted from policy and academic literature (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012). These communities have not received much attention in the domain of education policy, primarily due to stereotypes embedded in the dominant “model minority myth” and “perpetual foreigner ideology.” In the following section, I discuss how the invisibility of AA populations in school curricula is concerning for not only AA youths but all U.S. youths, and I introduce the AsianCrit framework and recent legislation requiring the inclusion of AA history in public school curricula in Illinois as a meaningful policy case. I conclude by suggesting potential areas of research in education policy that can contribute to promoting these important and quickly growing populations.

## **AA Invisibility in School Curricula**

One of the primary factors contributing to the invisibility of AA in education research is the model minority myth. The model minority myth is a discourse socially invented to undercut the political advancement of other minority communities (e.g., African Americans and Latino/as) in the context of the Civil Rights Movement (Wang, 2008) by positioning AAs as examples of the “correct” way to be a person of color in the United States—quiet, hardworking, and compliant with White supremacy (Lee et al., 2017). In the model minority myth, AA youths are viewed as the new Whites, which makes education policymakers and practitioners believe they do not require the kind of attention, resources, and support often given to non-Asian minority groups (Museus & Kiang, 2009). When AA youths are depicted as a uniformly successful and fully self-sufficient group, the challenges and failures they face in and out of the school system become invisible to education policymakers and practitioners (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Zhao & Qiu, 2009). In fact, AAs are an extremely heterogeneous group consisting of 48 different ethnic groups, each containing large disparities of education, economic and social capital, language, culture, and emigration trajectories (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012). The myth masks the fact that AA academic performance varies greatly according to subgroup, often at the cost of severe psychological problems and the neglect of other important knowledge and skills besides test-based academic performance (Zhao & Qiu, 2009). As the face of the model minority discourse, AA youths are pressured to maintain silence about their needs and internalize a mode of “keeping their heads down” so as not to offend White communities while experiencing isolation from other minority groups (Goodwin, 2010).

Another dominant discourse contributing to AAs’ invisibility in education policy, particularly in school curricula, is the forever foreigner ideology. It depicts AA individuals as fresh-off-the-boat immigrants to the United States who are culturally distinct and in the process of learning English (Hsieh & Kim, 2020). The forever foreigner discourse racializes AA individuals as non-Americans by erasing the AA community’s contribution to the history of the United States (Goodwin, 2010; Ng et al., 2007). Even with the expansion of multiculturalism, the history of AAs is still excluded from or misrepresented in school curricula, and such curricular silences reinforce AAs’ status as perpetual foreigners (Goodwin, 2010). When AA youths fail to see themselves in what they learn in U.S. educational institutions, they internalize the message that they are not an important part of the national culture (Banks, 1990). An (2020) argued that, due to such curricular silence, AA youths learn they do not fully belong to the mainstream U.S. society, which results in their civic and political alienation. An explained AA youths demonstrating low civic and political participation (e.g., they are less likely to vote, discuss politics, or engage in political activities) could be the result of AAs’ invisibility in U.S. school curricula on top of the ways in which the model minority discourse demands silence and compliance. With curricula excluding or misrepresenting AAs, both AA and non-AA youths internalize a dominating gaze toward AAs that sees them as perpetual foreigners or non-American. Such a curriculum of silence contributes to the bias-based physical and psychological violence most AA youths experience (An, 2020).

### **AsianCrit: Framework to Promote AA Communities in Education Policy**

For education policy researchers and practitioners to address the issue of invisibility of AA youths in education policy discourse, AsianCrit, a framework developed as a branch work of critical race theory (CRT), is a useful conceptual tool to help better understand AA experiences. Although AsianCrit, like CRT, could be effectively used to challenge ways White supremacy and systematic racism suppress people of color in U.S. education, it deliberately illuminates AA experiences in

relation to U.S. imperialism and colonialism, which are distinctively understudied topics in U.S. curriculum (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). AsianCrit has seven tenets:

1. Asianization: People with different ethnicity, culture, and language in the United States become “Asian” due to the pervasive White supremacy and native racism which view them uniformly as “perpetual foreigner,” “threatening yellow perils,” or “model minority.”
2. Transnational context: Past and present global political, economic, and social relations shape the racial experiences of AAs in the United States.
3. (Re)constructive history: AAs are typically invisible in the United States’ historical narrative therefore, remedying efforts must be made to incorporate their contributions and voices.
4. Strategic (anti)essentialism: While it is important to recognize and resist the monolithic notion of AA experiences, it is also crucial for different AA subgroups to form coalition to engender political power against systematic racism.
5. Intersectionality: White supremacy and other systems of oppression (e.g., imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, sexism) intersect to shape the experiences of AAs. (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, pp. 940–941)
6. Story, theory, and praxis: AAs’ lived experiences in U.S. education should inform theorization and praxis in education policy.
7. Commitment to social justice: AsianCrit is a part of comprehensive anti-oppressive project.

Education policy researchers and practitioners can use AsianCrit to analyze accurately experiences of AAs in U.S. education. For example, AsianCrit can be used to resist the notion of the monolithic model minority myth of AAs and to speculate and validate South Asian American experiences in education to lead to a policy decision providing culturally responsive resources and supports for those youths (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Further, in the context of current escalating political and economic tensions between the United States and China, AsianCrit can help education policy researchers and practitioners revisit the ways such global climates influence AA youths’ experiences (e.g., identity development, motivation, self-esteem, civic engagement).

### **Education Policy Promoting AA Communities and the TEAACH Act**

Starting with the 2022–2023 school year, every public elementary and high school in Illinois will teach a unit on the history and contributions of AA communities. The Teach Equitable Asian American Community History (TEAACH) Act—proposed by an advocacy group called Asian American Advancing Justice Chicago (AAAJC), sponsored by Representative Jennifer Gong-Gershowitz and Senator Ram Villivalam as Illinois House Bill 376, and signed by Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker on July 9, 2021—is the nation’s first law requiring inclusion of AA history in any public school curriculum (Zhou, 2021). Although the legislation does not specify lesson contents and lets local school boards determine and develop their own curricula, the TEAACH Act emphasizes contributions of AA communities to the economic, cultural, social, and political development of the United States. This law was passed at the intersection of conservatives’ attack on CRT and the upsurge of hate incidents toward AA communities (Zhou, 2021).

Efforts to make education policy include AAPIs’ experiences in school curricula are vital because curricular silence perpetuates the forever foreigner ideology limiting AAPI youths’ civic and

political engagement even as they continue to be exposed to physical and psychological violence. That is why the Illinois TEAACH Act is a monumental success that should be reproduced rapidly in other states, particularly as anti-AA sentiment is growing in the nation. Certainly, the TEAACH Act has its limitations. For one, it takes an additive approach without restructuring the existing White-centered curriculum. Moreover, it is an amendment to the school code alone without aligned changes in disciplinary standards, and it gives wide autonomy to local school boards to develop and implement a unit. If Illinois students are to learn effectively about AA communities' history and contributions in their classrooms, there must be incentives for local school boards, schools, and teachers to implement a unit that reflects the social justice rationales behind the law. To avoid weak implementation, a comprehensive and strategic approach encompassing teacher training, professional development, and resources is essential (Zhou, 2021).

AAAJC, the advocacy organization that led the initiative to pass TEAACH, partnered with several organizations across different minority communities for this legislation. Under its leadership, seven other organizations participated in a steering committee with an additional 19 organizations supporting this curricular policy (AAAJC, n.d.). A list of the partnered organizations suggests the success of the legislation was a collective effort by a pan-Asian coalition that collaborated on policy problems and solutions. Their shared experiences of racism, located in the complicated intersections of the model minority myth and forever foreigner ideology, contributed to transforming the complex relationships between and in AA communities to form a solidarity. The TEAACH Act is valuable because it not only prepares younger generations with a more inclusive national vision but also develops the civic and political efficacy of AA individuals. Such a milestone achievement creates confidence in AA communities for active civic engagement.

Considering the growing political and civic efficacy of AA communities, I invite education policy researchers to pay greater attention to remedying AAs' invisibility in education policymaking. For example, in the case of TEAACH, education policy researchers can ask questions such as: How are AA communities acting collectively as engaged activists and democratic citizens? What are the constraints and how are they experienced? For general policymaking, researchers can solicit questions surrounding the AA actors: Where does such collective action occur, and what strategies can be used to support AA communities? What are AA actors learning from such policy processes? How does their coalitional advocacy work through the issues of class, language, immigration status, and culture? Past experiences (e.g., South Asian communities post 9/11 and Japanese and other East Asian communities in the 1980s) clearly tell us the international conflicts of the United States directly threaten the lives of AA communities. With the escalation of the U.S.–China conflict, it is an unprecedented moment for addressing AAs' invisibility in education policy.

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