

Tokenism and Asian-American Education Industry

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Abstract. Tokenism is the practice of including a small number of people from underrepresented groups in an organization or environment, typically for the sake of appearances or quotas, without providing any real power or meaningful work. In the context of the education industry, tokenism can refer to the act of hiring a small number of Asian-American educators to appear diverse without giving them any absolute authority or opportunities for advancement. This paper will explore the prevalence of tokenism in the education industry, specifically as it relates to Asian-American educators. Using various contexts, this paper will discuss the implications of tokenism on the individuals who are included as tokens, the Asian-American community as a whole and the various obstacles that hinder the retention of Asian-American teachers and learners. Additionally, this paper will offer suggestions for combating tokenism in the education industry and creating more inclusive environments. This paper will also avail the justifications for recruiting more Asian educators, bridging cultural gaps in America, and highlighting future research problems. Tokenism is a harmful practice that has far-reaching implications. In the context of the education industry, tokenism can limit the career advancement opportunities of Asian-American educators and also deliver the message that Asian-Americans are incapable of being leaders in the field of education. Tokenism is a form of discrimination that should be addressed to create more inclusive environments in the education industry.

Keywords: Asian-American, Educational policy, Tokenism.

1. Introduction

At a time when COVID-19 exposed a surge of anti-Asian hatred in the United States, I wondered whether, if there were more Asian-American teachers in K-12 education, students of different ethnicities in American schools would be better able to understand, and humanize people of Asian descent in the United States. With Asian teachers, more students and more people of younger generations would grow up adapted to the idea that Asian people are part of the United States, and the stereotypes of Asian-Americans being un-human or perpetual foreigners may carry less power on the perceptions of Asian-American people. This research essay will investigate the factors contributing to the severe lack of Asian instructors in public elementary, middle, and high schools.

2. Demographics Statistics

Asian-Americans are underrepresented in the U.S. population of K-12 teachers, despite the continuing increase in the population of Asian people and Asian students in America. Asian teachers constitute 2% of American public-school teachers, around 75,000 (Schaeffer, 2021), falling below the percentage of Asian-Americans from the general population, 7% or roughly 22.4 million people (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). In addition,

this percentage of Asian teachers sinks below the percentage of Asian students, 6% (Schaeffer, 2021), or roughly 2.7 million students in public elementary and secondary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although the representation of teachers for Black and Hispanic public school students also falls short of parity, the discrepancy for Asian students is less studied and understood. These discrepancies indicate the need to address their causes, to determine the obstacles for hiring and retention of Asian people in American schools, and to clarify the reasons for the need to increase Asian teacher populations.

3. Obstacles for Job-seekers

Parental pressure placed on first-generation Asian-American students has been particularly influential in steering them away from teaching occupations. This parental pressure concerning the education profession focuses on the value of status and income. Asian parents want their children to ascend social ladders and be more successful than themselves, e.g., not taking over the family business but attaining better-paying and more-promising jobs. To achieve higher status and income is to reach for stereotypically more well-respected jobs in medicine or law. To Asian parents, the teaching profession in America does not guarantee the high pay

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and status that they want their children to achieve in the United States (Bracey 2001).

A feeling of personal inadequacy stems from the sense that the criteria and demands for the teaching profession in America are unattainably high. Cultural values play a role in this feeling of personal inadequacy. In Chinese culture, teachers are expected to be perfect from the beginning of their careers. In reality, teachers in America are given the flexibility to adapt and change their teaching styles as they work through the job. In addition, respect in Chinese culture is based on position rather than performance. Therefore, respect for teachers in China is viewed as a more fixed entity and does not fluctuate based on the varying performance levels of the teacher. This lack of promised respect for teachers in America steers Asian prospective teachers away from this profession (Bracey 2001).

An unfamiliar working environment exacerbates the insecurities that Asian prospective teachers may encounter (Bracey 2001). One aspect of the unfamiliar working environment is the language barrier. For example, the lack of English proficiency among foreign-born immigrant populations from Asia in America may impede them from completing necessary teacher training programs (Akbar, 2016). While 95% of US born Asian-Americans ages five and older are proficient in English, 43% of foreign-born Asian-Americans are less than proficient in English (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). For those who succeed in becoming teachers, it is hard for them to feel confident about educating students or even about making a positive impact on their lives when communication may be an impediment.

Political barriers also account for the lack of Asian teachers in America. Asian immigrants were essentially barred from entering the United States until the Immigration Act of 1965, which led to an influx of skilled Asian workers in the fields of medicine and STEM. The Asian people who began to enter America after that time belonged professionally to these scientific areas, ingraining a tradition of STEM- and medicine-focused pursuits into the minds of future Asian-American generations (Akbar, 2016) that glaringly detracts from the possibilities for a career in primary and secondary education.

4. Obstacles for Retention

In addition to struggles around the recruitment of Asian-American teachers, there are challenges that Asian teachers face in the classroom. There exists the idea of race-matched teaching in the United States, which suggests that it is somehow pedagogically crucial for the teacher's race to match that of the student. While there have been studies to support this idea (Ouazad, 2014), some Asian teachers experience the adverse effects of it (Bracey, 2001).

For example, some Asian teachers choose not to identify as a person of color to resist Asian stereotypes (Kokka & Chao, 2020). To counter the stereotype that Asian people are mythically excellent at mathematics, one Chinese-American mathematics teacher expresses how he

identifies as a teacher and not an Asian-American teacher, separating his racial identity from his professional identity (Kokka & Chao, 2020). Kokka & Chao (2020) define internalized racism as a form of self-hatred, e.g., an Asian teacher discriminating against Asian students by not reaching out to them or feeling the need to suppress certain Asian stereotypes in their workplace. While the internalized racism of Asian teachers is an issue that needs to be addressed with significant resources, Asian teachers are managing stereotypes by resisting them. For example, one Asian teacher—in order to prevent his students from turning to self-hatred, internalized racism, and ignorance—talked with his Black and Hispanic students about racial stereotypes and resulting misconceptions specific to them and to Asian-Americans (Kokka & Chao, 2020).

Asian teachers might interpret the idea of race-matched teaching to play on stereotypes of Asian people; e.g., just because a teacher is Asian, they can understand Asian students, serve their needs better, or "rescue" them. By avoiding a race-matched teaching style, Asian teachers would not be criticized for treating Asian students preferentially. Kokka & Chao (2020) quote an Asian teacher who sought to support Black and Latinx students but without expressing the same support or taking the same initiative with Asian students. This teacher, in particular, refused to work at a school with a majority Asian student body and tried to establish personal relationships with Black and Hispanic/Latinx students but less with Asian students. Multiple factors may account for this behavior: internalized racism and resisting Asian stereotypes, sensitivity to the Model Minority Myth (MMM) and the use of MMM in pitting Asians against Black and Hispanic/Latinx people. Ultimately, the Asian teacher's internalized racism may harm his Asian student populations, mainly when the MMM portrays these populations as having a measure of preordained success, possibly leading to fewer resources and attention towards Asian students. In particular, this lack of support may put Southeast Asian-American students, many of whom attend under-resourced schools and experience low graduation rates, at a disadvantage (Kokka & Chao, 2020). Microaggression is one of the obstacles to retention. One manner in which microaggression becomes an obstacle to retention in the Asian-American education industry is when educators make assumptions about Asian-American students based on stereotypes. For example, a teacher might assume that an Asian-American student excels at math and science but not at reading and writing (Budiman et al., 2019). This assumption can lead to the feeling by Asian-American students that they are not valued for their whole selves and ultimately cause them to lose interest in their education. Additionally, microaggression can create an environment in which Asian-American students feel they must constantly prove themselves while not given the same benefit of the doubt as other students. This exposure can be exhausting and cause Asian-American students to surrender and leave the education industry altogether.

Another obstacle is decision-making. There are a few ways in which decision-making can become an obstacle to retention in the Asian-American education industry (Gershenson et al., 2016). For example, decision-makers

are not aware of the unique needs and experiences of Asian-American students. This lack of awareness can lead to decisions that are not culturally responsive and that fail to meet the needs of Asian-American students. Additionally, decision-makers may not be familiar with the research on effective practices for supporting Asian-American students and may instead rely on ineffective or harmful approaches. Subsequently, decision-makers may be reluctant to make changes that could benefit Asian-American students out of fear that other groups of students will feel that they are being mistreated or disregarded.

There are various ways the curriculum is an obstacle to retention in the Asian-American education industry. For example, the curriculum may not be relevant to the experiences and needs of Asian-American students (Grissom et al., 2017). This lack of relevance can make it difficult for Asian-American students to engage with the material and feel like they are part of the learning process.

5. Tokenism in the Workplace and its Impact on Asian-Americans

Another issue of race-matched teaching is that it presents an intentional search for teachers of a particular race to satisfy the diversity and inclusion principle for which school districts strive. Therefore, Asian teachers who are hired may be treated as token figures, as if their race were the most critical aspect of their profession and not their abilities in pedagogy, administrative decisions in faculty meetings, and other tasks.

In the context of this paper, tokenism refers to the fact that Asian-Americans are often included in discussions and decision-making processes based on their race or ethnicity but without any real power or influence. This problem can be seen as tokenism because it gives the appearance of inclusion, but in reality, Asian-Americans are not given a voice or a meaningful role in the process (Dutta, 1998). This position can be frustrating and demoralizing for Asian-Americans, who may feel that their views and perspectives are not being considered. Tokenism can also harm the way in which others perceive Asian-Americans. When Asian-Americans are included only as tokens, it reinforces the stereotype that they are passive individuals who cannot contribute anything of value or that their views are not worth considering. This lack of inclusion can lead to further isolation and discrimination against Asian-Americans.

There is a long history of workplace discrimination and exclusion against Asian-Americans (Hewstone, 2020). This discrimination has been perpetuated by many factors, including the MMM, which suggests that all Asian-Americans are successful and do not need affirmative action or other forms of assistance. This myth has been used to justify discrimination against other groups, such as women and people of color. Tokens often face isolation and exclusion from the majority group, as well as heightened scrutiny and expectations. They may also be seen as representative of their entire group rather than as individuals with unique experiences and perspectives. Asian-Americans have often been tokenized in the

workplace. This tokenization is often performed in the name of diversity, but it can harm Asian-American employees. Tokenism can lead to isolation, unrealistic expectations, and a sense of always being on the outside looking in. In addition to feeling isolated and undervalued, they may have fewer opportunities to advance their careers (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). Tokenism perpetuates the idea that racial minorities are not truly equal members of the workforce, which can create a hostile and unwelcoming environment.

There are a variety of strategies that may be used to counteract tokenism in the workplace. One approach would be to make it a priority to guarantee that all workers have equal access to possibilities for promotion and advancement that is awarded based on performance (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Another approach is to create a culture in the workplace that encourages diversity and inclusion. This workplace culture may be accomplished by implementing policies and practices that support and encourage diversity, as well as by providing opportunities for training and development that emphasize inclusiveness. Last but not least, it is critical to ensure that workers and supervisors are held responsible for their deeds and words. If it is discovered that someone is participating in tokenism, appropriate disciplinary action should be taken against them.

6. Reasons to Increase the Population of Asian Teachers

Several compelling arguments favor the recruitment of more Asians to work as teachers in the United States. One of the reasons is to enhance communication across different cultures. Students will have a more significant number of chances to learn about other cultures and practice their communication skills with individuals from a variety of backgrounds if there are more Asian instructors in the profession. In addition, combating tokenism in the workplace may be more accessible by recruiting a more significant number of people of Asian descent (Redding, 2019). Businesses can negatively produce an atmosphere in which minority group workers develop the impression that they are not respected or involved in the company when companies recruit just a symbolic number of people from such groups. We can contribute to develop a more varied and welcoming workforce for people of all backgrounds if we increase the number of Asian instructors. In addition, boosting the percentage of Asian instructors in the teaching workforce may assist in rethinking the objectives of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Ford et al., 2020). We can send a message that we respect diversity and inclusion and that we are dedicated to employing a workforce that represents the variety of our nation if we increase the number of Asian teachers that we hire and retain.

Care must be exercised to ensure that an effort to increase the population of Asian teachers does not cause unintentional problems. For example, one possible outcome of such recruitment is a widened gap between pupils of Asian descent and those of other ethnicities. In addition, there is the possibility that an increase in the

number of Asian instructors may result in a scenario in which Asian teachers will be perceived as tokens. In particular, organizations may hire a small number of Asian teachers to appear diverse without committing to hire more Asian teachers in the future (Webster & Foschi, 1988). In conclusion, it is essential to remember that an increase in the proportion of Asians employed in the teaching profession in the United States is not a panacea for the difficulties posed by racism and prejudice in that country. But it is a start in the right direction.

7. Further research

As I researched this topic of the reasons why there are disproportionately fewer Asian teachers, it was challenging to find quantitative or data-driven research to account for this discrepancy and to establish the impact of Asian-American teachers in the classroom. More and better data-driven research should be performed to investigate the lack of Asian-Americans in the teaching profession. The majority of scholarly articles in this research area were ethnographic and relied much on anecdotal evidence (Kokka & Chao, 2020). While personal accounts are valuable to assess aspects of Asian-American teachers in the education workforce, quantitative evidence is essential to gauge the precise ways in which Asian teachers impact the classroom, e.g. whether they help to increase the number of Asian-American graduates.

Over the last two decades, substantive research has been performed on the impact of Black and Hispanic teachers on their Black and Hispanic students. More research should also be performed to assess the relationship between Asian-American teachers, their Asian students, and students of other ethnicities, considering the cultural values with which Asians may be familiar and the nature of Asian relationships with people of varying backgrounds.

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