

The Need for Teachers to Address Racism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Written by Yih Ren

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YIH REN, MAY 10 2020

President Trump used the term “Chinese Virus” as a counterattack in response to Chinese government’s handling of the COVID-19/coronavirus crisis. Yet his words not only have put Chinese Americans’ and other Asian Americans’ lives under threat, but also spread fear, anxiety and concerns to Asian International students whose legal-stay Visa might be terminated by the immigration department. Windows at Asian restaurants have been smashed; Asian students have been called “virus” at school, Asian people wearing a facemask are being beaten up, and some are scared of talking a walk outside. We can see this on local news, national news and international news. Asians’ safety and life has been heavily affected in all ways. Interestingly, former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang posted an article. With feeling a bit ashamed of being Asian, he suggested the way to combat existing racism towards Asian Americans is to “behave” and show our “American-ness”. The conflict existing along racial lines, and the limitations that immigration regulations impose on Asians’ engagement in the conversation really concerns me. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to address threats towards Asian and Asian Americans resulting from racism and xenophobia within our multi-racial and globalized society.

According to Open Doors Report 2019, the total number of international students is over 1.1 million with China, India, and South Korea leading the largest sources of international students; they also have contributed over \$41 billion, and supported 458,290 jobs to the U.S economy during the 2018–2019 academic year (NAFSA, 2019). With the integration of International students in American schools, the *lived experience* of international students has not been explored thoroughly other than their mobility, academic experiences, cultural shocks and linguistic challenges. The racialization of international students especially from non-White and non-European countries is often ignored or included into Asian American matters. Asian International students who face the negotiation of cultural, ethnic identity with language barriers, immigration regulations and status, deserve our attention in terms of assessing dynamics of privilege and oppression in the U.S society, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic that their lives have been directly affected.

Traditional racial identity theories tend to ignore intersectional identities of students of color, particularly on Asian American matters. Some scholars have pointed out that most of theoretical models addressing Asian and Asian American identity do not offer a perspective of their intertwined ethnic identity and their experience but tell their stories from the binary of people of color and the conformity of Whiteness. On the other hand, living with the xenophobic threat in the U.S. and the insecurity resulted from it not only has had a huge psychological impact on Asian and Asian Americans’ beliefs, but also it has planted serious desires for linguistic shift and cultural assimilation.

Moreover, with regards to Asian diasporas and Asian international students, the racialization of Asian (s) in the U.S. excludes them as a part of American racial ideology, oppression both in society and schools. Others argue that most Asian American racial models did not discuss the relation of the racial identity of individuals who were not raised in America and their immigrant experience and/or multi-ethnic experience. The exclusion of Asian international students in racial studies has led to conflicts and gaps not only between Asians and non-Asians, but also among Asians, Asian Americans and minorities.

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The term “Asian” sometimes can be questionable and even exclusionary, and the term “American” adds another layer on the necessity of citizenship for their experiences as Asian to be included and valid. Domestic non-Asian students often have negative connotations towards Asian international students as they think Asian International students come here to take their job, raise grading bars, and are unable to speak Standard American English (SAE) properly; also, they mistake Asian American students as international students, which not only dismiss their American identity, but also hinders the development of solidarity building among Asians. Due to language barriers, cultural differences and less support from American institutions, Asian international students often view discrimination as an individual-level problem, and the institutions fail to recognize these as a systematic racial problem.

In this manner, I argue here for the importance of recognizing the racial experience of Asian Americans and especially Asian international students as an important part of American racial ideology, oppression and power dynamic related to whiteness not as a static body but rather as being fluid, connecting to multifaceted social factors, and responding to complex identities both in a personal and a public level. Valuing Asian Americans’ complex ethnic identity and immigration background is essential when questioning, and problematizing current struggles in Asian American community, and including Asian international student’s lived experience, linguistic anxiety and their immigration status is beyond meaningful in finding commonality and building solidarity both in schools and the community.

Throughout U.S. history, immigration acts were “naturally” enforced on Asian people, and Asian people have been determined not by themselves to exclusions, exploitations and subordination. Like the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Japanese American’s incarceration during World War II, the immigration acts through the legislation process have shaped the characterization, subjection and formation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans with an impact on society, attitudes and cultures, in which Asian groups’ foreignness and subordination are strengthened inside and outside. Additionally, We need to understand how race is formalized, and that even though racial meanings and elements can be changed due to a change of social orders, racial ideologies as a system to a particular racial group seem to be a permanent feature in American culture. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have come to encounter again the existing relations of the dominant racial ideology and media regarding the attitudes to Asian and Asian Americans. With COVID-19 being discovered in Wuhan, China, mass media did not pay more attention to the suffering people and the truths but started spreading narratives that were not scientifically confirmed. Before President Trump labeled it as the “Chinese Virus”, Asian Americans and Asian immigrants (also in other countries) had experienced discrimination from society.

Calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus”, and titling news articles like “China is Real Sick Man of Asia” by Mead at *WSJ*, “How to make China pay” by Yoo at *National Review* are putting stress and fear both in Asian and American’s lives, and creating tensions between not only Asian and non-Asian groups, but also Asian and Asian Americans. The media has attributed to misunderstanding and segregation with “borderlines” of race, citizenship and ethnicity so it is vital to understand that race is constructed for political and social changes, and mass media and other forms of media serve as a force to shape our lives, memories and our attitudes toward others. Again, the need for teachers to address racism and xenophobia in this context with critical analysis is at a high stake for schools and society.

To help counteract these forces, I want to highlight the importance of the political dimension in schooling and the need for educators to embrace their multiple roles in developing a social activist teacher persona. I argue here for five profound roles or responsibilities that critical educators need to exemplify in the classroom: 1) as supporters, educators need to support all students, and encourage students to be active social agents, 2) as risk-takers, educators needs to take risk and create a safe and brace space for all students, 3) as learners, educators need to listen and value all students’ lived experience, 4) as researchers, educators need to enter their community, and recognize the validity of their culture, and 5) as communicators, they need to be, and encourage students to be “border-crossers” for building solidarity along with appreciating human differences.

Critical pedagogy advocates highlight five roles that a teacher should carry in order to awaken educators as well as students’ social conscience and awareness: Supporters, Risk-Takers, Learners, Researchers and Communicators. As supporters, not only should critical educators support students to actively engage what they are learning at school

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with beyond school matters that have meanings to them, their family and community, but also educators must develop their power in literacy and critically broaden scopes so they can provide students with multifaceted perspectives, cultivate students' ability to make decisions and eventually develop their social conscience and critical awareness. As Risk-takers, educators should provide all students with a brave space with respect and love for sharing and collaborations. A brave place is one step further from a safe space. a safe space emphasizes an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves with safety, peace and security from harm and risk but a brave space put its emphasis more on disrupting a former condition in the favor of a new way of seeing things, encouraging facilitation practice and dialogues among students and teachers centering race and racism, and learning a broad range of diversity and social justice issues.

As learners, educators' presence should go out of the classroom, and they should learn their students and learn from their students so instead of treating students like empty vessels, educators should value their prior knowledge from family and community. It is especially valuable for exploring underrepresented and misrepresented people's voices and stories for creating humanizing school experiences for all, and for an inclusive society where people affirm their ownership of power in a daily basis. We as educators have to recognize the importance of students' lived experience, and incorporate them into curriculum designing. Radical listening and storytelling serve as primary tools to activate students' critical consciousness. However, listening and storytelling are not merely two actions. Radical listening calls for "being with them". In another words, listeners must desert imperialistic ideologies regarding the world around them, and find solidarity with the tellers with having a good understanding for relationships between people. As tellers, sharing stories is a start to explore oneself and make connections with conditions that matter to themselves. One has to perform both roles in relation to people's revelation and the promotion of social equality. As researchers, educators should firstly accept the political aspect of schooling/education and complications influenced by the dominate culture. Then educators must be more aware of human differences and be a radical listener to understand otherness and reflect back on their own experiences and journey.

Finally, as "border-crossers", educators need to employ multidisciplinary methodology to help students understand their histories and experiences, and find the commonality within. The study of Border Pedagogy focuses on the U.S and Mexico borderline, but it can be applied to other contexts with a border that divides people, like citizenship, class, appearance and so on. Border Pedagogy presents five elements: Open-mindedness and flexibility; passion for borderland education; ongoing professional development; culturally sensitive; and pluralistic language orientation. Not only does the pedagogy centralize the significance of learning our cultures, but also highlights intersectional and interdependent relations to otherness in a multicultural context, and encourages us to be "border-crossers" with developing critical consciousness. Learning our cultures, languages and traditions, and bringing more counter-narrative stories are vital for both educators and students to understand ourselves better, but they are not enough to problematize domination and colonized mentality within different relations and power dynamics in a bigger context. We need to be able to travel across "dividing lines" and make ourselves as global, critical conscious citizens.

During COVID-19 – a time that we witness injustice, prejudice and stereotypes and discrimination targeting certain groups of people – the responsibilities for educators who want to exemplify schools as sites of possibility, and challenge social norms and dominant power, are heavy yet meaningful. There is an urgent need to address racism and xenophobia in our classrooms. Asian Americans, Asian Diasporas and those perceived to be Asians are targeted to be the "cause" of this coronavirus, and their lives have been affected in all ways. Their intricate ethnic identifies, lived experiences, and immigrant identity have not been valued and discussed thoroughly. Furthermore, educators as practitioners of liberatory education need to establish a multidisciplinary view of teaching and exemplifying democracy and social equality, and help students to raise their critical consciousness and self-awareness as an active representative of their history, family, culture, language, community and intersectional selves.

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