

Experiences During COVID-19: How the surge in Anti-Asian Hate Impacted Asian Canadian Educators

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Abstract

Since the start of the pandemic, a surge of anti-Asian racism across North America quickly surfaced. Canada's major cities (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal) had among the highest rates of anti-Asian hate crimes per capita during 2020 and 2021 (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2021). The Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC) reported over 1,150 hate crimes targeting Asian Canadians, over a one-year period, in which the majority of victims were elderly and women (CCNC, 2021). And to this day, Asian people continue to be scapegoats for COVID-19. This research project examines Asian Canadian educators' responses to the significant rise of Asian hate during COVID-19. We surveyed 45 Asian identifying educators and conducted interviews with 18 of the survey participants. The interviews delved into participants' reflections during the pandemic, where they recounted experiences of discrimination during personal and professional contexts. Our findings reveal a strong need for schools and districts to provide Asian Canadian educators with opportunities to come together to acknowledge the pain and suffering endured, to examine oppressive mindsets and practices, and to create spaces for healing practices. As participants watched endless media reports of Asian people being physically assaulted, verbally abused, and even murdered, it triggered their own memories of micro-aggressions, discrimination, oppression, and racism. Many of the memories stemmed from racist childhood bullies, while others reflected on recent acts of racism, describing discriminatory experiences of the bamboo ceiling, model minority myth, yellow fever phenomenon, and perpetual foreigner syndrome. Almost all participants expressed that being involved in this study was the first time their identities and struggles have ever been acknowledged. Almost all interviewees expressed feelings of invisibility, quietly being overlooked throughout their professional experiences. A major recommendation from this study involves the need for affinity spaces for Asian Canadian educators. Affinity groups would support well-being and emotional health, even long after the pandemic, as all participants disclosed feeling deeply troubled and negatively impacted by the unrelenting surge of violence.

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Introduction

During COVID-19, Asian people, specifically East Asians, faced tremendous increases in racial bias, discrimination and acts of hate (CCNC, 2021). Around the world, people viewed endless media clips of East Asian people being spat at, pushed, kicked, and killed. Across North America, the city of Vancouver had the highest rate of anti-Asian hate crimes, with over 600 reported cases during the first few months of the pandemic (Project 1907, 2020). Scholars argue that education is key to dismantling racism and fighting against oppression. Schools should be the hubs for cross-racial solidarity, where educators and students unite to decolonize classrooms and curriculum. Murray Sinclair (chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission), a former member of the Canadian Senate once said, "Education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it" (The National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education, n.d.). With the power of education in mind, this research aims to shed light on Asian Canadian educators and how their positionality situates themselves to be anti-racist teachers and leaders, during a time of unspeakable crimes against their very own communities.

Unfortunately, there is limited research that critically examines the lived experiences of Asian Canadians in educational roles. The literature shows that there is a strong need for this research. Museus (2014) gives evidence that only one percent of articles published in five of the most widely read peer-reviewed academic journals have given specific attention to post-secondary Asian American students. This study focused on articles in the field of higher education, over a 10-year period. The lack of scholarship on Asian populations conceals the struggles and issues, further perpetuating the invisibility of Asian groups (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Yi et al., 2020). There are limited studies on how Asian Canadian educators face racially motivated challenges and how they should address social injustices. Since the pandemic, the need for Asian educators' voices to be amplified is even more critical, due to the harm experienced by Asian communities and students in their schools. Not surprisingly, Asian educators received little or no support from leaders in their schools, districts, or provincial government. Instead, they were left to fend for themselves, keeping their heads down in fear of the next act of violence, hate, and racism.

Significance of the Research

Striving towards racial justice through education is a topic of study that is well reported in empirical studies and mainstream media. Yet, there are limited studies that are grounded in the experiences of Asian Canadian educators that can acknowledge the role of white supremacy in shaping Asian educators' identities and practices. The perspectives of Asian Canadian educators are few and far between in the scholarship (Museus & Park, 2015).

As a demographic group, Asian Canadians represent almost 18% of Canada's total population (Statistics Canada, 2016). Statistics Canada reported that there are 6,095,235 people in Canada who have Asian lineage and they are the fastest growing demographic group. Despite being the largest visible minority population in Canada, Asian Canadians are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, and this can be attributed to prescriptive stereotypes of docility and submissiveness (Berdahl &

Min, 2012). Other research gives empirical evidence of the disproportionately low numbers of Chinese Canadians at senior levels across the greater Toronto area (Zhang & Shi, 2021). Findings showed that only 2.17% of tier 1 leaders identified as Chinese Canadian, while there was zero representation at any senior executive level in all the major accounting firms and zero representation of directors or associate directors across 10 greater Toronto area school boards. Hence, the authors of this study aspire to bring forth the under-researched group of Asian Canadian educators, which hold significant perspectives and experiences.

Background of the Researchers

This research endeavour involved three lead researchers. Dr. Mary Reid is an associate professor at the University of Toronto (UofT); Dr. Kien Nam Luu is a superintendent of education at York Region District School Board (YRDSB) and lecturer at UofT; and Dr. Steven Reid is an associate director of YRDSB and assistant professor at Queen's University. This project involved four research assistants (RAs) who volunteered their time to support the facilitation of interviews and data analysis:

- Dr. Pamela Brittan is a sessional lecturer at the University of Toronto;
- Kristi Deki is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto;
- Phoebe Kang is a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto; and
- Mingyi Li a Master of Arts candidate at the University of Toronto.

Research Questions:

The purpose of the current study was to examine and generate an authentic understanding of the ways that racism is experienced by Asian Canadian educators. One main research question provided the foundation for the inquiry.

How did the surge in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic impact Asian Canadian educators?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as our framework for this research study as CRT values the perspectives of racialized voices (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The purpose of this study was to emphasize and legitimize Asian perspectives, experiences, and lived realities, so that counter narratives are amplified and unconscious biases are challenged (Lee & Tapia, 2021). This study aimed to offer Asian identifying participants to reflect on their professional and personal experiences that highlighted counter narratives to stereotypes of Asian Canadians. These stereotypes include: the model minority myth, emasculated and de-sexualized men, fetishized women, passive, obedient, quiet, non-leaders, and perpetual foreigner. Furthermore, by grounding this research on CRT, we placed a high value on the lived narratives of Asian identifying educator participants. Their stories disclosed racial injustices faced in their educational careers, spanning from experiences during pre-service education, in-service teaching, and leadership positions such as vice-principal and principal.

Research Methods and Participants

In order to answer the research question focusing on Asian Canadian educators' perceptions and experiences, we recruited participants who were Asian educators in Canada. We utilized two data collection methods: 1) demographic survey and 2) semi-structured qualitative interviews. The first set of data collected demographic information such as gender, race, age, and location of school/workplace; all of which were gathered via an online survey from May to October 2021. There were 35 females and 10 males. The majority identified as East Asian with 21 respondents, 15 were South Asian, three were West Asian, and six were of mixed race. The second set of data collection involved semi-structured qualitative interviews. The participants who completed the online survey were invited to participate in a follow-up interview from November to December, 2021. A total of 18 participants agreed to be interviewed and each interview lasted about 45 minutes to one hour. Almost all Asian educators participating in the interviews were from Ontario with only one interviewee from another province. RAs were given a script and set of interview questions and probing questions to facilitate interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the research team conducted data analysis of emerging themes. Through coding analysis, RAs and the lead researchers categorized the codes, until major themes were developed (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Findings

Participants chronicled acts of harm that were exacerbated during the height of COVID-19. These experiences included alienation from direct leaders, social isolation in schools, forced into being white washed, feelings of invisibility and invalidations, as well as ongoing accounts of microaggressions and micro-assaults. Their experiences and life narratives are framed by three major themes: mental health, invisibility, and the bamboo ceiling phenomenon.

Mental Health

All interview participants expressed being emotionally fragile as a result of the heightened awareness and reports of anti-Asian hate in the media. Not only did they struggle with reports of hate against Asian people, further media of anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Indigenous racism caused stress and anxiety. Participants expressed feeling deeply troubled by the unrelenting surge of anti-Asian violence that they viewed across North America. One educator noted:

I remember watching an elderly Asian woman get beaten up so badly and my heart dropped to the ground. That could easily have been my mother or grandmother. She was on her way to church, and she was attacked simply for being Asian. What was even more sad was that no one came to her rescue.

Participants disclosed they were on edge every day, not knowing who might be the next victim. Concerns were raised about how the surge of anti-Asian hate would impact Asian identifying students and their families. *"I was not only worried for me and my family, but I was just as concerned for my Asian students and their families. I totally understood why so many of my Asian students opted to access school online."* Most of the participants were fearful of copycat crimes as multiple assaults and acts of hate

were circulating in the media repeatedly. The constant barrage of anti-Asian hate seemed like there was no end in sight.

Many participants discussed how their anxiety led to sleeplessness and a constant feeling of nervousness. The seemingly endless media reports of Asian people being physically assaulted, spit on, coughed on, verbally abused, and even murdered fueled this state of anxiety. Only a few participants sought out professional support, such as accessing therapy or a medical doctor. *“During the height of the pandemic, I think it was shortly after the spa murders, where most of the victims were Asian women, I visited my doctor to get sleep medication. I desperately needed sleep.”* Without proper sleep, teaching performance was not optimal, as educators felt chronically fatigued. In addition, many participants believed that they couldn’t talk to others about their feelings of sorrow and grief, due to their desire to appear strong and gain respect. *“I was being weighed down by this sadness, and I couldn’t talk to anyone at my school because I wanted everyone to think I was strong.”*

Reports of anti-Asian hate triggered memories of racism and ultimately led to further diminished mental health. Many of the memories stemmed from racist childhood bullies, while others reflected on recent acts of racism. One educator explained:

I saw on the news a white man at my local T&T supermarket, telling the manager [Asian man] to go back to China and to take the virus back. This made me cry, it happened in my own community, my local supermarket. It brought back a flood of bad memories ... I remember years ago, a group of strangers on the street yelling ‘go back to your country’ and I was devastated.

Intersectionality of race and gender played a role in triggered memories. Male participants discussed feelings of emasculation in young adulthood. One male educator stated, *“In high school, I had a group of girls who said I was good looking for Asian, but would never date me.”* While Asian women respondents explained they always second guessed if a potential partner only dated them because they were into Asian women. These memories were specifically brought to the forefront after the Atlanta murders in March of 2021, where six Asian female spa workers were murdered. In these cases, educators discussed the importance for Asian teens to be their authentic selves as they discover their sexual identities.

Childhood memories of racism that had been suppressed for decades painfully made their way to consciousness. One educator described when news reporters mispronounced Asian victims’ names, it triggered memories of her own name being butchered and made fun of growing up, which forced her to anglicize her name in high school. She discussed the importance of correct name pronunciation and hoped for her students to feel proud of their Asian names. Generally, participants were concerned that their childhood experiences of anti-Asian racism might be repeated with their own students of Asian identities. For example, *“I suddenly remembered when I was bullied and made fun of because my parents couldn’t speak English, and the first thing I thought of was my own students, I have to ensure they don’t fall victim.”* For these reasons, participants were in a heightened and fragile state, feeling despair, sadness,

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anxiety, not only for themselves, but they feared for their families and the students they taught.

Invisibility

Several participants reported experiencing the model minority myth throughout their schooling years and during their educational careers. The model minority myth is a stereotype that upholds the belief that all Asians achieve universal success in academic and career trajectories, particularly in STEM fields. One participant was a pre-service teacher in his graduating year, with non-STEM teachable subjects (high school level). Since the beginning of his teacher education program, people assumed his teachable subjects were math and science. During practicum, teachers expected him to be part of the math department:

I was lost in the school and one teacher asked if I was looking for the math office...everyone is surprised that I am a French teacher. They only see my 'Asian-ness' and treat me as a stereotype, they automatically think I am someone good at math. They don't see me for who I really am, beyond my Asian appearance.

This is an example of how Asians navigate their identities in educational settings, in which their racialized visibility leads to wrong assumptions about identity, resulting in invisibility. This consistent reminder that Asian educators only exist as a stereotype further diminishes their sense of self-worth and belonging.

Another aspect of invisibility emerged when participants shared frustration about the lack of professional learning (PL) devoted to dismantling anti-Asian racism, “rarely was there any PL sessions that addressed anti-Asian racism issues as a separate topic. Anti-Asian racism topics were always lumped into the general anti-oppression workshops.” The lack of Asian perspectives in anti-racism work leads to the erasure of the real struggles and barriers that Asian Canadians endure in school settings. One major reason for the low priority attributed to dismantling anti-Asian racism involves how Asians are perceived as adjacent to whiteness due to the model minority myth (Han, 2019). This myth gives the illusion that Asians do not face barriers and therefore do not require support. An educator gives an example of how anti-Asian racism was dismissed, “when I asked my principal if we should be addressing the Atlanta murders at the staff meeting, I was told that the agenda was set and time wouldn't allow for more items.” The issue of invisibility is apparent, school leaders and the system asking Asian educators to keep their heads down and to refrain from rocking the corporate boat. Overall, participants felt the voices from Asian communities and specifically Asian educators were neglected and under-represented congruent with the literature (Museus & Park, 2015) and statistics in Canadian contexts (Statistics Canada, 2016). Almost all educators expressed that being involved in this study was the first time their identities and struggles have ever been acknowledged and they have always felt invisible throughout their professional experiences.

Bamboo Ceiling

Almost all participants felt road blocks of the bamboo ceiling at some point in their career trajectory. The bamboo ceiling is a phenomenon in which Asian employees face

barriers to hiring, advancement, and promotions, due to systemic issues that discriminate against Asian people (Yu, 2020). This ceiling is easily observable in the empirical data from Zhang and Shi (2021) investigating “the representation of Chinese Canadians in senior leadership positions in the greater Toronto area (GTA) (p. 1)” Overall, Chinese Canadians held 6 of the 203 senior leader positions or 2.96%, while only 2 of the 6 positions were women. In addition, not one school board from the 10 districts had a director of Chinese identity, despite the fact that 11.1 % of the GTA population is Chinese Canadians. In our study, many identified interpersonal racism faced in the workplace and did not know how to address racist acts or were too afraid of addressing racism for fear of retribution for career limiting actions. When asked about their career goals and aspirations, many participants stated they were too exhausted to think about career building because the pandemic brought on emotional fatigue. One educator who was transferring to another school talked about how their principal addressed them in a farewell speech:

My principal said a farewell speech for me when I was leaving the school. They had no idea who I was. My principal described me as a quiet, polite, demur and organized educator. I am not quiet or demur at all. I am actually very outspoken and I speak my mind loudly. This is why my principal didn't support me for promotion. They had no idea about my leadership qualities.

Our findings show that Asian educators are continually treated as a stereotype because they are viewed as obedient workers, who do not rock the boat, and keep their heads down. These stereotypical perceptions do not align with favourable leadership qualities, such as assertiveness and being bold. Another major issue that emerged involved white washed identities having advantages to moving up the promotion ladder. *“I noticed that Asian teachers who are socially outgoing, speak without an accent, and very extroverted, are favoured by the principal and are invited to more leadership opportunities.”* This is a systemic barrier in that educational institutions value white washed identities due to deeply entrenched colonial mindsets of leadership competencies and actions. This kind of discrimination results in very few Asian educators in leadership roles such as superintendent, associate director, and director.

Recommendations

Professional Learning for Leaders:

We recommend professional learning on dismantling anti-Asian racism for leaders of schools and school districts. By understanding and being aware of anti-Asian racism, principals, vice-principals, in-school leaders, senior district leaders, and trustees will be better equipped to dismantle racism of all kinds. Beyond leaders, all educators need to further understand the detrimental impact of anti-Asian racism that takes on forms of implicit bias toward Asian people. This includes challenging anti-Asian prejudice such as the model minority myth, de-sexualization of Asian men, fetishization of Asian women, viewing Asians as passive and obedient, judging Asian educators as non-leaders, and questioning Asians as perpetual foreigners.

Asian Diaspora Courses for Students, Staff and Educators:

Another recommendation involves courses for students, staff, and educators that focus on Asian Canadian Diasporas to further examine the contributions of Asian people and the challenges they face. Through course engagement, participants would explore systemic oppression that centers anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, and how anti-Asian hate is interconnected with all forms of oppression. Through supportive courses, students, staff, and educators would learn to appreciate the rich and diverse cultures of Asian diasporas and identities in which Asian voices are uplifted.

Race-Based Reporting:

We feel it would be important to gather district-wide reporting on demographic representation of students and staff, revealing race-based data on positions of power and allocation of resources. The aim of this kind of reporting is to shed light on any existing imbalance of power and resources when it comes to disproportionate underrepresentation of Asian educators in leadership positions, as well as disproportionate underfunding for schools that have high Asian populations. Many of the participants in this study faced barriers that served to exclude them from vice-principal and/or principal promotions, mainly because their principals believed they did not have leadership potential. These narratives were clear examples of the bamboo ceiling and are corroborated by research including a recent report highlighting that only 2.96% of Chinese Canadians held senior leader positions in 10 school boards across the GTA. Race-based reporting is required to determine who operates the positions of power and who is disproportionately underrepresented in the colonized structures that we call boards of education.

Affinity Groups:

Affinity groups occur when people gather together based on a specific social identity, such as race, gender, age, sexual identity. The aim of affinity spaces is to form an alliance by sharing similar personal narratives and common goals (Tauriac et. al., 2013). The need for Asian affinity groups among educators was strongly evident from our findings. Almost all participants expressed that their involvement in this study was the first time their Asian identity and struggles have ever been acknowledged. Further, many participants disclosed how they felt invisible throughout their professional experiences. Participants strongly voiced the need to continue the conversation about dismantling anti-Asian racism, even after the pandemic, in order to heal from the unrelenting surge of violence they observed. An affinity group for Asian educators would offer a safer space where participants would not be expected to explain their struggles of racism to white colleagues. Lastly, we feel that affinity spaces should focus on examining power, privilege, and participants' own lived experiences with systems of oppression in order to heal from the harms of racism and oppression.

Conclusion

Through the framework of critical race theory, we aimed to examine how racism is experienced by Asian Canadian educators during the height of the global pandemic. Our main research question was, *'How did the surge in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic impact Asian Canadian educators?'* We collected demographic data via online surveys, and interviewed 18 Asian Canadian educators from survey respondents. Using qualitative data analysis, we coded the data, and collapsed the codes into major categories. Participants' experiences and life narratives were framed by three major themes: mental health, invisibility, and the bamboo ceiling phenomenon. Each of these categories offer insight into how anti-Asian racism permeates the lives of Asian Canadian educators and their duties as teachers. We offer a series of recommendations to dismantle anti-Asian racism which include: 1) professional learning about dismantling anti-Asian racism in schools, 2) Asian diaspora courses for students, staff, and educators, 3) race-based reporting and, 4) Asian affinity groups. This research gives a snapshot of the harm and exhaustion that Asian Canadian educators endured during a time where acts of anti-Asian hate surged relentlessly.

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