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### Voices of Mixed-Race Asian Students on College Campuses

Amy Sara Lim

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# Voices of Mixed-Race Asian Students on College Campuses

## Comments

This thesis was written for Chapman University Honors Program's Capstone class and presented at the 2020 Annual University Honors Conference.

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Voices of Mixed-Race Asian Students on College Campuses

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HON 498: Honors Capstone Seminar

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## Introduction

*“Children of partial Asian descent continue to be raised in racial environments where they do not get the support and nourishment they need from the adults around them which has serious implications for not only their future but also the future of society at large” (Chang 2016, 5)*

“What are you?”

This was a question I was commonly asked on the school playground while other children were asked about what game they were going to play and their hobbies, interests, passions. Somehow this question weaved itself into conversation, and my external characteristics became a larger point of interest to my classmates than what game I was going to play at recess or how many questions I got right on the last math test. My answer, “I’m 75% Chinese and 25% British” was often met by curiosity, further questions, but sometimes denial, ridicule, and stereotypes. “Does your father have a long beard and meditate? Do you eat crumpets for breakfast in the morning? No, it’s impossible for you to be British. I’m British, and you don’t look like me.” Not only was I questioned by my peers, I was frequently questioned by teachers, parents, faculty, all of them curious as to how I had such light skin compared to my dark mother and why my eyes were almond-shaped but hazel. As a multiracial Asian woman, my identity was either the only thing people could see or conversely, it rendered me invisible.

When asked to “mark one ethnicity” on standardized tests and documents, I found myself unable to be identified by any one box. I searched for images of myself in every book we read in school, but alas, every character was white or monoracial. There were no clubs on campus to give me a platform nor history classes to teach about the privileges and oppressions mixed-race

people face. I was and am constantly frustrated that my multiracial identity was only relevant in school settings on culture celebration days, when people were curious, or when it didn't fit nicely into the "mark one ethnicity" category.

My experience is not singular nor is it an anomalous occurrence for mixed-race people in today's education system. It is one of many stories—stories that must be searched for, told, listened to, and recorded. This research project is fueled not only by my own personal experience but also my desire to learn more about others' experiences and struggles. The stories of multiracial students need to be heard to make the invisible *visible*. The importance is not only personal but extremely relevant in a nation and world that becomes increasingly multiracial each day. The goal of this study is to develop an empirically-informed theoretical model of a mixed-race Asian American critical pedagogy that: a) identifies and highlights the stories of mixed-race Asian American students that contributes to the qualitative aspect of their educational experiences, b) offers a clear conceptualization of how social agents within academic institutions can both positively and negatively affect, affirm, or disempower mixed-race students, and c) conceptually maps the struggles of mixed-race Asian students that has previously been excluded from academic research.

### **Multiracial Asians in America**

The number of multiracial people is on the rise with data predicting multiracial youth as the fastest growing youth group in this country (Chang 2016, 3; Khanna 2004, 115; Literte 2009, 191-192; Census 2010). The 2010 Census was the first census to allow for people to self-identify as more than one race. Of the growing multiracial population in 2010, 2.6 million reported as

Asian in combination with one or more races (Chang 2016, 6; Census 2010). The data showed that the majority of mixed-race Asian people live in California, Hawaii, or Texas, and have a median age of 24 (Chang 2016; Literte 2009). Research suggests that there are a growing number of people who identify as mixed-race Asian Americans, and thus there is a growing need to understand and document their experiences (Literte, 2009). However, despite the relevant need to explore, examine, and conceptualize mixed-race Asian identity, there are few studies on the racial identity of multiracial or mixed-race Asian demographic and little representation for mixed-race Asians in curriculum and academia (Chang 2016, 3; Khanna 2004).

The current invisibility of mixed-race Asian students, combined with their growing existence, necessitates more research and representation, particularly in the contexts of mixed-race Asian students' experiences in school and the intersection of their racial identity with their identity as students. Research on multiracial Asian students and education is virtually nonexistent with the scant amount of research focusing mostly on socialization of the child or the comparison of multiracial students to their monoracial counterparts (Chang 2016; Smith & Maton 2015). In the research that does exist, the logic of essentialism or purity comes into question. Within home and personal environments, Dr. Hiroko Katoka at UCSB researched the advocacy of rigorous immersion into students' parent's language and programmatic language schedules (speaking English on certain days at home and Japanese on others) in his study "Japanese Children in America". The results of this study address behaviors like this that force a mixed-race Asian student to keep their two races separate and discrete, and produce the anxiety of not feeling like a *whole*. Within American racial discourse, there seems to be a mechanism that strives to keep the "other" separate from the "self". This translates into race itself being

essentialized whether it is through forms and documents that force a student to pick one race or through social discourse wherein mixed-race Asian students experience a fragmentation of identity or oscillate between one “pure” race or the other.

### **Definitions**

This research study uses terms of race, mixed-race, multiracial, and Asian. Here, I draw upon Sharon H. Chang’s previous work from 2016: *Raising Mixed Race: Multiracial Asian Children in a Post-Racial World*. This comprehensive book was written recently by a female scholar whose research is critical and interdisciplinary—aligning closely with the aims of my own research.

Chang discusses race and racial identity from a sociological perspective rather than a scientific one. Contextualized as a social construction, “race is a psychosocial belief system made up and maintained by whites (mostly men) to justify and protect their interests [...] Race is a social construct that assumes people can be grouped by observable physical characteristics of phenotype” (Chang 2016, 12-13). It is also important to note that the Asian race, while it is entangled with culture, is packed with many diverse cultures. That is to say, there are a multitude of cultures that exist within the “Asian” racial category. From a historical perspective, Carl Linneas (1707-1778), Swedish botanist and grandfather of modern biological taxonomy, proposed four taxa of Homo Sapiens based on origin and skin color: *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Europeanus* (Hallgren & Weiner 2006, 1). Those of the Asiaticus race were thought of as sallow, avaricious and easily distracted (Hallgren & Weiner 2006). Throughout history other scholars have made different counts of how many races there are and the varying distinctions between them. Determining what separates the Japanese from the Chinese and any

other prescribed races is a discursive creation shaped by social groups, social existence, and white hegemony. The conflation of race proves the arbitrariness of this discourse yet displays the power behind *who* is assigning these arbitrary signs. Specifically within modern discourse, early US Censuses collected racial data as a proxy for slave status and later to distinguish anyone with one-drop of African blood (Sandefur et al. 2004). Blood quantum is used to determine Native American ancestry and the amount of land the government decides to give to them. These white mechanisms of oppression, alienation, and categorization for the purpose of persecution are pervasive in any research on race and those of multiple races. In American racial discourse and history, race is used as a linguistic marker to separate the “other” from the dominant, white majority.

In this study I use the terms mixed-race and multiracial interchangeably to mean a person who is a combination of two or more of the federally mandated races (Chang 2016). It is notable that the US government has had power over which races were included on the Census, and it was not until the 1800s that Chinese, Japanese and Filipino were added categories on the Census and later Korean, Vietnamese, and Asian Indian (Sandefur et al. 2004). The option to check more than one race did not appear until the Census of 2000. Specifically within Chang’s theoretical framework, a multiracial or mixed-race Asian person is one who identifies as Asian in combination with another other than Asian (Chang 2016). It is important to note that “races other than Asian” are not limited to white. Within this study, I define a multiracial or mixed-race Asian person as one who self-identifies with Asian in combination with another race.

For the purposes of inclusivity and straying away from white-framed perspectives of Asian races, Asian in the context of this study will cover the entire continent of Asia (within the

landmass of Eurasia), including the population of the subcontinent of India/ Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands, as well as indigenous populations. This is not to subsume the Pacific Islanders with Asians into a panethnicity that denies the distinct and complex differences and social processes that either group has. The purpose of keeping a broader definition of “Asian” is to acknowledge the greater diversity within this white-framed label (which is usually thought to mean East Asian populations with lighter skin tones than their South or Southeast Asian counterparts).

### **Theoretical Perspectives and an Interdisciplinary Approach**

Research suggests that there are a growing number of people who identify as mixed-race Asian Americans, and thus there is a growing need to understand and document their experiences (Literte, 2009). It is essential to explore and document the experiences of mixed-race Asian Americans to gain a better understanding of their social, racial, cultural, and academic identities and how we can improve school environments and curriculum for the increasingly mixed-race future. Multiracial Asian’s racial identity affects their social, emotional, and physical experiences within academic institutions. Through surveys and interviews, this project explores the experiences and educations of mixed-race Asian university students with the purpose of conceiving a critical mixed-race pedagogy that will inform educators, students, and parents of a pressing need for a diverse and progressive approach to education. When drawing upon theory to inform the framework of my research, I turn to critical pedagogy (also sometimes known as social reconstructionism or culturally relevant pedagogy), socioemotional learning, race/identity studies, sociology, and history.

Although this project focuses on mixed-race Asian students, the common denominator for each of these students is their identification with multi-racial Asian. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the history, legislation and social experiences of Asian Americans to frame what each of these mixed-race Asian students has in their family history and personal experience. Asian Americans, in this study meaning racially identifying with the subcontinent of Asia and the Pacific Islands, are subject to two polarizing stereotypes: the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner syndrome. Both stereotypes have their basis in history and legislature in America, and both have implications for microaggressions and stereotypes that multiracial Asians may also be subject to. People oscillate between these two psychological mechanisms when confronted with otherness. These two psychological mechanisms of racism project ambivalence as to what it means to be Asian American and therefore also contributes to the equivocation surrounding multiracial Asian identities.

The model minority myth, first coined by sociologist William Petersen, was popularized in the 1960s to use Japanese Americans as an antithesis to African Americans (Shih et al. 2019, Poon et al. 2016). Petersen emphasized in an article he wrote for *The New York Times* that the family structure and cultural emphasis on hard work was what allowed Japanese Americans to overcome discrimination and achieve economic success comparative to their white counterparts (Kasinitz et al. 2008). This idea has permeated into the stereotypes of Asians in general, generating an image of success and social and economic equality that renders Asians seemingly free from difficulties or oppression in America. The model minority myth suggests and assumes that Asian Americans, unlike other minorities, are able to assimilate well into the dominant culture of America to gain this “model” status of being equal to whites. The hard-working Asian

is seen as problem-free, often leaving them out of research and policy considerations (Shih et al. 2019). Asian Americans are already overlooked and made invisible by the model minority myth, promoting the hegemonic ideology that assimilation into one dominant group should eliminate racism and discrimination. What this means for multiracial Asian Americans is that they could easily also be overlooked and made invisible by the notion that they do not face any discrimination and have achieved full integration into the dominant culture, especially because they are mixed. However, while Asian culture has been defined as hard-working and worthy of making Asians the “model” minority, this same culture conversely labels them as perpetual foreigners.

The perpetual foreigner syndrome, like the model minority myth uses Asian culture, but to denigrate Asians instead of explaining their socioeconomic achievements. The perceived work ethic that bolstered the Asian identity as the “model minority” also worked against them to produce the nativist sentiment that perceived them as the “yellow peril”—stealing jobs from white Americans and presenting a danger to the Western world” (Shih et al. 2019). As a result, Congress passed a series of laws and acts prohibiting Chinese immigration including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1892 Geary Act. A more restrictive law was passed in 1917, The Immigration Act of 1917, which banned not only the Chinese but immigrants from a region including eastern Asian and the Pacific Islands. Asians were legally excluded and persecuted in the United States, forming normative practices that alienate Asians from ever truly becoming American or assimilating to American society. As a result of this legislation, the only way Chinese immigrants in the 1800s could get past U.S. immigration law was through opening a particular business (Lee 2015). By obtaining “merchant status”, these Chinese immigrants could

enter the United States and sponsor relatives, hence leading to the proliferation of Chinese restaurants across America (Lee, 2015). Not only were the Chinese persecuted by these laws and ideologies, but also Japanese American citizens. Japanese American citizens during World War II were held against their will in internment camps by order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. These actions were justified as a "military necessity" despite the proven loyalties of Japanese Americans; in contrast, no such actions were taken against German Americans or Italian Americans (Zhou 2012).

Asian Americans being seen as perpetual foreigners yet model minorities is a confusing and ambivalent image which renders the Asian American both as the exotic other and the "yellow peril". It is an empty signifier of identity that attempts to prescribe race as pure, essential, and crystallized when the reality of race and racial interactions in a social context is complicated, equivocal, and assailable. The racial mechanism of praising the Asian "other" as an ideal whilst denigrating them for their differences can also be attributed to the cultural field of study of orientalism. Orientalism was a scholarly discipline which emerged in 18th-century European centers of learning and their colonial outposts (Thomas 2014). It led to harmful, essentialized stereotypes, images, and ideas about a biologically inferior, culturally backward Asia that were laced with notions of colonialism, imperialism, power, and superiority (Sered 2017). The modern terms of "perpetual foreigner" and "model minority" are examples of the continuing impulse to stereotype Asian Americans into categories that those in power deem appropriate and useful to maintain power.

My essential question in regards to multiracial Asian students in educational spaces is: how is a student's identity as a learner within a classroom setting affected by their racial identity? If they are affected negatively by the historical, sociological, racial, emotional, and legal traumas of their past Asian ancestors, how is this reflected within educational environments? How can future educators create effective learning environments for all students, especially those of mixed-race? In socioemotional learning theory, classroom environment is quintessential for effective academic development which requires, "an environment where students feel socially and emotionally safe in taking the risks necessary to learn and grow. The essential character of that environment is the degree to which students feel known, cared about, included and supported" (Berman 2018, 3). The function of schools is not only to prepare our nation's children for the workforce, but also help cultivate humanity within each democratic citizen. Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy is reflective of this notion of liberating the oppressed and cultivating free-thinking human beings who are able to problem-pose and problem-solve within our democracy rather than replicating outlived traditions. Therefore, it is necessary to establish these safe environments, begin conversations about race and racial signifiers, and work to answer these essential questions about multiracial Asian students in America and the world.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

The concept of "mixed-race Asian American" identities is critical for researchers and educators interested in understanding and improving educational settings/institutions for a youth population that becomes increasingly "mixed-race" each year. This research is particularly prevalent for young, West Coast populations as "multiracial people tend to be disproportionately

young and concentrated on the West Coast, particularly in California and Hawaii [...] The median age for the two or more races' population is 23.4" (Literte, 2009, p. 191). Thus, college students are a target population to study and "have been instrumental in constructing a recognizable multiracial identity and raising awareness about the unique experiences and needs of multiracial people" (Literte, 2009, p.191-192). How might we more effectively address mixed-race Asian American students' (and mixed-race students') needs if we examine their educational experiences through an interdisciplinary, critical, and pedagogical framework? While some research has been conducted about mixed-race/multiracial/biracial identities in general (most of the studies within the past thirty years), there still remains a need to study specifically mixed-race Asian American populations in relation to education.

"Voices of Mixed-Race Asian Students on College Campuses" is a single-site case study at West University (pseudonym) that seeks to examine the experiences of mixed-race Asian students' experiences in education (including, but not limited to higher education). West University is a private, elite, 4-year university in Southern California. Socioeconomically, the majority of the student population is upper-middle class. The following research questions were addressed:

- How do social agents (teachers, peers, faculty, family members) in academic institutions play a role in mixed-race Asian students' identity formation?
- How does mixed-race Asian students' racial identity affect their sense of belonging in academic spaces?
- What spaces (physical and social) are available to mixed-race Asian students, and what spaces need to be created?

- What are the multiple meanings of mixed-race Asian identity?
- What experiences have mixed-race Asian students had that affected their educational careers in a positive or negative way?
- How does mixed-race identity operate as a social marker that exposes members of this group to both privilege and oppression within academia?
- How can the needs of mixed-race Asian students be effectively assessed in educational settings?

To reiterate the goal of this study, identifying and highlighting mixed-race Asian students' educational experiences, conceptualizing how social agents in schools can affirm or disempower mixed-race students, and mapping the struggles of mixed-race Asian students shall serve as the three major areas of analysis that will culminate in an empirically-informed theoretical model of a mixed-race Asian American critical pedagogy.

This is a single-semester (approximately 4-week) research project comprised of two phases. Phase one consisted of 30 surveys which were distributed through active recruitment emails to the larger student population to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The second phase was a single-site case study that examines the experiences of mixed-race Asian students in educational settings. This case study consisted of 3 online-conducted interviews, including one twin study, to collect qualitative data. Participation in this study required students to self-identify as mixed-race Asian. In combination, phase one and two produced both qualitative and quantitative data to then analyze, code, and identify themes.

### Participants and Setting

Participants included students at West University who self-identify as multiracial or mixed-race Asian students. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used as participants were selected or self-elected to participate based on their enrollment at West University and self-identification as multiracial or mixed-race Asian. Snowball sampling further grew the sample size. A total of 31 students participated in this research study— 31 survey takers, 3 of which also participated in interviews and one of which answered further follow-up questions via email.

Of the research study participants, 67.7% were female and 32.3% were male. Twenty-seven of the participants were born in the USA (87%), three were born in Tokyo, Japan, and one was born in Anhui Province, China. 6.5% were born in 1997, 25.8% were born in 1998, 25.8% were born in 1999, 19.45% were born in 2000, and 22.6% were born in 2001. The majority of participants identified as straight/heterosexual with one identifying as gay or lesbian and one identifying as bisexual. Over 50% of participants identified as second generation or later while 9.7% identified as first generation. Students were asked to self-identify/self-describe their ethnicity/race. There were multiple students who identified as the same race. The following unique racial-mix categories were described: Japanese & White, Chinese & Japanese (adopted into a family with one Asian parent and one white parent), Asian & White, Korean & German, Mixed Asian, Native Hawaiian & Caucasian & Hispanic & Native American, Korean & Caucasian, White & Japanese & Mexican, Filipino & Irish & Italian, German & Japanese, Filipino & Vietnamese & Cambodian, Chinese & White, Vietnamese & White, Portugese & Japanese & Spanish, Filipino & Japanese, Filipino & Norwegian & German & English, Hapa,

and African American & Asian Indian. The primary language for 96.8% of participants was English and 3.2% Japanese. A total of 41.9% spoke a second language including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Spanish. Within the parent demographic section of the survey, 87.1% of participants' mothers were Asian and 77.4% of participants' fathers were white.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In the first phase of the research, I contacted specific individuals through my student email whom I know identify as mixed-race Asian American. These students were invited to participate in the study by filling out a survey. In the email, I provided a brief overview of the study, its purpose, its affiliation with the Honors Program, offered to answer any questions the participant may have had, and ensured that all data remains anonymous. Using Google Forms as my data collection instrument, I collected 31 surveys that consisted of a brief background questionnaire to collect basic demographic information, a parental questionnaire to collect data on participants' parents, and a survey regarding the experiences they've had as mixed-race students. Students were given the opportunity to answer questions in a variety of ways on the survey. Some questions were multiple-choice, others were check off all that apply, and some were open-ended. The question asking participants to self-identify their race was left purposely open-ended so that participants could use any language they liked to answer this question. Participants had the option to opt-out of the research study at any time or not answer any question.

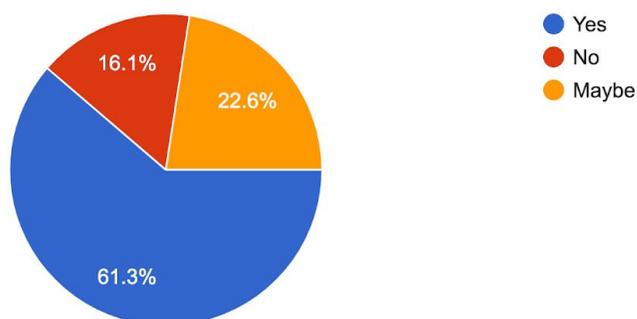
From the pool of 31 survey-takers, I emailed three to follow up with in a one-on-one interview. The three interviewees answered a set of thirteen interview questions with a

possibility of follow-up questions within the interview. These questions resembled the questions asked in the survey but asked for anecdotes and more specific examples of experiences participants have had as a mixed-race student. These interviews were either conducted via phone or video-calling platform on the internet.

## Findings

Have you ever felt that you had to choose between your races?

31 responses



Several significant themes emerged from the survey and interview data that reveal how students experience their mixed-race identity within academic contexts. Survey data indicated while students were of multiple races, they felt they had to “choose” to act more like one race or the other(s) another depending upon the environment. It is important to note that problems arose in analyzing this data because participants often confused racial identity with cultural, ethnic, and national identity. There is a necessary level of ambiguity that must be addressed. However, “acting” or behaving a certain way based on racial identifications is developed and sustained through social interactions between students, peers, and teachers— all of which was coded in this research study. Of the thirty-one survey participants, 19 felt as though they had to choose

between their races. This led to a fragmentation of identity for students, exacerbated by microaggressions and racist comments that criticized them for being too much like one race or not enough like their other race. Others felt as though they had to oscillate or ping pong between their races in order to fit in (though the results of this “acting” had varied success). Forceful hegemony of pure, essentialized race causes students to feel pressured to choose between their races which causes these dissonant, fragmenting, and confusing feelings. One participant lamented,

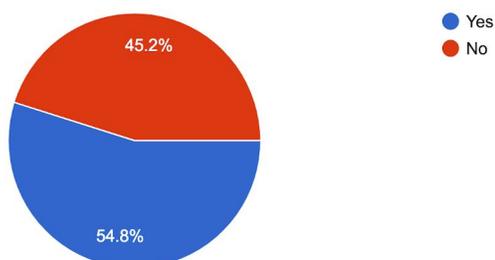
Being mixed made it difficult to choose between one race or another, and it was difficult to identify with either side as well, which gave me a disconnect.

This disconnect does not allow mixed-race Asian students to fully feel welcomed into either or any of the races that they belong to. A participant referred to this phenomenon of “being perceived as white by Asians or Asian by whites” as a “racial ping pong”. This study found that the majority of mixed-race Asian students have isolating and alienating experiences within school settings that lead to a racial ping pong or, on the other hand, fragmentation of their identity.

## ISOLATED AND ALIENATED IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

Have you ever felt like you didn't belong at school, in a class, in a particular academic activity, etc. because of your race?

31 responses



### Academic/Classroom

From open-ended questions in the survey and from individual interviews, the theme of isolation and separateness within academic school settings emerged. Academic school settings can mean interactions and experiences that take place within a classroom or outside a classroom (i.e. on a field trip) that surrounds curriculum and learning experiences. 41.9% of participants reported that they felt that their race gave them a disadvantage in school, and 54.8% said that they felt like they did not belong at school, in a class, or in a particular academic activity because of their race. These described experiences encompass the entirety of the participants' educational careers— including experiences they've had at West University. Specifically regarding the Asian part of their racial makeup, multiracial Asian students experienced Asian-specific microaggressions that led to a perceived advantage (model minority myth) or a perceived incompetence (perpetual foreigner syndrome) in academic settings. A participant commented, "people made me inferior for my mom coming from another country and questioned my ability", illustrating the way in which the perpetual foreigner syndrome, ("my mom coming from another

country”), led to this student’s academic competence being questioned. On the contrary, other participants remarked, “[it is] beneficial at times to be Asian, other times Asians are expected to do better”, “playing certain instruments makes me feel ‘more Asian,’ like when I had to play violin in middle/ high school”, “the asian community of students tend to be more motivated academically due to asian parenting”, and “being in AP/Honors classes" made them associate with their Asian side more. Much like their monoracial Asian counterparts, it seems from the data that multi-racial Asians still experience similar alienation and are thought to be academically less able than their white peers because of their perpetual Asian-ness and foreignness. Yet this same concept of “Asian” is flipped when Asian and mixed-race Asian students are expected to perform better in school due to cultural upbringing, emphasis on academics and cultivating talents, and a constant pressure to enroll in college-preparatory courses. A participant acknowledged, “sometimes I feel I am put to higher standards academically because of my Asian appearance/parent”. While this is not only unfair and gives in to harmful Asian stereotypes, it also suggests that the more Asian a mixed-race Asian student appears, the more Asian microaggressions and racism they are likely to experience. At the university level, one student gave an anecdote of how professors and students in college assumed they were intelligent or understood the material better simply because they were Asian. It seems that the binary of perpetual foreigner/model minority is not only common between Asian students and mixed-Asian students, but follows them throughout their academic careers. Multiracial Asian students in the classroom are sometimes seen only for their Asian side as illustrated by one student’s experience:

Sometimes if I am the only POC identifying, the students/teachers would look to me in the event of questions surrounding diversity. I also have had a lot of generally racist

remarks directed at me (i.e. “you can’t be a writer. Chinese people can’t speak English well.”)

Instead of being recognized for being multiracial, mixed-race Asian students often have experiences where they are seen as only one race whether it is complimentary or degrading. Within the contexts of learning, being portrayed as a token Asian minority is an erasure of mixed-race identity when multiracial Asian students are seen as monoracial. When multiracial Asian students are only seen as Asian and experience microaggressions and racism within the classroom, it alienates and exoticizes them in ways that are harmful to their education. A student shared their experiences having a Japanese middle name during roll call: “Many often question my middle name, which is Yukiyo, and then continue to question me about my background and what an ‘interesting’ middle name it is”. Continual, alienating questioning about the Asian aspects of their identity, being labelled as “interesting”, and having their names scrutinized can feel alienating to mixed-race students when the attention is called to them in a negative way. Students are disempowered when social agents in their academic settings use their race to scapegoat and essentialize their inherent “interestingness” and academic ability. While it isn’t always a directly negative comment, comments that are supposed to be compliments may do as much damage: “One time when I was abroad, my teacher complimented me on my English language skills, even though I am fully American”. The harm in Asian microaggressions and racism towards multi-racial Asian students is two-fold: 1) They feel uncomfortable in their school environments because they are either seen as the perpetual Asian foreigner or the model minority and 2) They experience a cognitive dissonance by only being recognized as Asian, ultimately rendering the other parts of their racial identity invisible. These are the ingredients of the fragmentation of identity that mixed-race students experience.

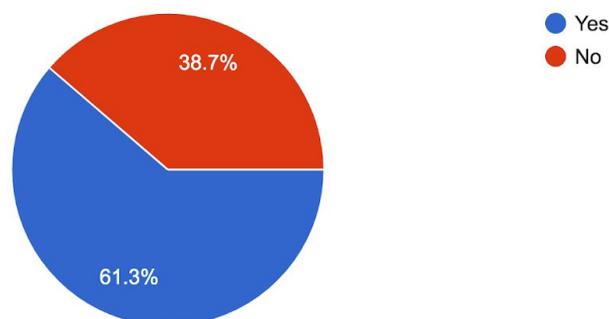
A participant related these feelings of discomfort and dissonance to their experience within a classroom:

Growing up in a predominantly white community, it often just felt like I did not belong in the same classroom and I felt uncomfortable in my learning environment. Additionally, it was clear some of my teachers had certain prejudices that affected my learning.

Without the security of a comfortable learning environment in which they feel accepted, mixed-race students suffer and point out the racial aspect of their discomfort as stemming from being in the minority and experiencing prejudice. Socioemotional research has shown that “effective academic development requires an environment where students feel socially and emotionally safe in taking the risks necessary to learn and grow. The essential character of that environment is the degree to which students feel known, cared about, included and supported” (Berman 2018, 3). Being alienated, having isolating experiences, and experiencing a lack of comfort in their learning environments negatively impacts mixed-race students’ ability to learn effectively in the classroom.

Have you ever felt that you couldn't see your own racial experiences reflected in school curriculum?

31 responses



In direct classroom instruction specifically, lacking representation in curriculum was a common thread throughout students' experiences:

I think the most impactful way it affected my educational experience was having a lack of representation in the curricula. In history classes, there was little attention paid to Spanish/Portuguese history (except when talking about colonization/the slave trade) and I only remember hearing about Japanese people when discussing internment camps during WWII. In literature classes, I don't think I read any books with significant characters that shared any of my racial backgrounds. Furthermore, I don't think much attention was paid to mixed-race characters or historical figures in general.

Students noted that on questionnaires, standardized test demographics, and other forms, racial categories were very limiting and forced them to select only one race.

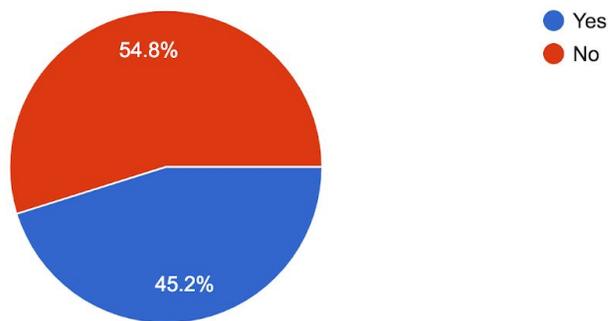
Many times I just select "other" and put "mixed" because I don't think I fully belong to "white" "Asian" or "Hispanic". Mostly, I've just felt like I'm not "enough" of any of my races. Sure I fall into each of those categories, but I don't feel super connected to any of them because I'm mixed [...] they represent the feeling I have of being forced into boxes that I don't think I fit into very well.

These experiences further alienate mixed-race students who are being asked to choose between their races when the reality is that they may not identify as one or the other, or have a clear conceptualization as to which box to choose. This leads to feelings of incompleteness, despair, confusion, and anger. When students are unable to negotiate these feelings, this leads to the fragmentation of their identity and their racial freeze—frozen between two or more than two essentialized categories which do not fully and accurately describe them.

## Social

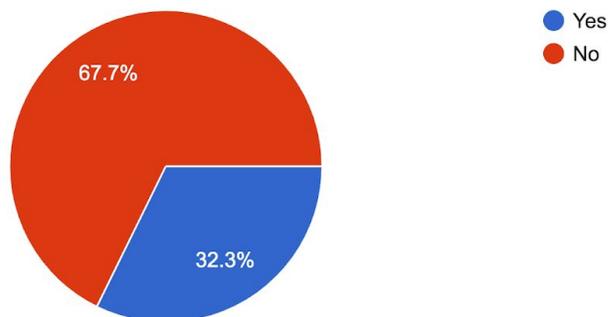
Have you ever felt excluded from certain social groups or activities at school because of your race?

31 responses



Have you ever been bullied at school because of your race?

31 responses



Not fitting in is a common adolescent lament that mixed-race Asian students experience on another level. Survey data indicated that 45.2% of participants felt that they were excluded from certain social groups or activities at school because of their race. This data offers a conceptualization of how social agents within academic settings not necessarily dedicated to curriculum are very likely to disempower mixed-race Asian students by “otherizing” them

whether intentionally or not. While not all students mentioned that they were affected in strictly academic settings in schools, they did note that socially, their racial identity was in constant scrutiny:

It has affected me more in a social setting. For example, my white friends see me as Asian, but my Asian friends see me as white. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong to either side, which can be very confusing at times.

Friends and peers play a large role in students' immediate social groups, shaping their sense of belonging within school environments. The racial ping pong described by this student is exacerbated by peers' perceptions of their race— seemingly, much of the power to ascribe racial identities in schools is by social agents including peers. These racial judgements are often made based on phenotype or appearance which can work for or against the student. One student said, “I never had a true place to fit in because I was mixed. I do not look Indian so I did not relate with students or I was not black enough for other kids” while another student said, “I think that since I am passing, I haven't really been treated differently because of my race. I can remember people associating some stereotypes with me or making lighthearted jokes but nothing that really made me feel different”. The overall theme gleaned from these statements is that peer groups and other social agents within school settings determine the belonging of multiracial Asian students largely through appearance. As is the case with the first student, looking ambiguous can translate into the racial ping pong experience whereas being white-passing generally offers some protection from this experience. A student affirmed this white-passing protection: “I feel like mixed kids who have “white” mixed in are definitely treated better than others”. Another participant similarly confirmed, “it definitely feels like an advantage to have some white mixed into whatever other race you are”. However, even students who are “half-white” describe that

they “felt like an outsider here. It wasn't until I joined Asian clubs (Nikkei Student Union) that I felt like I belonged”. It is unclear from the data if mixed-race students are more generally accepted by their Asian peers as is the case with this student who felt a greater sense of belonging after joining the Asian clubs at their school. However, what is clear from the data is that social agents within school settings are still governed by Eurocentric ideologies which picks out “what is different” and what otherizes these students. A participant admitted, “usually I'm lumped in with the Asians because that's what's more different [about me].”

### Code-Switching and Transforming Self

Students negotiate the academically-centered and socially-centered experiences they have in school through code-switching and transforming themselves in order to combat any dissonance, discomfort or pain experienced. One participant made up for the lack of multi-racial literature in schools by doing her own supplemental reading:

My learning was supplemented by the reading I did outside of school. I read a lot of different American Girl books that featured girls of different backgrounds and a few of them aligned with my own. In addition, I read various (picture/story/chapter) books that came from different areas of the world so at home I kind of made up for the lack of representation at school.

Despite the resourcefulness, creativity, and initiative present in this participant, it is notable that she had to seek these resources outside of her school and classroom. Her negotiations with the Euro-centric curriculum could not happen within the classroom because such a confronting, revolutionary curriculum does not exist. While home environments certainly affect students' educational experiences and a lack of multi-racial curriculum in schools implies that these topics

are not important enough to study in school. Negotiating this problem through supplemental home reading is merely a temporary solution until curricular advancements are made.

Other, more socialized variations of strategies included code-switching depending on the environment. When a participant was asked how she thought mixed-race Asian students were perceived on college campuses, she said,

I think they are kind of made to choose on campus, like there is no mixed-race club, its BSU or Indian dance club, etc. I felt like I had to choose which race I wanted to identify with or if I choose both I would have to code-switch a lot.

Because of the lack of clubs and lack of a shared cultural and racial space for mixed-race Asian students, this student illustrates the difficult decision that she has to make when choosing which clubs to join on campus. She acknowledges the dissonance that would come from the pressure of having to choose between the clubs and the negotiation she would have to make of “code-switching” should she choose both. This leads to students perceiving race as an “act” that is to be performed and switched on and off depending upon what their current environment necessitates. Students use this code-switching method by either attempting to act more like one race or by hiding one race. A student acknowledged the intersection between their race and cultural clubs:

I participated in a Filipino cultural club in middle school and felt the need to be more overtly Filipino to fit in.

As demonstrated by this student’s need to “be more overtly Filipino”, race is described as performative and socially constructed rather than biological. Although there is an arbitrariness of the signifiers of race, this arbitrariness does not equate to race being unimportant. Race is a pervasive topic in modern discourse, and reveals the positionality of mixed-race students when

they feel as though they must perform race a certain way in order to belong. Part of this performance can include hiding a race:

My elementary school was mostly white, and I wanted to fit in. I tried to hide the Japanese part of me, even though at home I was speaking Japanese and I was going to Japanese school on the weekends.

Student's identity continues to fragment when they negotiate their identities through constantly switching acts to adapt to their environment. This participant who felt that they had to hide their Japanese race at their predominantly white school shows the devastating effects of a rigidly euro-centric curriculum.

Furthermore mixed-race students' social affiliations or clubs/organization choices are perceived as other ways in which they are associated more with one race or the other:

I think mixed-race students may be judged on which social group they involve themselves in. For instance, some halfies may join Asian social clubs (APSA, KASA, VSA, etc.) and may be considered more Asian than others who do not join it. However, halfies who join frats and sororities can be depicted as more "white-washed" and have a complete disconnect with their Asian heritage and background.

Code-switching and transforming self, while motivated by a mixed-race Asian student's need to negotiate dissonance, pain and discomfort, is translating into further judgements from peers and other social agents within school settings. By choosing to associate with Asian social clubs or Greek life, it seems that multiracial Asian students' choice is loaded with racial, social, and cultural implications. The connection and intersection between race and culture is clear here, demonstrating that race is a defining category that also determines which cultures multiracial Asian students can and are "supposed to" participate in. These negotiations are neither healthy nor do they contribute to effective learning environments. Instead, they cause more

fragmentation and make racial ping-ponging an exhausting yet quotidian aspect of a mixed-race Asian student's life.

### A Different Experience For Everyone

However, not every participant in the study experienced oppression, discrimination, pain, discomfort, fragmentation of identity, and racial ping pong. It is unclear if this is due to their possible white-passing appearance or other factors. Nevertheless, it contributes to the idea that race, even a mix of races, is not essentialized, pure, or stereotypical. A sampling of what students said included:

- “In my own experience, I felt received on this campus and I was able to find a place. Regardless of my race like that didn't really affect my experience, but I know that's not the same for everyone else”.
- “I don't think it's ever been a source of pain or discomfort. I was one of very few Asian kids, and there were rarely other hapas in school with me. However, I never really let race determine my happiness at school. I have always felt proud of my race”.
- “Overall education-wise, it has not affected me that much. I was fortunate to have gone to school with a pretty understanding student body”.

Further, a twin study offers more insight into how mixed-race Asian students experience their racial identities very differently from one another. Through non-probability purposive sampling, this twin case study was conducted over the phone in separate interviews. The twins involved in this study are male, identified as “half Japanese half white”, and are monozygotic or identical. Twin studies are useful in psychological research and to this research project as they

offer an example where the variable for genetics is held constant. With genetics/biology the same for both participants, the cause of their experiences is “nurture” versus “nature”, meaning that socially-shaping experiences are more clearly seen to impact these individuals. The twins in this study, Fred and George (pseudonyms), were asked the same set of interview questions with different follow-up questions depending upon how they answered the initial question. They were not present for each other’s interviews so as to not bias either of their answers.

One of the first questions they were asked was, “When did you first become aware of your ‘multiracialness’? What was that like?” Their answers are as follows:

FRED: I don’t remember when I realized— so very young. I think my whole life, when we were in strollers, Asian moms and stuff would always be interested in what our nationality is— “oh are they mixed”— like dogs. I think I just always heard that.

GEORGE: Middle school. Well I remember in elementary school we were always “the Asian kids”. Once we started hanging out with more Asian people they were like “you’re *half* Asian” and I was like “oh, really? Is that different?” And well, all the Asian girls liked it in 8th grade.

While Fred describes a more innate experience of knowing about his multiracial identity his “whole life” from the time they were in strollers, George describes a much later awakening in his middle school years. Both mention negative aspects of this awakening through the connotation of “like dogs” and George questioning if being “half-Asian” was really that different. However, it is clear that Fred’s multiracial identity has been a layer over his reality from a young age while George’s answer implies a more socially-constructed response to his race in his middle school years— noting specific peer group interactions within school. This demonstrates the formative effects of schools and social agents within school on the formation of a multiracial identity.

When asked, “how has your race affected your education experience?”, Fred and George offered contrasting answers once again.

FRED: I would say that it has not really affected my education besides the fact that most of the time Asians are expected to perform higher .

GEORGE: They always paired me up with another Asian kid. One time we were going to Knotts Berry Farm [...] then the special-ed kids were going to Knotts with us and my teacher, she just put five of her students in with them. Later on the next day, I asked my mom and then the teacher, “can I not be in that group because I don't have any friends in there?”, and she’s like “oh well, I’ll just put one of your friends in there. I’ll bring Kaito (pseudonym)”. And so, he was the other Japanese kid in my class, and I was like “nice, I’m not even close with him”. Just because I’m Asian means I’m friends with the other Asian kid.

A more casual answer from Fred denies that his multiracial identity had a significant impact on his education other than the influence of the Asian model minority myth. However, again, George describes a more negative experience being stereotyped in school. Because his teacher assumed that because he was mixed-race Japanese he would also be friends with the other Japanese student in the class, George speaks of this experience with resentment even over a decade later. Despite being identical twins, Fred and George have had different experiences in school depending upon their experiences and whether the social agents they encountered disempowered and stereotyped them. It is possible that George was made more aware of his race in school through the actions of teachers and peers:

*Have you been asked questions regarding your race in school? By whom? How did you answer?*

FRED: Well the only thing I can think of like an AP test or those California State Testing. They always ask what your nationality is. So that’s the only thing I can think of.

GEORGE: People always ask. Teachers always ask when they say my name. And then kids are like what kind of “nese” are you?

George reports constant questioning as part of his school life, noting that it is his name and his Asian race that is always questioned. It is important to note that Fred and George both have Japanese names, but George comments that he has been questioned about it while Fred does not

mention this. Possibly, Fred has experienced this as well, but choosing which race to bubble in on his documents stood out more to him during the interview.

When asked about ways in which schools, teachers, administrators, etc. can make mixed-race students feel more accepted and understood in academic spaces, Fred deems his school environments as accepting and diverse while George notes the invisibility of mixed-race students in curriculum and the lack of comradery or a shared space for mixed-race students:

*What are ways that schools, teachers, administrators, etc., can make mixed-race students feel more accepted and understood in academic spaces?*

FRED: I never felt unaccepted, so I wouldn't really know what they would do differently. But maybe some other schools in other areas are less diverse and they would have something to say about that, but my schools were pretty diverse and accepting.

GEORGE: Well I've never learned about a half-Asian person before. I feel like when black people hear about some black people they're like "ya brother". And I feel like I can relate to all people... but not totally.

George's comment about black people hearing about their histories in school and creating a sense of community and comradery from it is contrasted with his own experience in which he feels like he can only partially relate to all people. His dissatisfaction contrasts with Fred's overall positive responses. The illustration of the contrasts of Fred and George's answers reiterates the point that race itself is an arbitrary signifier and that race is shaped through cultural, historical, social, and discursive formations. Not every mixed-race Asian student has the same experience in school settings— not even identical twins.

## Theoretical Contributions

### Creating Space for Mixed-Race Students: A Critical Pedagogical Approach

As a result of this project and my findings, I have developed a critical mixed-race pedagogy that combines Paulo Freire's ideology and aims with the data I've collected. Because "scholarly work on multiracials and education is virtually nonexistent" (Smith & Maton 2015, 197), there is a pressing need for a theoretical model to be developed, even though this project is in its infant stages. Schools are institutions in which social problems can be redressed, specifically through classroom environments which enhance experiential, sociocultural, and real-world learning (Alridge 2008). Drawing upon Paulo Freire's model of critical pedagogy, I use his concepts of problem-posing education, liberation, and praxis, (all of which will be explained in my theoretical framework), to develop these two key points:

1. Creating an Accepting Environment.
  - a. Students should feel safe and accepted in their classroom.
  - b. Educators, teachers, and students should become educated on the construction and mechanisms of race and racism.
2. Space for Conversation, Inquiry, and Expression.
  - a. After establishing a safe, accepting environment, voices of mixed-race students and people should be heard through conversation, inquiry, and various forms of expression.
  - b. Current curriculum should be revised to be more inclusive and representative of student populations.

## Creating an Accepting Environment

In order for students to be able to effectively learn in schools and for teachers to effectively implement critical pedagogical aims, a safe and accepting environment must be established. Research has shown that the socioemotional states of these environments have a profound impact on students' ability and willingness to learn (Berman 2018). The first step to creating such an environment begins with educating teachers, administrators, faculty, and students on the experiences, microaggressions, and racism that the majority of mixed-race students encounter. Creating an awareness of how social agents in school settings can affect the well-being and mental state of students is important to learn how to avoid alienating or exoticizing students. Participants in the study concurred that there are many ways social agents in schools can create a safer, more accepting environment:

There are so many ways. 1) Learn basic pronunciation of foreign words or defer to a student in class who knows. You can always give a little disclaimer that you don't know the pronunciation well. 2) Nip any xenophobic behavior, attitude, or words in the bud. Racism can't be written off as "just a joke," it's just not funny.

I feel that schools, teachers, and administrators have to make it clear that the campus and classroom are safe spaces for people and that they get the same treatment as any other student. Full or mixed. I think awareness is a big part and incorporating in any classroom environment is what is needed.

Mixed-race students, or any students for that matter, should never have their identities denied or invalidated through inappropriate questioning or be forced to conform into one category or another. The data has shown that the forcefulness of this hegemony causes mixed-race students to feel as if they are fragmenting or being forced to oscillate between identities. Instead, social agents in schools should simply validate identities and foster critical conversations and inquiry.

### Space for Conversation and Expression

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* outlines a type of education called "banking education" that is anesthetizing, inhibiting, and assumes that students are empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. If we do not question our current curriculum, pedagogies, philosophies, and current ways of teaching, we will become stuck in the cycle of "banking education" which perpetuates the same mechanisms and ideologies throughout history. Instead, Freire proposes "problem-posing education" which involves a "constant unveiling of reality". Freire describes the difference between banking education and problem-posing education: "the former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire 81). This contributes to a critical mixed race pedagogy by encouraging conversations which "unveil reality" through the voices and visibility of mixed-race experiences. This intervention or liberation of these voices into the curriculum is a praxis that Paulo Freire believes can only be realized by taking action. This action begins in the classroom.

Mixed-race Asian students in this study call for conversation. They call for spaces to be created in which they can express themselves and create a community. They call for understanding, acceptance, and visibility. In the true spirit of praxis and problem-posing education, I conclude this paper with the voices of mixed-race Asian students and the revolutionized education they would like to see.

### The Voices of Mixed-Race Asian Students on College Campuses

What are ways that schools, teachers, administrators, etc., can make mixed-race students feel more accepted and understood in academic space?

- ❖ Demographic information should be expanded so that students don't feel like they have to choose between parts of themselves. There can also be an expansion of the examples that teachers use in class to include mixed-race students.
- ❖ Mixed race students are of a high population, but I wish there was a club specifically for mixed race students.
- ❖ Start the conversation!!!
- ❖ I think implementing conversations about family and culture is very important. It would be even better if it were started at a young age, so people don't feel like they have to hide a part of themselves. Although it can be a difficult conversation to have, it is much better to have an opportunity to speak about your experiences rather than having them bottled up. It is really unfortunate that people are put into a box based on just appearance, and are made to feel like they don't have a chance to fully express and explore who they are. Incorporating these conversations into the school curriculum, can help all students feel like they belong.
- ❖ Incorporate minority lenses of looking at history.
- ❖ I believe that talking more about the mixed-race experiences in the US (during history classes for example) would make us feel more accepted.
- ❖ I would just like to see better representation in the curricula. I think this is especially valid because our society is continuing to get more and more "mixed" as time goes on. The mixed race experience is different from other minority experiences, even if there is overlap, and I think it is important to validate it and educate people about it.
- ❖ I don't think colleges really know what to do with mixed-race students because there hasn't been much awareness about them. I also don't think they realize how many mixed-race students exist because their demographic measures are so limited.
- ❖ West University does not necessarily have the best diversity recognition. Usually mixed race people are thrown into the category of POC, which is true, but the mixed-race experience is so different and a conversation that hasn't really been talked about. It would be great if college campuses had resources for mixed-race kids to have a safe space where they can talk about their experiences.
- ❖ Simply validate it. I hate it when someone questions me about my race or tells me that I am more of one than the other. I wish it was more common to just let people be mixed.

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