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(Re)Inventing Ourselves: An AsianCrit Analysis of Counternarratives of Asian American Women Who Lead in K–12 Public School Systems

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(Re)Inventing Ourselves: An AsianCrit Analysis of Counternarratives of

Asian American Women Who Lead in K–12 Public School Systems

by

Ella Farinas

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(Re)Inventing Ourselves: An AsianCrit Analysis of Counternarratives of

Asian American Women Who Lead in K–12 Public School Systems

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

For my family, real and chosen.

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ABSTRACT

(Re)Inventing Ourselves: An AsianCrit Analysis of Counternarratives of
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Despite what is known about the importance of diversity in the educator workforce, Asian American women (AAW) are not named in conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in leadership. The purpose of this qualitative study was to build on the limited research on AAW in social justice leadership (SJL), explore the lived experiences of AAW educators, and elevate their voices. I sought to answer the research questions: (1) What affordances and challenges do AAW experience in choosing and enacting SJL in K–12 public school systems? (2) How do the intersectional positionalities of Asian American women affect the way they lead for social justice in K–12 public school systems?

Eight AAW, who identified themselves as social justice leaders, from five California public school districts participated in semistructured interviews (Leavy, 2017; Seidman, 2019). I used the tenets of Asian critical race theory to analyze the interview data. The analysis revealed that the intersectional identities of AAW inherently present experiences that are simultaneously both affordances and challenges in their pursuit of SJL. Themes that emerged across interviews include: (a) Cultural/Linguistic Identity, (b) Motherhood and Educational Leadership, (c) Silencing Powerful Voices, (d) Role Models, and (e) Navigating White Spaces. Findings suggest public school districts must develop inclusive environments by investing time and resources into identity-informed mentorship, affinity groups, and antiracism and implicit bias professional

development at all levels. Moreover, higher education institutions that prepare teachers and

administrators for public school service must actively recruit AAW and build their capacity for

assuming these critical roles.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans have historically been subjected to stereotypes that frame them as hard working and successful. Although these are seemingly positive stereotypes, they essentialize Asian Americans as a one-dimensional minority. For this reason, Asian Americans continue to maintain a second-class social status in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Lee, 2015; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Moreover, Asian American women (AAW) face stereotypes of being submissive and docile, which can limit social mobility and life possibilities (Matsuda, 1997). These racial and gender stereotypes dehumanize AAW and have seeped into institutions creating barriers to their attainment of leadership positions; hence, AAW face overlapping and simultaneous barriers for being both Asian and women (Li, 2014; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, the United States has experienced a surge of harassment and hate crimes targeted at people of Asian descent (Horse et al., 2022), including the 2021 fatal shooting of six Asian women who worked in Georgia spas (Fausset et al., 2021; Leong & Kuo, 2021). Horse et al. (2022) reported "a large number of these incidents employed anti-China rhetoric that blamed AAPI communities for the emerging COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 2). Anti-Asian harassment and bullying has occurred in schools, whose actions have reflected "little or no attention to the long history of anti-Asian violence or to the current experiences of Asian students with anti-Asian racism" (Sawchuk & Gewertz, 2021, n.p.). This heightened anti-Asian sentiment began during the pandemic but continues more than three years later, at the time of this writing, and signals a national urgency for educators to enact

social justice leadership (SJL), publicly renounce Asian hate, and provide a sense of safety for families.

This is a critical time to examine Asian American identity development, uplift the experiences of AAW, and amplify their voices in public education. AAW are the least represented group among educational leaders in K–12 public schools (Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Approximately 80% of school principals are White, 10% are Black, and 7% are Latinx (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). At the time of this writing, I could not find national data on the number of principals who are AAW. However, like other women of color, AAW experience racial and gendered marginalization (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Leong & Kuo, 2021; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Yam, 2021). Understanding AAW's intersectional identities can provide an important perspective on educational leadership and add to the growing scholarship on AAW, intersectionality, and SJL.

The Sociocultural Landscape for Asian Americans

Many Asian Americans reject broad labels assigned to them by the dominant culture that denote otherness, such as *oriental,* which carries racist and colonialist connotations (Espiritu, 1992). Instead, Asian Americans often prefer to identify by their specific ethnic subgroup, such as Japanese American, Vietnamese American, and so forth (Hsieh & Nguyen, 2021). The term *Asian American* is commonly embraced by this community as it represents shared experiences of race-based marginalization and political positioning, making it valuable in discussions related to broader sociopolitical contexts (Junn & Masuoka, 2008).

The term Asian American was coined in 1968 by University of California, Berkeley graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka. Gee and Ichioka recognized that despite Asian activists' participation in political demonstrations, their presence often went unnoticed within larger rallies, rendering their efforts ineffective. Consequently, they chose to unite under a pan-Asian banner to expand their influence and create a more significant political impact (Espiritu, 1992). To achieve this goal, they founded the Asian American Political Alliance, an organization dedicated to increasing the visibility of political activists of Asian descent.

In 1969, the Asian American Political Alliance joined forces with the Black Student Union and other student groups at San Francisco State University, uniting to create a coalition known as the Third World Liberation Front. Together, they engaged in the longest student strike in U.S. history, a pivotal moment that led to the establishment of the first College of Ethnic Studies in the United States at the university. This groundbreaking movement inspired similar initiatives, including a subsequent strike at the University of California, Berkeley. Ichioka later contributed to the founding of the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles and taught its inaugural ethnic studies course. Subsequently, Asian American studies departments emerged at universities across the United States, solidifying and institutionalizing the use of the term Asian American (Espiritu, 1992; Kim & Hsieh, 2022).

Asian Americans currently constitute approximately 7% of the U.S. population, a number steadily on the rise. Over the past 2 decades, this population has witnessed an 88% increase and is projected to reach 46 million by 2060 (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Within the Asian American community, there are approximately 50 distinct ethnic groups, each characterized by unique nationalities, religions, and a multitude of languages spoken (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Zhou, 2021).

Although the term Asian American serves to create a sense of community, it can also present challenges. Namely, it has the potential to obscure the rich and diverse cultures and histories of individual Asian ethnicities (Venkataramanan, 2022). The tendency to view Asian Americans as a monolithic group can overlook significant disparities in access to education and opportunities for socioeconomic success (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Stereotypes associated with this panethnic label often perpetuate White supremacy and contribute to the dehumanization of these diverse people of color.

The term Asian American is often associated with East Asian ethnicities, such as Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, while the experiences of Southeast Asians and South Asians tend to be overlooked in historical accounts, media portrayals, and news reports. A significant example of this oversight is seen in the aftermath of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, which had profound and lasting consequences for the people of Southeast Asia. Between 1975 and 2010, approximately 1.2 million Southeast Asian refugees from countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were compelled to flee their homelands due to persecution, extreme instability, or the lasting trauma caused by the war (Lee, 2015). Paradoxically, the United States, which eventually provided refuge to these individuals, had played a significant role in creating the conditions that forced them to flee.

Today, many Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, and Cambodians living in the United States face economic challenges. Approximately 460,000 Southeast Asian Americans live below the poverty line, with Hmong Americans experiencing the highest poverty rates compared to other racial groups (Constante, 2020). Despite these disparities, there persists a pervasive stereotype that portrays all Asian Americans as a successful and high-achieving ethnic group, perpetuating

the model minority myth. This stereotype effectively erases the unmet needs and distinct challenges faced by various Asian American subgroups within the United States.

The comprehensive history of Asian America is vast and extends beyond the confines of this study. Asian American history is still being recovered by historians and scholars and continues to be shaped as the United States slowly comes to terms with its racist past. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the historical anti-Asian rhetoric in the United States and its modern-day impacts on Asian Americans.

Historical Anti-Asian Rhetoric

Throughout U.S. history, people of Asian descent have been portrayed as foreign invaders, carriers of disease, and a threat to America's livelihood (Lee, 2015). The essentialization of Asian Americans and the erasure of their contributions to American history dehumanizes them, making them easy scapegoats and targets of hate and resentment. It is important to understand the roots of these negative portrayals and the power they have over people to disrupt and dismantle systemic oppression. *Yellow peril*, the *model minority*, and the *forever foreigner* are three prevalent archetypes that erase and silence Asian Americans. Additionally, AAW are made to be both invisible and hypervisible by gender stereotypes. The following sections will discuss racial and gender stereotypes about Asian Americans and AAW.

Yellow Peril

Yellow peril is a racial epithet that emerged in the United States in response to the waves of Chinese and Japanese immigration in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries (Takaki, 2012). This derogatory term frames Asians as dirty, rat-like, diseased, and a threat to the livelihood of White America. Historically, the idea of Asian American people as a yellow peril occurs

multiple times, including in recent Asian American scapegoating for the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the late 19th century, many Americans on the West Coast attributed declining wages and economic hardships to Chinese laborers. Even though the Chinese composed less than 1% of the nation's population, U.S. Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 to placate worker demands and assuage concerns about maintaining White racial purity.

During World War II, Japanese Americans in Hawaii and along the West Coast were viewed as a threat to national security. Following the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 (Roosevelt, 1942), which called for the evacuation and incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans. The U.S. government uprooted Japanese Americans from their homes and businesses and imprisoned them in camps.

Although these racist laws were eventually reversed, yellow peril remains rampant today (Horse et al., 2022; Lee, 2015). After the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, South Asians and other Muslims were scapegoated, racially profiled by law enforcement, and harassed by the public (Lee, 2015). Nearly 20 years later, Asian Americans experienced harassment and violence due to anti-Asian rhetoric that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic (Horse et al., 2022; Sawchuk & Gewertz, 2021).

Model Minority and the Forever Foreigner

The most prevalent Asian American stereotypes are the model minority and the forever foreigner (Hsieh & Kim, 2020). The model minority stereotype oversimplifies all Asian Americans as high achievers and portrays them as socioeconomically successful solely due to their hard work and cultural values. However, this stereotype overlooks the persisting issues of discrimination and racism that continue to marginalize Asian American populations in specific

fields or leadership roles. It is often employed by those in positions of power to uphold existing racial and power dynamics (Ng et al., 2007; Yi et al., 2020; Yu, 2006).

Conversely, the forever foreigner stereotype racializes individuals who appear to be of Asian descent as perpetual outsiders in the United States. They are often exoticized and subjected to microaggressions that suggest they do not speak English, regardless of their place of birth, generational immigration status, English language proficiency, and heritage language knowledge (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Sue et al., 2007).

Both stereotypes portray Asian Americans as docile, obedient outsiders who comply with the dominant White patriarchy. Asian Americans are seen as hard working and successful, which seems like a positive stereotype, but they are expected to know their place. By virtue of their non-White appearance, Asian Americans' citizenship status and belonging are often questioned, and they are relegated to a secondary status. Moreover, Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) explained Asian Americans "are stereotyped as lacking political savviness and characteristics such as assertiveness and charisma essential for being effective leaders . . . [and] they do not command the same level of respect, deference, and power as their White counterparts" (p. 43). As a result, Asian Americans are frequently overlooked as leaders and excluded from leadership networks and pipelines.

Gender Stereotypes of Asian Women

AAW are often depicted in the media as docile and hypersexualized (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017), and they historically have been rendered as sexual servants to male masters (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Leong & Kuo, 2021; Yam, 2021). This hypersexualization has been known to lead to violence against AAW. Chou (2012) described the

abduction and sexual assault of three Japanese exchange students in Spokane, Washington by White men who wanted to live out their pornographic Asian bondage fantasies. Brock Turner, a White Stanford student, received a lenient prison sentence for raping Chanel Miller, an Asian American woman, while she was unconscious (Ko, 2019). In 2021, a White gunman claiming he had a sexual addiction targeted Atlanta spas and killed six women of Asian descent (Leong & Kuo, 2021). Scholars have argued the gendered and racialized stereotypes of AAW predisposes them to physical harm and mental health difficulties and limits their professional growth and personal opportunities (Chou, 2012; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018; Zia, 2009).

AAW face resistance to their leadership due to hypersexualized stereotypes as well as the gendered expectations of their respective cultures, in which women are often the primary caregivers in the family (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). AAW often cease to be hypersexualized when they become parents. Subsequently, they are viewed as domineering *tiger mom*s who push their children to high levels of achievement, thus reinforcing the model minority myth (Labao, 2017). These gendered stereotypes are in the U.S. collective consciousness, and AAW usually are not viewed as leadership material because they are either too passive or too aggressive. When they do become leaders, they typically meet resistance.

Invisibility and Hypervisibility in Leadership

Asian Americans are usually perceived as only dealing with positive stereotypes, which diminishes their racialized experiences. Their successes are attributed to their assimilation to the dominant White culture, while their perceived foreignness keeps them from achieving the same status as Whites. Their experiences place them in a sociocultural limbo that does not fit into the Black–White binary of racial discourse, rendering them invisible (Hsieh & Kim, 2020).

Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) argued "the persistent underrepresentation of Asian Americans in educational leadership is a manifestation of the fact that the population has been an invisible minority and understudied by social scientists" (p. 42). AAW are doubly invisible as leaders because they are implicitly and explicitly expected to be docile and obedient. When AAW are assertive, they are deemed to be dragon ladies or tiger moms because their behaviors contradict historical stereotypes (Labao, 2017; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

A parallel phenomenon to relative invisibility is hypervisibility. AAW administrators reported they stood out in their professional settings as "the only one" (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 59) and their every move was scrutinized. AAW in education who are one of few or the token person of color in predominantly White spaces are subjected to microaggressions, microinsults, and microassaults based on their perceived sexuality and foreignness (Endo, 2015; Sue et al., 2007). These experiences follow AAW from preservice preparation into their professional teaching careers (Endo, 2015) and stifle leadership pathways (Liang et al., 2018).

The invisibility/hypervisibility of AAW leaders is not unique to education. A report by McKinsey and Company (Chui et al., 2022) found although Asian Americans are heavily represented in corporate jobs, the representation of AAW drops by 80% at the board of directors level (Yam, 2022). The data have suggested AAW are passed up for promotions far more than their male counterparts. The rate of promotion for AAW compared to Asian American men at the senior manager level is 1:2. Moreover, at the C-suite executive level, the rate of promotion for AAW compared to Asian American men is 1:6 (Chui et al., 2022; Yam, 2022).

Li (2014) discussed different ceilings, or barriers, that keep women from rising to leadership. The *glass ceiling* is the "invisible barrier based on attitudinal or organizational bias

and discrimination that prevents minorities and women from rising up the corporate ladder and into high-level management positions, despite their qualifications" (Li, 2014, p. 143). The *bamboo ceiling* is a term that has been recently used to describe a similar barrier to advancement for Asian Americans; that is, "despite increased visibility on college campuses and in elite professions, Asian Americans are rarely seen in high-ranking positions" (Li, 2014, p. 145).

Li (2014) argued the glass ceiling tends to focus on a monolithic women's experience, devoid of race as a factor. This concept is commonly discussed in regard to the feminist movement, which has been shaped largely by White, middle-class women. Li (2014) continued, "Similarly, the bamboo ceiling addresses barriers to success for Asian Americans as a monolithic group, regardless of gender" (p. 147). These ceilings use a single-axis analysis where race and gender are mutually exclusive. Li (2014) argued both the glass ceiling and bamboo ceiling "exclude and delegitimize the experiences of Asian American women" (p. 147). AAW are invisible in either discourse because they face distinct barriers that result from overlapping and simultaneous discrimination. For the AAW who break these barriers, they are often hypervisible and prone to being tokenized.

Positionality

I identify as an Asian American cisgender woman. When I am in Asian spaces, I specify that I am a 1.5-generation Filipina American. That is, I was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States with my parents when I was a young child. I attended urban public schools on both the east coast and west coast where I was conditioned to assimilate to American culture and abandon my heritage language. I attended community college, public

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university, and graduate school in southern California and became a public school teacher in my urban community.

Although I have an administrative services credential, I prefer to lead from nontraditional seats and have chosen to remain a teacher. I prefer to use my talents and strengths to improve instructional quality, coach for equity, and humanize education (Freire, 2017). I find joy in facilitating professional learning and sharing ideas with colleagues about research, best teaching practices, building positive relationships, and meeting the needs of all learners. I have held teacher on special assignment (TOSA) roles in my school district, including language development resource teacher, science resource teacher, and instructional coach. I am currently a curriculum specialist in my district. I am responsible for ensuring that the district curriculum, instruction, and professional learning experiences are rigorous and culturally responsive and sustaining. Additionally, I mentor instructional coaches to build their capacity in coaching for equity. My work positively impacts teachers, which has a broader impact on students. At this point in my career, the demands of an administrator would keep me from doing this consistently and effectively (Fleming, 2004).

My reasons for conducting this research are both personal and professional (Horsford et al., 2011). As an Asian American woman who attended public schools and currently leads in a public school system, I have firsthand experience in the dehumanization of multiple marginalizations that harm both students and educators, and I wish that upon no one. I am also a mother of two school-age children who attend public schools. It is my fervent belief that children hailing from marginalized backgrounds, including my own, deserve to thrive in an educational environment where they feel accepted, respected, included, and supported (Gray et al., 2018),

with the opportunity to embark on positive life trajectories. Furthermore, it is imperative that all young people witness AAW in leadership roles, allowing them to envision themselves or their peers as capable of assuming leadership positions and fostering positive transformation.

It is essential to explore the experiences of women who are not seen as whole humans, as leaders, as Americans, and provide spaces for them to invent themselves. In her autoethnography, Yoon (2019) interrogated the historical and dynamic factors that influenced her experiences as a Korean American woman of color. She drew on her experiences to highlight the limited attention given to the perspectives of AAW engaged in critical qualitative scholarship within educational research. Similarly, Choi (2020) expressed a yearning to feel whole in the field of qualitative research for educational social justice. However, as one of the few AAW, she often felt isolated. My goal is to disrupt the stereotype that AAW are not fit for leadership roles by contributing to research that recognizes the humanity and intellect of AAW, shares their narratives, and amplifies the voices of these transformative leaders.

Problem Statement

Asian American students make up about 5% of public school enrollment (Castro et al., 2018). In California, there is a higher Asian American demographic, including Filipinos, whose numbers are reported separately. According to the California Department of Education (CDE, 2022), Asian Americans make up almost 12% of public school enrollment (see Table 1). Although Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States, particularly in California, they are grossly underrepresented in school staff and leadership (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The CDE (2022) reported 7% of public school teachers are Asian American (see Table 2).

Similar to teachers, school administrators are mostly a racially homogenous group. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) reported, of the 89,000 principals in U.S. public schools, 80% were White, 10% were Black, and 7% were Latinx. Moreover, only 6% of school superintendents self-identified as people of color (Castro et al., 2018). Notably, Asian Americans were not named in these data (see Figure 1).

Table 1

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of California Public School Students: 2022–2023

Ethnicity	Number of students	Percentage
African American	273,148	4.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	26,108	0.4%
Asian*	557,190	9.5%
Filipino*	127,735	2.2%
Hispanic or Latino	3,284,788	56.1%
Pacific Islander	23,847	0.4%
White not Hispanic	1,175,911	20.1%
Two or More Races Not Hispanic	252,400	4.3%
None Reported	131,417	2.2%
Total	5,852,544	100%

Note. Adapted from *Fingertip Facts on Education in California,* by California Department of Education, 2023 (https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp). Copyright 2023 California Department of Education.
*The state of California reports the numbers of Asian and Filipino students in separate categories. However, for the purpose of this study, their numbers are combined due to the significant Filipino population within the Asian diaspora.

Table 2

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of California Public School Teachers: 2018–2019*

Ethnicity	Number of teachers	Percentage
African American	11,998	3.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1,579	0.5%
Asian**	17,867	5.8%
Filipino**	4,708	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino	64,904	21.1%
Pacific Islander	925	0.3%
White (not Hispanic)	188,229	61.2%
Two or More Races Not Hispanic	2,985	0.9%
No Response	14,275	4.6%
Total***	307,470	100%

Note. Adapted from *Fingertip Facts on Education in California,* by California Department of Education, 2023
(https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp). Copyright 2023 California Department of Education.
*2018–2019 is the latest teacher data available.
**The state of California reports the numbers of Asian and Filipino students in separate categories. However, for this study, their numbers are combined due to the significant Filipino population within the Asian diaspora.
***Some totals in this table may not match due to difference in reporting strategy.

Figure 1

Racial Demographics of Principals in U.S. Public Schools

Racial demographics of principals

Other/Multiethnic
3.0%
Hispanic
7.0%
Black/African American
10.0%

White
80.0%
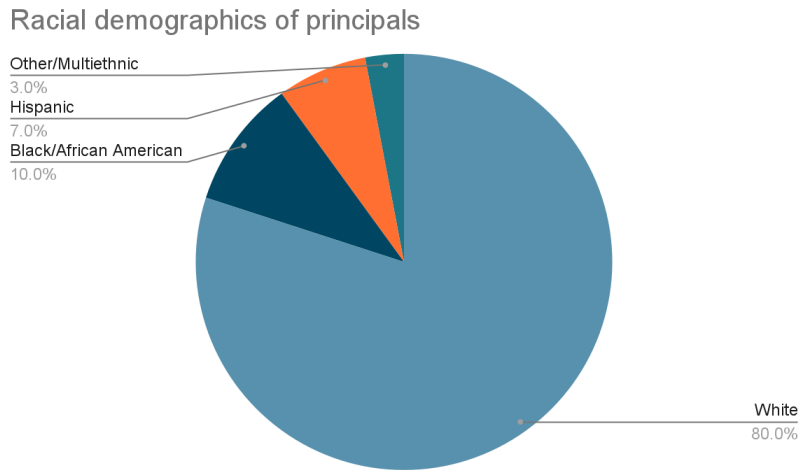
Note. Adapted from *Increasing Diversity in K-12 School Leadership,* by A. Castro et al., 2018. University Council for Educational Administration. Copyright 2018 University Council for Educational Administration.

Homogenous leadership creates social and cultural blind spots in decision making and perpetuates "the persistently inequitable public education system in which students of color graduate high school, and then attend and graduate college, at much lower rates than their White peers—thereby reducing the pool of possible teachers and ultimately leaders" (Castro et al., 2018, p. 2). Educational leaders of color are more likely to "bring perspectives of cultural competence and forms of capital which are highly regarded by families and communities, and specifically within immigrant communities" (Castro et al., 2018, p. 2). Principals with diverse cultural identities are more likely to advocate for marginalized communities and are positioned to change the current school conditions that lead to high rates of turnover among teachers of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Castro et al., 2018).

Although the demographics of public school principals are changing, AAW are not seen in the data. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reported a 10% increase

in female public school principals between 2017–2018 (54%) and 1999–2000 (44%). Moreover, the percentage of public school principals who were White was lower in 2017–2018 (78%) than in 1999–2000 (82%). Despite what is known about the importance of diversity in the educator workforce, Asian Americans continue to make up less than 1% of public school administrators (NCES, 2023). Moreover, the scarce data on Asian American leaders are not disaggregated by gender (see Figure 2). That is, there are not enough AAW leaders to report with the rules of reporting on small populations. As a result, AAW are erased from leadership pools.

Figure 2

Percentage Distribution of Principals and Student Enrollment in US Public Schools by Race: 2020–2021
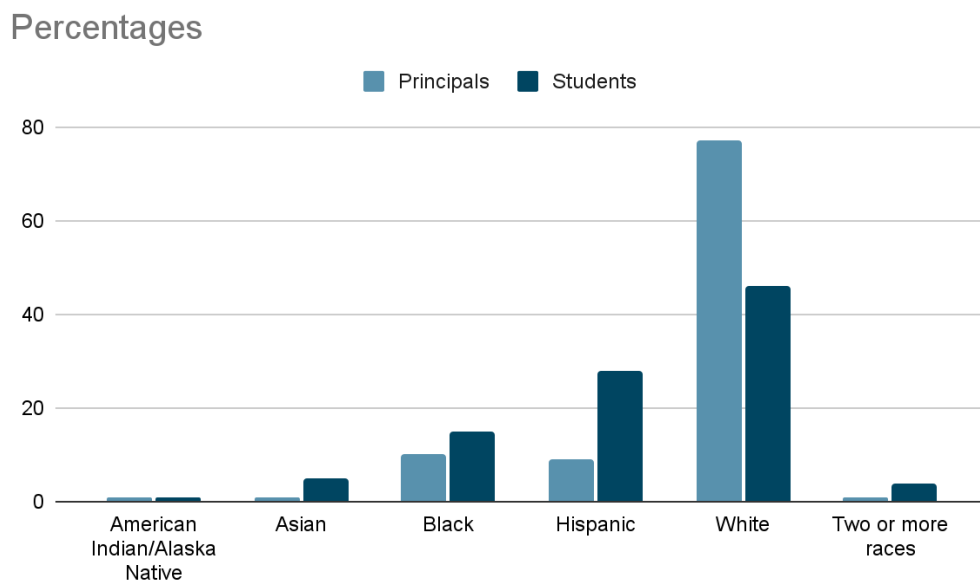
Note. One percent or less each were of two or more races, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander. These data are not disaggregated by gender, which erases AAW from the findings. Adapted from "Characteristics of Public and Private School Principals," *Condition of Education*, by U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2023 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cls). Copyright 2023 by National Center for Education Statistics.

Although there are AAW administrators in public schools, some AAW educators may lead in alternative ways. For example, public school districts have created roles for teachers to work outside of the classroom and coach colleagues in best instructional practices. As Zander

and Zander (2002) noted, people can lead from any chair, influencing others through their actions, even if they are not in a traditional position of power. Understanding the reasons some AAW lead in nontraditional roles may reveal opportunity gaps preventing them from attaining administrative positions, as well as help redefine educational leadership in the 21st century. Their personal and professional journeys provide insight into alternative leadership roles and illuminate ways to empower people from underrepresented groups to lead for social justice and equity in education.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to build on the limited research on AAW in educational leadership and examine the ways in which they choose to lead for social justice in their contexts. I conducted semistructured interviews with AAW leaders in California K–12 public school districts. Through thematic analysis, I identified common threads in these women's experiences to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What affordances and challenges do AAW experience in choosing and enacting SJL in K–12 public school systems?

Research Question 2: How do the intersectional positionalities of AAW affect the way they lead for social justice?

Significance of the Study

As classrooms become increasingly diverse (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), students need to be exposed to diverse educators to better understand themselves and each other. In California, about 12% of public school students identify as Asian, which is higher than most states; however, about 7% of California public school teachers are of Asian descent (California

Department of Education [CDE], 2022). There is a known relationship between representation and student achievement (Castro et al., 2018; Kress et al., 2019; Monroe, 2009). Teachers of color are more likely to discourage the use of zero-tolerance discipline policies that disproportionately impact African American students (Monroe, 2009). Kress et al. (2019) found students in California public schools with a Black or Latinx leader scored significantly higher on state tests, graduated significantly more prepared for college and career, and that African American students and high school students were suspended less.

Racial issues are typically framed in a Black–White binary, excluding Asian Americans as people of color who experience oppression and racism (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Kim & Hsieh, 2022). I argue Asian American students also need to see themselves represented in school leadership. Asian Americans, especially women, are often excluded from conversations on leadership and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The voices of AAW leaders must be amplified to affirm their experiences and leadership capabilities, encourage and inspire more AAW to lead in public education, and contribute to (re)inventing the system so it is socially just.

Theoretical Framework: Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit)

Critical race theory (CRT) grew out of the scholarship of post-civil rights activists, feminists, and legal scholars of color to combat institutional forms of racism embedded in existing structures and challenged the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in U.S. society. AsianCrit emerged as Asian scholars sought to understand how racial oppression particularly affects Asian Americans and their communities (Chang, 1993). This framework can be used to understand how

White supremacy shapes the experiences of Asian Americans . . . [and] maintains

ideological tropes that structure racialized experiences and identities, interacts with

global colonial and imperial projects to influence Asian American experiences, and

shapes how racially marginalized people navigate, engage with, and utilize the racial

categories through which White supremacy attempts to homogenize and essentialize

them. (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940)

Museus and Iftikar (2013) outlined seven tenets, based on CRT tenets, for examining and understanding Asian American issues, as well as providing a foundation for discourse around the racialized experiences of Asian Americans and other racially marginalized groups in education. The tenets of AsianCrit, which I summarize in the next sections, are (a) Asianization; (b) Transnational Contexts; (c) (Re)constructive History; (d) Strategic (Anti)essentialism; (e) Intersectionality; (f) Story, Theory, and Praxis; and (g) Commitment to Social Justice.

Asianization

People living in the United States whose origins can be traced to Asian countries are labeled as *Asian* because of White supremacy and nativistic racism. Asian Americans are distinctly racialized as foreigners, yellow perils, model minorities, emasculated men and hypersexualized women. These social constructions inform laws, policies, programs, and perspectives that privilege White people and dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Asianization often results in the delayed development of racial identity (Kim & Hsieh, 2022), which impacts personal and professional trajectories. For example, the centuries-old misrepresentation of AAW as subservient and docile dehumanizes them. To date, they are

rendered as hypersexualized and man-pleasing and/or cast as high achieving and domineering. Asianization results in AAW being overlooked for leadership opportunities because these gross misconceptions are incongruent with traditional ideals of White-male leadership (Labao, 2017; Li, 2014; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

Transnational Contexts

Despite the long history of Asians in America, Asian Americans are still typically gazed upon through a White lens that ignores their national and U.S. contexts. Asians have been in North America as early as 1565 having crossed the Pacific Ocean from the Philippines to Mexico as part of the Spanish galleon trade and then settling north (Lee, 2015), and large-scale Asian immigration occurred in waves from 1850 to World War II. During World War II, immigrants from China, Japan, and the Philippines were a welcome source of cheap labor (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). The California Gold Rush, and later the transcontinental railroad, attracted Chinese laborers to the United States. Japanese laborers migrated to Hawaii to work in the sugarcane fields and later established a thriving community. After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States ordered the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans and dismantled Japanese American communities. The growing presence of Asians in the United States came to be viewed as economic and social threats, and exclusionary immigration laws were passed (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Lee, 2015).

A second wave of Asian immigration occurred post-1965. Intended to attract a more educated population, the 1965 *Immigration Act* (U.S. Congress, 1964) lifted exclusions for Japanese and Koreans. During this era, the United States was involved in both the Korean War and Vietnam War, and refugees sought sanctuary in the states. U.S. military and government

employees occupied South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia, which resulted in a wave of American men bringing home Asian wives, Asian multiracial children, and transnational adoptees (Kim & Hsieh, 2022).

Asian American residents and citizens have been in the United States for generations, which is in stark contrast to the pervasive notion of Asians being foreign to this land. The COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Asian rhetoric of former president Donald Trump inflamed the yellow peril and foreign invader tropes, emboldening Americans to harm people of Asian descent (Margolin, 2020; Tavernise & Oppel, 2020). Therefore, "critical analyses of the ways that past and present global economic, political, and social processes shape the conditions of Asian Americans is essential to understanding how racism influences Asian American experiences" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940). These layers of "historical and contemporary national and international contexts" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 8) must be considered to understand the racial and gendered experiences of AAW.

(Re)constructive History

Matsuda (1997) remarked on the Asian American experience, "We participate in and act upon what we are handed by history" (p. 17). Unfortunately, Asian Americans have long been absent and/or misrepresented in U.S. history (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Lee, 2015). The invisibility and misrepresentation of Asians in history curriculum (An, 2016; Rodriguez & Kim, 2018), or a history that oversimplifies Asian American experiences to that of only East Asians, is damaging to Asian American identity development and perpetuates racism (An, 2016). (Re)constructive history is a call to action by AsianCrit scholars and historians to "transcend this invisibility and silence to create a collective Asian American historical narrative and reanalyze existing histories

to incorporate the voices and contributions of Asian Americans" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940). A truthful Asian American history beyond victimization, that celebrates the contributions of Asians in America, can create social conditions that "foster stronger Asian American identity and consciousness" (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 25). AAW are scarcely mentioned in Asian American history as it is currently written. This erasure is detrimental to the identity development of Asian girls growing up in the United States.

Strategic (Anti)essentialism

This tenet assumes race is a social construct "that can be shaped and reshaped by economic, political, and social factors" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 8). Kim and Hsieh (2022) unpacked the concepts of essentialism, anti-essentialism, and strategic anti-essentialism to understand this complex tenet. They explained "essentialism recognizes the sociopolitical importance of a cross-ethnic coalition under a group banner" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 79). "Anti-essentialism," they continued, "is the purposeful resistance to this group process and speaks to the desire to remain distinct" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 79). Strategic (anti)essentialism emphasizes self-definition and addresses the ways in which individual Asian Americans purposefully choose to identify ethnically or panethnically within specific contexts (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). That is, "Asian Americans can and do actively intervene in the racialization process" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940) for political purposes and coalition building.

Intersectionality

Oppression is often considered through a single lens, such as race or gender. Crenshaw (1991) argued the feminist movement did not address the unique oppression Black women face. Moreover, she argued people experience intersections of oppression. She coined the term

"intersectionality" to describe the overlapping social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. Intersectionality as a standalone framework and a tenet of CRT describes three forms of overlapping micro and macro level structures of subordination in which people are situated: (a) structural intersectionality, (b) political intersectionality, and (c) representational intersectionality. These systems of oppression "mutually shape the conditions within which Asian Americans exist" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 8).

According to Matsuda (1997), "All forms of subordination are interlocking and mutually reinforcing, even as they are different and incommensurable" (p. 64). She argued "separating and ranking oppression excludes some . . . identities and denies the necessary concerns of significant numbers of our constituency" (Matsuda, 1997, p. 67). Although she recognized the necessity of coalition, she argued for intersectional analysis from inside a structure of subordination to better understand the "particularity of that structure" (Matsuda, 1997, p. 67). She pointed to the feminist and antiracist theory building that emerged from the women of color movement, suggesting a "theory of subordination that comes out of work in coalition" (Matsuda, 1997, p. 68). That is, studying oppression only from an external or one-dimensional perspective can result in the omission of crucial information and insights.

Although intersectionality has been used to frame the experiences of Black women and Latina educational leaders (Hernandez et al., 2014; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2009; Owens & Harris, 2021), there is growing scholarship on the intersectional positionality of AAW who lead in schools (Labao, 2017; Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018).

Story, Theory, and Praxis

This tenet is "founded on CRT scholars' claims that racially marginalized people's experiential knowledge can serve to challenge dominant, White, European epistemology and offer an alternative and empowering epistemological perspective that is grounded in the realities of people of color" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). It "underscores the notion that counterstories, theoretical work, and practice are important inextricably intertwined elements in the analysis of Asian American experiences and advocacy for Asian American people and communities" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 8). I contend the stories and lived experiences of AAW leaders will "inform theory and transform educational practice" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 142). Hence, this tenet was the crux of my study.

Commitment to Social Justice

The tenet of commitment to social justice highlights the notion that "AsianCrit is dedicated to advocating for the end of all forms of oppression and exploitation . . . [and] aims to eradicate racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalist exploitation, and other systemic forms of dehumanization and domination" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). Kim and Hsieh (2022) noted a commitment to social justice requires a critical consciousness, the ability to reflect on one's own positionality within the world to navigate the sociocultural landscapes in which we coexist. This critical consciousness can be developed through the tenets of AsianCrit.

<center>**AsianCrit as Methodology**</center>

AsianCrit illuminates the important ways to make Asian Americans feel whole and empowers them to advocate for and work towards a compassionate and socially just world. The tenets provide Asian Americans access to information and conceptual tools to contextualize their

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experiences. For example, as Asian Americans develop a deeper understanding of their complex identities, they are demanding greater representation in curriculum and media (An, 2016; Rodriguez & Kim, 2018). Storytelling can provide opportunities for Asian Americans to make connections with others who share similar experiences and understanding and allows them to use their knowledge towards making change (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). For this study, AsianCrit served as both a theoretical and methodological framework to understand the identity development and motivations of AAW who lead for social justice in public school systems. Moreover, it provided a structure for understanding how their lived experiences shape and reshape AAW's identities and transformative leadership.

Method

I employed purposive sampling to draw participants from California public school districts, professional organizations, and education affinity groups. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) self-identify as AAW, (b) self-identify as a leader, (c) be currently employed by a public school district, and (d) be willing and able to participate in this study.

Participants were asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect demographic data and establish personal and professional contexts. Demographic information for each participant was necessary for drawing conclusions directly tied to variables, such as race and gender. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to attach to their demographic data and interview data to protect their privacy. Moreover, personal details were changed to protect their identity.

I conducted a semistructured interview, approximately 60 minutes in length, with each participant, asking targeted questions around their identity as AAW. Member checking for participant validation was conducted via email. Participants were asked to be audio/video recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed for analysis purposes only. I coded the data for patterns regarding how participants' intersectional positionality impacts why and how they lead in public schools. I analyzed the data to present counternarratives, or narratives from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), to provide a broader perspective on AAW and SJL.

Assumptions

Three assumptions guided the outset of this research. First, it was methodologically assumed that the participants in this study would be truthful in their interviews. Storytelling at its core involves sharing one's humanity, and I anticipated participants' narratives would be as accurate as their memories allow.

Second, there was an assumption that participants identified themselves as leaders in their roles in education. Aligned with Shields (2020), educators can lead for social justice from different seats (Zander & Zander, 2002). That is, leadership is a practice, not a position, and all leaders can find power in their positions to enact social justice. By adopting this assumption, the study aimed to foster a more inclusive exploration of leadership, from the classroom to the boardroom.

Third, an assumption was made concerning the prevailing sociocultural climate for Asian American students and educators, suggesting it might worsen before showing signs of improvement. This assumption was grounded in the documented surge of hate crimes against

Asian Americans in the United States, particularly since 2020 when Stop AAPI Hate initiated systematic recording of such incidents (Horse et al., 2022). The timing of this study coincided with the "aftermath" of a global pandemic as it became endemic, changing drastically the educational landscape in its wake. This rise of exacerbated preexisting racial biases faced by people of color and engendered backlash from segments of both White and Asian American populations who adhered to the ideologies of White supremacy. It also fostered resentment among other marginalized groups, particularly within Black and Latinx communities. This external context impacted my participants' experiences and perspectives, adding an extra layer of complexity to this study.

By explicitly stating these three assumptions, I remained transparent about the contextual factors that might have affected my research outcomes. I revisited these assumptions during my analysis and discussion to consider how they might have influenced my findings. Therefore, I assert this reflexive approach substantially enhanced the rigor of my study.

Limitations

The limited sample size and timeline of this study posed challenges in terms of generalizability. Qualitative multicase studies using narratives do not primarily seek generalizability. Rather, they aim to reveal unique perspectives and foster a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. The small sample was actually advantageous as it allowed for a more in-depth analysis of participant data. However, it is worth acknowledging that self-reported data is subject to exaggeration by respondents and influenced by social desirability bias. To mitigate these potential issues, I used a framework for analysis and sought expert input from my dissertation committee.

Throughout the research process, I maintained reflexivity in my data collection and analysis. Although I could not control participants' responses, I strived to create an environment conducive to open sharing of their stories. Qualitative researchers play an active role in shaping the outcomes of their studies, and my own experience was a central tool for deriving knowledge. Therefore, I persistently interrogated my own assumptions during the analysis phase to ensure the integrity of the data.

Delimitations

Asian Americans are people living in the United States whose origins can be traced back to countries throughout East Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Korea), Southeast Asia (e.g., Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam), and South Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). In my research, I intentionally use the term Asian American rather than more widely used terms, such as Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI). One reason I did this was to recognize Pacific Islanders as a panethnic group that is distinct from Asian Americans, while Native Hawaiians are their own sovereignty taken over by the United States. The systemic oppression of Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians in the United States requires research specific to their historical and current marginalization. I also wanted to home in on the specificity of the Asian American experience, which in itself is varied across cultures, languages, generational status, immigration experiences, and other contexts (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Lee, 2015). Because Asian Americans are inherently a diverse group, to portray a singular Asian American experience would be a misrepresentation (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). To understand the complexities of the intersectionality of race and gender, it was necessary to narrow my focus and limit my study to the narratives of AAW.

Definitions of Terms

Asian Americans—People living in the United States whose origins can be traced back to East Asia, Southeast Asia, and/or South Asia. This includes mixed race and/or multiethnic people. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), Asian origins include Asian Indian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepalese, Okinawan, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Other Asian specified, and Other Asian not specified.

AsianCrit—Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit) is a framework derived from CRT that considers the histories and realities of Asian Americans (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Museus and Iftikar (2013) outlined seven tenets "for understanding the ways that racism affects Asian Americans in the United States" (p. 23).

Counternarrative or counterstory—A CRT method of bringing the stories of marginalized groups into the forefront and in opposition to dominant narratives. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), the counterstory is "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 32).

Gender—The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) defined gender as "the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed" (n.p.), which vary by society and can change over time. This social construct is hierarchical in western cultures and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Women, girls, and transgender people often experience gender inequality and discrimination.

Intersectionality—A critical framework, and tenet of AsianCrit, for examining the overlapping social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Matsuda, 1997).

Model minority—The pervasive stereotype that all Asian Americans are high achieving and socioeconomically successful due to their hard work and cultural values. The stereotype essentializes Asian Americans and downplays racism and other structural problems marginalized groups continue to suffer; it is used by power elites to maintain the status quo in race and power relations (Ng et al., 2007; Yi et al., 2020; Yu, 2006).

Positionality—The theory that individuals have a position that impacts how they socially construct the world, and the position of an individual is informed by multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, and class) that simultaneously construct and reinforce individual perspectives; not to be conflated with intersectionality. Identity experiences shape positionality; an individual's definition of leadership is based on their positionality and what is possible in their context (Kezar & Lester, 2010).

Summary

Asian American educators remain significantly underrepresented in public school classrooms and leadership roles, with AAW facing the most acute underrepresentation among educational leaders in K–12 public school systems (Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Racialized stereotypes of Asian Americans, and the racialized and gendered stereotypes of AAW, are harming them physically and psychologically, delaying racial identity development, and creating barriers to leadership. Moreover, the escalation of anti-Asian rhetoric and a surge in hate crimes targeting

Asian Americans in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the challenges faced by Asian American communities, students, and families.

AAW possess distinctive insights into marginalization, providing them with valuable perspectives that can be harnessed for leadership, particularly during times of sociocultural upheaval. Unfortunately, they have been systematically excluded from leadership spaces due to deeply ingrained stereotypes that unjustly undermine their competence. The purpose of this study was to collect and share the stories of AAW who have chosen to enact SJL within the sphere of public education. To accomplish this, I leveraged AsianCrit as both a theoretical and methodological framework, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how the intersectional identities, positionalities, and commitment to SJL of AAW have manifested in the present sociopolitical landscape.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States (Budiman &
Ruiz, 2021; NCES, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), yet they continue to be drastically
underrepresented in educational leadership (Castro et al., 2018; Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Iftikar &
Museus, 2018; Labao, 2017; Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al.,
2018). Asian American students currently make up 5% of the U.S. K–12 public school
population (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; NCES, 2020), but less than 3% of public school teachers
and less than 1% of school administrators are Asian American (Castro et al., 2018).

Castro et al. (2018) asserted "diverse school leaders are more likely to bring perspectives
of cultural competence and forms of capital which are highly regarded by families and
communities, and specifically, within immigrant communities" (p. 2). Hence, Asian American
students and immigrant communities would benefit from the presence of public school leaders
with whom they can relate. Similar to Black women leaders, AAW leaders "view the world from
discrete perspectives based on their social positions, positionality, and within the confines of the
larger social structures of race and gender" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, as cited by Jean-Marie et
al., 2009, p. 576). They offer insights that help ensure public school classrooms and curriculum
are culturally responsive and sustaining (Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017;
Liang et al., 2018), particularly for this growing racial subgroup that has been historically
overlooked (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Ng et al., 2007).

Although there is an established body of work around women of color in educational
leadership (Hernandez et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2011; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Jean-Marie

et al., 2009), AAW have been excluded from this discourse until relatively recently (Labao, 2017; Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018). This chapter presents an overview of the literature that contextualized the experiences of these pioneering women of color who lead.

Intersectionality in Educational Leadership

Educational leaders for social justice are driven by a moral purpose (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2020; Shields, 2010) to create equitable schools and best outcomes for all students. SJL in education takes many forms and is enacted from common pillars: (a) resist the status quo; (b) implement culturally sustaining practices; (c) engage in social and political activism; (d) institutional transformation; (e) student, parent, and teacher empowerment; and (f) critical self-reflection (Brooks et al., 2007; Horsford et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016; Shields, 2010, 2020; Theoharis, 2007). However, SJL frameworks also must consider identity and positionality because these factors impact a leader's ability to implement and exert institutional change. Intersectionality can be applied in educational leadership for social justice "to highlight the relational aspects of human connections and society" (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 259).

Intersectionality arose from Black women's liberation politics (Collins, 1989) and CRT in legal studies (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) coined the term "intersectionality" to describe the simultaneous and overlapping oppressions that particular groups experience. Crenshaw (1991) argued "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism . . . [that] tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism" (p. 1243). Furthermore, "because of their

intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). This was echoed by Li (2014), who wrote:

> Women of color identify with both women and people of color, yet are constantly asked to "choose sides," to put aside their "woman-ness" to fight for the rights of people of color, or to put aside the color of their skin to fight for the rights of women. (p. 148)

Intersectionality is unique to the individual but shares structural characteristics. Crenshaw (1991) described three forms of overlapping micro and macro level structures of subordination in which people are situated: (a) structural intersectionality, the material consequences of interactive oppressions; (b) political intersectionality, the erasure of people's experiences at the intersections of multiple oppressions; and (c) representational intersectionality, the cultural construction of identities resulting in negative stereotypes used to further discredit marginalized experiences.

Intersectionality has been used among legal scholars and in the social sciences to analyze overlapping oppressions, most notably race and gender (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Cho et al., 2013; Matsuda, 1997). Intersectionality has been used to study educational leadership and related inequities particularly for Black women and Latinx women (Agosto & Roland, 2018), who have been historically oppressed on multiple axes (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). This framework allows for granularity in the unique experiences of women from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and histories. Furthermore, intersectionality "exposes uneven power relations behind unjust practices that result in patterns of inequity" (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 258), and builds oppositional

knowledge to support social awareness and enact change (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Collins, 2009).

Women of Color in Educational Leadership

Using a CRT lens and Afrocentric epistemological framework, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) highlighted the experiences of 12 Black women, using narrative inquiry to examine the intersectionality of race and gender in their leadership experiences in higher education.

Jean-Marie et al. (2009) found participants' personal and professional experiences "were closely tied to the struggle for equality during the Civil Rights Movement" (p. 568). Having grown up during school segregation and the subsequent integration that resulted from the *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 ruling, these women "were among the first in their families to integrate schools to attain a better education and change the social conditions of the Black community" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 570). The researchers described the "double jeopardy of race and gender bias" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 571) in their participants' education and professional careers, such as "being tracked because of their color and called 'nigger' on a White college campus" (p. 571). These women experienced "blatant bias, discrimination, sexism, and racism, as a result of gaining entry in historically White institutions and ascending to leadership positions in historically Black institutions" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 571), yet they transcended these struggles by focusing on the differences they make in the lives of their students. Because of their marginalized experiences as Black women, these participants developed inclusive, collaborative leadership styles "focused on improving the educational experiences and material conditions of students at their institutions" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 573).

Black feminist scholars have a continued legacy of inventing themselves through self-definition, theory building, and proffering "theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1990, p. 22, as cited by Horsford & Tillman, 2012, p. 1). Horsford and Tillman (2012) examined the intersectional identities and educational leadership of Black women "as informed by their *raced* and *gendered* positionalities, experiences, perspectives, and most importantly, the intersection of these marginalized identities in school and community contexts" (p. 2). Through collected essays and a qualitative interview, Horsford and Tillman (2012) researched "the ways in which the Black woman's socially constructed intersectional identity informs her leadership values, approach, and impact" (p. 2), and sought to identify "whether the challenges are due to their Blackness, womanhood, neither, or both" (p. 2). The articles on Black women leaders in K–12 and higher education highlighted "how the unique location of the Black woman, at the intersection of race and gender, shapes and influences their lived personal and/or professional experiences as educational leaders" (p. 2).

Horsford and Tillman (2012) identified shared themes of Black feminist caring, ethical leadership, transformational leadership, critical servant leadership, and SJL practices that emerged because of the overlapping and simultaneous racial and gender oppression Black women have faced throughout their lives. Moreover, Tillman postulated "the increased number of Black women [leaders] is a sign that there is some relationship between the recognition of the knowledge and unique perspectives that Black women bring to K–12 and higher education" (Horsford & Tillman, 2012, p. 4). The authors urged Black women to "interrogate the lives, theories, intersectional identities, and work of Black female scholars and leaders in both K–12 and higher education" (Horsford & Tillman, 2012, p. 7) and continue to invent themselves.

Latinas in the United States have also experienced multiple marginalizations, which shape their identity and impact their leadership. Hernandez et al. (2014) identified similar themes in their case study of a Latina principal at an urban elementary school. They used Latinx critical theory (LatCrit) to examine the role race and gender play in her commitment to and motivation for enacting SJL. They identified sociocultural and historical implications of how race, class, and gender get operationalized in her identity as a social justice leader and in her practices.

This principal developed a racial identity through family and schooling, and her racialized experiences fueled her commitment to SJL. For example, her White classmates were groomed for college, but Latinos were encouraged to participate in sports. However, as a Latina, she was not encouraged to learn, apply to college, or excel in sports. Growing up as a Latina in the United States allowed her to understand her students' experiences of discrimination, which influenced how she interacted with students, families, and staff. Moreover, her understanding of Latino family unity motivated her to advocate for community engagement. She held "high expectations for students of color by creating bridges between White teachers and students of color, as well as between families of color and White teachers" (Hernandez et al., 2014, p. 585) and "used her skills to help teachers think about the issues of students of color in relation to discriminatory practice" (p. 585).

Owens and Harris (2021) also used LatCrit in their report on a subset of data from a phenomenological narrative qualitative dissertation exploring the leadership experiences of eight Latina school principals. Participants' responses revealed career barriers, including "age discrimination, racial discrimination, and gender issues" (Owens & Harris, 2021, p. 144). Additionally, they revealed the added pressures of cultural gender norms.

The authors noted the cultural expectation for Latinas to fulfill their familial roles. Six of the participants were positioned as wives and mothers. Although they valued these roles, they acknowledged it was difficult to balance family and career. They suggested being a principal is easier for men because they either do not have children or rely on their wives to cook, clean, and care for their families. One participant "implied that the lack of women high school principals may be due to the fact that the job requires so much time away from home" (Owen & Harris, 2021, p. 149). Nonetheless, these women embraced all of their roles and welcomed the inherent challenges. One participant mused:

> I would not have sacrificed them [family] for this crazy job, because this job is crazy. It's just insane. . . . It's like that old adage that they say, "How do you eat an elephant? Just one chunk at a time." And you have to chunk everything and set priorities. (p. 150)

The women in this study shared the pain and struggles of their marginalized experiences but considered them to be "learning experiences that contributed to their identity as Latina" (Owens & Harris, 2021, p. 150). The authors suggested "pride in being Latina was a major asset that contributed to their success as leaders" (Owens & Harris, 2021, p. 143); they characterized the Latina identity as "being independent, self-driven, and self-sufficient when supported by family and high expectations" (p. 153). Participants expressed a moral imperative to lead and "serv[e] as role models not only for Latino children but for all children" (Owens & Harris, 2021, p. 155).

Asian American Women in Educational Leadership

Although the experiences of racial minorities and women of color have been instrumental in identifying common themes of oppression, they "cannot fully explain the experiences of Asian

American women" (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 44). The scarcity of research on their experiences "has led them to feel isolated, invisible, and unsure about their leadership competence" (Liang & Liou, 2018, p. 73). Research on the lived experiences of AAW "adds a new intersectionality, positionality, and voice to the established knowledge about women of color and educational leadership" (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 41). This emerging research has revealed barriers in their careers as well as the agentic behaviors they demonstrate in their practices.

As Labao (2017) remarked, "Asian American women are both Asian and women" (p. 1). Research has pointed to the ways in which these multiple marginalizations are particularly salient in AAW's professional lives. In a qualitative study of Asian American public school administrators, Labao (2017) found racial and gender stereotypes shaped their identities, personally and professionally. Despite hardships, participants credited mentors along their leadership journey for seeing their potential and encouraging them to pursue school leadership positions. They expressed the importance of "being visible" and displayed care through relationship building and SJL. Most notably, the legitimacy of their authority and leadership were often questioned due to deficit-based perceptions of their physical appearance, race, and/or gender. They also expressed a need for Asian American pipelines to school administration and became involved in affinity groups and/or served as mentors for AAW.

Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) found themes of marginalizing experiences and obstructed pathways to leadership in their study of AAW K–12 administrators. Participants reported they had not intended to become leaders when they started teaching. Rather, they were encouraged by someone else or were assigned to specialized roles, such as instructional coach or

coordinator of language programs, before ascending into administration; they tended to accept such positions rather than seek them out. Hence, these women were invisible as leaders; they did not see their own leadership potential until it was mirrored to them by informal mentors. In a subsequent study of 15 AAW administrators, Liang et al. (2018) found most of their participants became principals or assistant principals in their 40s and beyond, inferring opportunities for leadership development had not been made visible to the invisible. Once these women entered leadership, they met resistance, but they also drew from their lived experiences to forge relationships with diverse stakeholders and lead with their own resistance.

Liang and Liou (2018) examined the self-concept and leadership expectations of four female Asian American principals. Drawing on CRT, they concluded that the participants' race, gender, and immigration status had shaped their worldviews and instilled in them a strong sense of purpose for SJL. Their marginalization informed how they would lead their schools and disrupt cycles of oppression. Liang and Liou (2018) noted these principals actively worked to "eliminate stereotype threat and low expectations by deeply caring for all students' intellectual promise as a strategy to harness school-wide equity" (p. 85). They resisted racism and patriarchy by "dialogically placing people at the center of their leadership framework" (Liang & Liou, 2018, p. 87) and established a positive school culture and climate by creating "conditions of caring, sympathy, and solidarity with and for their school community" (p. 87).

The intersectionality framework has been instrumental in giving voice to women of color and advancing discussions on policies and practices that impact them. Asian and Asian American scholars have begun to use intersectionality to explore the simultaneous and overlapping oppression that Asian women in the United States face and how it impacts their education and

career trajectories. However, intersectionality alone does not adequately address national origin and transnational contexts, English language acquisition and/or heritage language loss, and immigration history that, in combination with race and gender positions, uniquely impact AAW. The tenets of AsianCrit, including intersectionality, provide a framework for a more granular examination of their unique experiences and motives for SJL.

AsianCrit in Education

Although scarce, the experiences of AAW who lead in K–12 public schools have been explored through the tenets of AsianCrit. Some of these women who lead have done so from nontraditional seats (Shields, 2020; Zander & Zander, 2002) for reasons yet to be examined. Nonetheless, AsianCrit has illuminated the nuances and complexities of the Asian American experience in schools. Kim and Hsieh (2022) used AsianCrit in their national study involving 42 Asian American public and private school educators from diverse ethnicities and contexts to examine their racialized experiences as students and teachers in the United States. Because my study had a narrow focus on AAW leaders, I highlight the narratives of select participants and implications for further study.

A number of AAW leaders in this study experienced oppression on multiple axes, specifically race and gender. For example, a Filipina American racial justice educational consultant and former director of diversity and inclusion on the east coast shared an upsetting incident she experienced as a student:

> I was in was high school and I was super quiet and I was in classes with these White jocks and they were talking about porn two tables behind me, and they were like, "We love porn with Asian chicks and they'll do anything," . . . and I was just like, "Oh I want

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to die," and of course there were no Asian teachers that I could turn to. . . . [T]here was just nobody, no adult that I could go and talk to about that or process that. (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, pp. 69–70)

The White male high school students' casual conversation is an example of the socially accepted, yet harmful stereotype of Asian women that has long been denied (Yam, 2021), and has led to harm against AAW (Leong & Kuo, 2021) such as the high-profile rape of Chanel Miller by Brock Turner at Stanford (Ko, 2019). This research participant was subjected to a dehumanizing conversation about women who look like her and she felt isolated and powerless in the situation. Azhar et al. (2021) has documented brief but harmful incidents such as this. Azhar et al. (2021) wrote:

These brief encounters reflect the positioning of API women as a fetish that is to be consumed, an experience that is to be encountered, and an adventure that is to be had. Often, the people with whom . . . [they] interact are unable to differentiate their Asian heritage, falsely equating Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other API women into a universally sexualized Asian being. Indeed, the particularities of identity are unimportant here as the Asian female trope is reinforced across a myriad of women. (p. 290)

According to Kim and Hsieh (2022), "Asianization and [gendered] stereotyping . . . can be traumatic and destabilizing for adolescent Asian American girls" (p. 70), which also speaks to the importance of gender and racial diversity among school staff. This dehumanizing experience might have been processed and addressed appropriately had there been an Asian American woman in the school's leadership to lend her perspective and disrupt these harmful manifestations of racism and sexism.

A Korean middle school teacher at a private all-girls school in northern California shared how she experienced oppression along the axes of race and gender throughout her teaching career. She alluded to sexist and patronizing remarks made to her by White male colleagues and administrators in her previous institutions who had expected her to embody the docile, passive stereotypes that AAW face. An advocate for equity, she expressed that her racial and gender identity helped shape how she navigated educational spaces and challenged these stereotypes. Her professional choices, such as deciding to teach at an all-girls school, and later pursuing education-adjacent work, were informed by marginalizing experiences and overlapping layers of oppression.

These women, like many AAW, experienced racial and gendered oppression in educational settings, which shaped how they lead in schools and outside of schools. Although they both expressed a commitment to social justice, they left their school settings for other education-related endeavors. Many teachers of color are committed to social justice, yet unsupportive conditions force them to leave the school setting (Ingersoll et al., 2019), which warrants further examination. Moreover, AAW are scarce in K–12 education, and the conditions to attract and retain them as teachers and leaders must be explored to bring them into spaces where they are needed.

Another theme that emerged among these women was their delayed racial identity development. For example, a second-generation Filipina American professional development support provider in northern California noted the lack of racial identity work in her teacher preparation program. Her racial identity developed from working in classrooms with predominantly Latinx and Asian students, where she began to consciously identify as a person of

color. Her racial identity led her to question her acceptance as a brown Asian, her career potential, and leadership opportunities. She told her interviewer, "It's become difficult to break into leadership positions. . . . I'm just looking for positions and communities where I know that brown people are more accepted" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 31). Because administrators and school leaders are overwhelmingly White men, and because teachers are predominantly White women, she ultimately wanted to lead where she can connect with the community.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 and in previous sections of this chapter, Asian Americans are often characterized as quiet and docile, which renders them as unengaged with social justice work (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). For example, participants shared instances where colleagues made racist remarks in front of them under the assumption that their perceived proximity to whiteness made it safe to speak in this manner. One participant, a Korean diversity coordinator in California, struggled with being confrontational, but leveraged this perceived "safety" to talk about issues of race in her White affluent school. Although she identified as a person of color, she was keenly aware of the privileges inherent with being Asian American and that her oppression is different from that experienced by other marginalized groups, such as Black Americans. She strategically leveraged her perceived proximity to whiteness to engage White colleagues in critical conversations about race.

Another leader, a South Asian diversity coordinator on the east coast noted people will generally assume Asians will not get involved, argue, or have an opinion (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). Having assumed her role from a Black woman, colleagues voiced unfair comparisons that cast a negative light on her predecessor. She pushed back on the unfounded expectation that she would perform the job better by virtue of being Asian, thus calling out implicit bias in her workplace.

Although they had expressed the initial difficulty of learning to speak up against racism, both diversity coordinators drew upon their racial identities to center discussions around race and decenter whiteness in their contexts. They understood their layered contexts and leveraged their positions to enact SJL at their schools (Kim & Hsieh, 2022).

These teacher–leaders shared becoming more racially aware and politicized led them to understand their positioning as Asian Americans in the Black–White binary of the U.S. racial hierarchy. Several participants actively rejected racism, challenged the model minority myth, and positioned themselves as people of color as an "act of political awareness and solidarity" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 133). These counternarratives provide snapshots of the lived experiences of AAW in nontraditional leadership roles and are committed to social justice. Together, these snapshots contribute to creating a gallery of experiences that are often unseen, yet necessary to uncover so AAW can recover from the collective harm that has been done to them for generations. More importantly, highlighting these experiences provides opportunities to discuss the conditions that created harm and ultimately dismantle them.

CRT scholars have used counternarratives to discuss the intersectional positions of women of color (including Asian Americans) who lead. However, Capper and Young (2014) argued intersectionality still "remains underused in educational leadership literature focused on understanding and critiquing inequities in PreK–12 schooling" (as cited in Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 258). The AsianCrit tenet of intersectionality shares goals and features with transformative leadership, which "can be used in research to better understand the past, monitor the present, and foreshadow the future" (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 281) of educational leadership in K–12 public schools. Transformative leadership is a means for changing the

institutions and/or the systems in which educational leaders operate (Shields, 2020). The following section provides an overview of transformative leadership.

Asian American Women as Transformative Leaders

The intersectional positionalities of AAW can affect their choosing and enacting SJL. Similar to other women of color (Hernandez et al., 2014; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Owens & Harris, 2021), their lived experiences have given them the critical consciousness often attributed to transformative leaders (Shields, 2020). Transformative leadership is a layer of SJL that is rooted in the work of Freire (1998, 2017), which contends education is a means for "liberation, hope, empowerment, activism, risk, social justice, courage . . . [and] revolution" (Shields, 2010, p. 559). According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership "critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others" (p. 559). Moreover, "transformative leaders advance liberation through schooling by pushing for new policies that value diversity, advocating for others, and empowering students with the critical tools to challenge unfair norms" (Shields, 2010, p. 559).

Burns (1978) often has been credited with developing the transformative leadership framework, although he never used the term *transformative* to describe leadership (Shields, 2010, 2011). Rather, he compared and contrasted traditional *transactional* leadership with his developing *transformational* leadership, which is "linked to the ends of equity, inclusion, and social justice" (Shields, 2011, p. 5). Like other SJL frameworks, moral and ethical behavior are intrinsic components of transformative leadership and "includes an understanding of historical and social causation, of power wielding and political power" (Burns, 1978, pp. 433–434).

Transformative leadership is grounded in the following tenets: (a) acceptance of a mandate for deep and equitable change; (b) the deconstruction of knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity; (c) the need to address the inequitable distribution of power; (d) an emphasis on both private and public (individual and collective) good; (e) a focus on democracy, emancipation, equity, and justice; (f) an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness; (g) the necessity of balancing critique with promise; and (h) the call to exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2016, 2020). Shields (2010) asserted:

> It is the essential work of the educational leader to create learning contexts or
> communities in which social, political, and cultural capital is enhanced in such a way as
> to provide equity of opportunity for students as they take their place as contributing
> members of society. (p. 572)

Shields (2020) also suggested "any educator in a formal or informal leadership position, any teacher-educator who is called to a leadership role in any kind of educational institution, and any member of the general public who cares about the quality of education offered to all students can be a transformative leader" (p. xiii).

Leung (2020) examined the transformative leadership practices of eight AAW administrators in California community colleges and found each narrative "was intimately informed by the participant's background, upbringing, and sensemaking of who they are as they negotiated through social systems" (p. 182). Similar to participants in the intersectionality section of this chapter, these leaders were keenly aware of their race, gender, and class identity as AAW. Despite the challenges associated with their intersectional positions, they deliberately "defined and redefined what it means to be an Asian American woman" (Leung, 2020, p. 115),

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remained "rooted in a strong sense of who they are" (p. 205) and developed "the resiliency to face challenge after challenge" (p. 205). Hence, their minoritized positioning motivated them to enact social justice in their college and community.

All of the participants strongly demonstrated elements of transformative leadership, specifically: (a) community leading, (b) strategic leading for social justice, and (c) activism. Leung (2020) credited participants' authenticity for empowering them to lead their college and community. Leung (2020) concluded:

> Authenticity is a marker of a transformative leader. The transformative leadership framework purposely does not define specific leader traits so that it may leave space for diverse leaders to bring in all of who they are, authentically (Shields, 2018). While transformative leadership steers away from a singular or autonomous leader, it finds that real transformation is conducted best when the leader is authentic to herself. (p. 167)

As transformative leadership scholars suggest, leadership is not the job of an individual. Rather, an authentic transformative leader inspires the collective to emancipate themselves (Freire, 2017; Shields, 2016, 2020).

Leung (2020) shed light on the role of intersectional positionalities for AAW in their transformative leadership within community colleges. Her study also underscored the collective nature of transformative leadership, aligning well with the values of Asian American collectivist cultures (Krassner et al., 2017) and the tenets of AsianCrit. Therefore, the intersectional positionalities of AAW lend themselves to transformative leadership. The stories of AAW in K–12 public systems who are working actively toward social justice (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Labao, 2017; Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018) need to be

illuminated and amplified to advance discussions on intersectionality, leadership, and, ultimately, to achieve collective liberation from oppression.

Conclusion

Women of color, including Asian Americans, have a place in educational SJL. Their unique perspectives, shaped by multiple marginalizations, add to a greater understanding of society as a whole. Studies have indicated that structural, political, and representational intersectionalities impact why and how women of color lead for social justice in education. Because of the limited amount of research on AAW who lead for social justice in K–12 public school systems, this chapter drew upon research from K–12 and higher education to understand AAW's leadership, first in general and then through the lens of transformative leadership (Leung, 2020; Shields, 2016). The use of AsianCrit allows for a deeper analysis of how nationality, history, racialization, and linguistic experiences shape and reshape the SJL of AAW.

The tenets of AsianCrit, particularly intersectionality, provide critical lenses for examining the overlapping and simultaneous marginalizations AAW face, disrupting the dominant narrative of leadership. Collecting the counterstories of AAW leaders has the potential to disrupt the dominant ideology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), advance discussions on liberating all women of color (including Asian Americans) and transform public education. The next chapter will outline the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

AAW educators experience racism and sexism in K–12 public schools, which impedes their professional growth and pathways to leadership. However, their marginalization is overlooked by the false notion that Asian Americans are a model minority and immune to racism. This erasure means their needs are not intentionally addressed and perpetuates racialized and gendered oppression in K–12 public education settings. Research on other women of color in educational leadership can contribute to an understanding of the Asian American experience, but they do not address the historical and sociocultural contexts of AAW. Little is known about how their intersectional positionalities impact AAW educational leaders, nor is there a clear definition of SJL outside of administrative roles. Hence, research specifically on AAW who lead for social justice in various roles in public schools is necessary.

As California public classrooms become increasingly diverse (CDE, 2022), students need to be exposed to diverse educators to better understand themselves and each other. There is "strong evidence that students of color benefit from having teachers and leaders who look like them as role models and also benefit from the classroom dynamics that diversity creates" (King et al., 2016, p. 1). Conversely, it is also "important for our White students to see teachers of color in leadership roles in their classrooms and communities" (King et al., 2016, p. 1). Minority teachers have significantly higher turnover rates than White teachers, which is strongly tied to poor working conditions in their schools (Ingersoll et al., 2019). Leaders from marginalized groups are more likely to attend to such conditions to meet the needs of staff and students

(Hernandez et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2011; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

Racial issues are typically framed in a Black–White binary, excluding Asian Americans as people of color who experience oppression and racism. Asian Americans, especially women, are often excluded from conversations on DEI as well as educational leadership discourse. Qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand the unique experiences of their subjects through firsthand accounts. By interviewing AAW who lead for social justice, I was able to honor their experience and allow their stories to be shared in their own words. The counternarratives of these leaders made their challenges and achievements visible to the greater public and challenged the dominant narratives. I explicitly chose to amplify the voices of AAW leaders to affirm their experiences and leadership capabilities, as well as encourage and inspire more AAW to take lead in K–12 public schools.

Research Questions

In this study, I sought to understand how the lived experiences of AAW have impacted their educational journeys and compelled them to lead for social justice in K–12 public school systems. Because Asian Americans are a panethnic group, several factors such as country of origin, generational and immigration status, and linguistic experiences must be considered when unpacking the unique experiences of AAW who lead. I sought to understand how the structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and the representational intersectionality of AAW impact their leadership in their specific contexts. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

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Research Question 1: What affordances and challenges do AAW experience in choosing and enacting SJL in K-12 public school systems?

Research Question 2: How do the intersectional positionalities of AAW affect the way they lead for social justice?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is inductive and exploratory, meaning research is conducted from the margins to uncover truths and elevate social justice issues. It is a political act because its findings have the power to advance discussions about social justice issues and prompt changes in policy. Qualitative research is distinct because it allows researchers to "conduct in-depth studies about a broad array of topics . . . in plain and everyday terms" (Yin, 2015, p. 6) without the constraints posed by other methods. Qualitative research typically involves smaller samples so researchers can more deeply investigate participants' experiences through methods such as narratives, ethnographies, action research, and case studies.

The aim of qualitative research is to understand the world from the participants' point of view. Researchers seek to understand their participant's reality, which is based on their lived experiences. Historically, the perspectives of marginalized people have not been given attention. Hence, research conducted from the margins gives voice to those who are often unheard (Safir & Duggan, 2021). By collecting and sharing participant perspectives, researchers can humanize the data, so those in power can become aware of social justice issues and understand the need for sociopolitical changes. To make the invisible visible, researchers must "capture the stories of everyday persons as they tell about the pains, the agonies, the emotional experiences, the small

and the large victories, the traumas, the fears, the anxieties, the dreams, the fantasies, and the hopes in their lives" (Denzin, 2010, p. 32) and share their stories.

Researcher as Data Gathering Instrument

Qualitative research is unique because researchers bring their own worldview into the data analysis (Yin, 2015). Data are methodically collected yet analyzed through the researchers' lens. Researcher positionality plays a role in the data collection and analysis, further humanizing the data and conclusions about social justice issues. According to Hatch (2002), "Even when mechanical or electronic devices are used to support qualitative work, data take on no significance until they are processed using the human intelligence of the researcher" (p. 7).

Extended Firsthand Engagement

Yin (2015) explained "qualitative research is driven by a desire to explain social behavior and thinking, through existing or emerging concepts" (p. 10). Therefore, the researcher role is integral to the process of data collection and analysis. The researcher's worldview and interpretations of their fieldwork have important roles in this process. This reflexivity in qualitative research creates space for scholars to reflect on their previous understandings, revise them, build on them, and possibly develop new concepts and frameworks (Yin, 2015) for social justice. Moreover, "the limits of statistics and statistical evaluations can be exposed with the more qualitative, interpretive materials furnished by this approach" (Denzin, 2010, p. 25).

Critical Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research

CRT frameworks were "developed in critique of the unequal power relations within the broader society" (Leavy, 2017, p. 130). They examine the micropolitics of power, challenge dominant ideology, and consider inequality at all levels. Qualitative research is a vehicle for

intentionally seeking out participants from underrepresented groups, constructing research that is designed to access their experiences, and producing "research that can be put in service of social justice" (Leavy, 2017, p. 131). Understanding the intersectional positionality of participants requires an inductive research design that will allow them to share their subjective experiences, make meaning of their experiences, and produce rich, descriptive data (Leavy, 2017).

In CRT and CRT-derived frameworks, counterstories and counternarratives are a method of bringing the stories of marginalized groups into the forefront and in opposition to dominant narratives. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), the counterstory is "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 32). Therefore, I created composite experiences from the mixed narratives of my participants to make the invisible visible and leverage the power of research to advance discussions on practices and policies that impact AAW leaders in K-12 public school systems.

For this study, I drew on the tenets of AsianCrit to craft interview questions that explore the lived experiences of my participants. Interviews are a widely accepted data gathering tool used in various types of research. In-depth, semistructured interviews allow participants to steer the conversation, share their stories in their own words, and allow them to ascribe meaning to their stories (Leavy, 2017; Seidman, 2019). This method allowed me to build a more robust understanding of the diverse experiences of participants from a broad panethnic group. Moreover, the open-ended nature of in-depth, semistructured interviews led to other areas to explore that were not anticipated (Leavy, 2017).

In qualitative research, bringing my own experience into the research is both accepted and valued. Denzin (2010) wrote:

The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands

outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and

locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is

brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with

the situated practices that define and shape the public issues and private troubles being

studied. (p. 23)

Similarly, Milner (2007) argued:

How educational research is conducted may be just as important as what is actually

discovered in a study. Moreover, who conducts the research, particularly what they know,

and the nature of their critical racial and cultural consciousness—their views,

perspectives, and biases—may also be essential to how those in education research come

to know and know what is known. (p. 397)

As an Asian American woman of color conducting this research, I bring insider

knowledge to this topic. Having been marginalized throughout my life, I am keenly aware of

how power comes to bear in society and hold a stance of strong objectivity in my research topic.

That is, I acknowledge my biases, attitudes, and feelings in this work. One cannot be objective in

social justice work since this work is value laden (Leavy, 2017).

Implications for Social Justice Issues

Denzin (2010) asserted qualitative research can contribute to social justice efforts

and potentially change the world. By exploring a topic from within its specific contexts and

amplifying participants' perspectives, it becomes possible to "identify different definitions of a

problem and/or a situation that is being evaluated with some agreement that change is required"

(Denzin, 2010, p. 24). Because "programs must always be judged by and from the point of view of the persons most directly affected" (Denzin, 2010, p. 24), the lived experiences and the meanings ascribed by its participants can broaden the understandings for those with power (e.g., policymakers) to enact the necessary changes to improve the quality of life for all.

Method

Participants

I recruited participants from California public school districts and a California Asian American leadership organization using purposive sampling. Additionally, I encouraged participants to refer colleagues whom they believed met the selection criteria. I conducted interviews with California K–12 public school leaders in various positions from five different school districts. Although 10 women volunteered to be interviewed, two of the participants did not fully meet the selection criteria. Consequently, I excluded their data from this study and analyzed the interview data collected from the remaining eight participants.

Table 3 provides information about the eight participants who identified as AAW and lead in public school systems. Among them, four were of Chinese American descent, two were Filipina American, one was Vietnamese American, and one was Korean American. Their ages ranged from 35 to over 50 years old, and their professional experience spanned 6 to 25 years. Four participants were engaged actively in teaching roles, two served as department administrators, one held a district-level administrative position, and one was a school board member. While I also approached site administrators, such as principals and assistant principals, during the recruitment process, they were regrettably unable to participate in interviews due to scheduling conflicts. Nevertheless, the unavailability of school building administrators provided

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an opportunity to explore the perspectives of more nontraditional transformative leaders within

public school systems.

Table 3

Participant Profiles

Participant (pseudonym)	Age range	Ethnicity	Country of birth	Educational role	Years in education
Janelle Franco	35–39	Filipina	United States	Department administrator	16–20
Emily Lau	45–49	Chinese	Italy	District administrator	21–25
Amelia Adams	40–44	Filipina	Philippines	Classroom teacher	16–20
Madison Cheng	35–39	Chinese	Taiwan	Department administrator	16–20
Julie Wang	35–39	Chinese	United States	Classroom teacher	6–10
Tracy Li	50–54	Chinese	United States	School board member	6–10
Sophia Nguyen	35–39	Vietnamese	United States	Teacher on special assignment	16–20
Melissa Kim	35–39	Korean	United States	Classroom teacher	6–10

Note. n = 8.

Setting

The focus of qualitative research is on the lived experiences of its participants,

encompassing their thoughts and actions in various circumstances (Yin, 2015). It entails

"studying the meaning of people's lives, as experienced under real-world conditions" (Yin, 2015,

p. 9). Therefore, researchers rely on natural settings to capture the wholeness and complexity of

the contexts they are observing. For evidence collected to be as authentic as possible, participants

should not be hindered by artificial environments or researcher interference. Moreover,

researchers may have preconceived notions about participants and/or their environments.

Conducting studies in natural settings can yield rich data for describing contexts to an audience

without prior knowledge. For these reasons, I conducted my interviews in person at the participants' California work site whenever possible.

Some participants chose remote interviews conducted through video conferencing, with recordings made after obtaining participant consent. To safeguard confidentiality, participant names and work locations were redacted from notes and recordings. In the analysis and discussion, participants were given pseudonyms and other identifying information was altered to ensure their anonymity. Many participants requested ethnic identifiers in their pseudonyms, which are reflected in their assigned surnames. Western surnames were intentionally assigned to some participants to reflect their unique stories.

Data Collection

Participants completed a pre-interview survey to establish personal and professional contexts (see Appendix A). Following this, I conducted semistructured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. These interviews consisted of targeted questions around their identity as AAW. A semistructured interview protocol was used to standardize interviews and allow for consistency (see Appendix B). These interview questions were developed based on the research questions, themes of the literature review, and the tenets of AsianCrit. The primary objective behind these interview questions was to uncover and unpack the participants' experiences while investigating whether any affordances or challenges in their leadership roles could be attributed to their race, gender, a combination of both, or other unforeseen factors. To ensure the validity of the data and its alignment with participants' perspectives, member checking was subsequently conducted via email for participant validation.

Data Analysis

Deductive codes were derived from the research questions, themes of the literature review, and the tenets of AsianCrit were used to analyze interview data. Inductive codes emerged from the review of transcripts. The data were coded for patterns regarding how participants describe their SJL and how their intersectional positionality impacts why and how they lead in public schools. Data was analyzed to present counternarratives of the lived experiences as told by participants. I engaged in memoing following each interview to allow for iterative, ongoing analysis. I conducted a second round of coding, both within individual participant data and across the entire data set. To ensure the validity of the analysis, participants were provided access to the findings through member checking.

Limitations

While conducting qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge factors beyond one's control that can influence the study's outcomes. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of specific findings and could introduce bias. Nevertheless, the small sample size was deliberately chosen to allow for a more thorough analysis of participant data. Additionally, self-reported data is susceptible to exaggeration and social desirability bias, as Milner (2007) cautioned about the various potential risks in research.

Maintaining critical awareness was essential, and as a researcher, it was imperative for me to establish a rapport with participants and actively listen during interviews. My own positionality as an AAW and my role as an educator who intentionally rejects an administrative position may have potentially influenced my data analysis. However, as Choi (2020) pointed out, AAW's experiences, particularly their racial and gendered identities, often remain unexamined in

research interactions. My intersectional experiences in public education and other contexts served as a starting point for inquiry, enabling me to rigorously investigate my own experiences and connect them to broader cultural, social, and political processes.

Moreover, potential researcher bias is a concern, as the researcher has control over what information to include in the study, potentially affecting findings and conclusions. To address these limitations, I maintained transparency, followed a systematic methodology, adhered to the evidence (Yin, 2015), and sought expert review within my committee.

Validity

Considerations and intentional steps were taken to ensure the validity of my data collection and analysis. First, member checking interviews were conducted as needed to confirm the data was accurate. Participants were invited to review interview transcripts for errors and to make additions or changes to their responses. Second, as an insider-outsider of this study with strong objectivity, I actively acknowledged my biases, attitudes, and feelings throughout this process (Jones, 2013). Qualitative research relies heavily upon researcher integrity and their ability to keep a self-critical stance to validate this method. Moreover, my identity as an AAW put me in a vulnerable position as I collected and analyzed data. Therefore, it was imperative that I practice self-care and consistently write reflexive memo notes throughout my data collection and analysis to document my position within the process. Third, participants were pulled from my personal and professional networks. Consequently, I remained mindful of our relationships and how they manifested in my data collection and analysis (Leavy, 2017). Finally, to ensure the validity of my data and analysis and to mitigate personal biases, I regularly consulted with my dissertation committee.

Delimitations

This study was limited to women who identified as Asian Americans, women whose country of origin was in East Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were excluded from the participant pool because this study did not address sovereignty nor the historical oppression of the Pacific Islands. Additionally, I argue that leadership is a practice rather than an isolated position of power. Leadership practice and position are also not mutually exclusive. Therefore, leaders in this study were self-identified and included, but were not limited to, superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, coordinators, counselors, teachers on special assignment, and classroom teachers.

Summary

Current research on women of color who lead in schools does not adequately address the historical and sociocultural contexts of AAW, nor have nontraditional leadership roles been explored and defined. Since there is little known about how their intersectional positionalities impact AAW educational leaders, a qualitative research design can illuminate their experience and advance discussions on AAW, leadership, and social justice. In-depth interviews and researcher reflexivity are features of qualitative research that humanize data and broaden the understandings for those with power to enact the necessary changes to improve the quality of life for all. The following chapters present my research findings and their implications for social justice in public school systems.

CHAPTER 4

THE NARRATIVES

This chapter provides a narrative summary of eight participant interviews, encompassing demographic details (see Table 3), their lived experiences, and professional contexts. Through an analysis of the interview data, I aimed to address Research Question 1: What affordances and challenges do AAW experience in choosing and enacting SJL in K–12 public school systems?

Initially, I expected to hear discrete examples of affordances and challenges relating to participants' racial and/or gender identities. Rather, I found their intersectional positionalities presented experiences that are both affordances and challenges to their SJL (see Figure 3). They cited marginalization as K–12 students, in college, and in their careers, as learning experiences that shaped their identities and beliefs. Throughout their professional journeys, they used the insights gained from their lived experiences to navigate an oppressive system and disrupt it from their respective positions.

Figure 3

Affordances and Challenges That AAW Experience in SJL in K–12 Public School Systems
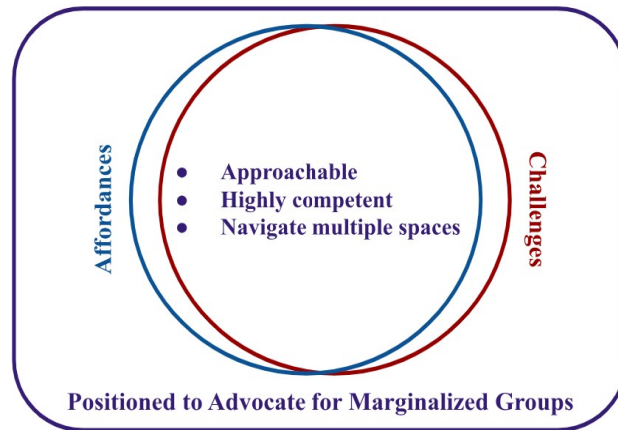
Note. This diagram illustrates examples of experiences of AAW that simultaneously present both affordances and challenges in their SJL.

Janelle Franco

"People don't generally associate Asian American women as leaders."

Janelle Franco, a Filipina American, was born and raised in Southern California, following her parents' emigration from the Philippines. Despite her limited proficiency in her heritage language, she believed her culture was both valued and affirmed throughout her early years. Janelle described her community as a "melting pot," with a noticeable presence of Filipinos. During her schooling years, she attended urban public institutions and mentioned sharing classrooms with "a lot of Filipino kids." Notably, she recalled having positive relationships with three Filipino teachers during her high school tenure.

Janelle's identity as an Asian American woman became more pronounced during her time at a predominantly White institution in college. During this period, she cofounded a local chapter of the National Asian American Women's Caucus, an organization dedicated to

cultivating leaders who champion DEI through both policy and societal transformation. Following her college years, Janelle embarked on her career as an elementary school teacher in a predominantly White, rural school district. At the time of this study, she had dedicated over 15 years to education, serving in various districts.

Janelle characterized her name and appearance as "ethnically ambiguous," leading colleagues to frequently assume her ethnicity as White. She elaborated on how this ambiguity manifested in the early stages of her career:

> For the first two years I never wanted to say anything and I kind of tried to keep to my ambiguity until I got tenure. I didn't really want to have a conversation [about it] because I kind of have my assumptions about how the conversations [would] go. *You're Filipino?* And then they want to know X, Y, and Z. Now that I'm older, I don't care. I feel a lot more confident. This is who I am, and here's X, Y, and Z.

Janelle subsequently transitioned to a suburban district in Los Angeles, taking on various leadership roles, such as teacher on special assignment. Later, she relocated to Orange County, California with her husband and applied for a department administrator position in a sizable suburban school district. Despite lacking prior administrative experience, Janelle secured the role, a feat she attributed to the position being newly established, allowing her the flexibility to shape its nuances. She also credited her doctoral program in educational leadership for providing her with valuable insights and knowledge. Reflecting on her journey, she stated:

> I understand that I don't have a lot of experience as an admin, but for the kind of work that I'm doing, it's not 100% necessary. Part of it is really feeling comfortable making mistakes and being able to kind of navigate and problem solve, and I can do that. I don't

get hung up on being perfect. And that's something that I feel good leadership knows how to navigate.

The school district where Janelle was employed predominantly consisted of White (46%) and Latinx (41%) students. This was followed by Asian Americans, who comprised 5%, and students identifying with two or more races, also at 5%. Less than 1% of the student population was Black, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Alaskan Native or Native American. Around 30% of the students participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program, and 22% were classified as English Learners.

Janelle identified as a 1.5-generation immigrant, which afforded her a unique perspective. She noted this connection to her family's immigrant experience allowed her to relate more closely with certain students or staff. Rooted in her personal experiences, Janelle prioritized the needs of marginalized families in her district, ensuring they were not overlooked. To bolster her advocacy efforts, she referenced current research. She adopted a "culturally responsive school leadership framework" to guide her priorities, decision making, and actions. She characterized her leadership style as collaborative, responsive, and organized. Colleagues frequently described Janelle as an organized and effective communicator.

Janelle frequently referenced her racial and gender experiences, viewing them as both affordances and challenges in educational leadership. As a Filipina American, she believed her personal understanding of the obstacles faced by historically marginalized groups enhanced her ability to connect with diverse stakeholders. Although Janelle perceived herself as accessible and cooperative, she still encountered microaggressions that hindered her leadership progression. She

suggested barriers to leadership roles may have been deeply intertwined with her racial and gender identity.

Janelle perceived her ability to connect with others as an advantage stemming from her identity as a Filipina American woman in her professional environment. She noted many of her colleagues were Latino and found significant similarities between Latino and Filipino cultures. This cultural resonance, she believed, made her especially approachable to certain colleagues. Additionally, her racial ambiguity granted her easier access to spaces that are predominantly White. Janelle recognized this accessibility made her more approachable to White stakeholders and colleagues, remarking, "One of the affordances I experience is that I'm seen as approachable. People feel they can converse with me and provide feedback, even if it's rude."

Janelle emphasized her intrinsic advocacy, tracing it back to her time as a teacher, as the cornerstone of her leadership journey. She firmly stated, without this proactive approach, she might have faced stagnation in her career due to glass and bamboo ceilings (Li, 2014). Reflecting on this, she commented:

> When I was a teacher, things were assigned to me. I felt like I got a lot of it where other people got nothing. It's kind of that problem of being competent, but also none of the mentorship towards leadership. Everything, getting my admin credential, finding the positions that I've applied for, really came from me. I didn't really have a mentor. . . . It's been more like you should do the work, but you shouldn't get the title kind of deal. And I feel like a lot of us get stuck in that cycle of being very confident, very competent, and we're able to do the work. But we are never encouraged into leadership because people

don't generally associate Asian American women as leaders and so you really have to assert yourself.

Reflecting on her personal and professional journey, Janelle advised AAW and girls to trust their instincts. She said, "Follow your intuition and get up when you fall. If you are not falling, you are not growing. It's more important to learn how to get up again than to walk around eggshells so you never fall."

Emily Lau

"We are often othered when it suits purposes, and then we are included when it suits purposes. But it's never our purpose."

Emily Lau identifies as a Chinese American, having been born in Italy shortly after her parents' emigration from Burma. Her family relocated to the United States when she was nearly 5 years old. Engulfed in Orange County, California's public school system "during the height of the no bilingual education era," prior even to Proposition 227—English Language in Public Schools (1998), she recalled being separated from other students for her to reach English proficiency goals set by her school. The school's approach not only separated her from her peers, but she was dissuaded from communicating with her family "in the ways they best expressed themselves." She remembered "constantly crying and not happy about being separated from [her] mother." Emily became a fluent English speaker, but she lost proficiency in the languages she had learned prior to arriving in the US.

In college, Emily's perception of herself as an AAW became prominent. Having previously endeavored to assimilate within her homogenized White community, she had not recognized her racial identity fully until she encountered fellow Asian Americans at her

university. They shared experiences that resonated deeply with her. Reflecting on this period, Emily stated,

> It was my racial identity that was brought to the forefront during my college years. I had always been acutely aware of my gender identity throughout my life. However, it was only post-graduation, during graduate school, and while teaching, that I genuinely started to embrace my linguistic identity.

Emily intentionally highlighted her hidden identity as a receptive bilingual. While she comprehended her heritage language, Mandarin, she grappled with fluent expression. Nonetheless, she took pride in and celebrated the receptive language skills she preserved.

Following her college graduation, Emily was resolute in her determination to ensure others would not undergo the struggles she faced during her childhood. Drawn to make a difference, she joined Teach for America and subsequently became a middle school teacher. Through her experiences, Emily discerned the intricacies of English language development. Over time, she came to the realization that "legislation and policy don't always hit the mark." In her quest to offer her children more affirming experiences than she had, she enrolled them in Mandarin dual language immersion schools.

At the time of the study, Emily held a district-level administrative position in a mid-sized urban school district located in the broader Los Angeles region. The student demographics in her district were primarily Latinx, comprising 60% of the population. White students represented 18%, Black students 11%, and Asian American students 7%. Additionally, 4% of students identified with two or more races. Less than 1% of students identified as either Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and similarly, less than 1% identified as Alaskan Native or Native American.

Almost 60% of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch programs, and English

Learners made up close to 20% of the total student population.

Emily characterized her leadership approach as servant-oriented, humanizing, and

transformational. She asserted, "I possess a profound empathy for marginalized students. I'm

especially sensitive to marginalization related to access to the curriculum through English."

Emily stated she believed in her "responsibility to discern, address, and challenge inequity," and

she employed her positional authority to confront barriers and advocate for change.

During the interview, Emily reflected on how her intersectional identity both afforded

certain opportunities and presented challenges in her pursuit of effective SJL. She suggested that

her organization perceives her as a mediator between privileged and marginalized communities

in the district due to her status as a person of color. Although the proximity to whiteness often

attributed to Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Museus & Iftikar,

2013) provided her a position in decision-making forums, her racial and gender identities

occasionally hindered her voice and influence in those spaces.

Emily disclosed she had been employed in the same district for nearly 25 years and, in

that time, she rose to a prominent leadership position. She highlighted that although there are

district administrators of color within her district, she remained the sole Asian American at the

upper echelons. She posited her racial identity might have granted her opportunities that were

potentially inaccessible to Black and Latinx colleagues with similar qualifications, expertise, and

length of service. She expressed:

> Knowing that just doing good work hasn't gotten other people into my space in the
>
> same way that I've been able to, I know it's something. . . . Often when people meet me,

they're not intimidated by me because when we are among other administrators, Asian people aren't seen as controversial. We're seen as hardworking. We're seen as intelligent and capable, and these are attributes that are valued in a system like this. And so, I've often said, I know I'm the safe choice. I never asked to be. . . . However, I think it's a struggle to say I'm a diversity hire because I've been here for too long. But I know that sometimes I get trotted out because I'm a person of color. But I'm the safe color.

Emily's multifaceted role in the district provided her with a unique vantage point, drawing from her experiences as a leader, mother, receptive bilingual, and woman of color. Through these lenses, she observed the erasure of Asian challenges within her school district. She discussed the duality of dual immersion programs and being silenced in spaces where she had an active seat at the table.

Emily's children attended Mandarin dual language schools in the district, a program viewed as prestigious. She quipped, "It is elite for some and not for others, and that's a problem." She shed light on the inadequate support for educators brought in from overseas to teach Mandarin. As a district administrator, she noted she sometimes found it challenging to advocate due to her acute awareness of how her intersecting identities influence the perceptions of her peers and stakeholders. She further detailed:

As an Asian American talking about an elite program, I tend to want to fade into the background because people will make assumptions [that] I'm just part of the privileged group. And yet, let's talk about anti-Asian hate. Let's talk about the fact that when I talk with the teachers, how marginalized they feel by our system that doesn't respect the fact that it is literally their lives, and we don't care about their visa, and it's our signature and

we will delay it for months, and then they get deported. It's just assumed these people are privileged because they have these degrees, they have these positions. And yet, they're different. I think we are often othered when it suits purposes, and then we are included when it suits purposes. But it's never our purpose.

Despite Emily's position within the highest ranks of leadership in her district, she observed that her advocacy for historically marginalized communities frequently went unnoticed. She commented:

Often what I feel is, no one is hearing what I'm really saying. Because if they really listen to what I'm saying, I'm saying the same thing [my colleagues of color] have been saying. But I come across very differently. I am received differently because of how I appear, and what they perceive those same words coming from me means.

Furthermore, Emily's efforts to advocate for Asian American students and families often went unrecognized. This lack of acknowledgment became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The district had previously released statements in support of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. Subsequently, Emily urged leadership to issue a supportive statement for the Asian American community during the rise of Asian hate crimes associated with the pandemic. Her request was met with silence–neither acknowledged nor answered. Reflecting on the incident, Emily spoke of the exasperation she felt but was unable to convey to those in power:

I'm in as many spaces as I could be. I have access to the leadership team. I'm in the board meetings and I'm asking the people who we presume are the ones who can make all decisions. I'm talking with them, I'm sitting at the same table as them. And yet when I

ask for something, it's not heard. And so how hard would that be for somebody who wasn't sitting at the table with them?

The following year, the district issued a resolution recognizing Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander month. Notably, there was no acknowledgment of Emily's earlier request during the pandemic.

Despite the setbacks she has experienced, Emily remained steadfast in her mission for social justice. Moreover, she offered the same advice to Asian American women and girls that she gives her own children each day, "Go be your excellent self." Emily tells her children, "The world will tell you who you should be, but you get to tell the world who you are."

Amelia Adams

"There are more people that look up to me than I think there are."

Amelia Adams, a Filipina American, was born in the Philippines. She emigrated to the United States with her father when she was in the third grade. Amelia attended public schools in a racially diverse urban school district in the greater Los Angeles area. However, she only recalls seeing "two or three" Filipino students during her time there. Many of her interactions with teachers were positive and affirming. For instance, an elementary school teacher, upon learning about Amelia's immigrant background, provided her with stationery to write letters to her mother back in the Philippines. Amelia's stepmother, also a Filipina immigrant, emphasized the importance of assimilation and insisted that Amelia speak only in English. Reflecting on this, Amelia stated, "I actually lost my fluency in Tagalog because of that, and I regret it so much. Now, I'm asking my mom to please speak to my son in Tagalog."

Amelia fondly recalled her secondary teachers as being "very supportive and encouraging." She has maintained relationships with several of them long after graduating from high school. After completing college, Amelia returned to her alma mater as a substitute teacher. She was eventually hired full-time, and at the time of the interview served as an English teacher at the very high school she once attended. In addition to her teaching role, Amelia was also a professor of education at a university based in Los Angeles.

Amelia, having dedicated nearly two decades to the same district, attributed her commitment to her deep belief in the public education system, stating, "I am a product of public education and I believe in the system." She described SJL as the work to bring the marginalized into the mainstream, being culturally responsive and anti-racist, maintaining an awareness of policies and practices designed to undermine equity, and educating others on how to be inclusive and equitable in all ways. Amelia leveraged her personal immigrant narrative to foster trust with her students. She articulated,

> As a teacher and with an immigrant story, I think that adds another layer of complexity to my identity that our students can connect with. . . . I want my students to understand, especially knowing some of the context of where they're coming from, and it sounds super cliche and dumb, and I explain it to them later, but I am the American dream, with the story, with the education, with finding a career and work that I love.

The school where Amelia taught primarily consisted of Latinx students (63%), with White students making up 20% of the population. Black and Asian American students each represented 7%, while those identifying with two or more races accounted for 3%. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and Alaskan Native or Native American students each made up less

than 1% of the student body. Notably, almost 60% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and close to 20% were classified as English Learners. Amelia observed that the district's demographic distribution shifted since her time as a student, with a notable decrease in diversity.

As a student, most Amelia's instructors were White women. Yet, she fondly remembered the presence of Black women in leadership roles such as principals, assistant principals, and deans during her high school years. Their visibility had a profound impact on Amelia, solidifying her belief in the potential of women of color to take up leadership positions in educational settings. Amelia became that figure for her students, assuming the role of the woman of color leading from the front in both her high school and university classrooms. She had an enlightening experience in her university class that made her reflect deeply on her position. She narrated:

> There were four Filipina women in that class and they started sharing who they were and their backgrounds, and it really stood out to me. They said that it was so meaningful for them and significant for them to see me at the front of the room because they didn't have that before. And that's when it clicked for me, *Oh shit! I didn't have me!* Before it was just me. It was about me doing the work I needed to do for the change that I wanted to see. It was a very emotional moment. Being the only Filipina among all these White people was hard. I think it's really important for me to be more mindful of what I represent at the front of the room now because there are more people that look up to me than I think there are.

Amelia reported she often encountered resistance to her SJL, such as administrators who do not believe in equity work or who deny inequities exist, colleagues who perpetuate harmful practices, and parents who "adamantly defend their children's racist behavior." Amelia quipped, "Sometimes they are taken aback because they don't expect me to be so vocal about social justice issues. I can be a lot to process." Furthermore, Amelia identified aspects of her intersectional positionality that both challenge her leadership and afford her opportunities to disrupt the status quo in public education.

Amelia described frequently confronting cognitive dissonance from parents and teachers who exhibit surprise at seeing an educated Filipina in a position of leadership. She noted these reactions to her positionality manifest as microaggressions, undermining her hard-earned achievements and expertise (Sue et al., 2007). She reflected on the recurrent challenges she faced when navigating her racial and gender identity:

> I think when parents look at my name, and it says Dr. Amelia Adams, and they come into my classroom and they see me sitting behind a desk, they're surprised because I think they're looking for an older White woman. And when they hear that I teach AP classes, I don't think they expect me to be attached to my name. . . . I've had student teachers come to my room to introduce themselves. *Oh, is Dr. Adams here?* Yeah, that's me. *Dr. Amelia Adams?* Yeah, that's me. And I think there's still a little bit of the need to prove myself and prove my worthiness of this title that I have.

As a non-Black person of color committed to SJL, Amelia occupied a distinctive position that enabled her to educate her peers and advocate for the Black community within her school.

She recounted an instance where a Black History Month performance at the school elicited negative reactions from the White community:

> The students' performance triggered a lot of people, and I was just seeing all these emails about people that were angry because they thought it was inappropriate. The principal sent something out to the school community saying that it would be addressed. Then we got apology emails from BSU. And I thought, wait a minute, we're not going to make Black people apologize during Black History Month. That's what we're not going to do. There was a point about language that [the students] were trying to make about how people throw around the N word. And they flipped it because it was ironic, it was supposed to be satire, and so they used the word cracker. I asked my principal to let me address this with staff, and I did a presentation on the origins of these words. And I said, *Okay, this is the origin of the word cracker. And actually, it's not a derogatory term. That's not what it was intended to be, and it was complementary*. Then we explored the origins of the N word and talked about how these words are not interchangeable. I asked the staff to discuss why the language is making them uncomfortable, because that's the space that you learn, when you're uncomfortable. And after that meeting one of my Black colleagues came up to me and said she really appreciated hearing that from another person of color, especially someone who wasn't Black.

Upon reflecting on the experiences that she shared during the interview, Amelia expressed that she is mindful of what her intersectionality and positionality mean to other women and girls of color. Her words of advice for them are to "stay true to yourself." She said, "Success

in the classroom at any age or at any stage of education has a lot to do with how much authenticity you bring into the space."

Madison Cheng

"I get the work done, but I'm just not quiet when I'm doing it."

Madison Cheng, a Chinese American, was born in Taiwan and emigrated to the United States with her family at the age of 6. Raised in a suburb of Los Angeles County, Madison often faced ridicule for her family's traditional food choices and her parents' accents. Madison fondly remembers her mother's insistence on speaking Mandarin during her childhood—a decision she appreciated as she is not only fluent in her heritage language but in three additional languages as well. Her passion for languages, which began with taking French in high school and further studying it in college, steered her toward a career in dual language immersion. This career choice was deeply rooted in her commitment to social justice, as she aimed to protect children from experiencing the social disadvantages she once faced. She noted her interest in preserving students' heritage language.

In college and postgraduate studies, Madison's racial identity became increasingly pronounced. Although she had primarily identified as American rather than Chinese up until then, her perceptions started shifting during her years studying abroad in France. There, locals often made assumptions about her nationality, expressing surprise when they learned she could speak English, French, and Spanish alongside her native Mandarin. This deepening self-awareness continued in her doctoral studies. When Madison chose French over Mandarin as the focus of her dissertation, colleagues and professors were taken aback, having expected her to specialize in Mandarin due to her ethnic background.

Early in her career, Madison pioneered a French immersion program, a decision met with resistance because it countered the prevailing expectation that she would launch a Mandarin immersion initiative. Madison contended that had a White individual displayed proficiency in an Asian language or initiated an Asian dual immersion program, accolades would likely follow. However, as an Asian American fluent in four languages, her abilities and choices were subjected to closer scrutiny and even doubt. This language expectation imposed on Asian Americans became even more conspicuous during her doctoral studies, as Madison recounted:

> I began to struggle with this idea. Am I misrepresenting who I am by not choosing to study dual immersion teachers or study the development of Mandarin immersion programs, or even starting a Mandarin program, instead of starting a French program? Am I not doing enough to represent my own roots knowing that? Then on the other hand, there's language representation and acceptance. You don't hear people making fun of people with French accents. You sure do hear people making fun of people with Chinese accents or Asian accents, right? Just in terms of language acceptance and my identity, I just kind of sat and was confused for quite a bit.

Madison's comprehensive experience in French dual immersion and her history of mentoring dual immersion educators across multiple districts led her to her position as a technology department administrator in a midsized suburban school district located in the greater Los Angeles area. The district's student population was predominantly White at 59%, followed by Latinx (20%), Asian American (15%), multiracial (4%), Black (1%), with Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Alaskan Native or Native American both constituting less than 1%. A

significant portion, 31%, of these students received free or reduced-price lunch, and 24% were classified as English Learners.

Madison noted, in her leadership capacity, she champions a collaborative approach, emphasizing, "share[ing] the decision-making process" with her team. This was done with the intent to make informed decisions that can positively influence not just the department but also those groups that may not traditionally have ready access to mainstream resources. Guided by a sense of equity, Madison understood her responsibility to "ask questions that may make the dominant population uncomfortable."

Madison described remaining acutely aware of the multifaceted challenges confronting multilingual families within her district and persistently championing their cause. Over 60 languages were spoken in her school district. Yet, when data collection, such as parent surveys, were carried out digitally, English invariably took precedence, followed only then by options in other languages. Madison posited this hierarchical approach acts as a deterrent for families, discouraging them from providing feedback. As a result, these families were effectively silenced, losing their ability to have their voices heard. She elaborated on this perspective:

> So, if I were a Korean speaker, I would have to go through all the fluff and then find it at the bottom. This can be resolved very simply by branching out the form. The very first question is *Would you like to see this in Korean, or whatever language?* My suggestion was met with, *It becomes a lot harder for the data analysis afterward.* Apparently, we have a lot of students, so like with 25,000 parent responses it does become burdensome. But you know what's burdensome? Knowing that Korean is last and a parent has to go

through all that fluff every single time. If I were a parent who reads in, say Armenian, I would be frustrated to have to sift through all of the languages to get to my language.

Madison attributed her strong connection to her cultural heritage to being immersed in Mandarin. This strong foundation in her native tongue empowered her to explore other languages confidently. She recognized this as a privilege that is not a given for many children of immigrants. For this reason, Madison "leads with language forward." She described how, in her leadership role, she actively campaigned for streamlined access to translation services, provided guidance to dual language immersion educators, and promoted bilingual education. Reflecting on her unique journey and how it shaped her leadership, Madison mused:

> I was really lucky in the sense that my mom was like, *I'm not speaking to you in English, and if you're gonna speak to me in English, I don't understand. Speak Chinese. That I understand*. She didn't care that people were staring at us. She didn't care that we weren't speaking in English. She sent us to Chinese school on Saturdays. So I'm privileged there, right? But I'm like, how could this be? It would be so much cooler if we could just do this in our normal schooling, where we get a sense of our own culture in our schools and do it for free.

Madison's multilingual upbringing afforded her opportunities to study abroad and paved a distinctive route to leadership. Nonetheless, even when occupying leadership roles, she confronted resistance within her district. She perceived this pushback to be rooted in the entrenched norms of White patriarchy and societal expectations that stereotype her as the "quiet Asian girl."

Madison was outspoken in department meetings when decisions on the table threatened to oppress marginalized groups. Notably, Madison's viewpoints and actions were often scrutinized by her White counterparts. She reminisced about an incident where a White supervisor confronted her:

I got some feedback after a meeting. I was told, *You can't make people feel uncomfortable in a meeting. Sometimes you ask questions that make people uncomfortable, or you make a comment.* But let's talk about the fact that you're a White male and have this perspective. Here is a different perspective, a minority perspective and with a different lived experience. Not everything is always handed to you. So, then they just kind of asked me to not ask uncomfortable questions. If I'm not the one asking uncomfortable questions, who will? Because y'all ain't asking. And if this question makes White people uncomfortable, don't you have to think about how it is for folks of color, and especially our students of color?

Madison expressed how her unwavering work ethic, combined with her identity as an AAW who challenges traditional norms, potentially influenced her career path. She suggested that her propensity for asking uncomfortable questions may have slowed her leadership trajectory, nearly hitting the glass and bamboo ceilings in her district (Li, 2014). Reflecting on her journey, she pondered whether her candor delayed the attainment of her current administrative position:

There is the stereotype that we work hard, right? That we are the quiet ones who get the work done. Except they don't get that with me. I get the work done, but I'm just not quiet when I'm doing it. But at the same time, I sometimes wonder, if I were a male, would I

have been promoted to this position sooner than this? We had a whole year where this role wasn't filled, and they just waited. And who was doing the job? I was. My predecessor was a White male, and he was promoted to assistant principal at a different school. But then somebody still had to do the job without the title or the pay. So, who would it go to? They all kind of saw that I was going to be the one to go for it. And then it just kind of fell on me, you know?

Reflecting on her educational journey, Madison's advice to Asian American women and girls is to courageously use their voice. She said, "People aren't going to stand up for us. We have to stand up for ourselves and break our own stereotype as the quiet listeners and doers."

Julie Wang

"It's also about being taken seriously and not being deemed the quiet Asian girl."

Julie Wang, a Chinese American, was born and raised in San Francisco. Though ethnically Chinese, Julie stated she felt a strong connection to Native Hawaiians and Indigenous cultures. Her family history intertwined with Hawaii, starting with her great-great-grandfather who moved there from China. Her grandfather grew up in Hawaii, and her grandmother, originally from Hong Kong, met him there. Julie's family has been in both Hawaii and the mainland United States for generations, and she grew up in an English-speaking home.

She attended Baptist and Catholic schools in elementary school and then went to public high schools in San Francisco. Her dream of becoming a teacher began early in her life. This was due in great part to the fact she had an Asian teacher in first grade who made an impression on her. She fondly recalled:

She's an Asian teacher, a Chinese teacher. I went to a Christian School, a very White

Baptist Christian School. I think it was the first time I saw someone else, who was not my

family, that looked like me. Looking back at it now, I think that really had an impact on

me. And she was just amazing. I just remember she gave pretzels, you know, she was just

really sweet. I don't remember anything else, but I remember her.

Julie's diverse perspectives came from her experiences in various private and public

school settings. Growing up in a low-income and diverse neighborhood, Julie had a sense of

privilege because her parents sent her to private parochial schools. In her early years at a

predominantly White Baptist elementary school, she felt like an outsider. She had friends from

different backgrounds, but "not many Chinese or White friends." Julie later attended a

predominantly Latinx and Filipino Catholic school. Although she was one of the few Chinese

students there, she noted she "didn't feel othered" by her classmates or teachers.

Julie's racial identity became more significant during her high school years. In one public

school with a significant Chinese population, she "did not feel Chinese enough" because she did

not speak the language. This made her feel like an outsider within her own ethnic community.

Subsequently, she attended another high school with a diverse community of color, where she

felt more comfortable, and "had mostly Black and Latinx friends." These high school

experiences prompted her to explore her ethnic identity further in college and beyond. She

shared:

I just always felt more comfortable with the Filipino, Black, Latinx community because

the Asian community, you know, just wasn't really accepting of [my heritage language

loss]. But I was always still really proud. I still always learned my culture. I still have

appreciation. In college, I joined the Asian Student Union, and I minored in Asian

American studies. So that's where the Asian American experience is for me. It's a

very eclectic identity, even though my family roots are in China, ancestry-wise. . . . I'm

very attuned to my culture and I know where my family is from. I studied it in college

and I've even been to China. But you know, I would always get comments like, *Oh but*

you look Chinese. Why do you not speak it? And then it's almost like, okay, I should just

pretend I'm a different ethnicity just to not have to deal with that.

At the time of the study, Julie had worked in education for nearly a decade. She began

her career teaching at a Catholic school and later transitioned to teaching in different public

school districts in the San Francisco area. In her first public school district, where there were

very few educators of color, Julie felt marginalized. The district aimed to provide DEI

professional development, but Julie was disappointed to find that the training was led by a White

woman who lacked the lived experience to speak effectively about issues related to

marginalization. She recalled the experience:

I was working with middle school, and I wanted my students to be social advocates for

change, so I was excited to attend a PD on equity. But then it was run by this White

woman, and I'm wondering, why is this White woman from Ventura telling me about

equity? She's not from here. This is ridiculous. This was my first exposure to a full staff

PD in the district. I didn't know anybody, and so I'm just here, and all these White people

are just eating this shit up, you know? And so I just felt super thin.

Julie's early experiences in education motivated her to seek a support network and take

proactive steps. She became a part of an affinity group for educators of color and eventually

transitioned to a smaller urban school district that prioritized hiring a diverse staff. Within this district, she assumed a role as an elementary classroom teacher and an induction mentor for new teachers in a school located in the San Francisco area, close to her hometown. The school had a predominantly Latinx (41%) and Asian American (40%) student population, with smaller percentages of students being of two or more races (9%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4%), Black (3%), and White (3%). About 63% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and approximately 17% of the district's population consisted of English Learners. Within this new educational environment, Julie co-founded an affinity group in her school district that focuses on discussions among educators of color about decolonizing their classrooms and challenging White supremacy in their schools.

Julie characterized her SJL as coaching toward transformative leadership. She emphasized the importance of social justice and antiracism in her role as a teacher-leader. Julie placed a strong focus on addressing conflicts, embracing discomfort, and engaging in courageous conversations. She stated that social justice leaders must "continuously learn, unlearn institutionalized norms, and regularly reflect on their personal experiences." Furthermore, Julie emphasized her commitment to self-decolonization, which involves examining her own privileges and biases and how they influence her decision-making processes.

Julie has had the opportunity to engage with various social levels within her community, and she was well-positioned to make an impact in multiple ways. She described how, as a classroom teacher, she created a culturally responsive and sustaining learning environment for her students and fostered connections with families. Additionally, she mentored new teachers, guiding them in discussions to challenge ingrained mindsets and confront oppressive practices.

Julie had also taken on a leadership role in facilitating an affinity group within her school district and was frequently in conversation with district leadership.

Julie's ability to effect change in her roles has been accompanied by challenges. She described encountering resistance in her work because she does not conform to the hegemonic model of leadership. As a result, she noted the need to exert additional effort to gain recognition and be heard, including adapting her approach to different environments and contexts:

> It's like with dating, even within my own culture, where I get reactions that imply
> *I like that you speak your mind, but I kind of want you to be submissive, too*. There's
> that ingrained stereotype that implies that I'm just gonna roll over. No, I can come at you
> in multiple ways. I can come at you like a girl from the city, I can also come at you at
> every other level. I can code switch very easily in many different ways, in White spaces,
> in spaces where it's deemed to speak in a certain type of way.

While Julie has adjusted her communication style to ensure her voice is heard, she described remaining steadfast in speaking from her core values of social justice and antiracism. She identified ways in which she actively resists stereotypes that might silence her as an Asian American woman. However, she acknowledged the ongoing challenge of not always being taken seriously, which she noted as a point of frustration given the urgency of her work.

Julie's diverse experiences have provided her access to various spaces and opportunities to advocate for marginalized students. However, as an Asian American woman, she also has experienced marginalization in these spaces. Her deep investment in her students has led her to internalize the social injustice against which she is fighting. She discussed the toll that all of this has had on her mental health and well-being:

A challenge I face is that I'm working towards having those uncomfortable conversations in a way that doesn't make me extremely emotional. It's also about being taken seriously and not being deemed the quiet Asian girl. Sometimes I struggle with the balance of being able to not take everything in as I empathize a lot and I carry that within me, which at times has impacted my depression and anxiety. In the past, I've taken it upon myself to try and change things by being involved in many things. But it put my health at risk, which did not make things sustainable. I'm trying to maintain healthy boundaries, healthy conflict, and healthy advocacy when pursuing this work in social advocacy.

Despite the setbacks she has experienced, Julie emphasized that Asian American women and girls must speak their truth and find their voice. She said, "We have the potential to be great leaders because we connect with so many people; we have such a valuable skill set. The world needs to not look past us, but they need to look at us."

Tracy Li

"I am challenging the status quo and so people might think that equals 'I'm not a team player.'"

Tracy Li is a Chinese American who was born and raised near the San Francisco area. She grew up in a predominantly White and Asian suburb, and she maintained her cultural heritage through Chinese dance and a close-knit multigenerational household. She described her upbringing as being raised by a modern-thinking mom, a traditional Chinese dad, and a lot of cousins. For this reason, she feels an affinity toward "Latino communities and immigrant communities because [she] can relate to . . . the large multigenerational households."

Tracy's awareness of her racial and gender identity came to the forefront during her college years when she transitioned from her sheltered suburban upbringing to a diverse

university campus in Southern California. This new environment exposed her to people with diverse life experiences, and she delved into ethnic studies courses and engaged with the campus women's center. Tracy found the women's center to be a haven for women to come together in a supportive community, which allowed her to connect with people's vulnerabilities and stories. During her college years, Tracy became politically active and began organizing and advocating for immigrants' rights in California.

Tracy initially pursued a career as a high school math teacher, and she finds some humor in the fact that it aligns with the stereotype of Asians being good at math. However, after a few years, she relocated to the Los Angeles area and transitioned to a different career path. Nevertheless, Tracy continued to be a leader in the realm of public education for social justice by running for a seat on the board of education in her children's school district, achieving success in her campaign.

Tracy identifies as an Asian American woman, a mother, and a political activist. She acknowledged these aspects of her identity significantly influence her role in educational leadership. She characterized her leadership style as collaborative and nonhierarchical, emphasizing shared decision making to foster consensus. Tracy's conception of SJL revolves around "advocating for those who have the least opportunity, resources, and power."

Tracy served in a midsized urban school district that was predominantly Latinx (60%), with 18% White, 11%, Black, 7% Asian American, and 4% having two or more races. There were also smaller percentages of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or Native American students. Approximately 60% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 20% of the district's population were English learners.

Tracy's college experiences shaped her into an outspoken leader in public education. She actively spoke out when decisions affected marginalized groups in her district. Tracy was keenly aware that her district's immigrant community often lacks the social capital (Yosso, 2005) to participate in board meetings, and she saw her role as providing a voice for them. Although she had a seat at a decision-making table that afforded her a public voice, she found herself "silenced and bullied" when her words and actions disrupted the institutional hegemony. Tracy understood that she was challenging the status quo, and she was often viewed as "not being a team player."

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to distance learning, Tracy raised the issue of vaccine mandates to protect vulnerable community members. However, her request for a discussion on this matter was dismissed. In response, she published an opinion piece in the local newspaper to bring attention to the fact that this crucial discussion had not yet taken place. This action led to her losing favor with her fellow board members, most of whom were White men. Tracy shared her experience:

> I've always tried to take action on something for change and this is no different. I have my board role, but I also recognize that I have leverage as an individual and as a community organizer. And so when I was outspoken about it and I tried to get our board to address the safety of having more people vaccinated, the powers that be did not like that. They already decided that we're just going to open schools in August. And I was fearing for [my child] and children her age because at that time there was no vaccine approved for that age group. First of all, teachers were not required to vaccinate and there was no vaccine for anybody in her grade or in her age. Are parents just gonna

throw them in there with a mask and that's it? And so I thought this is an issue I have to stand up on. It's not like this is just my opinion. This is a safety issue, of life and death. We have family members with preconditions, and we're going to create vectors for the spread by throwing these kids together with their teachers and they're in six periods of classes, and they're mixing together. That is just a formula for spread. So I wrote an op-ed in the paper. I called a press conference with the mayor, and that really upset my board and leadership.

The school board attempted to silence Tracy by implementing protocols that required members to submit op-eds for approval from the board president before they could be published. In response, Tracy filed a lawsuit against the school board, arguing that they violated her constitutional rights to free speech, free petition, and free press. She emphasized the broader implications, stating, "If my rights can be restricted today, then every board member's rights can be restricted tomorrow."

Weeks later, the board modified the contested protocols, making them optional instead of mandatory. In response to this change, Tracy withdrew her lawsuit. Subsequently, the board convened to discuss the potential implementation of vaccine mandates. The district reopened schools without enforcing mandatory vaccines for staff or students.

Tracy emphasized that AAW leaders are often underestimated, but she felt energized by the younger generation of Asian Americans because "they are more outspoken" about social issues. Her advice for Asian American women and girls to "Stand up for you. Don't take any crap. If you have the right principles, that should stand on its own."

Sophia Nguyen

"My parents were refugees that came here after a war for me, for us, for our future, and there is so much creative wealth in that."

Sophia Nguyen is a Vietnamese American who was born in the United States after her parents fled the war in Vietnam. She attended public school in the greater Los Angeles area. Sophia said that she remembers being "the only Asian in a predominantly Latino community and being practically mute" because she felt like she did not belong. She recalled racialized experiences in school, such as the time her teacher made fun of her Vietnamese name, which made her "feel like the smallest person in the world."

Despite these marginalizing experiences, Sophia fondly recalled moments when she felt included, particularly when she could sing with her classmates. In high school, she experienced a sense of acceptance as a dancer and excelled in her studies. She also acknowledged that her ability to speak English without an accent made her feel privileged in school compared to her classmates who spoke accented English. Sophia described her identity in fluid terms, with being Vietnamese American at the forefront:

> Vietnamese American is still very upfront because I have so much pride in the fact that my parents were refugees that came here after a war for me, for us, for our future, and there is so much creative wealth in that because they were creative survivors for most of their life. They never experienced a life without war, and so I'm so proud of that. And I think a lot of people, when they see me, they think of the model minority and assume I must have it easy. I'm like, *no, my family struggled*, and I'm very open about that because they risked their lives for us. I am very Vietnamese American . . . I'm an artist. I

am a mother of two boys, which is very specific. I'm a sister. I'm a public educator, and I hold a lot of pride in that. And so, you know, that's just a couple things. I see myself as a dynamic person that is going to constantly grow and so all of that is my identity and it's very multifaceted and deeply intertwined.

The performing arts remained a significant part of Sophia's life, accompanying her throughout college and her career. Sophia credited the performing arts for offering various avenues of expression during times when she didn't always have the words to process her experiences. Her racial and ethnic identity became salient during college, where she delved into the politics and polarization of the war that displaced her family. She shared her internal struggle:

> I was really conflicted with being a Vietnamese American because there are a lot of political connotations to that. All Vietnamese Americans that I was exposed to came from war, so there's a very clear division of North versus South Vietnam, communist versus anticommunist. I was really grappling with that because there were protesters in the community. Then there are all the anticommunist protesters that are so traumatized and disheartened from the war that they escaped from to come here. I think I was more concerned with seeing that polarization in my own community. So my program had a performance studies class. We would basically read about social theory and gender theory, and then we'd perform it. And I'm not a very vocal person; I'm very physical in how I communicate. I'm a dancer, I'm kinesthetic. That's my strength. And I remember creating this piece where I put this piece of cloth in the middle of the floor and I'm like which side am I on? Am I on this side? Am I on that side? And I was grappling with that

and then [I just threw the cloth in the air], and I was like, *fuck that*! It was exactly what we dealt with, this polarization of where we belong. As a performance artist, it's a very egotistical expression because it's raw and it's what you're feeling in the moment, and sometimes it's hard for folks to watch because they're like, *Oh my God, that was intense*. But as an artist that was a process that I had to go through because I didn't know I had this anger.

At the time of the interview, Sophia had been teaching for over 15 years and was a performing arts teacher at the elementary school she attended as a child. She also mentored other performing arts teachers throughout her school district. The school Sophia served was predominantly Latinx (60%) and Asian American (30%), followed by Black (5%), White (3%), less than 3% having two or more races, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Alaskan Native or Native American. The entire student body qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

Sophia expressed a "deep dedication and care" for what she teaches and the students she serves. She aimed to "build authentic relationships to understand the needs and strengths of all stakeholders" and described her leadership as "a facilitation of what we agree on, rather than a hierarchical take-over."

Sophia's extensive life experience and talents have positioned her to engage in fruitful collaborations with fellow teachers in her school. Moreover, her influence extended to novice performing arts teachers across her school district. Drawing from her own experiences as a public school student in an immigrant community, Sophia possessed a unique insight into the lives of her students. This insight fueled her commitment to fostering healthy, positive

relationships with her students, grounded in the understanding that learning was fundamentally relational. She emphasized the critical role of the performing arts and early language acquisition, noting, "Speaking from a brain perspective, that is when [children's] language acquisition device is the most prominent. They're going to take it all in, and you're setting that foundation and they're just running with it."

Sophia has had seats at many decision-making spaces, where she was intentional about collaborating with colleagues and integrating the cultural and creative wealth of her students. However, she met resistance in these spaces from teachers who expressed discomfort with being culturally responsive and sustaining and meeting the needs of the whole child.

Sophia faced resistance from some teachers who were dismissive of her efforts to create culturally responsive and inclusive educational experiences. For instance, when collaborating on a performing arts lesson about Hanukkah, one teacher declined to participate, stating, "I don't have Jewish kids, so I'm not doing this lesson." Despite encountering colleagues who may not fully recognize or acknowledge their biases, which can negatively impact their students, Sophia maintained a curious approach when addressing such resistance:

> I'm trying to decipher that negative energy. Is it because I'm trampling on an ego right now or is it based on insecurities? And I think that those are the challenges that I come up with where I'm more curious about deciphering where that comes from. Oftentimes it has to do with folks who have issues with their own identity and they're kind of unlearning or not even allowing themselves to unlearn their biased thought. I think that that's a huge challenge because when it comes down to serving kids and being an inclusive educator, we need to understand that someone can learn best with a

learning style that is not being tested on. That is a huge challenge and that's where we have to step in and not as a singular person, but in community, to be able to push that. I'm a leader trying to create other leaders so that we are on the same page.

Sophia passionately emphasized the significance of maintaining a growth mindset and authenticity in every aspect of her life, starting with a deep understanding of her identity. Having grappled with her intersectional identity as a child of Vietnamese refugees, a Los Angeles public school student, and an artist, she has cultivated a compassionate approach to public education, especially within immigrant communities. Her advice to Asian American women and girls is simple and profound: "Find the wealth in your identity and let that drive you."

Melissa Kim

"It's hard to ignore the whole model minority thing."

Melissa Kim is a second-generation Korean American and a third generation school teacher who was born and raised in the greater Los Angeles area. She received her education in public schools, including the Korean bilingual school that her mother helped establish. While Korean is not the primary language spoken in her household, with her family, or at work, Melissa is fluent in Korean and can code-switch effortlessly when needed. For instance, at Korean cultural events, she can navigate the space without sounding "Americanized." Melissa attributed her ability to retain her heritage language and culture to her bilingual education.

At the time of the interview, Melissa had been an educator for nearly a decade and served as an elementary classroom teacher in her hometown, which is a community of color with a substantial Asian American student population. The school she worked at was predominantly Latinx (60%) and Asian American (30%), with smaller percentages of Black (5%), White (3%),

and less than 3% representing two or more races. Additionally, there were minimal populations of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, as well as Alaskan Native or Native American students. The entire school qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

Melissa defined SJL as advocating for and supporting the needs of marginalized groups, a mission she wholeheartedly embraced in her role as a classroom teacher. Her dedication to this cause was often tested by systemic issues, practices, and expectations that lack cultural responsiveness. Melissa's leadership style is grounded in collaboration and relationship-building. Beyond her teaching responsibilities, she also took on leadership roles within her educational community, including serving on committees, pursuing her administrative credential, and being a parent.

Melissa emphasized several key aspects of her identity that hold significant meaning for her. Her role as a second-generation Korean American and her identity as a mother were particularly prominent during the interview. She also highlighted the importance of familial and generational facets, including being a spouse, daughter, and sister. Melissa acknowledged that these intersecting identities can occasionally create conflicts or tensions in her life:

> As a second generation you're torn between so many expectations, to live this American dream, to go pursue your dreams, but then also be obligated to fulfill your role as a female in the family. I think reconciling a lot of those expectations can be really challenging.

She also reflected on the salience of motherhood and its impact on her approach to teaching:

> Becoming a mom really changed my understanding of my role as a teacher. It intensified the level of intentionality that I have with what I do. It just made it all

personal, knowing that I have this baby at home, and I have 24 of those babies at school. Each one of them is somebody's everything, somebody's world.

Melissa's bilingual upbringing has opened doors for her to teach and assume leadership roles in a school with a significant Asian American student population. While she has cultivated meaningful relationships with students and colleagues, she also grappled with concerns about how her racial and gender identity might influence others' perceptions of her. She alluded to a contrast in how Asians are perceived compared to other communities of color.

Melissa acknowledged that "it's hard to ignore the whole model minority thing" and how it affects Asian American students. She pointed out that Asian American students may receive more "second chances" compared to students from other marginalized communities. Melissa also observed disparities in how attendance is scrutinized, with Asian students facing less scrutiny than Black and Latinx students. Furthermore, as an Asian American woman, she recognized her relative privilege in terms of safety and the absence of concerns about racial profiling by law enforcement, which differs from the experiences of Black and Latinx males (Meadow, 2022).

Melissa emphasized the importance of building positive relationships with everyone on campus, including students, families, faculty, and staff. She recognized the division that exists between Asian Americans and other communities of color and believes working through these divisions is crucial to bridging communities and ensuring a socially just education for all students. She said:

> I do feel like there is a little bit of a barrier between Latin American and African
> American families when they see me. And there is. I think that it takes some time to
> build trust. I think that's historical, and I understand that. I've seen it go the other way,

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too. I can see that it can be challenging for some Korean teachers who culturally feel more attached to first generation mentalities and ideas to have trust for Latin American and Black families as well.

Melissa said that she approaches her work with caution, considering how her contributions are received and whether they are embraced in the same way as those of someone from the dominant culture. She expressed that she needed "to do things with excellence" and aimed to "make sure that the quality of our work is done well." Melissa's upbringing in both Korean and American cultures has made her aware of the existing racial hierarchy (Hsieh & Kim, 2020; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Lee, 2015; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Although she was recognized as a teacher–leader in her workplace, she remained mindful of her identity as an Asian American, influenced by the advice her mother imparted: "My mom has always reminded me that at the end of the day when somebody just looks at you, you're Asian, you're not White." This awareness has informed her approach to leadership and advocacy for marginalized groups.

Melissa emphasized her continuous growth as a leader, maintaining a growth mindset and remaining open to learning and new possibilities. She fondly recalled the leaders who had the greatest impact on her as those who listened and provided support. In her view, effective leaders should "be open, not just to the people in front of you, but also the people who are next to you and those who might be a couple steps behind." This philosophy has become integral to her leadership approach, and she shares this valuable advice with Asian American women and girls.

Affordances and Challenges

The participants described experiences that are simultaneously both affordances and challenges of being AAW who lead for social justice in K-12 public school systems. These

experiences reflect common, but unnamed, perceptions of AAW educational leaders for social justice. They are often perceived as (a) approachable, (b) highly competent, and (c) adept at navigating multiple spaces, which uniquely positions them to advocate for marginalized groups. While their intersectional experiences motivated the participants to pursue social justice, their positionality required them to strategically navigate a hegemonic system to disrupt oppressive practices and protect their own well-being.

AAW Leaders are Perceived as Approachable

The data from these narratives reveal that participants were perceived as approachable in their leadership contexts. Given their marginalized experiences as women of color, they expressed compassion toward the communities they served, particularly immigrant communities and multilingual families. These participants actively cultivated positive relationships within their school communities and acted as advocates for those whose voices might otherwise go unheard. Consequently, marginalized families often felt comfortable in the presence of these leaders.

In parallel to being approachable by marginalized communities, their perceived proximity to whiteness afforded some participants access to leadership spaces that have historically been predominantly White. However, they often felt unheard in these spaces. For example, Emily described in her narrative that as an Asian American woman of color, she is received differently from other colleagues of color because she is the "safe color." Similar to participants in Kim and Hsieh's (2022) study, these participants recounted instances where colleagues made racist remarks in their presence, assuming that their perceived proximity to whiteness made it

acceptable to do so. As Janelle pointed out previously in this chapter, "People feel they can converse with me and provide feedback, even if it's rude."

These findings suggest the intersectional experiences of AAW have provided them with some access to leadership spaces and opportunities to foster community. However, because of their intersectionality, AAW leaders are also positioned to constantly confront racism and must formulate productive responses that drive public school systems closer to achieving social justice.

AAW Are Perceived as Highly Competent

All participants conveyed they were perceived as hard working, intelligent, and highly competent, aligning with the model minority stereotype. These favorable traits have opened doors for them in securing and maintaining positions within public education. Nonetheless, most participants encountered glass and bamboo ceilings (Li, 2014). Even if some participants deliberately opted to remain in nonadministrative roles, they face the prospect of forgoing opportunities for advancement in salary and potentially gaining a more influential role in decision-making spheres.

Like the AAW administrators in the study by Liang et al. (2018), these women did not initially aspire to become school leaders, nor were they mentored or actively encouraged to pursue more direct routes to leadership roles. Janelle assumed additional responsibilities as a teacher due to her perceived competence and dedication. However, she did not receive encouragement to transition into a leadership role. Instead, she took the initiative to seek out an administrative position on her own. Madison recounted doing the work of an administrator for an entire year before the title and commensurate salary were offered to her.

These findings suggest AAW in education face the dual challenge of being perceived as highly competent, yet not automatically recognized as leaders. This phenomenon highlights the obstacles AAW must navigate while striving for positions of influence in K–12 public school systems, hindering their advancement and potential impact in the realm of educational social justice.

AAW Are Adept at Navigating Multiple Spaces

Participants shared stories of navigating spaces, both racially diverse and predominantly White. They were keenly aware of their perceived proximity to whiteness and the privilege that came with speaking unaccented English in educational spaces. For instance, Julie's experiences in diverse school environments equipped her to communicate effectively in both White affluent spaces and urban communities of color. However, all participants noted constantly code switching between these spaces and straddling multiple identity markers, took a toll on their mental and emotional energy as they encountered racist and sexist microaggressions in their work. As women of color dedicated to SJL, AAW occupy a unique position that allows them to advocate for marginalized groups in their communities and serve as champions for equity. Supporting AAW in navigating these spaces is essential to ensuring their well-being and empowering them to maintain their commitment to social justice.

Summary

The eight participants in this study shared personal narratives that provide insight into their experiences growing up as Asian Americans, shedding light on the various challenges and moments that brought their racial and gender identities to the forefront of their lives. Their ethnic backgrounds span East Asia and Southeast Asia, and their unique journeys have led them to

assume leadership roles within California's public school systems. Although their paths have diverged, their shared commitment to advancing social justice is evident, as they worked to effect change in a range of educational contexts, from the classroom to the boardroom. These narratives align with the AsianCrit tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis, as they illustrate the interplay between personal experiences, theoretical understanding, and practical action (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

I aimed to address Research Question 1: What affordances and challenges do AAW experience in choosing and enacting SJL in K–12 public school systems? However, the study did not reveal discrete examples of affordances and challenges. Rather, it became evident that their intersectional identities inherently present experiences that are both affordances and challenges in their pursuit of SJL. The findings suggest AAW are uniquely positioned to advocate for marginalized groups because they are perceived as (a) approachable, (b) highly competent, and (c) adept at navigating multiple spaces. This duality was exemplified by participants' roles in championing equity while encountering resistance and being among the few engaging in this work.

Additionally, several recurring themes emerged across participants' narratives. These themes encompassed the influence of linguistic experiences on their identities, the complex dynamics of intersectionality and positional impact, and the struggle they faced in finding their voices and influence in decision-making spaces. These findings underscore the need for a reevaluation and potentially a reinvention of leadership in public school systems.

In the following chapter, I use the AsianCrit framework to explore the recurring themes in the participant narratives to address Research Question 2: How do the intersectional

positionalities of AAW affect the way they lead for social justice? This exploration will provide

valuable insights into the complexities of their experiences and the unique ways they engaged in

transformative leadership. The aim of this discussion is to amplify the voices of AAW who have

been historically marginalized or excluded from educational leadership spaces and illuminate the

benefits of increased AAW leaders for educational social justice. Following this discussion, I

will present recommendations aimed at realizing a greater presence of AAW in educational

leadership positions, including the reimagining of leadership within public school systems.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Iftikar and Museus (2018) asserted "racism is an endemic aspect of US society that profoundly shapes the lives of people within it . . . [and] that White supremacy and racial oppression work differently in different contexts and lives" (p. 936). The personal narratives of eight AAW leaders in K-12 public school systems contextualize their experiences and support this assertion. The data showed that the participants' intersectional identities presented experiences that are both affordances and challenges in their SJL. The AsianCrit framework, comprising seven interrelated tenets, elucidates how White supremacy influences the experiences of AAW (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). I employed the tenets of AsianCrit to unpack and synthesize the participants' experiences to answer Research Question 2: How do the intersectional positionalities of AAW influence their leadership for social justice? In this chapter, I will discuss the themes that emerged across interviews through an AsianCrit lens.

Complex Identities of Asian American Women

The simplest way to describe the AAW identity is *complex.* Even among the small sample of participants in the present study, diverse cultural/linguistic backgrounds, assorted educational experiences, varied family structures and roles, and different role models were evident. These elements together shaped participants' intersectional identities and leadership roles in K-12 public school systems. AsianCrit provides a conceptual structure to examine the intricacies of the AAW experience, particularly in how it informed the participants' leadership for social justice. Participants used terms such as "multifaceted," "dynamic," and "eclectic" to describe the complexities of their identities. In the sections that follow, I spotlighted excerpts

from four counterstories, using the tenets of Story, Theory, and Praxis; Transnational Contexts;

and Asianization to illuminate the varied experiences of AAW leaders (Iftikar & Museus, 2018;

Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Cultural/Linguistic Identity

Each participant shared aspects of retaining their culture and heritage language as part of

their intersectional identities. In particular, Emily, Madison, Julie, and Melissa demonstrated

varied cultural/linguistic experiences that manifested in their leadership positions.

A Receptive Bilingual

Emily, a woman of Chinese ethnicity, shared the journey of her family's migration—

from Burma to Italy, and to Orange County, CA. She lost fluency in her heritage language in

school, and she identified herself as a "receptive bilingual" due to her capability to comprehend

Mandarin but not to speak it fluently. Growing up in a predominantly White community

conditioned her toward assimilation. Discussing her cultural/linguistic identity, she said:

> I went through a very, very predictable trajectory of self-acceptance with self-hate,
>
> embarrassment, all of that, before coming and owning who I am. And it's something that
>
> I constantly grapple with. I'm still discovering new nuances and things [about my identity
>
> as an Asian American woman].

Emily's linguistic experience has had a profound effect on how she navigated her

position in the public school system:

> A lot of this is what drives me. When I see this story replicated across so many other
>
> people and so many other cultures. I think, if I get to work in a public school system that
>
> serves everyone and anyone who comes, then I need to keep that central to my leadership

decisions. . . If I were to really think about how my linguistic journey has been, I do have a heart for marginalized students. And I have a heart for marginalization that has to do with access to the curriculum through English. . . That's sort of the mission, how do we help without further reiterating this dominance of *this is how we define success*?

Importance of Primary Language

Madison, also of Chinese descent, moved from Taiwan to the US. She grew up in a Los Angeles County suburb with a significant Asian American population and attended Chinese school on Saturdays. Recollecting her childhood, Madison mentioned, "I never ever felt like I didn't belong because there were so many things that I belonged in."

Learning French in high school steered her towards a career in dual language immersion. Identifying as "Chinese American and French at heart," Madison described encountering biases based on her appearance:

> I've started to point that out to people more and more. Like, hey that's some serious bias you have in thinking that just because I look like this, that I will teach [Mandarin] or just because I don't look [White], I wouldn't [teach French].

Madison expressed a connection to her culture and language, which has led her to "lead with language forward" in her work as a mentor to dual language immersion teachers and drives her advocacy for bilingual education:

> Dual immersion programs or bilingual education was created in part to help promote English language growth, but through students' first language, right? So why can't we help children preserve their language and demonstrate that there is importance in knowing that first language? . . . It would be so much cooler if we could just do this in

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our normal schooling, where we get a sense of our own culture in our schools and do it for free.

Marginalized in the Margins

Julie's family, of Chinese ethnicity, has resided in Hawaii for multiple generations. She was born and raised in the San Francisco area, where she experienced diverse environments—from a White Baptist school to communities of color. Julie expressed feeling othered in the Chinese community because she is a monolingual English speaker. Reflecting on her high school years, she shared her sentiments about the long-term effects of this alienation:

> I got that a lot in high school, being called whitewashed. . . . That's when I really felt like I wasn't Chinese enough because I didn't speak the language. My grandma kind of spoke it. I've never heard my dad speak Chinese. My mom, she came here from Hong Kong when she was three, so she kind of lost it. My grandmother, my mom's mom, is from Canton and she lives in Chinatown. She doesn't really speak English, so we just weren't connected in that sense. So I've felt othered in my own community.

Julie noted her linguistic experience has given her privilege in White spaces, which she uses to bring in more diverse voices:

> I don't have an accent and that feeds into the privilege that other people might not have. For example, my co-chair is from China, she teaches Chinese immersion. When we present together, things are received differently when I speak and when she speaks. . . . [W]e did do a lot of things in partnership and we definitely question the racism that happens within our community and call that out. We're also calling people in.

Understanding my [linguistic] identity helps me navigate spaces and I know how to call

people in or call people out.

Asians Are Celebrated

Melissa's family originated from Korea. Born and raised in the broader Los Angeles area,

she benefited from a bilingual education. The Korean dual immersion program, combined with

residing in a region with a significant Asian American demographic, played pivotal roles in her

maintaining a connection to her heritage language and culture. Melissa recognized the social

capital (Yosso, 2005) that her upbringing and current position in an Asian community provide:

> I think being in a community where different Asian cultures were celebrated and
>
> acknowledged [was beneficial]. I would say at least 30% to 50% of my high school was
>
> Asian. So even the different cultures within the Asian community: Chinese, Japanese,
>
> Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, having a true appreciation for the distinct cultures within
>
> Asia, I think that was really a unique experience, too. I know the story that's out there
>
> with some Asian Americans that have grown up in areas that were predominantly White
>
> is like, *I was the only Asian kid and I was made fun of for that.* But I think my experience
>
> is a little bit different. And then going on to college [with a large Asian population] and
>
> after that working . . . at my school, which is located where a lot of different cultures,
>
> Korean, Filipino, Russian, and Bangladeshi meet, it's very diverse. I've had experiences
>
> with many diverse cultures. I don't think it's very typical. I think that's something you
>
> could only get in Southern California. . . . That's fed my leadership role, just being
>
> comfortable with my experiences and confident knowing there's always something to
>
> offer.

Divergent Experiences, Convergent Truths

The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis emphasizes the value of Asian Americans' lived experiences as data that "can inform theory and transform educational practice" (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 142). The preceding excerpts illuminated the pivotal role of heritage language in shaping identity. Emily had to forsake Mandarin and become fluent in English, whereas Julie grew up solely with English and experienced feelings of alienation within her Chinese community. Both Madison and Melissa's upbringings, surrounded by their heritage languages and cultures, fortified their AAW identities.

The tenet of Transnational Contexts emphasizes "the importance of historical and contemporary national and international contexts for Asian Americans" (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 24). Transnational contexts, such as immigration, generation, and language played pivotal roles in shaping the leadership identities of these participants (Kim & Hsieh, 2022). Although Emily and Madison moved to the United States as young children with their parents, their linguistic journeys diverged sharply. Emily faced traumatic experiences upon entering the public schooling system, while Madison's linguistic identity was affirmed through her weekend Chinese classes. Nonetheless, both prioritized the preservation of heritage language in their decision making, rooted in the deep understanding of the significance of primary language in immigrants' lives.

Asianization acknowledges historical racism "shapes the ways in which Asian Americans experience racism, [and that] these racist social constructions have influenced Asian American communities' responses to them as well" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 937). Interestingly, neither Julie nor Melissa were immigrants. Julie hailed from a Chinese American lineage and was born

in San Francisco, and Melissa, a second-generation Korean American, was born in Los Angeles. As these participants discussed, their divergent linguistic histories informed their leadership styles in unique ways. Julie leveraged her Americanized privilege—speaking unaccented English—to champion underrepresented groups and to amplify the often-muted voices of her racially diverse students and colleagues. Conversely, Melissa exuded confidence in her capability to cater to her Asian students and peers. Both were acutely conscious that, regardless of their generational status in the United States, they are often perceived as outsiders.

Although Julie was several generations removed from her heritage language and culture, Melissa might have possessed the closest ties to her cultural roots, thanks to her dual immersion childhood experiences. Distinct from Emily and Madison, neither Julie nor Melissa highlighted heritage language as a cornerstone of their leadership or decision making. Rather, they both acknowledged the profound influence of language on their interactions and movements across different spaces. For Julie, the inability to communicate in Chinese hindered her community connections, whereas Melissa effortlessly liaised with the Korean families at her workplace, indicating intriguing leadership dynamics worth future exploration.

Despite the divergence of experiences, these stories converge in the truths they reveal—cultural/linguistic identity and marginalization impact AAW leaders regardless of their generation, ethnicity, and/or educational role. The model minority myth "fuels misconceptions that Asian Americans are impervious to racial challenges and do not need support and justifies the exclusion of Asian Americans from racial discourse" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 937). However, these distinct experiences serve as counternarratives to the dominant stereotypes Asian Americans are subjected to through Asianization (Kim & Hsieh, 2022), shedding light on the

need for robust support systems for AAW educators and pondering the reinvention of educational leadership.

Motherhood and Educational Leadership

Five of the eight participants regarded motherhood as a salient aspect of their identities. Among them, four had children attending public schools, while one was a mother to a toddler. Drawing parallels with Latina principals in Owens and Harris's (2021) study, these AAW leaders conveyed a deep-seated cultural expectation to uphold their roles as mothers, a sentiment they wholeheartedly embraced (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Notably, their maternal identities were inseparable from their professional roles. For them, motherhood was intertwined with their responsibilities as educational leaders. In the following sections, I will use the tenets of Asianization, Intersectionality, and Commitment to Social Justice to discuss the relationship between motherhood and SJL in public schools.

Teacher–Leader Moms

Amelia, Sophia, and Melissa are teacher–leaders who identified strongly with their dual roles as mothers and public school teachers. For these women, these roles were deeply interconnected; their teaching practices influenced their parenting approaches, and vice versa. Their approaches to parenting informed their teaching methodologies and instructional leadership. All three emphasized a compassionate approach toward students, aiming for interactions that were both socially just and antiracist. Amelia offered insight into this perspective by describing one of her deliberate teaching practices:

> Regardless of what grade level I've taught, I've always started with a letter to my
> students introducing myself. They know about my education. They know that I'm an

alumni. They know that I'm a mom. They know that the most important thing to me, aside from anything else I do and however many students I'm attending to, whether they're at [this school] or at [the university], is my son. And I share with them what my passions are, so they know that I'm a social justice advocate. Then I ask them to write back to me. And they share aspects of themselves with me.

Sophia shared her own racialized experiences during her time as a public school student fostered a "deep empathy for every child." She viewed compassion as a cornerstone of her identity, which was evident in her interactions with both her own children and her students. She explained:

I think that's one thing that has translated into how I am with my kids in affirming them and then admitting to my mistakes. And showing that I'm human and I have feelings, and [letting them know] that it was a rough day.

Melissa said she underwent a transformation in her approach to interactions with children after transitioning into motherhood during the pandemic. Her heightened awareness and drive for intentionality were ignited further by the sociopolitical climate, notably following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Reflecting on this period, Melissa remarked:

All of these marches, you know, Black Lives Matter, the Time's Up movement, just so many things happening at the same time. And knowing that as a mom, I have so little time for myself, I realized how precious time was [and] that I have to be intentional with what I do and intentional with the time that I spend with my students. . . . Just hearing and watching and listening made me think how all this stuff on the news ends up happening, and really wondering where I fit in all this. You know, these people on the

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news pass through classrooms, right? Like these people on the news could be kids that pass through my classroom, and I just had to consider my role in all this. . .

Moms in Male-Dominated Spaces

Emily and Tracy both were high-ranking decision makers in their districts. They shared their perspectives on being both mothers and leaders. Consistent with the findings of Liang and Peter-Hawkins (2017), the "tiger mom" stereotype emerged during the interviews. Tiger moms are often perceived as cold and domineering—attributes that challenge the submissive stereotypes imposed on AAW through Asianization (Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Labao, 2017; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Emily, a district-level administrator, and a mother of children who attend Mandarin dual immersion schools, described how this stereotype manifests in their schools:

> There is always this association with Asian American women and this idea of the tiger mom. And I think that that's another connotation that gets laid on me, not only because I'm a woman, but I am an Asian woman, and then further an Asian woman whose children go to a Mandarin language school. Nobody is worried about the dads having that type of personality, or at least it's not something that's associated with them. A dad has to be quite demonstrative for somebody to say, *There goes a tiger dad!* But an Asian mom just simply has to show up at their kid's school and ask for something and suddenly you're a tiger mom.

Emily's dual roles as a mother and a leading figure within the school district offered her a multifaceted perspective. Not only did she view situations from a parent's standpoint, but she also gained student insights through her children. Despite this, as detailed in Chapter 4, Emily often chose to "fade into the background" in parent-centric spaces. She recognized her esteemed

position within the district influenced how other parents perceived her. In contrast, her identity as a parent of children enrolled in a program the district touts as elite affected how she is perceived as a district leader.

Like the Latina leaders Owens and Harris's (2021) study, Emily acknowledged the challenges of balancing her professional and familial roles. However, for Emily, the real struggle existed in navigating perceptions from her male colleagues. She often contemplated whether her role as a mother undermined her credibility in her leadership position within the district:

> Leadership is a very male dominated space in education . . . and there are moments where I'm really cognizant of a sort of natural respect that comes from having attributes of being male. We've lately had a gazillion evening meetings. At one meeting, I actually said that I really need to leave because I have to go home to my kids. And I don't normally talk about my personal life, but it was the third night in a row where I just hadn't put them to bed. But ever since then . . . the facilitator of that group thinks that he's trying to be sensitive to my role as a mother, and constantly asks me, *Do you need to get to your kids?* Well, I noticed that that same night when I said that I needed to go get my kids, my male colleague also came with me and said, *I gotta go get my daughter, too.* I also noticed that this facilitator does not ask my male colleague every night, the same way that he asks me if I need to get to my kids. I do realize that there is a very stereotypical perspective that we have around what women have to take care of. I'm always appreciative of it, but I'm here to do my job. It's just simply that we've gone way over time and I needed to go get to my kids.

Tracy, both a school board member and a parent, had purposefully interwoven these roles. She strategically utilized her maternal identity to level the playing field in interactions with community stakeholders. She stated, "When I introduce myself in different settings, I often bring up my children. It humanizes me, and there's just a fundamental connection when you have other parents in the room. I'm just another human being."

Much like Emily, Tracy's position as a mother within the district afforded her a unique vantage point, enabling her to discern the specific needs of students and families. Yet, when she voiced strong opinions or advocated for issues that disrupt the status quo, she encountered resistance. As detailed in the previous chapter, Tracy's instinctive concern for her child's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic spurred her to suggest a discussion on vaccine mandates. She was especially intent on championing the rights of low-income families with essential worker members who "had no voice" in board meetings. Her decision to convene a press conference and her firm stance on the matter were met with pushback from a largely White, male board.

Asian American Moms in Leadership

The tenet of Commitment to Social Justice recognizes the "intersections between racism and other systems of subordination" (Iftikar & Museus, 2013, p. 27) and advocates for the eradication of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Participants seamlessly integrated their racial, gender, and familial identities into their professional spheres, embodying compassion and taking a definitive stance against any form of oppression. Although Amelia, Sophia, and Melissa exemplified social justice in their classrooms, impacting students directly, Emily and

Tracy faced increased resistance from adults due to their leadership roles outside of the classroom and their outward identities as AAW.

The tenets of Asianization and Intersectionality illuminate the challenges of AAW who are mothers in leadership. According to Museus and Iftikar (2018), "Asianization is grounded in the reality that people within the US only become 'Asian' because of White Supremacy and the racialization processes that it engenders" (p. 940). Furthermore, "White supremacy and other systems of oppression and exploitation intersect to mutually shape the conditions within which Asian Americans exist, their racial identities and other social identities, as well as their everyday experiences" (Museus & Iftikar, 2018, p. 940). Through the lenses of Asianization and Intersectionality, it becomes evident that Emily and Tracy faced scrutiny not only for their Asian identities but also for being women and mothers (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). This scrutiny translates into resistance within predominantly White, male environments, manifesting as subtle microaggressions or more overt policy challenges, as detailed in Chapter 4.

Silencing Powerful Voices

Five of the eight participants expressed that they struggle with the pervasive stereotype of the "quiet Asian girl" at their workplace in simultaneously strong and subtle ways. Endo (2015) explained this phenomenon:

> Microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations, are commonly experienced by other historically marginalized groups such as LGBTQ individuals, people from low-income backgrounds/poverty, people with disabilities, religious minorities, and women, but . . . people with intersecting and multiple identities such as

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women of color are more prone to experiencing multiple forms of microaggressions. (pp. 604–605)

Significantly, the types of racial microaggressions directed toward Asian Americans are qualitatively distinct from other populations of color because of the longstanding assumption that most stereotypes about Asian Americans are flattering and positive rather than harmful and negative (Sue et al., 2007).

Outspoken Asian American Women

During their interviews, Madison, Amelia, and Julie characterized themselves as outspoken advocates on social justice issues, particularly racism. Historically, although outspokenness has been lauded as a valued trait in leadership, this recognition often does not extend to AAW. Their forthrightness was, at times, dismissed or deemed inappropriate, reflecting entrenched gender and racial biases (Li, 2014; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018).

As explored in the prior chapter, Madison, serving in a district office administrative role, frequently endeavored to provide an alternative perspective, acting as a counternarrative to the prevailing views of her school district (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In one instance, her White male supervisor urged her to refrain from "ask[ing] questions that make people uncomfortable." Reflecting on this, Madison stated, "I can't not talk about it. Maybe they thought I'd just be quiet. But I've lived way too long in this silence."

Amelia and Julie exemplified the resilience and tenacity of AAW in education and beyond. Their commitment to leading with social justice at the forefront challenged deep-rooted stereotypes and the perception of AAW as passive or submissive. By adopting antiracist

practices and guiding newer educators, these transformative leaders actively shaped the future of education to be more inclusive, equitable, and just.

The sentiments of "having to prove myself" and "not being taken seriously" highlight the intersectionality of their experiences. As both women and individuals of Asian descent, Amelia and Julie navigated spaces colored by gender and racial biases. This intersectionality compounded the challenges they regularly faced, as they also grappled with both gendered expectations and racial stereotypes (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Kim & Hsieh, 2022; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017). Yet, despite these hurdles, their refusal to "roll over" showcased their unwavering commitment to their values and students.

Silenced at the Table

Emily and Tracy distinguished themselves by breaking through both glass and bamboo ceilings within their respective school districts (Li, 2014). Occupying high-ranking district leadership positions, they were integral to the decision-making processes. Their unique intersectional identities empowered them with a distinctive voice, enabling them to advocate for underrepresented groups and enact SJL. However, despite the significant potential influence of their positions, both Emily and Tracy recounted instances where they felt marginalized, either by being "unheard" or by being "silenced and bullied" within decision-making spaces. Notably, even when they explicitly championed the cause of marginalized groups, their proposals often fell on deaf ears among their peers. Tracy's experience was particularly stark, as her school board president sought legal measures to suppress her voice—an effort she successfully resisted.

What Is Silencing AAW Leaders?

The AsianCrit tenets of Asianization and Intersectionality shed light on the experiences of AAW leaders, underlining the confluence of racism and sexism they face while advocating for the collective liberation of oppressed groups in public education (Crenshaw, 1991; Freire, 2017; Matsuda, 1997). Asianization refers to the racialized experience of Asian Americans, particularly the "model minority" stereotype that categorizes Asians as quiet and hard-working, rendering them invisible in racial discourse. Furthermore, AAW often confront a hypersexualized stereotype, suggesting their subservience, especially to White men (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Leong & Kuo, 2021). This convergence of racial and gender-based stereotypes complicates the leadership roles of AAW, particularly in social justice contexts.

The stereotype of the "quiet Asian girl" is both a racialized and gendered trope aiming to position AAW beneath traditional leaders, predominantly White males (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Leong & Kuo, 2021; Li, 2014). Consequently, participants in this study reported encountering microaggressions, microinsults, and microassaults when challenging the foundational bias of public education systems, which often leans towards perpetuating White supremacy (Endo, 2015; Labao, 2017; Leong & Kuo, 2021; Li, 2014; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Sue et al., 2007). Mirroring the experiences of Black and Latinx women leaders, these participants encountered opposition rooted in both their racial and gender identities. However, such resistance only solidified their dedication to social justice advocacy (Hernandez et al., 2014; Horsford et al., 2011; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Role Models

All of the participants identified specific women that they look to as leadership role models. The tenets of Transnational Contexts, Intersectionality, and (Re)constructive History provide lenses for understanding the significance of these role models in AAW leaders' lives.

Badass Asian Moms

(Re)constructive History addresses the invisibility and silence often experienced by Asian Americans in U.S. history. Iftikar and Museus (2018) noted this tenet focuses on "transcending this invisibility and silence to create a collective Asian American historical narrative and reanalyze existing histories to incorporate the voices and contributions of Asian Americans" (p. 940). Another key tenet, Intersectionality, recognizes race, class, and gender as markers of power. These markers create intersecting axes that are often used to bolster power relations and various forms of oppression (Collins, 2000). Lastly, the tenet of Transnational Contexts critically examines the social processes that contribute to the racialization of Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Collectively, these tenets provide valuable insights into understanding the oppression that impacts the experiences of these AAW leaders.

In the backdrop of historical invisibility and erasure, four of the participants turned to their mothers as exemplars of AAW leadership. Interestingly, they identified traits in their mothers that are often ascribed to White male leaders, such as the ability to take charge, ensure tasks are completed, and voice opinions assertively. I present these excerpts of these stories to make visible the power of Asian women.

In the previous chapter, I described how Madison credits her mother for preserving her heritage language. She also spoke of her mother's tenacity to get work done and seek knowledge, traits that Madison emulates in her workplace. She shared:

My mom is definitely my role model. She's just super badass. I'm like, *Mom, can you help me with this?* And then like three minutes later, she's like, *OK, done what's next?* Or she's like, *Oh, you need help with that. Let me call this auntie, let me call that person.* And then boom, done. She just gets things done and she's not a person who is afraid to ask questions.

Tracy, who grew up in a White suburb, saw her mother break racial and gender stereotypes in her community, while holding on to her Asian identity. Tracy felt she had a culturally rich upbringing and learned how AAW leaders behave through her mother:

My mom was more modern thinking. You know, everybody can do whatever they want to. She was an electrical engineer. She was the only woman in her class in electrical engineering, so she's already kind of a strong role model for me. And it's not explicit, but it's just her leading by example. . . . Weirdly, I am very similar to my mother. She was very active in the community.. . . My mom was part of a Chinese cultural group where they perform dance and music. She became the director of the cultural group, and they held multicultural events that she coordinated. And then that meant raising money and networking with mayors or whatever to promote it.

Sophia's mother held on to her racial and gender identity while running a household and navigating life in a new country. Her mother modeled being a Vietnamese woman that led with

humility. As a result, Sophia has a deep appreciation for her culture and has developed a schema for her leadership style:

> I would say just in general even as Vietnamese American women, there's sometimes a lot of humility that comes into that leadership. My mom never tooted her own horn. She just did what she had to do, and I really appreciate that act of my mom just going for it, never complaining about anything, and I think that sometimes folks might view that as compliant behavior. I think that's the stereotype of Asian American women of us being submissive, and obedient and what whatnot. But when things went down, she had power; it was a quiet power. And I think those are the best leaders because there's this deep intrinsic motivation to make things right, rather than this ego trip of power.

Melissa named several Korean American women as role models within her circle, including her mother. Melissa's mother stood out as her first role model of an AAW leader in education and a pioneer of a program that preserves the Korean language and culture. Melissa noted she might not have chosen a career in education if it was not modeled by her mother:

> My mom is a school teacher. She taught for over 30 years in my district. . . . She helped open up the first Korean dual language program here, and when I was a kid I was part of that Guinea pig class. She helped launch that Guinea pig class. . . . I didn't grow up thinking that when I grow up I'm going to be a teacher or go into the field of education. It just kind of happened. But the longer I stayed in it, I felt like it was a good fit. Maybe it's because of all of those background conversations I would have with my mom and just spending a lot of time with her.

Asian Moms as Leaders

The previous excerpts demonstrate the unseen power of Asian women. The participants identified the tenacity of their mothers to "get the job done" while also tending to the well-being of their family and community. These mothers were nontraditional leaders who led by example, with strengths that often went unnoticed according to White standards. Notably, the participants highlighted their mothers' humility as a leadership trait that they valued, admired, and emulated. White supremacy does not recognize humility as a leadership trait. However, Freire (2017) pointed out that humility is integral to productive dialogue, without which the world cannot be transformed.

Women of Color Who Lead

Though the field of education is predominantly occupied by White women, educational leadership traditionally has been dominated by White men. Amid this backdrop of racial homogeneity, four participants identified women of color as role models in their professional journeys.

Janelle was keenly aware of her intersectional identity as both an Asian and a woman. She actively resisted the combined forms of oppression associated with these intersecting identities. In college, she further embraced her identity as a Filipina American when she cofounded an Asian women's forum. Janelle regarded her cofounder, Lin, as a role model for AAW in leadership:

> I was very fortunate enough to be a founding member of the National Asian American
> Women's Caucus chapter [in college]. It was my friend Lin, actually she is the person
> who I learned from. She has been an organizer for her entire career. She has won national

awards for organizing and really I am able to look up to her, like a friend. She's doing really great work for the community, and I think she is a person that I kind of think about in terms of leadership and galvanizing the Asian American community.

Emily possessed a deep understanding of her intersectional identity as an Asian woman serving as a district administrator. She recognized the historical context in which her role has predominantly been held by men. Fortunately, Emily worked with another AAW leader, Katie, who had held a similar position in the district before her retirement. Emily often looked to Katie for leadership cues. Emily reflected:

I didn't even realize how much it meant to me that she was an Asian American in this role. . . . But I felt this affinity toward her, and I secretly thought she felt one to me. I really would kind of look to her for certain things. Even if I wasn't being explicit about it, I'd seek her advice. I'd kind of look to see like, *What would Katie do in this situation?*

Julie identified Black women educators and a matriarchal figure in her family as strong role models who have influenced her transformative approach to leadership. She said, "Lately, I've just been really centering on Black women, especially in education. And . . . a person who really influences me in general is my grandmother. She definitely embodies the compassion that I bring to my work."

Amelia reflected on the notable absence of Filipina role models in her school and university settings, commenting, "There was no me to look up to when I was going through school." For Amelia, Black women emerged as beacons of strength and leadership, filling the void left by the lack of Filipina representation:

I have a lot of Black women I look up to. . . . The people who believed in me and

affirmed who I was and who I am. I am so fortunate to have been exposed to women of

color in places of leadership. I talked to so many people, especially when you get to

higher ed, where teachers of color who have never had experiences with other teachers of

color. So, when I went to high school, our principal was a Black woman. The assistant

principal, the dean, they were strong Black women. I had teachers who were strong Black

women. I think as a girl of color and also as a woman of color to have had the

opportunity to learn from and look up to women of color in education, that was really

significant for me.

Significance of Role Models

 In the absence of formal mentors in college and in their careers, participants cited their

Asian mothers, AAW, and other women of color as playing a significant role in their identity and

leadership development. The historical omission of Asian Americans in U.S. narratives has often

sidelined AAW from educational spaces, particularly in leadership roles. Recognizing this and

knowing firsthand the importance of having women of color in the front of the room, these

participants actively engaged in the (re)construction of our history for present and future

generations (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Navigating White Spaces

According to Iftikar and Museus (2018), "Strategic (anti)essentialism recognizes and

counters the ways that White supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic group in the

US" (p. 940). Kim and Hsieh (2022) unpacked this complex tenet by defining essentialism as

Asians "recognizing the sociopolitical importance of a cross-ethnic coalition under a group

banner" (p. 79) and anti-essentialism as "the purposeful resistance to this group process and speaks to the desire to remain distinct" (p. 79). Strategic (anti)essentialism posits "Asian Americans can and do actively intervene in the racialization process" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940) for political purposes and coalition building. That is, Asian Americans purposefully choose to identify ethnically or panethnically within specific contexts (Kim & Hsieh, 2022).

All participants touched upon their engagement in strategic (anti)essentialism, whether it be through code switching between predominantly White environments and in spaces predominantly occupied by people of color, or by opting to identify as Asian American over their specific ethnic identifier in more inclusive settings. In the following sections, I present excerpts from two participants who epitomize strategic (anti)essentialism and explore the ramifications of this phenomenon on their commitment to SJL.

Ethnic Ambiguity

In the previous chapter, Janelle described her name and appearance as "ethnically ambiguous." Although she strongly identified as an Asian American woman of color due to her Filipina heritage, she acknowledged that her name and appearance can sometimes lead others to perceive her as White. This duality in her identity has occasionally granted her access to White spaces that may not be readily available to other people of color. For instance, despite her married name being Yang, she strategically opted to use her family surname to avoid potential biases or discrimination based on being Asian:

> I don't look as Asian as other people or people like my husband's family. He is ABC,
> American Born Chinese, from Vietnam. My married name is Yang, but I never legally

changed it. So, when we need to make any type of reservation, we always put it in my name since my last name sounds White.

Moreover, the surge in anti-Asian hate during the pandemic heightened her awareness of her intersectionality and positionality. This heightened awareness prompted her to take action, including enrolling in a doctoral program to increase her visibility and address issues related to anti-Asian hate. Janelle's strategic (anti)essentialism played a pivotal role in shaping her approach to SJL. This deliberate stance enabled her to navigate the complexities of her identity, using her position as an Asian American woman with an ethnically ambiguous name and appearance to strategically access spaces where she could advocate for social justice and challenge biases related to her identity.

Just Enough Otherness

Emily was keenly aware of her role as a woman of color holding a prominent position in district leadership. She recognized the complex dynamics within her racially divided community, and acknowledged that at times, she was called upon because of her racial identity, which she described as being the "safe color." Emily believes her intersectional identity and positionality were sometimes used to give the impression that the system genuinely cares about diversity:

> I have a lot of proximity to what this system values, but I have just enough otherness for you to believe that the system really cares about others. I have been in situations where I'm like, *Nope, I'm being exploited. No, thank you. . . .* But other times, I walk in and I'm fully aware of why I got to be in that space, and I will use it.

As a leader, Emily emphasized the importance of self-awareness. She has encountered situations where she felt exploited and declined opportunities as a result. Conversely, there have

been instances where she eagerly embraced opportunities, only for them to unfold differently

than expected. In some cases, she entered a space fully cognizant of the reasons for her presence

and was prepared to leverage her position accordingly. Her perspective underscores the need for

AAW leaders to navigate these complex dynamics in their roles.

Summary

The AsianCrit framework shed light on how White supremacy influenced the experiences

of my participants (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). I applied the tenets of AsianCrit to unpack and

synthesize participants' experiences to address Research Question 2: How do the intersectional

positionalities of AAW influence their leadership for social justice? The emergent themes of (a)

cultural/linguistic identity, (b) motherhood and educational leadership, (c) silencing powerful

voices, (d) role models, and (e) navigating White spaces revealed the complexities of the AAW

experience, particularly in how it informs their SJL. Based on my findings, I outline my

recommendations and next steps in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Based on the data and analysis of these eight narratives, there is no single AAW narrative. Rather, many racial and gender experiences shaped their identities and led them toward SJL roles in public school systems. These experiences included instances of being silenced and having had affirming role models who influenced their decisions to pursue SJL in their respective contexts. Therefore, there is no singular solution to addressing the underrepresentation of AAW in SJL. Instead, a combination of simultaneous and overlapping supports must be systematically implemented to support AAW educators in building their capacity for leadership. As Freire (2017) argued, education should be a humanizing endeavor. Therefore, efforts should be made to humanize AAW, strengthen Asian American identity, and attract and retain AAW educators. In the following sections, I will share recommendations for seeing this goal come to fruition.

Recommendations

The data show intentional steps must be taken to diversify the educational leadership pipeline and address the underrepresentation of AAW leaders in K–12 public school systems. Although scarce, previous research has shown there are opportunities to make space for AAW to thrive as leaders for educational social justice (Hsieh & Nguyen, 2020; Liang & Liou, 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018; Lohret, 2021; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Squire & McCann, 2018). If public school districts truly intend to serve their diverse communities, they must ensure they are developing inclusive environments by investing time and resources into identity-informed mentorship, affinity groups, and providing quality antiracism and implicit bias

professional development to staff, faculty, and leaders at all levels. Furthermore, higher

education institutions that prepare teachers and administrators for public school service must

actively recruit AAW and build their capacity for assuming these critical roles.

Affinity Groups to Cultivate Voices

As evidenced by my data analysis, AAW leaders grapple with the persistent struggle to

gain recognition and be taken seriously within decision-making arenas. Their commitment to

voicing their perspectives remains resolute, despite the challenging conditions they face. These

women found solace and empowerment in safe spaces where they could authentically express

themselves. Notably, individuals like Melissa and Madison cultivated a profound sense of

belonging within their Asian American communities. However, for those AAW leaders who

lacked access to such Asian spaces, they sought camaraderie and support elsewhere. For

instance, Julie discovered the value of joining an affinity group for teachers of color early in her

public school career. Subsequently, Julie went on to co-found an affinity group within her school

district, dedicated to fostering dialogues among educators of color.

Similarly, Tracy found community through her involvement in a university women's

group. This space enabled her to connect deeply with the vulnerabilities and stories of others,

providing insight into her own journey. Given these findings, establishing affinity groups tailored

to AAW educators could significantly enhance their ability to share perspectives, cultivate their

voices, and build their leadership capacity.

Pour-Khorshid (2018) argued, to prevent the cyclical nature of social toxicity perpetuated

both inside and outside of schools, all educators regardless of their experience and awareness of

social issues, should address unhealed trauma resulting from White supremacy, patriarchy, and

other forms of oppression. Their findings also underscored the necessity of establishing racial affinity learning spaces that "specifically address the challenges faced by Critical Educators of Color (CEoC) and celebrate the wisdom, love, joy, and creativity they bring" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 327). Similarly, affinity groups tailored toward AAW educators should be implemented at all levels, including teacher candidates, during induction, within school environments, and among leadership circles, to foster a supportive and inclusive community.

Mentorship for AAW

Participants in this study discussed the lack of mentorship in their careers; however, they found valuable role models in their lives who understood their intersectional marginalization and played a significant role in shaping their identities as AAW of color who lead. As a result, these participants assumed roles as formal and informal mentors to educators, which speaks to the importance of having an AAW of color at the front of the room.

Hsieh and Nguyen (2020) examined their mentor-mentee relationship within the sphere of higher education. They emphasized the crucial role of mentors in supporting female faculty of color, "helping to alleviate feelings of self-doubt and social isolation" (Hsieh & Nguyen, 2020, p. 169), emotions that resonate with AAW in K–12 public school systems. Furthermore, Hsieh and Nguyen (2020) detailed a positive mentorship dynamic that extended beyond the boundaries of the professional arena, urging institutions to consider identity as a factor in faculty mentorship and recommended an "identity-informed model of mentorship" (p. 178) designed to cultivate environments where female faculty of color can not only survive but thrive.

Unfortunately, opportunities for mentorship for women of color within academic institutions remain scarce. Thus, it is essential for AAW to access mentorship opportunities at all

levels, encompassing teacher preparation programs, induction, within school communities, and in leadership roles.

Squire and McCann (2018) found women of color doctoral students did not always benefit from mentors, especially if the mentor was assigned or did not understand their marginality. For instance, a mentor who does not share the same racial or gender identity as their mentee, such as a White man mentoring an Asian American woman, may have difficulty fully comprehending the unique challenges and marginalization she experiences. Like Squire and McCann's study, my participants stated they benefited from role models who were women of color. Whether it was their mothers or informal mentors at work, these AAW leaders benefited from receiving support from someone who understood their intersectional positionality. Therefore, I assert, albeit preferable, mentors do not necessarily have to share the same gender or race as mentees, as long as they have the ability and willingness to affirm their intersectionality, respect their critical worldviews, and support their social justice work (Squire & McCann, 2018).

The establishment of robust mentorship programs spanning various levels of the education system can play a pivotal role in empowering and nurturing AAW leaders, providing them with the support and guidance they need to thrive and make enduring contributions to K-12 public school systems.

Systematic Examination of Implicit Biases in Public School Systems

The participants' dedication to social justice faced constraints within the system. To progress beyond mere awareness of inequities, it is essential to systematically tackle racism and implicit bias. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the longstanding inequities in public schools. In this post-pandemic sociopolitical climate, there is an increased awareness of systemic

racism and implicit bias that perpetuate these inequities. In response to this awareness, districts have begun to invest in antiracism and DEI professional development in school buildings. However, it is crucial to explicitly name and include Asian Americans in these discussions, with these efforts spanning all organizational levels, particularly within the highest tiers of leadership, to ensure a steadfast commitment to social justice.

Lohret's (2021) research findings indicated a substantial need to address implicit bias through professional learning structures for school administrators and district level leadership. Lohret (2021) asserted, "There is urgency with the growing diversity among the student population, and the timeliness due to the current state of affairs of health disparities from the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened societal and moral lens on social justice and systemic inequities" (p. 149). That is, we have come to a crossroads where we must face the inherent inequities of a public school system built on White supremacy. Therefore, systemic action is imperative to address the needs of AAW and other groups who have been marginalized and silenced, allowing us to collectively emerge from oppression (Freire, 2017).

A Call to Action for Institutions That Build Educational Leaders

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not make recommendations to the School of Education (SOE) at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) for creating space for AAW leaders. I was initially drawn to the doctoral program at LMU due to its pronounced commitment to social justice. Throughout my academic journey, my professors and fellow cohort members enriched my intellectual growth and significantly bolstered my leadership capacity by infusing diverse perspectives, invaluable knowledge, and unwavering compassion into our educational experiences. However, despite LMU's commendable efforts to establish a culturally responsive

and inclusive program, I, as one of the few AAW in this context, often grappled with feelings of self-doubt and isolation. I independently pursued AsianCrit literature and encountered challenges in identifying dissertation committee members who I believed could resonate with my intersectional positionality and significantly contribute to my development in applying AsianCrit to educational leadership.

In light of these experiences, I wholeheartedly recommend the SOE take proactive steps to (a) diversify its staff, with a particular emphasis on recruiting AAW; (b) offer an extensive collection of literature authored by women of color and AAW scholars; (c) explicitly acknowledge and include Asian Americans in discussions concerning racism and systemic oppression; (d) explicitly acknowledge and include AAW in discussions centered on feminism and intersectionality; and (e) establish dedicated affinity spaces for Asian American doctoral students within the SOE. It is crucial to acknowledge AAW may not envision themselves as leaders in educational social justice unless they encounter a diverse and inclusive environment within the institutions that cultivate them. Therefore, I strongly urge LMU and other institutions to deeply consider how they might enact and begin building avenues for more social justice oriented AAW leaders.

Future Research

Although I aimed to recruit a diverse cadre of AAW leaders in education, this study was constrained by a small sample size. Consequently, it was not feasible to obtain a fully representative cross-section of the Asian diaspora or comprehensively explore the myriad perspectives within this group. I recommend future research replicates this study with a larger

and more diverse sample, encompassing AAW from South Asian countries and multiethnic and multiracial Asian American participants.

This study was unique in that the participants self-identified as social justice leaders in public education, incorporating perspectives from nontraditional leadership roles, including classroom teachers. These teachers are championing social justice from their current positions, and it raises questions about whether this is deliberate or if they aspire to take on administrative roles in the future. The data obtained in this study did not provide a conclusive answer, thus indicating that investigating the motivations and barriers for aspiring AAW administrators is an area for future research.

Cultural and linguistic experiences were prominent themes during the interviews. Notably, the contrasting linguistic backgrounds of Julie and Melissa significantly shaped their interactions and mobility within various contexts. Consequently, the preservation of heritage languages, the resulting dynamics, and their implications for the leadership styles of AAW in the pursuit of social justice warrants further exploration.

Finally, except for Julie, these women identified as first-generation, 1.5-generation, and second-generation Asian Americans, shaped directly and tangentially by the immigrant experience. Their journey of identity development encompassed the complexities of being both Asian women and American women. According to Tan (2016), the early generations of immigrant children hold stronger connections to their heritage culture. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that these individuals faced the additional challenge of shaping their identities as AAW. Future research focused on AAW who are third generation and beyond would offer additional perspectives and implications for their development as social justice leaders.

Conclusion

When we talk about social justice, especially on an educational level, we're digging into a system that is based on a very White supremacist model. . . . We need to infiltrate ourselves into this model and transform it into one that is representative of the people, of every single person. We need everyone working together to achieve what it is that we need to achieve. And that is with colleagues and that's with our students. We are the moving parts that need to come together for the power of our whole. And we're finding each other. And when we're with each other, that's really powerful. – Sophia

According to Iftikar and Museus (2018), "Racially marginalized individuals' experiential knowledge can serve as a powerful challenge to dominant White European epistemologies, offering an alternative and empowering perspective" (p. 941). The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis decolonizes Western methodologies by placing emphasis on story-centered forms of knowledge (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Consequently, centering on the experiences of AAW leaders provides "an alternative epistemology that is represented through stories and can inform theories and praxis in meaningful ways" (p. 941).

Although each participant's narrative is unique, a common thread runs through them; their journeys of (re)connecting with their heritage and discovering a sense of belonging shaped their commitment to SJL. As Freire (2017) aptly noted, "The pursuit of full humanity cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism" (p. 58). Therefore, systems and structures of support for AAW educators must be put in place to alleviate their isolation, amplify their voices, and empower them to enact SJL. The elevation of AAW in leadership will not only show young

Asian Americans their boundless potential, but also convey to all students their shared humanity and intrinsic worth.

In conclusion, the narratives of these AAW leaders offer valuable insights into the complexities of their experiences, highlighting the need for systemic change and increased support to ensure the full recognition and integration of their voices and contributions into our public school systems. As transformative leaders, they are (re)inventing what it is to be an Asian American woman in K–12 public education, inspiring change and equity for all.

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Demographic Data

Please provide the following information about you and your role as an educator. This information will be kept confidential and a pseudonym for you and your school/district will be used when I write about this study. You may skip any question(s) you do not wish to answer.

1. First name & last name:
2. Age:
3. Marital Status:
4. How many children live in your household?
5. Ethnicity:
6. Place of birth:
7. Language(s) spoken:
8. What degrees and/or credentials do you hold?
9. Educational role:
10. District administrator
11. Site administrator
12. Classroom teacher
13. Teacher on special assignment
14. Counselor
15. Other
       Please specify:
16. Number of years working in K–12 education:
17. Number of years in current educational role:
18. School district:
19. School site(s), if applicable:

Leadership Background

Please provide brief written responses to the following questions. This background information will supplement the information you provide in the interview. You may skip any question(s) you do not wish to answer.

1. How did you come to hold your current educational leadership role?
2. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. How might others describe your leadership style?
4. What does it mean to you to be a leader for social justice?
5. What are some of the challenges you face (or have faced) as a leader for social justice?
6. Beyond your role at your school or district, what other leadership roles do you hold?

Interview Protocol

Preamble
The aim of this qualitative study is to build on the limited research on Asian American women in educational leadership and examine how and why they lead for social justice. Although there are AAW administrators in public schools, some may lead in alternative ways. Understanding the reasons that some AAW lead in nontraditional roles may reveal opportunity gaps that prevent AAW from attaining administrative positions, as well as help redefine educational leadership in the 21st century. Their personal and professional journeys can provide insight into alternative leadership roles and illuminate ways for other marginalized people to empower themselves to lead for social justice and equity in education. I seek to answer the following research questions: (a) What affordances and challenges do Asian American women experience in choosing and enacting social justice leadership in public schools? (b) How do the intersectional positionalities of Asian American women affect the way they lead for social justice?

Script
Hello, my name is Ella Farinas. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my dissertation research**. These interviews are intended to explore how and why Asian American women lead for social justice in K–12 public schools.**

These questions are not intended to be intrusive or make you feel uncomfortable, but if I ask a question that you do not feel comfortable answering, please just tell me that you do not want to answer, and we will move on to the next question.

I anticipate this interview will take approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, I will record video and audio via Zoom so that I can transcribe the conversation and use the transcript for analysis.

[IF PARTICIPANT DOES NOT AGREE TO BE RECORDED, I MAY CONTINUE THE INTERVIEW JUST TAKING NOTES]

I.   **Interview – Intersectional Identity & Leadership**
1. How do your personal and /or educational experiences impact/inform your leadership? (e.g., I talk to my ELL students about the importance of heritage language because I lost mine.)
2. Is there a point in your life when you really started thinking about your Asian American and/or gender identity or it became salient to you?
3. Are there any times in your K–12 experience where you felt affirmed or marginalized in your racial and/or gender identity?
   a. How was your family treated compared to other families/families of color?
4. How does your identity as _____ impact your leadership?

5. What are some of the affordances/challenges of being an Asian American woman in your workplace? (e.g., some AAW feel like "the only one" at work)
    a. Can you tell me about any specific affordances/challenges you've encountered in your workplace?
6. Are there any AAW leaders you look to as role models? Why?
    a. Other role models?
7. How has the rise of Asian American violence affected you personally and/or professionally?
    a. How do you talk about Asian hate with young people/your kids/grandchildren?
8. What do you want students to know about Asian American girls and women?
    a. About the affordances and/or challenges they have or may face?
9. What do you want today's Asian American girls to know?
    a. If you could go back and give advice to your younger self, what would you say?
10. What advice would you give to other AAW educators/leaders?

We need to start wrapping up our interview now, but before we do, **is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask about?**

[STOP RECORDING.]

Thank you for your time and your thoughtful responses. My next step is to transcribe this conversation so I can use it in my data set for analysis. **Is it ok if I reach out to you if I have questions or need clarifications about this conversation?**

[I WILL TAKE NOTE OF THEIR ANSWER.]

Thanks again. If you think of any questions or have any concerns, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

II.   Member checking
Each participant will receive a copy of their interview transcript to review. I will ask the following questions:

1. Does this match your experience?
2. Do you want to change anything?
3. Do you want to add anything?

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