

**“This is why nobody knows who you are”: (Counter)Stories
of Southeast Asian Americans in the Midwest**

Noreen Naseem Rodríguez

School of Education, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

ORCID 0000-0003-0798-0155

Noreen Naseem Rodríguez is an assistant professor of elementary social studies in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Her research interests include educators of color, culturally sustaining pedagogies, racial literacy, the teaching of difficult histories, and critical uses of diverse children’s literature. She was the recipient of the 2017 Larry Metcalf Dissertation Award from the National Council of the Social Studies and the 2019 Early Career Award from the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Abstract

This paper describes findings from interviews with five second generation Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAAs) from Central Iowa. While Iowa is commonly associated with white farmers and endless cornfields, Southeast Asian refugees have a remarkable history in this region that is largely unknown and unrecognized. The five individuals interviewed describe their educational experiences on the margins, and their stories offer educators points of departure to better recognize the cultural and linguistic assets that refugee students possess.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Americans, Iowa, Midwest

Word Count: 7,000

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

“This is why nobody knows who you are”: (Counter)Stories of Southeast Asian Americans in the Midwest

In spite of the tremendous diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures encapsulated within their panethnic group, Asian Americans are commonly understood to be recent immigrants of East Asian descent who do not speak English (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). While the greatest concentrations of Asian Americans are on the West Coast, the Midwest is the region with the second greatest growth. Half of Midwestern states have experienced greater than 50% growth in their Asian American populations since 2000 (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Yet the population of Midwestern states remains nearly 83% white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), an overwhelming majority reflected in school systems throughout the region. The unfamiliarity with Asian American histories, cultures, and ethnicities to white Midwesterners presents a number of challenges, many of which manifest in schooling contexts.

Although Iowa is commonly associated with cornfields and white farmers, Southeast Asian refugees have a remarkable history in this region that is largely unacknowledged. The recognition of this history, through inclusion in school curriculum and the popular imagination, could be a powerful way to disrupt normative whiteness and xenophobia in the region. This manuscript centers the stories of five second-generation Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAAs) from Central Iowa. Interviewees described a lack of understanding of their cultures and languages by their teachers and non-Asian communities. The insights and activism of these particular individuals suggest possibilities for educators to take transformational approaches toward more inclusive pedagogy and curriculum for future generations in Iowa and beyond.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Asian American Educational Experiences

Compared to other ethnoracial groups, Asian Americans receive the least attention in school curriculum (Author, 2017); the little that is included is often relegated to the Chinese in the 1800s (Gold Rush, transcontinental railroad, and/or Chinese Exclusion) and Japanese Americans during World War II (Suh, An, & Forest, 2015). Although Asian Americans come from every country on the Asian continent, in both curricula and popular culture, Asian is typically understood to mean *East* Asian (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Such misperception belies contemporary Asian America, as the largest subgroups of Asian immigrants today are Chinese, Filipinos, Indians, Vietnamese, and Koreans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The continued conflation of Asian Americans with East Asian Americans results in the omission of Southeast and South Asian Americans and their unique histories and experiences.

The model minority myth is another popular misconception that impacts the educational experiences of Asian Americans. Asian Americans are often viewed as a successful “model minority” with high academic achievement and economic prosperity. Such perceptions deny the insidious nature of the model minority stereotype, which upholds Asian American achievement in ways that sustain meritocracy and white supremacy by juxtaposing Asian Americans against Black and Brown communities while masking the struggles and racial injustice also faced by Asian Americans (Kim, 1999). Moreover, immigration laws that preference holders of advanced degrees have facilitated the widespread arrival of doctors, engineers, and tech workers from particular Asian countries (Lowe, 1996), namely India, China, the Philippines, and South Korea (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017). These highly educated immigrants typically arrive fluent in English and hold high-paying jobs, and are often stereotyped in popular media (e.g., *The Big Bang Theory*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Mindy Project*); while Asian Americans are

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

also a part of the working class and may be involved in criminal activity and gang life (Vigil, 2010), they are rarely stereotyped in these social positions, particularly in comparison to Latinx and Black communities. In schools, the model minority myth is often applied to all students of Asian descent, ignoring the stark disparities made clear with data disaggregation, and resulting in an overrepresentation of Asian Americans in gifted and talented programs (Gallagher, 2015) and an underrepresentation and later initiation of services in special education (Cooc, 2019). While the model minority myth is damaging in a number of ways to all students, SEAA students and communities are often the most impacted by this stereotype, as it frames them as failures compared to their East and South Asian American peers.

Southeast Asian American Educational Experiences

Given the lack of attention to diverse Asian American histories in school curricula and the overwhelming research emphasis on East Asian Americans, scholars have attended to the particular educational needs of SEAs and the impact of their distinct immigration and refugee histories. Many SEAs arrived in two principal waves: between 1975-1978, the first wave was comprised primarily of Vietnamese of the professional and intellectual class as well as some Hmong soldiers and Cambodians; beginning in 1979, the second wave largely consisted of the labor class, as many rural ethnic Chinese farmers in Vietnam and Lowland Lao and Hmong in Laos fled conflict and deteriorating economic conditions. Cambodian refugees arrived later in the second wave as survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide (Kula & Paik, 2016). The experiences of refugees who lost family members, escaped war, sought asylum in crowded camps outside of their home countries, then suddenly relocated to the United States is understandably filled with trauma, poverty, conflict, and complexity that manifested in a multitude of ways as they adjusted to life in a new country and raised the next generation (Kula

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

& Paik, 2016; Lee et al., 2017). Although the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees were mostly educated, affluent, and had some fluency in English, the second wave had little education, limited command of English, and minimal industrial job training.

As a result of these multiple conditions, SEAs experience lower educational and occupational attainment than the overall Asian American population and the U.S. average (Kula & Paik, 2016). Lee et al. (2017) found that Cambodian American, Lao American, and Vietnamese American standardized test performance was heavily influenced by families' socioeconomic status and parents' educational levels. Uy (2008) suggests that the lack of formal education of many Southeast Asian refugee parents and the inability to read or write in their native languages may result in a lack of understanding of the U.S. education system and their subsequent interaction with it. Moreover, Uy (2008) argues, "Southeast Asian parents have a cultural expectation that teachers are the best advocates for their children and that they as parents should not interfere in the schooling process" (p. 46), a belief stemming from the reverence of teachers as professionals. Thus, Southeast Asian parents may not feel equipped to intervene in an unfamiliar educational system through a language in which they may not be fluent.

The extant literature on SEAs in education focuses on Hmong, Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese youth (Ngo, Lee & Pak, 2007). Due to distinct historical and immigration differences, research on Filipino Americans is often separate from Southeast Asian scholarship despite the Philippines' geographic location. Burmese American students are largely omitted from SEAA educational research due to their more recent arrival in the last decade. Burmese refugees entering the U.S. peaked in 2009, with the majority settling in the Southern United States followed by the Midwest (Tandon, 2016; Trieu & Vang, 2015). Compared to other Southeast Asian refugees, Burmese students have a higher high school dropout rate, drastically

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

lower high school graduation rates, and are more likely to live below the poverty line (Trieu & Vang, 2015). Notably, while a significant body of scholarship on SEAs takes place in the Midwest, research sites are typically relegated to Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) in education is a framework founded on at least five elements: the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and the transdisciplinary perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Together, these five themes name racist injuries and identify their origins in an effort to empower victims of racism. In particular, CRT aims to disrupt the majoritarian stories that generate from a legacy of white privilege and which distort and silence the experiences of People of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Delgado (1989) refers to the narratives that emerge from those who have been oppressed, victimized, and brutalized by the mechanisms of white supremacy as counterstories. Counterstories allow marginalized peoples a means to articulate their lived conditions in an effort to shatter complacency, challenge the status quo, open new windows into reality, and engage conscience (Bell, 1987, 1992; Delgado, 1989). Importantly, the stories of Communities of Color, and in this case, Southeast Asian Americans, can disrupt and subvert prevailing mindsets related to the presence and effects of racism in the United States broadly and in U.S. schools specifically. The experiences and stories shared by SEAs in this study offer important educational insights from a region traditionally disassociated with immigrant communities, and thereby also offer possibilities for transformation should educators take heed.

Method of Study

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

This study is a narrative inquiry that focuses on interviews with five SEAAAs educated in Central Iowa to answer the research question, *How do SEAAAs describe their educational experiences in Iowa?* The participants are part of a broader case study examining AAPI¹ educational experiences in the state; while the case study includes interviews and educational artifacts in three sites with a range of community stakeholders, this paper solely focuses on the interview data of SEAA individuals in the Des Moines metropolitan area.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as an Asian American scholar and teacher educator, born and raised in Texas to Asian immigrants who were fluent in English and held bachelor's degrees upon their arrival in the United States in the 1970s. I often experienced cultural clashes with my immigrant parents; despite their English fluency and formal education in Asia, they were unfamiliar with U.S. schooling and culture. Much of our family's social time was spent with other Asian immigrant families who spoke the languages and ate the foods of our homelands; outside of these sacred spaces, we dealt with racism and discrimination. Yet my parents' education and English fluency afforded them (and in turn, me) many benefits that other immigrants could not access with such ease. We became comfortably middle class and my parents had clear paths toward citizenship.

When I moved to Iowa three years ago for a faculty position, I was eager to learn about Asian American communities in the Midwest and their educational experiences. I did not expect the tremendous diversity and rich histories that I encountered, and was eager to learn directly from community members. One benefit to the small Asian American community in the state is that I was quickly embraced by leaders and organizations, who welcomed me wholeheartedly into their spaces and lives. As they shared their stories with me, many of the details of harrowing refugee life were unlike anything I had ever heard; however, we often laughed at similar

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

memories of strict parenting (no sleepovers, *ever*) and culture clashes, and always shared recommendations for specific Asian goods in the area.

As someone who has long advocated for the inclusion of Asian American histories and stories in P-12 education, I wondered how the Iowa context differed from my experience in Texas; I may not have been ethnically similar to my mostly Latinx peers, but with my black hair and brown skin, at least I looked like many of them. What was it like growing up Asian American in Iowa? Did the state's unique refugee history garner classroom attention? These and many other questions emerged from my initial conversations with Asian American community leaders, and ultimately led to the case study of which this paper shares a small glimpse. As a former classroom educator and current teacher educator, I do this work in the hope that sharing the stories of these participants with a larger audience will broaden educators' understandings of Asian American experiences in Iowa. I am both an insider and an outsider to these participants, but moreover I aim to be an advocate and ally. The findings that follow rely heavily on participants' exact words in an effort to share as much of their actual voices as possible.

Context of Study

According to the Iowa Department of Education (2019), AAPI K-12 enrollment in public and private schools has increased 61% in the last two decades; in the 2017-2018 school year, AAPI students made up 2.8% of the state's public school enrollment. Over 90% of Iowa's population was white in 2018 and 2.7% of the population was Asian American; however, in Polk County in Central Iowa, Asian Americans comprise 4.3% of the general population and 8.2% of the student population in Des Moines Public Schools, the largest urban school district in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Due to the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees to Des Moines in the late 1970s, Central Iowa has the oldest Asian American communities statewide and is home to a

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

number of Asian-owned businesses as well as multiple cultural and community organizations. Thus, Central Iowa is a unique context for the study of SEAA educational experiences in the Midwest.

The growing demographics of Asian Americans in Iowa reflect national trends, as Asian Americans are currently the fastest-growing ethnoracial group in the United States and are projected to compose 10% of the national population by 2050 (Hoeffel et al., 2012). As demonstrated in Table 1, over 40% of Iowa's Asian American population is of Southeast Asian descent, and Iowa is home to the largest Tai Dam population outside of Asia (Walsh, 2017). Southeast Asian countries include a range of ethnic groups (e.g., Hmong, Karenni, Tai Dam) which have established a number of thriving and emerging communities across the Midwest. *(Insert Table 1)*

In 1975, Iowa became the first state to offer resettlement assistance to refugees after the Vietnam War and remains the first and only state with a government resettlement agency. Led by humanitarian and political motivations after the fall of Saigon, Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray created a state resettlement program to aid the Tai Dam in “becoming productive members of the state's labor force” (Walsh, 2017, p. 9). After this program was developed, other Southeast Asian ethnic groups resettled in Iowa, including Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians. Most recently, Iowa has witnessed an influx of refugees from Burma² and Bhutan, who are estimated to number over 10,000 (Pradhan, 2015). While the community impact of these demographic shifts has been the subject of substantial conversation within particular state and community entities, SEAs have received minimal attention in the educational realm.

Participant Selection

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Participants for this study were recruited through snowball sampling. I first contacted a range of Des Moines Asian American community leaders in the fall of 2017, who referred me to a number of nonprofit agencies that worked with and for Asian American communities. Each of the participants in this study were either employees or volunteers for a nonprofit, and I was introduced to them at my initial meetings. During my introduction, I described my interest in Asian American educational experiences in Iowa and inquired if they might be interested in participating in an interview at a later date. Adult participants were deliberately selected, as they have completed their K-12 schooling and could reflect on the breadth of their schooling experiences.

Data Collection & Analysis

Prior to the interviews, a list of questions was provided to participants. Questions explored participants' family journeys to Iowa, educational experiences, and ongoing cultural connections. Each participant was interviewed in person; semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 minutes to nearly three hours in length, and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and provided to interviewees for review. Transcripts were descriptively coded (Saldaña, 2009) using Dedoose analytical software to determine patterns and themes that emerged from participants' responses, with an emphasis on the stories they indicated they most wanted educators and cultural outsiders to know about and instances in which they felt unseen in school by their peers and teachers.

Study Participants

The five participants featured here currently live and were educated in Central Iowa. Their self-identification as Asian American was what initially led to my request for their participation in this study; however, during our interviews, it became clear that cultural and ethnic specificity was central to their identities. In particular, each participant used the

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

subgrouping of Southeast Asia in their interviews, both as a descriptor of themselves and their communities. Given the unique history of refugees from this region, and to Iowa in particular, there were times when Southeast Asia(n) was an ideal descriptor and other times when ethnic specificity was necessary. The fluidity with which they identify as Asian, Asian American, SEAA, and/or specific ethnic identities illustrate the complexity of identity and racialization, and is what Asian American critical race theorists describe as strategic (anti)essentialization (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Strategic essentialization recognizes that white supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolith, yet unification across diverse Asian American subgroups can build coalitions and political power; at the same time, anti-essentialization is needed to identify and advocate for the unique needs of Asian American subgroups and marginalized experiences.

The participants are part of the “new second generation” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) as they are the children of immigrants and were either born in the United States or arrived as youth, receiving all or part of their education in Iowa (Table 2). According to Portes & Rumbaut (2001), the new second-generation undergoes a unique process of adaptation as they cope with the challenges of growing up in an environment foreign to themselves or to their parents, including discrimination in school and other settings from white student peers, teachers, and neighbors. Names are pseudonyms either chosen by the participants themselves or by the researcher to reflect their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds; as all surnames indicate specific clans/tribes whose names hold tremendous cultural and historical significance, they are not included. Occupations are also not described to protect participants’ anonymity. After introductory meetings, four participants (Arinya, Khai, Paw, and Khanh) were interviewed in the fall of 2017; Rosalie was interviewed in the spring of 2018.

(Insert Table 2)

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Arinya. Age 28 at the time of our interview, Arinya identified as Lao, Tai Dam, and Chinese. She was born in Des Moines to a Lao mother and Tai Dam father, with ancestors from Southern China. Arinya was part of the second wave of Southeast Asian immigration and expressed greatest fluency in English, with some comprehension of Tai Dam and Lao.

Khanh. Khanh, who was 35 at the time of our interview, is the eldest of the five Southeast Asian participants featured here. She identified as Vietnamese American and Asian American, and immigrated to Iowa with her parents from Vietnam when she was four years old. Khanh arrived as part of the first wave of Southeast Asian immigration and considered herself equally fluent in both English and Vietnamese.

Rosalie. Rosalie, 29 at the time of her interview, identified as Hmong American. Rosalie was born and raised in Des Moines as part of the second wave of Southeast Asian immigration, and was fluent in English and Hmong.

Khai. Khai, who identified as Chin Zotung, was 22 at the time of his interview and was the most recently arrived refugee in the study. After he and his father left Burma, they spent three years in Malaysia before coming to Des Moines in 2014, when he was 18 years old. Khai first learned English upon his arrival in Des Moines and attended four years of high school. He was fluent in Burmese, Zotung, and English.

Paw. Paw, age 24 during her interview, also immigrated as part of the recent wave of Southeast Asian refugees to Central Iowa and identified as Karenni. Her family left their home in Burma when she was three years old and lived in a refugee camp along the Burmese/Thai border until she arrived in Des Moines in 2009 at age 14. She spoke Karenni, English, and some Burmese. Khai and Paw were close friends and asked to conduct their interviews together.

Findings

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

As refugees and the children of refugees, each participant shared compelling stories of their families' journeys from Asia to America and experienced a distinct disconnect between the cultures of home and school. As the model minority stereotype is especially present in educational spaces, their stories of familial trauma and constant cultural and linguistic dismissal and invisibility in schools counter and disrupt popular perceptions of Asian American students as universally successful with little effort or strife. The findings that follow reflect three common themes found in the participants' interviews as related to their schooling experiences in Central Iowa. First, they expressed the challenge of holding identities that were unfamiliar, misunderstood, and/or dismissed in school, and described the exclusion of their family histories, cultures, and language in the curriculum, even when directly attending to events in Southeast Asia. Second, Paw and Khai, the most recently arrived participants in the study, addressed the silences that resulted from their emerging knowledge of English. Third, the participants explained how contemporary educators can do better by SEAA students and families. Across all five participants' stories were experiences of isolation, refusal, and struggle, yet these stories also demonstrated tremendous resilience, dedication, courage, and strength.

Where Are You From?

All five participants expressed palpable frustration from years of dealing with peers and teachers who did not know from where they came or what their identities meant. Rosalie recounted the many questions related to her ethnic identity in school: "What's Hmong? Who are you guys? How do you spell it? Like Mongolian?" In majority-white states like Iowa, Asian American essentialization is especially common, resulting in a false equivalency between Asian and East Asian (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). The distinctions between Asian nation-states and

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

ethnicities so important to the participants' identities and family histories were never addressed in the participants' schooling. Rosalie explained:

None of that is being taught. None of it. And all of us Southeast Asian kids are like, "We suck, because we're not Chinese, or Japanese, or Korean." And those are the three most well known Asian heritages. Everybody else is just like, "You're just Asian. Lump it all together."

Rather than offering a space for *all* students to learn about ethnoracial difference, Rosalie described her classrooms as merely reinforcing popular misunderstandings.

Moreover, in some cases, national origin had little to do with ethnic and cultural identification. For example, when asked how she identified, Paw responded:

I always prefer to call (myself) Karenni... (in Burma) they have different ethnic groups/ethnicities, so I say Karenni. Because most of the people, even though they're from Burma, they don't speak Burmese. They have many different dialects.

Paw's explanation attests to the lack of cultural and linguistic understanding of Southeast Asia, particularly regarding Southeast Asian ethnicities and languages, and her response to questions of identity depends on the knowledge of the person asking the question. However, when individuals, and teachers in particular, are unaware of such distinctions and the sociopolitical histories that have resulted in movement throughout the region, ethnic identities can be dismissed or even erased.

As Khai described his own ethnic identification, he provided additional explanation for my benefit:

For example, there is Haka, Mizo, Zotung, Falam; like that, right? They all have different languages and different cultures, but they all identify as Chin. But they all have different clothes, different everything. I am Zotung, Chin Zotung, so we have around 300 people in Iowa, just one tribe. The Mizo, they have around 600 people, different but they're Chin.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Khai's account of the specific subgroups of Chin in Central Iowa exemplifies the complexity of identity, language, and tribal affiliation within ethnic groups that often goes unknown to outsiders, particularly in the United States.

Khai and Paw, who were the most recently arrived participants in the study, spoke directly to how the refugee experience impacted their interactions with others. Paw, who arrived in the second semester of her freshman year of high school, dealt with teachers and peers who were apathetic to her family's refugee circumstances. "Sometimes I feel like even teachers they will say, 'Oh, where are you from?' But they don't care... It seems like they don't respect your cultures." In high school, Paw and Khai's linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences were isolating and a source of pain.

Additionally, none of the participants recalled any instances of reading or discussing Asian American or SEAA content in school. Consequently, during her sophomore year of high school, Rosalie and her Hmong classmate were excited to cover the Vietnam War in class. She recounted,

Both (of us) were like, "Yeah! Now we're going to learn about who we are, and that's really cool." And then we covered the Vietnam War in one session and then that was it. We never talked about it again and we never talked about Hmong people.

Rosalie's father often spoke about "the (Hmong) Freedom Fighters, who helped the American soldiers but also helped the Hmong people... I remember talking to my friend, because we're both Hmong, and we're just like, 'Man, this is why nobody knows who you are.'" Rosalie and her friend's enthusiasm at the prospect of ethnic representation demonstrates the importance of curricular connections for students whose cultures and marginalized identities are rarely represented.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Despite Iowa's unique history of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, the histories that brought the participants' families to the state were erased in their schooling. Unfortunately, such erasure is common across the United States, as immigration is often solely taught via early European settlement in the 1800s and early 1900s, ignoring more recent immigration. These omissions demonstrate the constant Eurocentrism found in teachers' content knowledge and pedagogy, even when U.S. military intervention in Asia is the purported curricular focus. Moreover, few K-12 curricular materials are available about Hmong, Lao, Tai Dam, Karenni, Karen, and other Southeast Asian ethnic minority migrations to ameliorate this issue.

In contrast to the other participants, Arinya described herself as not wanting to be seen as Asian American. "I just want(ed) to be seen as a person, but growing up like that, who you are is just erased and that's what happened to me. Everything I feel got erased." Arinya described her childhood as focused on assimilation, and she distinguished her "at-home world" from the white world of school. Now, however, she said, "I wish I would've asked questions, I wished someone would've been more proactive with me on digging into who I was and finding out my parent's stories." After graduating from college, Arinya made her first trip to Asia and visited Laos, which she cited as the moment when she first started asking questions about her heritage and family history. For many immigrant students, assimilation into mainstream white Eurocentric culture may result in an abandonment of culture and language (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

We Have a Lot to Say... We Just Keep It In Our Heart

All of the participants learned English when they enrolled in U.S. public schools, but most had parents who did not speak English fluently, resulting in a lack of parent-teacher communication. Paw explained,

Even though (Southeast Asian parents) go to their child/parent conferences, they don't

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

know what they're going to ask. That's why any time people ask the question, "Do you have any questions?" They will say, "No," most of the time. The thing is they don't know what to say, they don't know what to ask. And they said they don't know how to speak their language and that is also the problem.

Arinya said she and her siblings "never talked about school or anything with our parents... My dad hated going to conferences, so he never went." These comments suggest the ways in which parent-school communication is deeply grounded in white, middle-class norms, with little interest in connecting with families that exist beyond this norm who may work outside of traditional 9-5 jobs, may not speak English fluently, etc.

Participants' English language development over time also impacted their interactions with others. Khai explained his own reticence to participate in class:

Sometimes we don't really speak up in school and it doesn't mean that we don't have nothing to say. We have a lot to say... We just keep it in our heart because... Everything is different, every culture is different we just better keep it in our heart than speak at all. But we have a lot, a lot, *a lot* to say... my fellow Asian refugees... they have a different story but they don't want to speak up. But it doesn't mean that they have nothing to say.

At times, Khai felt frustration with his lack of English proficiency. He admitted, "Sometimes I even look down on myself, give up because I can't really communicate to other people."

Although Khai first learned English as a teenager upon his arrival in Iowa, he already knew two other languages (Chin and Burmese) and had fluency in other Burmese languages. As he described, he had a *lot* to say about his life and learning in high school, but was unable to express himself in English despite his abilities to express himself in other languages. Teachers who lack training in supporting English learners might assume that a lack of oral participation suggests student disinterest; conversely, if educators apply the model minority stereotype, they may assume that an Asian American student's silence suggests full comprehension and therefore withhold additional academic or emotional supports.

Remember Who They Are and Where They Came From

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

The final question in our interviews asked participants what they would want educators to know about SEAs. Khanh stated,

Just make sure that they know that what they're learning is limited and informed by what in Western society is important. But if they really want to expand their mind and their knowledge, they have to go and seek it, and then they have to piece it together and make sense of it somehow themselves.

Khanh recognized that the project of U.S. public schooling is grounded from a Western lens, but was adamant that did not have to be the case nor does curriculum have to be limited to that perspective. She also considered teachers to be personally responsible for expanding their perspectives and knowledge.

Khai was enthusiastic about participating in this study and sharing his story. He explained,

Learning different culture or teaching you cultures is like taking a new world into your heart. It's like totally new. I want all the teachers to teach some different cultures to their students because ... Especially to my fellow Asians, because they've forgotten and then they just take the culture of United States.

Regarding his fellow refugees, Khai stated, "I want them to... remember who they are and where they came from." In their respective Burmese communities in Central Iowa, both Khai and Paw witnessed many examples of second-generation youth who no longer maintained their cultures or languages and they were deeply concerned about the fractures these shifts were causing in families and what it meant for the identities of the new generation.

Rosalie, the director of a nonprofit, described how she and her high school SEAA peers took action in response to the lack of understanding of their histories and identities:

We were like, "No one knows about us." No one cares about Southeast Asians, or Southeast Asians and Islanders, no one really cares about us. We have to change that narrative. So then in high school we created... A youth coalition called "Together," which was to help more people become aware of issues that were related to Southeast Asians and how we came here, even like the Cambodians. All of that. Because we had a whole

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

bunch of us who were like, “We're all Southeast Asians, we're all in the same grade and no one knows who the fuck we are.”

As teenagers, Rosalie’s SEAA peer group recognized a clear need to advocate for themselves and other SEAs who were severely minoritized in school. In the absence of curricular representation and teacher support, they took the initiative to create their own support group.

Despite the many challenges outlined above, the individuals in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience in schools and did not wait for their largely indifferent (and sometimes oblivious) teachers to attend to the needs of their communities. Khanh, the eldest participant in this study, was the leader of a nonprofit that supported AAPIs, and Paw and Khai, the youngest participants in this study, worked in another AAPI-supporting nonprofit as volunteers. For each participant, their passion for supporting and uplifting their communities became a driving force in their careers. Contrary to stereotypes of Asian Americans working in tech and medical sectors, these participants became devoted to providing ongoing community support through nonprofit organizations. However, the persistence and endurance illustrated by these five SEAs must be recognized as exceptional, rather than the norm, and implicates the need for widespread support in educational settings so that cultural and linguistic maintenance and positive self-identification are encouraged rather than achieved in spite of the many barriers to them that currently exist in schools and society.

Discussion & Conclusion

Arinya, Khai, Khanh, Paw, and Rosalie regularly participated in distinct ethnic communities completely unlike their school settings. In school, their identities as SEAs were largely misunderstood and misread, particularly by white teachers and peers who expressed little interest in cultivating more culturally relevant pedagogies. While the challenge of learning English while navigating schooling in a new country presented additional difficulties for Khai

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

and Paw, most notable across all participants was the consistent apathy and lack of understanding about their Southeast Asian places of origin, languages, and cultures. This lack of understanding deeply impacted the relationship between school and family, as the participants were often positioned as cultural and linguistic brokers for their parents. In some cases, as Arinya described, the void between home and school was so great that the two rarely connected.

Native and Black history scholars have long argued that the trauma of the past remains in present generations (DeGruy, 1994; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart & Horse-Davis, 1998). Yet popular perceptions of immigrant journeys to the United States, particularly those presented in schools, bear scant resemblance to the traumatic voyages experienced by the refugees in this study, and such misunderstandings are further maligned through the model minority stereotype frequently applied to Asian Americans of all generations. For refugees, trauma and struggle may deeply inform the relationships between children and families and between home and school. The results of this study suggest several areas in need of attention by educators and community stakeholders, with implications far beyond the Midwest.

First, educators must attend to the unique refugee stories of SEAs; in some cases, students and families may not be prepared or willing to openly share these stories. Such revelations require trust that predominantly white, middle class, English monolingual schools rarely take the time to establish and develop. Whether or not students and families share their stories directly with teachers, counselors, and other schooling staff, educators have a responsibility to learn more about the students they work with, including the histories that led to the arrival of immigrants and refugees.

Second, the learning of refugee stories, whether first- or secondhand, must generate adjustments and adaptations in pedagogy and curriculum that ultimately impact praxis. This

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

work must be inherently dialogical, which requires both social and political responsibility (Freire, 2007/1973). If educators dare to claim responsibility for the development of the next generation of citizens, they must acknowledge the cultural and linguistic wealth of all members of the future citizenry. Such recognition requires insight into the ways U.S. imperialism and military intervention have directly impacted the flow of refugees into the nation.

Third, educators must look beyond the traditional canon of pedagogical resources; extensive research in literacy and social studies education has revealed the woefully inadequate attention to women and historically marginalized groups (Cornbleth, 1997). Regardless of the ethnoracial diversity in any given classroom, mainstream textbooks and curriculum do not adequately attend to the racial realities of the contemporary United States and fail to recognize the role of recent immigration legislation in the extraordinary demographic diversity of the country. Lastly, educators must engage community members, such as the participants in this study, to support their work and to ensure that ethnoracial groups are depicted with accuracy and dignity.

References

- Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial reform*. Basic Books.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Clymer, K. (2016). *A delicate relationship: the United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945*. Cornell University Press.
- Cooc, N. (2019). Disparities in the Enrollment and Timing of Special Education for Asian American and Pacific Islander Students. *The Journal of Special Education*, 53(3), 177-190.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Cornbleth, C. (1997). Birds of a feather: people(s), culture(s), and school history. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 25(3), 357–362.

DeGruy, J. (1994). *Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury*. Caban Productions.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8), 2411-2441.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (3rd ed.) Temple University Press.

Duran, E., Duran, B., Heart, M. Y. H. B., & Horse-Davis, S. Y. (1998). Healing the American Indian soul wound. In *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 341-354). Springer.

Freire, P. (2007/1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gallagher, J. J. (2015). Education of gifted students: A civil rights issue? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 38, 64–69.

Hoeffel, E. M., Rastogi, S., Kim, M. O., & Shahid, H. (2012). The Asian population: 2010. *2010 Census Briefs*. U.S. Census Bureau.

Iftikar, J. S., & Museus, S. D. (2018). On the utility of Asian critical (AsianCrit) theory in the field of education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 31(10), 935-949.

Iowa Department of Education. (2019). *Condition of Education: 2018 Annual Report*. Iowa Department of Education.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

- Kim, C. J. (1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & society*, 27(1), 105-138.
- Kula, S. M. & Paik, S. J. (2016) A historical analysis of Southeast Asian refugee communities: post-war acculturation and education in the U.S. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 11(1), Article 1.
- Lee, D., Duesbery, L., Han, P., Tashi, T., Her, C., and Pang, V. O. (2017). Academic needs and family factors in the education of southeast Asian American students: Dismantling the model minority myth. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 12(2), 1–28.
- Lee, J., & Ramakrishnan, K. (2019). Who counts as Asian. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1-24.
- Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press.
- Ngo, B., Lee, S. J., & Pak, Y. K. (2007). Complicating the image of Model Minority success: A review of Southeast Asian American education. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(4), 415–453.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. University of California Press.
- Pradhan, S. (2015). *State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Iowa, 2015*. Des Moines, IA: Office of Asian Pacific Islander Affairs, Iowa Department of Human Rights.
Retrieved from https://humanrights.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/media/State-AAPIs-Iowa-2015%20FINAL_0.pdf
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *Coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

- State Data Center of Iowa. (2019). *Asian/Pacific Americans in Iowa: 2019*. Office of Asian Pacific Islander Affairs, Iowa Department of Human Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.iowadatacenter.org/Publications/api2019.pdf>
- Suh, Y., An, S., & Forest, D. (2015). Immigration, imagined communities, and collective memories of Asian American experiences: A content analysis of Asian American experiences in Virginia U.S. history textbooks. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 39(1), 39–51.
- Tandon, M. (2016) Resettlement struggles of Burmese refugee students in U.S. high schools: A qualitative study. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 11(1), Article 4.
- Trieu, M. M., & Vang, C. Y. (2015). A portrait of refugees from Burma/Myanmar and Bhutan in the United States. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 18(3), 347-369.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/IA>
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2017). *Number of H1-B petition filings, FY2007-2017*. Department of Homeland Security. Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/Immigration%20Forms%20Data/BAHA/h-1b-2007-2017-trend-tables.pdf>.
- Uy, P. S. (2008) How the American Community Survey informs our understanding of the Southeast Asian community: One teacher's perspective. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 3(1), 44-48.
- Vigil, D. (2010). *A rainbow of gangs: Street cultures in the mega-city*. University of Texas Press.
- Walsh, M. R. (2017). *The good governor: Robert Ray and the Indochinese refugees of Iowa*. McFarland.

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Table 1	
<i>Asian Alone by Selected Groups: 2017</i>	
<u>Group</u>	<u>%</u>
Asian Indian	18.4
Burmese	8.9
Chinese, except Taiwanese	16.7
Filipino	7.1
Korean	8.4
Laotian ³	6.4
Thai	3.8
Vietnamese	13.9
Other Asian	16.4

THIS IS WHY NOBODY KNOWS WHO YOU ARE

Note: Reproduced from Asian/Pacific Islanders in Iowa: 2019 from State Data Center of Iowa & The Office of Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.iowadatacenter.org/Publications/api2019.pdf>.

Table 1. The Asian American Population in Iowa

Name	Age	Place of Birth	Places Lived Beyond Iowa	Ethnic Identification	Languages Spoken (in alphabetical order)
Arinya	28	Iowa	Nebraska, Colorado	Lao/Tai Dam/Chinese/Thai	English
Khai	22	Burma	Malaysia, Thailand	Chin	Burmese, Chin Zotung, English
Khanh	35	Vietnam	Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines	Vietnamese	English, Vietnamese
Paw	24	Burma	Thailand	Karenni	Burmese, English, Karenni
Rosalie	29	Iowa	Texas	Hmong	English, Hmong

Table 2. Participant Information.

¹ As the focus of this manuscript is on Asian Americans, AAPI will only be used in citation and when referring to content in which Asian American is aggregated with that of Pacific Islanders (e.g., data).

² Burma was named by 19th century British colonizers after the predominant ethnic group, the Burmans. In 1989, the ruling military junta changed the official name to Myanmar. As the junta was viewed by many as an oppressive and illegitimate regime, whether one calls the country Myanmar or Burma is often politically motivated (Clymer, 2016). In this manuscript, Burma reflects the participants' exclusive use of this name in reference to the country of their birth.

³ As "Laotian" is a name that emerged from French colonialism, "Lao" is the preferred term to describe the people of Laos and will be used exclusively except in citation of works that use "Laotian" instead.