



Diversifying the Workforce: Increasing the Number of Asian Americans in Early Childhood Education

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Despite nationwide attempts to increase the racial and cultural diversity of teacher candidates and in-service teachers, negligible progress has been made in recruiting Asian American educators. At the preschool and kindergarten level, only 2.2 percent of teachers report to be Asian, compared with 12 percent reporting to be Black and 15.3 percent reporting to be Latino/a (USBLS 2021). In addition, teacher education programs lack diversity when compared with other college and university disciplines (Constantine et al. 2009). According to data presented by the US Department of Education, 25 percent of those in teacher preparation programs were from diverse backgrounds, compared with 37 percent in other fields of study. Lower degree completion rates for racially and culturally diverse students, those from families with low incomes, students following a non-traditional path, students with disabilities, and first-generation students further impact the number of diverse teachers entering the teaching profession (ED 2016).

In 2018, 5 percent of students in prekindergarten through grade 12—or roughly 2.7 million children—were Asian American (Irwin et al. 2021). Evidence exists that children benefit when they see their own social identities, including race, culture, and gender, in the individuals who educate and care for them (Dee 2005; Egalite & Kisida 2018; Rasheed et al. 2020). As such, those facilitating educator preparation and professional development programs should consider establishing goals related to race and ethnicity, among other criteria (NAEYC 2020).

Because recruitment and program completion within teacher preparation programs are two aspects that impact the workforce, this article outlines the reasons why individuals enter the teaching profession and shares key recommendations for recruiting and retaining Asian American teacher candidates. Intertwined throughout are the voices of the authors, whose personal and professional experiences demonstrate their dedication to and the need for increasing the number of Asian Americans in the early childhood profession.

Why Work in Early Childhood Education?

In general, individuals are motivated to pursue careers in teaching for altruistic, intrinsic, and/or extrinsic reasons (Fray & Gore 2018):

- Those motivated by altruism are interested in giving back to other people or society, or they are answering a call to teach.
- Those motivated by intrinsic reasons enjoy teaching and working with students, are interested in what they teach, and believe they are good at what they do.
- Those motivated extrinsically may be attracted to teaching for its work-life balance, job stability and availability, and/or because teaching is considered a noteworthy profession.

In examining the literature and comparing it with our own experiences, we found that as Asian American educators, our reasons for entering the profession fall within these parameters.

A Noteworthy Profession

Many individuals who decide to go into teaching do so because they believe it is a noteworthy profession (Fray & Gore 2018). The notion that teachers work to help shape and prepare the next generation seems to be paramount in their minds (Lor 2010; Bryan & Browder 2013). This is the case for Neal Nghia Nguyen and Jun Ai.



Neal Nghia Nguyen

I grew up in Saigon, Vietnam, during the Vietnam War era. Early education was a luxury for me due to the hardships under the new regime. After several failed attempts to escape the country by fishing boats, my family successfully sought our long overdue freedom in the United States when I was 16 years old.

Before working as a teacher educator in higher education, I taught first grade for five years at several elementary schools in Nevada and Florida. I chose early childhood as my focus because I strongly believe children should be taught, modeled, and given the chance to practice the foundational skills across the five developmental domains as early as possible. A vast body of research has shown improved learning outcomes for children during the early childhood years, when they have the active involvement of families and related stakeholders.

I have always enjoyed working with preservice and in-service teachers in early childhood and special education. These prospective educators need an effective and compassionate role model to guide them through the acquisition of various content-related and prosocial skills during their teacher preparation programs.

Jun Ai



I changed careers from biochemistry and molecular biology to early intervention and early childhood special education. This drastic change stemmed from my lived experience as a daughter of a father with disabilities who struggled with finding quality and equitable services.

My volunteer experiences working with young children with disabilities made it clear to me that the early years are the golden window for educators to make a change in young children's lives. I know the lasting impact that an early

childhood educator can have on young children. It was a lifetime commitment I chose to honor then, and I will honor for the rest of my career.

The Call to Teach

Of the roughly 985,650 center-based early childhood workers who were asked what motivates them to work with young children, more than 60 percent reported “This is my calling or career” (Paschall et al. 2020, 14). This calling has been described as “a way of coming at life, of finding oneself, which is experienced as deeply spiritual and life affirming” (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon 2011, 128). Teaching is something these individuals feel like they were born to do or that they need to do. This exemplifies Shin Silver’s story.

Shin Silver



I knew from the third grade that I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. It was then, as a student in an English language learner class, that I told myself, “This is what I want to do . . . teach.” I wanted to help children who were English language learners like myself. Being an immigrant from South Korea and raised by a single mother who barely spoke English, I knew teaching was going to be my life. I was already teaching my mother the culture and the English language. I became her translator at an early age. Little did I know my life would take me on another path.

As I entered my freshman year of college, my part-time job as a teacher’s assistant at the college’s preschool changed the course of my career. At this preschool, which fostered and advocated for inclusion, I experienced the joy of young children learning and families seeing their children thrive. I saw how large an impact early childhood education has on the trajectory of their lives.

Although I completed my bachelor’s degree in elementary education, my passion for early childhood, and especially inclusion, led me to get my master’s degree in early childhood special education. Now in my 20th year with the same program since my freshman year of college, I have come to realize that this is a part of my legacy—a legacy that shows how much I love working with young children and their families and that gives me a passion to pass on that love to a new generation of teachers. A legacy intertwines educating, coaching, mentoring, and ultimately supporting and building up the multitude of people I come into contact with on a daily basis. I am a teacher.

Inspired by Prior Teachers

A third reason people choose to teach is because another educator influenced them (Liu 2010; Su 1997). Perhaps an inspirational teacher took difficult concepts and—as if by magic—presented them in ways that were understandable and joyful. Here, Jenny Chiappe shares the importance of role models in her journey to becoming a teacher, both in positive ways and ways that made her want to become a role model for her students.

Jenny Chiappe



In high school, my chemistry and math teachers were exemplary, making me want to become a high school science teacher. That trajectory changed in college, when I became interested in developmental disabilities while taking a psychology class. I volunteered at an early intervention clinic for toddlers with autism and eventually decided to pursue a career as a special education teacher. I have been working in schools now for 13 years in different capacities.

Throughout my own educational experiences, I realized the inequities that exist in under-resourced communities. As I reflect back on my experiences as an Asian American and how

my parents navigated our educational experiences with translators, I understand the importance of access and advocacy. I realized the importance of representation when I first started working as a teacher. There were not many teachers that looked like me at the school where I worked. I wondered about the importance of diversity within teacher education and the larger community as a whole. As a result of those experiences, my focus is to provide access and equity for students of color at an early age.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

Despite the underrepresentation of teachers of color, both in the field and more broadly in media representations of educators (Marrun, Plachowski, & Clark 2019), individuals who pursue careers in teaching may want to work with students who look like them and/or share similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Su 1997). They may connect with the educational experiences, biases, and obstacles faced by children of color, and they may want to be a change agent by recognizing and infusing culturally responsive practices into the curriculum.

In addition, many children and families in the United States are dual language and multilingual learners. Thirty-two percent of children birth to age 8 (roughly 11 million children) are dual language learners, and the top five reported home languages (other than English) are Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Arabic (Park, O'Toole, & Katsiaficas 2017). It is important that early educators recognize and support the development of these dual language and multilingual learners (NAEYC 2020). Heather Bae's contributions stem from her work as a translator and early childhood educator.

Heather Bae



I chose a career in early childhood because I genuinely love interacting with young children. I love that I can make silly voices to make my students laugh. I can pretend to be a tiger, an astronaut, and a monster truck—all within a single day. I have the opportunity to teach children learning-to-learn skills, which will ultimately be the steppingstones of their educational journeys.

I understand the responsibility that comes with being an early childhood educator. It is my responsibility to provide the most secure and stimulating learning environment, guiding each student to acquire new skills and persevere through challenges. I need to connect with their families so we experience the good and the bad together. I also need to collaborate with them to ensure that learning opportunities are presented across all settings (e.g., school and home).

Every day is different: some days are easier, and others are more physically and emotionally demanding. Regardless, I go back the next day, anticipating the smiles and silliness of my students, ready to be whatever animal, person, or thing I need to be to make learning intriguing. I simply love that I get to be a part of children's growth.

There is a significant need for Asian American early educators. Being a Korean American, I communicate with families in their native language, building and maintaining a rapport that may otherwise be difficult due to the language barrier. I act as an instrumental participant in Individualized Education Program meetings by translating for both parents and school staff. Not only that, I can also communicate to Korean-speaking English language learners to increase their understanding. This career gives me the chance to wear many hats.

Becoming a Leader

While the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce is troubling, an even greater disparity exists among individuals in educational administration and leadership. People of diverse backgrounds make up less than 20 percent of principals (80 percent identify as White), and only 6 percent of superintendents identify as individuals of color (Castro, Germain, & Gooden 2018). Furthermore, Asian Americans are more likely to serve in managerial positions in health care, social services, and postsecondary education than in K–12 schools—possibly a carryover from the already low numbers of individuals entering the teaching workforce (Hansen & Quintero 2018).

Here, Delilah Krasch shares her journey from third-grade teacher to working with preschool and kindergarten children to serving as an early childhood administrator in one of the largest school districts in the United States.

Delilah Krasch



I have worked in education for the past 17 years, first as a third-grade teacher, then as an early childhood special education teacher. After seven years, I became a coach and supported other early childhood special education teachers. I felt that, as a coach, I was able to support more students and families by coaching teachers to implement evidence-based instructional practices and by empowering families.

I became an administrator to provide these supports on an even larger scale. My current position gives me the opportunity to continue to advocate for young children and their families across my entire school district. The programs I work with ensure high-quality learning opportunities for students and families living in poverty and for those from historically marginalized groups, including dual language learners, students with disabilities, and racially and culturally diverse students. I supervise coaches who directly provide

professional learning, modeling, and mentoring for teachers to ensure high-quality programming for students and families. Together, we provide the foundation for each student's educational career. I cannot imagine doing anything else.

I was very close to my grandparents growing up, and my grandmother instilled in me the values she learned from her childhood in Japan. I worked hard for my education and am proud to work in an esteemed profession.

A Desire to Be a Male Role Model

Much has been written about the need for male teachers in early childhood education (Cunningham & Watson 2002; McGrath et al. 2020). Despite recommendations offered by experts (Nelson & Shikwambi 2010), men still comprise less than 3 percent of the preschool and kindergarten educator population (USBLS 2021). This trend stems from stereotypical viewpoints that working in early childhood is

- not for men (Bryan & Browder 2013)
- not important (Friedman 2010)
- equivalent to babysitting (Friedman 2010)

Compensation, which is far below what it should be (NAEYC 2021) and less than other professions men may be encouraged to pursue, is also an issue. Further complicating matters, men who do enter the field report being talked down to. For example, Bryan and Browder (2013) report that after a male teacher introduced himself to a parent, the parent's response was, "That can't be possible. Are you sure you know what you are doing?" (151). Male teachers may also find it challenging to be the only male teacher on staff (Friedman 2010).

With the already low numbers of early childhood teachers of Asian descent, it is likely that Asian American males represent an even thinner slice. Conrad Oh-Young is one of the few.

Conrad Oh-Young



If you have ever set foot in an early childhood classroom, you have probably seen the toy people set that depicts people dressed in typical work uniforms. The doctor wears a white coat and has a stethoscope, the surgeon wears scrubs and a mask, and the scientist has on a white coat, goggles, and gloves and looks to be mixing different chemicals. Of interest to me were two specific people: the computer person and the teacher. The computer person is depicted as a male with Asian features and is holding what appears to be a computer monitor while the teacher is a White female holding a book and pointing to a picture of an apple.

These two depictions stood out to me because of my nontraditional pathway to the classroom. Having started my career in technology, I always wanted to take that experience and apply it to helping children and their families. In 2008, I made the decision to go back to college. It was difficult while

still working full time. Eventually, I earned my teaching license in early childhood special education. I was hired to teach in an early childhood program where children in the district attended a community-based site with children in Head Start. In essence, I was that toy computer person who transitioned to a profession where the stereotypical employee was depicted as someone who did not look like me.

During my service I found that the majority of the children and families I interacted with did not look like me. I thought to myself “This is great!” Although I looked different on the outside, I was still working with everyone else on the teaching staff to show that we all shared the common goal of providing a quality early childhood educational experience for our children.

Though I now work at the university level teaching classes in special education and early childhood, I look fondly upon my time in the classroom. I hope that I made a difference in the lives of the children and families I worked with. I hope to continue making a difference moving forward.

Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs

Asian American teachers continue to comprise a small percentage of the teaching workforce. Teacher preparation programs can help address this lack of diversity by focusing on recruitment and retention in a variety of ways.

- They can expand recruitment efforts to neighboring cities, states, and non-traditional venues such as child care centers, community recreation centers, and places of worship.

- Programs can recruit multilingual candidates who may be able to facilitate relationships with families from diverse backgrounds. (Note that not all Asian American candidates are multilingual.)
- They can develop and maintain an online presence that is separate from the standard university website. Possible avenues include social media (Facebook, Twitter), social networking (LinkedIn), and audio/video sharing sites (YouTube), which can also be used to remain in contact with program graduates.
- Video conferencing software (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet) can be used to hold virtual sessions where prospective candidates can interact with program advisors to address specific questions.
- Programs can offer financial supports to teacher candidates who may be forced to quit their current jobs because of the time demands made on preservice teachers.
- They can address direct and indirect forms of aggression, discrimination, and prejudice that Asian American teaching candidates may face.
- They can address the implicit and explicit biases that prevent male candidates from pursuing a career in early childhood education.
- Programs can recognize that completing a degree program and starting a teaching career can be stressful. Therefore, they need to ensure that future educators are connected to all available resources that can help them navigate and respond to stressful events and times.

“Recommendations for Recruiting and Retaining Asian American Teacher Candidates,” below, offers several strategies to implement these recommendations. Additionally, identifying administrators who are of similar cultural, linguistic, and/or ethnic backgrounds to interact with prospective and current teacher candidates should not be overlooked. Data suggest that benefits exist to having administrators who look like the students, families, and teachers they serve (Shah 2009; Grissom & Keiser 2011; Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern 2017).

Recommendations for Recruiting and Retaining Asian American Teacher Candidates	
Recommendation	Implementation Strategies
Recruit from non-traditional sources	Partner with local, state, national, or international organizations. For instance, a local Head Start site may be interested in having their teachers work toward licensure/earning credentials.
Address issues of cost and access	Offer financial assistance and hold courses at convenient times and locations. Apply for state/federal grants that will provide candidates with stipends. Partner with organizations and school districts to hire candidates as interns.
Support multilingual candidates	Provide opportunities to practice using more than one language in the field (not all are comfortable with "code-switching" and not all candidates speak more than one language).
Develop an online network	Designate an individual to post program information, event information, alumni testimonials, and celebrations of candidate achievements. This individual should validate and post new content at least once every two weeks while also working to build an online community. Incorporate QR codes that will link to the appropriate site when scanned.
Hold virtual information sessions	Hold a virtual information session at least quarterly to provide prospective candidates with opportunities to learn about the program, ask questions, and meet faculty. Advertise the sessions through your online network and through print materials.
Develop an administration pipeline	Encourage veteran Asian American teachers to move into administration roles. They have experienced the profession as members of historically marginalized groups and will be able to share their experiences, offer counsel, and serve as role models.
Address discrimination	While it may not be possible to prevent incidents of discrimination, provide systems of support so that if they do occur, they can be reported and addressed appropriately and in a timely manner.
Encourage male candidates	Recruit and provide ongoing support and mentoring for all candidates. Work to eliminate cultural and societal double standards.
Promote self-care	The well-being of teachers impacts effectiveness, which then impacts the children teachers work with (NRC 2015). Encourage teacher candidates to strike an appropriate work-life balance. Invite graduating teacher candidates and alumni to present their educational journeys and the strategies that they found effective.

Final Thoughts

Even with attempts to increase the racial and cultural diversity of teacher candidates and in-service teachers, there is still a lack of Asian American current and future early childhood educators at this time. As programs meet to discuss current student enrollment numbers, syllabi revisions, or changes related to state certification and licensing requirements, they should consider reviewing the population demographics of program completers. We have shared our stories of why we chose to pursue careers in early childhood education along with recommendations that teacher preparation programs can use to recruit Asian American candidates.

This article aligns with the NAEYC Professional Competencies and Standards:

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