

Reimagining Culturally Relevant Education Informed by AsianCrit

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Abstract: Culturally relevant education (CRE) is long-recognized as a fundamental framework for promoting equity-based teaching in K-12 schools. However, prevailing frameworks often overlook the unique racialized experiences of Asian American students. I fill CRE's critical gap by extending the scope of culturally relevant education via integration of two AsianCrit tenets — Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis — to develop AsianCrit-CRE. Asian American students are racialized through narratives such as the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner stereotype, two experiences that shape their sense of belonging, identity, and educational opportunities in schools. AsianCrit-CRE argues for a more racially responsive approach that recognizes Asian American students' lived experiences, centers their counter-narratives, and challenges curricular and institutional invisibility. Implications for educational leadership include strengthening culturally responsive professional development, critically examining racialized assumptions embedded within school practices, and cultivating more inclusive educational environments that affirm the experiences of Asian American students as central to equity and social justice efforts.

Culturally relevant education (CRE) has long been acknowledged as a foundational framework to enhance equity-based teaching in K-12 education (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2023). Yet, its prevailing frameworks have primarily focused on Black and Latine students' experiences (Pang, 2006). Despite Asian American being one of the fastest growing student populations in U.S. schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023), frameworks of culturally relevant education systematically neglect Asian American students by overlooking their unique racialized experiences — shaped by racial stereotypes such as the model minority myth and portrayal as perpetual foreigner — which contributes to their ongoing cultural under-recognition and curricular invisibility (Goodwin, 2010). Exclusion and narrow focus create a critical problem: a limited vision of equity-oriented education. The absence of Asian American perspectives undermines efforts to build inclusive educational environments that affirm all students' identities and experiences. I address exclusion of Asian American students by critically examining the limitations of prevailing frameworks of culturally relevant education and reimagining CRE through the lens of AsianCrit — particularly the tenets of “Asianization” and “Story, Theory, and Praxis” — to promote more equitable learning engagement for Asian American students (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). I focus on these tenets because they directly disrupt the racialized stereotypes and narrative invisibility that shape Asian American students' experiences in school. In addition, Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis highlight the racialized realities of Asian American students, integrate their counter-narratives into dominant educational discourses, and contribute to development of more inclusive and equity-driven approaches that inform both teaching and educational leadership. Intentional and meaningful incorporation of experiences of Asian American students enables teachers and administrators to practice a form of resilient, collaborative, and responsive schooling grounded in cultural knowledge, personal narrative, and social justice (Parkhouse et al., 2023; Sleeter, 2012).

Centers and Margins of Culturally Attentive Education

Culturally relevant education encompasses a set of interrelated pedagogical frameworks that seek to center teaching and learning on students' cultural backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesize culturally relevant education as

comprising two major strands: Geneva Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995a, 1995b, 2023) culturally relevant pedagogy. Paris and Alim (2017) expand the idea of culturally relevant education to include culturally sustaining pedagogy. While these frameworks share a broad commitment to equity-oriented education, they differ meaningfully in their emphasis and scope. Ladson-Billings centers the student as a whole person, insisting academic achievement, cultural identity, and critical consciousness must be pursued together. Gay's framework shifts the lens toward instructional practice by focusing on how teachers draw on students' cultural knowledge as a vehicle for learning/academic achievement. Paris and Alim push further, arguing the purpose of education must be reimagined. Rather than using students' cultures as bridges toward dominant academic outcomes, schooling should actively sustain and revitalize cultural and linguistic practices of communities of color. These distinctions are essential because they determine not only what equitable teaching looks like in practice, but also which students' experiences are centered and which remain at the margins.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) developed culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a framework grounded in the academic and cultural needs of Black students. Drawing from ethnographic research in elementary classrooms, Ladson-Billings identified three core criteria that define culturally relevant teaching: (1) academic achievement, which emphasizes that all students can and must experience intellectual success regardless of background; (2) cultural competence, which involves supporting students in maintaining and affirming their cultural identity while navigating the demands of schooling; and (3) critical consciousness, which challenges students to interrogate and critique social inequities and structural injustices that shape their lives. Ladson-Billings (2021) revisited her framework acknowledging that CRP is frequently misappropriated and reduced to prescriptive, surface-level approaches rather than treated as a transformative pedagogy. But as early as 2010, Ladson-Billings had already cautioned that true implementation of CRP is an ethical position and a way of "being" rather than a rigid checklist of "doing," calling on educators to look beyond standard routines to foster deep student learning and critical consciousness. While CRP remains a cornerstone of equity-based teaching, its primary historical grounding in African American student experiences has prompted subsequent pedagogical evolutions to address more explicitly the linguistic and cultural autonomy of a broader range of racially marginalized groups, among them, Asian Americans (An, 2016; Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Expanding from Ladson-Billings' CRP, Geneva Gay (2018) developed culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a comprehensive pedagogical framework that emphasizes using students' cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and prior experiences as conduits for learning. Gay argues that effective teaching requires cultural competence — an essential ability teachers need to understand and honor the diverse cultural heritages students bring to school — and insists that this competence must be actively translated into instructional strategies, curriculum design, and classroom relationships. Gay's framework is broad in scope, intended to be applicable across diverse student populations. CRP delineates five key dimensions of culturally attentive teaching and learning: (1) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base; (2) designing culturally relevant curricula; (3) demonstrating cultural caring by building a learning community; (4) communicating with ethnically diverse students; and (5) responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. Although Gay's framework was developed to address diverse student populations, its practical application in K-12 settings has often focused on Black and Latine student experiences, leaving Asian American students' distinct cultural and racial realities under-addressed (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Pang, 2006).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Paris introduced culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as a critical extension of culturally relevant and culturally responsive frameworks. Paris (2012) argues that frameworks organized around relevance and responsiveness risk being assimilationist in orientation. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, by contrast, centers the goal of sustaining and revitalizing cultural practices, languages, and ways of knowing that communities of color enact, particularly in the face of forces that seek to erase or devalue them. Paris and Alim further developed CSP by emphasizing dynamic, evolving understandings of culture that resist static or romantic representations. CSP calls on educators to engage students as full participants in cultural production, allowing classroom spaces to affirm both heritage practices and the contemporary, hybridized cultural expressions of youth communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Despite these advances, CSP, like its predecessor frameworks, has engaged Asian American students unevenly. The framework's emphasis on sustaining community practices is highly relevant to Asian American youth whose linguistic and cultural identities are often erased in schools, but CSP has not yet been systematically extended to address the specific racialization processes that construct Asian Americans as model minorities and perpetual foreigners. Sleeter (2012) also critiques the broader trend of overgeneralizing student needs as a weakness of culturally relevant education, a weakness that has inadvertently resulted in Asian American students' erasure from equity-oriented frameworks.

AsianCrit: A Framework for Analyzing Asian American Experiences in Education

Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) was developed by Iftikar and Museus as a race-conscious framework firmly grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) but specifically tailored to the experiences, histories, and concerns of Asian Americans. Iftikar and Museus argue that while CRT has generated important insights about the role of white supremacy in education, it has disproportionately informed scholarship focused on Black and White populations and, so, has fallen short of generating complex and holistic understandings of Asian American racial realities. AsianCrit addresses this gap by offering a framework that begins from an evidence-based assumption that nativistic racism and racialization processes profoundly shape the lives of Asian Americans in ways that are simultaneously similar to and distinct from other racial communities. The AsianCrit framework consists of seven interrelated tenets that can be understood around three thematic functions: understanding how Asian Americans are racialized, centering Asian American knowledge and narrative, and enabling structural and political action toward justice. The first four tenets were developed by integrating CRT scholarship with knowledge of Asian American racial realities, while the final three are adapted from core CRT principles and reoriented to the specific conditions of Asian Americans (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). In concert, these tenets offer a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding how white supremacy shapes Asian American students' experiences in education and for guiding educators toward more equitable teaching and leadership practice. As such, it is crucial to examine how these tenets can help address specific needs of Asian American students arising from their racialized schooling experiences.

The first two tenets address the foundational question of how Asian Americans are racialized and why understanding those processes is essential for educators and school leaders. The tenet of Asianization posits that people within the United States become "Asian" through racialization processes driven by white supremacy and nativistic racism. Iftikar and Museus argue that these processes have historically constructed Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and have also consistently functioned to dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans. Critically,

racial constructions serve as the vehicles through which white supremacy becomes embedded in laws, policies, programs, and institutional perspectives that structure the conditions of Asian American life. In educational contexts, Asianization generates a particular paradox for Asian American students: They are simultaneously marked as academically exceptional and rendered invisible in terms of their cultural identities, emotional needs, and racialized struggles. The model minority myth, a product of Asianization, leads educators and institutions to assume that Asian American students do not need support, thereby justifying their exclusion from equity initiatives and culturally affirming practices. The tenet of transnational contexts deepens this analysis by insisting that the racialization of Asian Americans cannot be fully understood without situating it within a broader network of global economic, political, and social relationships (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Many Asian American students' family histories are shaped by U.S. imperialism, colonialism, war, and forced displacement, often resulting in intergenerational experiences of migration, trauma, and cultural adaptation that continue to influence students' educational experiences today (Lowe, 1996). This tenet calls on educators and school leaders to expand their understanding of students' backgrounds beyond national borders, and to design educational environments capable of acknowledging, validating, and responding to the full complexity of Asian American students' lived histories.

The second cluster of tenets addresses whose histories and voices count in education — and what is lost when Asian American students are rendered invisible in curriculum, pedagogy, and educational discourse. The tenet of (re)constructive history is grounded in recognition that Asian Americans are typically absent and voiceless in dominant U.S. historical narratives. Rather than treating Asian American absence as an oversight, AsianCrit understands it as a structural feature of white supremacy that perpetuates the erasure of Asian American contributions, struggles, and resistance. In K-12 settings, curricular invisibility has direct consequences for Asian American students: When they do not see their communities' histories reflected in what is taught, the implicit message is that their experiences do not belong to or matter in the national story (An, 2016). Educators need to redesign curriculum to include Asian American histories of exclusion, resistance, and community-building, while school leaders must ensure that those curricular commitments are institutionally supported and sustained. The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis extends commitment to knowledge and narrative by centering the experiential histories of Asian Americans as a legitimate epistemological foundation for educational theory and practice. Drawing on CRT's tradition of counter-storytelling (Milner IV, 2007) and TribalCrit's emphasis on the connections between story, theory, and practice (Brayboy, 2005), this tenet holds that stories inform theory, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate new stories and apply theory for transformative ends (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). For Asian American students whose narratives have been systematically marginalized in both academic and educational discourse, Story-Praxis-Theory has profound implications. It calls on educators to create genuine opportunities for students to share and examine their own experiences, to treat those narratives as sources of knowledge, and to use them as a basis for developing more responsive and culturally affirming pedagogy (Han, Kang, & Kim, 2024). Together, (re)constructive history and Story, Theory, and Praxis reframe Asian American students from passive recipients of a curriculum that does not present them to active producers of knowledge in dialogs where their voices are central to teaching and learning.

The third cluster comprises the final three tenets of AsianCrit, adapted from core CRT principles and reoriented to address the specific structural and political realities of Asian Americans, speak to how Asian Americans can resist racialization and what educators and school

leaders must do at the structural level to create more just educational environments. Strategic (anti)essentialism acknowledges that while white supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic group, Asian Americans can actively intervene in this process. For instance, Asian American students and communities engage in pan-ethnic coalition-building to advance collective advocacy, while simultaneously pushing back against erasure of differences among ethnic subgroups. In schools, strategic (anti)essentialism challenges educators to resist both the flattening of Asian American diversity under a single stereotype and the (mis)aggregation of data that allows administrators to ignore intragroup disparities in achievement, mental health, and access to support. The intersectionality tenet recognizes that white supremacy does not operate alone but intersects with other systems of oppression — including imperialism, colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and capitalism — to shape the conditions within which Asian Americans exist. For Asian American students, race alone is an insufficient lens for understanding their experiences. Applying intersectionality in schools requires educators and leaders to move beyond race as a singular dimension of analysis and to develop the capacity to recognize and respond to the overlapping forms of marginalization that individual students face. Finally, commitment to social justice makes explicit that AsianCrit is fundamentally oriented toward action to dismantle all other systemic forms of dehumanization and domination. In educational contexts, commitment to social justice calls on educators and school leaders not only to understand racial inequities but to actively work to disrupt them — treating equity as a moral and institutional imperative. Importantly, Iftikar and Museus (2018) emphasize that AsianCrit is not intended to replace CRT but rather to adapt and extend it in ways that center the specific racialized realities of Asian Americans, generating more nuanced and actionable insights for educational research and practice.

Asian American Schooling Experiences

Asian American students' schooling experiences are shaped by a complex and often contradictory set of racialized narratives and structural realities that existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have been ill-equipped to address. The model minority myth occupies a central place in shaping how Asian American students are perceived and treated in schools. The myth perpetually masks inequities within Asian American communities, fuels misconceptions that Asian American students are impervious to racial challenges, and justifies their exclusion from racial discourse and targeted support (Museus & Kiang, 2009). While often framed as a compliment, the model minority stereotype places enormous academic pressure on students, erases the diversity of experiences within Asian American communities, and produces a form of racial silencing in which students' struggles go unacknowledged (Goodwin, 2010; Lee, 2006). The perpetual foreigner stereotype compounds these challenges by positioning Asian American students as permanent outsiders regardless of how long they or their families have lived in the United States. This racialization manifests in schools through experiences of racial isolation, racial hostility, pressure to assimilate to dominant white norms, and racial silencing in curricular spaces (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Students may feel that their cultural and linguistic identities are neither recognized nor valued in school, contributing to diminished sense of belonging and cultural identity.

At the same time, Asian American students' academic achievement is frequently interpreted through narrow racialized assumptions that obscure the structural conditions shaping their educational experiences. Aggregated achievement data and model minority narratives often lead educators and policymakers to perceive Asian American students as uniformly successful,

minimizing attention to disparities among ethnic subgroups and reducing institutional urgency to provide culturally responsive support (Museus & Kiang, 2009). As a result, Asian American students are frequently excluded from conversations about educational inequity, diversity initiatives, and social-emotional support despite experiencing racial discrimination, cultural marginalization, and identity-based stressors in school settings (An, 2016). Conditional recognition positions Asian American students as academically valued yet socially peripheral, reinforcing the perception that they do not require the same forms of racial or institutional support afforded to other marginalized student populations. Ni et al. (2022) explains that Asian-origin youth face heightened mental health challenges, often shaped by the intersection of academic pressure, experiences of racial discrimination, and cultural marginalization: A daunting set of challenges intensified by racialized invisibility in schools and lack of institutional recognition of their unique cultural and racial experiences. Pang (2006) similarly highlights emotional and psychological costs of navigating a school environment that demands high academic performance while offering little recognition of the cultural knowledge and identities students bring. Goodwin (2010) extends Pang's analysis to the curriculum itself, arguing the broader pattern of curriculum exclusion positions Asian American students outside the scope of culturally relevant education and renders their histories, contributions, and experiences invisible in what is taught, valued, and discussed in schools. Structural and experiential realities of marginalization and erasure underscore a fundamental gap in the field of culturally relevant education: Existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have not yet developed the analytical tools or practical strategies necessary to meaningfully address the racialization of Asian American students. I offer a conceptual extension of existing frameworks — one that begins from an explicit acknowledgment of how Asian Americans are racialized and that centers their counter-narratives, histories, and lived experiences as foundational to equity-oriented teaching and leadership.

Toward AsianCrit-Informed Culturally Relevant Education

I propose a conceptual extension of existing frameworks of culturally relevant education through the intentional integration of two AsianCrit tenets: Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis. The goal is not to replace the foundational contributions of Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017), but to redress limitations in responding to the specific racialized experiences of Asian American students. I select these tenets because they directly disrupt the dual challenges that most profoundly shape Asian American students' schooling experiences: the racial stereotypes that render their struggles invisible, and the narrative erasure that excludes their voices and histories from educational discourse. Together, the AsianCrit tenets of Asianization and Story-Theory-Praxis offer a conceptual foundation for AsianCrit-Integrated Culturally Relevant Education (AsianCrit-CRE).

Asianization as a Foundation for Equitable Teaching and Leadership: The tenet of Asianization addresses a gap that existing frameworks of culturally relevant education have not adequately filled: the need to name and disrupt the specific racialization processes that construct Asian American students in schools. Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017) all call for educators to recognize and affirm students' cultural identities, but none of these frameworks explicitly provides the analytical tools to interrogate how the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner stereotype actively distort how Asian American students are perceived, supported, and positioned in educational settings. Asianization makes myth and stereotype visible and names them as structural features of Asian American students' schooling

experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). For Asian American students, integrating Asianization into culturally relevant education means that their racialized struggles are finally recognized as real and worthy of institutional response. Students who are presumed academically self-sufficient, emotionally resilient, and culturally assimilated are in fact navigating significant pressures related to identity, belonging, and mental health that schools routinely overlook (Ni et al., 2022; Pang, 2006). An AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework affirms that racialized experiences are not personal failings but the consequences of racialization. AsianCrit creates educational environments in which Asian American students' full identities are seen, valued, and supported.

For educators, Asianization functions as a critical lens for pedagogical reflection. Rather than treating Asian American students as uniformly high-achieving and unproblematic, educators informed by the tenet of Asianization are called to examine how their own assumptions, shaped by dominant racial narratives, influence their instructional choices, relational practices, and interpretations of student behavior. Appropriate steps include actively working against stereotype-driven expectations, developing more complex and accurate representations of Asian American students in curriculum, and attending to the emotional and cultural dimensions of students' school experiences (I, Son, & Jung, 2024). Advocacy also means disrupting the curricular invisibility that An (2016) documents to ensure that Asian American students see their communities reflected not only in supportive relationships with teachers but also in the content of what is taught. For school leaders, Asianization has direct implications for how equity frameworks are designed and implemented. When Asian American students are excluded from equity initiatives on the assumption that their aggregate academic performance signals well-being, the model minority myth becomes institutionalized as policy. An AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework calls on leaders to critically examine these structural assumptions, to disaggregate data by ethnic subgroup, to explicitly name Asian American students' needs in institutional equity plans, and to allocate resources accordingly.

Story, Theory, and Praxis as a Framework for Counter-Narrative Integration: The tenet of Story, Theory, and Praxis addresses the second dimension of Asian American students' marginalization: the systematic exclusion of their voices, histories, and perspectives from educational knowledge. While Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023) emphasize the importance of students' cultural backgrounds in teaching and learning, and Paris and Alim (2017) call for sustaining community cultural practices, none of these frameworks sufficiently engages with whose stories are centered as legitimate knowledge in schools or with the particular ways that Asian American narratives have been silenced in academic and educational discourse (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Story, Theory, and Praxis fills the curricular gap by treating Asian American students' experiential knowledge as an epistemological foundation for theory and practice.

Addressing Asian American Students' Schooling Experiences Through AsianCrit CRE: Taken together, the integration of Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis into culturally relevant education offers a more complete and racially specific response to the schooling experiences of Asian American students than existing frameworks have been able to provide. Where Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2023), and Paris and Alim (2017) offer powerful but insufficiently targeted frameworks for equity-oriented teaching for Asian American students, the AsianCrit-integrated culturally relevant education framework adds the analytical precision needed to address the particular ways that Asian American students are racialized, silenced, and

excluded. By naming Asianization as a structural force and centering Asian American counter-narratives as valuable knowledge, the AsianCrit-CRE framework creates the conditions for educational environments that affirm Asian American students' full identities academically, culturally, emotionally, and racially and that equip educators and leaders to act with both awareness and intention in their roles.

Advice for Leadership: Research, Practice, and Policy

My work calls for school leaders to strengthen inclusion, expand educational opportunities, and cultivate greater levels of student well-being and success, particularly for students whose racialized experiences remain on the margins of dominant educational narratives. In relation to leadership research, I encourage scholars to engage in deeper inquiry into how Asian American students' racialization shapes their sense of belonging, participation in curriculum, and access to support. School reformers need to consider how equity initiatives can be designed to meaningfully respond to and improve school experiences of Asian American students (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Research guided by AsianCrit-CRE could generate insights into how school environments can be made more culturally affirming and racially specific, moving beyond frameworks that inadvertently generalize student needs and render Asian American experiences invisible. For educational practice, this work underscores the need for professional development that deepens educators' understanding of Asian American students' racialized experiences. Guided by the tenet of Asianization, school leaders should create spaces for educators to critically examine assumptions about academic competence and cultural assimilation that are embedded in the model minority myth. Guided by Story, Theory, and Praxis, leaders should create institutional conditions that support the sustained inclusion of Asian American histories, perspectives, and counter-narratives across teaching and learning practices (Han, Kang, & Kim, 2024; I, Son, & Jung, 2024). At a moment when diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in education are facing intensifying resistance, AsianCrit-CRE affirms the urgent need to confirm equity-centered leadership and to remain committed to social justice by centering the experiences of marginalized students. Leadership is needed that is not only knowledgeable but also resilient, grounded in critical collaboration and community partnership, and willing to challenge dominant narratives that normalize the exclusion of Asian American students from equity work. In doing so, school leaders can help build educational environments that acknowledge and validate the racialized experiences of all students, and that fulfill the promise of culturally relevant education for those it has too long left behind. Integration of Asianization and Story, Theory, and Praxis into culturally relevant education invites school leaders to reconsider how culturally relevant education can be practiced more inclusively, and how school systems can better support Asian American students who are often overlooked in mainstream equity initiatives.

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