

## **Enhancing Anti-Racism of Asian American Children in Ministry**

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### **Asian American Children Encountering Racial Discrimination**

“No, No. You can’t pull this wagon. Only white Americans can pull this wagon.”<sup>1</sup> This is what Lingmai, a three-year-old Asian American child, heard from Renee, a four-year-old white child in a daycare. Renee did not allow Lingmai to pull a wagon, admonishing her with this saying. Lingmai retried to pull the wagon, but Renee reclaimed that only white Americans can do it. Lingmai was deeply hurt and cried loudly.<sup>2</sup>

This is not an uncommon case among children in North American society. Like Lingmai did, many Asian American children have experienced racial discrimination in their kindergartens and schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, racist behaviors against the children in those places have become even worse. American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) announces that numerous Asian American children have suffered from bullying, both in person and online, and have felt shunned.<sup>3</sup> In 2021, 30.6% of Asian and Asian American parents reported that their children encountered a hate incident at their schools.<sup>4</sup> As many educators have noted, Asian American children have been framed as perpetual foreigners and disease vectors, and have become targets of racist harassment.<sup>5</sup> These cases show that kindergartens and schools, which are key public spaces of Asian American children, have become sites where racial discrimination circulates. As the AAP declares, such discrimination is a detriment to child health, both physically and mentally.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Asian American children are frequently exposed to racial discrimination and its resulting physical and emotional pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Debra van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (Landam, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 37, 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Savio Beers et al., “Immunizing Against Hate: Overcoming Asian American and Pacific Islander Racism,” *Pediatrics* 148, no. 1 (2021): e2021051836; American Academy of Pediatrics, “Pandemic-Fueled Racism and Xenophobia Against the Asian-American Community,” *Healthychildren.org*, May 6, 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/news/Pages/Pandemic-fueled-Racism-and-Xenophobia-Against-the-Asian-American-Community.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Sara Braun, “Statement: New Data Shows 1 in 5 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Have Experienced a Hate Incident in the Past Year,” *Stop AAPI Hate*, November 18, 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://stopaapihate.org/statement-new-data-shows-1-in-5-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-have-experienced-a-hate-incident-in-the-past-year/>

<sup>5</sup> Tomoko Wakabayashi et al., “Addressing Inequities in Education: Considerations for Asian American Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19,” *Society for Research in Child Development*, September 9, 2020, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.srcd.org/research/addressing-inequities-education-considerations-asian-american-children-and-youth-era-covid>; Moriah Balingit, Hannah Natanson, and Yutao Chen, “As Schools Reopen, Asian American Students Are Missing from Classrooms,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/asian-american-students-home-school-in-person-pandemic/2021/03/02/eb7056bc-7786-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/asian-american-students-home-school-in-person-pandemic/2021/03/02/eb7056bc-7786-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117_story.html).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Trent, Danielle G. Dooley, Jacqueline Dougé, AAP Section on Adolescent Health, AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, and AAP Committee on Adolescence, “The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health,” *Pediatrics* 144, no. 2 (2019): 2-4.

Noting these situations of Asian American children, in this article, I argue that children's ministry of Asian immigrant churches should intensify anti-racism efforts in relation to the children. An essential task then emerges to understand why racism is iterated in (pre)schools and how children recognize it.

### **Racism Rooted in (Pre)School System**

Before discussing why racism is iterated in (pre)schools, it is important to understand what racism is. Traditionally, racism was understood as a set of beliefs that different racial groups possess different degrees of capability to carry out certain tasks that are required in society.<sup>7</sup> In other words, racism was identified with the prejudicial idea that certain racial groups of people are superior because they possess superior capabilities, while other groups of people are inferior due to their inferior capabilities. However, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva points out, the focus of this traditional view of racism on beliefs and prejudices generates the recognition that racism is a matter of individuals. This in turn ignores a social structure, which reproduces such racial prejudices.<sup>8</sup> This claim has been widely accepted, so that many scholars in various fields, including psychology and education, have redefined racism with systemic awareness. For example, psychologists Steven O. Roberts and Michael T. Rizzo regard racism as “a system of advantage based on race that is created and maintained by an interplay between psychological factors, [including] biased thoughts, feelings, and actions[,] and sociopolitical factors, [such as] biased laws, policies, and institutions[.]”<sup>9</sup> Educators Lindsey Nenadal and Rashmita S. Mistry as well as psychologists Taylor Hazelbaker and Christia Spears Brown state that racism involves an existing system of power that “advantages White people and disadvantages people of color.”<sup>10</sup> This strong statement shows that racism has both individual and systemic dimensions.

This understanding relays the message that racism in (pre)schools should be examined as a systemic issue. Here I will point out two of many problems in the educational system. First, the whole history of Asians and Asian Americans is not reflected in school curricula. In other words, Asian Americans' stories and voices are not fully heard in the curricula. Education scholars Yonghee Suh, Sohyun An, and Danielle Forest reveal that today's U.S. history textbooks largely ignore Asian American stories.<sup>11</sup> Although several big events in relation to Asian American communities, such as Asian American immigration and Chinese workers' building the railroad, are included in the curriculum in some individual states, the events do not provide the accurate

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre van den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), 11, quoted in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997): 465.

<sup>8</sup> Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism,” 465-80.

<sup>9</sup> Steven O. Roberts and Michael T. Rizzo, “The Psychology of American Racism,” *American Psychologist* 76, no. 3 (2021): 476.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor Hazelbaker et al., “Fostering Anti-Racism in White Children and Youth: Development Within Contexts,” *American Psychologist* 77, no. 2 (2022): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Yonghee Suh, Sohyun An, and Danielle Forest, “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, no. 1 (2015): 39-51; Sohyun An, “Asian Americans in American History: An AsianCrit Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standard,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 244-76.

and complete Asian American story.<sup>12</sup> Rather, as An aptly criticizes, the teaching of these events results from white supremacy and produces the model minority prejudice by portraying Asian Americans as hardworking passive, and obedient people.<sup>13</sup> This erases the complexity and diversity of Asian American stories.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the absence or insufficiency of Asian American history in school curricula indicates the perpetual exclusion of Asian Americans and implicates the unworthiness of the whole Asian American story to be heard and learned.

Another problem is the avoidance of talking about racism in educational settings. This is related to the teacher population; most of the kindergarten and school teachers in North America are whites.<sup>15</sup> Robin D'Angelo notes that whites tend to become fragile and avoidant in racial dialogue because they regard themselves as morally good people and perceive the racial dialogue as a challenge to themselves.<sup>16</sup> This is also echoed in the tendencies of many teachers to shun talking about racism and to teach a safer, inclusive message instead; for example, that students need to mingle well with their classmates.<sup>17</sup> However, this seemingly nice approach often exacerbates racism. Lingmai's case illustrated earlier is an example of this: after being admonished by Renee, Lingmai cried and reported Renee's behavior to a nearby teacher. The teacher let Renee apologize to Lingmai using this rationale: "because we are all friends here, and friends don't hurt each others' feelings."<sup>18</sup> Here, the teacher does not specify Renee's behavior as racist but proclaims an inclusive and safe message. As Debra van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin—who observed this incident—contend, the teacher's failure to address racism in this case allows Renee not only to succeed in race-based exclusion but to repeat it in her future contacts with other people of color.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, unless children's racial discrimination is addressed as racism and corrected, racism will be reproduced. The avoidance of talking about racism continues racism in (pre)school contexts.

Therefore, racism against Asian American children is embedded in the system of their kindergartens and schools. As Asian American children spend much time daily in the public spaces, they are situated in unjust environments. The AAP maintains that when children constantly encounter racism, they may experience "internalized racism," that is "internalizing racial stereotypes about one's racial group[.]"<sup>20</sup> This will negatively influence the children's interactions and relationships with others and eventually their physical and psychological

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<sup>12</sup> Olivia B. Waxman, "A 'History of Exclusion, of Erasure, of Invisibility.' Why the Asian-American Story Is Missing from Many U.S. Classrooms," *Time*, March 30, 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://time.com/5949028/asian-american-history-schools/>

<sup>13</sup> An, "Asian Americans in American History," 244-76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>15</sup> In the years of 2017-18, whites were 79% of public school teachers in the US, while Asian teachers were 2%. Also, in 2014, only 9% of elementary school and kindergarten teachers in Ontario, Canada were from racial minority groups, which means about 90% were white teachers. See, National Center for Education Statistics, "Characteristics of Public School Teachers," *U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences*, May 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clr>; Tana Turner, "Ontario's Teaching Diversity Gap," *New Canadian Media: The Pulse of Immigrant Canada*, November 1, 2014, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://newcanadianmedia.ca/ontarios-teaching-diversity-gap/>

<sup>16</sup> Robin D'Angelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2018), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Van Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Trent et al., "The Impact of Racism," 4.

health.<sup>21</sup> Noting this dangerous scenario, many scholars have claimed that it is important for people to learn anti-racism at an early age to resist racism and remain healthy in their lives.

### **Learning Anti-Racism at an Early Age**

A simplistic perception of anti-racism is that it is against racism. As the word “anti-” means “opposed to” or “against,”<sup>22</sup> anti-racism signifies the opposition to racism. Sociologist Alastair Bonnet considers this and defines anti-racism succinctly as “forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism.”<sup>23</sup> This definition shows that anti-racism is not merely disliking racism but engages in certain actions, combating against racism. The combating feature of anti-racism, however, does not mean that it simply remains antagonistic to racism. Rather, anti-racism goes beyond this level, as Floya Anthias and Cathie Lloyd’s understanding of anti-racism indicates: “a response to racism(s) [and] the construction of a positive project about the kind of society in which people can live together in harmony and mutual respect.”<sup>24</sup> In the constructing process, anti-racism involves both individual and systemic dimensions, as racism does. Roberts and Rizzo’s definition of anti-racism demonstrates this point: “a system of equity based on race that is created and maintained by a dynamic interplay between psychological factors (i.e., equitable thoughts, feelings, and actions) and sociopolitical factors (i.e., equitable laws, policies, and institutions).”<sup>25</sup> Roberts and Rizzo focus on power differentials among different racial groups and thus accentuate equity as a core value of anti-racism.<sup>26</sup> This represents that anti-racism, by nature, is a transformative practice that addresses, resists, and subverts racism which is deeply rooted in the social system. To sum up, the discussion on anti-racism thus reveals that it is an active praxis to address power disparities among diverse racial groups, achieve individual and systemic equity, and therefore seek a more harmonious and just society for all people.

Hazelbaker and others argue that it is important for all individuals, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, to promote anti-racism at an early age. The authors insist that by promoting anti-racism, children can interact more positively with people of different races and participate actively in structural transformation. The earlier people promote anti-racism, the more and longer they will obtain these positive results.<sup>27</sup> The AAP also claims that engaging in anti-racism can enable children of color to enjoy their well-being psychologically and physically.<sup>28</sup> Some education theorists, including George J. Sefa Dei and Bernadette Sánchez, have noted this and proposed anti-racism education in public schools. What should be noted is that the anti-racist effort can be more effective when it accompanies the involvement of Asian immigrant churches where Asian American children feel even more comfortable and safer than in (pre)schools. Dei

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 5; Lydia HaRim Ahn, NaYeon Yang, and Mira An, “COVID-19 Racism, Internalized Racism, and Psychological Outcomes among East Asians/East Asian Americans,” special issue, *The Counseling Psychologist* (2022): 4, 7-18, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00110000211070597>

<sup>22</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “s.v. anti-,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anti>.

<sup>23</sup> Alastair Bonnett, *Anti-Racism* (London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Flora Anthias and Catherine Lloyd, ed., *Rethinking Anti-Racisms: From Theory to Practice* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 16.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts and Rizzo, “The Psychology of American Racism,” 483-84.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 476, 484.

<sup>27</sup> Hazelbaker et al., “Fostering Anti-Racism,” 1.

<sup>28</sup> Trent et al., “The Impact of Racism,” 4.

and other educators also assert that an active and positive engagement in religious communities will help children of color to develop their identities in desirable ways and teach them to deal with environmental issues such as racism in their (pre)schools.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, Asian immigrant churches should help Asian American children enhance anti-racism.

### **How To Enhance Anti-Racism through Children's Ministry**

I will conclude this article by proposing three ways of enhancing anti-racism through children's ministry. The first way is listening to Asian American children's stories. Asian immigrant churches are spaces where Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have discovered their belongingness and comfort.<sup>30</sup> Equally important is that the churches should provide time and space for Asian American children to freely talk about their issues in their public lives, get comfortable, and feel supported. The role of Christian educators is raising the children's voices that were previously unheard or insufficiently heard in their (pre)schools, by inviting the children to share their life stories and how they feel about their life issues, including racism. When a child begins to articulate his/her experience related to racism, other children as well as educators should listen to the speaker's hurtful stories, may find it to be a similar case that they might have experienced, and can feel empathy. Let's return to Lingmai's story again and assume that she attends an Asian immigrant church. A typical question that a Christian educator asks Lingmai while welcoming her or participating in small group gatherings would be, "How was your week?" Lingmai may explain what she experienced in her daycare and how much Renee hurt her feelings. After listening to Lingmai's story, the educator can give her empathetic words to help her feel fully heard, which was neglected by the daycare teacher who hastened to finalize the incident.<sup>31</sup> Also, the Christian educator (and/or other children) can share a similar case, which (s)he experienced before, with Lingmai; this enables her to feel not alone. As this possible scenario shows, the listening practice goes together with empathy and sharing of similar experiences. Through these practices, Asian American children will see that racism is a common and unjust phenomenon that occurs in our daily lives, that together we ought to eradicate.

The second way is specifying racism and anti-racism. Henry Zonio maintains that many churches have told children to love everyone, which is not significantly helpful to resolve racism; instead, churches should explicitly teach children racism and anti-racism.<sup>32</sup> For the explicit teaching, preaching and small group gatherings are influential avenues. Pastors can preach the biblical narratives where people from different cultural backgrounds encounter each other: for example, Jesus and a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25-27), Jesus and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), and Paul and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15). While relating those passages to Asian American children's contexts, the pastors can address racism, expound how it is rooted in the public education system, and clarify how to resist it. The same ways are applicable to small group gatherings, where educators can specify racism and explain how (pre)schools produce and reproduce power disparities among racially different people.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, if the children begin

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<sup>29</sup> George J. Sefa Dei, Irma Marcia James, Leeno Luke Karumanchery, Sonia James-Wilson, and Jasmin Zine, *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars', 2000), 67-68.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> Van Ausdale and Feagin, *The First R*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Zonio, "Why We Must Start Talking About Race in Our Children's Ministries," *Childrensministry.com*, February 25, 2022, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://childrensministry.com/race-today/>

<sup>33</sup> George J. Sefa Dei, *Anti-Racism Education: Theory and Practice* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 1996), 10, 25.

to talk about their experience of racism as demonstrated above, Christian educators should notice this as a teachable moment, where the children's relevant experience and knowledge can be incorporated most effectively.<sup>34</sup> The educators should then teach the children immediately what racism is and which anti-racist actions they can take. This is the moment when the transition of hurt by racism to resistance to racism can occur. Hence, the explicit teaching of racism and anti-racism is a powerful way to enhance anti-racism in Asian American children.

Finally, visual images can be used to empower Asian American children. Elliot Eisner claims that the images impact teaching and learning by representing implicitly what learners should remember.<sup>35</sup> Poignantly, as HyeRan Kim-Cragg points out, the image of white people has been frequently used in church ministry, especially when portraying the ideal type of Christians.<sup>36</sup> Such visual images have subtly but powerfully conveyed white-centered Christianity.<sup>37</sup> Christian educators of Asian immigrant churches should recognize this critically and seek alternative images. Dei and others assert that the anti-racist work in educational places includes the use of art works, posters, and other types of visual images that show people of color and their cultures.<sup>38</sup> To apply this, some examples of the visual images, which can be used in Asian immigrant churches, include pictures of Asian American children, wallpapers that have drawings of the children's characters, wall posters relevant to anti-racism mottos, and the use of a non-white looking portrayal of Jesus in sermons. These images will be powerful resources that promote anti-racism and empower Asian American children to be anti-racists.

By listening to Asian American children, specifying racism and anti-racism, and using appropriate visual images, Asian immigrant churches can help the children enhance anti-racism. This will benefit the children in many ways. Asian American children will grow with stronger competence, interact better with people of other races, interrupt disrespectful and hurtful behaviors against themselves, resist the unjust system that has impacted their lives, and participate in social transformation toward building a more just and harmonious society. Indeed, we all are invited to this transformative project.

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<sup>34</sup> Eunsook Hyun, *Teachable Moments: Re-Conceptualizing Curricula Understandings* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006), 69-71.

<sup>35</sup> Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1985), 87-108.

<sup>36</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "The Emperor Has No Clothes!: Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula," *Religious Education* 114, no. 3 (2019): 242-43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>38</sup> Dei et al., *Removing the Margins*, 176.