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The Journal of Social Studies Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jssr

AsianCrit Perspective on Social Studies

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 14 June 2016

Keywords:
Critical race theory
AsianCrit
Curriculum studies
Social studies curriculum

ABSTRACT

Despite an extensive body of curriculum research on inclusion and representation of historically marginalized groups, Asian Americans and their perspectives have received relatively little attention in and of themselves in curriculum studies. Although some progress has been made in curricular treatment of historically marginalized groups, Asian Americans are still almost absent from official school knowledge, and when they appear they are generally misrepresented. This article introduces Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit) as relevant to curriculum studies, and explicates how AsianCrit can be a theoretical, methodological framework to research and transform curricular treatment of Asian Americans. In doing so, this article seeks to address the lack of curriculum research on Asian Americans as well as the limited curricular inclusion of Asian Americans and their experiences.

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Introduction

Despite an extensive body of curriculum research on inclusion and representation of historically marginalized groups, Asian Americans and their perspectives have received relatively little attention in and of themselves in curriculum studies (An, 2016; Suh, An, & Forest, 2015). Although some progress has been made in curricular treatment of historically marginalized groups, Asian Americans are still almost absent from official school knowledge, and when they appear they are generally misrepresented (An, 2016; Suh et al., 2015). This article introduces Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit) as relevant to curriculum studies, and illustrates how AsianCrit can be a theoretical, methodological framework to research and transform curricular treatment of Asian Americans. In doing so, this article seeks to address the lack of curriculum research on Asian Americans as well as the limited curricular inclusion of Asian Americans and their experiences.

In the following, I first situate the article in the long-standing curriculum research regarding the curricular treatment of historically marginalized groups. I follow this with an overview of AsianCrit. Then, I explicate how AsianCrit troubles and transforms curricular treatment of Asian Americans, and thus takes part in a broader goal of eliminating racism and other forms of oppression in education and the larger society.

Long-Standing Curriculum Research

The inclusion and representation of historically marginalized groups in official school knowledge is by no means a new concern. For decades, scholars committed to teaching for social justice and equity have fought difficult battles to transform unjust depictions of historically marginalized groups in school curricula (Brown & Brown, 2015). As many scholars have

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2016.06.002>

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Please cite this article as: An, S. AsianCrit Perspective on Social Studies. *The Journal of Social Studies Research* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2016.06.002>

noted, a school curriculum “is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation” (Apple, 1996, p. 22). Instead, what is included and how the included is depicted in school curricula sends an important message to students and teachers about whose knowledge counts and whose does not, implicitly and explicitly shaping social reality (Apple, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2003). US history curricula particularly define whose experiences and perspectives are necessary, legitimate, and significant in telling the story of the United States and defining the national identity (Anderson, 2012; Brown & Brown, 2015; Journell, 2008). Therefore, there is a long history of research on inclusion and representation of historically marginalized groups in US history curricula.

Studies so far suggest that although US history curricula today afford much more space to historically marginalized groups than in the past, the nature and quality of the representation have changed very little (Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012). For instance, African Americans are more visible in today’s US history curricula than in the past, but the curricula still tend to focus on noncontroversial histories and heroic figures of African Americans; present racist violence as acts detached from larger structural and institutional issues; or limit the place of African Americans in the United States history to the topics of slavery and the civil rights movement (Alridge, 2006; Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Brown & Brown, 2010; Hess, 2005; Wills, 1996). While textbooks in the 1960s portrayed Native Americans as remnants of the past, static, inferior, and savage (Costo & Henry, 1970), textbooks have improved to acknowledge that Europeans did not “discover” what is now the United States and that Native Americans were and are diverse both in tribal affiliation and custom. However, research shows numerous distortions have remained and the historical agency and voices of Native Americans have been denied in curricula (Good, 2009; Journell, 2009; Shear et al., 2015). Similarly, women, despite increased inclusion, have not yet claimed their own place in US history curricula, and their issues are explored to the extent that they fit within men’s issues (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009; Schmidt, 2012). Meanwhile, studies show Latin Americans are still largely absent in history textbooks, and when they are included they are misrepresented simply as blue-collar workers or immigrants reluctant to assimilate while making little contribution to nation building (Cruz, 2002; Noboa, 2006; Salvucci, 1991, 1992).

In the case of Asian Americans, almost half century ago Zuercher (1969) disclosed and criticized the invisibility of Asian Americans in US history textbooks. The problem continued in the 1990s as Harada (2000) found that US history textbooks used in Hawaii’s high schools included little about the history of Asian Americans, and conventional attention was paid to the Chinese and Japanese while neglecting other Asian ethnic groups. A recent study by Suh et al. (2015) suggests that today’s textbooks may not differ much from the textbooks of the past. Their analysis of US history textbooks used in today’s Virginia schools found that Asian Americans were still largely absent; when they appeared, they were mostly depicted as passive victims of nativist racism. While not overlooking the long history of nativist racism and discrimination of Asian Americans, inclusion of Asian Americans only as passive victims denies another long history of Asian American fights against injustice (Aguirre & Lio, 2008; Maeda, 2011; Pulido, 2006). This omission distorts fundamental elements of the Asian American experience and deprives substantial elements of the community of agency and history (Selden, 2005). In doing so, the omission reproduces the dominant societal racialization of Asian Americans as passive, submissive, or apolitical, which can damage racial and civic identity development of Asian American students, and ensure their marginalization from full civic and political participation (Palumbo-Liu, 1999).

How can we explain this half-century-long underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Asian Americans in US history curricula? Furthermore, except the works cited above and a few others, research has paid relatively little attention to curricular treatment of Asian Americans and their experiences in US history (Suh et al., 2015). How can we explain the lack of scholarly interest when it comes to Asian Americans?

One possible explanation among many, I posit, may relate to a lack of a theoretical, methodological framework that offers a rationale and means to research and transform curricular treatment of Asian American experience. Thus, here I introduce and make a case for AsianCrit as such a framework.

What Is AsianCrit?

AsianCrit is a branch extending from critical race theory (Chang, 1993; Museus, 2013). Originating in the field of law in the 1970s, critical race theory (CRT) is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that places race at the center of analysis and demonstrates how the legal system sustains the dominance of whites in US society (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Matsuda, 1995). CRT operates with a variety of tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). First of all, CRT sees issues of race and racism as permanent and endemic to the very fabric of the United States, and contests dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, color blindness, and merit. CRT also challenges ahistorical, decontextualized analysis of how the law operates, while valuing the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society. Finally, CRT recognizes the project of eliminating racial oppression as interdisciplinary one and as part of a broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

Although CRT can analyze how race functions in a society and influences the lives of its people, some scholars have branched off to generate a critical race perspective that focuses on a specific racial or ethnic group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). LatCrit, for example, addresses the injustices Latinos often face, such as those related to language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). TribalCrit seeks to highlight experiences of racism specific to indigenous peoples, such as the problems of assimilation, the centrality of sovereignty and self-determination, and the importance of tribal philosophies and traditions (Brayboy, 2005). Similarly, AsianCrit was

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