Voices of Sensei: Oral Histories of Japanese American Women Teachers, 1950-2000

by Julie Kang[1]

Introduction

"*For low income women of color, class/gender/race act as a 'triple strike*'"

(Prismatic Metropolis: Inequality in Los Angeles, 2002)

As a woman of color from an immigrant family in Los Angeles, I never considered teaching as a profession. Although I enjoyed working with children and had been a tutor since sixth grade, teaching was not an option I considered because I never had a teacher who looked like me or who encouraged me to become a teacher. Growing up where I did, there were no Asian American teachers to act as role models; that is, until I began volunteering at a large urban school in Los Angeles. The teacher shortage in Los Angeles Unified School District during the 1990s influenced my administrator's decision to recruit and hire teacher candidates like me.[2] I was placed in a bilingual classroom to fulfill the requirements of the Title VII Legislation, the "Bilingual Education Act," which was signed in 1964 (Crawford, 2004).

This teaching opportunity encouraged me to graduate from college during my junior year so that I could teach full time. During the day, I taught thirty-two bilingual children. At night, I went to graduate school to study for a master's degree in teaching. During my years as a teacher in an urban school district, I did not feel that the "triple strike" of class, gender, and race was applicable to me. In fact, even though I grew up under the guidance of a single parent who worked twelve hours a day to make ends meet, I was able to achieve the "American Dream" through education and teaching.

It was not until I began interviewing teachers of Asian descent in Washington state that I came to understand the quotation at the beginning of this article. The oral history interviews that I conducted of Japanese American women teachers in their seventies and eighties helped me understand that the triple strike did exist for women of color prior to the civil rights movement.[3] The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial discrimination in public places, such as schools, and required employers to provide equal employment opportunities to all teacher candidates. But prior to the 1960s, teachers of color in search of jobs had a different experience from the one that shaped my perspective. I wanted to know who these pioneer teachers of color were and to explore when and how they entered the teaching profession.

Data from the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction show that Asians are the largest non-European teachers group teaching in Washington (2004). One thousand, three hundred, and thirty-three, full-time classroom teachers identify themselves as Asian. In Washington classrooms, there are more Asian teachers than Black teachers (818) or Hispanic teachers (1,175). But despite the large numbers of Asian teachers, Asian Americans have been greatly neglected in studies of the lives and work of US teachers. Most research on teachers' lives and work explores the identities of teachers of European descent (Alsup, 2006; Casey, 1993), and, in a few instances, the lives of African-American teachers (Walker, 2001; Foster, 1997).

This study aims to add to the research on Asian American teachers by collecting the oral histories of one Asian subgroup, seven Japanese Americans women in the Pacific Northwest. Drawing on oral history interview data and historical records, I was able to explore how they became teachers and how they contributed to student learning.

I will begin with an overview of the existing literature on issues relating to the hiring and placement of teachers of color in order to provide readers with the background and context in which these teachers were hired and placed in Seattle schools. The experience of African American teachers, who were also marginalized, provides a useful historical foundation for understanding the experiences of Japanese Americans in the teaching profession. Following this review of the literature, I will describe the intersectional framework that guides this study. Finally, I will discuss oral history research methodology and present some of the findings of this research.

Historical Background

Although considerable literature exists that addresses the hiring and placement of African American teachers (Dougherty, 2004; Walker, 1996) and teachers of Mexican descent (San Miguel, 2001), no studies specifically focus on the hiring and placement of Asian American teachers in the US. This lack of research is also the case in Washington, where Asian American teachers are the fastest growing racial minority and the largest group of nonwhite teachers (Taylor, 1994).

The struggles of Japanese American teachers for employment in public schools in Seattle and the discrimination they once experienced following the Executive Order 9066 during the Second World War, cannot be ignored. Executive Order 9066 triggered the Seattle School District to forcefully ask Japanese Americans to resign because their employment was a "determent to the school district" (Shimabukuro, 2001, p. 91). At this time, there were no teachers of Japanese ancestry, but some were employed in clerical positions. Yet these employees were American citizens by birth, so their dismissal in 1942 was wrong.

Taylor (1994) claims that white prejudice in many areas of the Pacific Northwest was stronger against African Americans than against Japanese Americans. Yet, in Seattle, the first African

American teacher was hired before any Japanese American teacher (Taylor, 1994, p.174). According to Taylor, Seattle School District hired Thelma Dewitty and Marita Johnson in 1947 as its first black instructors. Four other African American teachers were hired in 1948 (185). The causes of the hiring and placement of teachers of color in the US are complex, but there is no doubt that one reason is due to the labor shortage caused by WWII. Walker (2001) explains that many white teachers in northern cities left the classroom for the more lucrative wages they could obtain in performing war-related work. In Seattle, the war also created teacher shortages. However, in spite of the lack of qualified teachers, discrimination in employment continued, especially against African American women who "continued to face gender and racial discrimination and remained an underutilized work force" (Taylor, 1994, p.165).

Where are the voices of Sensei?

According to the 2000 census, Asian Americans as a group have done very well socially and economically in the US. Compared with other racial/ethnic groups in this country, Asian Americans earn more college degrees, including advanced degrees (professional or Ph.D.), have higher median family incomes, and are more employable in the labor force (US Census Bureau, 2003). In these categories, Asian Americans even outperform Whites. Asian Americans seem to have done so well that they are often referred to as the "model minority" in the United States (Lee, 1996). While some Asian Americans attempt to validate the "model minority myth" by working hard and "acting white" (Lee, 1996), these attempts are not always successful since there is a cultural dimension of being Asian American that is not easily ignored. This study aims to explore some of these cultural dimensions as well as other aspects of identity by closely examining the experiences of Japanese American retired women teachers in Washington State.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectional framework

According to Collins (1990), the use of an intersectional framework as a means of examining gender, race, class, and other markers of differences simultaneously has gained much scholarly attention in the 1990s. Intersectional framework approaches have previously been used by scholars to explore interconnections among systems of oppression for African American women (Crenshaw, 1996; Collins, 1990). However, it has also gained attention in Asian American studies as Asian American scholars have come to recognize "women's lives as sites of 'multiple intersections'" (Kim, 2000). I have, therefore, used an intersectional framework to guide this study because it provided an "inclusive method of examining how identity and societal structures crisscrossed" (Kim, 47). Krane, Oxman-Martinez, and Ducey (2001) also recommend using an intersectional framework because it "allows for an exploration of the multi-aspect context of people's lives" (2). They also comment on its usefulness as a method of capturing some of the implications that may rise when we focus on the complexities of women's lives.

Asian American scholars like Choy (2003) have used an intersectional framework to study a group of Filipino nurse migrants and the roles they played in the United States. Choy includes gender as a category of analysis so that her study "engages with and hopes to expand and reconceptualize Asian Americans." She writes, "the ways in which race, nationality, gender, and class have shaped the experiences of Asian professional immigrant women have been virtually ignored in both ethnic and women's studies" (8). Because I also focus on lives of Japanese American teachers, an intersectional framework provided a lens to explore their multiple identities marked by categories, such as race, class, gender, and age.

Methods

This study began with a series of oral history interviews of retired Japanese American teachers in the Pacific Northwest. Each of the seven teachers was interviewed for three to six hours about their personal and professional identities.

Methodological orientation

In *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women*, Shirley Hune (2003) claims that oral history "can empower women by granting them a voice in the writing of Asian/Pacific Islander American women's history" (9). While "traditional historical methodologies, with their attention to big events and standard practices of documentation, tend to silence "ordinary people," oral history can provide a "new terrain for doing research and can yield rich historical details and first-hand observations whereby women, as historical subjects, become knowledge producers" (9). According to Yow (2005), oral history testimony is also valuable because it provides the kind of information that makes other public documents understandable. Etter-Lewis (1991) writes that oral history "offers a unique and provocative means of gathering information central to understanding women's lives and viewpoints." It captures the complex identities of these women, characterized by the intersection of race, gender, and age with society at large—its culture and history (43). She concludes that, "scholarly studies by and about women often prove to be fruitless for women of color" (43). Scholars of color have made strides in recent years in publishing literature by and about women teachers of color (Walker, 2001; Foster, 1997), but very little research is currently available on one sub-group—Asian American women teachers.

Data

Participants and Setting

Because there are too few retired Japanese American teachers to make random sampling plausible (Merriam, 1998), I used a purposive sampling method to select the participants for this study. I was interested in the experiences of Japanese Americans in Washington state so I deliberately sought out teachers of Japanese descent who had spent most of their teaching years in this area and who had retired in the state. Although the interviews were predominately conducted in the Seattle area, participants were recruited

from throughout the state. Professor Gehrke and I sought out teachers by newsletters, community nominations, and through the Japanese American teachers' network. Eleven teachers responded. Based on social categories assigned to them, such as race, gender, class, and age, I selected seven of the eleven volunteer teachers for this study. One teacher is much younger than others in this study and is still teaching, two others grew up in Hawai'i and did not share the same history as the teachers in this study, and one never taught in the Seattle area.

The first six oral history interviews with Japanese American teachers revealed patterns of similarity and difference in their access to employment in Seattle schools. This tended to vary according to the year they entered the teaching profession. I continued to seek more teachers of Japanese descent to interview, and Dr. Gehrke and I were able to conduct five more oral histories.[4] Throughout these interviews and immediately following, I made notes to use as additional data. I also transcribed the tapes. The interviews provided fresh opportunities to capture the complexities of Japanese American teachers' perceptions and experiences in their involvement with the Seattle School District, especially those of teachers who began teaching before the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The data were analyzed and themes identified using "Atlas.ti," a computer program designed for qualitative data analysis.

Documents and Artifacts

Professional artifacts were collected to supplement interview data. These artifacts included lesson plans, photographs, awards, letters, and other personal materials related to their teaching careers. I also reviewed policy documents from the Seattle School District regarding the hiring and placement of teachers of color. The Revised Code of Washington and other legal documents helped me to understand the laws that pertained at the time to employment of teachers of color.

Findings

As an Asian American student who grew up in the United States, I have been told by white teachers that "Oriental" students are smart, though they tend to be quiet and docile in the classroom. This stereotype is also conveyed in typical Western images in the media of the "Oriental" woman, who is represented as subservient and passive. Although I knew that these stereotypes were distortions, I never once, in all my years at school, saw an image of a strong female Asian American. I am happy to say that this lack has been redressed as a result of my introduction to the eleven role models I met in the process of conducting the oral interviews. In the following section I offer a brief account, drawn from their words in the oral interviews, of some aspects of the lives of these pioneer women teachers that conveys their spirit and their commitment to education.

Becoming Teachers

Lily T is among the first group of Japanese American women teachers to be hired by the Seattle School District in 1951. When I asked her about getting hired, she said, "I was lucky to get a job." In recalling her first year of teaching, she admits that she knew that students would be curious about her. "I'm sure their parents must have told them that the school was going to have a Japanese teacher…I explained to them that I was born in Seattle" (Lily T., interview, 2005).

The first lesson she taught on the first day of school was a short lesson on Japanese. "We're all going to have a real quick lesson in learning some Japanese words, going to learn how to count to 1-2-3-4-5 in Japanese. And it was easy, because those five numbers, it sounds so much like some English. Ichi is itchy. Nei was your "knee." Son was the sun. Chi was girl, she. And five was go". She concluded the lesson by saying, "So you see, it's not different. We're all the same" (Lily T., interview, 2005).

Lily T. felt that she was lucky to get her teaching job, but eighty-seven year old Claire Seguro, who was also hired in 1951, credits her principal with providing her with an opportunity to become a teacher. Claire recalls, "Son of an immigrant, he wasn't quiet about it. He was Italian with a very loud voice. And what he wanted, he went after it; and that is how he got those of us [teachers of color]" (Claire, interview, 2006). During the late 1940s, while Claire was completing her teacher education courses, many Japanese Americans were not able to pursue a teaching job because Japanese Americans could not be placed in schools to complete their student teaching assignments. A retired eighty-one year old Japanese American teacher, Bette, speaks of this barrier: "When you'd go to the counselors for advice to what area you should go into, when I mentioned teaching, they said—Well, you know, teaching, we cannot help you when you finish. So there's no point in your pursuing it." But Betty enjoyed working with children, and she continued to volunteer in her children's schools until 1965. In 1965, she was hired to be a part of the summer Head Start Program, and she became a full-time teacher in 1970. It took her longer to obtain a teaching certificate. "I had to take all the education classes because, you see, I graduated in 1948, and they said that anything over five years, you have to take over. I had to take everything that was required in the education department, and that was about fifty credits" (Bette, interview, 2005).

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the following years, teachers of Japanese descent had a different experience with school district hiring and placement practices. When Mako graduated in 1966, she found that "Education was a field that was open to Japanese Americans at that point." She continues, "I went to apply for a [teaching] job, and I was pretty sure I would get a job" (Mako, interview, 2005). Miyoko, who is eighty years old and started teaching in 1975, found that she had no difficulty in securing a teaching job. She was hired to teach English Language Learners (ELL) and Japanese language at a local high school with a diverse student population. "When I was hired in through the school district, we had to write a little essay and if we passed that, we were accepted into the program, that is, into the school district to teach" (Miyoko, interview, 2004). Although it was fairly easy for Miyoko to enter the teaching profession in the mid 1970s, Miyoko did not

consider teaching when she was younger. It was not until she was in her mid 40s that she returned to complete her college degree. That was when, in 1970, an advisor in the college of education suggested that she pursue a career in teaching.

Contributing to Education

After a full day of teaching, Claire often taught classes for the parents of her students. Because of her fluency in Japanese, she was asked by the district to teach citizenship class after school. She describes the class as "a night school kind of thing. The bad thing was there was not a real textbook" (Claire, interview, 2006). But Claire was able to make a useful professional connection with a teacher from California who helped to provide materials for the class. Claire felt that in establishing connections with her students' parents, she was able to maintain a useful two-way communication. Claire's ongoing communication with the parents of her students helped to improve student learning in the classroom.

Mako, a retired teacher, now directs a cultural diversity training program for teachers to better prepare them for our increasingly diverse student population. Her training provides professional development opportunities for teachers to participate in candid discussions about issues related to racial prejudice and consequences of stereotyping people. As a teacher during the civil rights movement, she created the multicultural curriculum for the district—the Rainbow ABC Program. She got involved in multicultural education early in her career. "After the first year of teaching, my principal asked me if I would like to work on this project that they were working on, trying to come up with some curriculum for making Seattle schools more multicultural…that was probably the first official way that I got involved with multicultural education" (Mako, interview, 2005). Mako's Rainbow ABC Program has helped to address some of the social issues that affect students from diverse cultures, and it has helped to reduce stereotyping in district schools.

When I asked Claire about a significant historical event during her teaching years, she related the period of mandatory school integration in her district. "I think it's a good thing that they were forced because there is never a good time to do something like-we've got to integrate these kids." She recalls that the teachers of color in the district were a little more sensitive to those [students of color]." Claire also helped students in her high school to develop awareness of Japanese culture through arranging international visits. For three years, she took the school choir to Japan. Over two hundred students a year participated in this cultural exchange. "The kids who wanted to go to Japan would come over to [my school] because they knew we were talking about an exchange." As a result of these trips, Claire comments that she established close relationships with her former students. After all these years, Claire still visits with them.

When asked to relate some of her experience as a teacher, Miyoko tells how she enhanced the school curriculum to meet the needs of all her students. "As I gained more experience, I found out what worked for me with my class and not necessarily, you know, black-and-white as we were taught [in teacher education program]." Miyoko recalls how, on two separate occasions, she prevented students of Asian ancestry from committing suicide. Miyoko was able to reach out and connect with Asian American students with an understanding of their difficulties in the school, even with the ones who were labeled as "troublemakers" by other teachers. She comments on one particular student: "He picked up on it, that I cared. But if it were some other, you know, like the Caucasian or American culture, I wonder if that would have worked. They might have thought, you know, what's with this teacher?" (Miyoko, interview, 2004).

Sharon, an eighty-one year old school librarian, contributed to her school by making up for a lack of multicultural books in her library. "There really weren't any [books that would describe the Japanese American experience]. There was a book called *Tales a Chinese Grandmother Told Me*. But there weren't any Korean tales. [I] would try to fill the empties." She adds: "I also put out the Library News Weekly…and when I talk about supplementing for something like Black History Week, I would take posters of all the black leaders in the nation and then we would speak about each one. For example, one of them actually was the discoverer of blood plasma." She also describes how important it is to provide role models for students: "to see one of their own achieve anything of this sort [is a valuable lesson]… we'd talk about world leaders that are black…we could make black history come alive and make them—try to motivate them to become like them" (Sharon, interview, 2005).

The oral history interviews provided wonderful opportunities for me to meet many Japanese American women teachers in Washington. Through their stories, I was able to learn more about who these pioneer teachers of Asian descent were, and how they became teachers. The intersectional framework that I used was helpful in exploring the multiple identities of these teachers and their professional lives as teacher leaders and multiculturalists. Their work has helped to give many students "an equal chance to experience educational success" (Banks, 2004, p.3). They employed and developed valuable teaching "techniques and methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups" (Banks, 2004, p.5). Their own backgrounds gave them an insight into the nature of different ethnic communities, and they showed affection for their residents because they grew up in similar communities (Banks, 2004, p. 767). They provided support and links between generations and through their personal and professional identities. This study is only a first step in beginning to recognize their contributions to education.

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Endnotes

[1] I would like to thank Nathalie Gehrke for introducing me to the oral history methodology and for inviting me to collaborate on the oral history project. I also wish to thank Nancy Beadie, Gail Nomura, and Manka Varghese on their valuable comments on this study.

[2] Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) hired non-credentialed teacher candidates with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and provided them with 40 hours of intensive training before placing us in self-contained classrooms. We were given emergency credentials until we completed all state-required teacher education courses within five years. LAUSD discontinued emergency credentials in fall of 2003. I was hired in 1994 and received my teaching credential from LAUSD Intern Program in 1996.

[3] Oral History Project by Dr. Nathalie Gehrke and Julie Kang helped to collect eleven oral histories of Japanese American retired women teachers in Washington.