Asian American voices and experiences are largely absent from elementary curricula.

Asian Americans are an extraordinarily diverse group of people, yet are often viewed through stereotypical lenses: as Chinese or Japanese only, as recent immigrants who do not speak English, as exotic foreigners, or as a “model minority” who do well in school. This fundamental misperception of who Asian Americans are begins with young learners—often from what they learn, or do not learn, in school.

This book sets out to amend the superficial treatment of Asian American histories in U.S. textbooks and curriculum by providing elementary teachers with a more nuanced, thematically driven account. In chapters focusing on the complexity of Asian American identity, major moments in Asian immigration, war and displacement, issues of citizenship, and Asian American activism, the authors include suggestions across content areas for guided class discussions, ideas for broader units, and recommendations for children’s literature as well as primary sources.

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Routledge’s Equity and Social Justice in Education series is a publishing home for books that apply critical and transformative equity and social justice theories to the work of on-the-ground educators. Books in the series describe meaningful solutions to the racism, white supremacy, economic injustice, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, neoliberalism, and other oppressive conditions that pervade schools and school districts.

*Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms*
Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, Sohyun An, and Esther June Kim

*Literacy for All: A Framework for Anti-Oppressive Teaching*
Shawna Coppola

*Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators*
Noreen Naseem Rodríguez and Katy Swalwell

*Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education:*
Alex Shevrin Venet

*Learning and Teaching While White: Antiracist Strategies for School Communities*
Jenna Chandler-Ward and Elizabeth Denevi

*Public School Equity: Educational Leadership for Justice*
Manya C. Whitaker
For Lola Lucia, Erum, and Jen - N.N.R.
For 부모님, Jean, Jacqueline, and Terrie - S.A.
For 엄마와 아빠 - E.J.K.
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This book is the product of communities and efforts that extend far beyond the three of us as individuals. We conduct research in social studies education, a field that has not historically been supportive of this kind of scholarly work. Therefore, we have had to find resources, expertise, and encouragement beyond our field, and through each other. One nurturing academic community has been the Research on the Education of Asian and Pacific Americans (REAPA) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. We are grateful to our REAPA family for honoring and uplifting our work, particularly in recent years. We also want to thank the contributors who explored Asian American narratives and histories in our 2022 special issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, as well as journal editor Scott Waring for entrusting us with the privilege of spotlighting such important scholarship. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to pass the mic to others so that we can all learn from them! The scholarship featured in these venues and shared within these communities has been foundational to the creation of this book.

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Introduction

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.


“Where are you from? No, where are you really from?” Most Asian Americans have been asked this question more times than they can count. People in the United States consume Japanese technology, Korean pop music and streaming films, wear clothes made in Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines, and enjoy a wide array of Asian origin cuisine. However, Asian Americans are still viewed as outsiders who are assumed to be recently-arrived immigrants and to speak languages other than English. This fundamental misperception of who Asian Americans are begins with young learners, often in school. This book aims to change these and other misconceptions and omissions about Asian Americans.

We are three Asian American teacher educators—that is, we are all former K–12 teachers (Noreen taught elementary students, Esther and Sohyun taught high schoolers) who now work in teacher preparation programs with the next generation of educators. We keep in touch with our former students, many of whom are now experienced teachers themselves, and work with teachers, school districts, and national organizations to offer professional development on a range of topics.
We are united by our Asian American identities as well as a commitment to support social studies educators in teaching Asian American histories. For Esther and Noreen, these were histories that they never learned in school when they were students. Those omissions often left them confused, with feelings of isolation. As for Sohyun, she sees the danger of exclusionary curriculum continuing today as her children struggle to find belonging and connection to the U.S. history taught in school. After conducting many professional development workshops about teaching Asian American histories, we knew it was time to come together to create a resource to support educators in this work.

In this book, we offer readers a thematic approach to teaching Asian American stories and histories. Most stories shared with young children, whether through popular media or trade books used in and outside of the classroom, tend to center white-presenting, cisgender, heterosexual, Protestant, abled English-speaking characters and families. In terms of historical narratives, traditional U.S. history follows the chronological approach, which allows learners to see how issues and events occur over time. One problem with this approach is the presentation of historical events as if they were disconnected. For example, students may not see the connection between the Spanish-American War of 1898 and Filipinx migration in the 1900s, or between U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam and the migration of Koreans, Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodians to the United States from the 1950s onward.

Another challenge is that the substantial teaching of U.S. history with explicit connections and context is often reserved for intermediate grades and above. In addition, as teacher educators, we are painfully aware of the ever-decreasing amount of instructional time devoted to social studies in the elementary grades. In some schools, social studies teaching and learning may only take place every 4 or 6 weeks, making content even more disjointed and limited. We hope that the themes laid out in this book offer educators the flexibility they need to integrate Asian American content into elementary classrooms, in social studies and beyond.
WHO WE ARE

We write this book drawing from our expertise as experienced former teachers in K–12 settings, as current teacher educators, as researchers of social studies education, and as Asian American women. Yet even with our shared teacher and racial identities, we hold other unique identities and experiences that distinctly inform how we approach the topics covered in this book. In this section, we share a little about ourselves, from our own educational experiences to our work as teachers, so that you can better understand how and why the teaching of Asian America is so important to us individually and as a group.

Noreen

Noreen is the child of Asian immigrants. Her father was born in New Delhi just before Partition, one of the largest and most violent mass migrations that occurred after the independence of the Indian subcontinent and the subsequent creation of the majority-Muslim nation of Pakistan and the majority-Hindu nation of India. His family migrated to Karachi when he was a baby. As a young adult, he immigrated by himself to Houston, Texas in 1972 to pursue graduate school. Noreen’s mother was born in the small town of Dolores in the Quezon province of the Philippines. After attending nursing school, she immigrated to Yazoo City, Mississippi in 1973. Noreen’s parents immigrated as a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, along with millions of other people from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. They met in Houston in 1978, where they were part of a vibrant immigrant community that included several other Pakistani-Filipina couples, and moved to San Antonio shortly after they were married in 1980.

Months later, Noreen’s grandmother joined them in San Antonio to care for her while her parents worked full-time. Shortly afterward, her mother’s youngest sisters immigrated to the United States and lived with them for a few years. As Noreen’s father was the only person in his entire extended family to come to the U.S., her stateside family has been limited to her maternal Filipinx side. She grew up listening to English and Tagalog, and heard her father and his friends speak Urdu.
at weekend gatherings. Noreen was raised Muslim but also occasionally attended Catholic church with her mother’s side of the family. At school, however, these varied cultural aspects were rarely present. Surrounded by Mexican American peers, she blended in physically with her brown skin and black hair but never heard her parents’ languages or cultures mentioned in any meaningful way across her K–12 education in the 1980s and 1990s.

In her first undergraduate education class in 2001, Noreen learned about bilingual education. She was blown away by the notion that schools and teachers might center the languages and cultures of students in their curriculum and instruction. After this realization, Noreen quickly changed her major from generalist education to bilingual/bicultural education and added additional majors in Spanish and linguistics. She taught bilingual students in Austin, Texas for nine years before leaving the classroom to pursue a Ph.D. full-time after the birth of her second child.

Although Noreen initially intended to continue working with Latine immigrant students and families, she quickly realized that she knew far more about Mexican American culture and history than she did about her own Asian American origins. One day, at the age of 32, she discovered that the first Filipinos landed in Morro Bay, California in 1587. Despite spending nearly 30 years in classrooms, first as a student and then as a teacher, this fact had previously eluded her. Why hadn’t she learned this? Why had she and her family always been viewed as outsiders, as foreigners, when her people landed in what would become the United States long before the Pilgrims and the so-called Founding Fathers? At that moment, Noreen decided she needed to immerse herself in Asian American histories. Her dissertation explored how Asian American elementary educators in Texas attempted to teach their students the Asian American histories that they were denied in schools. The teaching and learning of Asian American histories in K–12 settings has been her primary scholarly passion ever since.

Esther

Esther was born and raised in California, where her parents immigrated from South Korea. Like Noreen’s parents, they immigrated
shortly after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Esther’s paternal family was originally from what is now known as North Korea, but escaped to the South during the Korean War, when her grandfather was jailed and tortured because he was a leader of the underground church resistance. Her mother’s family was in China during that time and thereby escaped much of the devastation and poverty that resulted from the war. However, Esther’s maternal grandfather was from the Northern area of Korea. After the U.S. and the USSR decided to split the Korean peninsula, he never saw much of his family again. Esther grew up with these stories and histories at home. She never learned about them in schools, except perhaps as a short paragraph or sentence in her high school U.S. history textbook.

As with many other Korean Americans in southern California, Esther’s Korean identity was very much shaped by church. Church was where she made all her Korean American friends and took Korean language classes. In contrast, school was where she learned to feel shame about her race and culture, from being called “chink” by her schoolmates to hearing comments about smelly Korean food. When she began teaching high school history, she wanted to make sure that no one in her class would be made to feel shame about their cultures. This was also the first time she learned many Asian histories (often one or two days before she had to teach her students about them) in ways that did not make Asian countries sound backwards and inferior. But it was not until Esther’s doctoral studies in Texas that she learned about Asian American histories. Studying these histories was the first time Esther felt her and her family’s life and experiences connected directly to what she was learning in school. Her focus since then has been on purposeful and authentic representation of different identities in school curriculum.

Sohyun
Sohyun is a first-generation immigrant born and raised in South Korea. She loved learning about history as a kid and became a secondary social studies teacher. In 2003, she came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for doctoral study. Her original goal was to go back and continue her teaching career in Korea, yet she eventually decided
to stay with a newfound passion for advancing Asian American studies in K–12 schools as a curriculum scholar and teacher educator.

Growing up in 1980s South Korea, where 99.99% of its population was Korean ethnic, race hardly mattered to Sohyun. It was rather class and gender that shaped her and other Koreans’ everyday lives. In fact, Sohyun never thought about herself as “Asian” and never met a person of another race until she came to the United States. Her initial ideas about other races exclusively came from Western (U.S.-made) movies and books that were popular in South Korea during her childhood, such as MacGyver, Top Gun, Super Man, Tarzan, Little House on the Prairie, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, and Snow White. Through these cultural products, she learned that the United States was the best country in the world; whites were real and good Americans; Blacks were inferior and dangerous; Native Americans were long-gone; and there was no structural racism, just a few racist people, in America.

These beliefs were proven wrong as soon as Sohyun arrived in the U.S. Her daily experiences as an international student from South Korea, as well as her doctoral study on U.S. social studies education, helped her build critical race knowledge. After Sohyun found a sheer lack of research on K–12 Asian American studies and the challenges of teaching Asian American histories, she decided to spend her professional career filling these gaps. Her passion got much stronger as she became a mother of Asian American children. Listening to her daughters’ frustration with white-dominant social studies curriculum and their yearning to see themselves and other marginalized groups in school lessons was the impetus for Sohyun’s research and practice centering on K–12 Asian American studies.

Coming Together

Our paths crossed in a couple different ways. We each arrived at the importance of teaching and learning Asian American histories later in life, largely through our second careers as teacher educators and educational researchers. Noreen and Esther met in graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin, where they were both part of the Social Studies Education program. As the only Asian American students in the program, they initially bonded over children’s literature that
Noreen eagerly shared with Esther. What began as an informal interest in Asian American children’s literature that was unlike anything either of them had read when they were young soon blossomed into a qualitative research project where Noreen and Esther conducted a detailed analysis of children’s literature (Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). That project was the first of many collaborations between the two, most of which have been centered around Asian American children’s literature and the use of primary sources (see Chapter 1 for more details) to teach in-depth Asian American histories to young learners (see Rodríguez & Kim, 2021; 2022).

While Esther and Noreen were still in graduate school, Sohyun was already an experienced professor and an active member of the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies. Sohyun’s scholarship was unique in that she was the first social studies researcher to engage Asian American critical race theory as a way to understand the absence of Asian Americans in state social studies standards (An, 2016; 2017). Her research was pivotal to Esther and Noreen’s emerging scholarship. As there have been very few Asian American scholars in the College and University Faculty Assembly, the three of us found ourselves frequently on the same conference panels and presentations and in the same academic journal special issues. A rich mentorship and friendship were born, and after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sohyun and Noreen began to collaborate on work aimed to increase awareness about anti-Asian violence.

They co-authored the National Council for the Social Studies’s organizational current event response to anti-Asian violence as well as a chapter in Post-Pandemic Social Studies: How Covid-19 Changed the World and How We Teach (An & Rodríguez, 2021). In 2022, Sohyun and Noreen guest edited a special issue of Social Studies and the Young Learner focused on Asian American narratives and developed an Asian American Studies K–12 Framework sponsored by the nonprofit Stop AAPI Hate (see Appendix). Sohyun and Noreen continue to work together to conduct professional development workshops for teachers, but this book is the first time all three of us have been able to bring together our shared expertise. We are so grateful for this opportunity, and to you for reading the fruit of our labor!
While we do consider ourselves primarily experts in the teaching and research of social studies with a secondary focus on children’s literature and literacy, we want to acknowledge that our knowledge of Asian American histories and experiences is not all-encompassing. Of course, there is no way to deeply understand the transnational relationships and unique histories of every Asian nation and its diaspora, but this is further complicated by the ways that the very definition of Asian American has shifted over time. We recognize that our training has privileged the “traditional” view of Asian America as including only East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, while problematically leaving out Central and West Asia. We will explore some of these tensions in Chapter 1, but want to make clear that we are continuing to learn and grow. We hope that you as a reader are engaging in this book as someone who is trying to improve their own knowledge and expertise in order to do better by your students. We want you to know that we are right alongside you on this path to recognize everyone’s full humanity and histories through more inclusive and critical teaching.

UNDERSTANDING ASIAN AMERICA

Before one can teach Asian American histories, they must know where the term “Asian American” came from. Contrary to popular belief, it is not simply a racial category. Rather, the term was the creation of two college students—Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka—who selected the phrase with great deliberation in 1968 (Maeda, 2012). Inspired by civil rights and Third World Liberation Front activists (more about them in Chapter 6), Gee and Ichioka wanted to create a coalition of University of California Berkeley students whose families were of Asian origin. At the time, this was mostly Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipinx Americans. While these groups came from nations with their own distinct histories, cultures, languages, religions, and politics, in the United States they were often lumped together as “Orientals,” an archaic term that positioned them as exotic Others. By naming their organization the Asian American Political Alliance, Gee and Ichioka sought to unify students who shared a common antiracist