BREAKING THE MODEL MINORITY MOLD:
STORYING THE EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICANS LABELED DIS/ABLED

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction

by
Kaela N. Fuentes-Packnick

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The dissertation of Kaela N. Fuentes-Packnick was reviewed and approved by the following:

Ashley Patterson  
Assistant Professor of Education  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Kathleen Collins  
Associate Professor of Education

Allison Henward  
Associate Professor of Education

Tina Chen Goudie  
Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies

Andrea McCloskey  
Associate Professor of Education  
Director of Graduate Studies
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of Asian American individuals who identify as dis/abled. Using narrative inquiry, the data were collected through in-depth individual interviews and a focus group interview guided by the central research questions: 1) How do Asian American individuals who experienced difficulties in school reflect on and understand their experiences? 2) In what ways do Asian American individuals understand and perceive the labels and identities (imposed or self-proclaimed) or Asian American and/or dis/abled or struggling? 3) What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled individuals identify as having particular impacts on their educational experiences? 4) How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American individuals inform educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems? Five major themes emerged from the data: 1) Connectedness and Disconnection 2) Role of Ethnicity 3) Support and Resources 4) Experiences in School 5) Experiencing Dis/ability. The themes were further analyzed utilizing the theoretical lenses of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins and Bilge, 2016) and Dis/Crit (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri, 2013) which allowed for a multifaceted and richer understanding of the study participants’ educational experiences. The study findings emphasize the impact of relationships with educators and families on the educational experiences and self-image of individuals.
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DEDICATION

With love and honor for my grandparents, who were with me every step of the way.

Michael and Rose Lepovsky

Virgilio and Nelia Fuentes
CHAPTER ONE:

But where is our story in all of this? The Absence and Invisibility of Asian Americans in Education Research

Throughout this chapter, I present the origins and goals for this research project first, by providing an overview of the problem followed by its significance. Second, I present the project origins, my researcher positionality and three vignettes that serve as the motivation and inspiration for the project. Third, I define important concepts and terms for the project. Then, the theoretical orientations and basis for the study are discussed. Next, a brief introduction to the relevant literature contextualizing the project. Then, the research questions are presented. Lastly, the limitations of the study are introduced.

Study Overview

Throughout much educational research, scholars offer work that highlights many forms of inequitable treatment and oppression for students of color. Structural barriers impeding access to education and resources, inequitable treatment by educators or school systems, or culturally unresponsive curriculums perpetuate the marginalization of students of color within a society that already works against them. Education focused research, specifically within the frameworks of DisCrit and Intersectionality, has a wealth of work that explores the inequities often faced by students of color but much of this
work fails to directly examine the experiences of Asian American students that fall outside of the assumptions of the model minority myth.

The model minority myth is a long-held belief that Asian Americans, more so than other minority groups, are socially, academically, and subsequently economically successful. Citing their perceived cultural values, sustained academic performance, enrollment in higher education, and representation in high-earning jobs, Asian American success throughout the 20th and 21st centuries is a result of their overcoming and near elimination of racism. (Lee, 1994; Li and Wang, 2008; Pang, et al., 2011) However, much work exists demystifying the model minority myth, exposing the harmful effects within society that have come because of this persistent belief. (Lee, 2015; Moses et al., 2018; Ngo & Lee, 2007) When considering the implications of the model minority myth within education research, there is significant opportunity to expand the current state of the literature to include the experiences and voices of individuals who fall outside of the assumptions of the model minority myth.

As proposed within the theoretical frameworks of DisCrit and Intersectionality, listening and working to understand the stories of historically marginalized people are essential to the research process. The most impactful work paints deeply rich and illustrative pictures of the lived experiences of study informants, which calls for the use of a method such as narrative inquiry. D. Jean Clandinin describes narrative inquiry as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding.” (2016, p. 17) Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to learn about and share the stories of Asian American students who have faced difficulties in school in hopes of disrupting the
presumed stereotypes of Asian American students and call into question the ways we think about dis/ability and race in the United States.

**Statement of the Problem**

Given these brief explanations of the current state of the literature, I have come to recognize that the model minority myth is a concept which has a pervasive impact throughout American culture, whether people are aware or unaware of its existence or even that it may impact their perception of Asian American students. Therefore, the model minority myth may affect the ability of Asian American students to receive the academic support that they need and deserve. I believe that it is necessary to conduct research to better understand the experiences of Asian American students who face academic struggles and imposed identities in educational settings. Within this project more specifically, I am curious about the potential relationships between the perceptions of Asian American students and the intersections with dis/ability within school systems.

**Significance of the Study**

Given the ripe opportunity to contribute to existing literature on students of color and dis/ability by focusing on Asian American students with dis/abilities, the primary goal of this project will be to offer this contribution via stories from voices not often heard. Through this work, I hope to bring attention to the ways that Asian American students are subjectively read within school systems or related educational contexts and
trouble the pervasive impacts of the model minority myth. Limited examples of work that focuses on the negative impacts of the model minority myth and Asian American students with dis/abilities only allows dominant white narratives and beliefs to continue within school and societal cultures.

While the initial targeted audience of this project is other educational researchers, my goal is to have the findings and stories generated from the project reach future and current classroom teachers. Teachers have a tremendous impact on the educational experiences of students which will likely continue to influence their self-concept and perceptions of the world around them. Teachers can either continue damaging narratives and beliefs about students of color or work to disrupt the white-centered and supremacist narratives that have existed in this country for centuries. The goals of this project aim to create impactful knowledge that will contribute to understanding how communities of color, specifically the Asian American community, are positioned by white narratives.

Project Origins and Inspirations

Within this section, I first offer my researcher positionality and then present three vignettes that served as the inspiration and motivation for conducting this research project. As I progressed through graduate school, I spent time reflecting on years of family discussions and experiences which, with the support of my inspiring professors and classmates, were illuminated and gained new meaning. I began to see the ways that culture and society have indelible impacts on the educational experiences of students and vast amount of work highlighting the inequitable experiences of students of color. But I
also noticed the inadequate representation of the voices of Asian American student experience, I rarely saw my family represented within the research. Quite often, researchers also pointed out the significant need to conduct further research on the unique experiences of Asian American students. Therefore, this project, inspired by the deeply personal experiences of my family members as well as myself, answers that call.

**Researcher Positionality**

As an Asian American student, I have experienced many assumptions imposed on me by teachers, other students, friends, and school administrators. Even as I began my career as an educator, I faced blatant references to my ethnicity, often from seemingly well-intentioned school administrators. It appeared that part of my appeal as a job candidate rested on my presumed identity as an Asian American woman and as one school district human resources employee stated, “you’ll bring good diversity to our schools.” Just as I faced assumptions made about my role as a future teacher, my brother Tyler and cousin Darby faced assumptions made about them as students. These assumptions enforced the biases that much of American society holds about dis/ability and Asian American students: Asian American students are smart, hardworking, and come from families that value education; Asian Americans are quiet, good kids, and focused students; disability is considered “bad” and a sign of something inherently wrong, weak, or broken and should be fixed and/or hidden. The vignettes that follow demonstrate the various assumptions we all faced throughout our educations.
Kaela

I am a biracial woman, the daughter of a Filipino-American man and Ukrainian-American woman and the oldest of their three children. My Filipino grandparents, my Lolo and Lola, lived a beautiful love story, too long to tell here, which brought them to Brooklyn, NY in the early 1960’s where they began the story of the Fuentes family. My Ukrainian great-grandparents arrived in Philadelphia via steamship at the turn of the century, eventually settling in central Pennsylvania, where they had eleven children.

Overtime, my grandmother, the first of her eleven siblings to earn a high school diploma, left Pennsylvania for New York City, met a man who became her adoring husband and settled in New Jersey as the Lepovsky family. My Lolo and Lola also saw the appeal of the quiet New Jersey suburbs and left Brooklyn to raise their family. Both the Lepovsky and Fuentes families chose the same small neighborhood where they became close friends and gave my parents the opportunity to grow-up together and eventually fall in love. This family history shaped who I am as a woman, daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin and, surprisingly, now as a scholar. Much of this project is born out of the history and stories of my family, whose generous reflections and conversations have helped shape my thoughts and questions as I considered this project’s possibilities.

As an Asian American student, I’ve experienced many subjective readings and interpretations of my identities projected onto me by teachers, other students, friends, administrators, etc. Throughout my education, I have been told and it has been, at times, assumed, that I am or was a talented—and sometimes obsessive—reader, a focused and organized and consequently academically gifted student, a bubbly and kind person, and
overall, an individual motivated to please those around me. My teachers’ observations, their assumptions, my classroom behavior, and testing outcomes provided enough “evidence” to warrant an assignment to special education through a Gifted Individualized Education Plan (GIEP). My teachers never doubted my belonging in the gifted program, or later in the honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Even as I failed calculus during my senior year of high school, my abilities and skills as a student were never questioned. Instead, my teacher and guidance counselor were quick to blame a previous math teacher for my failure to thrive in calculus. It’s impossible to know now, as I reach the last stage of my formal education, whether these assumptions about me as a student were made because of my race, gender, class, family, prior academic performances, or any combination of a range of factors and variables (Crenshaw, 1991).

Tyler

In reflecting on my own education, I also consider the experiences of my younger brother, who has asked to be called Tyler, and who has graciously permitted me to his story. In his earliest years of elementary school, Tyler struggled to learn to read and complete the tasks expected of him during school hours. Our parents sensed something was “wrong” as they watched their youngest child struggle with the prescribed academic tasks at school and slip into a despondent moodiness certainly not typical of their otherwise sweet, relaxed, creatively spirited son. They pushed the school to investigate the possibility that Tyler’s difficulties were beyond a typical transition into schooling or that he may take a bit more time to learn these early skills. Our mother even reported that
she recalls a classroom teacher discouraging their pursuit of a special education “label” out of fear that Tyler would be “stuck with that kind of label” for the rest of his academic life. In hearing about this period in conversations with our parents and with Tyler himself, through artifacts from those years, and my own knowledge as an educator, I question the hesitation to investigate why Tyler wasn’t thriving in those early school years. I am led to question the teachers’ perceptions of him as a “good kid” from a “good family” (as reported in various report cards, student profiles, observational data from teachers and counselors, and our mother’s personal records) and the perceived negativity of receiving special education services.

Darby

I’ve also considered the experiences of my youngest cousin Darby, who graciously shared her story and permission to use her name for this project. During her senior year of high school, she was in a car accident which left her with a traumatic brain injury (TBI). After her accident, she describes experiencing an “extreme identity loss” as she had to drop numerous AP classes, accept significant modifications to her daily schedule, and limit her time participating in the academic and social activities that previously gave her a sense of belonging. As Darby progressed through her college career at a small, private, predominantly white institution in New Jersey, she struggled with her academic programming, professors, and the procedures in place for her to receive the necessary accommodations for her to have equitable access to her education. Within her nursing courses and training program, Darby said she felt accepted and welcomed by the
faculty who, she believes, were very familiar with Filipinas within their field. However, outside of the nursing program, professors who were predominantly white were less than supportive of her accommodations. They regularly questioned the official university letter stating Darby’s approved accommodations and modifications, asking her why she received disability support services, in her own words, “like they didn’t think something could be wrong with me” or in an effort to “invalidate” her disability. Although she recently graduated and began her career as a nurse, Darby still wonders if the professors who did not provide her adequate support, felt that way because they didn’t expect anything to be wrong with her as an Asian American woman.

Thinking across these stories, I recognize similar themes: the subjective racial identities imposed on the three of us, the prescribed characteristics of “success” student identities, and the prevailing structures and expectations of school systems. I believe the themes within these stories demonstrate the pervasive nature of the normalized white, middle-class culture that can be found within school systems and our society. From these personal and family experiences, I find myself curious about the potential relationships between the perceptions of Asian American students and intersections with dis/ability. Both concepts have various understandings and conceptions and long, complicated histories. Therefore, moving forward it is important to discuss how I understand and use the terms Asian American and dis/ability.
Defining Terms and Concepts

Throughout this work, I present the position established by many scholars that establish “Asian American” as a loaded term and concept, which in society today can be considered culturally and politically constructed yet necessary in conversations about race in the United States. The formation of a pan ethnic identity began during the social movements of the late 1960s. Although scholars differ on the definitive motivations of the creation and adoption of the Asian American identity, it is generally accepted that its birth be attributed to Yuji Ichioka as part of the Asian American Political Alliance fight for equality, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism (Koshy, 1996; Maeda, 2009; Rao, 2018; Yoshiko Kandil, 2018). Since its inception, Asian American identity has been taken up through political and cultural means and what had originally been a term to demonstrate solidarity for communities of color advocating for social justice, has been manipulated to one used for race management through homogenization.

I therefore want to be clear, that I take up the understanding of Asian American identity as expressed by the activist Pat Sumi and described by Daryl Maeda (2009): “Renouncing the assimilation of her childhood, Sumi came to see Asian Americans as racial subjects of the United States and embraced an Asian American identity that sought solidarity with other people of color in the United States and across the globe” (p. 17). This emphasis on Asian American as an identity of resistance and in solidarity with other communities of color versus an identity of a constructed subject of a state is important as it disrupts the dominant narrative of Asian Americans used in opposition to other people of color.
Similarly, throughout this work I will intentionally use ‘dis/ability’ rather than ‘disability’ to bring awareness to the ways that culture influences and creates dis/ability from a deficit minded perspective. Annamma et al. (2013) describe the problematic nature of ‘disability’ which,

“Overwhelmingly signals a specific inability to perform culturally-defined expected tasks (such as learning or walking) that come to define the individual as primarily and generally ‘unable’ to navigate society. We believe the ‘/’ in disability disrupts misleading understandings of disability, as it simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability” (p. 24).

With the adoption of ‘dis/ability’ rather than ‘disability’, I aim to continue to dismantle the commonly accepted understandings of dis/ability in society and put forth the idea that anyone and everyone can be made to be dis/abled in varying contexts and cultures.

By drawing upon the early intentions of the Asian American identity and the DisCrit rationale of dis/ability as proposed by Annamma et al. (2013), I hope to solidify my understanding of race and dis/ability as concepts that come from cultural constructions and societal subjectivities.

Organizing Theoretical Frameworks

Concerning the exploration of race and education, there is rich work within the field and theoretical framework of Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), a field of study and theoretical framework which examines the intersections of race and disability and draws upon and extends the core aspects of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Prior to the creation of DisCrit, the field of education saw a significant body of work exploring ability and race with much work paying
particular attention to the ways in which the structures of society employ racism and ableism to segregate and further marginalize students of color (Artiles, 2011; Artiles et al., 2005; Bal, 2017; Blanchett et al., 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008, 2016). The establishment of DisCrit offered a field of study that simultaneously and cohesively allowed for the examination of multiple, nuanced factors that impact the experiences of people of color by identifying the ways that race and ability are interdependent and mutually constructing rather than utilizing one of those identifying factors as “an additive” (Annamma et al., 2013). Despite being identified in the seminal DisCrit piece (Annamma et al., 2013) as an area for future work, the thorough examination of Asian Americans as a population of people of color through a DisCrit lens has yet to be extensively explored.

In addition to using DisCrit as a theoretical lens for this project, I also employed Intersectionality which allowed me to consider the multiple overlapping identities of the study participants and their potential impacts on educational experiences. With its origins in Critical Race Theory and the field of law, Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), urges scholars to examine the intersections of various identities, considering their interconnections and interdependencies. By simultaneously investigating identities such as race, gender, or class, we can avoid limited conceptualizations of individuals, offering richer and more multifaceted understandings, “Rather than seeing people as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, Intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world, especially in relation to global and social inequality.” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 15)
was an essential theoretical lens for this project as I examined the ways various forms of systemic oppression may have impacted my study participants as well as how their unique identities may have influenced the ways they have moved within education settings.

There are numerous controversies to be found when researching the experiences of students of color in education and specifically with those who fall outside of the realm of “typical” students. There are strong arguments about the under- and over-representation of students of color in areas of education with some scholars perplexingly insisting that students of color should be represented more within special education (Morgan et al., 2015) and others arguing that students of color are being overidentified for special education services and therefore being unnecessarily segregated from their peers within school systems (Blanchett, 2006; Cavendish et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2016; Connor et al., 2019). No matter which side you take in this argument, it is clear that Asian Americans are often left out of this conversation.

While it may be impossible within the scope of this project to fully determine why Asian American students are currently left out of this research, I speculate that the model minority myth may be at play. Asian Americans are often found in a precarious position, within a triangulation of racial management--where they are not categorized as white, often used in opposition to Black and Latinx communities, as well as falling victim to a perpetual foreigner status in the United States. The position of Asian Americans has been made even more tenuous in the months since the COVID-19 pandemic has swept the world. Therefore, the work of this project is likely at risk to be taken up in various ways by the field of education research. Yet I hope to be clear that my intention is only to fill
the gap and contribute to the literature which holds true the long history of solidarity between the Asian American community and other communities of color which have fought for social justice and equity for multiple generations.

**Research Questions**

In response to the absent narratives of Asian American students within the discussion of dis/ability, the research problem and purpose of this study, I propose pursuing four research questions within this project.

- How do Asian American students who experienced difficulties in school reflect on and understand their experiences?
- In what ways do Asian American students understand and perceive the labels and identities (imposed or self-proclaimed) of Asian American and/or dis/abled or struggling?
- What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled students identify as having particular impacts on their educational experiences?
- How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American students inform educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems?

**Assumptions and Limitations**

As with any study, I entered this project with several assumptions and limitations to the work that was completed. These factors influenced the formation of the study from
the very understanding of the problem to research questions being asked and understandings I arrived at after gathering and analyzing the stories of my informants. Likewise, it is likely that my participants had their own sets of assumptions and knowledge of their unique experiences within the world. Therefore, it is important to address these assumptions and limitations prior to delving deeper into the research project.

By undertaking this project, I am assuming that a problem exists, that it is possible that the stereotypes surrounding Asian American students may impact their ability to receive appropriate or necessary support within learning environments. This assumption is drawn from the limited existing literature representing Asian Americans as students of color who are labeled as dis/abled by school systems, trends within the literature that do exist about the experiences of Asian American students, as well as the experiences of myself and my family members. Also, despite the body of literature in existence and social trends and movements that have worked to demonstrate the ways that the model minority myth exists within American culture, it is possible that my informants may not believe that the myth either exists or is damaging. In many ways, some Asian Americans may possess or believe they possess a certain amount of privilege due to their race and ethnicity and may be hesitant to discuss the ways that their racial identifications may impact their schooling experiences.

I also must recognize that although I and some family members identify as Asian American, specifically Filipina/o American, and at times have been identified as abled in different ways, our experiences may be different from those of my informants in the study. It is important throughout the research process that I have participants clarify their
stories and statements as clearly and deeply as they are willing. While we may share some experiences, I cannot assume that I fully understand how my informants understand those lived moments and should always seek to have them clarify as much as possible.

There are also several delimitations to this potential study. The identity of Asian American has a broad understanding and has come to mean numerous things to any number of people. For the purposes of this study, I included the stories of individuals who were born in or raised primarily in the United States. Although some individuals born outside of the United States did express interest in participating in the study, I was most interested in hearing from those who received most of their primary and secondary education in the United States. While the stories of immigrants of Asian descent are certainly valued and should be told within the context of research focusing on students of color, I aimed to focus most on the ways that American school systems may impact the identities and experiences of students.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I provided a brief overview of the study and situated it within the literature. First, an overview of the study was presented with the statement of the problem and potential significance of the study for the fields in which it is situated. Then, I offered the origins of the research project which provided an explanation of my researcher positionality and subjectivities followed by three vignettes which served as inspirations for the project. Next, key terms and concepts were defined. Then, I introduced the theoretical frameworks that guided the project followed by the four
research questions. Lastly, I presented the assumptions and limitations of the study.

Within the next chapter, I present a review of the literature.
CHAPTER 2

The Literature Review

As discussed within Chapter 1, this dissertation project focused on the experiences of Asian Americans with dis/abilities and those who may experience difficulties within learning environments. While much research has focused on the model minority myth and the educational experiences of Asian American students, it is rare that the stories of dis/abled Asian American students have been told. Similarly, within the literature focusing on the experiences and overrepresentation of students of color in special education, most of the attention is on the ways that Black and Latinx youth face discrimination within school systems. The limited inclusion of the stories of Asian American students from the literature on the educational experiences of dis/abled students of color enhances the problematic nature of the model minority myth as it is situated within a system of white supremacy. Therefore, it is important that this project begin the task of filling in the gaps in the literature and aim to tell the stories of dis/abled Asian American students as a means of dismantling systems of oppression.

Throughout this chapter, I will be discussing relevant areas of research that relate and contribute to my understanding of the fields in which I will situate this project. First, I will discuss the history and formation of the model minority myth to better orient this project within a long history of race management in the United States. In the second section, I will introduce the theoretical orientations of the study by providing an overview of Intersectionality and DisCrit and the ways that they are complementary and supportive of the goals of this project. I will also connect the goals of this project with the gaps in
the literature of my two selected frameworks and discuss the ways that I see this project advancing both frameworks. In the third section, I briefly discuss the selection of narrative inquiry as the appropriate research method for this project, provide a history of the development of narrative inquiry research, and address potential concerns and issues in using narrative inquiry. Lastly, I summarize the chapter and preview the contents of Chapter 3.

Throughout this research process, I utilized the Pennsylvania State University’s library system to gather nearly all my sources. I began with the seminal pieces for each of the theoretical frameworks and then utilized the Penn State Libraries search tool to retrieve articles, special journal issues, and books that built upon these original pieces. I also utilized Google Scholar to gather additional sources and mine the references of widely cited articles within the fields and topics of DisCrit, Intersectionality, ethnic studies, Asian American studies, and the model minority myth.

Overview of the Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth is a long-held belief that Asian Americans, more so than other minority groups, are socially, academically, and subsequently economically successful. Citing their culture, values, sustained academic performance over many decades, enrollment in higher education, and representation in well-earning jobs, Asian American success throughout the 20th and 21st centuries is attributed to their perceived triumph over and near elimination of all sources of racism (Lee, 1994; Li and Wang, 2008; Ling, 2008; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Wing, 2007; Wu, 2013). However, the model
minority myth should not be interpreted as a positive identifier. Rather, it has significant negative implications for the lived experiences and perceptions of Asian Americans in a variety of realms. Ultimately, “the model minority myth suggests that hard work alone can overcome any obstacle and it trivializes claims of social injustice made by Asian Americans and other minority groups” (Tran and Birman, 2010, p. 107) a claim which has been used by majoritarian, white discourse in the United States as a political mechanism for the management of race for multiple generations.

**Creation of the Model Minority Myth**

The idea of the model minority myth was presented to American culture in the mid-1960’s with the publication of two widely read news articles. William Petersen, a sociologist from the University of California, Berkeley, published an article in 1966 in the New York Times featuring the first use of the term “model minority” which was used to demonstrate the success achieved by Japanese Americans despite facing significant racism throughout the previous decades. In the preceding years, Japanese Americans had faced significant anti-Japanese movements as seen in the internment and concentration camps of World War II which then shifted drastically into post-war social mobility. Petersen’s article also highlighted Japanese Americans’ high academic success, low crime rates, and high employment rates while explicitly contrasting them against African Americans. Later in 1966, US News and World Report echoed the New York Times article with their own piece that outlined the success of Chinese Americans, specifically within the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Again, a group of Asian Americans
were pitted against other racial minorities, “it must be recognized that the Chinese and other Orientals in California were faced with even more prejudice than faces the Negro today. We haven’t stuck Negroes in concentration camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese in World War II. The Orientals came back, and today they have established themselves as strong contributors to the health of the whole community.” (p. 9) The US News and World Report article broadly cites merit-based characteristics such as the high academic achievement, family dynamics and values, and hard work of Asian Americans as the source of their success in the United States. This values system is still present and enforced today and demonstrates the way that white culture continues to dominate and dictate the systems of oppression in the United States.

These two widely cited articles established the model minority myth within American culture and society, fixating on specific values and performance in various aspects of life such as academic achievement and employment rates. However, the articles largely ignored ways in which systemic racism was at play, manipulating the ways in which white American culture views racial minorities in the United States and shielding the reasoning behind the existence of the model minority myth.

The Model Minority Myth: A Means to Perpetuate Racism

The publication of these articles also coincided with the growing strength of the Civil Rights Movement and rising unrest within Black communities.

“The model minority concept resonated with Americans who became threatened by urban black riots and the strident demands made by Black Power advocates that were couched in the aggressive symbolism of Third World revolutions. In this way, model minority discourse tapped into
pervasive fears of black unrest and in doing so pioneered an image of Asian Americans that a new generation of conservatives would deploy to limit and roll back the civil rights revolution.” (Kurashige, 2016, p. 215)

While some identified the model minority myth as a vehicle to “whitewash racism and injustice against Asian Americans” and continually “divert attention from and denigrate the ongoing African American struggle for racial equality and economic justice” (Wang, 2008, pp. 21-22), their voices were not enough to overcome the strength of the model minority myth, the wedge being driven between Asian Americans and other racial minorities, and the dominant narrative around Black citizens. The “disorganization” of urban, Black families was identified as a cause of weakness, lack of social mobility, and perpetual cycle of poverty while Asian Americans were positioned as the model minorities with strong families and “good culture”. Asian Americans were often held in contrast to Blacks, “there can be no model minority without the concomitant lazy, underachieving black ‘other’ (Lee, 2009, p. 7). The taking up of Asian Americans by dominant, white, culture during the 1960’s set a dangerous and damaging precedent that continues in the present day. Central to the model minority myth is the perceived ways that Asian Americans vastly differ from other racial minority groups. By drawing comparisons to the ways in which Asian Americans’ social status rose and strengthened following World War II to that of earlier European immigrants, white culture worked to criticize and denigrate Black citizens and their efforts throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

The defeating racism narrative around Asian Americans continued in the 1970 New York Times article “Orientals Find Bias is Down Sharply in U.S.” which describes the success that many “orientals” found after overcoming significant discrimination based
on their looks and other negative stereotypes. Through a few selected profiles of individuals, the article aims to demonstrate the focus and resilience of Asian American citizens, “His story reflects a quiet, little noted American success story--the almost total disappearance of discrimination against the 400,000 Chinese and 500,000 Japanese Americans since the end of World War II and their assimilation into the mainstream of American life.” The article often attributed Asian American success, as did its predecessors, to their high academic achievement which led to high paying, prestigious jobs resulting in economic growth and stability. Yet this merit-based system of identifying and measuring success is highly problematic as it places all Asian Americans into one, homogenous group, void of their rich histories and experiences over many generations (Lee, 2006). It also ignores the fact that today, Asian Americans experience the widest and fastest growing income divide amongst all racial groups in the United States. (Jan, 2018).

By the mid- to late-1980’s, Southeast Asian Americans were beginning to be pulled into the model minority identifier previously held mainly by Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. The 1987 Time magazine article by David Brand, “Education: The New Whiz Kids”, highlighted the tragedies and traumas that many Asian American students and their families had overcome to reach academic success within the United States. Again, citing their higher educational achievement, as seen through the percentage of Asian Americans attending elite colleges and universities, Brand links academic achievement to erasing any potential racism that may be found in American society. However, Brand, unsurprisingly, values meritocracy and likens Asian American successes to their inherent cultural values and equates educational achievement to success
as do all the previously mentioned articles. These apparent successes largely ignore much larger sociopolitical factors that significantly impact many Asian American’s abilities to achieve success in other realms of society. “Scholars have explicated and critiqued the stereotype’s message of American meritocracy (Hurh & Kim, 1989; S. Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1987). According to these researchers, embedded in the model minority stereotype is the implicit and explicit message that the political structures of American society allow for success and the achievement of the American Dream” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 415).

Problematizing the Asian American Naming Convention

Shortly after the invention of the model minority myth, during the turbulent times of the civil rights and black power movements, groups of engaged students, scholars, and activists joined together in efforts to organize historically marginalized groups in solidarity against structural inequalities. Although the narrative most often heard focuses on the unification of African Americans to further the Civil Rights Movement, there was a robust movement amongst other racialized populations within the United States in solidarity with the efforts of the Black community as well as the Third World and against the Vietnam War. Until the late 1960’s, people of Asian descent most often referred to themselves and others by their ethnicity or nation or origin (Koshy, 1996). But with these unifying movements, some felt that a collective identity would be useful and necessary. The creation of the inclusive identity “Asian American” is generally attributed to Yuji Ichioka as part of the Asian American Political Alliance fight for equality, anti-racism,
and anti-imperialism (Koshy, 1996; Maeda, 2009; Rao, 2018; Yoshiko Kandil, 2018).

“The Asian American Movement was pivotal in creating a pan-Asian identity politics that represented their “unequal circumstances and histories as being related.” Asian American was a political subject position formulated to make visible a history of exclusion and discrimination against immigrants of Asian origin” (Koshy, 1996, 321). While the creation of a pan-ethnic identity unified many groups during the social movements of the 1960’s and allowed for strength within collective action, it also situated a broad group of people into a form that was easily recognizable by the state (Okamoto, 2003).

“In addition to increasing the numerical basis of Asian America, making racially based appeals to the state allows Asian Americans to more easily conform to categories that the state already recognizes, for claims made on the basis of race are much more likely to be accepted than are those based on ethnicity.” (Maeda, 2009, 19)

Since its inception, the Asian American identity has been taken up through political and cultural means and what had originally been a term to demonstrate unity and solidarity for communities of color advocating for social justice, has been manipulated to one used for race management.

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) offer a more contemporary assessment of the ways that race and ethnicity work within social spaces by describing those categories as “gravitational fields” that carry with them powerful political and economic implications. Similarly, Junn and Masuoka (2008) state:

“State-sponsored racial classification places limits on how people can identify, and there are clear incentives to accept this scheme of racial classification. “Asian” has persisted as a non-white racial group throughout most of the history of the United States, nor does it appear that this racial classification will disappear in the near future. Throughout the history of the United States, assignment to a racial group has carried
important consequences, among them freedom, voting enfranchisement, property ownership, and citizenship rights.” (p. 734)

Relatedly, Koshy (2001) examines Asian Americanness in relation to whiteness and offers assessments of the position of the Asian American identity within dominant state-related entities. Koshy argues that although “parallel minoritization” initially brought working-class and nonwhite groups together, events throughout the late 1990’s and early 2000’s have since brought politicized divisions. Today, we see a resurgence of these politicized wedges with the emergence of a global pandemic which has renewed Asian Americans' perpetual immigrant status and precarious position within racialized American politics.

The Model Minority Myth’s Impact on Education

The impacts of the model minority myth can also be observed within the research sharing the stories of Asian Americans in schools. Much of this work highlights how the model minority myth works to hide the ways that systematic oppression and white supremacy work within school systems (Lee, 2005; Ngo & Lee, 2007). As seen in research looking at the history of the model minority myth, Asian Americans close approximation with whiteness often carries over into education (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). “Whites and smart people are only real insofar as social institutions like education, and formidable processes like common sense, recognize certain bodies as White and certain people as smart” (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011, pp. 2225-2226). While the general narrative of the model minority myth promotes the belief that Asian Americans have overcome racism, the privileging of white, middle-classness as the norm and
positioning Asian Americans as “almost white” sustains the many problems in relation to other communities of color and continues to demonstrate the ways that race is managed within the United States.

**Representation of ‘Struggling’ Asian Americans in Education Literature**

The perpetuation of the model minority myth has undoubtedly contributed to what may be interpreted as the reticence of scholars to take up study of Asian American students through a lens that focusing on academic needs and struggles. What follows is a review of currently available literature in this area, albeit scarce.

Within this body of research, scholars examined a range of conditions when considering Asian Americans through a special education lens. Pang et al. (2011) looked at the performance of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) 7th grade students on California statewide testing and compared their results to those of White American students. Additionally, this study disaggregated the data of the AAPI students to directly assess the performance of 13 different ethnic categories and compared those results to the aggregated AAPI student data and White American student data. The results of their study found that the aggregated data showed that AAPI students scored significantly lower in reading but significantly higher in math than their White American peers. However, the disaggregated data showed massive discrepancies with a majority of the AAPI ethnic groups, such as Filipino American, Vietnamese American, Cambodian American, Samoan American, etc., performing significantly lower than their White peers in both reading and math. These findings emphasize the dangers of overgeneralizing
aggregated data which can mask the true academic needs of Asian American students, thereby perpetuating the model minority myth and a lack of educational equity. Pang et al. (2011) offer a historical contextualization of many AAPI ethnic groups to emphasize the ways ethnicity may play a role on the educational performance of students and ultimately to call upon educators to “reflect upon the complex nature of the AAPI population.” (p. 387)

Wang et al. (2021) also offers a perspective on the importance of educators working to understand the complexities of all AAPI ethnicities and examines the role that educator bias may play within education settings. Their study identified the essential role that educators play in identifying students for special education and speculated that educators may be influenced by students’ race when making their recommendations. Ultimately, the study found bias amongst teachers when presented with near identical hypothetical student profiles of an Asian American and White American student with the Asian American student being recommended for special education services at a much lower rate than their White peer. However, when considering both a hypothetical Asian American student and White American student for gifted education, the rate of referral for the Asian American student did not differ from the White American student. The scholars hypothesized that Asian American students are only considered to be ‘exceptional’ when compared to other students of color, a theory that reinforces one of the roots of the model minority myth that used Asian Americans to contrast African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.

A closer examination of the influence of students’ ethnicity on teacher assumptions can be seen in Chhuon and Hudley (2011) which looked at teacher views on
Cambodian students attending an American high school. Overall, the study found that often educators and school administrators maintained the beliefs of the model minority myth, making open presumptions about one of the researchers, who is of Cambodian descent, and remarking that the Cambodian students who were placed in high achieving academic courses came from families that prioritized and valued education. Additionally, the achievements of Cambodian students who were high academic achievers were often situated together with those of the Chinese American, Japanese American, and Korean American students. However, the study also found that Cambodian students who did not meet the assumptions put forth by the model minority myth and were placed in lower achieving academic courses were frequently grouped into “the discourse of urban low achieving and culturally deficient minority students.” (p. 681)

Lastly, while there is a significant amount of literature debating the over- and under- representation of students of color, Cooc (2019) raises questions about “whether the special education process works differently for some students.” (p. 178) Also advocating for the disaggregation of data pertaining to the rate of identification of AAPIs in special education, Cooc finds that AAPIs are the least likely to receive special education out of all ethnicities of students. As seen often through the model minority myth, assumptions have been made about the cultural views of learning within AAPI families as an impacting factor deterring the identification of AAPI students for special education. However, Cooc’s study ultimately found that school related barriers were the most significant influences hindering the identification of AAPI students for special education. Factors such as lack of teacher cultural awareness related to AAPIs, culturally unresponsive curriculums, or school administrators having difficulty identifying
disabilities among AAPI students may all be affecting the underrepresentation of AAPIs in special education.

While the abundance of literature examining Asian American students through a ‘struggling’ or special education lens may be modest, all appear to support similar conclusions: the importance of disaggregated data pertaining to AAPIs, the influence and impact of educators, the importance of receiving appropriately supported educations, the dangers of a perpetuated model minority myth.

**Theoretical Orientation of the Study**

The beginnings of this project are rooted in the theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality and DisCrit. Both frameworks place significant attention on the importance of the overlapping and mutually constitutive relationships between the multiple identities an individual holds and the ways that those identities may be oppressed and/or discriminated against in various contexts. It should be noted that both frameworks acknowledge that identities are not always self-affirming or even “real”; often identities are externally imposed by structures within society and constructed by a culture. Categories such as race and ability are products of a culture, yet they have real impacts on the ways in which people move throughout and experience society. Both frameworks consider the ways that systems of oppression utilize categorizations and identities as ways to manage and further marginalized various populations. Throughout this section, I will trace the origins of Intersectionality and DisCrit, discussing the seminal works and more contemporary contributions as related to my project’s focus. The
connections and relationships of both theories and the ways in which they help shape my understanding of this project. I will also discuss various shortcomings and gaps within the current research in both areas, offering ways in which my work hopes to contribute to the field.

**Intersectionality**

Since its inception in 1989, Intersectionality has been taken up by scholars in a wide range of fields of study that all aim to analyze and address myriad issues experienced by people all over the world. Although ever evolving and never fully arriving at its final form, Intersectionality is used as a theoretical framework and method for analysis that instructs us in approaches to expose and dismantle singular ways of understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Carbado et al., 2013). It also helps us to see the layered and interactive forces of power and control that have worked in invisible ways to manipulate social perceptions of people and issues.

Intersectionality was first introduced in name by American black feminist, legal and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) through her examination of concerns on Black women’s employment in the United States specifically looking at “the intersection of gender, race and class matters in their exploitation and exclusion.” (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 4-5) Crenshaw’s (1989) article and her subsequent “Mapping the Margins” (1991) piece pushed scholars of law, and shortly after scholars and non-academics of many fields, to consider the ways that Black women have been subjected to a single categorical axis and to look at the interconnections and interdependencies among race,
gender, and class (Collins, 2015; Dhamoon, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Crenshaw (1989) suggests:

“This single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women.” (p. 140)

It is necessary to examine the ways that gender and race engage with one another in ways that have real-life consequences for, in this initial piece, Black women. By not considering the impact of these additional and contributory factors, we exclude very real aspects of individual’s lives that cannot and should not be ignored or removed from understanding the full picture of their lived experiences.

Although frameworks such as Critical Race Theory existed and were put into action by scholars prior to the inception of Intersectionality, there was not an explicitly named or employed method for addressing and examining the overlapping ways that multiple aspects of identity interacted and impacted the ways in which people move throughout the world or existence. Over time, the definition of Intersectionality expanded to describe:

“A way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2).
At the center of Intersectionality is the understanding that these aspects of identity are socially and culturally constructed and constantly influencing each other as an individual moves throughout the world; they are not able to be separated or examined independently of the others.

Intersectionality encourages a multifaceted examination of all the ways someone’s identities may interact in various spaces and places and perhaps even during different periods of time. Throughout the research within the field of education pertaining to Asian Americans, scholars have considered and accounted for numerous identities and variables. In one study, Stacey Lee (1994) discusses Asian American high school students who utilized and recognized race, nationality, and class as factors which impacted the ways that they interacted and managed relationships with their peers who also identified as Asian Americans specifically within the setting of school. Nellie Tran and Dina Birman (2010) conducted an in-depth literature review of studies which challenged the model minority narrative surrounding Asian American students and aimed to provide an analysis for their academic performance. Their review exposed multiple aspects of identity that are relevant to the lived experiences in and out of school for Asian American students that were frequently unaccounted for or contained incomplete data. Factors such as generational status, gender, and language were generally missing or misconstrued which hinders the ability to accurately understand the ways in which Asian Americans experience education in the United States (Tran & Birman, 2010).

Bic Ngo and Stacey Lee (2007) also conducted a literature review but specifically focused on studies featuring Southeast Asian American participants. Throughout their review, they found that the income levels of many Southeast Asian American populations
were significantly lower than that of the average Asian American population, emphasizing the importance of including class in conjunction with ethnicity as factors for analysis. Ngo and Lee’s review also highlighted the importance of gender, language proficiency, religion, connection to ethnic and cultural communities, and access to culturally responsive pedagogies within schools as particularly impactful to the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students (2007).

Although it could be argued that all the studies previously mentioned did make efforts to utilize an intersectional approach to their studies and analyses, they did not explicitly state the intentional use of Intersectionality nor did the authors place themselves within this theoretical field, which exposes a broad gap within the literature utilizing Intersectionality. Since its inception and in the time since, the field of intersectional research aimed to address race as well as many other social identities and the ways they intersect and co-construct in multiple domains. It is surprising then, that while Crenshaw (1991) and Chun et al. (2013) do emphasize the importance of understanding the unique cultural, class, gender, and immigrant status identities of Asian women facing domestic violence and other forms of oppression there are few other studies within the field of Intersectionality that consider Asian Americans. Despite being considered people of color, a group of people commonly discussed within intersectional research, Asian Americans are still often excluded.

In a larger social and cultural context, this unfortunately has come to be expected. The model minority myth unfairly places Asian Americans as the minority group most closely representing the values and behaviors seen in whiteness (Lee, 1994; Wu, 2013). Due to their apparent (although inaccurate) economic and educational success, Asian
Americans are also seemingly less in need of research advocating for the exploration and remediation of the ways they have been marginalized by systems of power and privilege (Lee, 2009; Moses et al., 2018; Museus & Kiang, 2009). However, this leads to a significant gap in intersectional literature, among other frameworks, and simply reinforces the inaccurate model minority stereotype allowing its damaging ramifications to continue. The exclusion of Asian Americans from intersectional research also works against the inherent nature and efforts of Intersectionality to identify and discuss the multiple ways that people’s identities are discriminated against and marginalized within societies and cultures.

It is also clear that the identification of dis/ability (whether it is taken up or rejected by the participants), is also largely excluded from the current literature in Intersectionality. If we consider the origins of Intersectionality with its roots of working to acknowledge and come to understand the complex experiences and factors at play in human lives, it makes sense to utilize this framework for my work. Dis/ability and race have been linked in damaging ways for hundreds of years; both have been used as malicious forms of social control as seen through the justification for slavery, legislation that targeted certain races as dis/abled through unsightly beggar ordinances, and the long fought battles for civil rights throughout the twentieth century (Collins, 2015; Dolmage, 2018; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Schwiek, 2009) For over one hundred and fifty years, Asian Americans and individuals labeled as dis/abled have had their experiences manipulated, minimized, misconstrued, homogenized, and camouflaged by the dominant social powers in place in the United States. By utilizing an intersectional frame, facets of
the history of Asian Americans as well as the current struggles of those identifying as Asian American and dis/abled may finally come to light.

**Filling the Gaps in Intersectionality**

In much work regarding elements of identity, particularly those of race, gender, and class, many “categories” signify broad populations of people. The act of categorization puts people into specific boxes and with certain classifications, effectively erasing aspects of their identities. “Rather than seeing people as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, Intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world, especially in relation to global social inequality.” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, 15) As seen in the original aim of Crenshaw’s (1989) work and scholarship that followed, Intersectionality worked to highlight the ways that separate and seemingly disparate identities amongst individuals shared experiences and commonalities rather than the damaging effects of single-axis identifiers (Carbado et al., 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010).

There is much scholarship criticizing the homogenizing strategies employed by societal structures and institutions such as the United States Census Bureau or the National Center for Educational Statistics, which generate influential and often aggregated data sets as well as the synthesizing methods utilized by some scholarship. “Although the racialization of Asian Americans lumps all Asian groups in the United States into a singular, high-achieving category, an examination of disaggregated data by
ethnic groups reveals striking differences” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 419). Many scholars are finding aggregated data hide complex realities such as the language proficiency, immigrant or refugee status, levels of and/or access to education, etc. for innumerable Asian Americans (Caldwell, 2010; Annamma et al., 2013; Kozleski, 2016; McCall, 2005; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

By employing an intersectional frame, scholars can better contextualize the lived experiences of research participants or individuals within underrepresented groups in nuanced ways. This helps expose how power, oppression, and representation impact people and ensures that these systems within society do not selectively choose which singular aspects of an individual’s identity will be viewed and utilized to classify and count (Yosso, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In viewing the field of current literature, there are many ways that data and other figures represent and feature particular groups of people, which suggests that there are individual groups who may count or are more relevant than others (Patterson et al., 2019). This then leads me to question: How many people are not accurately or adequately represented due to forced categorization or examining singular identifiers? In what other areas do we see structures combining facets of identities to simplify a data set, or worse, purposely mis-, over-, under-, representing people? And what valued aspects of individuals’ cultural identities are lost and erased through data collection measures that do not account for these factors? Intersectionality helps us answer these questions and examine which aspects of culture as well as whose culture is reified and counted by systems of power and aims to identify the consequences of those actions.
Used as an analytical tool, Intersectionality allows us to examine the many ways that power plays out and impacts the lives of individuals. Looking through this lens helps to challenge often long held beliefs about established “truths”. Within my work, this means situating the positioning of Asian Americans within a particular historical and social context where they are viewed in, often favorable ways. Additionally, when we consider Asian Americans who are also identified as dis/abled by institutions, we can gain knowledge on the ways that two commonly dissociated identities interact and impact the lives of individuals. Race and dis/ability co-construct each other within the lived experiences of people: “race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than white students with dis/abilities” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 7). In many ways, race and dis/ability have been used together to manage black and brown bodies in school systems (and society in general) for many generations (Blanchett, 2006; Connor, 2015; Harry and Klingner, 2014). Intersectionality encourages us to look deeper at the other elements (i.e. race, gender, dis/ability, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, etc.) that may be at play which cause these “truths” to gain power in a society. Through my work, I aim to further this effort and explore the ways in which socially and culturally constructed stereotypes, ideals, and expectations potentially impact the lives of Asian American students with dis/abilities.

Intersectionality complements this project in many ways and significantly furthers how I think through the questions and observations that arise when considering the current state of the field and this framework. Collins and Bilge (2016) offer six core ideas that have appeared when scholars implement Intersectionality as an analytic tool: social
inequality, relatioanalitity, power, social context, complexity, and social justice. These themes push me to consider the many factors that must be considered in designing my project and extend my thinking to address many if not all these core ideas. Using these themes, I can enhance my thinking on my project in each of these core areas in ways that other theoretical frameworks cannot.

As I consider the scope of the project broadly, I recognize that at its core it aims to examine and hopefully dismantle social inequality. Collins and Bilge (2016) state that, “Intersectionality adds additional layers of complexity to understandings of social inequality, recognizing that social inequality is rarely caused by a single factor. Using Intersectionality as an analytic tool encourages us to move beyond seeing social inequality through race-only or class-only lensees. Instead, Intersectionality encourages understandings of social inequality based on interactions among various categories” (p. 26). In much of the current research on Asian Americans and education, the model minority myth, or the idea that Asian Americans are a succesful minority group that no longer faces the racism experienced by other underrepresented groups, is regularly explored. Intersectionality allows us to consider the significant number of factors that contribute to the social inequality still faced by many Asian Americans, despite the cultural perception of the model minority. Additionally, since the intersection of dis/ability and the ways Asian Americans may experience it is rarely explored, my project would help to continue the effort to a broader understanding of socia inequality.

The next themes, relationality, power, and complexity, I choose to explore together as they are closely related and constantly interacting and influencing one another. In considering the ways that power is an entity entwined in relationships with
people and systems, relationality accounts for the shifts and evolution of relationships that may change over time as the needs of involved parties change.

“Relational thinking rejects either/or binary thinking, for example, opposing theory to practice, scholarship to activism, or blacks to whites. Instead, relationality embraces a both/and frame. The focus of relationality shifts from analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examining their interconnections. This shift in perspective opens up intellectual and political possibilities.” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, pp. 27-28)

The idea of relationality highlights exclusionary ways of thinking and rejects conceptualizing the lived experiences of individuals as singular or able to be divided and examined one piece at a time. This aspect of Intersectionality and the value of this theme encourages scholars to emphasize the “both/and frame” and consider the potential ways that multiple aspects of identity and power continually interact and impact the ways in which individuals move through the world or are moved through the world by systems of power. Collins and Bilge (2016) state that, “Power is better conceptualized as a relationship, as in power relations, than as a static entity. Power is not a thing to be gained or lost as in the zero-sum conceptions of winners and losers on the football playing field. Rather, power constitutes a relationship” (pp. 27-28). Within an intersectional framework, power is understood through a lens of mutual construction; we must consider that people’s identities are shaped by factors that cannot be separated or examined individually, that these identities possessed by a person are constructed in relation to one another. Additionally, “power relations are to be analyzed both via their intersections, for example, of racism and sexism, as well as across domains of power, namely structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 27). These themes clearly lead us to identify and address the complexity of the lives of
individuals that has too often been simplified or minimized. By taking up an intersectional frame, we can see the nuanced and complicated lived experiences of people.

As I examine the complicated histories of Asian Americans and dis/abled people within the United States, there are numerous incidents and periods of time when both identities were manipulated by people, cultures, and institutions for gain or continuation of positions of power. Within my work, the theme of social context is especially relevant in considering the ways that power has impacted the complex positioning of Asian Americans throughout the twentieth century to the present as well as those labeled as dis/abled. In considering the structure of my project, I must pay close attention to the domains of power identified by Collins and Bilge (2016): structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal. If I am to take up an intersectional framework, it is important to examine the experiences of my participants with careful attention to their various identities across those four domains. Gathering data within or about their experiences within school systems as well as broad cultural and social interactions will be necessary. It is important to consider the ways that participants interact with these domains of power such as through popular media and social media and the messages and information these domains convey in terms of acceptable or expected behaviors or mindsets and what consequences may ensue if someone falls outside of these expectations. Lastly, it will be important to include experiences within their interpersonal interactions with a variety of people such as family members, peers, teachers, or others within their lives or community that they discuss or deem significant.
Using Intersectionality as a framework that acknowledges all these complex themes and situated domains while examining the lived experiences of my participants, I hope to arrive at a project that addresses social justice. The core of my project challenges the level of access to academic support for Asian American students who may be identified as dis/abled by structural powers. This effort is directly related to the intersectional theme of social justice which aims to address the inequitable access to resources and to work against structural forces that permit and perpetuate barriers that restrict that access (Ben-Moshe & Magaña, 2014; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Mayeri, 2015).

In its origins, Intersectionality was born from an activist standpoint with intention to create systemic shifts, it “is a concept animated by the imperative of social change” (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 312). My hopes are that my project can provide a richer and more detailed picture of the experiences of Asian American students so that we are able to create interventions and shift mindsets that make unfair and inequitable assumptions about our students.

**DisCrit**

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) joins together many of the core aspects of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) with the aim of identifying the ways that race and ability are interdependent and mutually constructing rather than utilizing one of those identifying factors as “an additive” (Annamma et al., 2013). In recent years, there has been a rise in scholars utilizing this theoretical framework to further the discussion on the ways in which race and ability interact within society and
aims to offer opportunities for scholars to foreground these issues. This is essential work for the field of education because as Annamma et al. (2013) state, “for students of color, race does not exist outside of ability and ability does not exist outside of race; each is being built upon the perception of the other” (p. 6).

For hundreds of years, scientists, governments, societal structures, and scholars have worked to identify the ways in which non-dominant races can be considered inferior and in need of management and control. From enslavement throughout the world, strict immigration regulations, legislation restricting rights and movements, and access to quality living conditions and education, people of color have been subjugated and pushed to extreme marginalization by white, dominant culture. Although in some ways we have moved beyond the extremes seen in the 19th to mid-20th centuries in the United States, people of color still experience restructured and renamed forms of racism and oppression. This leads scholars to continually ask, in what ways are students, particularly students of color, being positioned as academic failures? (Baines, 2014; Collins, 2013; Erevelles, 2011; McDermott and Varenne, 1995)

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) first emerged as a named theoretical framework in the seminal piece by Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013). This work outlined the gaps within the literature of DS and CRT, offered organizing tenets and goals of this new framework, and offered ways for scholars to progress in research related to dis/ability and race both in and outside education. The scholars who created DisCrit began with efforts to, “highlight how the process of structural racism externally imposed identities on individuals by applying socially constructed labels. We also hope to illustrate how specific consequences are associated with labeling. We therefore
acknowledge that while ability and racial categories are socially constructed, they continue to have real material outcomes in terms of lived experiences.” (Annamma, et al., 2013, p. 9)

DisCrit as a theoretical framework offers nuances not available through either DS or CRT alone nor in other frameworks. It problematizes singular ways of considering the many factors that impact students of color. As stated in Annamma et al. (2013), “DisCrit draws on insights from dis/ability studies to provide a discourse responsive to the social positioning of students of color with a dis/ability, reframing dis/ability from its subordinate position to a positive marker of identity and something to be “claimed” (p. 8). A strongly situated theoretical framework, DisCrit offers seven tenets that are useful when conducting a DisCrit centered analysis:

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
4. DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
6. DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. (Annamma, et al., 2013, p. 11)

Each of these tenets offers researchers a starting point and insights on the types of questions that can be asked when employing a DisCrit lens. As did its predecessors DS, CRT, and Intersectionality, DisCrit embraces the co-construction and interrelatedness of
multiple identities such as race, gender, dis/ability, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. It also brings focus to contextualizing the positions of those labeled as dis/abled and/or who are racialized by dominant white culture. By contextualizing the positioning of certain individuals as outside of the dominant cultural norms, DisCrit recognizes the interest convergence of white citizens and the power enacted as a means of managing difference.

In the original text proposing DisCrit as a new and necessary theoretical framework, the authors identify three key areas that demonstrate the ways that overrepresentation of students of color in special education “reinforces the racial hierarchies the US subscribes to” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 8). Broadly, these areas are the underrepresentation of Asian Americans, the exclusion of Native Americans in most of the research, the overrepresentation of Latinx students, and the persistent overrepresentation of African American students. All these areas, the authors state, are in need of continued exploration and deserving of attention in the field of education research. We can see progress in many of the areas previously stated, particularly the focus on the overrepresentation of African American and Latinx students (Annamma et al., 2017; Bal, 2017; Cavendish et al., 2018; Connor et al., 2019; Fergus, 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Kozleski, 2016). Yet, very little research since the inception of DisCrit has addressed the overall absence of Native Americans in the field and the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in special education.
Filling the Gaps in DisCrit

Since the original article proposing DisCrit as a new and necessary field of study, Asian Americans have been presented as a population in need of representation within the literature. While exploring the ways that the overrepresentation of students of color in special education reinforces racial hierarchies, Annamma et al. (2013) discuss various areas that are under researched and are potential avenues for the future of DisCrit. They argue that “the under-representation of Asian Americans, which problematically allows them to be seen as a homogenized ‘model’ minority (Lee, 2009)” (p. 8). Outside of DisCrit, there is much literature discussing the damaging and camouflaging impacts of the model minority myth, which presents Asian Americans as a successful, upwardly mobile, although homogenized group. In this final section, I discuss the gaps in DisCrit literature when it comes to exploring the intersections of dis/ability and being Asian American. I then present a brief overview of current literature that discusses the experiences of Asian American students and the impacts of the model minority myth. Lastly, I close with the future trajectory of my work and the contributions it may make in the DisCrit literature.

Since the inception of DisCrit, little work has explicitly explored the ways that Asian American students who are also identified as dis/abled through a DisCrit lens. Although pieces such as Hatt (2016) briefly mentions Asian Americans, and Connor et al. (2019) lists Asian Americans as part of the discussion on the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, little research centralizes the stories and experiences of Asian American dis/abled students. Kolano (2016), Leonardo and
Broderick (2011), and Broderick and Leonardo (2016) do an artful job of considering smartness and goodness as property and cultural wealth and carefully convey the experiences of Asian American students in relation to whiteness. The authors demonstrate the ways in which Asian American students have been taken up by dominant white culture in ways that continue to pit them against other students of color. Similar ideas can be seen within Ford (1998) and Ford and Grantham (2003) where Asian Americans are briefly mentioned in their overrepresentation within gifted education in contrast with African American, Hispanic American, and American Indian students who are significantly underrepresented within gifted education. Yet, these works make little effort to challenge the problems of Asian Americans being overrepresented within gifted education and very absent from the literature on students of color in special education. Lastly, it can be argued that none of these works take up a DisCrit lens or look extensively at the intersections of dis/ability and being Asian American.

Through the lens of DisCrit, multiple variables are made visible that cannot be seen using other theoretical frameworks. Similarly, to the efforts of Intersectionality, DisCrit aims to take into consideration socially constructed identities such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. and acknowledges that discrimination towards all identities are endemic to society and culture. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) state, “If racism were merely isolated, unrelated, individual acts, we would expect to see at least a few examples of educational excellence and equity together in the nation’s public schools" (55). The presence and persistence of racism in and out of school, is mirrored by the locations of perceived success by Asian Americans. In a review of the literature on the impact of the model minority myth, Tran and Birman (2010) found that while much data
emphasizes the success of Asian Americans in academic performance, it may “potentially mask the inequalities that exist outside of the academic realm including gaps in occupational prestige or income for equal educational experiences” (p. 107). Similarly, Sue and Okazaki (1990) discussed why Asian American academic success cannot exclusively be caused by their cultural values. They state that the exclusion of Asian Americans from opportunities in professional areas such as politics, sports, and entertainment may suggest that the sociopolitical context may explain the motivation for striving for academic success. While this foundational work is incredibly important, by not employing a DisCrit framework, many factors and additional questions are left unexplored. This is where my work will fill this gap in the DisCrit literature, exploring, simultaneously the experiences of Asian American students who are dis/abled.

In considering the future pathways of my own work, all the individual tenets of DisCrit have clear lines of inquiry with dis/abled Asian American students and generously inform my thinking about ways to structure my project. In this section, I aim to explore how some of the DisCrit tenets contribute to the ways in which I consider my preliminary work that focuses on the intersections of being Asian American and labeled as (or embracing) dis/ability.

Tenet one focuses on the ways that race and ability are mutually constitutive processes, that neither on their own can explain why Asian American students are underrepresented within special education. Relatedly, tenet five considers the historical and legal aspects of dis/ability and race and how both are used as ways to manage race and ability, through denial or granting of rights. When taken together, these tenets
significantly inform my work and provide a specific context through which I can situate my findings.

Throughout the course of the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, Asian Americans faced vastly differing levels of rights in the United States. Beginning with the early immigration of Asians to California during the 1850s, Asian immigrants faced crushing anti-Asian sentiments and legislation aimed at slowing or halting immigration and managing the movement of Asian workers already in the United States. Similarly, governments and municipalities used dis/ability to target Asian immigrants and manage others viewed as different through their implementation of ugly laws, or unsightly beggar ordinances (Baynton, 2001; Schweike, 2009). These harsh forms of discrimination culminated with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which continued in varying forms until 1943.

The political and social opinions on Asian Americans shifted throughout the 20th century as Asian American value and worth, both economically and socially, shifted in the eyes of the white dominant culture. Shortly after World War II, Asian Americans were seen as a tool for racial management in the United States as they were quickly identified as the “model minority” and held in contrast to African Americans and other minority populations (Kurashige, 2016; Peterson, 1966; U.S. News and World Report, 1966; Yang, 2004). The model minority myth continued to take hold throughout the remainder of the 20th century as seen through the publication of multiple popular articles highlighting the academic achievements and economic contributions of Asian Americans (Brand, 1987; New York Times, 1970).
Understanding the origins of the model minority myth and contextualizing the position of Asian American students within that history, per the tenets of DisCrit, allows me to question the sociocultural underpinnings of the education system within the United States. Could such a long-held history and myth readily adopted by the dominant white culture, potentially explain the lack of research on dis/abled Asian American students and their diminished presence within special education? If DisCrit aims to bring volume to voices often overlooked and silenced specifically within the communities of dis/abled students of color, isn’t the lack of scholarship bringing light to the experiences of dis/abled Asian American students just further perpetuating the damaging narrative of the model minority stereotype?

With extreme caution, I theorize that due to the camouflaging effects of the model minority myth, Asian American students may not be identified with disabilities or in need of additional academic support. This speculation is offered with caution due to the misleading and problematic work offered by Morgan et al. (2015) which suggests that students of color are underrepresented within special education, “Minority children were less likely than otherwise similar White, English-speaking children to be identified as disabled and so to receive special education services.” (278) Although this work was quickly and strongly contested by numerous scholars who identified the flaws and concerns with Morgan et al.’s piece (Collins et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016), it still has gained popularity and recognition by the media and popular culture. This problematic work actively takes up a positivistic stance that ignores the structural racism enacted upon students of color leading to their overrepresentation in special education (Connor et al., 2019). Rather, my assertion that Asian Americans are being underrepresented within
special education is in direct opposition to the philosophical position taken by Morgan et al. as it acknowledges the real power of racism and ableism embedded in society. This position is made visible through tenet one and tenet six of DisCrit.

Tenet one proposes that “the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy” (Annamma et al., 2013, 11). Within the context of my work, the idea of “normalcy” is the positive positioning of Asian Americans within American society and culture. Connectedly, tenet six identifies whiteness and ability as property and attributes gains for people of color with dis/abilities because of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens. This concept can be seen through the shifting positioning of Asian Americans throughout the 20th century. Prior to World War II, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans were subject to legal, political, and economical exclusion and otherwise marked as “definitively not-white.” (Wu, 2013, 2) As the 20th century continued and the United States entered the post-WWII era, the political and economic ambitions and interests of white, American culture shifted, so too did the opinions of Asian Americans. “A host of stakeholders resolved this dilemma by the mid-1960s with the invention of a new stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority--a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and definitively not-black.” (Wu, 2013, p. 2)
**Related Critical Theories**

It is important to note that, similarly to DisCrit, multiple theoretical frameworks have emerged to supplement, complement, and expand Critical Race Theory. Most relevant to the work this study undertakes is AsianCrit. While the earliest forms of CRT largely discussed race in a Black-White binary, scholars identifying a need for a more nuanced examination of Asian American and Pacific Islander experiences within the field of Critical Race Theory and to problematize being “represented by African Americans and whites in contemporary discussions about race relations and in the underlying struggle for civil rights.” (Gee, 1999, p. 764) Since the call for inclusion of a more AAPI centered critical theory, scholars have utilized AsianCrit to “illuminate the differential racialization between Asian Americans and other People of Color, among Asian American ethnic groups.” (Curammeng, Buenavista, and Cariaga, 2017, p. 2) Specifically, scholars have also provided an AsianCrit framework to expand the widely accepted CRT tenets. (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Museus and Iftikar, 2013; Iftikar and Museus, 2018) The tenets within AsianCrit are also complementary of those put forth within Intersectionality and DisCrit, accenting the importance of an understanding on the history of critically oriented work in the United States. Additionally of note, the establishing of additional frameworks such as DesiCrit emphasizes the idea that ‘Asian American’ as a feasible group title is problematic.
Advancing the Frameworks

In much of the scholarship on Intersectionality, particularly Intersectionality and education research, the experiences and identities of Asian American students are difficult to find. There is some intersectional work dedicated to the experiences of Asian immigrants (Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin, 2013; Purkayastha, 2010), work simply encouraging further exploration of Asian Americans experiences (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Wu, 2012), and similarly to Crenshaw’s (1989) initial work offering Intersectionality as an analytical tool and theory, Asian women and employment discrimination (Wei, 1996; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). Very few studies related to Asian Americans explicitly utilizing an intersectional framework can be found within the field of education and/or dis/ability studies. Further, no work that is contemporary or current specifically focuses on applying an intersectional analysis on the lived experiences of Asian American students labeled by systems of power as having a dis/ability. In many instances, Asian Americans are mentioned as an aside when considering the experiences of people of color or a group to explore at a later time, rather than being the sole focus of a study or article.

Intersectionality also complements the ways of thinking founded within DisCrit. Both theories push scholars to consider the multifaceted lives of people with the stance that all aspects of one's identity can never be examined exclusively from the others. Within the field of DisCrit, a framework which shares a theoretical lineage with and was formed intentionally to address a shortcoming of Intersectionality, there are similar trends with much research briefly identifying Asian Americans as people of color who do
experience some forms of racism and ableism. Yet, there is still a lack of research focusing exclusively on the unique and complicated intersections of Asian American race and dis/ability.

Given the significant void in the intersectional literature directly addressing dis/abled Asian Americans, who certainly experience many other identity categories, it is my hope that my research and project will begin to expand the conversation to include these individuals. Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing population in the United States today and unfortunately also represents one of the least researched and discussed populations (Eligon, 2020). Without adequate and accurate research, Asian Americans and their complex and layered identities will continue to be misunderstood and misidentified by structures of power, likely continuing to perpetuate damaging stereotypes and societal norms.

Ultimately, I hope that my research will reach and impact other education researchers who will help to expand the academy’s understanding of Asian American students as vast and diverse and deserving of continued attention. I also see this work impacting educators of all levels and hope that it will help them reflect on their own inherently unconscious biases and assumptions about Asian Americans.

**Review of Methodological Literature**

Throughout much of the literature providing an overview and analysis of Intersectionality and DisCrit as theoretical frameworks and analytical tools, qualitative research is generously highlighted and utilized. Specifically, ethnography and narrative
inquiry are two methods more frequently cited as best fits in theory and in practice. For this project, I utilized narrative inquiry as my method of choice as it has clear support and positive outcomes as seen in previous literature. Within this section, I will first discuss the ways that both theoretical frameworks offer recommendations for utilizing narrative inquiry as an appropriate method. Then I will provide an overview of the history and development of narrative inquiry.

**Theoretical Frameworks & Methods**

A source of concern in utilizing Intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical method may be the argument that Intersectionality lacks clear methods (Chang & Culp, 2002; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). McCall (2005) attributes the difficulty of outlining clear methods to “the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis.” (p. 1772) Through her own work analyzing existing intersectional research to identify an intersectional methodology, McCall offers three intersectional methodologies all with their own benefits and shortcomings.

The first is called “anticategorical complexity” “because it is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories.” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773) This methodology challenges the social categories that currently exist and are used in various domains of society and culture, claiming that “social life is considered too irreducibly complex...to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing difference.” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773) It is clear
then how the earliest iterations of intersectional research contrived much of the research that falls into this methodological category.

The next intersectional methodology described by McCall is “intracategorical complexity” which “interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself...it acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories.” (2005, pp. 1773-1774) McCall utilizes this name, “intracategorical”, as it identifies the ways that various social groups and individuals embody identities that flow across traditionally defined and accepted boundaries, leaving a richer understanding of their lived experiences yet unexplored.

The last type of intersectional methodology identified is “intercategorical complexity” which “requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions.” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773) Rather than work to oppose or resist the social categories in existence that tend to manage and classify people, the intercategorical approach aims to “expose the relationships between inequality and the categories themselves, and to use categories strategically in the service of displaying the linkages between categories and inequality.” (Nash, 2008, p. 6)

These three intersectional methodologies as named by McCall and enacted by numerous scholars, offer a starting point for utilizing a more defined and repeatable process. I anticipate my own work following the strategies suggested through the intercategorical complexity approach. Although the category of Asian American has
worked in ways that erases the individual experiences of many ethnicities and nationalities, it is a useful and necessary term and category to use in exposing the ways that many Asian Americans may be experiencing inequality within the intersection with dis/ability.

Cho et al. (2013) suggests that an intersectional analysis, “whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline--is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.” (p. 795) Therefore, in working to reconcile these concerns and tensions, I envision the methods that I choose to employ as a positive starting point. Through my methods, I can aim to position my participants in positions of power, supporting them in telling and exploring their own stories and experiences while constantly considering the fluid and transforming ways that identities may be influencing and shifting based on contexts and other individuals.

My project utilized methods often found within an intersectional analysis, exploring the historical socio-cultural powers that precipitated the formation of the model minority myth and ways in which Asian Americans labeled as dis/abled experience systems of education. Works providing an overview of intersectional research to date, highlight the abundant use of ethnographic and narrative methodologies as productive and appropriate while utilizing an intersectional framework (Caldwell, 2010; Collins, 2015; McCall, 2005). To utilize narrative inquiry is logical when considering the ways that quantitative data has erased and hidden the lived experiences and realities of Asian Americans and dis/abled students compared to the rich, descriptive, and individualized stories that can be told through qualitative work. I utilized narrative inquiry with an
organic contribution of tools found within ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews and groups interviews.

Narrative inquiry focuses on the stories that people tell and encourage embracing the unique and complex ways that people come to understand their lives and the world around them. Clandinin (2013) states, “We restory ourselves and perhaps begin to shift the institutional, social, and cultural narratives in which we are embedded.” (p. 34) Ultimately, I believe that the best way to come to understand the ways in which power and inequality impact the lives of individuals participating in my project will be through attentive and meticulous observation, in-depth interviews, and careful analysis of the ways in which they talk about their lives and lived experiences.

Narrative Inquiry

“It is a commonplace to note that human beings both live and tell stories about their living. These lived and told stories and talk about those stories are ways we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other’s help in building our lives and communities.” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44) In reflecting on this sentiment on narrative inquiry, I realize much of my knowledge of and about my family history is centered around moments of storytelling. My earliest memories are of the large family gatherings with an abundance of food spreads, swarms of multiple generations of family members crowding in the kitchen, around tables or strewn across the floor as they loudly laughed and reminisced. Whether they were shared or co-constructed memories, or loud retellings of how an embarrassing event “really” happened, it is a family tradition that our
knowledge and understanding of our present is wholly dependent on our shared family past. That part of our future is intimately tied to the experiences and stories of our earlier generations. This emphasis on collective memory and shared storying throughout my childhood has a clear impact on my decision to use narrative inquiry for my project. How I come to understand myself is linked to how my family has shaped me; I believe in the transformative and transforming power of storytelling.

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology which focuses on the stories that people tell about their lives. Within this method, the words and stories of the informants are at the center of any narrative study which then ensures that the complexities, complications, tensions, and specific contexts are fully conveyed. Data sources within narrative inquiry can include (although this is not an exhaustive list): field notes of shared experience, journal records from the participants in a shared practical setting, in-depth interviews, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, or other artifacts such as lesson plans, newsletters, established rules or principles, picturing, metaphors, or personal philosophies (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Not only is narrative inquiry a method suggested as appropriate within an Intersectionality or DisCrit framework, but it is also productive and explores the rich data within the broader field of education. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) offer:

“We see living an educated life as an ongoing process. People’s lives are composed over time: biographies or life stories are lived and told, retold and relived. For us, education is interwoven with living and with the possibility of retelling our life stories. As we think about our own lives and the lives of teachers and children with whom we engage, we see possibilities for growth and change. As we learn to tell, to listen and to respond to teachers’ and children’s stories, we imagine significant educational consequences for children and teachers in schools and for faculty members in universities through more mutual relations between
schools and universities. No one, and no institution, would leave this imagined future unchanged.” (pp. 246-247)

Human experience is an individual and socially contextualized and constructed phenomenon. There is no way to measure a storied or lived experience, to boil down a life to a number or quantity. These lives must be told and re-told, constructed through conversation and experience with others. Lives are shaped through experience and interaction with others, and it is the job of narrative inquirers to work to understand the lives and stories of their informants to share with others. While these stories can never be taken as a generalizable Truth, they offer us perspectives to consider with the hopes that they influence and shift our thinking and actions.

Narrative Inquiry Concerns and Issues

As with any research method, issues, concerns, or shortcomings may arise by narrative inquiry. Issues such as ethical concerns, defining narrative and stories, generalizability, and the validity of stories and interpretations have all been raised as areas to be aware of and addressed in choosing to utilize narrative inquiry in a research study. Within this section, I briefly address some of these concerns and how I plan to address them within my study.

In conducting research, researchers must consider the ethical implications of embarking on a study. Chase (2011) cites Josselson (2007) in discussing the ethical issues within narrative inquiry in emphasizing the need to:

“explain narrative research to participants, the particular problems raised by informed consent forms (which usually assume a researcher can say in advance everything the narrator needs to know), how to work with
institutional review boards (IRBs), and writing research reports. Rather than listing specific rules for ethical practice, she implores researchers to develop an “ethical attitude,” which must be carefully developed in each research situation.” (p. 424)

In building a respect for and with informants, a researcher creates an environment in which informants can comfortably and safely build their stories. This ethical positioning also emphasizes the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry which involves “mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds” which also requires the researchers “to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard.” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4) Similarly, Elbaz-Luwisch (2010) offers the perspective that narrative inquiry has extended beyond just a research methodology and may now consist of the research relationships that “provide a hearing for the stories of people on the margins, whose experience is generally not heard.” (p. 274) Therefore, given the collaborative and sensitive nature of a narrative relationship, I anticipate working to build a reciprocal relationship with my informants. It will be important to be mindful that I do not just “take” the stories from my participants. Rather, it will be necessary to co-construct our understanding of the stories while facilitating a space that is cooperative and affirming, accepting the stories of my informants as a truth to be known and experienced to better convey it to a broader audience.

Some researchers have raised concerns about the broader understandings of the key terms and concepts narrative and stories. Polkinghorne (1995) has suggested that broadly, qualitative researchers have ambiguous understandings of narrative have “led to a lack of clarity and precision in its use.” (p. 5) Similarly, the use of the term “story” “carries a connotation of falsehood or misrepresentation, as in the expression, “That is
only a story.” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5) To combat these misconceptions and ambiguities, I follow in the tradition of previous work that defined narrative as “the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 136), and story as “narratives that combine a succession of incidents into a unified episode.” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 7)

The issue of validity is often called into question with narrative inquiry. Polkinghorne (2007) states, “The purpose of the validation process is to convince readers of the likelihood that the support for the claim is strong enough that the claim can serve as a basis for understanding of and action in the human realm. Narrative research issues claim about the meaning life events hold for people. It makes claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves.” (p. 476) Therefore, it is up to the researcher to ensure that they provide enough evidence gathered from the informants’ stories, observations, and a range of artifacts and anticipate the questions that readers may ask about the plausibility of the research claims. Although the stories as interpreted by researchers do not need to claim that they are the only possible conclusions, it should be clear that “researchers need to cogently argue that theirs is a viable interpretation grounded in the assembled texts.” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 484)

Similarly, the concern about generalizability, or the ability to apply the findings across a broader population or context, arises in the employment of narrative inquiry. Many narrative scholars wholly reject the notion of generalizability and validity rejecting them as “overrated criteria” (Van Maanen, 1998 in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) or suggesting they be given up in favor of “transferability” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989 in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) offer the point that “It is
important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research.” (p. 7)

Therefore, I approach this concern with attention to the ways that dis/abled Asian American populations have been harmed through overgeneralization and homogenization, an effect which this study ultimately hopes to combat. While it could be perceived as productive for the field of education to take potential findings of this study and apply them to all Asian American students, narrative inquiry rejects that effort nor is it my hope or goal. Rather, I consider the words of Clandinin and Rosiek (2006):

“While the starting point for narrative inquiry is an individual’s experience it is also “an exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted - but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others.” (p. 46)

We make sense of the world by relating back to ourselves, therefore, in doing this work, I hope that it gives my audience a signal to pause and consider ways they may connect with or be impacted by the stories shared by the study’s informants, rather than take the findings as an ultimate Truth.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I discussed the ways that Asian Americanness has been taken up by dominant, white culture to manage race within the United States. This idea was also discussed within the formation and sustained use of the model minority myth
and damaging ways that the Asian American identity has shifted away from its original intentions. I then discussed the theoretical frameworks which inform this study; through the employment of Intersectionality and DisCrit, this study aims to consider the multifaceted lives of individuals that occur in highly contextualized and socially constructed ways. Following the introduction of the theoretical frameworks, I offered ways that this study aims to address gaps in the literature which often features the absence of stories from dis/abled Asian American students. In the last section, I introduced narrative inquiry as the selected method for the study, discussing its core elements, potential shortcomings, and ways it will be useful and necessary for the goals of the study.

Within the next chapter, I provide a detailed plan for the way in which the study was conducted by employing narrative inquiry as informed by the theoretical frameworks. The chapter will review the steps and procedures for the project focusing on the research questions, participant recruitment, profiles of the selected participants, and methods for data analysis.
CHAPTER 3

Methods, or How This Project Happened

The goal of this study was to explore the educational experiences of individuals who identify as Asian American and dis/abled in some way, whether self-identified or an identity or label imposed upon them. Within the current field of literature that relates to race and ability within educational spaces, the stories and experiences of Asian American students are largely missing. Often, it is found that Asian American students are discussed through an examination of the negative impacts of the model minority myth within the contexts of both education and society. Across literature discussing the over- and under-representation of students of color in the various areas of special education, Asian Americans are frequently referred to tangentially or briefly, often only to state that they are overrepresented within gifted education or not a featured group of students of color of any notable concern. Much research in the field acknowledges the absence of these voices and calls for additional work to fill that void—this project aims to answer that call. The work in this study responds to the gap in the literature by centering the stories and experiences of Asian American individuals who all experienced struggles within educational systems at various points of their lives. Using narrative inquiry, the participants’ life stories are captured, analyzed, and presented so that we may gain insight on the unique and rarely understood experiences of Asian American students. This chapter discusses the motivation for and use of narrative inquiry for this study, research questions, research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures.
The Essential Need for Stories

The factors impacting the lack of literature focusing on dis/abled Asian Americans may be impossible to definitively determine, yet it is likely that we are observing the impacts of the model minority myth and associations of Asian Americanness with Whiteness. These factors may also affect the ability of Asian American students to receive the academic attention and support that they need and deserve, which supports the necessity of conducting this study. As proposed within the literature utilizing DisCrit and Intersectionality as theoretical frameworks, by listening to and working to understand the stories of historically marginalized peoples, we can understand the ways that dominant white values may be infiltrating aspects of society and misconstruing the lived experiences of communities of color. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to learn about and share the stories and experiences of Asian American students who have faced difficulties in school in hopes of disrupting the presumed stereotypes of Asian American students and call into question the ways we think about dis/ability and race in the United States.

The primary goal of this project is to contribute to the literature on students of color and dis/ability by learning the stories of individuals that are often quieted, silenced, made invisible or misrepresented therefore bringing attention to the ways that Asian Americans are subjectively read within school systems and trouble the impacts of the model minority myth. Therefore, this study takes cues from the work of Projects in Humanization (PiH) (San Pedro and Kinloch, 2017; Kinloch and San Pedro, 2014). PiH “center the daily experiences (e.g., storytelling, story gathering, relationship building,
reciprocal engagements) we have with people in ways that, on the one hand, emphasize our shared desires for racial, linguistic, educational, political, and social justice in schools and communities and, on the other hand, emphasize those same desires in our professional and personal lives” (San Pedro and Kinloch, 2017, p. 374S). PiH emphasize a departure from “normalized Western constructs of social science” towards research that centers the experiences and stories of participants in relation to those of the researchers. San Pedro and Kinloch emphasize the necessity of understanding the problematic historic past of research conducted on and about Indigenous communities and other communities of color and, through PiH, advocate for research approaches that centralize the generative relationships between researchers and participants that create valuable shared knowledge and collaborative learning. With the values and efforts central to PiH in mind, this project aimed to utilize narrative inquiry as a complimentary method that will continue the relational knowledge building through story telling.

In conducting this research study as a narrative inquiry, it not only elevates the stories and experiences of the participants but also works to understand my own past educational experiences through my discussions with participants. The purpose of narrative inquiry, as stated by Clandinin and Rosiek (2006), emphasizes “seeking ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others” (p. 42). As this study has its roots embedded within my personal and family history, the goals and purposes of the study beginning there, to enrich and enhance my understanding of my own and my family’s experiences. As much of my former and current responsibilities live in educating students and future teachers, I also see this study impacting my classroom practices in training the next generation of teachers. I aim to bring attention to the ways
Asian American students see, read, interact with and come to understand their educational experiences as situated within a racialized society. I hope that this project challenges the problematic “norms” that have been established by dominant narratives and pervasive stereotypes about Asian American students.

**Why Narrative Inquiry?**

Human experience is an individual and socially contextualized and constructed phenomenon. There is no way to measure a storied or lived experience, to boil down a life to a number or statistic. Lives must be told and retold as they are constructed in conversation and experience with others, “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Lives are shaped through experience and interaction with others, and it is the job of narrative researchers to work to understand the lives and stories of their participants to share them with others. While these stories may not be taken as a generalizable truth, they offer us perspectives to consider and to shift, impact, or expand our own thinking and actions. The ontological and epistemological beliefs held by narrative inquiry align with this perspective, centering the experiences and understandings of individuals as valuable knowledge, that by “accessing the perspectives of several members of the same social group about some phenomena can suggest some cultural patterns of thought and action for that group as a whole” (Glesne, 2016, p. 9). This study aimed to extend the learning gained from understanding the “patterns of thought and action” of Asian Americans by suggesting there is much for all educators to learn from these insights.
Before undertaking a project utilizing a narrative inquiry, it is important to understand the core truths and beliefs of the methodology. As one of the foremost researchers on narrative inquiry within education, D. Jean Clandinin offers us a long history of publications and collaborations discussing what narrative inquiry is, why it is useful in education research, and how it can be utilized. According to Clandinin (2016), “narrative inquirers understand experience as a narratively composed phenomenon. Narrative inquiry is thus methodology and phenomenon, an understanding that is central to what we mean by narrative inquiry” (p. 16). Informed by Dewey’s views about the nature of experience, the methodology reinforces the belief that experience is relational, that through our interactions, we are continuously shaped by the world around us, that there is no version of the self or lived lives that can be isolated from the world around us (Clandinin, 2006, 2016; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013). Experiences are continuously informed and shaped through the contexts in which we are situated, “what you see (and hear, feel, think, love, taste, despise, fear, etc.) is what you get. That is all we ultimately have in which to ground our understanding. And that is all we need” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 41). Within the relationships created through a narrative inquiry, both the participants and the inquirer mutually construct understandings about past, present, and future experiences as they constantly inform and support new understandings with one another. Narrative inquiry enables us to begin to unpack experiences with our participants to not only help them reflect and understand but also for us inquirers to do the same for ourselves and others.

Clandinin (2016) defined narrative inquiry as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important
knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). With the voices and stories of people of color often quieted, silenced or made invisible, honoring their voices and stories as vital knowledge to pursue, and come to understand is necessary work. Beyond the individual story or stories of a few participants, Clandinin emphasizes the ways in which these stories are situated within broader social and cultural contexts, “the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals’ experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 18). These beliefs align not only with the overall goals of this project, but particularly within the context of the theoretical foundations of the project as well. Work that employs an intersectional and DisCrit lens must make considerable efforts to contextualize the participants and their experiences and understands that much of society is constructed and constituted by dominant culture.

Connor (2006) offers a rich example of utilizing narrative inquiry to share the story of educational experience of a student named Michael. Weaving the words of Michael’s stories into a poetic form, in collaboration with Michael himself, followed by a detailed intersectional analysis, Connor offers a roadmap for other narrative inquirers to artfully present vivid, contextualized stories of experience. “Using narrative to know a person in a particular context is my prime interest; narrative elevates ordinary occurrences to important experiences, worthy of careful study and deliberation” (Connor, 2006, p. 155). In narrative inquiry tradition, the seemingly ordinary stories of an individual’s experience offer us a broader exploration of ways in which power, difference, and oppression have come to work in educational spaces.
Employing Narrative Inquiry

In conducting a narrative inquiry research project, a researcher employs many tools from other qualitative methods. Common forms of data collection include field notes of shared experience, journal records (from the participants and/or the inquirer), interviews (most commonly semi- or unstructured), letter writing, autobiographical or biographical writings, or storytelling. It is suggested that storytelling may be the most central aspect of conducting a narrative inquiry as “individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are stories about the self. They are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding, and they provide answers to the question ‘Who am I?’” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 136). It can be argued that the telling of stories is common across all methods of qualitative research. However, narrative inquiry differs in its commitment to focus on a participant’s experience not just in relation to others but also in relation to specific social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Not only are the stories situated within a social and temporal context, so too are they constructed within the inquiry itself in conversation with the researcher and participant, but a goal also echoed within the work of Projects in Humanization (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017).

Additionally, Chase (2011) offers an extended definition of narrative inquiry as a way of coming to understand a phenomenon “through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, or organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events
over time” (p. 421). Though using similar tools to other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry approaches the gathering, organizing of, and analysis of data in varying ways.

**Research Questions**

Given the absence of work focusing on Asian American students with dis/abilities within the literature on students of color and dis/ability, the primary goal of this project is to contribute to this field of study and begin to offer stories from voices not often heard. Through this work, I aim to bring attention to the ways that Asian American students are subjectively read within school systems or related educational contexts and trouble the pervasive impacts of the model minority myth. The absence of work that focuses on the negative impacts of the model minority myth and Asian American students with dis/abilities only allows white dominant narratives and beliefs to continue within school and societal cultures.

While the initial targeted audience of this project will likely be other educational researchers, my goal is to have the findings and stories generated from the project reach future and current classroom teachers. Teachers have a tremendous impact on the educational experiences of students which will likely continue to influence their self-concept and perceptions of the world around them. Teachers have the opportunity to either continue damaging narratives and beliefs about students of color or work to disrupt the white centered and supremacist narratives that have existed in this country for centuries. The goals of this project aim to create impactful knowledge that will contribute
understandings about how communities of color, specifically the Asian American
community, are positioned by white narratives.

Research Questions

In response to the missing narratives of Asian American students within the
discussion of dis/ability, the research problem and purpose of this study, I explored four
research questions within this project.

- How do Asian American students who experienced difficulties in school reflect
  on and understand their experiences?
- In what ways do Asian American students understand and perceive the labels and
  identities (imposed or self-proclaimed) of Asian American and/or dis/abled or
  struggling?
- What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled students identify as having
  impacted their educational experiences?
- How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American students inform
  educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems?

Research Design

Within this section, I discuss the research design for the project as informed by the
preceding discussion on narrative inquiry methodology and methods. I will begin by
discussing the sample type, targeted population, and recruitment of participants for
inclusion in the study followed by data collection methods and data analysis.
Study Participants

My target population for participants were self-identified Asian Americans who have had or have difficulties in education in any self-identified or imposed capacity. With the understanding that dis/ability is something that is culturally constructed, I acknowledge that some individuals may not take ownership of a dis/abled identity that is imposed on them by systems of power such as educational systems. Therefore, I chose to word my participant description as anyone who believes that they had or have difficulties or have been told that they have struggled in various aspects of an educational context.

Due to my proximity and relationships with the university, (upon receipt of project approval from the Penn State Institutional Review Board) I initially sought participants within the Penn State community, both at University Park and commonwealth campuses where I have personal connections. I created a flyer and recruitment email describing the nature of the research project and sent it out to the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC), Offices of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (which go by varying names) across all the academic colleges, appropriate student organizations with whom I already shared a relationship as well as those identified in the student organization directory, and my personal connections at Penn State commonwealth campuses. I also utilized the Study Finder made accessible through the Institutional Review Board at Penn State. Through this first round of recruitment, I had numerous individuals answer my call for participants who completed a brief Microsoft form with general contact information, educational information, and background information including self-identify ethnicity, generation status, and disability status or description of
struggles or giftedness with their schooling experiences. Unfortunately, no individual who responded to the form either met the inclusion criteria or responded to my contact email describing the study.

Next, I utilized social media to recruit participants for my study by posting my recruitment flyer. This proved to be the most useful form of recruitment as I found two of my participants through these online relationships and snowball sampling whereby friends shared my original post which then connected me with two additional participants.

The study participants consisted of four individuals ranging in age from 22 to 60 years of age. All individuals identified themselves as Asian Americans who received the entirety of their education in the United States and experienced significant academic difficulties at various points of their academic careers. All participants spent various points of their lives living in a range of regions around the United States including Hawaii, California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves to maintain anonymity throughout the study. However, all participants elected to have a pseudonym chosen for them. The table below presents the participants’ basic demographic information:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Current Residence</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Dis/ability Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waverly</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Southern California</td>
<td>She/her/they/them</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety, ADHD, Autism spectrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dory</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Filipino American and Italian American</td>
<td>Northeast Virginia</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Chronic migraines, ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Filipino American</td>
<td>Northern California</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>No “official” diagnosis; struggled throughout post-secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>Central Pennsylvania</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Narcolepsy, Depression, Anxiety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Demographic breakdown of participants

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected in four stages. First, I screened potential participants through a survey and short response form which assessed general biographical information and characteristics pertinent to inclusion criteria for the study with the goal of identifying participants who were a best fit for the project. Second, I conducted initial, individual semi-structured interviews with each participant where we began building a relationship, got to know each other’s personal and family histories, and discussed various educational experiences with attention to moments of tension and struggle (see Appendix A for individual interview protocol). Third, I conducted a focus group interview unfortunately consisting of three out of the four participants (see Appendix B for focus group interview protocol). One participant had a personal emergency arise the day of the focus group and could not participate. Lastly, I conducted a final, individual interview with each participant in which they reflected on their discussions during the focus group interview, allowed me to ask follow-up questions based on their responses in their initial interview
and the focus group interview, and provided an opportunity for participants to share any final thoughts, stories, and questions (see Appendix C for final interview protocol).

Data was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and then reviewed by myself and my participants for accuracy. Then the transcripts were analyzed for common themes or threads as described by Rogers (2007), examined for areas of commonality within the stories told by participants. Participants were given the option to review and discuss the initial round of thematic analysis. All participants were candid in the limitations of their schedules and reported feeling overwhelmed by the current pandemic, personal and professional demands and declined the offer to further review the data or my emerging data analysis.

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of Asian American students who face or have faced academic struggles and imposed identities in educational settings in the hopes of broadening the inclusivity of knowledge within the field of educational research. Often, the voices and stories of individuals who identify as both Asian American and dis/abled or struggling in some ways are absent or made to be invisible within educational spaces. Throughout the analysis of the data gathered for this study, five main themes emerged and helped to answer the guiding research questions: 1) How do Asian American students who experienced difficulties in school reflect on and understand their experiences? 2) In what ways do Asian American students understand and perceive the labels and identities (imposed or self-proclaimed) of Asian American and/or dis/abled or struggling? 3) What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled students identify as having impacts on their educational experiences? 4) How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American students inform educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems?
Analysis Process

As guided by the frameworks of DisCrit and Intersectionality and utilizing a narrative inquiry method, it was essential that I focus on the words and the stories of each of my participants. Their generosity in time, vulnerability, and thoughtfulness was abundant and could fill numerous volumes of a dissertation. Therefore, not all their stories and experiences are included here, rather, the stories that most closely contributed to the answering of the research questions were included.

Coding the Data

In working to arrive at new understandings through the research questions, five broad themes emerged. To arrive at these themes, I completed multiple rounds of analysis. As I began the analysis process, I composed brief memos of initial thoughts, reactions, and reflections immediately after each interview. I compiled the notes, scribblings, and blurbs that I jotted down during each interview typically next to each interview question that I had printed out. These rough notes, or “preliminary jottings” (Saldaña, 2013) also contributed to the content of each memo. At the conclusion of each memo, I highlighted potential follow-up questions for the group and final interviews. Once the transcripts came back from the transcriptionist, I thoroughly reviewed them for accuracy compared to the recorded video and pre-coded throughout that review process. All participants were provided copies of the transcript and video files and invited to review both and revise previous statements, provide additional insight to their responses, have sections omitted from the project, and generally provide their approval moving forward. All individuals reviewed their initial interviews, two participants reviewed the group interview, and only one participant reviewed their final interview. All participants
were clear that they were unable to participate in the analysis process of the project due to their work commitments, family demands, and/or increasing stressors due to the pandemic.

To complete the first round of coding of the data, I utilized “lumper coding” as described by Saldaña (2013) which allowed me to broadly categorize passages of text from the participant interviews. I used my memos to prompt and guide my thinking before and during reviewing the transcripts, drawing attention to sections of the interviews or topics that I noticed the participants frequently referencing or returning to. After this first round, I noted the common themes that emerged across all the participants. Often many of these themes could be collected under a broader theme. Next, I organized the passages that were identified as belonging to the various themes within a data matrix which was held within a Microsoft Word document.

I reviewed the data and themes that I organized using a data matrix and considered their relevancy to answering the research questions and if their assigned themes were accurate, eliminating any data selections or themes that did not directly work to answer the research questions. Then, I began the next round of coding where I revisited the transcripts, previously selected data, and themes. During this round I selected additional data sections that stood out in relation to the research questions, expanded previously identified themes with additional subthemes, combined themes, and reallocated data selections to different themes based on new understandings. Throughout the entire process, the research questions were posted on my computer and on multiple pages in my researcher notebook so that the questions were the constant focus and determining factor of what data would be considered for inclusion in the study.

All coding was done by hand on the transcripts, which were printed out, utilizing colored pens and highlighters. Once data was selected for inclusion in that coding round’s
data matrix, it was put into a table using Microsoft word. The first column of the table had each of the broad themes and corresponding subthemes. The remaining columns contained the relevant data from each of the participants. This format allowed for direct comparison of data across all participants. (see Table 3-2 for an example of the data matrix structure)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2: Role of Ethnicity</th>
<th>Waverly</th>
<th>Yvette</th>
<th>Dora</th>
<th>Tara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Asian Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Reactions to being Asian and American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Example of data matrix

Trustworthiness

Within this section, I discuss the ‘trustworthiness’ of this study, “Like other qualitative methods, narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research.” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7) Given the values held within narrative inquiry in centering the stories of participants to bring volume to historically marginalized voices, I took direction from Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) substitution of ‘trustworthiness’ over ‘validity’, an approach that uses measures of “transferability”, “dependability”, or “credibility” when evaluating a study. Thus, through this project, I do not suggest that the findings of the study will be broadly applicable to the experiences of all Asian American students who may struggle within school. Rather, I
consider the ways that the narratives of the study’s participants may allow us to consider the impacts of social constructs such as race and dis/ability on the schooling experiences of Asian Americans.

**Affordances and Limitations**

As outlined in previous sections, one of the strengths of employing a narrative inquiry methodology to a research study is the foregrounding of the stories of the participants within a clearly stated social, cultural, and temporal context. It offers participants, inquirers, and audiences a chance to deeply come to know an individual or small group through their own words and stories while also observing and questioning a broader context or concern. Narrative inquiry allows for “more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition and solution.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) As I reflected on the storytelling process of my participants, I found that although their retellings were initially prompted by a posed question, in the process of these retellings they arrived at conclusions that neither of us expected. The richness of these multifaceted stories was made possible through a narrative inquiry method, therefore, the quality of the data gathered for this project was surely enhanced.

However, narrative inquiry also has limitations. As highlighted by some researchers, narrative research has come to have an ambiguous use and understanding within qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995). This ambiguity has led to a wide range of work that presents itself as narrative research using
varying methods and resulting in issues of validity and a consistent method. Within this project specifically, it may be considered a limitation that there are only four study participants. Within narrative inquiry, researchers are less concerned about the generalizability of the findings and rather put emphasis on the richness of the stories and experiences of the participants (Peräkylä, 2011; Riessman, 2011). Additionally, one participant, Yvette, is significantly older than the other participants. Despite her age, Yvette was selected to participate in the study due to the overlap in her educational experiences with two other participants, Tara and Dory, who were also attending graduate school at the same time as Yvette. Since the major focus of this project is on the educational experiences of the participants with an additional goal of featuring oft marginalized voices, I believed that including Yvette’s stories would be incredibly important and valuable. Yvette’s generation status, being first generation American and first generation for attending college, was also relevant and a factor she has in common with Waverly and Tara. Hence, inclusion of Yvette also provides an opportunity for future research focusing on multigenerational perspective.

Participant Portraits

As seen through the work of David Connor (2015), I aimed to create individual “portraits in progress” for each of my participants. All the language throughout their profiles are taken directly from our interviews together or their responses in the initial recruitment survey. In writing the profiles of the participants in this way, I aim to center their stories and highlight their voices and self-concepts. I work to avoid making
assumptions or judgements about their experiences and identities by ensuring that the participants are speaking for themselves. Using their own words from our various interviews, I created profiles of each participant describing themselves, their families, friends, their dis/abilities and difficulties, and overall reflections on experiences they deemed most important to better understand who they are. The data used to construct these portraits originated from across of our interviews together and selected by me to best represent how I came to know and understand each of the individuals. Unfortunately, none of the participants were able to participate in the analysis aspect of the research process. Most cited the stressors of their work, family life, and increasing concerns around the pandemic as factors impeding their ability to participate further in the project.

Waverly Portrait

So, my family and I were kind of a small family. Back in 2000, my mom, and my brother, and I came to America. My dad was already in America because he was in the [Vietnam] war and so, he was already an American citizen and here before any of us were. My mom and my brother had to study to get their citizenship. But I was granted citizenship pretty early on since I was so young. I grew up in Seattle, Washington for about 19 or so years, that’s kind of the place I consider growing up in. I’m 24 now and I recently moved to California to live with my partner.

My family is very traditionally Vietnamese, I think I was the only one that really assimilated to American culture and American values. Whereas my brother, and my mom, and my dad have always kind of held these more traditional family values and kind
of views. I also identify as queer and non-binary and use she/they pronouns. So it was really difficult for me growing up and realizing a lot of these things about me. I’m not fully out to my family yet either. I’ve kind of always assumed that they sort of knew because a lot of the traditions that we had at home—mainly me kind of having to perform more feminine roles and traditions—I would always kind of be very apprehensive about it. And that sort of seeped into my academia as well growing up.

I had a lot of difficulties keeping up with my tasks. I struggled with depression and a lot of social anxiety growing up. I was enrolled in therapy I think as early as I want to say seventh grade, in middle school. So since then, I’ve been pretty much in therapy and my family wasn’t a huge part of that. Whenever I went to therapy or whenever I was struggling in school, it was sort of a kind of hushed part. They didn’t really like to mention it with one another, but especially not with other family members or friends and family. That kind of support that I needed was always outside of my family. More recently, in the last year or so that I have self-diagnosed as being on the spectrum and as well as ADHD. A lot of these things make a little bit more sense as to why I have struggled a lot in school and also feeling very different amongst my peers.

Tara Portrait

My mom is full Japanese, and my dad is half Japanese and half Korean. They were born and raised in Japan and then they came to the U.S. for college. I grew up with both of them up until around high school before my parents separated and divorced. I was
born in Los Angeles and lived there until I was six and then we moved to Hawaii. I went
to private school like my whole life. Preschool I went to Ocean Shores, I obviously don’t
remember much of it. Then I went to a Lutheran school and then halfway through first
grade we moved to Hawaii. Then I spent the rest of first grade at another Lutheran school
and that was part of the same school system with the high school. I think my parents just
wanted me to go to like a private Christian school and then, Lutheran was just the only
option around there. A lot of things that we did at home were like Japanese culture or
Japanese tradition. There’s this one thing my mom did where she would put on like a
demon mask and I would throw crackers at her or something. We definitely had the thing
where like we had mochi every New Year’s. I kind of miss that too. I mean, the good
thing about living in Hawaii is the Asian culture is everywhere.

I was actually really nervous to go to a PWI for college because, you know, like
whites are the minorities in Hawaii. So, we definitely have our prejudices. It’s just, it
exists. There’s no going around it. I know a lot of the white people that are in Hawaii are
mostly tourists that don’t really know what they’re doing. And they’ll say like some
things that are culturally inappropriate. So I came here [the PWI] with the assumption
that that’s kind of how everyone would be. Not too far off of what I thought. I didn’t have
issues with my ethnicity until this year [2021] and I feel like a lot of it started when
COVID started. So I feel like everything was pretty great until COVID started and then
all of a sudden, things were a little bit more hostile. Or at least they feel more hostile than
they should be.

I was diagnosed with narcolepsy about a year ago and my depression and anxiety
started to become an issue in the summer of 2018. I had an incident in 2018 and that was
in between sophomore and junior year. So right before I was going to start my major
classes and my mom came up to see me. And she said like, “No wonder you’re
depressed. Look at this place. I have an idea, come back to Hawaii, let’s make you
happy.” She was really hesitant about letting me stay up here because she came up here
herself and she said, “I’m depressed just being here.” It’s hard because like they don’t
understand that it’s invalidating feelings. They think, you know, well, like I think their
intention is good and that’s why they don’t see a problem with it. So, it’s a huge like I
don’t know what to call it. But it’s like this huge disconnect between like what they are
actually doing for us and what we need from them.

Dory Portrait

I grew up with my mom, my dad, my brother, and my sister. But we’ve also spent
a lot of time with all of my grandparents, and a lot of my aunts, and uncles, and cousins.
I’m the oldest. I’m 25. My brother’s 24 and my sister’s 23. I’m Filipino and Italian and I
probably have little percentages of other European. I grew up in the northeast,
specifically New Jersey, definitely suburban. We always really focused on school and
doing well in school. And like my mom wanted to make sure that like we all like loved to
read. We went to private preschool—all three of us. And then, from kindergarten I just
went to a Catholic private school from kindergarten to fourth grade. After the end of my
fourth grade year, starting fifth grade, I switched to public school. I was in public middle
and high school from fifth to 12th grade. And then, I went back to a private university for
college. I guess technically my middle and high school were diverse, but like black or
white, like I didn’t have a ton of Asian friends growing up. I mean, my brother and I would always talk about how weird it is that we were the only Asian people in high school. I just acutely remember being the only Asian person in high school. I know I was practically the only like “ethnic” friend. I don’t specifically remember meeting another Filipino person until I went to college. But at the end of the day it was still like a predominantly white institution.

Middle school and high school were simply horrible, I cannot give you the nitty gritty details because, you know, I’ve blocked out the trauma. In middle school I was diagnosed with migraines. And like that really affected how much I’d go to school and how well I would do on my assignments because it’s hard to do well on tests when you’re about to vomit. And I was also diagnosed with ADHD. So, that was also like coming into play especially in high school when you had to start reading a lot more. That was really difficult for me because I can read very well, but sometimes I just run into comprehension issues where I can read the same sentence three times and I just won’t remember it at all. Even though I had multiple doctors notes from multiple different doctors saying this was what I needed, they [the middle school and high school administrators and teachers] were like, “We don’t think so.” I think that because it was just invisible…

College got better in terms of like I knew how to cope with my ADHD and my brain a lot more so I was able to do a lot better in school. But I had accommodations starting I think it was seventh or eighth grade I started getting accommodations for tests. And then it looked the same in college except I would take exams in the Academic
Support Center. College was a lot better and now I love my master’s program. Now I’m getting my master’s so I do that part-time afterwards in Government Security Studies.

The big difference between me and my sister is that I can pass for white and she cannot. I would say that definitely benefitted me because I know my sister has had a lot more negative experiences regarding race than I have. People have told me I’m not real Asian. I’m like, “Okay, please explain to me what I am then.” Like someone explain to me what not a real Asian is. What does that even mean? I don’t know. Like I feel like people identify Asians as like Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and that’s it. To some people, like that’s simply all of Asia. And I’m like, “Okay, so I’m not really Asian if I’m not Chinese, Japanese, if I’m exotic. I’ll just tell people I’m fake Asian then.” Look at the Philippines on a map and tell me where you think it is. It’s mainly white people. I think it’s because they associate being Asian as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

Yvette Portrait

I was born in 1961. I’m half-Filipino and I guess the other half’s kind of German. So, I started grade school in the late 60’s. And I have an older sister who was born in 1957, so a few years older than me. And she was born in the Philippines. My mom was a single mother there before she met my dad. And my dad brought the two of them here to the West Coast, to Berkeley. So they lived there for about two and a half three years before my dad moved them out to the suburbs. And the suburbs in 1963 were not kind to people of color, you know. And my mom looked different. My sister has cerebral palsy,
so she has, you know, physical disability. And again, slightly invisible in that she’s never had to use a wheelchair or crutches. So, once she became of grade school age, she was placed in a special school for the disabled. And at the time, I don’t remember if it was for both developmentally disabled kids and physically disabled. I don’t know if they just threw them all in one school. I’m not aware of that at this point. But in 1970, when she was 12-13, she was mainstreamed into a regular junior high school. And she was the only Asian. And she was the only student of disability.

So you can imagine over 50 years ago for a child to go into that situation where there is absolutely no sensibility whatsoever. You know, people of color or people with disabilities. So that kind of was a marking point for us as a family because of the difficulty she had adapting to that environment. And that kind of affected, I have a younger brother, I’m the middle child. Both my brother and I, with the trauma that she went through being mainstreamed. So, as school goes, as a child, I was your average learner I think. I was terrible at Math, and I excelled in Spelling, and things like that. But, both my parents only went to high school. And so, the expectations placed on us with school were, you know, incredibly high, you know. Get good grades. Don’t fail, you know, do your homework.

And in high school, I did above average, I excelled. Again, I excelled in certain classes and not in others. But you know, it was all about how well boys did, it was the late 60s into the 70s. I had a couple of friends who were super smart, but as a rule, girls and school were not given much credit for anything. I always felt unsure of myself in a classroom, except in things like Choir and Drama. But in harder classes, I would keep my mouth shut. I wouldn’t ask for help. And as I neared the end of high school, you know,
obviously the time comes where you’re going to go to college. And I had three very close friends who were all going away to school, right? So, one went to Cal Poly and a couple of others went to UC-Santa Barbara. And I decided to stay home and go to the local community college. And at that time, community college was completely free. If I had the confidence when I left high school, I think I would’ve tried to get into a four-year institution like my friends did and gone away to school. That’s the trajectory I would’ve taken. But I think I just didn’t have the confidence. I lacked the confidence to go away to school.

So I went to this community college that was very nearby. I’d take class and I’d go to work on an evening shift and I did that for instead of just two years, I ended up being at this junior college for three years. I had an opportunity to go to a small French language school and so did that for two months and that’s what inspired me to major in French. I went to France for those two months and I decided at that point, “Oh okay, I’m going to come back and major in French. And I’ll attend a local California State University” which is in driving distance from where I live. And so, I did get into one of the Cal State schools and my intent was less a bachelor’s than it was to go back to France on an international program. I did okay with the French classes. I was intimidated because the teachers spoke so quickly and I couldn’t always understand them. Again, I did poorly in general ed classes like math and science. And it didn’t occur to me, and it sometimes still doesn’t, to reach out to anyone in the department or in the university, not making myself aware of any kind of services that might be there.

In 2006, I met my current partner and when we first met as you get to know a person, he knew I had the bachelor’s and he asked me, “did you ever think about getting
a master’s degree?” I’m like, “no I can’t do that, I couldn’t get into a master’s program. That’s impossible.” He would every once in a while drop the question, “Why? Well, maybe think about it sometime.” And so I decided to apply to a master’s program at another California State University and there was still fear there. And I did fine, once I was there. I worked hard and I did well even though I lacked certain practical skills as far as being a student. And you know I had deep imposter syndrome. But I was nominated for a diversity fellowship. And it’s specifically aimed at students in low represented groups going into Ph.D. programs, especially in California, Latino, poor working class, probably even DACA students I think. And so I thought, it’s weird because I didn’t own my being half-Filipino. I didn’t own the biracial part of the diversity, but that I’m an older students, that’s how I identified. And I was one of 23 students in the state to receive this fellowship and there was some money to attend conferences and I did a summer research program and so I thought, “Well, okay. I guess then maybe I can do a Ph.D.” and I applied like everyone else to numerous institutions.

I really wanted, I was fixated on “Northeast State” [pseudonym], and I got in, and I, oh, I always felt I got in less for my academic accomplishment and more from one of my recommenders who knew the faculty in the French department there. And I was all gung-ho about it, I think I was more enamored of the fact that, I got into this university. But from the first semester I knew that I was a really tiny fish in a huge pond. I felt so intimidated when I got there. And there was one professor who made the first semester very difficult. And so, there was a bit of you know, you felt the hierarchy—that hierarchy of academia. And so that atmosphere bogged me down. I didn’t know how to take notes well and all the classes were in French. I was more hesitant to speak up and just never felt
at ease in that institution. But academically I just felt completely out of place. At the time, the department wasn’t that diverse at all. There was one other person of color. There was one other student, older students who were in their early thirties, which I wouldn’t consider an older student. I was old enough at the time to be all of my students’ mother and there were a couple of professors young enough to where I could be their mother too. It was just a constant battle with myself to not be found out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the methods for participant recruitment and data collection for the project. I also provided basic demographic information for the four participants as well as their individual profiles constructed by me utilizing their words from the three project interviews. Within the next chapter, I present the data collected, analytical themes formed, and answer the project’s research questions.
CHAPTER 4

Storying Experiences and Searching for Understanding

After reviewing all the data across all participants, multiple rounds of coding, and considering what would be most useful in answering the research questions, five broad themes emerged for final inclusion in the study: 1) Connectedness and Disconnection with Family and Peers 2) Role of Ethnicity 3) Support and Resources 4) Experiences in School 5) Impacts of Dis/ability. Within the next section, each of the five themes and their corresponding subthemes are briefly defined. Then, I provide an in-depth exploration of the themes by first introducing each section with an illustrative sample of data from various participants in keeping with the narrative inquiry-based orientation to understanding the data that I have adopted as a part of this project. Each theme is then described and discussed along with additional examples that effectively illustrate my interpretation of each thematic category. Lastly, answers to the research questions are briefly presented in the conclusion of the chapter.

Identifying the Themes

The five themes selected for inclusion in the study were chosen for their connections to the research questions. As I reviewed and analyzed the data, the participants often provided stories from their experiences that were told in relation to other people in their lives, leading to the development of the first theme. Connectedness and Disconnection with Family and Peers explores the relationships that the participants had with others and the ways that those relationships, in all their complicated forms,
impacted how the participants viewed themselves and their experiences. The theme Role of Ethnicity considers the way that the participants understand their Asian identity and the moments where they shared emotional reactions to identifying as both Asian and American. Support and Resources explores the experiences the participants had while seeking or receiving any forms of support from other people, stories that focused solely on teachers they worked with, and ways that participants found success specifically through the support they received or resources they accessed. Within the theme Experiences in School, I selected data that focused primarily on participant experiences within the physical space of school and the culture and values they perceived within those spaces. Unlike the previous theme that often pertained to people the participants worked or interacted with, Experiences in School focuses more on the participants’ feelings, behaviors, and reactions within the space of school. Lastly, data within Experiencing Dis/ability includes stories where the participants’ dis/abilities or perceived differences are explicitly discussed in their stories. Data within this theme also includes moments where they discussed moments of success or struggles in direct relation to their dis/abilities.

While other themes did arise from the data, only those that directly contributed to answering the research questions were ultimately included. The five themes selected contained data from each participant that contributed rich stories and experiences that helped to offer several perspectives as I worked to develop answers to the questions driving this project. The next section provides an in-depth presentation of data found within each theme.
Connectedness and Disconnection

“I struggled with depression and a lot of social anxiety growing up. And I was enrolled in therapy I think as early as I want to say seventh grade in middle school. So, since then I’ve been pretty much in therapy. And my family wasn’t a huge part of that. Whenever I went to therapy or whenever I was struggling in school, it was sort of a kind of hushed part. They didn’t really like to mention it with one another, but especially not with other family members or friends and family. So that kind of support that I needed was always outside of my family. So, whatever accommodations that I had, financial support, was kind of something that I had to do and figure out by myself.” [Waverly, Initial Interview]

The theme of Connectedness and Disconnection focused on events and experiences in which the participants discussed their relationships with others. The subthemes within the theme included Connecting with Family, Expectations from Family, and Connecting with Peers. The data within these themes ranged in tone across the participants. As seen in the data selection that introduced this section, some participants described more distant or detached connections with friends and families which at times corresponded to feelings of isolation, loneliness, or increased self-reliance. Within the selection above, Waverly talks about how their experiences with depression and struggling in school were not talked about amongst their family and their friends, describing it as “kind of hushed”. They described another “incident” that reinforces the lack of connection with family after an event at school caused teachers and counselors to raise concern after they found their journal which contained “really, really kind of negative and angry responses generally towards my family of, you know, really hurtful and hateful things” in addition to the school learning about their years of self-harm:

“I think they [the school] contacted my family. And so, it was all very quick and next thing that I knew, they had contacted Asian Counselor Referral Services and sort of feared that I was either in danger of harming
myself or others. And so, you know, that’s why they had invited the counseling service in. And we did try family therapy for a few sessions. And it got “better” [air quotes included by Waverly]. But I think that I knew that it wasn’t going to work. I knew that my family didn’t think that it was a huge deal. It was more so they were afraid of what other people thought of our family which my family didn’t really think mental health was a thing which is why I kept my therapy and I kept a lot of my mental health stuff a secret from them.” [Initial Interview]

Waverly’s disconnect with their family continued into their adulthood and especially during college, “There were many times where my depression would hit really hard or I kept changing majors. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. And there wasn’t a whole lot of support from my family. There was a lot of guilt and shame.” [Initial Interview] When talking about their family, the feelings of guilt and shame and expectations (a subtheme within Connectedness and Disconnection) were frequently brought up. Often Waverly would describe the pressures of being a first generation American and fulfilling the expectations they felt from family members to “find a job that pays a lot of money”, “perform more feminine roles”, or adhere to “more traditional family values”.

Similarly, and from the perspective of another first generation American, Yvette discussed the disconnect between her parents’ expectations for post-secondary education as compared to the parents of her peers: “I did have one friend who did go to UC Santa Barbara straight out of high school and she’s a third generation Chinese American. But both her parents were educators and so, she grew up in a home where that was held up quite high. But the friends that I hung out with they were all sort of encouraged and pushed, right, to go to a four-year institution and so that was cultivated where it wasn’t necessarily cultivated in me or my siblings.” [Initial Interview] Throughout her interviews, Yvette occasionally discussed the confusion or lack of understanding from her parent’s as she has pursued graduate degrees, explaining that higher education wasn’t something that many family members did. “I’m the only graduate from a four-year institution. My brother did not finish. He does not have a college degree. My sister has an
AA, I think it’s an AA, but yeah kind of an alternative liberal arts. And certainly the only one in my family—including cousins from either side—to go to post-secondary or I mean to post-graduate.” [Initial Interview] Despite having a family that did not fully support her pursuit of higher education, Yvette did discuss her mother’s expectations for her performance during her elementary education. “The expectations placed on us with school were incredibly high. Get good grades. Don’t fail, do your homework.” [Initial Interview] But, these high expectations placed on her by her family were not to ensure academic success or progress, rather, Yvette attributed it to wanting to meet the expectations for immigrant families:

“Grade school it was do your best, keep your nose to the grindstone kind of thing because neither of my parents went beyond high school. There was no pressure to excel beyond doing the best as you could and that was it. And my dad because he was gone half the month because of his job, my mom is essentially the one who raised us. And for her, I think it was about assimilation, having moved here in 1960 and just wanting to fit in and kind of be invisible. I think that was a time when you just made yourself invisible.” [Group Interview]

Both Waverly and Yvette, the children of immigrants from Vietnam and the Philippines respectively, experienced disconnect from their families when related to their education and individual struggles. Many of the expectations they felt from their families were related to the image that the family was projecting and what others may think of them. When their individual experiences or desires did not meet family expectations, both Waverly and Yvette experience a level of disconnect and detachment from their families.

Tara also discussed at length a degree of detachment from her mother when it came to understanding her academic struggles. When asked about the level of her mother’s involvement when she began to struggle significantly in her academic life, Tara responded:

“She actually doesn’t know too much, um, she’s she I mean she got engaged last semester so I didn’t want to put like any downers on her so
she actually doesn’t know all of this is going on, she just knows that I’m working hard to graduate. I feel like our relationship is very like surface level. I feel like part of it is the language barrier because I don’t know, she grew up with like she has this broken English and I don’t speak Japanese at all, so I feel like we never got into deep conversations because, I don’t know. I use bigger words with English and she’s bigger words with Japanese and it just doesn’t connect. At first, I think, because she was also just learning like how to be American she also wanted me to grow to be American so they emphasized English a lot. And I think they were afraid of me falling behind in English so they wanted to make sure that my English was fluent and that it was at or above grade level before they would focus on Japanese too, and I don’t think they understood that if you teach your kids to be bilingual it would eventually catch up.” [Final Interview]

Unlike Waverly and Yvette who attributed their disconnect with their families as the family not approving or wanting to hide aspects of their struggles to keep up appearances to others, Tara describes her relationship with her mother as “surface level” due mainly to the language barrier and not wanting to put “any downers” on her mother.

On the contrary, Dory has described a very close relationship with her family, discussing the deep ties she has with her siblings, parents, and extended family as well as the level of involvement her mother had with her education and academic struggles. Dory’s mother was a significant feature of many of her stories around her educational experiences and she often described her mother as being her strongest advocate, especially when it came to ensuring that Dory received all of the supports she needed within school. “Well, my mom’s a Special Ed teacher, so she knew about it [getting a 504 Plan]. So, she was like, “This is what we’re doing.” But I don’t really know how we would’ve figured it out if my mom like didn’t already know about it, and know like the entire process, and know exactly what we needed to do, and what I was actually entitled to, because like my mom does IEP’s all the time.” [Initial Interview] Even in moments when she was having tremendous difficulties in school to the point that she “blocked out
the trauma” and couldn’t recall “the nitty gritty details”, Dory discussed her mother always advocating for her and ensuring that her teachers and schools would provide the appropriate accommodations to support her. Although the strong connections with her family did not prevent Dory from encountering struggles and difficulties within school, their validation for the pain she was in and encouragement in her academic tasks helped her persevere and feel justified in receiving various supports.

The last subtheme within Connectedness and Disconnection that the participants discussed was the ways in which they connected with their peers. Waverly, Dory, and Tara discussed moments in their early adulthood where they did not have notably close relationship with peers especially when it came to areas in which they were struggling. When Waverly did not get into their top choice university, they discussed the feeling of “not being good enough” for their family as well as with their peers, “There was not much of me hearing amongst my peers that community college was a viable second option. There was a lot of beliefs that it was, you know, less than.” [Initial Interview]

Waverly also discussed the pressure from family and friends to pursue a career such as nursing as STEM fields were much preferred among Asian American families:

“Yes, it was from family. Kind of subconsciously from friends too because my Asian friends were also pursuing careers and degrees that were either doctors or engineers pretty much like STEM fields. And it was really discouraging because I was sort of the odd one amongst them, but didn’t really have an interest in any of those. And I think too even before figuring out what we wanted to do for college, they kind of always did a lot better than me in classes. I took AP classes. I took the honors, but I took them because that’s what everyone did. And I guess that was now upon reflection, I did a lot of things that other Asian students did and that I thought should do. And I think that played a huge role in that too. I know that for me, media played a lot of roles for me learning how to mask, and figure out how to socialize, and kind of form my identity growing up. So, it was definitely a lot of those peers and family.” [Initial Interview]
Dory was also alone among her peers in the struggles that she encountered in college. While in college, Dory utilized her school’s Academic Support Center which was the office that ensured that all students with dis/abilities received accommodations and access to other academic resources. This was also the center in which she took all her tests and final exams. Dory described feeling alone and not having any friends or close connections while utilizing the Academic Support Center:

“I remember never knowing a lot of people at my finals and I would never see anyone else I knew like socially in the Academic Resource Center. If I ran into people during finals because everyone would be taking their finals at the same time and there were only two slots to take your finals in the Academic Support Center. So, like you could never take more than two tests in a day.... But like the people I saw there, I would like recognize from seeing them around campus because our campus was not big. So like you just kind of like recognized people. But like I didn’t have any friends I could like, “Hey, you want to get coffee and then walk into the test center together?” Yeah I didn’t know anyone else there.” [Initial Interview]

In her last sentence, Dory paused and almost appeared surprised to recall that she did not know anyone else within her circle of friends who utilized the Academic Resource Center.

Comparable to Dory who did not report having any friends who identified as dis/abled in some way, Waverly also experienced a level of disconnect from their peers. They talked about their friends being aware of their history of self-harm and depression and never outwardly ridiculing them. However, they did express sadness over their friends’ lack of understanding for the things they struggled with.

“Every time I did relapse, they were disappointed and I think at some point it kind of turned into more so of like frustration of like, “Why can’t you just tell your parents?” or “Why can’t you find other ways to cope?” And so, I think that at first I would confide in my friends and they were supportive where they would say that they won’t judge me. But it became
this thing where I sort of ended up just not talking about it at all because people didn’t understand. And even though they weren’t being mean to me, they weren’t technically being nice.” [Initial Interview]

Waverly was consistently clear that they felt alone and isolated when it came to dealing with her depression and social anxiety. They lacked any type of support of validation from family and inconsistent support and connections with peers throughout high school and college. However, they have found the peer connections they lacked earlier in life by creating online spaces themselves, through outlets such as Twitch, for other queer individuals, who identify as Asian American, and have faced traumas and other difficulties. “And so, sort of that’s what streaming has been for me that like I’ve been able to build this community and I’ve been able to sort of connect with other people. And we have these conversations…And it’s really helped me feel very validated to have these faces and have these conversations.” [Final Interview]

Some participants discussed the ways in which their ethnicity played a role in the connections they made with peers. Despite not having any friends to share in her use of additional academic supports while in college, Dory did say that she found more success and connections with peers in college due to the ethnic diverse in her friend group. During her earlier educational experiences, Dory shared that her schools were predominantly white with some Black and Latinx students but rarely any Asian American students. But in college, Dory described her friends as “Actually like a good mix. Jeana is Argentinian, like her parents are immigrants. And then one of my other best friends, Michelle, like technically white. Her family is Russian. And then my other friend, Jocelyn, is Egyptian. Oh! And then my other friend, Amal, she’s Indian. She’s like half-Indian and half-white.” [Initial Interview]

Similarly, Tara described having one close friend in college with whom she shared many of her struggles. But she also found that relationship surprisingly uncovered biases that she was experiencing within her program.
“Jen is the only one that kind of knows everything and I kind of compare my experiences with hers because I mean she’s blonde and blue eyed so she receives like the opposite end of the spectrum that I receive. So that’s where I kind of get most of the perspective of how I feel like I’m being treated unfairly because I see how they treat her, and then I compare it with how they treat me and even she agrees that like they’re so much more friendly towards her. It’s ridiculous how different the responses are for the same thing.” [Final Interview]

While all four participants described varying levels and experiences in their relationships with friends and families, it appears that these relationships all had some type of impact on their educational experiences. For Waverly, the lack of family and peer relationships earlier in life has led them to creating spaces for themself as well as for others. Yvette has worked to come to realize the impact of her mother’s immigrant status on her own identity and educational goals. Tara also realized that the language barrier with her mother and vastly different places in life have led to a disconnect with her mother. And Dory recognized the huge role her mother played in advocating for her throughout her education and the importance of having friends who understood at least some part of her identity.

Role of Ethnicity

“People have told me I’m not real Asian. I’m like, “Okay, please explain to me what I am then.” Like can someone explain to me what not a real Asian is? What does that even mean? I don’t know. Like I feel like people identify Asian as like Chinese, Japanese, and Korean and that’s it. To some people, that’s simply all of Asia. And I’m like, “Okay. So, I’m not really Asian if I’m not Chinese, Japanese, if I’m exotic. I’ll just tell people I’m
fake Asian then. Like, look at the Philippines on a map and tell me where you think it is.”

[Dory, Initial Interview]

The theme of Role of Ethnicity included any data where participants discussed their Asian American identity with the data further divided into two subthemes: “Understanding Asian American identity” and “Emotional Reactions to being Asian AND American”. In the first subtheme, I included any passages in which the participants discussed their individual Asian American identities, how they understand it, came to understand it or are still working to understand or come to terms with what that identity means to them. At times I also included moments where they discussed how external forces, such as individuals, groups, or various spaces have influenced their understanding of the identity. In the second subtheme “Emotional Reactions to being Asian AND American”, I included passages where emotions played a central role to the story the participant was telling and how that story was also specific to the unique identity of being of an Asian ethnicity as well as being American. Data within this subtheme often featured conflicting and shifting emotions and mindsets.

As seen in Dory’s illustrative example introducing this section, participants faced complicated emotions and wide-ranging experiences when working to understand their Asian identity. Dory’s Filipino ethnicity and validity as an individual of Asian descent has been called into question by others. This is not an uncommon occurrence, much literature pertaining to the model minority myth has seen the association of Asian Americans as predominantly those of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent traced back to articles published in the 1960’s (Petersen, 1966; US News and World Report, 1966) and 1980’s (Brand, 1987). Waverly has also described similar experiences:
“Asian is such an umbrella term. And so, it was always really awkward when people looked to me if I was one of the few Asian people in the room in that it was sort of like this incredibly jarring experience of having to be like, “Oh, I don’t really know much about this thing because I’m not..., you know, I’m Vietnamese. I’m not Chinese or I’m not Japanese. So, I can’t really comment.” And it was always very interesting because I feel like a lot of these like microaggressions and things, even if they weren’t intentionally like people being harmful, it was still sort of the impact was still harmful regardless of their intentions. And I think that because others would sort of overperceive or overemphasize my ethnicity, that was part of the reason why I tried so hard to be invisible in the classrooms or in school because I didn’t want people to bring attention to my ethnicity. And I used to think that it was because I really hated being Vietnamese. But I think I just hated that that’s what people only saw me as. And in fact, I don’t even really know if they saw me as Vietnamese. I’m sure they just saw me as Asian—as like a generalized, you know, make assumptions that I was East Asian and not Southeast Asian.” [Final Interview]

The conflation of Asian with mainly East Asian ethnicities is problematic and harmful as seen not only in current research and literature, but also through the testimonies of these participants. The assumptions and projections of others about their ethnicities caused frustration, feelings of shame, embarrassment, and confusion.

As seen in part of Waverly’s previous passage when they pushed back against their Vietnamese identity and tried to “be invisible”, participants shared moments when they worked to avoid their ethnicity. In her interviews, Yvette talks about the confusion she felt in owning her Filipino identity. As Yvette was considering what to do after finishing her master’s degree, she was told that she qualified for a diversity fellowship. She explained, “It’s specifically aimed at students in low represented groups going into Ph.D. programs. So, especially in California, Latino, poor working class, probably even DACA students I think. And so, I thought, “Well you know, I—” and it’s weird because I didn’t own my being half-Filipino. I didn’t own the biracial part of the diversity, but that
I’m an older student. That’s how I identified.” [Initial Interview] Later on in the interview, Yvette continued, “It’s taken me all of my life to identify as Filipino, I always felt, and you know it could be the time I grew up in, the assimilation thing.” [Initial Interview] Yvette attributed her avoidance or “not owning” of her Filipino identity to the pressures to assimilate to American culture. Reflecting on her childhood, she often thought of a Filipino identity as exclusive to her mother, rather than part of who she is:

“I think I even looked at it I think when I was younger as kind of a novelty. It was novel to be able to say, you know, “My mom’s Filipino.” But at the same time, you know, as a very young child, my other friends’ parents, they’re all white. And my mom had her, kind of cultural peculiarities, right? She ate with her hands and, she had a relatively strong accent. She still has her accent. And so, you know, there was that feeling of being different, having, from that standpoint that my mom’s kind of different. And I think there was some probably as a child, you know, like you’re kind of embarrassed because one of your parents is not like other people’s parents, so. And then, you feel guilty for feeling that way. And so, yeah, I didn’t think of myself as Filipino. And it’s only been in the last maybe 10 years—not even that—where, you know, that I’ll even say that I’m a woman of color. I mean, I don’t know. To be comfortable with it, you know. Now my partner—who is white—has been the most encouraging to say, ‘You own that. That’s yours.’ And so, yeah. Now I feel more comfortable talking about it, and saying it, and identifying.” [Initial Interview]

Just as other people can be invalidating and challenging of the participants’ ethnic identities, so too can people be validating and encouraging. Yvette, despite spending much of her life avoiding and not owning her Filipino identity, has arrived as ownership and a sense of pride with the help and support of her partner.

Waverly also described a journey to understanding her Asian identity similar to Yvette’s journey. In reflecting on trying to understand what it means to be Vietnamese American, Waverly stated:
“There was a lot of assimilating for me growing up. But more so now it’s sort of turning over to being more mindful, and reconnecting with my culture, and trying to resist or at least reflect on what it means to sort of be Vietnamese and American when all of my family is pretty much traditionally Vietnamese, and sort of how it looks trying to navigate that identity because I still relate to or it [referring to the group interview] made me really remember and think more about how I don’t feel Vietnamese enough, but I also don’t feel American enough. So, it’s just this kind of constant tug and pull of trying to find a community that feels safe and authentic. But there’s always that lingering feeling that I don’t quite fit in anywhere it seems. I still don’t know what it means. And I’ve tried to sort of be more mindful about following, you know, other Asian Americans. And if I can, I try to follow Vietnamese Americans, but it seems so difficult to do. And I don’t quite know if it’s just because I just don’t have my neutral circles, if there’s just a lack of having them there. But it’s I guess something for me to still reflect on in that it’s probably something much bigger as to why I kind of struggle with not knowing exactly what my identity means to me. And maybe that in itself is sort of the answer, which is I don’t know. And I wonder if when I do find those people or those communities that perhaps it’ll be a lot clearer for me. And maybe my lack of community has been a reason why I’ve sort of not really been able to answer sort of the disconnect with my identities or at least my Vietnamese one.” [Final Interview]

In their passage, Waverly describes going from avoidance and rejection of their Vietnamese identity, to a “tug and pull” between being Vietnamese and American, to finally revisiting and reexploring what it means to be Vietnamese and American and accepting that they have not yet fully arrived at an answer. Their acceptance of not completely understanding their ethnic identity yet is supported by the hope of finding a community of people who may assist them in coming to terms with their identities.

Relatedly, Tara and Dory both describe how they arrive at understandings of their ethnicities depending on the space they occupy and the people that they are with. Tara, having grown up in the predominantly Asian and Pacific Islander space of Hawaii, did not have her ethnicity play a significant role in her life until attending college in Central Pennsylvania.
“My ethnicity doesn’t really have anything to do with anything except for when I was in Centreville (a pseudonym for a town in very rural Central Pennsylvania where Tara did her student teaching). Centreville is kind of like its own little thing. So they are much more conservative I think so there’s just like no Asians, but there’s also like no Latinos. No there’s no Black people either. I guess there’s just no minorities. So it was really weird and they were more comfortable making like slightly racist remarks but didn’t know that they were racist. You know what I mean? It’s hard because they just, they’re just ignorant, they just don’t know but also, it’s like, you can’t just, there’s certain things you can’t say. I remember this weirdly racist drawing that the students made on a bulletin board and then they tried to erase it because they knew that it was wrong. Like it was my classroom. I don’t know, it was just weird it was kind of funny because it’s like I don’t know why you’re trying to hide it, I can obviously see it. It’s like, it’s middle school. So they really don’t know that much better.” [Final Interview]

Only when she entered a predominantly white and rather isolated community did Tara experience her ethnicity as a problem or called into question.

Dory also discussed her ethnicity playing a role in certain spaces. Growing up in suburban New Jersey, Dory described her school as predominantly white with a few Black and Latinx students and no Asian students. “My brother and I would always talk about how weird it is that we were the only Asian people in high school.” [Initial Interview]. Dory returns to this thought later in the same interview, “I remember being acutely aware of being the only Asian person in high school. Like I was actually definitely aware that I as the only Asian person besides my sister.” She also described how her awareness and understanding of her ethnic identity was highlighted when comparing her experiences with her sister’s, “That’s the big difference between me and my sister, is that I can pass for white and she cannot. I would say that has definitely benefitted me because I know my sister had a lot more negative experiences regarding race than I have. I mean, mainly I can pass and she can’t.” [Initial Interview] Dory has
described instances where until her sister was standing next to her, some people did not realize that Dory was Filipino American.

When working to understand their ethnic identity, all the participants experienced a range of emotions. Dory has experienced frustration that people did not feel that she was not “real Asian” and heightened awareness and sensitivity when she was the only Asian in her school. Tara regularly used the word “weird” to describe her first instances of her ethnicity being called out in a predominantly white and conservative community. Waverly expressed shame and resistance towards her Vietnamese identity, “Sometimes it felt like I was the only person that didn’t want to see that I was [Asian]. And again, that’s a lot of guilt and it definitely did contribute to a lot of me trying to erase my own ethnicity.” [Final Interview]. Lastly, Yvette also described a resistance and hesitancy to owning her Filipino identity, resulting in guilt, “As a youngster, I didn’t identify as one or the other [Filipino or White]. It was almost like I looked at my mom kind of objectively I guess in some ways. I think now I look back on it and I put that on her that I didn’t take it in for myself at the time because I think when you’re growing up in that kind of, an all-white suburb, and your friends are all white, you know that one of your parents is different from your other, and your friends’ parents, you don’t want to. I think I didn’t want to acknowledge that.” [Group Interview]

All the participants faced a range of emotions and experiences as they work to understand their Asian ethnicities. Yvette and Waverly felt pressures to assimilate to American culture early in life while also facing challenges from others regarding their Asian ethnicities. Dory was also challenged on her authenticity as Asian American as some questioned the validity of Filipinos as Asians. Finally, Tara describes not
recognizing any hostilities or challenges to her Japanese American identity until experiencing a predominantly white school in a community with few people of color.

Support and Resources

“I definitely did know and feel that it was difficult to kind of get support and help because there’s kind of that assumption that Asian people and Asian students do well and certainly don’t need support. And it was just a very complex and complicated feeling because I did need a lot of support throughout my college and high school years. And I felt that because of those preconceived ideas and assumptions that I didn’t get quite the support that I needed or that maybe it took way too long to help me because it wasn’t taken as seriously or maybe even sometimes that it was so specific or some uncommon for someone like me to need a whole lot of support that they just didn’t know how to respond.” [Waverly, Initial Interview]

The theme of Support and Resources focuses on the experiences participants had while seeking or receiving any forms of support from people, stories involving teachers that the participants worked with, and the ways that participants found success through the support they received or resources that they accessed. Waverly’s illustrative passage provides a model example of many of the feelings that the participants had when it came to accessing the supports and resources they felt they needed throughout their educational experiences. Waverly discusses the assumptions that they perceived others had around their ethnicity and them needing support, that because of their Asian identity, they may not actually need any support to be successful in school. Specifically, Waverly speculates that due to their ethnicity they either didn’t receive adequate support or that there was a marked delay in getting help from others.
Similarly, Tara suspects that others have made assumptions about her ethnicity and adjusted their expectations, “I feel like people do look at me and kind of expect more. Not so much on like growing up in high school or anything, but mostly in college. I feel like looking at me, they think that I would be better at some things and maybe they might have higher expectations.” [Initial Interview] Since Tara grew up in Hawaii, a state with a very high population of people of Asian ethnicities, she reports not having experienced anyone making assumptions about her abilities until attending a predominantly white institution. While in college, she believes that her abilities have been judged based on her appearance, implying her ethnicity.

In some instances, participants discussed how difficult it was for them to have other people see them in a neutral light. Yvette described the difficulty she had being vulnerable enough to ask for help, believing that her age and perceived levels of experience and expertise would go against the image professors had about her.

“I didn’t know, what to, how to write a prospectus. I mean, my advisor, I would go to her probably not often enough. But she would sort of talk to me about what I need to include and it was at a point where I couldn’t bring myself to say, “I don’t know what I’m doing.” I would just, I should be able to know what I’m doing. I’m at that point, you know, I’m 57 years old. I can’t. To ask for help was not on my radar. You know what I mean? It was too embarrassing. It’s like, “Well, how can you not know how to do it? How did you get this far and not know how to do these?” [Initial Interview]

Dory described a slightly different experience when it came to accessing support and resources. Early in her educational experiences, when she began struggling in school due to her migraines and ADHD, her mother took the lead as her advocate and intermediary with teachers and administrators. She described her mother’s understanding of the education system and how she was able to get a 504 Plan, “Well my mom’s a Special Ed teacher, so she knew about it. So, she was like, “This is what we’re doing.”
But I don’t really know how we would’ve figure it out if my mom like didn’t already know about it, and know like the entire process, and know exactly what we needed to do, and what I was actually entitled to, because like my mom does IEP’s all the time.” [Initial Interview] Dory’s mother’s detailed knowledge of the special education system enabled them to utilize the supports and later accommodations necessary for Dory to access her education.

Although Dory and her mother had knowledge of how the special education system worked, it did not exclude them from encountering roadblocks and difficulty receiving accommodations. Dory described a particularly difficult time they had with the school district during her middle school years:

“She threatened to sue them multiple times because they were just like “no” [when Dory should have been receiving accommodations]. And I know my mom like had to bring it up through Social Services with the entire school district because the school wouldn’t listen. Like even the principal and vice principal were like, “no”, and my mom was like, “What do you mean no?”…I was also just like at such a bad place in my life, I cannot give you the nitty gritty details, because, you know, I’ve blocked out the trauma.” [Initial Interview]

Eventually, Dory did receive the accommodations and supports she needed due to her migraines and was entitled to through her 504 Plan. Later in high school, Dory described being able to take on more self-advocacy and recognized that she was not completely alone in her struggles at school. While taking an appropriately leveled math class she described, “I knew if I wasn’t getting something, I was never afraid to ask about it because if I wasn’t getting something, other people were also not getting something.” [Initial Interview]

When examining the data pertaining to the participants’ experiences seeking and accessing support and resources, overwhelmingly represented were stories about teachers and professors. All the participants had a range of stories about educators they worked
with who had significant impacts on not only their experiences but how they viewed themselves as students as well. Both Waverly and Dory discussed experiences with teachers and professors they felt were positive and validating. Waverly frequently discussed a professor they had in college, that they called “T”, who made profound connections with them and helped them understand that many of their struggles were not because of their own problems but rather from the issues within the institution and pressures and expectations from their family.

“T would always just challenge me to think outside the box. T was also queer, you know, gender non-conforming, really challenged a lot of things that society sort of would try to categorize or put into a box. And although T was white, he was always very, very, intersectional, and always challenged people to seek out sources from marginalized communities and voices. And I think for the first time, I finally had someone who would kind of listen to me and see me however it is that I kind of identified. And if I struggled, just kind of communicating that with T. And so, I think that with that encouragement and with a lot of the reflection that I did in his classes, it really kind of showed me that it’s not so much me, but a lot of the societal pressures.” [Initial Interview]

Waverly went on to state that T’s influence helped them to “slow down” and work to understand their own identity and what made them feel most validated. T’s impact helped Waverly in their personal journey as well as in the classroom, “That’s when I started to really feel accomplished and happy with my work and to kind of…so what makes me happy as opposed to what I think that I should do or be.” [Initial Interview]

Similarly, Dory felt most supported as a student when she was validated by a professor who understood the impact of migraines. Dory described how she would visit each of her professors at the start of a new semester to explain her accommodations and the pain she experiences with migraines to make a more personal connection with her new professors. She said, “I would go and explain it to them just because it’s like more personal at school and I wanted them to kind of understand what was going on. Like I could kind of like sometimes I would be in class, but like would just feel like unable to
participate. But physically I would be there, but mentally I would not be there. And one of my professors, I was talking to her after class the first week and she was like, “Oh my god. My wife has migraines.” She was like, “they’re so debilitating. Please let me know if you ever need anything.” [Initial Interview] The validation and support that Dory received from her professor was the opposite of many of her high school experiences and is what she attributes to much of her post-secondary success.

However, participants also shared many negative experiences with teachers and administrators throughout their education. Tara discussed professors in college who would reach out to her to seemingly provide support, but with little concern over ways she was struggling.

“They do reach out, but not for the right reasons so they’ll reach out because they think I’m not trying to get my assignments in on time. And they’ll say, “Okay, what’s going on?” And then when I explained that I’m working a full-time job overnight, on top of the full-time student teaching, because my parents got laid off during COVID, so they don’t have insurance and I need something with insurance then they’ll say, “Okay, well, why don’t you like quit your job, and then apply for scholarships to make up for that money.” So, it’s like they’ll check in with me, but not to make sure that I’m ok, just to make sure they can come up with solutions so that I can get their work done for them. But it’s like, look, if my other classmates had issues, I feel like they wouldn’t suggest that sort of thing. So, they’re like, my friend, like she didn’t turn in assignments for a couple of weeks because she had symptoms of COVID and they’re completely understanding completely dismissed all of that, and said, “Ok, don’t worry about school at all just focus on your health.” But if I have other outlying issues, then it’s well, you need to not worry about that and focus on our school work.” [Final Interview]

Tara observed the discrepancies between the ways she felt she was being treated by her professors compared to the treatment received by her peers. Her struggles outside of school impacting her in-school performance were not acknowledged or validated by her professors.
Yvette also faced a professor who was insensitive to her experiences and individuality as a student. She told a detailed story about some of her interactions with this professor while attending her previous institution, a large East Coast research university, in pursuit of her doctoral degree.

“She had this condescending attitude towards students. She was terribly unorganized where she would change things up, change things from the syllabus, email you the night before you’re supposed to do this reading and she would switch up, “Oh don’t worry about that one” that you just finished reading. “Read this. Read this.” And I went to see her in her office to talk about what to do for my final project. And I guess this was her interaction with other students. But I mean, I wasn’t prepared for it. But, you know, she knew the background I came from. I was an older student. And I mentioned I think off hand like, I realized that I’m not going to have read as much as some of these other students. And she said something off the cuff like, “Well no, you’re never going to be, you know, you’re never going to get to that level” so to speak. And when I turned in the paper, there was some misunderstanding about her having received it. And I was already in California for our visit here after the semester ended. And I get this email that, “You didn’t turn in your paper” and I’m like “I did”. And so, I ended up getting a deferred grade for a couple of weeks until I resent it to her. And her comments, you know when you get feedback from a professor that it’s called like the sandwich moment? You say something good and then you say something constructive like the criticism and then you end it with something positive? She only had the interior of the sandwich there.” [Initial Interview]

Yvette expresses her disappointment in a professor’s “condescending attitude” and departure from expected teaching norms in constructive criticism for a paper. She also mentions here and continues later that she had difficulty with level of reading expected of her as a graduate student at this first institution she attended. She also shared how she felt unaware of the expected behaviors of graduate students, that she was not adequately trained and practiced in the behaviors that she saw other graduate students utilizing that brough them success. Yvette describes the unwelcoming culture within her department.

“I don’t remember anyone—any of the faculty, sending me an email or pulling me aside and saying, “How are you doing?””, “How are you getting through?”. No one seemed interested in that, so. And I didn’t bother to
Yvette identified the culture in the department combined with her lack of institutional knowledge impacted her ability to seek out and receive the supports she needed to find success in her graduate program.

Lastly within the Support and Resources theme, participants shared moments when they experienced individual success with the support of educators. For Dory, the Academic Resource Center at her university provided significant support throughout her undergraduate program. The Academic Resource Center was the location where she would take all her exams, attend academic skills workshops, and meet with her counselor, Maggie, who helped to coordinate all of Dory’s accommodations and ensure that her professors were following through with appropriate supports. Dory shared, “Maggie, love her! So helpful! Like so understanding. Like consistently gave me all of these different resources, helped manage my time, and manage all of my deadlines.” [Initial Interview]

She described the entire staff and culture within the Academic Resource Center as one of tremendous support, “You could go in there and they could walk through all the major deadlines with you for your entire semester essentially. So, you could have proper planning time for all of your assignments. I wanted to kiss every single person who worked in that office. They understood the needs of all of the students. And like everyone there knew my name.” [Initial Interview]

Dory said that all the skills and strategies that Maggie helped to teach her and resources that she learned about through the Academic Resource Center are still things
that she utilizes now in graduate school and even in her professional life. The Academic Resource Center also ensured that Dory could schedule classes early to make sure that her class schedule would complement her body’s needs.

Waverly broadly talked about many teachers throughout their educational experiences, in addition to their professor, T, who they took classes with during college.

“My teachers were all very, very wonderful to me. I would say that they were a very pivotal moment for me finishing my education and seeking out a lot of resources outside of school. I confided in a lot of my teachers all throughout school. So, not just college, but in elementary school, middle school, high school I surprisingly always had at least one teacher who was very kind and comfortable with kind of me telling them that I was dealing with stuff at home and they didn’t need proof or anything like that. They just kind of just was like, “Okay. Well, you know, if you want to work out a plan with me—” maybe kind of figuring out if I was behind on schoolwork, kind of creating a plan for me to kind of catchup. And so, they never let me sort of just not do the work, but rather they found the ways that would help me complete the work that I needed to do, but in a way that was accommodating to me. And I think a lot of that and the accommodations made me realize and see that it’s again, not me. It’s just that my brain works differently and that sometimes people just need different ways and styles to do the work that they have to do.” [Initial Interview]

For Waverly, teachers that found the balance between support and holding them accountable led to their success. They learned that they were not less than just because they needed to do their work in a different way. Waverly also noted that teachers believing them and not needing “proof” that things were difficult at home made them feel comfortable enough to ask for help.

Throughout the theme of Support and Resources, participants were clear that they sought support from educators and other people they viewed as validating and understanding and worked to understand them as individuals. They thrived when their needs were accepted, not challenged, or judged, and met. And participants were most
successful when the culture created by teachers or professors enabled them to seek the resources and supports that they felt they needed without fear of judgement or denial.

Experiences in School

“So there is a competitiveness there [referring to the large East Coast university she previously attended for graduate school]. There’s this expectation of their graduate students that you all want tenure track positions and, you know, published, go to conferences, publish, publish, publish, conferences, conferences which is the opposite of here [in her new graduate program]. They, in fact, discourage their students, until they’ve passed their qualifying exams, from attending conferences or writing papers. You’re focused on your coursework and then you focus on your qualifying exams. So, it’s a different mindset here. I mean, it’s a University of California school. So, it’s hard, there’s a lot of work. But when I arrived here in September, I could, you know, even though we’re remote, I could feel a difference. I could sense and I can’t even describe it. I don’t want to say it’s relaxed, but I think the diversity issue, there’s a whole dynamic that’s different here towards students of color, non-traditional students, you know?”

[Yvette, Initial Interview]

Within the theme Experiences in School, I selected data that focused primarily on participant experiences within the physical space of school and the culture and values they perceived within those spaces. Unlike the previous theme that often pertained to people the participants worked or interacted with, Experiences in School focuses more on
the participants’ feelings, behaviors, and reactions within the space of school. The subthemes included here are Methods for Success and Representation in School. In Methods for Success, participants shared things unique to specific school related spaces and/or culture that helped them find success and feel successful. Representation in School included moments or stories about how participants felt represented or not represented within the school.

As seen in Yvette’s example, contrasting cultures within two graduate programs had varying impacts on her academic progress and how she accesses support from professors. In the example above, she references a more diverse cohort of graduate students, not just in ethnicity but also in age, something she did not experience while attending her first graduate school. In describing the large East Coast graduate school, Yvette said, “I felt so intimidated when I got there. My French wasn’t as good as some of the other students. And there was one professor in the department who made the first semester very difficult. Academically, I just felt completely out of place. And at the time, you know, the department wasn’t that diverse at all. I mean, there was one other person of color.” [Initial Interview] Later in the same interview, when asked to explain more about what made that first semester “very difficult” Yvette responded,

“You know, no welcome. No feeling of gosh, you know, it’s like you’re an older student and usually you get people say, “Well that’s awesome” you know, “You’re in midlife and you’re getting your Ph.D.” And you know, it’s like news stories you see of like 85-year-old people getting their degree after all these years. But none of that at all. Like I got the sense from her that, you know, “You don’t belong here.” For all I know, she was on the committee, you know who selects grad students and maybe someone fought for me, but she didn’t want me there. I don’t know. It really set a tone from the first year there and I would say that it affects your confidence. It wasn’t like any kind of harassment thing. It wasn’t. But it was this subtle dig.” [Initial Interview]
However, after changing schools and returning to California to continue pursuing her doctoral degree, Yvette described a “different mindset” which immediately shifted her sense of belonging and sense of self as a student. The values held within her program significantly impacted her motivation and outlook.

Similarly, Dory described how a “communal” classroom feeling helped her feel successful for the first time within a math class. She described being amongst other students who also struggled in math was reassuring and enabled her to be vulnerable in sharing her difficulties, “No one understood math and I wasn’t the only person sitting there with no idea what the frick was happening. Like you were there because you were all horrible at math. It was no secret. They actually explained every single thing they were supposed to be doing for you instead of just thinking you could figure it out by yourself. It was much more communal.” [Initial Interview] A classroom culture where student needs were recognized and a curriculum that directly addressed those needs helped Dory feel seen as a student and she was able to find success in math for the first time.

The participants also talked about the ways representation within their school as well as the material they were learning impacted their educational experiences. Waverly described representation within their high school, “I think West High School was a little bit more white students. There were still, I would say decent amount of students who were BIPOC. But definitely much more white than probably my previous schools that I had grown up with...But yeah, it was mostly mainly white including staff as well. So, I definitely felt very different. Didn’t really feel as, you know, represented.” [Initial Interview] Similarly, Dory described her experiences, “I remember being acutely aware
of being the only Asian person in high school. Like I was actually definitely aware that I
was the only Asian person besides my sister.” [Initial Interview] Both Waverly and Dory
have described moments during school where they felt singled out, unsafe, or called upon
to represent and answer all Asian people if not people of color in general. During the
 group interview while participants were reflecting on feelings around representation in
school, Waverly shared some of their experiences and feelings:

“I guess for me, growing up I went to a lot of schools that were
predominantly white. And so, for me, being in those spaces made me very
aware that I was non-white and also too a lot of the classes that I had were
also a lot of men as well. So, I was very, very aware of my identities. And
I think even if people of other students didn’t really say things to me as
specifically, sort of being aware of the fact that I was different and that
people probably also realized this too made it feel very unsafe and not,
you know, comfortable for me to engage in discussions or anything like
that because I knew my experiences and perspectives were quite different
from the majority of my peers. I think that my race, and then my gender
identity, and also because I’m queer as well. A lot of that intersectionality
played a huge role in definitely influencing sort of trying to be more
isolated as opposed to wanting to connect and work more so in a group
setting. So, I think for my experiences in school, it’s much more isolating,
a little bit more cautious and I guess very different from a lot of
experiences and stories that maybe other folks would say that, you know,
high school and college was a very good experience for them.” [Group
Interview]

Dory responded to Waverly’s shared experience:

“You unlocked a memory that I forgot I had. Let me tell you a story. It
was junior year of high school in French class. My French teacher—
whack job, literally nuts, crazy. And we were doing a unit on
multiculturalism in France. And she wanted me—the only student of color
in the class—to dress up as a Muslim person and pretend to be Muslim.
She wanted me to wear a hijab. And then she wanted us to make a video
and put it on YouTube. And when I tell you my mother lost it when I told
her this. Just because I’m a little tanner than everyone else in the
classroom I had to be the Muslim. I didn’t do it, but she wanted me to.
That was the problem.” [Group Interview]
Dory, Waverly, and Yvette tell stories where lack of representation and problematic behaviors and attitudes negatively impacted their school experiences. The participants also discussed how the cultures and values within their classrooms and programs also impacted their feelings of academic potential, belonging, and safety. In the next section, I’ll explore the final theme, Experiencing Dis/ability, and how the participants reflect on their dis/abilities and academic struggles within educational spaces.

**Experiencing Dis/ability**

“I would really encourage and ask teachers, and professors, and pretty much just everyone to kind of really seek out disabled voices because, especially for me, a lot of the work that I like to do and a lot of my passion comes from the disabled community. And I know that a lot of the experiences that we face are sort of caused by the ablism in society and especially in academia. I know that I mentioned earlier that if I could go back and change things, it would be to seek more support, more help. And I think that if somehow, we’re able to sort of instill those support systems in place at the foundation, then it would alleviate a lot of advocating that many disabled people need to go through which is a very rigorous process already. And that I know that many, many people—especially people like me—have struggled a lot trying to comply and subscribe to a lot of the standards and norms that happen in academia. I’m autistic and ADHD. So a lot of the things that we were being graded on—how professional we could sound or how much eye contact, or not being able to use fidget toys, or stim toys to try to help with a lot of the sensory overload processing issues that many autistic folks go through. I think that kind
of pushing for more people to seek out these disabled stories, and voices, and sort of shaping education around accommodating, and creating accessible ways of communicating...I think would be something that could be a very huge difference and change for the disabled community.” [Waverly, Group Interview]

Within this final section, I explore the theme Experiencing Dis/ability which discusses how each participant identifies any factors that they use to define dis/ability or how they understand their experiences with it within educational spaces. The data within this theme fall into two main subthemes, Encountering Struggles where participants discuss moments where they felt the expectations of teachers, or the structures of school brought attention to their dis/ability and Achieving Success which includes stories from participants where they felt their needs as related to their assigned or self-affirmed dis/abilities were met.

In the selected passage above, Waverly summarizes the experiences and hopes that they have for the field of education and things that they wish could be different. They discuss the difficulties of accessing support systems within academia, which they describe as “a very rigorous process”. This is a barrier also identified by Tara who explains why she did not seek out the Disability Resource Center for support in receiving accommodations for her narcolepsy.

“I haven’t filed paperwork with Disability Resources because I just got diagnosed with the narcolepsy last year and that’s when the whole COVID thing started. So, everything was really complicated. Like I wouldn’t have been able to schedule an in-person meeting with Disability Resources and I just didn’t know how anything worked. And then, after a while it just became like, “I don’t think I have enough time to even get accommodated if I wanted to.” [Individual Interview]
Both Waverly and Tara discussed not having support from their families when it came to their academic struggles and mental health issues, largely having to advocate for themselves and navigate complicated support systems within academic institutions. However, Dory, who had a Special Education teacher mother who ensured Dory’s access to documentation and supports such as a 504 plan, was able to utilize the Academic Resource Center at her university which allowed her access to ample supports. “I had multiple meetings every single semester. And my Academic Assistant Counselor would go over things to help me study, or ways I can make my schedule better, or if I was having trouble in a class, they would step in and ask the professor to help me out.” [Initial Interview]

A common theme across all participants in relation to dis/abilities and academic struggles was the perception of teachers and professors. Often, the participants noted that the invisibility of their dis/abilities led others to question its validity. In reflecting on her narcolepsy, Tara stated, “Like I swear, I’m not trying to sleep all the time. If I could stay awake and be productive all the time I would.” [Initial Interview] Similarly, Dory stated, “They didn’t understand that I literally cannot go four hours without eating because I will get a migraine. And they just simply didn’t get it.” [Initial Interview] Relatedly, Waverly has discussed how isolating it felt amongst peers as they got support for their depression:

“Every week at the same time I would get a slip to be dismissed from class. And everyone would always stare at me and they always knew that every day or not every day, but one day a week when you always have to go somewhere. And so, it was very isolating too to know that other people knew that I was doing something and it was most likely therapy. So it definitely wasn’t great to kind of have this sort of invisible disability and mental health issues that other people sort of speculate and were aware of.” [Initial Interview]
The lack of awareness and consideration of others when it came to the dis/abilities experienced by the participants significantly impacted their educational experiences and often led to feelings of isolation and frustration.

As they reflected on their experiences with dis/ability within educational spaces, the participants brought attention to the systemic barriers they faced in seeking accommodations and/or supports, lack of validation and understanding from educators, and feelings of isolation when the culture norms in place did not make considerations for their lived experiences and voices.

**Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I presented the data gathered for the project and the five themes and corresponding subthemes in which it was organized. The themes of Connectedness and Disconnection, Role of Ethnicity, Support and Resources, Experiences in School, and Experiencing Dis/ability are all directly related to the project’s research questions and worked to help answer them. The data presented demonstrated the ways in which the participants understand their various identities and make sense of their struggles and successes. The participants brought attention to their Asian Americanness and the ways that educators read them in educational spaces, speculating on the biases that their teachers and professors may hold about Asian American students. They also shared the impacts of their relationships with friends and family members in how they understand themselves and their dis/abilities. In the final
chapter, I discuss and analyze the data and work to answer the research questions with the stories and experiences from the four participants.
CHAPTER 5
LEARNING FROM STORIES AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout this final chapter, the data presented in Chapter 4 is discussed and analyzed through the lenses of DisCrit and Intersectionality while working to find answers to the research questions driving this project. The first section reviews the goals of the project, research questions, the significance of the study, and how it fits within the literature. The second section is a discussion of the study results and answering the research questions. The third section discusses the limitations of the study followed by recommendations for future work. Lastly, the chapter conclusion reflects on the study as a whole and the personal impact of the project.

Study Overview

The goal of this study was to explore the ways that Asian Americans who identify as dis/abled reflect on and understand their educational experiences and to identify and discuss any potential factors that had a significant impact on those experiences. To achieve these goals, four driving research questions were developed:

1. How do Asian American students who experienced difficulties in school reflect on and understand their experiences?
2. In what ways do Asian American students understand and perceive the labels and identities (imposed or self-proclaimed) of Asian American and/or dis/abled or struggling?
3. What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled students identify as having particular impacts on their educational experiences?

4. How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American students inform educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems?

Within the literature, there is much discussion about the origins and problematic nature of the model minority myth, the belief that Asian Americans are academically and economically successful and have “overcome” any racism that may exist in the United States (Lee, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Wang, 2008). Research that explores the experiences of students of color in special education often discusses the overrepresentation of students of color within the category of special education (Annamma et al., 2013; Connor et al., 2019; Kozleski, 2016). Yet most of this work has limited inclusion of Asian American stories and voices. Certainly, the existence of the model minority myth has had an impact on the scarcity of literature exploring the academic needs of Asian Americans.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to fill the gaps within this field of research. By offering a project featuring the stories and voices of dis/abled Asian Americans, the study hopes to bring light to the unique and often overlooked experiences of a diverse group of individuals. The experiences of the participants within the study offer educators and researchers an opportunity to consider the ways that our culture and society may hold inaccurate and unfair biases within the expectations that we place on students. Within the next section, I offer an overview of responses to the guiding research questions as well as a detailed exploration of each illustrated with representative data.
Responses to Research Questions

The focus of this study was to understand the ways that dis/abled Asian Americans reflect on and understand their educational experiences, their multiple identities, and bring attention to any factors the participants identified as impactful. By examining the interview videos, transcripts, and data organized within the themes, the most prominent factor participants identified as impacting their educational experiences was their relationships with families and educators. The nature of these relationships and the supports and security that they provided or lacked, affected the way that participants not only understood the experience but also how they saw themselves as learners. When considering this conclusion through my theoretical lenses, specific factors emerge and help illuminate the individual experiences of my participants within cultural and historical contexts. The effects of interpreting the conclusions through these lenses helps us understand the lasting impacts that culturally constructed stereotypes, ideals, and expectations may have on individuals. Within the sections that follow, I review each of the research questions, present the ‘big picture’ findings for each question, present the data that supports the findings, and then close with a discussion on the implications of the results.

Research Question 1: How do Asian American students who experienced difficulties in school reflect on and understand their experiences?

In the first research question, I was most interested in learning about the ways that each participant narrated their difficult educational experiences. In looking across all their stories, the broad themes of data that addressed the research question pertain to their connections or disconnections in school, implications of their ethnicity, and relationships with their family.
Connections/Disconnections

Throughout the study’s interview process, participants regularly shared their reflections on their educational experiences as in relation to others. Often, they came to understand their experiences as impacted directly by the behaviors and mindsets of others. Early on in their education, Waverly described having dark thoughts which they recorded in their journal and faced misunderstandings from peers and teachers when it was discovered. This event paired with the subsequent detachment they encountered with their family led to increased isolation, especially when it came to the ways Waverly was experiencing school. However, as Waverly got older, they began making connections with multiple counselors and educators who provided the support they Waverly did not receive at home or amongst their peers. These connections allowed them to receive guidance when it came to education and career pursuits, financial aid, and support as they explored their own identities. Overall, Waverly reflected on their educational experiences as incredibly difficult, possibly made more so due to the lack of connection with their family, but ultimately one that they reflected on fondly when they considered the relationships they had with educators.

At times, participants also reflected on their own actions or inactions as carrying consequences for how they moved throughout their schooling experiences. For Yvette, not knowing how or that she even could and should seek help and support had lasting impacts on her educational experiences. Early in life she was taught to keep her head down and to work hard in school, asking for help in school was not typically something that was encouraged or modeled. This behavior continued to plague Yvette throughout graduate school as she struggled to manage the demands and expectations of graduate school. By not building connections, or not feeling that she was within a learning environment where connections were encouraged, Yvette was isolated in her academic
struggles and led to her withdrawal from her program. Yet when she changed graduate schools, Yvette was suddenly immersed within a culture where connections were actively built among her peers and the faculty members. It was expected that a community of learners was established early in her program and Yvette described immediately feeling welcomed and reinvigorated to pursue her doctorate degree.

**Implications of Ethnicity**

Participants also openly referenced moments when they felt that their ethnicity had a direct impact on their educational experiences. Throughout their interviews, Waverly and Tara both explicitly discussed their beliefs that their race may have played a role in the ways they experienced school. As they began to struggle within school, Waverly speculated that their race may have impacted the speed at which they received support, believing that teachers incorrectly assumed an Asian American student wouldn’t be likely to have academic difficulties. This reflection identifies a direct consequence of the model minority myth as Waverly’s Vietnamese ethnicity impeded their ability to receive timely and appropriate support. We can also see the ways that Waverly’s ethnicity impacted their education from the pressures that she felt to conform to the STEM oriented education and career paths that their Asian American peers and family friends were pursuing, and the corresponding expectations placed upon them by their family. They had also discussed the expectations that their academic and mental health struggles not

For Tara, her ethnicity was not called out or made to feel “other” until she began attending a predominantly white institution for college and later began teaching in a local school. Tara stated that she believed that there were marked differences in the way that she was treated by professors compared to her white peers, a belief she attributed to
different expectations due to her race. Tara described feeling that professors expected more of her when compared to her white peers and she saw these differences in the ways professors reacted to her dis/ability and needs. Facing stricter criticism and higher standards as one of two students of color in her cohort of students led to Tara, at time, questioning her abilities to be successful as a student.

**Family Relationships**

The relationships that the participants had with their families had impacts on the way they reflect on their educational experiences. For Dory, her mother is a prominent character in her stories about her earliest struggles in school. Serving as her biggest advocate, Dory’s mother ensured that her daughter would receive every accommodation and support that she needed to find academic success and reach her intellectual potential. Given the ways that Dory describes her family’s values, we can consider her mother’s work as her advocate a success as Dory has since completed graduate school from a prestigious D.C. metro area university.

However, not all the participants had similarly close relationships with their family members. For Waverly, the lacking support and recognition of their needs from their family led to confusion and conflict around their various identities. In moments when they were not meeting school expectations, Waverly described “a lot of guilt and shame” in relation to their family and that those feelings are only “amplified when the people who are supposed to support you don’t know how to do that and kind of just sort of has you go to someone else.” In Waverly’s case, the lack of support and understanding from their family led them to seek connections and support from teachers and counselors. So, despite the academic difficulties that Waverly experienced and lacking relationship with their family, their relationships with educators had lasting positive impacts.
For Tara, a distant and carefully curated relationship with her mother has led to her often struggling with her academics and mental health alone. She describes not wanting to be a “downer” on her mother’s happiness and rather confides in her one close friend in college when she encounters struggles or inequitable treatment from professors. This means that Tara can maintain her mother’s perception of her academic success and progress, while unfortunately, she struggles alone.

Lastly, generational status also appears to have impacted the ways that participants reflect on their experiences. Both Waverly and Yvette are first generation Americans with parents of a similar age that arrived in the United States following tumultuous war times. Following the group interview, Waverly talked about relating a lot to Yvette and her stories about growing up with her family. They identified the contrasting mindsets of their parents as one area that they found themselves reflecting on after meeting Yvette, “It was nice and validating to hear sort of like her family sort of had both of the surviving, trying to sort of do our best to assimilate, but also at the same time resist and remain true to our culture and heritage.” We can see these mindsets of surviving, assimilating, and maintaining cultural ties play out in conflicting ways for both Yvette and Waverly throughout their education.

Research Question 2: In what ways do Asian American students understand and perceive the labels and identities of Asian American and/or dis/abled or struggling?

The purpose of the second research question was to better understand how the participants define and comprehend their ethnic and/or dis/abled identities. However, as I explored the data to arrive at answers for this question, I found that the participants were not necessarily impacted exclusively by the dual identities of their ethnicities and/or dis/ability status as I had framed the question. Rather, their interconnected multiple
identities such as ethnicity, gender identity, dis/ability, or generation status all had varying degrees of impact and meaning often dependent upon the setting. Therefore, in considering the findings related to research question two, it is essential that we take up an intersectional understanding of the study participants. Within this section, I discuss first, moments where participants discussed solely their ethnicities and its possible impact on their experiences, and second, the role that their multiple identities played in their experiences.

**Ethnicity**

Throughout the study, as participants reflected on their identities of Asian American and dis/abled, they often commented on struggling most with coming to terms with their ethnicities. In some cases, their Asian American identities were ones they did not own or fully realize until later in life. Typically, this behavior was generated from others bringing attention and/or emphasis to their ethnicities, at times labeling them as “other” in some way. For Tara, growing up in Hawaii meant that most of her peers were also of Asian ethnicities or were Native Hawaiian. It wasn’t until she came to the East Coast for college and attended a predominantly white institution that she was made to feel aware of her ethnicity as “other” or something to joke about as seen in her classroom during student teaching.

Relatedly, Yvette shared that she did not own her Filipina identity for herself until well into adulthood. For much of her life, she deflect the Filipino American identity onto her mother, describing the ethnicity as a “novelty” and Filipino culture as a “peculiarity” belong solely to her mother and not herself. She described being
embarrassed that her mother was not like the mothers of many of her friends growing up and the subsequent guilt in having those feelings. It was not until much later in life that Yvette began to own her Filipina identity and consider the impacts that it may have had on her experiences.

Similarly, Waverly talked about the conflicts of being Vietnamese and American, feeling the push to assimilate to American culture and the constant pull from their family to remain tied to their Vietnamese heritage. This push and pull of cultures was wearing on Waverly as their various identities clashed against the values held by their family. This resulted in Waverly shying away from their Vietnamese identity, at times being resultful towards it and the oppression they felt in expressing their gender identity and experiencing their dis/ability amongst their family. Similarly to Yvette, Waverly has shared an urge to reacquaint themselves with their Vietnamese ethnicity, but is having trouble doing so. During one of their interviews, Waverly said about their Vietnamese ethnicity:

“I still don’t know what it means, and I’ve tried to sort of be more mindful about following other Asian Americans. And if I can, I try to follow Vietnamese Americans, but it seems so difficult to do. And I don’t quite know if it’s just because I just don’t have my neutral circles if there’s just a lack of having them there. But it’s I guess something for me to still reflect on in that it’s probably something much bigger as to why I kind of struggle with not knowing exactly what my identity means to me. And maybe that in itself is sort of the answer. And I wonder if, when I do find those people or those communities that perhaps it’ll be a lot clearer for me. And maybe my lack of community has been a reason why I’ve sort of not really been able to answer sort of the disconnect with my identities or at least my Vietnamese one.”

Given Waverly’s response, as well as the stories from the other participants, it seems that they all may have taken a lot of cues on how to understand their ethnic identities from their families. Therefore, it makes sense that Waverly’s lack of close ties with their
family and a lacking Vietnamese community in close proximity would leave them in an uncertain state when it comes to understanding their ethnicity. In contrast, Dory’s describes having a close and secure relationship with her immediately family and extended Filipino family. These relationships have led to her secure understanding and connection with her Filipina identity. Through her secure relationship with her family, that brought no shame to her dis/abled identity, she herself was able to proudly own and understand both identities as inherent parts of herself.

Multiple Identities

With some participants, the dual identities as dis/abled AND Asian American were in conflict due to the ways they understood the identities from their families and culture. Throughout their life, Waverly constantly struggled with the vast expectations of their family. Waverly’s queer, non-binary identity was not one with which they could be open and out amongst their family, leading to tensions around the gender-based expectations of what they describe as a “traditionally Vietnamese family”. Adding another complex layer, is their dis/abled identity which was to be hidden and kept quiet not only from those outside of the family, but as something not spoken of within the family as well. The invalidation and lack of acknowledgement of Waverly’s multiple identities by their family directly impacted their mental health throughout their adolescence and young adulthood and impeded them from having a close, open, and supportive relationship with their family and friends. It also had a direct impact on their pursuit of education as Waverly was expected to pursue a career within a STEM field as many other Asian American students within their community did. By not fulfilling this cultural expectation, Waverly faced increased alienation from their family.
These gender and career expectations placed upon Waverly are reflected within many aspects of the model minority myth. It is likely that the persistent yet contradictory pressures from Waverly’s family, to assimilate to American culture while also fulfilling the expectations of daughters in Vietnamese families, is a result of them immigrating to the United States at a tumultuous time in history. To not call attention to themselves as immigrants to the country, Waverly’s family modeled and expected them to do the same. This left them isolated and without a family support system to guide them through their education.

Similarly, Yvette also a child of immigrants, faced multiple facets of cultural and social expectations. First, she offered the gender and generational expectations of her early elementary school years. She described being quiet in classrooms since it was expected that the boys would be the leaders and dominate in school. Even in the present day, Yvette’s parents still do not fully understand why she is pursuing a graduate degree. She reports that even though they are not explicitly discouraging, they have admitted to not understanding why she is pursuing another graduate degree. Since none of the other participants, all of whom are in their 20’s, mentioned gender dynamics in the classroom, I believe that may be reflective of a cultural shift in gender expectations within school. For both Tara and Dory, attending graduate school was not a choice that their parents ever challenged or questioned. Rather, they were encouraged and supported in recognition of the potential career advancement a graduate degree could bring them.

Unlike their ethnicity which some participants discussed in isolation, when considering their dis/ability identity, it was often mentioned in relation with other social identities as previously discussed. However, all participants discussed their dis/abilities and academic struggles in continuously varying ways. For Dory, they wrestled with a deficit-oriented narrative that she encountered at school where her dis/ability and accommodations were often invalidated or ignored, resulting in significant conflict
between Dory, her family, and the school district. It then makes sense that Dory’s family worked incredibly hard to find a university that recognized, respected, and was prepared to support Dory’s needs. Their efforts resulted in success as Dory had a near opposite educational experience in college when compared to the trauma she experienced in high school. Additionally, although Dory experienced conceptions of dis/ability as a deficit in some school settings, she was never made to feel less than or shamed by her family, a perception she took on for herself throughout life.

However, Waverly experienced different understandings of their dis/abilities. From their earliest experiences, they were made to feel different, first by counselors and teachers who initially found their journal alerting them to Waverly’s mental health struggles and then by their family that silenced and ignored Waverly’s dis/ability from those within and outside the family. The distance that their family and later on peers put between themselves and Waverly led them to believe that there was something wrong with them and that they could not confide in or rely on others. It wasn’t until later in Waverly’s educational experiences when they one or two educators that helped them to realize that they were not less than.

“They found the ways that would help me complete the work that I needed to do, but in a way that was accommodating to me. And I think a lot of that and the accommodations made me realize and see that it’s again, not me. It’s just that my brain works differently and that sometimes people just need different ways and styles to do the work that they have to do.”

Research Question 3: What factors (if any) do Asian American dis/abled students identify as having particular impacts on their educational experiences?

In reflecting on the third research question, the consistent factor that participants discussed was the level of understanding, support, and acceptance by their teachers. Educators often “make or break” the positivity of their educational experiences. Some
teachers made participant’s experiences “living hell”, breaking them to the point that they no longer pursued paths or goals and/or leading them to question their value as a student. While other educators inspired and empowered the participants, helping them to see their potential, find success, and feel validated in their identities. Additionally, as seen in the responses of the previous two research questions, family relationships were significant factors in the educational experiences of the participants.

Harmful Educators

All the participants shared stories of difficult moments and relationships that they shared with educators. While some, such as Tara who did not go into much detail beyond talking about a few professors who she felt held unfair expectations to her, provided reserved stories, others offered stories that reflected a deep-seated hurt and resentment. For example, Dory recounted two teachers from high school that had significantly negative impacts on her educational experiences, at one point describing her experiences in high school as “living hell”. First, a high school math teacher refused to provide her appropriate accommodations to the point of her almost failing the class. If she had failed, she would not have been set back in her course progression which could have impacted her college plans. Dory also described a French teacher who singled her out as the only person of color and tried to make her dress up as a French Muslim individual for a class project. During our interviews, Dory narrated these stories with passion and clear lingering emotions for those interactions with her teachers. These teachers invalidated her dis/ability to the point of penalizing her for it and isolated her as the only student of color, making her feel ‘othered’ and defined by only single facets of her multiple identities.
Yvette described working with professors who did not try to understand her unique needs as a self-proclaimed “non-traditional” and “older” student. Additionally, she describes feeling unsupported in learning how to structure long readings and that no professors offered strategies to manage reading loads and her graduate courses. She shared her reflections on the detached mindsets of many of her instructors and often cold demeanors that contributed to her feeling “less than”, massive imposter syndrome, and overall, as not belonging within her graduate program.

However, even when faced with hurtful, difficult, or distant educators, some participants were still compelled to emphasize that they had “positive experiences”. Tara, Yvette, and Waverly at different points made clear statements to cement their final position of their past difficult educational experiences as positive learning opportunities or to give a difficult educator the benefit of the doubt. It is unclear if their intention was to reframe the negative events for me as the receiver of their story or self-preserving to shift or rewrite their recollections of the events. I interpret these sentiments in two ways. First, that they have been socialized into maintaining positive attitudes and not complaining. This position can be supported by both Waverly and Yvette’s recounting of their childhoods being raised by parents who encouraged them to not complain or bring attention to themselves. Or perhaps secondly, that they simply want to move past these difficult memories and write more positive narratives for themselves for the future.
However, the participants also shared stories of educators who empowered them, helping them realize their own potential, shaping education and career goals, or supporting them towards success. Waverly’s transformational relationship with T, who helped them explore and work to understand their queer identity and find the courage to pursue their own career interests, serves as a positive example. Or their reflections on counselors that helped them find financial aid and other support services. All these individuals contributed to their eventual success while in college. In reflecting on their positive, negative, or lacking experiences within educational settings, Waverly decided to be the resource that they were missing growing up and started to build their own community through online streaming.

For Dory, her relationship with the Academic Resource Center and counselor Maggie had profound impacts on the way she reflects on her college experiences. She attributes much of her success to the support and resources she had access to through them and shares that she doesn’t know how she would have made it through college without them. Dory also lauded a professor who understood migraines, validating the degree of pain that she experiences and never questioning the validity of her dis/ability. For Yvette, her experiences in her new graduate program department as compared to the culture of her old one had monumental effects on her feelings of self-worth and academic potential. And for Tara, despite feeling singled out by her professors, describes having amazing experiences throughout her college education and feeling prepared to take on her career as an educator.
Family Relationships

The level of family support also contributed to the participants’ emotional state and well-being. Some families were the energy source for participants to persevere through challenging periods in school, such as Dory’s mother and extended family. For others, families were hands off, detached or uninvolved which led to loneliness, isolation and needing to seek support from other sources or communities that they created for themselves, as seen through Yvette and Waverly’s experiences. In some instances, such as Tara’s stories, the family is present and somewhat connected, but not fully aware of the extent of their struggles at times to not disappoint or dampen an otherwise positive relationship.

Research Question 4: How can the experiences of a small group of Asian American students inform educators of the structural biases that may be present within educational systems?

From the stories and experiences of the participants, the perspectives and behaviors of educators and school systems have a significant impact on the experiences of individuals. Teachers can be either validating or invalidating to students which has a direct impact on their self-image, self-worth, educational and career goals, motivation, and attitudes. The biases that were demonstrated within educational systems played out in a variety of ways.

Relationships with Educators

A range of relationships with educators is reflected throughout many of the responses to earlier research questions, however, I will briefly highlight again the import
role these relationships play in the participants’ experiences. For Dory, during high school, had “traumatizing” experiences with teachers and administrators who made receiving accommodations difficult, made her feel that the pain from her migraines were imagined or invalid, and at times she was a disrespected and token student of color in a predominantly white suburban school. Yet when Dory went to college, again with a predominantly white student body, she worked closely with professors who worked to understand her as a student first and respected her needs as someone who suffers from migraines and has ADHD. Dory worked closely with an academic support counselor who helped take a role as an advocate while supporting Dory as she learned how to advocate for herself and begin the transition into adulthood and the workforce. Dory had completely opposite experiences between high school and college, demonstrating the vastly different impacts that educator attitudes can have on a student’s experiences within a classroom and in a learning community.

Waverly reported lacking all types of support from their family and friends but consistently commended the relationships she had with counselors, teachers, and professors. From counselors who advocated for her and helped her find sources of financial aid and mental health support, to teachers who modeled supportive and open classrooms and ways to explore their queer identity, Waverly attributes much of their eventual success to the support those relationships provided them.

Classroom Culture

When reflecting on her experiences at her first university when beginning her doctoral program, Yvette regularly discussed receiving minimal support or expressed interests in her individuality as a student from her professors and advisor. Although she admits that she could have reached out to receive support for her academics, Yvette
described an environment in which she never felt comfortable being vulnerable or safe enough to express her insecurities, particularly as an older student who regularly has difficulty with large reading tasks. The perceived lack of interest in her as a student or as an individual, led to Yvette feeling “less than”, isolated from her classmates, and plagued with imposter syndrome. After two years attending a large East Coast institution and little academic progress, Yvette returned to a California State institution to continue pursuing her doctoral degree. After switching to this new institution, she reports nearly all her previous feelings of insecurity and failure disappearing. Yvette described almost instantly feeling completely different about her potential as a doctoral student. Now, she feels connected to others, valued as a student, respected as a new colleague, welcomed, and well supported by everyone in her department and program. She sees that her goals of finishing her degree are attainable and more than reasonable.

Given the vastly different experiences that Yvette described between the two institutions she attended in pursuit of her doctorate, it is apparent that the culture an institution or teachers foster for students is integral in the ways the students see themselves and their potential, may or may not access the support they need to succeed, and can impact the retention of students.

In a closing question of the final interviews, participants were asked if they had any recommendations for educators in ways to build successful classroom relationships with students. Their suggestions included things they wished their own educators had done or resources that they wish were in place for all students to access. Dory continuously lauded the resources and supports she found within the Academic Resource Center at her college. The counselors, workshops, and other resources available to her
had a direct impact on her academic success. Similarly, Waverly brought attention to the teachers and professors that worked to understand their individual learning styles and built-in accommodations that helped them find successful. Rather than demanding proof of their dis/ability or lessening expectations, Waverly appreciated educators that helped devise plans to ensure their learning and success. Tara wanted to emphasize that students with dis/abilities “don’t do the work because they’re lazy”. She insisted that educators must work to understand students outside of the classroom, taking into consideration additional factors that may be impacting their ability to be ‘successful’ in the classroom.

Lastly, all the participants emphasized the importance of representation in the classroom. Their calls for representation ranged from wanting to feel represented in the material and curricula covered in courses, to teacher that reflected similar backgrounds, or simply having conversations in which they felt valued rather than tokenized. They all believed that they had unique perspectives and experiences that were often not recognized or valued or inquired about, essentially feeling silenced or unheard by those around them. Therefore, it is essential that educators consider the importance of the relationships they build within their classrooms, ensuring that they are validating and supportive of all their students’ needs.

**Considerations for Future Work**

The findings of this study bring particular attention to the importance of educator/student relationships and adequate academic support. It is my hope that this project is only the beginning of a robust field of literature that fulfills the goals and calls
within DisCrit and Intersectional work where marginalized voices are amplified to call attention to the inequitable structures within educational systems.

I envision future research in this area to extend the scope of this project. As one of the limitations of this study included the small number of participants, I would first like to continue this line of research with a broader sample of participants to see if the findings of this study are consistent across a larger group. It could also be helpful to broaden the demographics of the participants. As three of the participants identified as cisgender, straight women and one as queer non-binary, it would serve to enhance the study if it was able to include additional queer and/or male voices. Additionally, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, I am interested in pursuing a multi-generational study of similar participants. Within Yvette’s stories, her experiences shared some similarities with other participants mainly due to her status as a graduate student as well as her status as a first generation Asian American. A future study may include work that considers the ways that multiple generations of individuals reflect on the ways that their ethnicity and dis/ability have impacted their educational experiences.

As one of the goals of the study was to inform educators of the prominent role they play on the educational experiences of their students, a future study could focus on the teacher perspective. I believe that creating a study in which teachers are asked to reflect on and share their understandings and experiences with Asian American students could extend the work previously conducted by scholars such as Cooc and Yang (2017) and Cooc (2018; 2019) or Wang et al. (2021) specifically through a DisCrit and/or Intersectional lens, which is currently absent. Lastly, given that family relationships was a primary factor that participants shared as impacted on their educational experiences, I believe that a study that includes the narratives of multiple family members could be a positive addition to the literature.
Final Thoughts

Overall, the most impactful takeaway from the project is the multiple identities of the participants all have varying degrees of impacts on their experiences dependent upon the environment, other individuals, their relationships, and ultimately how they are feeling about and defining themselves in those circumstances. Identities such as gender, ethnicity, role as an offspring, dis/ability, class, and generation all had varying impacts on the ways the participants experienced school. It is also important to note that participants regularly took cues from the individuals closest to them when it came to understanding their identities and forming their self-image. In other words, the participants are fluid, intersectional individuals, constantly working to define and redefine themselves as they move through time and within the world. Therefore, when this study is situated within educational research and considered for the ways it can inform educators, it is essential that educators are aware of the societal biases and stereotypes that may impact the way they read and understand their Asian American students.

In reflecting on this project and the long process of completing it, I am thankful for and invigorated by the stories that the participants shared. Their vulnerability, vibrant narratives, and thoughtful reflections offered essential perspectives that are often not presented within the current literature. Their stories also serve as a reminder of the dangerous assumptions propagated by the model minority myth and demonstrate its invasive nature within our culture and society.
References


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Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocol

Interviewer: The focus of this project is to gain a better understanding of the educational experiences of Asian Americans who also identify as dis/abled in some way. With your consent, this interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed and later analyzed. All of the transcripts from the interviews throughout this study will be sent to you to review for accuracy, clarity, or to exclude any parts or the entire interview from inclusion in the study. You may end this interview and/or withdraw from the study at any point. Do you consent to participating in this interview and the recording of it? [wait for verbal response from participant]

Interview Questions:
1. Can you tell me a bit about your family, who did you grow up with, your ethnic background, family traditions or values that really shaped or impacted who you feel you are?
2. What does life look like for you currently? This can include your work or school life, where you live, with whom, etc.
3. For the next part of the interview, I want to focus on your educational experiences. To start, can you give me a brief timeline of your school experiences? Such as where you went to school, the type of school(s) like public/private/religious, etc., where in the U.S. you were located, general demographics of the schools if you recall them.
   a. (if they’re hesitating) Since I’m a stranger to these places, try to paint me a picture of what these schools where like for you.
4. Broadly thinking, how would you describe your experiences within school systems?
   a. Can you tell me a story about one of the times you felt [accomplished, defeated, challenged, misunderstood/understood, smart]?
5. Are there differences in the way you experienced elementary, middle and high school? Post-secondary school (if applicable).
   a. Within this question, if participants need encouragement, ask them to describe their friend group (in/out of the classroom), subjects in which they excelled or struggled, their favorite school activities, favorite/worst memories, etc.
6. Can you describe any moments of tension or struggle that you can recall throughout these school years?
7. Were you identified or labeled with a disability while enrolled in school? (age, location, etc.) Can you reflect on that process?
8. If they weren't labeled or identified as disabled: How do you think the lack of an “official” label impacted your experiences?
9. Are there any teachers/educators/counselors that stand out in your memories for any reason? What do you think makes these individuals stand out?
10. In what ways, if any, do you see your ethnicity playing a role in your educational experience?
11. Is there anything else you’d like to share?
Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Thank you all for signing into this group interview. As I stated during our prior, individual interviews, the goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the educational experiences of Asian Americans who also identify as dis/abled in some way. With your consent, this interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed and later analyzed. All the transcripts from the interviews throughout this study will be sent to you to review for accuracy, clarity, or to exclude any parts or the entire interview from inclusion in the study. You may end this interview and/or withdraw from the study at any point. Do you all consent to participating in this interview and the recording of it? [wait for verbal response from participants]

Before we begin, can each of you introduce yourselves using your selected pseudonyms and give your current location, hometown if you’d like, current occupation or school major, and ethnic identity.

Interview Questions:

1. Before we get started with the questions I’ve prepared for today, does anyone have anything they’d like to share based on our previous conversation? Sometimes things come up between interviews and I just wanted to give you a chance to share. Even if you don’t have anything to share right now, please feel free to reference our past interview here if you’d like.
   a. I want to bring attention to the violence that our community has experienced these past few weeks—personally I am feeling all the feels, outraged, scared, hopeless, exhausted, helpless. I’m just wondering how all of you are holding up.

2. In our earlier interviews, some of you reflected on moments of difficulty or struggle—are there ways that you think that your ethnicity played a role in those instances?
   a. What were some of the feelings or behaviors that arose during those periods?
   b. How did your families react to your struggles/difficulties?
   c. How did your friends react to your struggles/difficulties?

3. Did your struggles/difficulties change as you got older—as you went to college, graduated, entered the workforce, etc.
   a. In addition to your ethnicity, do you feel that your gender identity played a role?

4. Are there things about your educational experiences that you found particularly helpful? Particularly difficult?
a. How would you change your educational experiences if you had the chance?
b. Are there things you wish your past self knew or realized?
c. Are there things you wish your family knew or understood about you or your schooling experiences?

5. What, if anything, would you recommend a current or future teacher know or understand about students that may be like you?

Removed questions due to getting this answered throughout most of their individual interviews.

- Thinking back to your experiences in various educational systems—how would you describe the demographics of your schools?
  o Were there many other students who looked like you?
  o Did you feel like you were part of a community while in/at school?
    What did these communities look like or focus on?
  o Were there activities or organizations outside of school that you felt connected with? Who were the other people involved in that?
Appendix C

Final Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Thanks for coming to this final interview. As I stated in all previous interviews, this interview will be recorded with your consent. The purpose of recording the interview will be to transcribe it and analyze it for my dissertation study. The transcript will be provided to you to review and provide any clarifications or note any areas you’d like to be partially or fully omitted from the study. If at any point you wish to end this interview or remove yourself entirely from the study, you may do so with no consequences or penalty. Do you consent to participating in and recording this interview? [wait for verbal response from participants]

Interview Questions:

1. What was it like being in a group interview or discussion?
   a. Were there any realizations or new understandings that came out of your time in that group discussion?
   b. Are there any lingering thoughts or curiosities that are still with you following that discussion?

2. What does your identity as an Asian American [be specific to each individual’s ethnic identity] mean to you?
   a. In what ways do you think your ethnic identity has impacted your educational experiences? This could be in or out of the classroom, with friends, teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.

3. What would you tell your past teachers about your experiences in their classrooms?
   a. What do you wish they knew/understood?
   b. What should they have done differently or the same?

4. Are there questions that you think I should have asked?

5. Are there other things/stories I should know or that you’d like to tell me?

6. Do you have any thoughts or questions for me?
VITA

Kaela N. Fuentes-Packnick

Education

Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, Fall 2016-Present
The Pennsylvania State University - University Park, PA
Language, Culture, and Society Program

M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction, Spring 2011
The Pennsylvania State University - University Park, PA
Reading Specialist Certification K-12

B.S. in Special Education, Spring 2011
The Pennsylvania State University - University Park, PA
Special Education Certification K-12

Conference Presentations