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Asian Adult Education Annual Conference

The Asian Adult Education Annual Conference began in 2003. Its former name was the Asian Diaspora Adult Education Pre-conference in conjunction with Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). The steady development over the past 20 years has made it the leading pre-conference in the North American Adult Education Research Annual Conference, actively promoting and co-constructing the academic development of North American adult education.

The purpose of the Asian Adult Education Conference (AAE) is to provide a platform for academic exchange among researchers and scholars in adult and continuing education, as well as higher education, from the East, West, and Rest, especially those who are interested in conducting research related to Asian and Asian Diaspora adult education theory and practice. It seeks to promote mutual learning, enhance shared understanding, and stimulate academic viewpoints and dialogue from various perspectives from global educators. Selected presentation papers are published in peer-reviewed conference proceedings.

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Community Transformation: Asian American Community Leaders

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Abstract

Utilizing in-depth interviews, theories, and concepts in analysis, this study examines how a group of Asian American leaders transformed their community politically, socially, and economically.

Key Words: learning-from-experience, community, leadership, mentorship, collaboration

Community Transformation: Asian American Community Leaders

This paper details the success of a specific group of Asian American community leaders from Orange County, California in transforming their community by advocating for important causes such as addressing hate crime, promoting education, facilitating economic growth, and combatting poverty, which are pertinent to the Asian American Pacific Islander Native Hawaiian (AAPINH) population in Orange County. This research also covers significant historical American moments such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, WWII Japanese American internment camps, and more recent events like the Anti-Asian violence during COVID-19. The leaders highlighted in this paper are of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese descent, representing different age cohorts from their late 40s to their 70s, and coming from diverse sectors such as nonprofit, for-profit, k-12, and politics. They have all worked in their respective fields for at least twenty years and have demonstrated leadership skills while participating in learning from experience (LFE), informal and incidental learning, and developmental networks throughout their lives.

Methodology

This study involves collecting and analyzing data through interviews conducted over a period of twenty months to identify patterns and themes. A literature review was conducted to explore Asian American history and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Furthermore, the Institutional Review Board at Teachers College, Columbia University approved this research. The study analyzes interview transcripts and applies theories and concepts to the analysis.

Literature Review

This paper begins with a literature review of LFE. The inclusion of LFE in this study is based on the hypothesis that it is fundamental in adult learning and a crucial element in the growth, mentorship, leadership, and collaboration of Asian American community leaders in Southern California's AAPINH community. These leaders of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese descent have learned through deliberate cognitive efforts and informal and incidental means, such as interactions with family and the wider community. Research on informal and incidental learning proposes a model for effective adult learning in their lives (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; 1992; 2018). LFE leverages past experiences to navigate the world effectively and involves learning from challenges and mistakes while developing approaches to address problems.

LFE has been a topic of study for many years, tracing back to the early 20th century. John Dewey, one of the influential educators who contributed to the development of the LFE theory, emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience and active engagement in his educational philosophy (1938). Other key theorists who added to LFE include David Kolb, Victoria Marsick, and Karen Watkins. Kolb developed the experiential learning theory, emphasizing reflection and experimentation (1984), positing that learning is a continuous process involving experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (1984; 2014).

Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins have also contributed to the concept of LFE by highlighting that reflection and experimentation occur not only in formal education settings but also informally and incidentally (1990). As prominent scholars in adult learning and professional development, they created a model for informal and incidental learning that highlights four interrelated parts: context, experience, action, and reflection. This model has helped numerous organizations better understand how learning occurs and how to facilitate it (1992; 2018). Additionally, mentors both internal and external to organizations can be utilized to aid in learning.

Scholar Kathy Kram (2001, 2012) has described how personal growth and development can be facilitated through formal and informal mentoring relationships known as developmental networks. These networks comprise individuals in an adult's life, including family, friends, colleagues, and role models, who provide invaluable guidance and support to help the mentee attain their career and personal goals. The significance of these networks lies in their contemporary approach to mentorship, which differs from the conventional hierarchical relationship between a single mentor and mentee that was previously perceived (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978).

The primary objective of this literature review is to demonstrate the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin the argument presented in this paper, specifically the focus on Asian American community leaders who have engaged in informal and incidental LFE to develop their leadership skills and advance community transformation efforts. These leaders possess a rich historical knowledge of the challenges faced by the AAPINH community in the late 19th and 20th century, which they are committed to preserving. The older Asian American leaders learned from their mentors, who were Asian American leaders and activists in the past, and have passed their knowledge down to future generations of AAPINH community leaders in Orange County.

Interviews

The interviews, seven in total and conducted in Summer and Fall 2021, were in response to the Anti-Asian violence that was broadcasted throughout the US during COVID-19 (Takasaki, 2020). As a Korean American, the researcher felt a personal connection because it affected his family in California. To better understand the Asian experience in the US, a literature review was conducted on topics such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese American internment camps during WWII, unfair immigration laws, labor practices, and negative stereotypes of AAPINH people.

The researcher was introduced to a group of five distinguished Asian American leaders by an influential seventy-three-year-old Chinese American leader with a reputation for advocating for disenfranchised communities in Orange County and local AAPINH communities. The group consisted of two Japanese American men in their mid-70s and mid-60s, a Chinese Japanese American in her mid-50s, and two Korean American women who are also in their mid-

50s. The elder Chinese American leader and the two Japanese American leaders were instrumental in developing Orange County's Asian American leadership. The oldest member in the group previously served as the national president of the Japanese American Citizens League, the oldest Asian American civil nonprofit advocating for Japanese American civil rights. The other Japanese American male leader currently holds the position of superintendent in a large Southern California school district. These two Japanese American leaders and the elder Chinese American leader provided mentorship and support to the Chinese Japanese leader, who established her nonprofit organization focusing on AAPINH issues in the 1990s.

Her organization has since become the largest nonprofit organization focused on AAPINH issues in Orange County, offering valuable services such as workforce development, mentorship, tutoring, and health and mental health advocacy. The researcher also notes that this nonprofit has received multiple grants to support the AAPINH communities throughout California.

The Japanese American superintendent also introduced the researcher to a Korean American teacher who works in his district and because of COVID-19 and the Anti-Asian violence became a community leader. This Korean American teacher, in his late 40s, has been working for this superintendent's district for over twenty years and has held various roles, including being a social studies middle school teacher, a coach for other teachers in the district on how to teach civic engagement and learning. Additionally, he created the first Korean American ethnic studies course in California for K-12 schools and actively engages with his students in discussions about race and Asian Americans.

The next two Korean American leaders introduced to the researcher worked closely together in nonprofits and collaborated with the largest Asian American nonprofit in Orange County. One of the leaders runs a significant Korean nonprofit providing legal and healthcare services to the Korean community, leveraging her extensive knowledge of law and healthcare. The other leader merged her nonprofit with the former, resulting in her becoming a manager at the combined nonprofit and also entering local politics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she ran for Vice-Mayor of an Orange County city and was elected.

As the Vice-Mayor, she took proactive measures to support the AAPINH communities in response to the worsening COVID-19 and Anti-Asian violence situation. Her city provided rental assistance and small business loans to residents during the pandemic, and to ensure access for vulnerable populations, she had the application translated into other languages. As a result, the city received 168 Farsi, 100 Korean, and 75 Chinese applications. Additionally, as an elected leader, she established a hate crime incident portal within the city to document incidents and collaborate with the police department, ensuring the safety of all citizens. This Korean American leader emphasized to the researcher that all of the Asian American leaders in this study are the "heavyweights" when it comes to influence in the AAPINH community in Orange County.

The Asian American community leaders interviewed in this study engaged in LFE to become effective collaborators in promoting justice and access for the AAPINH community in Orange County. Their informal and incidental learning occurred within their respective fields, and they shared a deep understanding of the history of Asian Americans in the US since the 1800s, which allowed them to connect and work towards strengthening the AAPINH community (Takaki, 1998). Many of these Asian American leaders had parents, grandparents, and friends who were impacted by the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment camps, making it vital for them to work towards promoting justice for their communities.

The older generation of Asian American leaders, including the Chinese American and two Japanese American leaders, were supported by their own mentors who played crucial roles in significant moments in American history and activism for the AAPINH communities across the United States and California. These leaders shared that Dr. Jack Fujimoto, who became the first Asian American president of a community college in 1978, Bill Watanabe, the inaugural Executive Director of the Little Tokyo Service Center in 1979, and Dr. Feelie Lee, the director of international projects at UCLA, and Senior Consultant for UCLA Extension's Asian/ Pacific Outreach Program in 1986, along with many other exceptional leaders, served as their mentors. In addition, Senator Inouye and Colonel Young Oak Kim are notable mentors who inspired and guided them. Colonel Kim led the Japanese American 442nd battalion, which Senator Inouye was a part of during WWII, and the battalion remains the most decorated American unit in American history. The movement to empower the AAPINH community in Orange County started in the 1990s and has continued till today, largely thanks to the efforts of these Asian American leaders and the developmental network that they established and continue to maintain.

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