

Research Article

Empowering Anaheim: Igniting Civic Engagement and Social Justice through Innovative Staff Development

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Abstract

This paper explores how an Asian American teacher's course initiative and the Anaheim Union High School District's (AUHSD) strategies in teaching and community involvement advance social justice and combat anti-Asian violence in Orange County, California. Utilizing systems theory and informal and incidental learning theory, this study examines the effectiveness of AUHSD's efforts. Findings reveal that the teacher's approach effectively addresses discrimination, while AUHSD's innovative curriculum and partnerships promote inclusivity and equity. This research underscores education's critical role in building informed, inclusive communities.

Keywords: ethnic studies, civic engagement, learning organization

Introduction

In the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. catalyzed the Civil Rights Movement, advocating for desegregation, voting rights, and economic justice (Garrow, 1986). This movement not only impacted the African American community but also addressed historical inequalities faced by ethnic groups such as Native Americans, Latino Americans, and the Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPI). King's activism underscored the broader struggle for social justice through political action and reform, emphasizing education, healthcare, and employment. While the movement achieved notable milestones, such as the Civil Rights Act of

1964, it also encountered severe challenges, including King's assassination, which highlighted the ongoing struggle surrounding race relations (Martin, 2022).

One contemporary issue regarding Civil Rights is the rise in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that the quest for justice is ongoing. This resurgence has prompted renewed efforts to combat racism and promote equity and justice (Takasaki, 2020). Within this context, initiatives like those done by the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) and the work of Kim exemplify contemporary efforts to address social injustices (Gallegos, 2023). As a Korean American educator, Kim responded to the rise in anti-Asian violence by developing the first Korean American Ethnic Studies course for high school students in the United States. This course not only addresses the violence faced by Asian American communities but also fosters civic engagement and a deeper understanding of Asian American histories and contributions.

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Under the leadership of Matsuda, AUHSD has developed a unique educational framework fostering a supportive environment for innovative initiatives. Since May 2023, the district's Career Preparedness Systems Framework (CPSF) has been pivotal in changing AUHSD into a "Democracy School District." The CPSF embraces the 5Cs initiative, which focuses on essential 21st-century skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and compassion (Anaheim Union High School District, n.d.). This framework integrates civic education, career readiness, and social justice into the curriculum, providing a robust foundation for educators like Kim to develop innovative courses that address contemporary issues. Within the district, the CPSF leverages the Anaheim Innovative Mentorship Experience (AIME) program and Civic Learning Institutes to achieve these goals.

Against this backdrop, this reflection paper explores two central themes: the impact of Kim's Korean American Ethnic Studies course in combating anti-Asian violence and fostering civic engagement, while also exploring AUHSD's commitment to equity and inclusion through the CPSF. By examining these themes, this paper reflects on how various literary and educational theories—such as systems theory (Senge, 1990), and informal and incidental learning theory (Marsick & Watkins, 1990)—can be applied to the experiences of AUHSD and the initiatives of Kim.

Research Project Collaboration

Before launching the Korean American Ethnic Studies class, Kim played a pivotal role in a research project at Columbia University led by the author of this article. This project explored the lived experiences of Kim and six other Asian American leaders, examining their efforts to transform Southern California for the AANHPI community. The leaders, representing a diverse spectrum of sectors—including nonprofit, for-profit, politics, and education—spanned various generational backgrounds, from veteran leaders in their 70s, 60s, and 50s, and hailed from the Korean American, Japanese American, and Chinese American

communities. Their shared commitment was to advocate for the AANHPI community in Southern California.

This project was conceived in response to the surge in Anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. The culmination of their collaborative efforts resulted in the paper “Community Transformation: Asian American Community Leaders,” which was recognized and published by the International Transformative Learning Conference in April 2022 (Ahn & Volpe, 2022).

Historical Context of AANHPI Challenges

Before discussing AUHSD’s initiatives, it is essential to understand the historical challenges faced by AANHPI communities:

1. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted Chinese immigration and barred Chinese women from entering the United States, reflecting economic tensions and racial biases (Kil, 2012).
2. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 imposed strict quotas on Asian immigration, reinforcing racial discrimination and limiting opportunities for AANHPI individuals (Fish, 2022).
3. The Japanese American Internment of World War II displaced Japanese American citizens, stripping them of their homes and jobs during the war (Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998).
4. The Magnuson Act of 1943 repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, allowing a limited number of Chinese immigrants to the United States during World War II (Wong, 2010).
5. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s sought to integrate AANHPI individuals into American society despite ongoing racial discrimination (Fish, 2022).
6. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 reformed U.S. immigration policy, increasing AANHPI immigration and diversifying the American demographic landscape (Tichenor, 2016).

This historical context highlights the systemic challenges faced by AANHPI communities and provides a foundation for understanding AUHSD’s contemporary initiatives. Kim’s Korean American Ethnic Studies course exemplifies AUHSD’s commitment to addressing these challenges by integrating diverse historical perspectives into the curriculum and fostering a deeper understanding of AANHPI experiences.

Korean American Ethnic Studies Course

Kim’s response to the surge in anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic was to launch the inaugural Korean American Ethnic Studies high school course in the Fall of 2023. The anti-Asian attacks that arose in 2020 left many students, both Asian and non-Asian, confused and fearful. In addition, the tragic Atlanta spa shootings in 2021 solidified Kim’s resolve to address these issues through education and community engagement.

This comprehensive year-long course is structured into five sections:

1. Students articulate personal narratives to foster empathy and community within the classroom.

2. Students explore pivotal moments in Korean American history to deepen their connection to the United States.
3. Students engage with stories of historical figures such as Colonel Young Oak Kim (World War II commanding officer), Sammy Lee (physician and Olympic diver), and Ahn Chang Ho (politician and activist), highlighting their contributions and resilience.
4. Students curate virtual museums showcasing aspects of the Korean American experience, becoming historians of their heritage.
5. Students participate in community projects focused on the Korean American community, promoting healing and personal growth.

This Korean American Ethnic Studies course gained recognition when it was featured on NBC's 5 o'clock news in July 2023 (NBC, 2023). Motivated by concerns over negative portrayals and hate incidents faced by AANHPI individuals, Kim wanted to empower students through compassion and education. Collaborating with educators from K-12 and higher education institutions, including Grace Cho from California State University, Fullerton, and the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea of Los Angeles, he developed a robust curriculum.

The success of this course highlights AUHSD's supportive environment for civic and community engagement. One poignant moment in one of the classes was when a non-Asian student expressed regret for not intervening during a past incident of harassment and committed to becoming an ally to the AANHPI community. This example demonstrates the profound impact of Kim's course on fostering empathy and social responsibility.

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AUHSD Experience with Social Justice

To comprehend fully AUHSD's engagement in civic participation and social justice, it is essential to explore a pivotal moment in the city's history marked by widespread civil unrest (AUHSD Communications, 2020). In July 2012, Anaheim was shaken by two separate police shootings that affected members of the heavily Latino immigrant population. These incidents sparked chaos, protests, and vandalism, leaving residents and leaders grappling with the violent aftermath and seeking viable solutions.

Amidst the turmoil, a prevailing sense of foreboding affected Anaheim's youth, who felt overwhelmed and lacked guidance. Recognizing this, Mayor Tom Tait of Anaheim and Matsuda of AUHSD took a proactive stance to address the root issue: a lack of hope among economically challenged immigrant families (Brady, 2022).

A critical moment came in 2013 during an Anaheim Committee meeting when approximately 200 to 300 high school seniors advocated for greater support. They highlighted the urgent need for mentors and internships to guide their post-high school futures. This advocacy catalyzed collaboration among Mayor Tait, AUHSD, the city of Anaheim, and AUHSD, leading to the creation of the AIME program. AIME was designed to connect AUHSD students with mentors from the corporate and nonprofit sectors, offering invaluable career

insights, personal development opportunities, and over 300 paid summer internships every year across Orange County.

Since its inception, AIME has flourished, establishing partnerships with over seventy corporate and nonprofit entities committed to supporting Anaheim students. It stands as a model for mentorship and internship programs, recognized for its success in empowering youth, fostering civic engagement, and preparing students for future success.

Building on the success of AIME, Matsuda furthered AUHSD's commitment to student empowerment by establishing the Civic Learning Institutes. Kim plays a crucial role within these institutes as the Civic Lead and Coach, spearheading efforts to integrate civic participation and social justice into AUHSD's curriculum. As one of the coaches, he teaches how to implement civic learning in different classes across AUHSD. Alongside him are key contributors Steve Little, an educator at Savanna High School, and Reuben Patino, the Curriculum Specialist, both of whom also serve as Civic Leads and Coaches. Together, they champion innovative educational initiatives that promote civic engagement and social justice within the district.

The 5Cs Initiative and the CPSF

Many U.S. school districts focus primarily on "teaching to the test" to meet Common Core standards, often perpetuating educational inequality and failing to equip students with essential skills for real-world challenges. In contrast, AUHSD, under Matsuda's leadership, has adopted a holistic educational philosophy emphasizing mentorship and career development for the 21st century (AUHSD Communication, 2020).

Central to AUHSD's approach is the 5Cs: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and compassion (AUHSD Communications, 2019). This framework marks a significant shift from traditional test-focused methods and a commitment to developing vital 21st-century skills necessary for effective problem-solving, teamwork, and democratic engagement.

Pat Bassett, former president of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), advanced the 5Cs as foundational competencies for preparing students for future challenges (Bassett, 2009). Additionally, the CPSF incorporates systems thinking principles, creating a cohesive strategy that integrates diverse programs to support students' academic, career, and personal growth.

Key Elements of CPSF

1. The Career Preparedness Systems Framework (CPSF) connects initiatives like AIME and the Civic Learning Institute to support students' academic, career, and personal development, aligning efforts toward the common goal of future success.
2. By emphasizing both soft and hard skills, CPSF offers a balanced approach that extends beyond test preparation, promoting essential 21st-century skills known as the 5Cs, which are critical for long-term success (AUHSD Communications, 2019).
3. CPSF fosters a dynamic learning environment where students explore interests and engage in real-world experiences, aligning with systems thinking principles that

emphasize the interconnectedness of educational components and adaptive strategies for complex challenges (Senge, 1990; Teece, 2018).

4. Programs like AIME provide practical career experiences through internships and mentorships, bridging classroom learning with professional life. The Civic Learning Institute empowers students and educators to tackle civic issues and engage in community-building, furthering AUHSD's mission for success in an interconnected world.

The 5Cs not only equip students with essential skills but also foster purpose, empathy, and compassion. Through activities like TED Talks and civic dialogues, AUHSD connects academic concepts with real-world applications, preparing students for future challenges and encouraging active citizenship, as seen in discussions on anti-Asian violence during COVID-19.

AUHSD's commitment to these initiatives has earned it the designation of a democracy district, celebrated at the Nixon Library in 2023 (EdFamily, 2023). This recognition underscores the district's innovative educational approach and dedication to fostering civic engagement and student empowerment.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the impact of AUHSD's educational innovations, it is essential to analyze these initiatives through theoretical frameworks. This paper examines AUHSD's initiatives through systems thinking theory and informal and incidental learning theory (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Senge, 1990). These frameworks illustrate how AUHSD has created a vibrant, equitable community and the rationale behind Kim's course development.

Systems thinking theory examines organizations as interconnected systems where each part affects the whole (Senge, 1990; Teece, 2018). It helps explain how AUHSD integrates programs like AIME and the Civic Learning Institute to foster a supportive environment for growth and adaptability. The Career Preparedness Systems Framework (CPSF) exemplifies this by aligning curriculum development, mentorship, and career exploration into a cohesive strategy for student development.

Informal and incidental learning theory focuses on how adults acquire knowledge through experiences outside formal education (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). This theory builds on Malcolm Knowles' Andragogy, emphasizing self-directed learning and practical application over traditional instruction (Knowles, 1973).

At AUHSD, programs like TED Talks and "Days of Dialogue" exemplify informal learning by connecting real-world experiences. educators on integrating science, math, English, approach, demonstrating opportunities enhance both

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academic concepts with Kim's workshops for civics into subjects such as and history reflect this how informal learning teaching and learning.

Researcher's Reflections on Theories

Analyzing AUHSD's initiatives through systems thinking and informal and incidental learning theories reveals key insights into the district's educational and social justice strategies. Systems thinking enables observers to see AUHSD as a learning organization, illustrating how its various components work together to achieve overarching goals.

Informal and incidental learning theories highlight how initiatives like TED Talks and "Days of Dialogue" enrich traditional education by connecting academic concepts to real-world issues. These experiences enhance students' learning and prepare them for future challenges. Kim's mentoring exemplifies these principles, fostering collaborative learning communities and promoting professional development in the Civic Learning Institutes, ultimately creating a dynamic educational environment for both students and teachers.

Conclusion

AUHSD's impactful educational initiatives have established it as a leader in promoting civic engagement and social justice in education. Its designation as the first California Democracy District, with all 20 schools recognized as Democracy Schools, underscores its commitment to active citizenship and integrating civic engagement with career readiness (EdFamily, 2023). Notably, AUHSD has the highest number of students earning the State Seal of Civic Engagement in California. Building on this foundation, the development of a Korean American Ethnic Studies course by an Asian American teacher further illustrates how innovative educational practices can drive social change. This course introduces students to Korean American history and culture while promoting cross-cultural appreciation and historical awareness, positioning AUHSD as a model for future ethnic studies programs.

The course's recognition by Invent2Prevent, sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, highlights the impact of curricula that foster empathy, dialogue, and historical awareness (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). By aligning AUHSD's broader achievements with this teacher's work, the district demonstrates how education can address contemporary social issues and combat prejudice. Together, these initiatives create a more inclusive educational environment, setting a precedent for future courses and inspiring the next generation of educators and students to advocate for social justice and equity. AUHSD's journey illustrates how education rooted in civic engagement and inclusivity can cultivate a more just society for all.

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