

Asian American Invisibility and Hypervisibility
in Work Toward Racial Justice in Mathematics Education

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Abstract: In this paper, we examine ways that Asian Americans have been simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in mathematics education. Further, we investigate how this phenomenon is related to the invisibility and hypervisibility of other people of color, particularly Black youth. We draw on data from an ongoing project that aims to advance racial justice in middle school mathematics by engaging youth of color (including Black, Latine, and Asian American middle schoolers) as emerging researchers and designers. Findings suggest that advancing racial justice requires attending to the intersections of invisibility and hypervisibility for differently racialized groups, in order to go beyond improving outcomes for particular groups and instead uproot white supremacy so that all people can be seen in their full humanity.

As Black civil rights and women's rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer (1971) stated, "Nobody's free until everybody's free." However, white supremacy frequently "displace[s] what is fundamentally a White–non-White conflict over resources (higher education, jobs, businesses, contracts) onto a proxy skirmish between non-Whites, thus shifting attention away from the exercise of White racial power" (Kim, 1999, p. 118). The role of Asian Americans in recent Supreme Court cases illustrates this point, as claims that Asian Americans are disadvantaged by affirmative action policies that benefit Black, Latine, and Indigenous people displaced the more fundamental issue of White privilege in college admissions (Johnson, 2023).

In this paper, we examine ways that Asian Americans have been simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in mathematics education. Further, we investigate how this phenomenon is related to the invisibility and hypervisibility of other people of color, particularly Black youth. We draw on data from an ongoing project that aims to advance racial justice in middle school mathematics by engaging youth of color (including Black, Latine, and Asian American middle schoolers) as emerging researchers and designers. We are situated in this work as a third generation Chinese American whose children attend schools involved in the project (Nicole) and as a second generation Hmong American who grew up in the city in which our study takes place (Chundou). We share a commitment to creating spaces where Asian Americans are seen in their full humanity, striving for "thick solidarity" with one another and with other people of

color—probing “the specificity and irreducibility of [different] racialized experiences, and yet ... car[ing] and empathiz[ing] despite incommensurability” (Liu & Shange, 2018, p. 190).

Background and Perspective

Building on the work of Stacey Lee and colleagues (2022), we understand racialized *invisibility* in schools to involve processes whereby “the perspectives, histories, and concerns of non-White students are often rendered invisible—they are erased, silenced, excluded” (p. 3). The other side of the same coin, *hypervisibility* involves the emphasis of particular aspects of these students’ experiences and identities in ways that are essentializing, demonizing, and dehumanizing. Invisibility and hypervisibility work in tandem to maintain white supremacy, sometimes targeting the same group simultaneously.

Asian Americans are subject to both hypervisibilizing and invisibilizing discourses. Like the broader myth of the model minority, the trope “Asians are good at math” hypervisibilizes Asian and Asian American success while reducing us to computing machines and invisibilizing the full range of our humanity, including our struggles within and resistance against racist systems (Shah, 2019). As various scholars have argued, these phenomena are not separate from but rather intimately entangled with the denigration of Black, Latine, and Native American mathematical abilities and intelligence—positioning Whites as the standard for human (Chen & Buell, 2018; Shah, 2019).

Prior research has shown that Asian American students pay for their hypervisibility and invisibility in various ways, including being ignored and neglected by educators even when they face serious challenges in navigating their schooling (Lee & Pheng, 2022; Lew, 2007). Studies have also examined how students themselves navigate racial narratives about mathematics ability in their everyday school interactions and the effects on their participation, learning, and identities (Nasir & Shah, 2011; Shah, 2017). Here, we extend existing literature by investigating how these narratives play out in hypervisibilizing and invisibilizing processes connected to an initiative aiming toward racial justice in school mathematics.

Methods

Study context

The present study emerged from a larger project grounded in participatory design research (PDR) as a methodology. PDR seeks to center those most affected by social problems in designing and studying solutions, and to link structural critiques with collectively imagining and working toward more just futures (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). The project took this approach in direct response to the dominant approach to educational equity in our context, which has been exclusive in multiple ways. In particular, negative press has continually highlighted the district’s failures to support Black students, and the district’s reactions have been top-down rather than participatory and moreover have positioned the interests of local Black communities in competition with the interests of other communities of color.

This paper focuses on our work during the initial phase of the project, which involved recruiting school partners and building student teams at two middle schools, Washington and Urban (pseudonyms). Schools were selected in part through district administrators' nominations and in part through personal connections (Nicole is a parent at Washington). School staff were asked to nominate students of color with a range of relationships to mathematics who would have useful insights to share about their experiences learning math at school.

The schools are differently situated in the district. Urban enrolls approximately 400 students, about 30% of whom identify as Hispanic/Latino, 20% as Black, and 5% as Asian. Washington is almost twice as large, with a smaller proportion of students of color: about 10% identify as Hispanic/Latino, 5% as Black, and 15% as Asian. Whereas Urban recently moved to detrack its mathematics program, Washington has three different math tracks (on grade level, accelerated, and double accelerated). Washington has a reputation as a "good school," but both schools struggle to support Hispanic/Latino, Black, and Asian—especially Hmong—students academically, as standardized test scores show. We note that Hmong people face additional layers of invisibility. As a Hmong student explained (Her et al., 2023): "Most people don't know what Hmong is." Further, reports typically lump all Asians together, obscuring Hmong experiences and outcomes.

Data collection and analysis

The current study draws primarily on typed field notes from meetings with school and district administrators, teachers, and students, as well as audio field notes that we recorded together immediately before and after meetings with students. We also recorded meetings with students (sometimes audio, sometimes video) and collected artifacts that they produced (e.g., memos about their school math experiences).

Analysis has been iterative and ongoing. We began to generate themes through our reflections and conversations with one another, making connections and noting apparent patterns. For the present study, we systematically reviewed all of our data, searching for both confirming and disconfirming evidence. Additionally, we have shared our findings with participants, who have confirmed and expanded our interpretations.

Findings

We found that dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility permeated the initial phase of our project, affecting which schools and students were nominated to participate and how youth positioned themselves and were positioned by others in mundane school interactions. As we interacted with the youth more, we also observed a multitude of ways in which they, and we, worked to counter hypervisibility and invisibility.

Who should be part of work toward racial justice in mathematics education

Others' ideas about who should be part of the project indicate the invisibility of Asian

Americans in our context, coupled with the hypervisibility of Blackness. First, when we suggested Washington as a potential partner school—noting that tracking at the school produced inequitable mathematics learning experiences—some administrators discouraged that choice, explicitly because the number of Black students there is relatively small. Then, at both Washington and Urban, teachers nominated Black students almost exclusively despite our request for students of color with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and experiences at school. (We subsequently asked staff to nominate Asian and Latine students specifically.) This occurred despite the fact that there are more Latine than Black students at both Urban and Washington, and standardized test scores show similar achievement patterns between Black and Latine students at Washington, and between Black, Latine, and Asian students at Urban.

Thus, there was a pattern of teachers and administrators associating race and racial justice work with Blackness in ways that reproduced the invisibility of Latine and Hmong youth and families, and potentially also reflected the hypervisibility of Blackness as *the* race problem—diverting focus from white supremacy.

Hypervisibility and invisibility in daily school interactions

Mundane interactions in schools also enacted hypervisibility and invisibility. For example, for our first project meeting with students, we walked around Urban gathering students. Davonte, a Black 7th grader, was the only student in our group to be questioned about where he was going. We later learned that the school deemed Davonte someone who required constant supervision in the hallways—i.e., he was hypervisible as a Black boy presumed to be delinquent. On the other hand, the school rendered Asian American students invisible. For instance, when we went to a classroom to pick up a Hmong 6th grader named Amy, her teacher told us she was absent. As the teacher spoke, however, Amy slowly and quietly raised her hand, making herself visible as unobtrusively as possible. Similarly, we noticed Michael, a Korean American 8th grader, minimizing himself and his needs when he needed to go to the bathroom. These examples evidence the ways that the school has communicated to students what it desires: silence and invisibility from Asian students, and perpetual justifications of their presence from Black students.

Contesting hypervisibility and invisibility

We have seen students challenge their own stereotyped hypervisibility and invisibility. For example, Davonte was one of the most thoughtful and consistent contributors to group discussions, whether the subject was racial stereotypes or video editing. Michael, too, emerged as a leader, becoming the only student to learn how to use a digital camera and gimbal to capture footage for a group video project. And we saw Esther, a Hmong 7th grader, countering Amy’s invisibility by noticing the younger girl’s timidity and taking her under her wing, partnering with her for various activities even though the two did not know each other prior to joining the research team.

We have also sought to challenge hypervisibility and invisibility ourselves, in particular

by deeply considering how to take care of each person in our emerging community, to make sure they have a place and a purpose so that their value is clear to them and to everyone else, and to protect the community as a whole. We have deliberately drawn on our own cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in these efforts, building on our experiences of big family dinners at our aunties' homes when we were children. In those spaces, our aunties worked to ensure collective surviving and thriving with an eye on our families' shared past, present, and future. They communicated to us that we mattered in the face of invisibilizing, white supremacist systems. In attempting to bring this ethos into our work with the youth, we have found ourselves enacting ways of being education researchers that are new for us (as we imagine they might be for many in mathematics education) and frequently surprising to the youth. For example, we exhume their buried race talk, playfully taking their jokes and invocations of stereotypes and putting them on the table to be examined (whereas students are accustomed to having teachers ignore these jokes or scold them for making them). We sprinkle our own speech with Cantonese, Hmong, Spanish, and African American Vernacular English. We make ourselves too busy to film so that Michael has an indispensable role. And we find a way to grant kids' wish for french fries, fried cheese curds, and rice at our end-of-year celebration—at 7:00 in the morning (a difficult hour to procure these items, cheese curds in particular). In some ways, none of this is revolutionary. Yet it points toward possibilities for visibility and wholeness for Asian Americans alongside other people of color in mathematics education.

Discussion and Implications

Our findings suggest that the field must attend to the intersections of invisibility and hypervisibility for differently racialized groups, to go beyond trying to improve outcomes for particular groups and instead uproot white supremacy so that all people can be seen in their full humanity. Ignoring Asian Americans in these efforts, or continuing to position them as too “good at math” to be harmed by racism in mathematics education, is dehumanizing to Asian Americans and may lead to their exclusion from (and perhaps resistance against) work toward racial justice. Moreover, it works against thick solidarity, instead bolstering antiblackness and white supremacy. Challenging these dynamics is, for us, not just about asserting the full humanity of Asian Americans but of all people.

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