

Jen Walsh:

From the American School Counselor Association, this is I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, Director of Education and Training here at ASCA. This month, ASCA is proud to celebrate Asian Pacific Islander heritage month, which is a time to recognize the contributions and influence of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islander Americans to the history, culture, and achievements of the United States. Like the rest of the country, ASCA is dismayed at recent data that reveals that over the past year, the number of anti-Asian hate incidents, which have included shunning, slurs and physical attacks have been on the rise. And a disproportionate number of attacks have been directed at women, ASCA condemns this violence and racism that permeates our nation. And we call on everyone to take real measures to end the cycle of racism. Today, I'm happy to be joined by Joy Erzinger, a school counselor in Des Moines, public schools in Des Moines, Iowa. Welcome Joy.

Joy Erzinger:

Thanks so much for having me, Jen, it's an honor and privilege to be here.

Jen Walsh:

I hear you say that your experience as an Asian-American impacted group tremendously growing up.

Joy Erzinger:

Before I dive in, I'd just like to mention that what I share is both unique, but also shared by many other Asian-Americans. So I am a second generation Taiwanese American, and I say unique because as one person, I do not want to pretend like I represent the incredibly diverse AAPI community. So the AAPI community includes over 20 million people speaking over a hundred languages and hailing from over 20 countries. So there are lots and lots of unique traditions and cultures that are practiced. And there are also tremendous differences within the AAPI Pacific Islanders experience within America. So I want to say that, but I also want to express that the experience is shared by many other Asian-Americans, because unfortunately in America, AAPI is lumped into one racial category. And so for many Americans, specifically white Americans, the differences are not recognized nor celebrated.

So back to your original question, growing up here, I actually experienced quite a few different microaggressions that impacted me and my self view growing up. So microaggressions often happen from well-meaning individuals and they can be extremely confusing because I knew that they didn't necessarily make me feel good, but I kept brushing them under the rug by thinking, "Well, maybe this person is just trying to be nice or this person is just being curious." So for me, and I think for many of the AAPI community micro aggressions can be separated into two primary categories. So the first being the perpetual foreigner concept, and then the second being the model minority myth. So the perpetual foreigner concept is a way to describe how someone is seeing as foreign and not American enough. And for me, and I think many others, this plays out when strangers will ask me, "Where are you from?" And then followed by? "No, no, no, but where are you actually from?"

And this also looks like when someone will just come up to me and start speaking in an Asian language or asking me which Asian language I speak. And so these types of microaggressions constantly reminded me as well as many other Asian-American Pacific Islanders that we are just simply not American enough and that we don't belong. They remind me that the first thing that someone sees about me is that I cannot possibly be American. And so I remember very vividly that when I was in third grade, my family and I went back to visit my relatives in Taiwan. And my brother and I were in a

bookstore and we were speaking in English, as people were passing by, a lot of people were stopping and looking at us and staring at us because I think English is not commonly spoken.

So we quickly realized this and trying to fit in, we decided to try to speak in Mandarin and now our Mandarin is fairly subpar. And we noticed pretty quickly that a lot of people continued to stare at us. And I remember this experience distinctly, because this is what really, I think reminded me of... In Taiwan, people do not consider me to be Taiwanese, but in America I have found that most people do not see me as American. And it became this question of belonging and where do I belong in both America, but also in my Taiwanese Chinese heritage. So for me, and I think many other Asian-Americans in the United States, we find that these microaggressions and these questions and comments commonly make us ashamed of our heritage. So for me, it made me ashamed to be Chinese. And I know that for myself, I try to assimilate as much as possible to prove to both me and to Americans that I could be a good American.

So then the second type of microaggressions that is commonly heard is one that is, again, not just unique to me, but common and used across the AAPI community is the model minority myth. And this played out in both students and teachers saying to me, "You're Asian, you should be good at math. Or, "I want Joy in my group, she's Asian and she has to be smart." So something along those lines. So at first glance, I think this is a great concept, right? Who wouldn't want to be labeled as good at something. But then I started to realize, as I grew a little older, math is actually really hard for me. And I started wondering if there was something wrong with me because it didn't come as naturally to me as I thought it should because I'm Asian. And I also started to think, "Do people want to actually work with me because they liked me? Or is it because they think that I should be smart?"

And so I found that this model minority myth is not only harmful to my own self image, but it has been used in extremely harmful ways for other people of color. So primarily the black and Latin X community. And I have found that it has pitted Asian-Americans against the black and Latin X community. And for me growing up, I would say that I bought into this myth and began to think that perhaps it was because of our hard work that other communities could also succeed if they put in that hard work as well. And now I realize it does not take into account the deeply rooted systems that we have in place and the different histories of oppression that different communities experience. As counselors, this might also look like as we work with Asian-American students, that we might shoe horn them into certain professions or as educators not give Asian-American students the help that is needed in class, because we assume that day they got it or that they don't need help.

So again, at the beginning, I mentioned that the term AAPI is a concept that categorizes diverse people with a single label. So for example, in the U.S. census, Asian-American Pacific Islanders have a lower than average poverty rate and a higher than average post-secondary education rate. However, if you disaggregate the data, it shows a very different picture. So for de Moines, we have a larger Burmese and Lao population. And if you just aggregate the data, pew research shows that 35% of the Burmese community actually lives in poverty. And that's nearly three times that of the American percentage and only about 15% of the Lao community attain higher education, which is half of the percentage of all Americans who are attaining higher education. So because Asian-Americans are seen as the model minority, we often aren't given the resources and support that is needed in the proper places. That's why it's really important to look into our data and be able to dis-aggregate it, to be able to find out where in your local community do the resources and the support need to go.

Jen Walsh:

You talked about not really having a sense of belonging or always feeling like an outsider. And belonging is just so important. It's in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And it's really crucial for all humans at any point

in their life to feel a sense of belonging. But when we think about children, I feel it's even more important.

Joy Erzinger:

Yeah. So definitely for me, I think there's this straddling of two different worlds. And so going home, there is a very much a sense of trying to preserve and educate us about our heritage from my parents. But then when you walk out the door, you realize that there is a completely different world outside of our house, that sometimes the challenges of trying to reconcile two very, very different cultures and worlds, and not really knowing where I fit or like not feeling like I'm a hundred percent Asian, but not feeling like I'm a hundred percent American and not knowing where I fall.

Jen Walsh:

We'll hear more from Joy in a moment. But first I wanted to share some resources that may be helpful as you celebrate Asian Pacific American heritage month. The first is from the Smithsonian, Library of Congress and National Archives. You can visit the [smithsonianapa.org/stand](https://smithsonianapa.org/stand) for upcoming AAPI programs across the Smithsonian. And additionally, Learning for Justice has a great article titled Humanizing Asian Americans in the Classroom Through Children's Literature. You can find this at [learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org). And we're now back with Joy. I hear you say that your school district is hosting a course based on Alicia Oglesby and Rebecca Atkins book, Interrupting Racism: Equity and Social Justice in School Counseling.

Joy Erzinger:

Yes. So actually something that a lot of people may not know about Des Moines is that we are incredibly diverse. So we serve over 30,000 students and 36% of our students are white and the remaining 64% are students of color. However, like many other school districts across the country, our staffing does not reflect the same demographics as our students. And so that's why it is incredibly more important for our staff to know how to celebrate and affirm our students of color and to work alongside of them. So as school counselors, we have this amazing opportunity to teach our students, staff and communities. And this year we piloted a class based off of the book, Interrupting Racism by Alicia Oglesby and Rebecca Atkins. And so we had it as a nine week course where we paired chapters with guest speakers and small group discussions. For me, this class was such a breath of fresh air because I was able to converse and work with people who not only know that racism is in our schools, but also know that we must take action.

Jen Walsh:

And Joy, is this class with students?

Joy Erzinger:

It's just with school counselors throughout the district. Yep. So there is about 23 of us.

Jen Walsh:

Got it. Okay. Thank you.

Joy Erzinger:

So a few weeks back, I got to share a little bit about my story and my experiences with microaggressions as I was growing up. And while I was preparing and sharing, I realized that so many times the AAPI community falls through the cracks in conversations about equity and racism. And this is in part because of the model minority myth that we talked about earlier. So I feel like often the AAPI community flies under the radar. So therefore, I think this is even more important for school counselors to be able to learn how to take the time, to understand and hear our AAPI students who often feel unseen and invisible and to give them platforms to use their voice. We must be actively involved and intentionally affirming our AAPI students.

Jen Walsh:

I'd love to hear a little bit more about the course itself. Have there been any aha moments for you?

Joy Erzinger:

Well, I think something that a lot of people talked about in which I agree with throughout the course, so our district has about a hundred counselors. And so a quarter of us took the class and something that's so helpful for all of us, because we often as an elementary counselor or middle school counselors, there's usually two of us that we often feel like we're working in silos as one or very few counselors in the school. So what was amazing about this course is being able to bring us all together around a common cause and to be able to remind us that we aren't alone in this endeavor, but that we have a group of other counselors throughout the district and nearby who are working and tirelessly working to interrupt racism.

Jen Walsh:

It sounded like other participants of the course were surprised to hear your experience.

Joy Erzinger:

Yes. And I think that's why I felt very strongly about sharing this more or talking about it with ASCA. Because again, I think that often the AAPI community doesn't get included in conversations about race, justice and equity, and that we have our own experience. And often the hard part about it is that there obviously are cases and a lot of overt racism that happens, but on the day-to-day basis, there's also a lot of microaggressions that happen that fly under the radar and aren't brought up, but have a huge impact on our students and their self identity and their sense of belonging.

Jen Walsh:

And often their education experience, essentially.

Joy Erzinger:

Yes. Yep.

Jen Walsh:

Discuss how your journey with your identity shapes your work with faculty, parents, and students.

Joy Erzinger:

So the first thing for myself is realizing that my Taiwanese heritage is actually a really beautiful thing. And then realizing how important it is to intentionally affirm our students of color. So for me, that

actually didn't happen until a few years ago when I was about 31 years old and I was in a store and the store clerk told an anti-Asian joke. And while I'd experienced many anti-Asian incidents, this one for some reason hit me harder. So while I was processing all of this with my brother and we are both Christians, he said something that I never heard before. He said, "Joy, you know that in the Bible, it talks about heaven as being a place where we will be in our perfect form and that we're going to see people from every nationality. And so if people in heaven will still recognize you to be Chinese and you're in your perfect form, then there is absolutely nothing wrong with your Chinese-ness, it's already in its perfect form."

And quite honestly, when I heard this, I started to cry. I had never heard this before. I had never had anyone affirm my Taiwanese Chinese heritage and remind me of how beautiful and amazing it is to be Taiwanese American. And so I think this is really important for counselors to know, because you may not realize that in a nation that tends to elevate whiteness, if we are not actively and intentionally affirming our students of color, they may never hear how beautiful and wonderful their heritage makes them. I think some of this might sound a little bit contradictory to what I talked about earlier about focusing on where someone is from. So I think there's definitely a fine line between being colorblind and treating someone as a perpetual foreigner. And a lot of this has to be based upon the relationship that you build with your students. So what I'm trying to say is that, not to focus and only see someone from where they're from, but also to recognize that and to be able to affirm it when it's appropriate and when it's needed.

Jen Walsh:

No, that makes sense. And I'm glad that you addressed how it can be a fine line and it's finding that balance or building a relationship first in order to know the best approach.

Joy Erzinger:

Yeah. Some people don't ever want to talk about it. I mean, especially for some of our students who are refugees that may have had a really traumatic past and might not want to talk about it.

Jen Walsh:

Yeah. That's a really good point. And I think it goes back to the importance of building relationships.

Joy Erzinger:

I think it's so different for every student. And I think this is just part of getting to know someone, but also I do think when there are appropriate times to probe a little bit more is when a student or a parent brings up naturally and talks about... Sometimes I would have parents who would come in and say, "Well, in my country we would never do something like this." Or something like that. And I think then that is a really good opportunity for us to take a stance of humility and to be able to ask the parent, "Well, tell me a little bit more about when you say in my country. What does that mean?" And to be able to use that as an opportunity to learn more about the student and the family. In terms of with parents, I think that it's really important to recognize that their respect is a really important aspect for many Eastern cultures. So being able to present yourself and being able to acknowledge the parent and to be able to hear them and understand them is a really important way to be able to build bridges.

Jen Walsh:

Thanks so much Joy. We'll hear more in a moment, but first, school counselors have an ethical obligation to serve as advocates, leaders, collaborators, and consultants who create systemic change by providing equitable educational access to the students they serve. School counselors have a unique opportunity to be an important part of the solution for change. Did you know that ASCA offers the diversity, equity and inclusion specialist training at no cost for any educator who wishes to pursue the coursework? You can find out more information by heading to the ASCA website, [schoolcounselor.org](http://schoolcounselor.org) under the events and professional development section under the ASCA U specialist trainings. We're now back with Joy. Joy, I'd love to hear more about your journey with your identity as an Asian Pacific American.

Joy Erzinger:

So another step in my journey has been learning to speak up. And so even right now, speaking on this podcast is something that I never would have done a few years ago. However, I have learned that our silence inhibits change and in our interrupting racism class, we actually talked quite a bit about one of the barriers for school counselors to speak up or to lead discussions about racism, equity, and justice is that there's this fear that we're going to say something wrong. And this is always a fear for me, but we also talked about how much grace there is when we have built strong relationships with our students. And so according to a report by stop AAPI hate, one of the websites that has been recording and reporting a lot of the hate crimes that have been happening to the AAPI community. So of the 341 incidents that were reported by youth, nearly 50% of them said that there was an adult who was nearby, but only 10% of them said that the adult actually intervened.

So it reminds me of last year, there was an Asian student who was brought to me and the teacher was very exasperated with the student and he was arguing and disrupting class. So I asked the student to tell me what was going on. And he explained that there was another student in the class who was not Asian, but who had shouted out to the class and said that he had COVID. But I was immediately able to address with the other student and with the teacher that this is considered as anti-Asian sentiment and racism. And the teacher didn't know the history of anti-Asian sentiment being linked with diseases and also, how anti-Asian hate crimes have increased 149% during COVID. So if our staff aren't aware of what constitutes as anti-Asian racism and what are anti-Asian microaggressions, then they're not able to be on the lookout and they're not able to intervene. So there's both the education aspect, as well as the speaking up aspect.

And then lastly, something else that I have been processing my whole life. And I think we'll probably continue to process for the rest of my life is how to differentiate if something is right, wrong or just different. So my whole life I've been trying to reconcile two vastly different cultures, and there are tremendous differences between Eastern culture and Western culture. So of course, we live in a country that elevates Western culture. And I grew up largely thinking that there is a right way of doing things. There's a wrong way of doing things. And now I'm actually learning that the majority of the things that are done are just different and they're not right or wrong.

So we think about an individualistic culture in America that upholds independence and free-thinking where, as in a lot of different Eastern cultures, there's this collectivism and a group mentality, and there are benefits of both individualistic and collective cultures. We also think about the ways that different cultures interact with authority or save face. And a lot of times in America we'll look at something that is different and denounce it or condemn it when in fact it's just a different way of thinking and a different way of doing things. I think it's really important to learn and acknowledge these differences and not treat them as right or wrong. Otherwise, we will end up white washing our students and forcing them to assimilate.

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Jen Walsh:

Yes, absolutely. Well, we like to close each episode with something that gives you hope.

Joy Erzinger:

So what is happening now really gives me hope and motivates and inspires me, the conversations, the awareness, the policies. And I just think about how timely it is that we had the COVID-19 hate crime bill passed overwhelmingly in the Senate, but in our interrupting racism class, we also talked about how policies are great and that they're needed, but they don't change hearts. And so I see that there are more and more counselors who are leading their students and staff in these challenging conversations about racism, equity, and justice. And I see that there's a generation of students that are becoming activists who are learning to speak up with each other and for each other. And ultimately I see that there are hearts that are changing and that's what motivates and inspires me.

Jen Walsh:

Well, that was so lovely and so well said. I wanted to thank you Joy for joining us today and thank you all for listening. This has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counselor Association. We hope to have you back on our next episode, but until then be sure to check out our website [schoolcounselor.org](http://schoolcounselor.org) for school, counselor resources. Also, we'd love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook at the American School Counselor Association, Twitter at ASCA tweets and Instagram at we are ASCA. Thanks and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh. And this has been, I Hear You Say.