Asian Educators Experiencing the Bamboo Ceiling: A Canadian Case Study of Systemic Barriers in Hiring, Advancement, and Promotion

Mary Reid
University of Toronto

Steven Reid
University of Toronto

Ardavan Eizadirad
Wilfrid Laurier University

Abstract

Our study amplifies the voices of Asian educators undergoing career advancement in a large district school board with a significant Asian student population in Ontario, Canada. Our data sources included survey results from 234 Asian educators and focus group transcriptions from 83 Asian educators. Grounded in Asian critical race theory ("AsianCrit"), our findings show that Asian educators faced the "bamboo ceiling," wherein institutional barriers and inequities in relation to their Asian identity limited their career advancement when applying for leadership roles. Through a thematic analysis, we found systemic bar-

Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation

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riers: (a) pressure to conform to whiteness to advance their careers, (b) accent and name discrimination, and (c) colonial ideologies that have been normalized and embedded in leadership selection processes. Our research addresses significant gaps in the literature on Asian Canadian educators' experiences in career advancement and contributes to the important development of AsianCrit theory.

Keywords: bamboo ceiling, AsianCrit, Asian educator, career advancement, Canadian leadership

Résumé

Notre étude fait entendre la voix d'éducateurs asiatiques en évolution de carrière dans un grand conseil scolaire de district ayant une population étudiante asiatique importante en Ontario, au Canada. Nos données proviennent de résultats d'enquêtes menées auprès de 234 éducateurs asiatiques ainsi que de transcriptions de groupes de discussion rassemblant 83 éducateurs asiatiques. Fondés sur la théorie critique de la race asiatique (*AsianCrit*), nos résultats montrent qu'ils sont confrontés à un phénomène appelé le « plafond de bambou », c'est-à-dire que des barrières institutionnelles et des inégalités liées à leur identité asiatique limitent leur avancement professionnel lorsqu'ils postulent à des fonctions de leadeurs. Une analyse thématique a permis de découvrir des barrières systémiques : (a) des pressions pour se conformer à la « blanchité » afin de faire progresser leur carrière; (b) une discrimination par rapport au nom ou à l'accent; et (c) des idéologies coloniales normalisées et ancrées dans les processus de sélection des leadeurs. Notre recherche comble d'importantes lacunes dans la littérature concernant les expériences d'éducateurs canadiens d'origine asiatique en matière d'avancement professionnel et contribue à l'important développement de l'*AsianCrit*.

Mots-clés : plafond de bambou, théorie critique de la race, AsianCrit, éducateur asiatique, avancement professionnel, leadeurship canadien

Introduction

The "bamboo ceiling," a term coined by Hyun (2005), is a phenomenon where Asian employees face discriminatory barriers that limit career advancement in Western workplaces, thus preventing them from reaching higher leadership positions despite demonstrated qualifications and skills. These barriers are often due to stereotypes, biases, or negative cultural perceptions of Asian people. Scholarship on the bamboo ceiling has mainly focused on corporate America, specifically in high-tech industries, wealth management, and Fortune 500 companies (Nunes, 2021; Yu, 2020). There are limited studies that examine Asian educators' experiences in hiring, advancement, and promotion (HAP) processes and even less scholarship that exemplifies Asian *Canadian* educators' voices as they attempt to move up in the education system.

Grounded in Asian critical race theory ("AsianCrit"), our study emphasizes the experiences of Asian Canadian educators as they navigate the HAP processes in a large district school board (DSB) in Ontario, Canada. In school systems, career advancement usually involves applying for lead teacher roles (such as department/subject head or instructional leader) and administration roles (vice-principal, principal, or superintendent) after being a teacher for at least five years. The central question of this study was: *What are the experiences of Asian Canadian educators as they attempt to move through the advancement and/or promotion processes for leadership roles, such as lead teacher, vice-principal, or principal?*

Our data sources included survey results from 234 Asian educators and focus group transcriptions from 83 Asian educators, all collected in 2022. In a scan of AsianCrit literature, most research centres on Asian Americans (Hwang, 2021; Chou & Feagin, 2015; Kim et al., 2011; Shih et al., 2019; Trieu, 2019; Xie, 2022), with very few studies on Asian Canadian educators applying for leadership roles in their districts. Hence, this study is noteworthy because its findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the bamboo ceiling within a Canadian education system. Our study not only aims to identify critical gaps in the literature but, more importantly, identify ways to mitigate the systemic barriers for Asian educators pursuing leadership positions, leading to transformative change to advance fairer representation and equitable outcomes. Further, we propose an important addition to the tenets of AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018): a tenet focused on linguistic assumptions.

Racialization of Asian Identities: Asian Critical Race Theory

There is no doubt that Asian diasporas and identities are rich in diversity, with Asian Canadians tracing ancestry to the continent of Asia. According to recent census data, the two largest visible minority groups in the DSB are Chinese (45%) and South Asian (22%), and the top five countries of origin for recent immigrants to the region are China, Iran, Philippines, India, and Pakistan. Other Asian regions are featured in the remaining top 10 regions of origin, including South Korea, Hong Kong, and Sri Lanka (based on regional demographic data). Further, demographic data from the DSB's website indicates that 49% of the student population (Grades 7–12) self-identifies as Asian (i.e., East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian). Despite the prevalence of Asian students and communities within the DSB, discriminatory practices exist, resulting in denied promotions for Asian educators.

Racialization of Asian identities perpetuates stereotypical assumptions such as them being perpetual foreigners, a model minority, exotic, or a dangerous threat to Western civilization. Such racist beliefs ultimately lead to xenophobia, otherizing, intolerance, and hate against Asian people (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Coloma, 2013; Cui, 2019; Hyun, 2005; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Sakamoto et al., 2023). These negative assumptions and stereotypical representations in the dominant discourse and the media lead to internalized oppression, such as many East Asians having double eyelid surgery to enlarge their eyes and look more white. Another example is the prevalence of South and Southeast Asians lightening their skin through bleaching techniques to look paler. Also, many take up English names so that Westerners can pronounce their names more easily (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012). This speaks to the extent to which white supremacist and colonial ideologies continue to marginalize Asian identities and contribute to their othering as part of their day-to-day realities (Bauman, 2013; Chou & Feagin, 2015; Eizadirad, Abawi, & Campbell, 2023; Kohn & Reddy, 2021; Zhao & Biernat, 2017). Further, intersecting oppressions result in varied racist and gendered experiences (Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021). For example, East and Southeast Asian women experience fetishization and hypersexualization (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021) while South Asian men experience more racial profiling by government border crossing services (Selod, 2018).

The racialization of Asian people includes the "model minority" myth, which is the belief that all Asians achieve universal success in their careers and education, specifically in the fields of math and science, due to the hardworking values they possess. This

stereotype became popular in the 1960s amidst the civil rights movement. Its ideological intentions stem from white supremacy, with the goal of pitting one marginalized group against another based on the myth of meritocracy. This myth promotes the idea that the harder one works, the more opportunities will open, leading to greater success. However, this concept does not consider how systemic barriers create and maintain inequality of opportunities (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2022; Battiste, 2013; Eizadirad, 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). In contrast, prior to the 1960s, "yellow peril" was the dominant ideology, which viewed Asian people as savages and a direct threat to Western society. Although the model minority myth may be considered a "positive" stereotype by some, it has harmful implications, as it paints all Asians with a monolithic brush and their marginalization is rendered invisible or dismissed as "not a priority" in comparison to other social groups or communities (Shih et al., 2019).

Sadly, systemic racism is a lived reality for Canadians with Asian heritage, culture, and lineage, who continue to experience microaggressions and micro-invalidations daily including in schools—as students, parents, and educators (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020; An, 2022; Eizadirad, Villella, & Cranston, 2023; Gover et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). With these negative and colonial assumptions, stereotypes, and ideologies that permeate Canadian society in mind, it is critical to examine the hiring, advancement, and promotion barriers that Asian educators face. Once barriers are identified, we can then be strategic and intentional in how to mitigate them.

Our research was guided by AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018), a theoretical framework rooted in critical race theory (CRT) (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). CRT offers a scholarly lens for examining how race and racism intersect within various societal realms including education, health, and law (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Building on CRT, AsianCrit allows for a deeper examination into the experiences of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians. The main purpose of AsianCrit is to critically understand how white supremacist and colonial ideologies impact Asian Americans in education (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Foundational to AsianCrit are seven interconnected tenets that frame the purpose and objectives of the theory. In this study, we utilize three tenets offered by Iftikar and Museus's (2018) conceptualizations of AsianCrit. *Story, theory, and praxis* is the first major tenet of the AsianCrit framework: "stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). We agree that story should inform theory and practice,

which is why we centre Asian participants in our study who willingly shared their heart-wrenching stories about discrimination during HAP processes, as well as their personal narratives of internalized racism. Through these meaningful stories, we illuminate emotional narratives and humanize conversations about the bamboo ceiling, all while offering an "alternative epistemology" (p. 941) in which Asian Canadian educators give evidence of their real struggles and barriers. Ultimately, we hope such stories propel the work of "positive transformative purposes" (p. 941), where processes for DSB promotions are reviewed through the critical lens of dismantling anti-Asian racism.

A second major tenet of AsianCrit is the process of *Asianization*, the racialization of Asian people due to dominant white norms. As noted previously, Asian people in the Western world are "racialized as perpetual foreigners, threatening yellow perils, model and deviant minorities" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940). Iftikar and Museus (2018) purport that the construct of Asianization impacts ways in which institutions, organizations, and systems operate, which fundamentally "dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans" (p. 940). Relatedly, our study showcases how the bamboo ceiling is a consequence of such systemic practices. For example, we observed that Asian educators were frequently overlooked for leadership positions due to stereotypical assumptions that all Asians are docile, quiet, and hardworking. These biases, in conjunction with colonial views of leadership qualities (e.g., charismatic, articulate, boastful, outgoing), become major barriers for advancement and promotion in Asian educators who happen to lead quietly and collaboratively within their school community.

Our study's theoretical framework is also grounded in *intersectionality*, a third tenet of AsianCrit. Intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1989), is a construct that examines how social identities and other systems of oppression intersect. AsianCrit specifically explores how Asian people's intersecting marginalizations "shape the conditions within which Asian Americans exist" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 940). Without doubt, the intersection of identities (e.g., gender, accent, body size, age perception, and Asian-sounding names) played a major role in how study participants experienced the bamboo ceiling.

Methodology and Data Sources

We employed a mixed methods approach, accessing primarily qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and focus group transcriptions. Participants were Asian-identifying educators who worked in a large DSB in Ontario, Canada. A total of 234 educators completed an anonymous survey, and 83 educators participated in focus group discussions. The survey took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete. Qualtrics survey software was used to collect and store responses, which were accessed via secure servers based in Canada. Participants rated their experiences using a Likert scale ranging from 0–10 (e.g., "On a scale of 0–10, to what extent do hiring, advancement, and promotion processes in the DSB support the recruitment of people who identify as Asian?" and "On a scale of 0–10, to what extent are Asian identities represented in senior leadership positions that impact policies, practices, and initiatives within the DSB?"). After each item, participants were invited to expand on their experiences. The qualitative and quantitative data were triangulated as part of thematic analysis with the research team, confirming the findings and overall themes.

Three themes surfaced via an iterative coding process involving the assignment of codes to qualitative data, merging codes, identifying potential categories and themes, and triangulating with the quantitative data:

1. Pressure to conform to whiteness to advance their careers
2. Accent and name discrimination
3. Colonial ideologies are normalized and embedded in leadership selection processes

Out of the 234 educators, 210 were teachers and 24 were administrators, either vice-principals, principals, or system administrators. The study also conducted multiple focus group sessions (in groups of up to 10 participants) with 61 teachers and 22 administrators participating through Zoom. The data from open-ended survey items focused on questions about mentoring, promotion support, and experiences with the DSB's HAP processes. The survey also included quantitative data through identity-based questions, as well as Likert scale questions about leadership opportunities. Transcripts of the focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses were analyzed and coded as a research team. Grounded in the AsianCrit tenet of "story, theory, and praxis," focus group discussions offered participants the opportunity to share their stories with raw emotions,

in which some showed frustration, anger, and even crying. Focus group facilitators made note of details that emphasized specific information about leadership experiences and contextualized it as part of the analysis. These notes included observations such as heightened emotions, gestures, body language, or group actions like participants nodding to confirm a specific point made by a speaker.

The qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and focus group transcripts consisted mainly of participants' experiences of HAP processes. Through various meetings, the lead authors trained the research assistants (RAs) on how to deconstruct the qualitative data sets and apply coding techniques by labelling and organizing participant responses to determine emerging themes and relationships among the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Iterations of analysis involved the coding of the qualitative data by individual RAs listing the initial coded items, then the entire research team collectively reorganizing the full set of initial codes into categories. Lastly, the lead authors revisited the list of categories and finalized them into themes (Green et al., 2007; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Furthermore, this study's quantitative data offered a secondary source, namely the results from the Likert scale questions and the identity-based data collected. The quantitative data was analyzed and used to triangulate the overall data (Green et al., 2007).

Table 1 shows the racial identity of educators who completed the survey, where 59.48% identified as East Asian, followed by 25% as South Asian, and 9.48 % Southeast Asian. Mixed identities represented 4.74% of educators, while 1.29% of educators specified a racial identity that was not listed. Of this 1.29%, the majority indicated they were of Middle Eastern descent, as well as Central Asian.

Table 1

Racial Identity of Survey Respondents for Educators (n = 234)

Race	Educators % (n = 234)
East Asian	59.48%
South Asian	25.00%
Southeast Asian	9.48%
Mixed Identity	4.74%
Not listed	1.29%
Total	100%

Tables 2 and 3 outline more specifically the identity of the educator survey respondents. This is important as each group has its own unique needs and concerns from an intersectional lens. Of the 234 educators who participated in the survey, the majority— almost 90%—were teachers, while the remaining 10% were administrators. Administrator participation was open to vice-principals, principals, and system administrators. System administrators are principals and superintendents with responsibilities at the DSB level beyond the school. As the number of Asian-identifying system administrators is low, only an overall percentage of 10.09% is provided for the position of "Administrator." Subsets of this position (principal, vice principal, system administrator) are suppressed to ensure the privacy of all participants. The division in which educators worked showed that almost 55% were elementary educators (kindergarten to Grade 8), 41.3% identified as secondary educators (Grades 9 to 12), and a small percentage worked in both divisions.

Table 2

Position of Educator Respondents (n = 234)

Race	**Percentage (*n* = 234)**
Teacher	89.91%
Administrator (Principal, Vice Principal, System Administrator)	10.09%
Total	**100%**

Table 3

Division of Educator Respondents (n = 234)

Division	**Percentage (*n* = 234)**
Elementary (Kindergarten to Grade 8)	54.78%
Secondary (Grades 9 to 12)	41.30%
Both	3.91%
Total	**100%**

Findings

Our findings highlighted the unique struggles that Asian Canadian educators faced when attempting to advance their careers. By leveraging AsianCrit in our analysis, we achieved a more comprehensive, culturally responsive, and socially aware interpretation that addresses the issues faced by Asian Canadian educators. Although racialized educators may experience similar challenges in the workplace (e.g., isolation, perpetual foreigner syndrome, and otherizing), there are forms of discrimination that are uniquely attributed to anti-Asian racism. These include the model minority myth and cultural stereotypes of submissiveness and docility, leading to assumptions that Asians are not suitable for leadership. These concepts are discussed in detail throughout the themes that offer strong evidence of a bamboo ceiling. Below, the three major themes are explained in detail through the lens of an AsianCrit theoretical framework. Specifically, important connections to the AsianCrit tenets of story, theory, and praxis; Asianization; and intersectionality are outlined as we examine the systemic barriers that Asian educators faced when applying for leadership roles.

Theme 1: Pressure to Conform to Whiteness to Advance their Careers

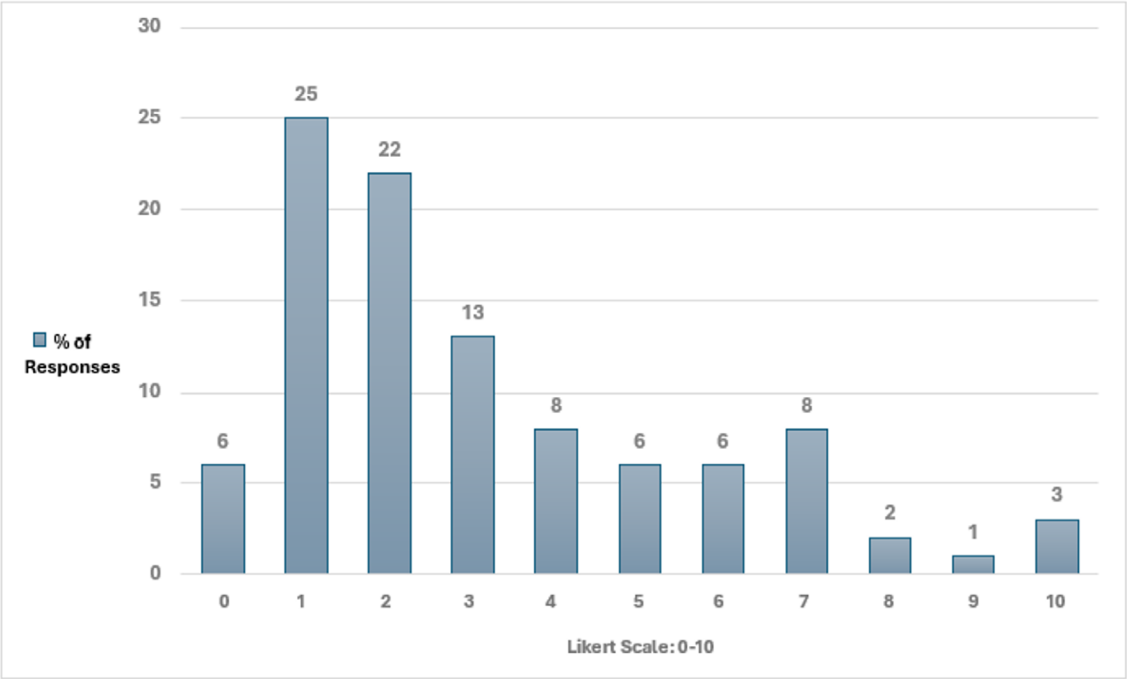
Feeling pressure to conform to whiteness and colonial ideologies was expressed by almost all educators. Throughout this theme, we examine participants' realities of Asianization and how intersecting identities of gender and race uniquely shape access to opportunities for promotion. Participants revealed feeling a necessity to conform in attempts to feel accepted by their white peers and superiors and be considered for leadership roles. As one educator stated, "performing whiteness helped people take me more seriously." Other educators explained that whitewashed identities held an advantage because DSB leaders gravitated toward them: "I see that whitewashed Asians get more invitations for leadership opportunities and are part of more circles." Participants shared specific behaviours of conforming to whiteness that included efforts to avoid linguistic biases by decreasing Asian accents and Westernizing Asian names. Furthermore, efforts were made to distance oneself from Asian colleagues while gravitating toward white colleagues, thereby strengthening one's white social network. These stories illustrate how colonial structures shape the experiences of Asian educators to the point where they cannot exist as their authentic Asian selves, but rather must act white and code-switch between home and school to be considered a good candidate for leadership.

When considering advancement and promotion, participants discussed the challenges of getting approval from their superiors, who played the role of gatekeepers in advancing to the next level. One female educator shared the hurtful response she received from her principal when she expressed interest in putting her name forward to become an administrator: "My principal reacted with 'Are you sure you're ready? Maybe rethink your decision.'" The lack of support was explicit for this educator, despite having over a decade of experience as a school leader and involvement in school- and district-wide projects. Overall, Asian women shared more stories of microaggressions (e.g., being ignored in or excluded from conversations) and stories of rejections during the hiring and promotion process when compared to male counterparts. On one hand, Asian educators felt pressured to whitewash their identities to match the dominant norms of an assertive leader, but for female Asians who defied the reserved stereotype, outcomes were detrimental for career advancement. As explained by an Asian female teacher who challenged her male administrator, "My principal thought I was overreacting to an issue that involved an irate parent who questioned my expertise. He didn't like how I responded and didn't support me." From these stories, participants discussed how administrators expected the Asian stereotype of "keeping our heads down, staying out of the radar of the office, and don't bother to speak up," especially for Asian women. This stereotype of docility and passivity disadvantages career trajectories as Asians are not seen as competent leaders. Many others expressed their disappointments about administrator promotions: "When it comes to hiring, white privilege still exists," and "the [DSB] has stated that they are committed to equity and inclusivity, but actions do not back it up…almost all promotions are of white people."

A major part of this issue of conforming to whiteness resides in the serious lack of Asian representation in senior leadership roles. When educators were asked "To what extent are Asian identities represented in senior leadership positions that impact policies, practices, and initiatives within the district?" the average Likert response from educators was very low at 3.19 out of 10. This low average puts a spotlight on the structural racism that impacts the daily lives of Asian employees (see Figure 1 for details). Many educators expressed frustrations with the low Asian representation of senior leaders: "There needs to be representation of all Asian backgrounds/races on a DSB level, not just one or two token faces," and "The DSB's students are 49% Asian. This proportion is not reflected in its teaching or support staff. There are even fewer Asian administrators, and even fewer Asian people in positions of senior leadership."

Figure 1

Educators' Responses to Asian Representation in Senior Leadership



Note. The x-axis represents a Likert scale from 0–10 (0 being "not at all" and 10 being "very evident)." The y-axis displays the percentage of educators' responses when asked "To what extent are Asian identities represented in senior leadership positions that impact policies, practices, and initiatives within the district?" The overall average response for educators was 3.19, while the mode was 1.

Key to dismantling anti-Asian racism involves shattering the bamboo ceiling so that Asian representation is not tokenistic at leadership levels. In doing so, decision making and policy development should include Asian voices and perspectives. Hiring just a few Asian leaders does not equate to sincere representation, nor does it guarantee equitable power dynamics across schools or DSBs. Instead, this performative and "checklist" approach to doing equity work is ineffective tokenism (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2022). Representation of diverse Asian leaders across a DSB cultivates inclusive workplaces and safer spaces, where Asian students and families feel a greater sense of belonging and inclusion (Nevarez et al., 2019). Diversity in leadership levels (including diverse Asian identities) allows for contributions that are varied and authentic perspectives to be valued, alleviating the pressure to conform to whiteness.

Theme 2: Accent and Name Discrimination that Negatively Impacted Career Advancement

Accent discrimination. Discrimination against Asian accents is part of the Asianization process due to deeply ingrained colonial mentalities resulting in xenophobic attitudes toward Asian-accented English speakers (Kubota et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2011). Accent prejudice is reinforced when Asian accents are depicted as inferior or comical through representations in pop culture. Such colonial stereotypical assumptions were identified in this study when participants expressed incidents of racism against Asian accents, making them feel inferior to white Canadians. One educator explained in detail how speaking with their accent makes them feel unsafe, while also having to cope with regular microaggressions:

> My accent comes into play, because I do not have the privilege of what is known as an elite North American accent…. When I enter particular buildings, it is not unusual for people to either gesture to me, and/or speak to me in a louder voice. As if speaking to me in a louder voice is going to help someone who doesn't understand English to understand it, because that's an automatic assumption that is made of somebody who looks like me. So in terms of feeling safe, feeling comfortable, welcomed, and safe in my school, it is not a given.

There is a significant body of research on prejudice against Asian accents across North America (Bauman, 2013; Bhatia, 2018; Kim et al., 2011; May, 2023; McDonough et al., 2022). Bauman's (2013) study found Asian accents were rated significantly lower in comparison to mainstream American English accents and European accents across three dimensions: attractiveness, dynamism, and intelligence. This form of discrimination clearly sets up roadblocks in the career trajectories of Asian-identifying employees, including initial hiring and future advancement opportunities. Our findings corroborate the literature on accent discrimination. Participants recalled numerous occasions where their Asian accents prevented them from advancing their careers. One educator stated, "I have been questioned about my first language which is not English by a principal who refused to hire me." Another teacher went on about how their "fluency and spoken language ability [were] questioned." Many educators also discussed that they witnessed accent discrimination: "I see others getting discriminated against because of their accent. It was never

handled or reported because no one really cared." One teacher described how a fellow lead teacher was never promoted because the principal did not support their promotion despite outstanding leadership qualities: "The principal during those years was not supportive of their promotion—partially because they were too good at supporting the administrative work around the school and partially because English was not their first language."

Participants who spoke with accented English faced more barriers during the interview process. Despite appropriate qualifications, strong community relationships, and demonstrated leadership skills, one teacher stated that they avoided HAP processes because they did not want to be unfairly judged by interviewers: "If you speak with an accent, especially an Asian accent, interviewers can't get past the accent. I am too afraid of continual rejection which is why I don't go through the VP process, and that is why we rarely see Asian leaders with accents." Hence, the intersection of being Asian and speaking with an accent leads to chronic xenophobic assumptions about poor communication skills and language proficiency.

It was also noted by most participants that Asian accents were regularly made fun of in the school environment: "Two weeks ago I heard an educator in the hallway put on a 'Chinglish' accent while talking to another staff member." When Asian accents are mocked under the pretence of a joke or "all in good fun," it undermines the real harm experienced by Asians who speak with accents or who have close relatives with accents. Overall, Asian participants who were exposed to the mocking and imitating of Asian accents felt shamed, embarrassed, and stigmatized, yet these incidents went unreported and unresolved because they are often masked as jokes.

Name discrimination. Deficit assumptions against Asian names are obstacles to employment advancement. Participants described that their Asian sounding name was a barrier due to "unconscious bias against names that are not North Americanized." Another educator stated, "how are superintendents going to know about my leadership experiences when they don't even attempt to learn my Asian name?" Sadly, name-based discrimination is all too common. Research conducted by Oreopoulos and Dechief (2012) found that résumés with Western names were 35% more likely to receive an interview when compared to résumés with Asian names, despite similar skills and qualifications. They found that employers view Asian names as an indication of potential deficits that would impact success on the job (e.g., lack of required communication and social skills). Hence, deficit assumptions against Asian names are substantive obstacles to employment pathways and this was reflected in the stories shared from the research participants.

Findings indicated that microaggressions regarding the butchering of Asian names and misnaming Asians were prevalent in everyday interactions as shared by teachers and administrators. We analyzed frequent reports of microaggressions involving the constant butchering of Asian names. Names are an essential aspect of one's identity and the normalization of butchering names forces Asians to whitewash their names to avoid social isolation and embarrassing moments. This was illustrated when one teacher shared how a principal attempted to "help" them while applying for a position in the DSB: "Do you think that you could shorten your last name…because your r*é*sum*é* is going to be looked over with such a long, weird name…make it shorter, like more digestible." Equally damaging is confusing and misnaming Asian people for other Asians because this leads to feelings of invisibility, essentially erasing their identities and individualities and perceiving them as a monolithic social group. Participants shared personal stories about being consistently misnamed for another Asian person because "all you people look alike." These incidents were not isolated one-offs, but instead happened persistently. As one educator stated, "because [being misnamed for another Asian teacher] kept happening, until I had to say, 'don't you know who I am yet?' I just felt very disheartened that it didn't stop." A reflection was provided by another educator who shared, "When administration is often white, they fail to learn our names, confuse multiple Asian female teachers between each other, assume that we can't speak or write well, etc." Repeatedly being misnamed is harmful and racist and when these microaggressions are often dismissed or not acknowledged, it compromises Asian educators' access to leadership opportunities.

Theme 3: Colonial Ideologies are Normalized and Embedded in Leadership Selection Processes

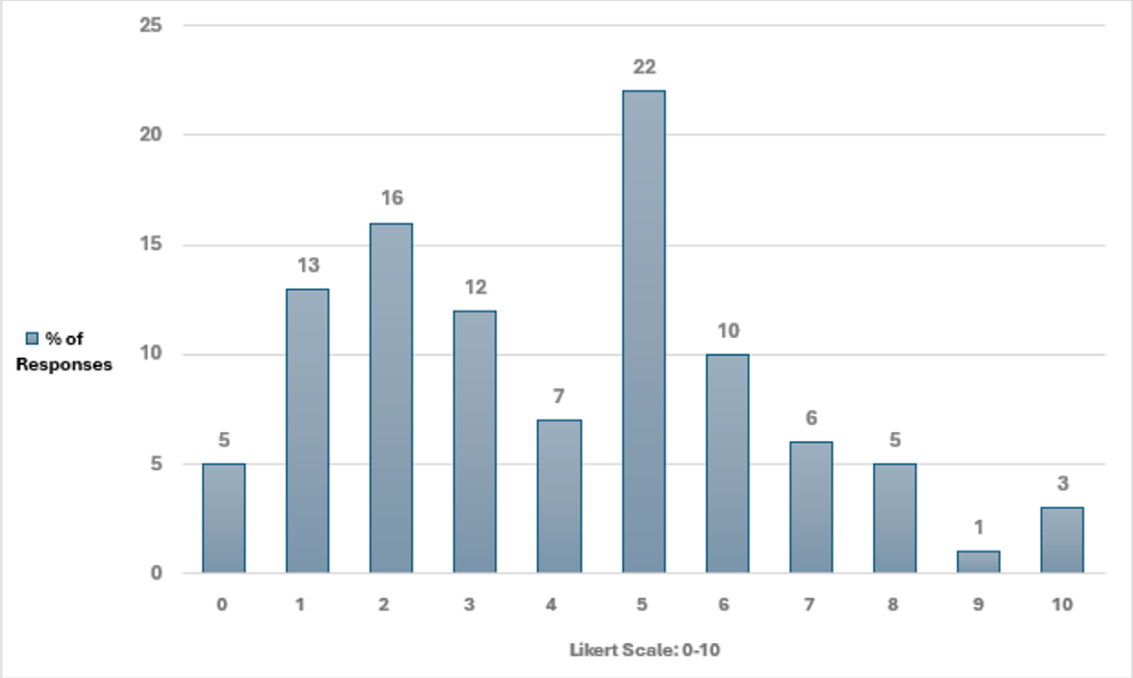
Our data analysis showed that there were issues with the selection process itself for vice-principal and principal promotions. One primary concern centred on who had decision-making powers during the selection process. The DSB website states that the vice-principal and principal selection process involves a committee of members with diverse social backgrounds, viewpoints, life experiences, and skills. However, participants in our study noted that going through the promotions process involved in-depth evaluations by a majority of white administrators and senior leaders: "In a panel system of hiring, it should be fair. However, when there is an all-Caucasian panel, [the DSB] can't ensure there aren't systemic biases at play…. If the panel was diverse, it would have been more fair," and "I believe that the individuals who hire will hire people who reflect themselves." Although the DSB

mandates that all selection committee members complete training on "Bias-Free Hiring," this appears to be a performative "checklist" approach because barriers remain for Asian members and other marginalized employees. As one educator put it, "You just need to look at leadership positions in the [DSB] and the answer is clear that we are still in a culture of whiteness." The same educator commented, "How can you hope to affect change…without changing who is at the top to create actual change?… I am pinpointing a hypocrisy in hiring practices." Hence, the cycle of colonial dominance is perpetuated when leadership spaces do not authentically represent the diverse make-up of the communities they serve.

Breaking through and/or dismantling these barriers requires a coordinated effort to recruit Asian-identifying educators. As part of the survey data, educators were asked, "To what extent do hiring, advancement, and promotion processes in the DSB support the recruitment of people who identify as Asian?" The overall mean was 4.03 out of 10. This very low ranking substantiates the qualitative responses within the surveys and the narratives expressed via focus groups (see Figure 2 for more details).

Figure 2

Educators' Responses to Hiring, Advancement, and Promotion Supports



Note. The x-axis represents a Likert scale from 0–10 (0 being "not at all" and 10 being "very evident"). The y-axis displays the percentage of educators' responses when asked "To what extent do hiring, advancement, and promotion processes in the DSB support the recruitment of people who identify as Asian?' The overall average response for educators was 4.03, while the mode was 5.

The model minority myth is considered a colonial belief because it homogenizes the experiences of diverse Asian groups, leading to the erasure of their unique struggles. Our findings showed that this myth perpetuated the bamboo ceiling because Asian educators were perceived as good workers, but not adequately skilled or competent to be leaders. This is a clear example of Asianization, which is a major tenet of AsianCrit. As one educator explained, "There is little effort on the DSB's part to encourage a different narrative other than the obedient worker who will not cause waves…. System-imposed 'model minority'-ship is clearly alive and well." Our study found this to be particularly evident for Asian women, who were expected to be quiet, polite, and compliant (Liang et al., 2018). One administrator discussed the microaggressions regularly faced by Asian women, especially those who are short and petite:

> People [want] to infantilize you. A quick microaggression that just came up when I was going through the [administrative promotion] process, someone said to me, "You'll have no trouble because you're a cute brown little thing." So just undervaluing my accomplishments.

Such microaggressions normalize colonial ideologies and require a vigilance about how one navigates spaces within the school and classroom. One Asian female administrator described it as, "Even when I walk through the space, I'm very aware of my small size and how I might be read as a racialized woman. But on top of that, an East Asian racialized woman." Another administrator acknowledged that male and female administrators are treated differently: "Male administrators can wear jeans and a T-shirt and it's really cool. And it's great. And, sometimes as a female administrator, it's NOT considered cool, especially as an Asian woman because we won't be taken seriously with casual clothes."

Many educators further expressed that they are expected to conform to colonial ideologies (Kohn & Reddy, 2021) in terms of how to behave and carry themselves to be considered for promotion. Colonial ideologies are rooted in norms, beliefs, and values that centre whiteness as superior. Through the lens of AsianCrit, we examine how such ideologies dominate the interview process for vice-principal and principal promotions. Almost all educators discussed how important it was to perform well during the one-hour interview and this performance was largely based on how well candidates spoke and boasted about their achievements. Some expressed their concerns through such com-

ments on the survey. One participant explained, "The interview process is all about how well one speaks and one talks about their accomplishments. In different cultures, talking about one's accomplishments is not as common." Another educator stated, "Advancement processes are colonized—mainly based on how you speak and respond to interview questions." Yet another participant shared that "when it comes to promotions the leadership they look at is very North American. They value people that can speak but not necessarily do the job." From the perspective of many educators, the promotion process emphasized how well one speaks about their professional achievements instead of the actual impact of leadership in schools and communities. This emphasis sets up barriers for those who might speak with an accent, due to interviewers' linguistic assumptions about language proficiency and social competence. Furthermore, leadership styles of Asian educators who lead quietly and unpretentiously were undervalued. For example, highlighting the collective accomplishments of the team and the community are common characteristics for many Asian collective cultures, instead of focusing and boasting about one's own accomplishments. As one educator explained, "I have seen many people that have been overlooked because many East Asian backgrounds are based on being humble and not overly boastful or talkative. This is primarily a North American way of interviewing."

Many educators disclosed their repeated struggles and attempts to get through the promotions process and felt disheartened about failing, knowing they were ready and fully qualified for the promotion. As one educator explained, "I went through the process several times, and each time I had white leaders evaluating me. I wish I had more coaching and mentoring." Other educators recalled the limited (or lack of any) feedback regarding their interview and why they were not selected: "I wasn't successful the first time. The feedback I got was useless. They told me I needed to be more clear in my examples for some of the questions. Basically, I had to brag about myself more," and "Beyond a couple of acquaintances, there has been no support in hiring, advancement, and promotion, nor feedback after an unsuccessful interview, despite reaching out on a few occasions to the interviewer for help." Our results are substantiated by research from Paulhus et al. (2013), who examined why Asian applicants with similar skills as white candidates received poorer evaluations in hiring procedures. Paulhus et al. (2013) found that interviewees who self-promoted and self-praised scored higher, resulting in biases against Asian applicants because they were less likely to exhibit such behaviours.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Employing the AsianCrit framework, this mixed-methods study engaged Asian educators to describe their lived realities in a large district school board in Ontario, Canada. With 234 educators participating in the anonymous survey and 83 educators contributing through focus groups, participants shared how they have experienced the bamboo ceiling through actions such as being stereotyped, dismissed, overlooked, and constantly othered. The findings from the focus groups and open-ended survey questions, as well as the Likert scale survey questions, contributed to identifying important themes and recommendations in addressing the bamboo ceiling. In attempts to move up the leadership hierarchies, educators offered personal stories of when their leadership was not acknowledged, ultimately being bypassed for others who situated themselves as closer to whiteness and colonial standards. Ultimately, Asian educators did not feel welcomed or supported, and instead had to constantly grapple with systemic barriers impeding their career trajectories. Instead of being their true and authentic selves, Asian educators felt pressured to conform to North American standards about leadership, which included presenting whitewashed versions of themselves to receive a greater chance of being promoted into a leadership position. Our findings validate the presence of systemic barriers and oppression faced by Asian educators, reinforced by school cultures and DSB policies, procedures, and processes.

This research study holds scholarly significance because it fills voids in the current literature. First, there is limited scholarship on the bamboo ceiling in education, specifically examining educators' experiences as they move through advancement and promotion processes. Second, there is even less research in this area from a Canadian schooling context. The literature that exists in AsianCrit has mainly focused on American educational contexts. Therefore, Canadian perspectives on issues about the bamboo ceiling will support much-needed efforts to dismantle anti-Asian racism in various settings. Our research provides an example of how AsianCrit can be used beyond the American context.

Overall, this study provides strong evidence that Asian Canadian educators face the bamboo ceiling by experiencing discrimination and numerous forms of systemic barriers. We truly believe that education and knowledge-informed solutions are key to dismantling racism and fighting against oppression. We remain hopeful that this study propels DSB leaders and others to take actionable steps that acknowledge and address the

systemic barriers identified in this study. For this to occur, stakeholders must be intentional and invest in the work necessary to mitigate the root causes of the bamboo ceiling that negatively impact Asian educators' career trajectories. This critical and necessary labour, including emotional and spiritual labour, can only be realized by working together to decolonize protocols, procedures, and practices to dismantle anti-Asian racism across schools, districts, and communities.

Additionally, further research is required in how linguistic identity impacts the lived experiences of Asian Canadian educators. In fact, we propose an additional tenet be added to the current tenets of AsianCrit to fill a void as "the AsianCrit perspective does not explain how language shapes the experience of Asian Americans" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 945). This new tenet would be associated with *linguistic assumptions* (e.g., assumption of accent, accent bias, and stereotypes of poor language proficiency). We found that perceived linguistic assumptions notably impacted participants' lived realities of HAP processes. For example, each theme had a connection to linguistic assumptions, including efforts to decrease Asian accents, accent and name discrimination, and interviews in which performance is dependent on how a candidate speaks. With this additional interconnected tenet, further research should examine the systemic barriers and oppression experienced by Asian people through a lens of linguistic assumptions in North America.

Recommendations and Next Steps to Dismantle the Bamboo Ceiling

The following recommendations are outlined as a call to action to implement short- and long-term improvements toward creating more equitable HAP processes. The dismantling of the bamboo ceiling requires a commitment to action based on existing gaps identified and the elimination of systemic barriers faced by Asian educators in their careers. The recommendations are made with the objective of mitigating critical issues pertaining to colonialism that have manifested into cultural and ethnic shame, internalized racism, whitewashing of identities, and feelings of inferiority for Asian educators.

(1) Hiring, Promotion, and Advancement Representation and Transparency

Representation of racialized staff across DSBs is important because it cultivates inclusive workplaces where everyone can feel validated. Diversity in an organization allows

for amplification of multiple perspectives rooted in varying lived experiences. At a DSB level, all leadership selection processes must be reviewed and modified to attract educators and leaders from diverse backgrounds with intentionality. As part of this action, the processes must be reviewed by a diverse team or working group. For participants in this study, it is important that the interviewees are being interviewed by panels (three or more panel members) that include representation from equity-deserving groups. It becomes the work of the DSB to clearly communicate what skills, qualities, and lived experiences are most valued by the organization and how responses will be ranked or scored.

Identity-based information about leaders, including race-based data on Asian identities, should be collected and shared annually to monitor progress in dismantling the bamboo ceiling and promote transparency. Instead of viewing Asian staff through a deficit model that focuses on how the applicant needs to change to fit into the DSB's model of a leader, DSBs must consider how colonial processes exclude Asian leaders from advancing in the organization.

(2) Consultation and Engagement

There must be purposeful investments in research projects and community consultations to regularly receive feedback from various stakeholders in DSBs to identify current gaps and innovative solutions. For example, ensuring culturally reflective services should be a key priority of the DSB at all levels and within all schools. Consulting with Asian affinity groups within the DSB is a starting point to capture their concerns and how they can be involved as part of new changes implemented, and how Asian identities and their experiences can be amplified in classrooms and the larger community. Creating a "Dismantling Anti-Asian Racism Advisory Circle" with representation from students, parents, community agencies, educators, administrators, and board trustees will help identify ongoing issues (including the bamboo ceiling) and illustrate how to support specific schools based on unique community needs and geographical challenges.

(3) Professional Learning and Culturally Responsive Mentorship

The DSB should be committed to ongoing professional learning opportunities that amplify Asian voices by presenting counternarratives to the model minority myth as part of its commitment to dismantle anti-Asian racism through workshops, keynotes, equity

projects, research, and culturally responsive mentorship. For senior leaders who have decision-making powers, especially during HAP processes, professional learning about the bamboo ceiling should be mandatory instead of optional. Other systemic issues afflicting Asian-identifying staff and students should also be reviewed for professional learning opportunities throughout the DSB (e.g., bias against Asian accents and names).

(4) Community and Healing Spaces

As Asian educators described their experiences in the school system, it was noted several times that our focus groups provided the first opportunity to share their voice. It became clear that there is a lack of community and healing spaces for Asian educators, spaces where they can authentically share their experiences with others and connect for support and mobilization to challenge inequitable policies and practices. Affinity groups can be formed in person or online and can potentially be coordinated based on geographical proximity or demographics. Examples of groups may include East Asian teacher leaders, South Asian administrators, or an Asian female mentorship network. These identity-specific affinity spaces will also promote self-care and relationship-building amongst educators with leadership aspirations.

Acknowledgements

We owe an enormous debt of gratitude for all the participants who willingly shared their lived experiences and realities. Their compelling stories shaped this research study. Deep appreciation goes to the DSB for participating in this research initiative. Engaging in this challenging work has demonstrated a shared commitment to creating inclusive educational spaces that value Asian-identifying educators and their diverse identities from various walks of life. Further, this article is not a criticism of the DSB, as the themes in this research would be prevalent in DSBs across Canada and beyond. DSBs that engage in this kind of work should be commended for putting a spotlight on issues of anti-Asian racism, and ultimately demonstrating ownership of the findings and investing in making education more inclusive.

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