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Intersectional Identities: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Through the Lens of Chinese American Music Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we critically examine Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy through the lens of student and teacher experiences in Chinese American music education, primarily through personal dialogic counter-narrative as co-researchers. While culturally sustaining pedagogy can empower students by valuing their cultural heritage, its implementation has predominantly focused on certain ethnic groups, often overlooking the complex identities within Asian American communities. We explore the limitations of current culturally sustaining pedagogy approaches, drawing on tenets of Asian Critical Theory and counter-narrative methodology to advocate for a more inclusive and continuously evolving understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy that considers the intersectional cultural identities of students in a pluralistic society. We call for a shift in consciousness among stakeholders to ensure culturally sustaining pedagogy sustains the cultural wealth of all students.

Keywords

Culturally sustaining pedagogy, DEI, Chinese American, Asian American, intersectionality, pluralism, Asian Critical Theory, counter-narrative.

Christy

May 21, 2021. 2:50pm. The article catches my eye almost immediately, "Teen rockers fire back at anti-Asian comments with a viral punk anthem: 'Racist, Sexist Boy.'" I click on the article, greeted with the image of four Asian presenting teen girls aggressively playing electric guitar and drums juxtaposed among shelves of books in a library. The article chronicles the band *The Linda Lindas*, a young group identifying as Asian/Latinx who performed the song as part of an Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month celebration at the Los Angeles Public Library. The song was written after a member of the band had a racist encounter due to their Chinese American identity with a classmate spawning from anti-Asian sentiment associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Hawkins 2021).

Their performance is powerful. I sit in awe, watching these young women openly express their frustration projecting strength. This is in complete opposition to the meek, obedient, Chinese girl I felt like I should be growing up. What is it that gave them permission to be unapologetically themselves? Why do I feel I couldn't do the same?

This was the moment I began to reflect on my experience growing up as a Chinese American. Through the next year, through comments and questions raised by my students on #StopAsianHate campaigns and news reports and through my work starting and leading an Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (AANHPI) staff affinity group in my district, I realized that these long-term feelings and experiences I had while growing up were not unique. Others with similar backgrounds related to my stories and began to put names to the phenomenon I was recounting: model minority, invisibility, perpetual foreigner…

Elation with this discovery propelled and motivated me into advocacy for students and staff identifying as AANHPI in the district. I quickly hit a wall with district leadership who asserted and perpetuated the stereotypes I was fighting against. My concerns were dismissed. Furthermore, initiatives labeled as promoting culturally sustaining pedagogy by district and school administration felt lacking. I realized after a particularly frustrating leadership meeting that it was because the only initiatives and literature that district leadership cited represented and targeted Latinx and African American students. They openly situated my comments as not a priority. This dismissal to me, was effectively as if the district had labeled students with other ethnic identities as irrelevant.

Who does culturally sustaining pedagogy currently serve? What prevents it from reaching all students? Why do I feel like it specifically, in its current form, doesn't meet the needs of Asian identifying students?

I am a first generation Chinese American cisgender female, born and raised in the United States, who grew up speaking a mix of Hokkien (a dialect of Chinese associated with Fujian province), Tagalog (from my parents who are Chinese ethnically but were born and raised in the Philippines), and English, which before preschool, I learned from Disney movies. My cultural identity, a mixture of Chinese and Filipino, is mostly asserted through food. While I grew up with American ideals, I also internalized cultural norms and expectations from Chinese and Filipino culture. I also have internalized the cultural and societal expectations of Asian presenting individuals projected on me by American society. These concerns led me to examine the experiences of Asians and Asian Americans in music, music education, and education broadly as part of a class project.

Garrett

In the first year of our doctoral studies, Christy gave a presentation about the microaggressions experienced by East Asian Americans in music education and made recommendations for implementing more culturally sustaining pedagogy in music education. My prior teaching experience was in the rural south, where the bulk of the racially marginalized students in my classroom were Black and Latinx. After engaging in dialogic practice with Christy over the course of this project, I began to realize that some of my efforts to integrate culturally sustaining pedagogy as a teacher at the time were prescriptive and categorical in approach. Christy's story clashed with unexamined biases and untested assumptions about the intersectionality of some East Asian Americans—and more, marginalized populations more broadly, in my practice. I had not considered the implications for culturally sustaining pedagogy through the lens of Chinese American music education and how that lens might inform the way I think about culturally sustaining pedagogy as a whole. This ongoing change in paradigm brings me to question the relationship between theory and application of culturally sustaining pedagogy and ultimately led to this paper.

I am a cisgender white male graduate music education student working with my colleague, Christy. Over the course of eighteen months, we conducted a dialogic

counter-narrative of Christy's experiences as an East Asian-American individual navigating a career in music education. This was a natural, and for a time, unnamed process including discussion, discovery, and dialogic analysis. In this inquiry we explore our individual and shared iterative interpretation of the relationship between culturally sustaining pedagogy theory and practice through the lens of Christy's counter-narrative. Christy's ongoing counter-narrative provides the foundation for this conversation as we wrestled the application of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the pluralistic classroom.

Method: Dialogic Counternarrative

Presenting my (Christy's) investigative project on Asian and Asian American experiences in class opened a thread of conversation between Garrett and I that we found ourselves continuing one evening in the hotel lobby during a professional conference. It was here that the seed of sharing parts of my personal story as counter-narratives was planted. Counter-narratives are considered a type of narrative inquiry. Lueg et al. (2021) state, "narrative inquiry researches what people do with narratives, as well as how narratives impact on people" (3). They expand further to explain that narrative inquiry is both a theoretical and methodological approach, being tied together as both a presentation of narrative, and as contributing to the structure of the narrative (5). Andrews (2002) defines counternarrative as "the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" (1). The opposite of counternarrative is master narrative, which "are assumed to be a normative experience … such storylines serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well" (1). Thus, counter-narratives present stories that may be overlooked by the master narrative, providing alternative perspectives and challenging the dominant blueprint.

As I continued to share my personal narratives and Garrett and I worked to unpack them, we felt it was relevant to frame them as counter-narratives against the dominant and pervasive stereotypes and societal normality imposed on Asian Americans. While my narratives were shared and discussed on a personal level, our investigation into the experiences of other Chinese Americans and Asian Americans revealed similar experiences. Thus, we frame this as counternarrative research, discussed by Lueg et al. (2021) as "research [that] takes an interest in

how cultural narratives manifest themselves on the organizational and on the individual level" (7). Further, the process of sharing my story led to Garrett's subsequent reflection of his own positionality and narrative. We then drew on techniques of dialogical approach to counternarrative discussion as presented by Meretoja (2021) in unpacking, collective sense-making, collaborating, and reciprocal meaning making in interpreting and reinterpreting my counter-narratives. Meretoja discusses the dialogic approach of narrative as being linked to relational ontology, emphasizing reciprocity between individual and social structures, involving existential and ethical dimension of narratives, and stresses how narratives are embedded in relations of power (31).

With this theoretical and methodological framework in mind, we were cognizant of the nature of our professional partnership as a Chinese American female and a white male, and the potential racial power relations we might navigate in this project. Early on we discussed our positionalities, and Garrett was careful in not allowing the burden of his reflections and realizations to be placed on me as the person of color. We additionally referenced the work of Bettina Love for Garrett to aspire towards being my co-conspirator, rather than ally. Love (2019) defines ally-ship as "working toward something that is mutually beneficial and supportive to all parties involved.... They just have to show up and mark the box present; thus, ally-ship is performative or self-glorifying" (117). Love points to the nature of ally-ship as being self-serving, and uplifting the ally, rather than the marginalized individual. In contrast, Love says, "a co-conspirator functions as a verb, not a noun" (117). Co-conspirators understand and leverage their privilege in aiding to uplift marginalized individuals, simultaneously placing themselves alongside them and acting even if there is no marked self-benefit. As Meretoja (2021) positions counter-narratives as "acts of resistance and as actions they are about doing, instead of mere artifacts" (39), we felt that capitalizing and exploring Garrett's position as one focused on action could aid in advocacy for other white educators to take this stance when addressing the issues we name and discuss.

Intersectionality

We cannot discuss intersectionality without referring to Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality considers how multiple

marginalized identities (race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) intersect and interact in how individuals are perceived and treated in society. The lines of intersection between these identities shift depending on context, perception, and other factors (Cho et al. 2013). It is important to reiterate that intersectionality is not simply the presence of multiple identities but how the continuous flux of the intersections of these identities contributes to multiple and unique marginalizations. My (Christy's) experiences are thus influenced by my identity as a Chinese American and a woman. How the intersection of these is perceived and what biases and assumptions may arise because of that intersection ebb and flow through daily interactions in my life and impact me mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Asian Critical Theory

Understanding the position of Chinese Americans, and Asian Americans more broadly necessitates an examination of the perpetuation and continued prevalence of structural racism as outlined through Critical Race Theory. Specifically, examining the subset of Asian Critical Theory is a useful lens for highlighting and interpreting my (Christy's) experiences, and the experiences of other Asian Americans. Museus and Iftikar (2013) summarize tenets of Critical Race Theory: race as social constructionism, racism as normal and pervasive, the need for revisionist history, differential racialization, interest convergence, anti-essentialism, intersectionality, and storytelling. Asian Critical Theory does not replace tenets of Critical Race Theory. Instead, it highlights elements that allow for a more relevant critical analysis of racism as it pertains to Asian American lives (Museus and Iftikar 2013).

Museus and Iftikar (2013) present seven interconnected tenets that make up the framework for Asian Critical Theory. They discuss the first four as taking foundational tenets of Critical Race Theory with the "additional knowledge of Asian American racial realities" (23). The final three reinforce or combine tenets of Critical Race Theory through centering Asian American issues and experiences. These tenets include Asianization (how society racializes Asian Americans), transnational context (how current conditions have been shaped by historical and contemporary national and international contexts), (re)constructive history (the importance of including and reconstructing historical Asian American narratives), strategic (anti)essentialism (how dominant oppressive forces have impacted the racialization of Asian Americans), intersectionality (the multilayered analysis of

these intersections), story, theory and praxis (encouraging counter-narratives as tools for informing theory and practice), and commitment to social justice (advocacy for anti-racist action) (23–27).

Introduction of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

We cannot begin to talk about culturally sustaining pedagogy without acknowledging Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995) groundbreaking work on culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (469). This definition implies action on the part of the educator to aid students in identity development related to their backgrounds, allowing them to cultivate a mindset of empowerment to address historical inequities. This focus aims to cultivate student success without sacrificing individual cultural identity.

Zaretta Hammond (2015) places responsibility on the educator further in defining the related concept of culturally responsive teaching. She positions culturally responsive teaching as "An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning" (15).

Hammond (2015) places the emphasis on the educator to recognize when students are exhibiting learning behaviors associated with their unique cultural and social backgrounds and use these as a catalyst for further learning, implying that educators need to have a deep understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their students. In cultivating relationships and creating safe learning spaces, educators must also understand how relationship building is exhibited in those distinct cultural backgrounds. Hammond relates this to elements of brain function and development in her work.

While culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching focus on student identities within the classroom, culturally sustaining pedagogy considers

additional learning contexts. Culturally sustaining pedagogy scholars promote embracing multiple identities and expanding the educational sphere beyond the school, including to the home and local community. Three definitions of this pedagogy provide clarity of its many facets.

First, Paris and Alim (2017) define culturally sustaining pedagogy as, "seeking to perpetuate and foster–to sustain–linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation. culturally sustaining pedagogy positions dynamic cultural dexterity as necessary good and sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits" (1). This emphasis on sustaining cultural pluralism acknowledges the intersectional complexities that make up one's cultural identity, and that these many facets contribute positively to an individual's knowledge base and ways of learning. Paris and Alim interrogate the long-standing models of schooling that focus on assimilating cultural knowledge to the dominant perspective. They acknowledge the cultural knowledge students bring into the classroom as a strength, rather than a weakness that needs to be reformed and addressed.

Second, Lind and McCoy (2023) further explain that "culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes culture as fluid and dynamic … responding to our students' cultural knowledge in our teaching actually means to sustain that knowledge, value it, and be nimble enough to accommodate those shifting cultural realities" (22). Here, the concept of culture is presented as ever changing, not static. This emphasis is significant, as in urging teachers to recognize and respond to students' cultural knowledge, teachers must be versed on the complexities of cultural backgrounds. This could involve students coming from a variety of contexts; however, in Western dominated cultural settings, this could involve students who are grappling with dual (or multiple) identity straddling—what Paris and Alim (2017) refer to as "shifting cultural realities" (90).

Finally, Good-Perkins (2022), discusses how culturally sustaining pedagogy in music education must be approached intentionally, warning that "if enacted within a Western classical framework, will continue to perpetuate coloniality…culturally sustaining pedagogy in music education requires humility and a willingness to concede expertise and the traditional master apprentice model" (20). Good-Perkins urges interrogation of common features of dominant traditional music education

practices, highlighting the barriers they present in pursuing true culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Along with these definitions, these authors present what could be considered frameworks, based on their own research, experiences, and reflections. These include suggestions for educators of ways they can engage with students that are considered as culturally sustaining.

In the second edition of their text, Lind and McCoy (2023) include considerations of Paris and Alim's (2017) work towards culturally sustaining pedagogy in their discussion of culturally responsive pedagogy. They present culturally responsive pedagogy as a mindset, rather than an approach, while noting that it that requires commitment and evolution. They further describe culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework for reflective practice in which educators examine their own biases, experiences, values, and beliefs. Culturally responsive pedagogy calls for learning about the cultural backgrounds of students through conversation and intentional opportunities for dialogue. In this way, teachers should create a supportive learning environment that prioritizes relationship building, student interests, physical space organization, and meaningful representation. At the same time, culturally responsive teachers make intentional program and curriculum choices regarding genres, cultures, time periods, and ways of learning and making music. In its fullest expression, culturally responsive pedagogy requires working to re-envision school culture by showcasing cultural diversity, expanding professional development, strengthening representation, and reconsidering school structures. Lind and McCoy describe culturally responsive teaching as engaging with the school community by being present, diversifying communication with families, drawing on community expertise, and acknowledging learning that happens outside the classroom.

Paris and Alim (2017), in their introduction and presentation of several case studies, highlight culturally sustaining pedagogy as a means of de-centering whiteness through re-framing issues of access and equity and warn educators to be cautious in drawing absolute links between language, literacy, cultural practices and race/ethnicity, thus ignoring dynamic cultural shifts and intersectionalities. They additionally highlight the need for critical reflexivity in considering expanded notions of culture (e.g. diaspora, microculture, and intersectionality) with intentional teaching beyond the historically dominant perspective, including historical and

cultural context and considering diverse ways of learning and use of language. Thus, culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to de-colonize mindsets by critically approaching historically marginalizing education structures. Paris and Alim also emphasize the importance of acknowledging cultural shifts in the identity creation of young people. They state that work to sustain the languages and cultures of historically marginalized students should be done "in ways that attend to the emerging, intersectional, and dynamic ways in which they are lived and used by young people" (9).

Good-Perkins (2022) brings up issues in presenting the need for culturally sustaining pedagogy, situating that historically music has been used as a tool for "civilizing" populations for "saviorism, betterment, and refinement" (27). She goes on to describe music education's use as a tool for character building within a Western value system and as reinforcing a set hierarchy through emphasis on Western musical styles, pedagogies, and curriculum. Findings from her research culminated in her recommendations towards examining music's role in identity development, and the potential to silence or empower, and cultivate or stifle creativity. She advocates the need for the dismantling of the traditional music education belief system, expanding curriculum, ways of performing, and including counter-narratives, and the need for embracing alternative ways beyond the dominant Western canon of knowing and learning in music.

The three pedagogies of culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining are related and intertwined but remain separate entities; one does not necessarily lead to the other. We chose to frame Christy's experiences and inquiries under culturally sustaining pedagogy, due to its emphasis on maintaining the cultural integrity of the whole cultural space of the child (school and home).

In examining these foundational works of culturally sustaining pedagogy in music education, we found few mentions of examples with Chinese American students or educators. While the themes and suggestions presented by the authors are important in considering, we posit that more work needs to be done to truly make culturally sustaining pedagogy relevant to all students and their pluralistic identities. Furthermore, culturally sustaining pedagogy should be considered an asset-based pedagogy (as opposed to a deficit-based viewpoint) and thus must center the students in the classroom as the focal point. Considering examples, tenets, and frameworks as stagnant requirements rather than fluid starting points ignores the

essence of culturally sustaining pedagogy. We use Christy's position as a Chinese American, along with studies and literature relating to Chinese American and Asian American identity to interrogate these concepts. Through examining historically seeded stereotypes, biases, and assumptions that continue to be perpetuated today, we draw attention to how current applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy in many studies do not meet the needs of Chinese American students. While suggestions by the aforementioned authors are positioned to support all students, we posit that the prevalence of stereotypes, biases, and assumptions associated with Asian Americans, and Chinese Americans more specifically, may have caused educators to overlook ways culturally sustaining pedagogy can support these students.

We acknowledge that the narratives we present and highlight are not representative of Chinese Americans broadly, and in this context are centered around Christy's experiences and reflections. We choose to focus on Chinese American identity, because that is how I (Christy) identify; however, we acknowledge that the uniqueness of my cultural background (with connections to the Philippines) contributes to complex pluralism and may not connect to others identifying as Chinese American. However, we hope that in highlighting my story, as well as the narratives of others, we can begin a deeper conversation of how to expound on the work of Lind and McKoy, Paris and Alim, Good-Perkins and others to continue working for music education that is inclusive for all.

Christy's Experiences in Literature

The following vignettes are re-storyings that I wrote after recounting my counter-narratives to Garrett throughout the period of engaging in this study. They are my distilled thoughts from larger narratives after unpacking themes with Garrett through prolonged dialogue and discussion. The following explanations resulted from our joint analysis of the narratives and relating to similar themes in the literature that aligned with aspects of Asian Critical Theory. This process helped to validate and position my narrative.

Model Minority

The year I decided I wanted to be a music teacher I was a freshman in high school. Every year until graduation, I would receive my class schedule and visit the counselor. Every semester my counselor would remove choir from my schedule and replace it with AP math. Each time I would go to her office to change it, she would try and convince me that the math class was going to be more useful to me than choir, despite my career goal of music education. I am also notoriously bad at math; one reason why I think I still struggle with music theory. I remember being in theater rehearsal once and asking a friend for help with a math assignment. Another cast member walked by and said, "Well that's weird, a white person helping an Asian with math."

All the ways I didn't fit into the model minority stereotype contributed (and still do) to my imposter syndrome. Everyone (teachers, classmates, counselors) assumed I would sign up for AP and honors classes. My high school counselor assumed that I would not be accepted into college for voice, and recommended a college where non-majors could still join the choir; and a school that had strong math and science programs. When I completed college auditions, several times I walked up to the registration table greeted with "piano or violin?" and a look of surprise when I answered "voice."

When I started my undergraduate study, I quickly realized my classmates had been immersed in opera since they were young. I knew nothing about opera and had only learned the required arias and art songs for the audition. For four years I wondered, "Am I only in this program because I'm a diversity acceptance?" My lack of skill in music theory and experience in string instruments continued this imposter syndrome through my first years teaching as I felt I wasn't a skilled enough musician to teach my students.

The model minority myth is attributed to the articles "Success Story, Japanese American Style" (Petersen 1966) and "Success Story of One Minority in the U.S." (U.S. News and World Report 1966), which painted Asian Americans (specifically Japanese and Chinese Americans) as star students (particularly in science and math) whose cultural values allowed them to succeed despite historical and environmental hardships (Wu 2014). Previously labeled as "Yellow Peril," Asian Americans were now viewed as successful and upright middle-class citizens who contributed responsibly to the general economy (Tatum 2017, 277). However, as Oluo

(2019) states, "The model minority myth fetishizes Asian Americans, reducing a broad swath of the world's population to a single stereotype" (192). The myth perpetuated by viewing Asian Americans as the "model minority" undermines success, erases individual identity, and shunts individuals into presupposed career pathways because of race and ethnicity.

Imposing overarching assumptions about ethnic groups is dangerous and harmful. Even language that surrounds these assumptions can serve to perpetuate stereotypes. In her dissertation on the music experiences of Asian immigrant youth in New York City's Chinatown, Liu (2017) recounts a teacher describing one of his Chinese American students, "Polite, hard-working, and smart are some of the characteristics that Mr. Zack used to describe Lucas. No doubt these descriptors fit perfectly into the model minority stereotype" (82). While this may be a genuine description of this student, imposing this image onto students may prevent them from expressing the need for support if educators hold this to be true for all Chinese American students.

Christy's experience of being stereotyped towards math classes or questioned due to her lack of math ability is not isolated. Kim and Hsieh (2022), in their investigation into the racialized experiences of Asian American teachers, find that oftentimes students are shunted towards STEM programs due to their ethnicity (128) and denied support in math tutoring: "No, she's Asian.... We have to focus our attention on the ones who really need it" (130).

Oluo (2019) comments that this assumption of Asian Americans' predisposition towards math and science discourages the pursuit of careers in other fields and leads to the questioning of their belonging or expertise in those fields (196). Hongzi (2021), in her dissertation investigating Chinese American cultural identity in music education recounts the words of a participant, "By jokingly calling herself a 'diversity hire,' Riley implied concerns about her ethnic minority background and questioned her own ability to be 'as good as' her white American colleagues" (56). These feelings can lead to imposter syndrome similar to what Christy experienced.

Blurred lines and multiple definitions of what constitutes racial diversity also complicate this issue, resulting in mixed opinions among Asian Americans. López (2006) discusses the phenomenon of honorary whiteness, in which certain non-white ethnic groups are historically and socially racialized as being closer in proximity to whiteness, particularly applying to East Asian presenting individuals

(152). However, the status of honorary whiteness does not erase inequities, but rather serves to mask them. In some cases, this status brings to question where Asian Americans stand in relation to other marginalized groups. Currier (2024) shares her experience attending a luncheon for faculty and staff of color, during which an African American colleague leaned over and asked in all seriousness, "Are Asians considered people of color?" (9).

Furthermore, the model minority myth and honorary whiteness have resulted in scapegoating East Asians and pitting them against other minoritized groups, contributing to anti-Blackness and other forms of discrimination. Uyematsu (1969) criticizes Asians for subscribing to these phenomena and perpetuating racial oppression, stating that by "allow[ing] white America to hold up the 'successful' Oriental image before other minority groups as the model to emulate … white America justifies the blacks' position by showing that other non-whites—yellow people—have been able to 'adapt' to the system" (8). Kim (1999) explains further that uplifting Asian Americans in comparison to Black communities contributes to anti-Black perspectives among Asian Americans and other racial groups.

Internalization of the model minority myth and honorary whiteness also complicate opinions and conversations about diversity policies. Asian Americans demonstrate mixed opinions on the end of affirmative action, from agreement of ending the policy, to support for its continued practice (Ruiz et al. 2023). Opinions solicited by Nawaz and Hastings (2023) reveal that many Asian American students feel they are disadvantaged due to affirmative action and advocate for merit-based admissions, regardless of race. However, certain participants noted concerns that historical and systemic issues complicate these claims. One student, Teng, shared, "I'm starting to realize that meritocracy is only an illusion." Nevertheless, the mixed opinions demonstrate how the concepts of model minority and honorary whiteness are deep seeded in society.

Equating Asian Americans to whites in terms of racialization draws attention away from their unique needs and minimizes their experiences, which may unintentionally exclude them from the conversation when considering diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Currier (2024) states, "DEI initiatives predominately focus on African American, Latino, and Native American minorities and gloss over the challenges impacting Asian Americans…. This does not mean we should dismiss Asian Americans as a lesser minority or minimize their experiences in

diversity debates. Nor should we use them as a model minority to reinforce racial hierarchies" (10).

Additionally, assumptions such as what instruments one should play based on their race, as when Christy was presumed to play violin or piano, perpetuate stereotypes. These assumptions may be projected onto students based on the representation of musicians they are exposed to as children. In Cayari's (2021) exploration of Asian American music professionals' development of ethnic identity, one participant commented, "There they were, (in regional youth orchestra), the Asian faces playing—yes, you got it—violin, viola, and cello" (18).

The model minority stereotype is relevant to the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy because teachers make assumptions about Chinese American students' abilities and interests while simultaneously holding them to a higher standard. This causes educators to overlook the funds of knowledge and identity that individual students bring to the classroom, due to assumptions and bias derived from this stereotype.

Stereotype Promise

I remember as a child having a complicated relationship with music. I loved to sing; I would sing all the time but practicing piano was such a chore. While my parents gave me a choice about playing an instrument, once I started, quitting wasn't an option. I struggled with music theory, and it was hard to practice when concepts got difficult, and I didn't feel emotionally attached to the pieces. My mom tried to help support me during practice time but would often get frustrated and angry at my slow progress. I think she thought my study of music should have helped me build character and diligence.

When I decided I wanted to go into music, my parents were very supportive in helping me with the college application process. My dad in particular did a lot of research into how to apply and how to navigate that process. However, while they were supportive, I never got the sense that they were proud, or happy with my decision. In the back of my mind I've always felt like I was selfish in choosing my passion and that I'm not honoring my parents by choosing this profession. I think it's little comments about friends, acquaintances or family my age who are making more money, coupled with expectations I place on myself (perhaps

influenced by my subconscious or deep-seated societal expectations) that keep these feelings in the forefront.

A consequence of the model minority myth is the idea of stereotype promise. Lee and Zhao (2015) define stereotype promise as "the promise that they [Asian Americans] will be viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype, which can enhance their performance" (181). However, this often leads to feelings of inadequacy for students who feel they should be achieving (specifically in the fields of math and science) at a higher level. The psychological effects are detrimental and contribute to low self-esteem.

This idea of high achievement also contributes to the reasoning why music study should be pursued. Culturally, the study of music in Confucian Chinese ideals is said to be a form of moral instruction (Yu 2014). This aligns to Christy's experience. Yu (2014) gives an example from a participant interview: "My parents believed that music is an important factor in a child's moral formation. They thought persistent piano study could shape my character. They asked me to sit at a piano for hours of practice. They also told me that kids who study music are more likely to be good kids" (49).

While music is often viewed as a vehicle for moral instruction, it may not be viewed as a viable career pathway. Hongzi (2021) states that one participant's parents "saw instrument study as a vehicle to academic success and not necessarily a profession they want their kids to take" (38). Later on, Hongzi asserts that "Chinese American parents' enthusiasm for Western instruments is often met with resistance, especially when reacting to their children's wish to pursue a career in music. Both Connie and Riley fell into bitter disagreements with their parents over the potential financial instability of being a musician" (79).

These concerns, which are often perpetuated by other family members and friends, may seed deeply rooted thoughts that the pursuit of music is "not good enough" and a failure of stereotype promise. These ideals are only reinforced by society. This may explain why Christy continues to feel guilty in pursuing music despite continued displays of support from her parents.

Understanding the psychological impact of stereotype promise is important not only in addressing the mental health of students, but also in considering how students may respond to continued study of music. Educators need to consider how pressures from student's home lives and the assumptions from society may

place burdens on students to achieve a so-called "standard" they are held to. Concepts such as stereotype promise may also affect how the "pedagogical bridges" that Good-Perkins (2022) refers to are built between educator and home community.

Dual Identity

Since my high school years, there has been a surge of restaurants specializing in Asian cuisine in my city. As the popularity of Asian food has grown, I have greatly enjoyed introducing friends to some of my favorite dishes, watching their eyes light up from flavors that evoke prominent memories from my childhood. I have spent many hours learning how to recreate my favorite childhood dishes and am still trying to make "kiam peng" (savory rice) the same way my grandmother did—I wish I had asked her to teach me before she passed away.

I think food, as well as hanging onto my Hokkien speaking ability is part of how I engaged with my Chinese identity. But I've always felt like I'm negotiating between the Chinese part and the American part.

As I went through middle and high school, I think I was subconsciously trying to find ways to connect with my heritage, to being Asian. I became interested in Japanese and Korean pop culture and music and remember being disappointed when we only spent three classes talking about China in World History. When preparing for my senior recital in college, I asked to sing some Chinese and Japanese art songs. While my studio teacher was supportive in my decision, I was the one who had to seek out the music and reach out to professors in the Asian Studies department for pronunciation and translation help. There were only two books of Asian music in the college library, so I chose from those selections. In retrospect, I would have loved more support from my voice teacher in finding resources.

While the concept of dual identity has been discussed at length by various authors, I (Christy) refer to Lu (2020) as I resonated with their work on Chinese American dual identity specifically. Lu describes dual identity as a "double consciousness" of race and nationality that interact in ways that shift, or "recategorize," which often results in straddling or balancing between two (or more) identities. Individuals thus navigate between "or" (e.g., Chinese or American) instead of "and" (e,g., Chinese and American) (1871–72).

Participants in a number of studies express such dual idenity. A participant in Hongzi's (2021) study states, "I was born in America, but I don't look American, I don't look white. But I'm also so far removed from the Chinese culture, like what's it like to live in China, or just outside of the United States. So I'm not Chinese enough to be Chinese" (47). This straddling of cultural identities can be emotionally and mentally taxing and fluctuate on a daily basis. Students may struggle to find a sense of belonging and grapple with embracing and holding onto elements of their Chinese heritage alongside those of their American identity.

In my (Christy's) experience, desire to reconnect and explore my cultural identity manifested during my university years. A participant in Cayari's (2021) study shares that they became interested in exploring Chinese and Japanese (both parts of their heritage) music when they pursued their master's degree, and saw many other Asian Americans participating in ensembles of traditional Asian music in the program (228). Similarly, in her book on her participatory ethnographic experience with playing taiko in the United States, Wong (2019) shares that taiko is a way to reconnect with her Chinese identity and that it plays this role for many Asian Americans (despite culturally being historically tied with Japan). In light of these thoughts, we assert that the invitation to explore cultural heritage is something to be considered carefully. Students may respond in different ways to this invitation, depending on their own relationship with facets of their identity.

Additionally, educators should not assume that students have certain funds of knowledge, or that introducing music from their cultural heritage will aid in identity development. While I (Christy) shared that I desired more support from instructors in finding resources to connect with my cultural identity, this may not echo the sentiments of other Chinese American students. In a study exploring Chinese American student identity in cultural children's choir involvement, Lindl (2018) states, "There were mixed findings on whether singing Chinese folksongs aided in cultural identity development. An educator cannot assume that because someone identifies as Chinese American that singing a token folksong from China will aid in cultural identity growth" (46). The key culturally sustaining pedagogical component of bringing cultural backgrounds into the classroom involves considering how students experience navigating dual (or multiple) identity.

Assimilation

One of the most vivid memories of music in my childhood is of what my dad called "pyoh" music. "Pyoh" in the Hokkien dialect means "to joke around," or "to mess around." My dad would put on CDs of "Hooked on Classics," which are remixed versions of classical pieces, and we would dance around the room. Another vivid memory I have is wearing a store-bought Princess Jasmine costume, singing "A Whole New World" and other Disney songs on top of my parent's bed.

Every night, my dad would put on a cassette tape of hymns to help me fall asleep. On Side B of the tape, the same hymns on Side A were sung in Chinese. I listened to them, but my parents never gave me any context or talked about the translation (they were in Mandarin, a dialect I do not speak).

I don't remember having any ties to Chinese music in my childhood beyond those hymns. Sometimes we would go to Lunar New Year celebrations and I remember watching the performances in the same way I watched an Irish dance once, or beheld a pow-wow. That it was something not connected to me; I was an observer, not an insider. Even the Chinese opera my grandmother watched was something my cousins and I mocked the singing style of. I never thought to ask her about it.

To my recollection, even my parents never listened to any Chinese or Filipino music. My dad mainly listened to English pop songs he grew up hearing on the radio. They would get channels that the soldiers in the nearby Air Force base would listen to. His playlists were filled with the Carpenters, Bee Gees, Mantovani, and The Cascades. There was a tape of Japanese flute music he played on road trips, but that was something he found at the local library.

Alba and Nee (1997) explain assimilation as taking on cultural characteristics that align with the dominant culture, often leading to decline or disappearance of distinct ethnic identity (culture, social differences, expression). While part of this assimilation stems from historical oppression towards Chinese and Japanese Americans before, surrounding, and after World War II (Hsu 2015), a persisting affinity for Western culture and society is pervasive through Asian culture, both for people in Asia and for Asian Americans.

David and Okazaki (2006) discuss the idea of colonial mentality "as a form of internalized oppression, characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority that is believed to be a specific consequence of centuries of colonization"

(241). While they discuss colonial mentality in the context of Filipino American identity and experience, we argue that crossover exists for Chinese Americans.

While China was not physically colonized by the West, it has been colonized in mindset to value Western ideals, education, entertainment, and culture as socially superior and a guarantor of success. This explains the prevalence of Western education systems in China, the push to pursue further education in the West, and the goal of assimilation that first and second-generation immigrants are subject to. For many Chinese Americans, becoming proficient in English, learning Western instruments and Western Classical Music, and engaging in the consumption of Western culture allows them to gain valuable cultural capital that ensures success, not only in Western countries, but within China and other East Asia communities. This is supported in the literature through participant testimony. For example, in Hongzi's (2021) study, one participant indicates that their parents were "incrementally Westernized, culturally, musically, and religiously, which did not provide them with many opportunities to learn about her ancestral culture" (39).

In some cases, this slow assimilation further separated individuals from their cultural identity. Another participant in Hongzi's (2021) study states, "I think my parents are Americanized. They're both pretty adjusted to the American culture. Both my dad and my mom speak English and Mandarin fluently, but they never taught me the language, they never taught me the music, they never really taught me the culture.... We used to dress up in traditional dress when we were younger, and we would go celebrate the Chinese New Year. Then, as we've gotten older, it has definitely gone away a lot" (119).

Such statements relate to how some individuals gravitate towards assimilation in choosing between identities. Another participant of Hongzi's (2021) study indicates, "I definitely felt like there was a struggle to separate yourself from your parents' immigrant experience, and people would constantly be trying to show how American they were, how well they fit in at high school" (40).

Cayari (2021) reports similar findings in relation to participants' music experiences. His participants note that they were predominantly exposed to Western musics and that there existed a "goal of assimilation" leading to limited exposure to Asian music. Though some participants reported exposure to Asian popular music, such as karaoke at family gatherings, exposure to Asian popular music was

largely due to their parent's individual interest, rather than through an effort to pass on musical culture to the next generation.

This "goal of assimilation" is related to the general idea that the pursuit of Western ideals and culture will lead to success. Thus, Asian American children may often be encouraged to study Western classical music, rather than traditional or classical music of their ethnic heritage. This presents a complexity when educators are operating under the assumption that Chinese American students in their classroom are culture bearers for all things "Chinese," have deep ties to their Chinese heritage, or that families will support learning of Chinese music in the classroom. Some families may be opposed to the study of traditional Chinese music in the classroom, citing that because their children are attending school in the United States, they should be learning Western classical music or other Western genres. Since culturally sustaining pedagogy capitalizes on engagement in the community, educators should be prepared and open to have conversations with families about repertoire choices (e.g., Chinese composers, Asian folk songs, etc.) with the aim of expanding musical knowledge for all students, not only targeting those who identify as Asian American. Studying repertoire that blends elements of traditional Asian music and Western classical could also lead to valuable conversations about global music spread and expand knowledge about playing in different styles. Choices and conversations such as these would draw the focal point away from tokenizing or capitalizing on assumptions while still honoring the culture and cultural learning of families. Educators solely using observation to determine if students are exhibiting cultural ways of knowledge formation may overlook Chinese American students who are (consciously or unconsciously) aiming to assimilate to the Western perspective. There cannot be an assumption that engaging in cultural music practice will aid in or validate the cultural identity of students simply by providing representation.

In contrast, we also found instances wherein Chinese music was highly valued by parents, such as Yu's (2014) investigation into the experiences of Chinese American parents. Again, this highlights the importance of centering the current students and community when engaging with culturally sustaining pedagogy. It is crucial to realize that these experiences cannot be generalized, and educators will need to consider the unique students in their classrooms and their experiences.

Invisibility/Erasure

My last two years teaching I helped start and lead the Asian American Pacific Islander Affinity Group for faculty and staff of my district. While meeting with other Asian staff was wonderful and a fantastic opportunity for connection, when bringing concerns to district leadership we were met with opposition.

In a leadership meeting, my colleague from the Indigenous Affinity Group and I called for more robust data aggregation for different groups, as much of the district data lumped Asians and Indigenous populations together, and our membership expressed frustration that considering such large ethnic groups in a single category caused student needs to be lost in the generalization. District leadership responded: "Our focus is not on that right now; we need to focus on black and brown students."

In a document recommending more robust data aggregation for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Byon and Roberson (2020) bring attention to the invisibility and erasure that broad groupings perpetuate—ignoring differences and inequities as well as continuing the spread of the model minority myth. Cayari (2021) states, "regardless of self-determined identities, Asian Americans are often influenced by prevalent monoracial conceptions perpetuated by dominant groups" (9). Educators need to be aware of how they are perceiving students, especially in considering how to implement culturally sustaining pedagogy. Holding these views limits representation, especially in musical contexts. Oftentimes there is a push for arrangements of traditional folk songs done in the style of Western art music, or iterations of these songs in outdated contexts, which can lead to the presentation of cultures as being "frozen in time" (Schippers 2010). We observe that Asian (referring to a large continent of nearly fifty nationalities) is often used to represent exclusively East Asian cultures. Furthermore, music educators do not always differentiate these cultures but rather lump them together under a single label, thus notating the permanence of exclusion.

This often leaves specifically Asian American curriculum with no place to fit into the larger context of educational priorities. In a study by Museus and Park (2015) on Asian American college students, members of one class note that they were denied voice and representation in the curriculum on campus. In fact, one participant discusses how an American literature professor excluded the work of Asian American authors from the course and relegated those authors' work to the

domain of Asian American studies, even though no Asian American Studies program existed on their campus.

Lack of data aggregation and lumping Asians together also affects debates over policies such as affirmative action. Currier (2024) states, "the challenge for Asian Americans with respect to affirmative action and race-based admissions is in the erroneous way Asians are captured as a monolithic group in statistics, which makes them appear artificially overrepresented" (6). Appearing overrepresented then draws attention away from the unique needs and challenges that specific Asian ethnicities face. Thus, Asians are often portrayed as not adding to the diversity of the student body in many higher education institutions.

Beyond considering traditional cultural music, educators need to be more aware specifically of how Asian American music diasporas (such as taiko) have developed into ways of acknowledging and celebrating Asian American identity. Simultaneously, highlighting the evolution of traditional musical contexts and their modern-day manifestations (e.g. Lion and Dragon Dance at Lunar New Year Celebrations) combat the notion of these musics as "frozen in time." Considering and reflecting on the complexity of intersectionality is crucial in this instance.

Perpetual Foreigner

When I was in second grade, my mom made one of my favorite Chinese dishes (salted fish and chicken fried rice). I remember being so excited for lunch, sitting down and opening my lunchbox for my friends at my table to say, "Eww, that smells awful, what is it? You eat that?" I ended up eating my lunch outside in the corner of the playground. I was so embarrassed and ashamed and asked my mom for other lunches afterwards.

I think many Asians and Asian Americans (and probably other people of color) share this trauma. What is shocking to me is that this happened again, my first year teaching when I made mapo tofu and brought it to lunch in the teacher's lounge. It was such a violent way to relive that trauma, and for the next six years I was very conscious of what I brought to lunch.

I am a first generation Chinese American. I was born and raised in the United States, completed my undergraduate studies here, taught here and am now a graduate student. Multiple times and at different institutions, I have received an email at the beginning of the school year titled "Welcome International Students"

and continued to be bombarded throughout the year with resources for international students despite repeated communication that I am not one. They assume that my values, needs and experiences will be the same as an international Chinese student.

All of these interactions erase my American identity and emphasize the foreignness of my Chinese identity.

Kim (1999) addresses the idea of perpetual foreigner by explaining the racial triangulation of Asian Americans. She explains that racial triangulation "occurs by means of two types of simultaneous, linked processes" through the valorization of three groups, whites, Blacks, and Asian Americans. These processes involve white perceptions viewing Asian Americans as socially superior to African Americans, however viewing Blacks as holding "insider" status and Asian Americans as perpetual "outsiders" (107). This may explain the often-interchangeable use of "Asian" and "Asian American."

The perpetual foreigner ideology relegates Asian Americans the status of "other," with emphasis on language, accent, food, and culture as foreign, leading to an underlying thought of Asian presenting individuals as foreign. This contributes to the lumping together of international students and Asian American students, though their identities and ties to cultural heritage are vastly different. The prevalence of this thought in modern society exploded with Asian hate crimes and issues of social justice during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yoon 2022).

In considering culturally sustaining pedagogy and music education, the perpetual foreigner manifests in what educators may choose to represent Chinese American and Asian American students in their classrooms. While culturally sustaining pedagogy does recommend diversifying curriculum to reaffirm student backgrounds and cultural identity, representation needs to be considered carefully. A participant in Cayari's (2021) study demonstrates the complexity of such action. In response to being asked if Asian music had been represented in their school music program, they responded, "Are you kidding? If there was, it would have been insulting like a song from The King and I. It was never real!" (16). This alludes to supposed Asian representation from a white perspective. For example, "traditional folksongs" from Asian countries are often re-presented by non-Asian arrangers using Western styles (e.g. *Fantasy on a Japanese Folk Song* by Brian Balmages, *Chinese Folk Fantasy* by James Curnow, *Variations on a Korean Folk Song* by James

Barnes Chance), and "Asian inspired" pieces and works dot the Western music landscape (e.g. *Chinese Galop* by Johann Strauss, *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot* by Giacomo Puccini, *Chinese Dance* by Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky). Many of these pieces tokenize Asian culture and people and continue to be performed without being informed by cultural bearers or members of the Asian community.

Well-intentioned but poor efforts at cultural representation can create or resurface trauma in individuals. One participant in Cayari's (2021) study named Sarah (pseudonym) indicated that her band director's efforts at representation consisted of performing *Variations on a Korean Folk Song*. Her peers in the ensemble branded the piece "Sarah's Song." Sarah described her discomfort at being othered through the perpetual foreigner stereotype (16).

Provocation and Call to Action

The primary purpose of this article is to present counter-narratives specific to the experience of Christy as a Chinese American music educator that challenge paradigms surrounding the application of culturally sustaining pedagogy. In light of the deep-seated stereotypes derived from societal expectations, the well-founded theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy must be revisited and refined. Paris and Alim's (2017) work set a strong foundation, defining culturally sustaining pedagogy as an effort to perpetuate and foster, to sustain, linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation (1). However, the majority of studies on culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasize how student funds of knowledge and strong associations with cultural identity can expand to learning in the classroom that acknowledges these foundations. While this has value, it leaves significant gaps in how educators are prepared to engage with pluralistic and intersectional identities, especially those not legibly tethered to cultural traditions.

Thus, we argue that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a framework, as it is not prescriptive. The answers for teachers hoping to sustain their students' cultures are not directly available in a book or PDF. For me (Christy), and other cases outlined in the literature, making assumptions regarding Chinese American student experiences, identity, and funds of knowledge has proved harmful in perpetuating the "Asianization" of monolithic group, model minority, perpetual foreigner, and yellow peril as outlined by Museus and Iftikar (2013, 24). According to

Asian Critical Theory, counter-narratives must engage the realities of racialization, nativism, and invisibility that shape how Asian American students are seen (or not seen) within equity discourses. If music educators are serious about transforming their classrooms into spaces that sustain culture rather than erase it, they must shift both our mindset and our methods. We suggest the following actionable steps.

First, we must let go of essentialism. Cultural identity is complex and not always visible. Ethnic background doesn't always predict interest, fluency, or connection. Assuming that Chinese American students can assist with the pronunciation of a song, for instance, is presumptuous. It is also unfair to assume that students will have or want to engage with explorations of their cultural identity if they are still navigating their dual identities. Second, reflexivity must be constant. Teachers should be aware of their own biases and how their power and positionality as school leaders impacts how they implement culturally sustaining pedagogy. Reflection without action is insufficient. Finally, culturally sustaining pedagogy is not just about content; it is about power. If we want to sustain culture, we have to share ownership of the learning space and truly listen. Cultural responsiveness without this power shift reinforces the very hierarchies culturally sustaining pedagogy is meant to disrupt.

This work requires sustained engagement from white educators. My (Garrett's) early efforts with culturally sustaining pedagogy were grounded in good intentions, but I had not critically examined whose definitions of inclusion I was working from. Much of what I framed as responsive practice was shaped by unexamined assumptions. Furthermore, this is ongoing work, rather than a task completed. In a society that systematically marginalizes some identities, biases must be continuously reflected on and identified. Co-conspiratorship requires more than awareness—it requires continuous action. Within culturally sustaining pedagogy, this means stepping back, resisting the urge to lead conversations about race and identity, and taking responsibility when we cause harm. It also means acknowledging the power music educators hold in shaping what is sustained in students' lives and cultures. White educators do not need to become academic-level experts in the cultural identities of others. Rather, they must recognize how their own culture is centered in the classroom and work to disrupt that pattern. Humility and accountability are essential components of this work.

There exists a pernicious dichotomy between these assumptions and stereotypes. Assimilationist assumptions—such as the model minority stereotype—continue the erasure of representation in curriculum. Recall the statement from my (Christy's) former employer in response to a request for more robust data aggregation for Asian students: it was simply dismissed as not being the priority. Meanwhile, assuming cultural fluency, depth, or desire based on race leads to tokenism. These assumptions harm students navigating their own relationship to identity, especially bi- or multiracial students whose intersectionality may not fit neatly into curricular categories. Intersectionality must extend beyond race, class, and gender to include a fuller range of social and cultural dimensions that shape identity.

We honor the work of Paris and Alim (2017), as well as that of Lind and McKoy (2023) and Good-Perkins (2022) and acknowledge that they serve as strong foundations upon which paradigms of culturally sustaining pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy may be based. We further explore ways of thinking about culturally sustaining pedagogy through this paper. We posit that appropriate and ethical implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy requires constant reflection and empathy. We challenge our assumptions of what students' funds of knowledge are. Furthermore, we aim to assess the accuracy of our evaluation of what those funds of knowledge are. These are positions we find to be fundamental and well-founded given the foundations of culturally sustaining pedagogy seen through the lens of Asian American music education.

As we wrestled with these ideas, we identified three questions to reframe the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy theory and its application moving forward:

- Can we assume that the purpose of culturally sustaining pedagogy is to aid in developing cultural identity? If so, how do we give students the option to explore this heritage and identity?
- How do we develop cultural identity through existing funds of knowledge in a way that doesn't emphasize the power and privilege of the teacher?
- Believing that a mentality of reflection and empathy is a prerequisite for the appropriate application of culturally sustaining pedagogy, what does this mean in practice? What implications does this hold for the practical teaching setting?

We do not have the answers to these questions, but we believe they can guide us as we continue to reflect and respond to students in pluralistic classrooms. Just as our process of reflection is iterative, the answers to these questions and where they guide us may shift over time. What remains constant is the need for an ethical, dialogic approach to culturally sustaining pedagogy that resists essentialism, centers student agency, and acknowledges the complexities of identity. Through this approach to utilizing culturally sustaining pedagogy, educators may be better equipped to address issues of misrepresentation, tokenism, and erasure for students whose experiences fall outside dominant narratives of culture and race in music education.

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