



AFFINITY SPACES

Cultivating & Promoting Diversity in the Workplace

by
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The uptake in anti-Asian racism locally and globally, as highlighted in a recent Bloomberg article ["This is the Anti-Asian Hate Crime Capital of North America"](#) pinned the Vancouver area and three other regions in Canada as the top five hotbeds of hate towards Asians in North America. Shocking? Not really! As we acknowledged Asian Heritage Month in May, a reckoning of sorts was occurring. Incidents of hate prompted an outcry for action, and we protested and stood side by side, allying with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and movements against intolerance. We stood against hate and discrimination in our communities and unto our most vulnerable Asian members of society, and we called for an end to hate. As I continued to feel this empathic distress for my fellow Asians, and felt a deep need to end this feeling of alienation, I reflected on my own context. What am I doing to end the hate? I am learning in webinars and reading a ton, but what am I willing to action?

I started by asking some students about racism and if they have experienced it in some way, shape, or form. Some of them expressed that they feel unwelcome in the very building where they come to learn, by the very people they are asked to trust, and that they feel disavowed in the history that is taught to them. Token gestures and curricular privilege take a front seat, and our Asian students and staff are left with the generational advice of not stirring the pot, staying quiet and focusing on a strong work ethic to get ahead. Consequently, this narrative has erupted in violence and bigotry, with dire consequences in some instances. How can we do better? How *will* we do better and get away from the model minority myth?

I recently called on educational leaders to join an **Asian Edchat**. The goal was simply to allow a space

that was for us: an affinity space. Affinity spaces are simply groups that share common interests, values, backgrounds, and/or goals. These spaces are meant to cultivate and promote diversity within the workspace. You may think that an affinity space is counter-intuitive to inclusion, but it actually stimulates it by allowing the members within the group to further develop an understanding of how identities shape lived experiences. An affinity space promotes a more inclusive culture by recognizing how a space responds to its participants, ultimately opening communication and dialogue about race.

I was introduced to affinity spaces through the workshop "Dismantling White Supremacy Culture in Schools", facilitated by Joe Truss. This virtual workshop was held last summer during the height of the pandemic, and it included several hundred educators from all across North America. After being provided a framework for addressing anti-racism work, we were sent into affinity breakout rooms with the purpose of providing a space to interrupt White Supremacy Culture in our adult interactions. The framework provided another tool to deepen our consciousness on racial dialogue, and enhance our practice or, in some cases, change our practice. My consideration through this school year was how to create this space, as I was the sole Asian administrator in my district. Working with Kenneth Headley, I knew that there was a group of Black administrators who had created this space within the province, and it inspired me to act.

What happened next was a roller coaster of emotions, second guessing, and elation. With support from the team at BCPVPA, I posted an advertisement promoting a connecting conversation to talk about the challenges of being an Asian educator, to share

thoughts on how to address anti-Asian racism in education, and to discuss what we as educational leaders are doing at our schools to bring about change. I was hesitant to launch this ride, but I felt excited about the opportunity. The first few days were slow, with only one interested administrator who identified as white but was wanting to join as an ally. I felt humbled and appreciative for this person's outreach. I felt relieved to know that my call to action was noticed, but I was hoping for a bigger response. I felt a bit defeated, and unsure about this call to action. *Was I the only one who felt this way?* What resulted was more than I could ever ask for: the next few days were more productive, as others reached out to join the call.

I was reminded by my good friend Grant Frend that it's not about the numbers. I had quantified success with participation rates, and I fell into White Supremacist thinking. The small group that eventually did meet over Zoom was comprised of diverse Asian educational leaders with a common goal to do better. It is not about critical mass, but more about critical friends – those who will engage you in the courageous conversations and hold you accountable

for actioning your intentions. We spoke for more than an hour, sharing common stories of triumph and challenge. We did not aim to fix, but rather to open the flow of dialogue and understanding. I learned that our colleagues from different districts need support in how to deal with educating staff, students, and the community on how to be culturally aware and responsive. I learned that we face discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace, that we deal with these in different ways, and that they can exact a toll on our well-being.

At the heart of it, we are proud of who we are, and proud of the work we are doing to support our racialized students. I would like to encourage all Asian educational leaders to reach out and look into affinity support networks. I am grateful for this space, and this ride is just starting to get momentum. This ride would not have been possible without the support of some critical friends: Grant Frend, Kenneth Headley, and Karl Lindgren-Streicher. Some may not have those friends who can encourage you to do better, and be better, which is why it is so important to find and connect to spaces to do this work.

If you would like to join an upcoming Asian Edchat session, contact Wayne Chow wayne_chow@sd42.ca



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