

# Bicultural Identity & Diet: A Study of Asian Americans and the Role of Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Asian Americans (AA) were the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. Though numerous studies have identified factors, such as diet, language, and discrimination, as relevant players in the acculturation and identity formation processes of AA, few focus on the perspectives of AA youth, especially within the high school setting. The present study aims to investigate how Asian American high school students' dietary habits are related to their perception of their bicultural identity. Moreover, it seeks to identify what culture-related challenges AA students face and potential supportive strategies for schools. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, 10 AA students were surveyed and interviewed at a suburban public high school in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. Through content analysis of the survey and interview data, a few themes emerged in the following categories: a) Dietary habits and bicultural identity, b) Challenges with bicultural identity, and c) Suggestions for schools. Results suggest a strong correlation between dietary habits and perceptions about their bicultural identity. Confusion about cultural identity and negative racial comments or stereotypes were among the challenges, internal and external, identified. In addition to existing factors that contribute to AA students' sense of cultural belonging at school, like cultural clubs, potential suggestions for schools include greater AAPI representation in the curriculum, faculty, and food offered. Implications include the implementation of the suggestions at schools and future research on AA identity, cultural challenges, and diversity efforts inside and outside of school.

## Introduction

As a second-generation Taiwanese American, food has been a core part of my 'Asian American' identity. Whether it be the Lunar New Year traditions of folding dumplings or the variety of Asian (Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, etc.) dishes that my family ate almost every day, food has been a critical way for me to connect with my cultural heritage. Therefore, my initial assumption is that food plays a significant role in shaping cultural identity for Asian Americans. However, with around 22 million Asians currently living in the U.S., according to the Pew Research Center (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), it's likely that while some AA may share similar experiences with me, other AA have drastically different ones. Throughout this study, I made discoveries that both corroborated and countered my assumption. I also broadened my scope of research to encompass the challenges that Asian American youth face and the potential role of schools.

For the purposes of this study, AA refers to Asian Americans, or more generally, people originating from countries or populations of the East, South Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) residing in America.

## Literature Review

During the review process of existing literature, I sought to understand the relationship between AA bicultural identity and food. In this study, the term ‘bicultural identity’, which the Merriam-Webster dictionary states is “an identity defined by two or more distinct cultures,” refers to a combined Asian and American cultural identity.

Studies have found that food habits are closely related to AA’s bicultural identity on a more individual, personal scale. A study by Diep et al. (2017) on Chinese American children and adolescents researched how acculturation, or the process of adopting aspects of another culture while maintaining one’s own (Cole, 2019), is related to diet. Higher levels of acculturation, or having adopted more aspects of Western culture, was found to have a relationship to having a more “Westernized” and “non-Asian diet” (Diep et al., 2017, p. 1).

Yet, research on this relationship among mid and later adolescents, whose behaviors appear to be most influenced by their peers, is limited (Diep et al., 2017). As an example of peer influence, in one study, it was reported that many AA have early experiences of stigma and judgment when they eat Asian food at school (Kim & Aronowitz, 2021). The cultural and racial challenges that Asian Americans experiences, however, extend beyond those around food. A study by Yeo et al. (2019) found that many international and domestic Asian students experience microaggressions and racism like mockery of accents or xenophobic attacks at school. These attitudes result in a harmful racial ‘othering’ of Asians students. Coupled with a study by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism (2020) that demonstrated a rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes during the Covid-19 pandemic of 149% from 2019 to 2020, it is evident that racism, microaggressions and racist perceptions have disastrous effects on Asian immigrants in America and AA.

AA youth also experience cultural related challenges on an internal level. A study by Tummala-Narra (2016) on South-Asian adolescents identified several factors that contribute to acculturative stress. For instance, increased responsibilities like having to linguistically and culturally translate for family members with lower English proficiency, decreased connection with family members due to parents having less time and resources to spend with children in order to focus on maintaining or achieving financial stability, conflicting value systems and cultural perspectives in the home versus at school or with peers, and pressures for high academic achievement (Tummala-Narra et al., 2016).

Especially with the external and internal challenges, food or culture related, AA youth face, schools pose as a potential actor in helping create an environment where AA students feel culturally supported. In an article about school meals, Wilson (2017), the USDA Deputy Under Secretary says, “Our goal at USDA is to ensure children have access to nutritious food that nourishes their growing bodies—all while embracing diverse cultural customs and cuisines.” As suggested by Wilson, schools are working to support students’ diverse cultural identities through school food. However, there is limited research on whether or not incorporating cultural diversity into food at school actually makes AA students feel more supported.

In summary, existing studies suggest that among the multitude of factors that help shape the identities of AA, a relationship exists between food and cultural identity. However, there is limited research on how dietary habits, specifically, influence AA’s perceptions of their bicultural identity. Likewise, research about the food-related challenges and negative experiences AA youth face and how those challenges affect their sense of cultural identity is minimal. High school students are of particular interest to research since studies suggest that, in a cultural context, adolescents’ behaviors are influenced by their peers’ opinions and comments (Diep et al., 2017; Kim & Aronowitz, 2021).

Attempting to gain a greater understanding on the bicultural identity, the dietary habits, and cultural challenges of AA youth, could provide valuable implications, for example, to discover ways that AA students believe schools can support AA students in feeling more comfortable in their identities. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand: How are Asian American high school students’ dietary habits related to their perceptions about bicultural identity? Moreover, what culture-related challenges do AA students face and how can schools provide them support?

## Methods

## Qualitative Inquiry and Phenomenology

In this study, I employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach using surveys and semi-structured interviews. I selected a phenomenological approach because its definition aligns with the goals of this study. As cited in Mostafa (2019, p. 53), phenomenological research has the capacity to “describe human experiences” around a specific phenomenon (Manen & Adams, 2010). Moreover, as cited in Practical Research (Leedy et al., 2019), phenomenological research allows the researcher to “understand better what it is like for someone to experience that [the phenomenon]” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). The goal of this study is to understand the cultural experiences and perceptions of a certain people group, AA high school students, in regard to a particular social reality or phenomenon, being an Asian youth in America. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is very suitable for gaining this type of understanding.

Additionally, phenomenology was successfully applied by studies with very similar topics and goals to this study. For example, the method was used in Iwamoto et al.’s study (2013) on the racial and ethnic identity formation process of second-generation Asian Indian Americans and Mostafa’s research (2019) on describing the acculturation experiences and bicultural identities of second-generation Asian Indian American students in higher education.

## Participants

The research subjects of this study are Asian American secondary students, or high school students. Participant criteria include being a high school student, being of Asian descent, and currently living in America. This includes individuals who are of Asian heritage or ethnicity and those who themselves or their parents, grandparents, etc. used to live in Asia. In other words, participants must be first, second, or further generation AA immigrants.

A sample of only 10 students was taken from a Pacific Northwest High School (PNWHS) due to time limitations. Additionally, this sample size proved effective in similar literature (Iwamoto et al., 2013; Mostafa, 2019) for gaining a comprehensive understanding of a select number of individuals. Mostafa’s study (2019) had 10 participants, and Iwamoto et al.’s study (2013) had 12 participants.

To recruit participants, I took a convenience sampling of my classmates and of members of the Asian American Pacific Islander Coalition (AAPIC), a student-led club at PNWHS. During an AAPIC meeting, I shared a brief overview of the study’s purpose and interview questions. I also shared information about my study with my classmates and peers. After, collecting the emails of those who demonstrated interest, I sent them a Microsoft Forms survey (Appendix A).

## Setting of Study

According to an October 2020 Ethnic Enrollment Report issued by the Washington state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, of a total of 1,907 students enrolled at PNWHS, 60% were White, 14.9% were Asian, 13.3% were Hispanic or Latino, 2.5% were Black or African American, 0.2% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.1% were Native American or other Pacific Islander, and 9% were of two or more races. PNWHS has two AA related clubs including the Indian American Association and the Asian American Pacific Islander Coalition (AAPIC).

## Data Collection

### Surveys

One purpose of the survey (Appendix A) was to gain voluntary consent. Interested participants first read a detailed description of the study and then were asked to sign and read the informed consent form (Appendix B). The survey included demographic questions like age, grade, sex, place of birth, and ethnicity or race, modeled after those a similar study by Diep et al. (2017) on culture and diet among Chinese American children. Study-specific questions were asked, including “What generation immigrant do you consider yourself as?” and “Do you identify most with being ‘very Asian, mostly Asian, equally Asian and American, mostly American, very American, or other?’” The survey data provided a basic understanding of each participants’ bicultural identity, which was discussed in subsequent interview with the participant.

### Interviews

The semi-structured interview structure with open-ended questions used in this study was modeled after Iwamoto et al.’s study (2013) and Mostafa’s (2019) study. According to Manen and Adams (2010), as cited by Mostafa (2019, p. 55), “Interviewing is a... qualitative data collection procedure that guides phenomenology”, and therefore, is suitable for gathering the perspectives of participants about the phenomena of bicultural identity development as an Asian adolescent in America.

During the interview, I asked a series of open-ended questions (Appendix C) and followed up with additional questions for clarity and to encourage participants to share stories and experiences. Moreover, being flexible allowed me to gain insight into topics not previously addressed by the prepared questions.

The interviews lasted from about 30 to 45 minutes based on the participants’ availability and how much the participants shared. The length of interviews was based on those of similar studies (Iwamoto et al., 2013; Mostafa, 2019).

Interview Questions: the interview questions fell under 4 categories, dietary habits, bicultural identity, and culture-related challenges, and suggestions for schools. These topics aligned with both parts of the research goal.

The interview questions about culture and diet were modeled after or replicated from Diep et al.’s study (2017). For example, as was done in that study, I asked participants about the frequency and types of foods they typically eat. Questions about bicultural identity and challenges, in relation to culture or diet, were modeled after Iwamoto et al.’s study (2013). Lastly, to understand the potential role of schools, I asked, “What do you think would make you feel more like you culturally belong at school?”

## Results

After interviewing the participants, I listened to the recordings and made note of significant themes that emerged, as was done by Diep et al. (2017). I identified themes that were pertinent to answering the research goal. The themes fell under the following categories: a) Dietary habits and bicultural identity, b) Challenges with bicultural identity, and c) Suggestions for schools.

Below in Table 1 are results from the survey which includes some basic demographic information and responses to the questions: “Which identity statement do you most closely identify with? [Asian, mostly Asian, equally Asian and American, mostly American, very American, or other] and, “On average, do you think the foods you eat are more Asian, American, both, or other?”

**Table 1.** Survey Results on demographic information, identity statements, and eating habits. (n = 10)

Age	Sex <sup>1</sup>	Ethnicity/Race	Birthplace	Immigrant Generation	Identity Statement	Frequency of Eating Asian Food Relative to American Food
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17	F	Hong Kong, Chinese	Washington, US	2nd	Mostly Asian	Mostly Asian
18	M	German, Chinese	Washington, US	2nd	Mostly Asian	More Asian
18	M	Indian	Washington, US	2nd	Very Asian	Mostly Asian
16	F	Caucasian, Chinese	California, US	2nd	Mostly American	50/50
16	F	Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Swedish, Finnish, Irish, Polish	Washington, US	3rd	Mostly American	50/50
15	F	Indian	India	1st	Other: Anglo-Indian	Mostly Asian
18	F	Indian	India	1st	Other: Neither	Mostly Asian
16	F	Indian	Washington, US	2nd	Equally Asian and American	More Asian
15	F	Korean	Washington, US	2nd	Equally Asian and American	More American
15	F	Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kong	Washington, US	2nd	Equally Asian and American	50/50

<sup>1</sup> F = Female; M = Male

### Dietary Habits and Bicultural Identity

Through a closer analysis of the survey results, coupled with the interview responses, some patterns between the participant's identity statement and frequency of eating Asian and/or American food emerged. The following patterns are highlighted in Table 2 below. The three participants who identified as "mostly Asian" or "very Asian" also stated that they eat "more Asian" than American food, on average. The two participants who identified as "mostly American" said they eat about equally half and half, or a "50/50" ratio, of American food and Asian food. The two participants who said they identified as being neither particularly Asian nor American were both 1st generation immigrants and both stated they eat "mostly Asian" food. Lastly, the three participants who identified as "equally Asian and American" had the greatest range of responses on how often they ate Asian and/or American food, from "more Asian" to "50/50" and "More American."

These patterns suggest that on a spectrum from identifying as more Asian to more American, the more closely one identifies with being Asian, the more frequently they eat Asian food ("Mostly Asian" or "More Asian"). Similarly, it appears that those who identify as a 1st generation immigrant tend to eat Asian food more frequently ("Mostly Asian"). Whereas, in the opposite direction, those who identify as more American seem to eat, relatively, more American food ("50/50").

During the interview, all participants agreed that to at least some degree, food plays an important role in shaping one's cultural or ethnic identity. However, participants expressed a range of opinions on how food personally relates to their individual cultural identities. Most participants, 4 out of 10, said that food is tied very closely to their cultural identity or is one of the main connections they have to their culture. 3 out of 10 said food plays a notable role. Lastly, 3 out of 10 acknowledged that food is important, but it is not the sole defining factor of one's individual cultural identity. These themes, along with exemplifying quotes, are displayed below in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes about the role of food in shaping cultural identity.

Theme about Role of Food in Shaping Cultural Identity	Example(s)	No. of Participants Mentioned
Food is the main connection to one's cultural identity	<p>"It was mostly through food that I grew up... connected to my culture."</p> <p>Food is "one of the main connections" I have to my culture and is "very close to the thing I consider makes me Asian. We have a Sunday tradition of making dumplings, which I'm very proud of..."</p> <p>Food is "very important.... Every time my parents meet with family friends [and] work friends... it's always over our cultural food."</p> <p>"I think [food] definitely does because the food that you eat can also shape the way that you eat or the way that you view food..."</p>	4
Food plays a notable role	<p>"My mom will cook a lot of Asian food, and I kind of associate that with who I am because that's what I've been eating for most of my life."</p> <p>"I feel connected [to my culture] because... most of the food I eat is Indian..."</p>	3
Food is important but not the sole defining factor	<p>"Food is very important... but [it] doesn't make me who I am. It's... a part of who I am [that] just adds to the culture part [of my identity]."</p> <p>Food "definitely helps me feel more Korean because there's so much culture that goes into food. But, at the same time if I never ate it [Korean food], I think I'd feel the same amount of Korean."</p>	3

### Challenges with Bicultural Identity

A major theme that was present throughout the participants' responses about the challenges they experience, whether it be related to dietary habits or bicultural identity, was a difference between mixed-race students, specifically those who are partially White, and full-Asian students. 3 out of the 10 total participants identified as partially White (having European ancestry). The remaining 7 out of 10 of participants identified as full-Asian (being of only Asian descent).

When talking about food specifically, 4 out of 10 participants reported experiencing some level of discomfort with eating ethnic food in public. However, of these participants who expressed discomfort, most were full-Asian students. Many full-Asian students shared they felt uncomfortable due to fear of judgement or being seen as different when compared to White peers and what they ate. All 3 out of 10 participants who said to have had at least one specific negative experience with peers making judgmental comments when they brought Asian food to school, were full-Asian. Most of these experiences occurred at a young age like elementary or middle school, however, participants expressed that the negative experiences still affect them today. Some said they still feel hesitant to bring Asian food to school.

Meanwhile, mixed-race students were more likely to say they do not feel discomfort bringing Asian food to school. In fact, many participants said they feel proud to share Asian food with their friends. Some reasons included that the student usually eats lunch with Asian friends at school or that he/she usually does not

bring Asian food to school. Table 3 below provides a comparison of full-Asian and mixed-race students' feelings and experiences regarding the above-mentioned themes.

**Table 3.** Comparison of full-Asian and mixed-race students' feelings and experiences towards bringing Asian food to school.

Feeling or Experience with Bringing Asian Food to School	Example(s)	No. of Full-Asian Participants Mentioned (_/7)	No. of Mixed-Race Participants Mentioned (_/3)
Feel Uncomfortable	<p>“In middle school, especially elementary school, I really hated bring lunch from home when it was something Indian.”</p> <p>“When it comes time to share them [Indian dishes] with non-Indian people, I’m like ‘What if they don't like it?’ They’re going to think all Indian food is so nasty and things like that.”</p>	4	0
Feel Comfortable	<p>“I’ve always been pretty alright with sharing my food and culture.”</p> <p>“I’m happy to tell people what I eat at home. I love telling people about that stuff, and I like it when they're interested because it's a big part of my personality and it's important to me.”</p> <p>“Most of my friends are Asian, and if I did sit with a White person eating a PB&amp;J, I wouldn’t really care.”</p>	2	2
Feel Neither	<p>“In third grade, my mom gave me a Nutella sandwich every day for lunch. I don't think it was peer pressure. It was kind of a subconscious thing of, ‘I don't want to have something that I have to eat with my hands when everyone else is eating a sandwich.’”</p> <p>“I haven't had many opportunities to eat ethnic Asian food in front of my peers.”</p>	1	1

<p>Negative Experience Bringing Asian Food to School</p>	<p>“When I was younger like in preschool, [and I brought something like] leftover dim sum, ... kids used to [ask] ‘What are you eating? That’s so weird’; they’d just think it was so different.”</p> <p>"In elementary school... bringing [cultural food] to school, I'd get a lot of looks and people would say that it smelled weird. Even to this day, I honestly still don't feel comfortable..."</p> <p>“A classmate made a joke about the chickpeas in [my] chickpea chole. In hindsight, it was a really funny, somewhat stupid thing to say, but it was really insulting to me at the time, and I was self-conscious about it. [After that] I was like, ‘You know what mom, maybe I’ll just get school lunch today.’”</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>0</p>
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The differences were also evident in participant’s perception of their cultural identity. Full-Asian students were more likely to express feeling the need to prove oneself as not too Asian and to be more American to fit in. Meanwhile, mixed-race students struggled more with proving oneself as Asian enough especially because of appearance. These themes and accompanying examples from interview responses are shown below in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Struggles around bicultural identity: Feeling ‘too Asian’ or not ‘Asian enough.’

<p><b>Bicultural Identity Struggle</b></p>	<p><b>Example(s)</b></p>
<p>Fear of being ‘Too Asian’ (Falling into racial stereotypes)</p>	<p>“I thought I was really cool for eating meat and not being vegetarian because a lot of Indian people are vegetarian so just not being vegetarian made me feel different and separated from them [Indian people], but I felt good about it, which looking back is a little weird because there's nothing wrong with being Indian and vegetarian.”</p> <p>“Eating with your hands when everyone else is eating with forks and spoons is kind of weird. So, I was a little shy about that back then.”</p> <p>“I’ve definitely felt uncomfortable being seen as ‘very Asian’ because of the people I’m surrounded by [and] the way people react to you being Asian.”</p>
<p>Desire to be ‘More American’</p>	<p>“At school I try to turn into an Americanized version of myself to kind of avoid any issues. For example, my name [that I use at school] is an Americanized version of my actual name.”</p>



<p>Feel not 'Asian enough'</p>	<p>"I'm white-passing, I feel like it's hard to connect [to my culture]."</p> <p>"I don't look Asian; I don't feel Asian enough because I don't have the features and traditions. It's very difficult for me. I'm still trying to claim my identity and feel valid."</p> <p>"I don't really like to speak mandarin in front other people that aren't my parents or my grandparents partly because I'm uncomfortable that I'm going to say something wrong. Pronunciation in Mandarin is so intense, but I don't want people to be like 'Oh she's fake Asian'. It wouldn't be like wrong to do that [speak in mandarin at school], but it would be a little bit uncomfortable for me. There's just some awkwardness about it."</p>
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One participant emphasized the struggle of trying to avoid reinforcing racial stereotypes for Asians while balancing both parts of her cultural identity, stating:

I'm always having to balance things that are Indian and the things that I do that are American like doing American teenager rebellious things and then doing Indian studious, hardworking, going to get into a good college thing, just stereotypes, but that's how it seems it is. I feel like I have to balance those two things like not be too much of one thing or else people will be like, 'Oh she's a whitewashed person'... Being too Indian is like... falling into stereotypes. I don't want to be either of those things. I want to be a balance... There's always just this feeling [that] I have to prove myself.

5 out of 10 participants said that they feel more comfortable expressing their culture at home in comparison to at school or in public. One participant said it feels like she has "a different personality, almost" at school compared to at home, in terms of cultural expression. Another participant said:

I think I feel the most comfortable expressing my culture at home just because I don't have to prove to anybody else that I am Asian. At school and out in public is fun because it's kind of like 'Oh yes, this is my identity. These are my traditions and my culture.' But there's also a little bit of like impostor syndrome sometimes where it's like, 'Am I really qualified to represent this?'... but it's often a good time even if there's that little bit of doubt in there.

2 out of 10 participants said they "don't see a reason to express it [cultural identity] at school." Another student said, "I don't really know where I could express it if I wanted to."

Students shared a variety of other challenges related to bicultural identity that they experience. On an internal level, the most common themes that arose were that participants felt confused about one's cultural identity. Reasons for this confusion included feeling disconnected to one's culture because of living far away from one's home country of cultural heritage, distance from relatives of their culture, language barriers, or differences in food customs. Additionally, internalized racism was another issue brought up by several participants.

Besides receiving negative comments when bringing Asian food to school, participants also shared about a variety of other external challenges that AAs face. For example, as touched upon previously, some students expressed frustrating with having to deal with negative racial comments about one's accent or cultural differences or racial stereotypes, such as being too studios or having slanted eyes. Below, Table 5 displays the data for both the external and internal culture-related challenges participants reported to have experienced.

**Table 5.** Internal and external challenges experienced by Asian American high school students.

Challenge or Negative Experience	Example(s)
Racial Slurs	"Some of the guys I'm friends with say the C-slur. I feel like there's a lot of people who have self-hatred towards their own identity. It's weird because they do it all the time, and it seems like an insecurity about themselves as

	Asian people and wanting to fit in. I feel like they purposely try to act like they have don't want anything to do with Asian culture. They're Asian so it's not that bad but it makes me uncomfortable, and I've definitely heard ppl that aren't Asian say the C-slur."
Negative Comments	"I've had someone pull their eyes like... [motions with eyes]. One kid saw my small handwriting and said, 'That's so kawaii; are you taught to write that way?'; Some kids at school make such stupid comments [, and] I've had it happen to me multiple times." "In India, school is a lot more formal; you call the teacher sir or ma'am and stand up when you speak. Here, you don't, and I feel like people judged me when I did. It was definitely hard."
Racial Stereotypes	"In elementary school, people would make fun of [my accent] and would compare it to stereotypical Indians in the media like [the cartoon characters from popular shows, such as] Baljeet [from Phineas and Ferb] and Ravi [from Jessie]. It made me really ashamed of how I spoke, so I kind of tried to push that [my accent] away."

### Suggestions for Schools

When asked about the ethnic foods offered at school for lunch, such as Italian, Chinese and Mexican inspired dishes, participants shared common complaints including that the current dishes are not authentic or are too Americanized. One participant said, "I don't think the school lunch does it [Asian food] justice." However, these comments were paired with acknowledgements of school's limited resources. Participants overall agreed that it would be beneficial, to offer a greater variety or more authentic versions of ethnic food for school lunch to increase representation and exposure of Asian culture to the student body. One participant expressed, that "It's good that they're [the school] trying to provide other options. It'd be nice to see more representation in the food especially for minorities."

Next, participants were asked, "What would help you individually, or the Asian American student body in general, feel more like they culturally belong at school?" Some students noted existing factors, groups, or activities at school that they found helped increase cultural diversity. For example, the presence of student cultural clubs like AAPIC and visible celebrations of cultural holidays or events. One participant said, "It's really nice being surrounded by Asian people who've had similar experience as me." Another participant added, "AAPIC is a good club because it brings people together" and "makes you feel like we [AAPI students] are a community." Another factor that several students touched on is that there is a sizable AAPI population at PNWHS, which is about 15%, according to a Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction 2020 Ethnic Enrollment Report for PNWH's school district.

In terms of suggestions for change, some students said that they don't feel the need to culturally belong more at school because they already have their own community with their friends, or again, because PNWHS has a pretty sizable Asian student population. For example, one participant said, "I've never really thought about what the school could do to be more inclusive because I've never felt underrepresented." Meanwhile, another participant shared a differing opinion that "you [students] should try to connect with as many people as possible from different ethnicities, not just from within your community."

However, some participants did note a few actions that schools could take to increase the representation of Asians. For example, they suggested that schools should integrate more AAPI representation in the curriculum (such as in history, English, or art classes) and hire more Asian teachers. Moreover, students supported the idea of schools and students continuing to visibly celebrate cultural holidays and events at school. Table 6 below highlights some student responses on this topic.

**Table 6.** Suggestions for how schools can help Asian American students feel like they more culturally belong.

Suggestion for School	Example(s)
Integrating More AAPI Representation into the Curriculum	<p>“I think in curriculums, especially in world history... it would be beneficial to provide more information on different countries.... In my two years of high school so far, I've only learned about Indian history in the Hindu section of Ancient Civilizations. History classes especially world history I feel are a lot more focused on Europe and not the other half of the world, and I think providing more diverse curriculum in all subjects would be beneficial. I would feel a lot more comfortable and more proud of my culture.”</p> <p>“It would be nice to see more emphasis on Asian cultures in our American history classes because they don't really talk a whole lot about immigrants even though there were things like the Chinese exclusion act....”</p> <p>“I think just talking about each culture more... whether that's in homeroom or History or English class... helps us be more sympathetic and understanding of each other. Beauty standards are a huge thing that people are insecure about because of their ethnicity so when... in history [we] look at paintings and artworks from throughout the ages, I think just the simple fact of seeing artwork of different bodies and different skin tones from different eras can boost people's confidence immensely. I know seeing a painting of somebody with your exact nose when your nose isn't the western beauty standard right now would just be so helpful. Those little things like that just validate your existence.”</p>
Hire More Asian Teachers	<p>“I've never been in a school where they had more than two Asian teachers, or at least East Asian teachers, so it would be cool to see more Asian teachers.”</p>
Support Visible Cultural Celebrations	<p>“It would help to have more [efforts to celebrate] different traditions and special events like Chinese New Year or the Mid-Autumn festival. I really liked [the] red posters [good luck posters put up around the school by AAPIC during Lunar New Year with the Chinese character 'Fu']. Those were really interesting to see... it was totally unexpected because I didn't think this kind of school with a very white population would have this kind of stuff.”</p> <p>“Better representation of cultures and cultural traditions or specific holidays... I know the school did... something for Lunar New Year; that was nice to see that in the school. I think just more embracing of that kind of stuff. It makes me feel more safe at school and more able to express my identity.”</p> <p>“I think it's more up to the students, like, more attempts to include other cultures like Black History Month or AAPI appreciation [AAPI heritage month].”</p>

## Discussion

Based on these interview response analyses and patterns, a few conclusions can be drawn to better understand the experiences and perceptions of AA high school youth regarding bicultural identity, dietary habits, challenges faced, and suggestions for how schools may support AA high school students.

First, the data suggest a strong correlation between Asian American high school students' dietary habits and their perceptions about their bicultural identity. Participants had varied dietary habits ranging from eating almost exclusively Asian food to eating "50/50" Asian and American food to eating slightly more American food. The survey results paired with the interview responses suggest that on an individual level, identifying more closely with being Asian relates to eating Asian food very frequently. Meanwhile, identifying as "more American" seems to be correlated with eating Asian food less often. A significant portion of participants said that food is the most significant way that they connect to their Asian heritage and culture. Additionally, even those who expressed that food is not as important to them personally, still recognized the importance of food in Asian culture and its role in shaping cultural identity. These findings partially support my initial assumption of the significance of food overall but suggest that importance varies from person to person with some relation to one's overall sense of cultural identity.

An interesting finding about culture related challenges was that the perceptions about one's bicultural identity differed between full-Asian and Mixed-race students. For example, the data supports the notion that students who are of only Asian descent sometimes feel the need to prove themselves as American enough and to distance themselves from activities or behaviors that make them too Asian, such as studying hard. Moreover, students identifying as full-Asian sometimes felt confused about their cultural identity. Many expressed struggling with not belonging strictly in one culture or the other. For example, they sometimes feel like they are too Asian but other times they feel too American. Lastly, it can be inferred from the data that full-Asian students feel less comfortable and more self-conscious about bringing Asian food in anticipation of judgement. This theme can be compared to mixed-race students, who were generally more comfortable and prouder to share Asian food and culture at school or with their peers. Along these lines, the data supports the idea that mixed-race or partially white Asian American students struggle with feeling not Asian enough or that they needed to prove themselves as being Asian. Therefore, though in different directions, the data suggests that many AA youth struggle with feeling insecure about their cultural identity due to a variety of reasons such as being disconnected from their culture, whether because of language differences or physical distance.

On an external level, one of the most common cultural challenges among participants was discomfort expressing culture or bringing ethnic food to school, which was especially strong for those who had past negative experiences doing so. Moreover, some participants talked about receiving negative comments about one's race, such as one's accent, hearing racial slurs, or feeling the harmful pressure of racial stereotypes, such as because of one's physical appearance.

Lastly, the data suggest that having cultural clubs and celebrations at school is beneficial to helping AA students feel more comfortable in their cultural identities. Moreover, many students proposed that schools can support AAs by incorporating more AAPI representation in the curriculum and more Asian teachers. Lastly, some participants advocated that offering a greater or more authentic selection of ethnic foods for school lunch, if financially and practically possible, would be beneficial.

## **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

I believe this research contributes to the body of knowledge on the cultural identity development processes of Asian American and Asian heritage youth. For example, it furthers understanding on both the internal and external challenges that AAs face. Moreover, it adds to the understanding of what role schools currently and should play in the cultural identities of students at school. Lastly, it upholds the idea put forth by previous research that food is of value in cultural contexts.

The findings of this study also have potential for real-world applications. Given the suggestions made by AA students in this study, there are many practical changes that can be made to increase representation of the Asian community and to help the AA student body feel more comfortable expressing their culture at school. One effective solution would be to revise history curriculums to include broader and more diverse coverage of

Asian history, culture, and people. Art history curriculum could be revised to highlight more artwork, subjects, and artists from other regions of the world, not just in Europe. To pursue this, school districts would need to provide extra training, support, and funding into gradually revising the curriculum. School administration and teachers can be supportive by being club advisors or giving clubs the freedom to make school-wide presentations and posters or to hold cultural events and fundraisers. Moreover, school admin can show support for cultural celebrations and holidays by announcing them to the student body. This would mean increased efforts to connect with families and students of different cultures in the school community in order to learn how they can provide active support. Moreover, school districts hiring more AAPI teachers could help AA students feel more represented and comfortable in their identity.

However, this study also implies that schools cannot singlehandedly prevent the issues that Asian American youth are facing in high school, whether it be struggling with their bicultural identity, being embarrassed about their identity, or being made uncomfortable with their cultural or ethnic identity due to experiencing race-related comments or jokes. Many of the issues that were brought up in this study involved internal struggles that are rooted in individual family experiences or situations completely separate from school. Therefore, further research must be done on other ways that racism and discrimination can be stopped, whether it be at home or in other community institutions.

This study also has some notable limitations to address. One weakness of this study is due to the sampling procedure and the small number of participants. However, according to Creswell (2007), as referenced in a study by Iwamoto et al. (2013), which had 12 participants, the “sample size is within the adequate sampling range for phenomenological studies.” Additionally, the results may be biased due to convenience sampling. The participants were drawn from AAPIC, of which I, the researcher, was a club officer, and my classmates at PNWHS. By being part of AAPIC, club members already made efforts to be connected to the AAPI student community at PNWHS which may have swayed their responses about belonging to a cultural community at school. Since I was already familiar with some of the participants as classmates and due to my position in the club, they may have been influenced to mention or speak positively about AAPIC. Therefore, I made conscious efforts to only include quotes from students who spoke about AAPIC in more objective language. Lastly, because this study was conducted with students PNWHS, a school with a relatively sizable AAPI population, the perceptions and experiences of the participants may be different to AA students living in and studying in areas with a lower AAPI population. Thus, the findings and themes from this study are not representative of all AA high school students.

Future studies might consider sampling from other high schools in the United States, especially those with different racial demographics, to get a more accurate representation of the wide diversity of Asian youth in America. It would also be beneficial to evaluate the efficacy of the school diversity efforts proposed in this study as well as to discover what are other ways to combat cultural challenges outside of school. Lastly, researchers can delve deeper into comparing how other factors like age, location, language, peers, media, and physical appearance play a role in shaping one’s cultural identity. These factors were identified during the interview process of this study but did not appear in the results or discussion because they were not the focus of this study.

Despite the limitations listed above, this study contributes to the developing body of knowledge regarding Asian American youth’s cultural experiences, the challenges they face, and the relation of food to cultural identity. This study also provides suggested courses of action for how schools can support Asian American youth.

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