

Intersectional Positionality and Lived Experiences of Asian International Teacher Educators in U.S. Academia

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Abstract: This study, part of a larger research project, examines the intersectional identities of Asian international teacher educators (AITEs) in U.S. higher education. Grounded in Crenshaw's (2013) framework of intersectionality, the study explores how AITEs experience systemic marginalization, racialization, and linguistic prejudice in academic spaces, and how these experiences inform their equity-oriented pedagogical approaches. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six AITEs, the study investigates how intersecting identities shape their professional roles and pedagogical practices. Using an intersectional qualitative methodology that integrates narrative inquiry, document analysis, and thematic analysis, the findings reveal how AITEs negotiate invisibility, institutional constraints, and discrimination. Despite racial, linguistic, and gendered challenges that undermine professional credibility, participants resist marginalization by drawing on non-Western epistemologies, fostering inclusive dialogue, and contesting Eurocentric frameworks. By recognizing their positionality as AITEs and cultivating critical consciousness, participants engage in transformative acts of resistance and liberation. Their identities remain fluid across transnational contexts, positioning them as cultural and epistemological bridges (Coll et al., 2012). This study contributes to scholarship on AITEs' intersectional experiences and advances critical multicultural education and institutional reform in higher education.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Asian international teacher educators (AITEs), positionality, critical multicultural education.

Classrooms across the United States are growing more culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse, reflecting broader demographic shifts that demand equity-focused responses in teacher education (Goodwin, 2017; Min et al., 2022; Pugach et al., 2019). In response, federal and state initiatives have emphasized culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-bias training, and more inclusive curricula. Yet research continues to show that teacher education programs often struggle to operationalize multicultural and social justice-oriented commitments in ways that meaningfully address structural inequities in schools and society (Banks, 2001, 2009; Sleeter, 2024). Multicultural education (MCE) and critical race theory (CRT) offer important frameworks for preparing teachers to examine power, challenge racial inequities, and affirm students' cultural identities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Still, the

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implementation of these frameworks remains limited by institutional norms, colorblind ideologies, and the enduring dominance of Eurocentric knowledge in U.S. teacher education. Existing scholarship documents how faculty of color encounter racialized scrutiny, linguistic bias, and challenges to their authority when teaching coursework related to race, culture, and equity (Choi & Lim, 2021; Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022; Yoon, 2019). Despite the centrality of equity in teacher education, the experiences and contributions of Asian international teacher educators (AITEs) remain underexamined in existing scholarship. As educators who navigate intersecting dimensions of race, language, nationality, and immigration status, AITEs occupy distinctive positionalities shaped by transnational training and racialization within U.S. higher education. Examining how AITEs negotiate their positionality in U.S. academia is therefore essential, as it illuminates how global and intersectional identities shape multicultural pedagogy and reveals the systemic conditions that influence equity-oriented teacher preparation. As Asian international teacher educators (AITEs) navigate complex intersections of race, culture, gender, language, and immigration status, they often experience a form of “double minoritization,” racialized as Asian in the U.S. and marginalized as non-native English speakers and international faculty within predominantly white institutions (Choi & Lim, 2021; Gulmezoglu, 2022; Kohli, 2019). While their unique positionalities equip them to foster inclusive classrooms, AITEs bring transnational perspectives, global epistemologies, and lived experiences rooted in border-crossing knowledge and hybrid ways of knowing that have the potential to expand what counts as knowledge in multicultural teacher education (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2014; Kohli, 2025). At the same time, they often encounter institutional and cultural challenges, including racial microaggressions, accent bias, and questions about their legitimacy within predominantly White academic settings (Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022; Yoon, 2019; Zacharias & Shleykina, 2021).

Grounded in intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2013) and the concept of positionality (Collins, 1997; Harding, 2004), this study centers the voices of AITEs working in U.S. teacher education programs. It explores how their personal and professional identities are reconstructed through racialization, linguistic surveillance, and institutional precarity in higher education and how these experiences inform their commitments to equity, cultural responsiveness, and decolonial approaches to teaching. This research is guided by the following questions:

Q1. How do Asian international teacher educators (AITEs) negotiate their intersecting identities, (e.g., ethnicity, language, nationality, and minority status) within U.S. academic and sociocultural contexts?

Q2. How do these intersectional and transnational identity negotiations shape how AITEs conceptualize and enact multicultural, equity-oriented pedagogy in U.S. teacher preparation programs?

Through these questions, I aim to illuminate how AITEs reflect on and respond to their positionalities, and how they enact equity-centered pedagogy within the constraints and possibilities of U.S. teacher education. By amplifying their experiences, this study contributes to a more inclusive vision of multicultural education that recognizes the global and intersectional dimensions of teacher identity.

Literature Review: Challenges Faced by International Teacher Educators

Emerging research highlights the complex experiences of international, immigrant, and transnational faculty of color navigating predominantly white institutions, particularly when teaching courses centered on diversity, equity, and social justice. Yoon’s (2019) autoethnographic narrative illustrates the profound emotional and psychological labor she experienced while transitioning from teaching in South Korean elementary schools to becoming

a university instructor in the United States. This shift brought heightened insecurity and anxiety as she navigated unfamiliar racial, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Her challenges intensified when students questioned her authority, often interpreting her accent through racialized assumptions that position Asian educators as perpetual foreigners. As Yoon reflects, the convergence of emotional labor, internalized oppression, and the persistent need to overperform not only shaped her daily experiences but also deeply influenced her evolving identity as a justice-centered educator of color.

Choi and Lim (2021) similarly engage in collaborative autoethnography to reflect on their experiences as Asian immigrant women teaching multicultural education. Their analysis exposes what they term “triple marginality,” the compounded challenges arising at the intersection of race, gender, and immigration status, which frequently undermines their pedagogical authority. Their voices and expertise were often dismissed by both students and institutional actors, despite their professional qualifications (p. 107). Moreover, being frequently perceived as outsiders, international teacher educators often find their authority and professional contributions evaluated in ways that differ from those of U.S.-born teachers of color (McLean, 2007; Takaki, 1998). Their foreign accents and racialized bodies become sites of contestation, casting doubt on their contributions during classroom discussions on race. This phenomenon, described as the “body/knowledge nexus,” illustrates how a teacher’s racialized body can simultaneously serve as both a conduit and a barrier to knowledge production within academic spaces (Choi & Lim, 2021, p. 113).

Bernal and Villalpando’s (2002) work illustrate how U.S. higher education institutions sustain what they describe as an “apartheid of knowledge” (p. 177), a system in which Eurocentric ways of knowing are granted legitimacy while the cultural and experiential knowledge held by faculty of color is routinely devalued or ignored. Building on this critique, Stein (2017) interrogates the colonial underpinnings of internationalization in Western higher education, challenging the assumption that global engagement inherently promotes equity or epistemic plurality. She argues that when institutions fail to confront deeply entrenched Eurocentric frameworks, internationalization efforts risk reproducing global hierarchies of knowledge and prioritizing economic imperatives over meaningful intercultural learning. Mohanty (2003) critiques how Eurocentric assumptions shape transnational feminist scholarship and international teacher education, demonstrating how Western frameworks often misrepresent women in the Global South. She calls for knowledge rooted in local histories and power dynamics and advocates a decolonial, solidarity-based praxis. Her concept of “comparative feminist studies” (p. 523) positions teachers and learners in the Global South as active creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of Western expertise, urging more equitable and context-sensitive pedagogical practices. Settles et al. (2021) reveal how faculty of color in predominantly white institutions face epistemic exclusion, with Eurocentric norms and everyday biases devaluing their work and limiting recognition. These experiences contribute to burnout and marginalization, a pattern that parallels the challenges faced by international teacher educators whose diverse epistemologies conflict with dominant institutional frameworks.

In response to these conditions, educators drew on practices of critical self-reflection, relational engagement, and purposeful resistance to dominant norms, enabling them to cultivate a form of resilience that was political, intentional, and grounded in care (Bernal, 2024; Espino, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This resilience did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was continually strengthened through community connections and a shared sense of pedagogical purpose. In doing so, educators’ emotional labor became a vital source of justice-oriented teaching and collective possibility within academic environments that often remain exclusionary (Kohli, 2025; Picower & Kohli, 2017; Schutz & Lee, 2014). Building on this body

of work, recent scholarship continues to examine how identity, power, and institutional positioning intersect in the lives of marginalized educators and leaders. Nixon's (2013) qualitative study of five women of color serving as Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) reveals the complex contradictions embedded in their roles: they must confront deep-seated marginalization, tokenization, and ambiguous expectations even as they work to advance institutional commitments to equity. Despite these structural and symbolic constraints, the CDOs exercised significant agency by leveraging their personal histories and cultivating supportive professional networks as sources of professional emotional support (Severino, 2024), and grounding their efforts in critical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism. Through these strategies, they challenged dominant norms and advanced meaningful, transformative changes. Likewise, Yoo et al. (2023) investigate how the "model minority" myth functions as a racializing tool in academia, particularly within linguistics. Their findings demonstrate how institutions co-opt the perceived proximity of Asian Americans to whiteness to downplay structural racism, disrupt coalitional politics, and maintain racial hierarchies by fragmenting solidarity among minoritized communities. Moreover, drawing on an intersectional framework, Nguyen (2020) illustrates how gender, race, culture, class, institutional and personal contexts, and role models unevenly intersect in shaping Asian American women's leadership pathways and leadership practices, while religion remains marginal to these intersections.

Taken together, these studies reveal that the authority of international and transnational educators of color is not merely a matter of academic expertise or pedagogical skill; rather, it is profoundly political and inseparable from the sociocultural meanings projected onto their racialized, gendered, and accented bodies (Choi & Lim, 2021; Yoon, 2019). Their legitimacy is rarely assumed and must be continually negotiated within institutions that privilege whiteness, U.S.-centric norms, and native-speaker ideologies (Zacharias & Shleykina, 2021). The intersecting forces of race, language, gender, and nationality often relegate international educators to the margins, exposing them to heightened scrutiny, emotional labor, and persistent expectations to overperform to prove themselves. Cho and Hayes (2024) demonstrate that identity journey mapping serves as a critical pedagogical practice that fosters self-reflection, intercultural awareness, and agency among participants in transnational learning contexts. Drawing on findings from a study abroad program with Korean American students, they show how identity-centered reflective practices can challenge linguistic inequities, interrogate power relations, and support the articulation of multifaceted and intersectional identities within globalized educational spaces.

Building on these insights, recent political developments, including a highly contested U.S. presidential election that intensified national political polarization, illustrate how public discourse and policy debates, particularly around Critical Race Theory and equity-focused curricula, further amplify surveillance, scrutiny, and moral panic targeting educators, especially those from minoritized or international backgrounds (Kheirkhah & Aronson, 2025). Addressing these inequities requires more than performative diversity initiatives. Institutions must implement structural changes, including culturally sustaining mentorship, reimagined professional norms, and the integration of transnational feminist and decolonial frameworks. Such approaches are essential for affirming and supporting the complex, intersectional contributions of international educators, fostering truly equitable and inclusive academic environments.

Methods and Data Analysis

This article is part of a larger intersectional qualitative research project that investigates how international teacher educators' understandings of their sociocultural identities and positionalities shape their approaches to multicultural education (MCE) within U.S. educational landscape. The decision to recruit international teacher educators was intentional, as their distinct positionalities within teacher education programs, and their lived experiences navigating transnational, racialized, and institutional dynamics offer insights directly aligned with the study's focus, insights that would not emerge from interviews with faculty outside this professional context, with particular attention to AITEs. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (IRB ID: STUDY00026095) in December 2024, participants were recruited using a written advertisement, distributed through international academic networks, professional listservs, and interpersonal referrals. Recruitment began after a successful dissertation prospectus defense and employed snowball sampling to identify additional participants. In total, six AITEs (Table 1) from diverse national, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds participated in the study.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Profiles

| Pseudonym | Background Summary |
|-----------|--|
| Leina | Leina, a Japanese Pacific Islander heterosexual woman from a lower-middle-class background, identifies as Christian and apolitical and is able-bodied, with 15 years of full-time teaching experience, 14 in the United States and one in Pacific contexts. |
| Arjun | Arjun, an Indian South Asian gay man from a middle-class background, identifies as atheist and politically leftist and is able-bodied, with five years of teaching experience, including three years in India and two years in the United States as a graduate teaching assistant. |
| Derek | Derek, a Chinese gay man from an upper-middle-class background, identifies as spiritually oriented and politically liberal and is able-bodied, with nine years of part-time teaching experience—less than one year in China and eight years in the United States. |
| Mira | Mira, a South Asian Indian heterosexual woman from a poor background, identifies as spiritual and politically socialist and has an invisible disability, with 12 years of teaching experience in India and five years as a graduate teaching assistant in the United States while pursuing her doctorate. |
| Tao | Tao, a Chinese heterosexual man from a working-class background, identifies as libertarian and spiritually “Other” and is able-bodied, with nine years of experience teaching students with autism and developmental disabilities, seven years in China and two years in the United States as a teaching assistant and assistant professor. |
| Min Ji | Min Ji, a Korean heterosexual woman from an upper-middle-class background, identifies as Christian and politically liberal and is able-bodied, with experience in early childhood education, including four years as a kindergarten teacher in South Korea, four years as an independent teaching assistant, and five years as an assistant professor. |

Note. Demographic information is self-reported by participants.

The guiding research questions were:

RQ1. How do Asian international teacher educators (AITEs) negotiate their intersecting identities, (e.g., ethnicity, language, nationality, and minority status) within U.S. academic and sociocultural contexts?

RQ2. How do these intersectional and transnational identity negotiations shape how AITEs conceptualize and enact multicultural, equity-oriented pedagogy in U.S. teacher preparation programs?

In this study, the researcher employed an intersectional qualitative research design, an approach well-suited for examining how multiple dimensions of identity intersect within systems of power (Crenshaw, 2013; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). This framework enabled analysis of how AITEs' identities are shaped simultaneously by race, language, nationality, and migration histories, as well as by structural forces such as racism, xenophobia, linguistic hierarchies, and academic precarity. Given the reflective and relational nature of research questions, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method for data collection. Each participant was invited to a 60–80-minute Zoom interview using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews began with confirming participants' verbally informed consent and a background questionnaire exploring participants' national and educational histories, teaching contexts, and perceived identity shifts. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share course materials, including syllabi or assignments they had created, which provided concrete examples of how identity and positionality informed their pedagogical decisions and offered additional data for triangulation. Full datasets are unavailable due to confidentiality and IRB requirements; de-identified materials are available from the corresponding author upon request. Data analysis followed a three-stage (Appendix A), iterative process rooted in intersectional qualitative methods (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Misra et al., 2024). Interview transcripts underwent narrative analysis (Hatch, 2023) to trace participants' identity trajectories and the tensions or transformations they experienced across geographic and institutional contexts, racialized and linguistic experiences, and evolving senses of legitimacy and belonging. Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) served to extend the interview data and to understand how critical commitments and identities were enacted through course design, learning objectives, readings, and pedagogical strategies. Finally, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Glesne, 2016; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) integrated both narrative and document data beginning with initial coding to identify recurring patterns, such as racialization and identity reconstruction, linguistic marginalization and classroom legitimacy, and transnational pedagogies and survival strategies, that highlight the interplay between participants' internal identity negotiations and the external racialized, linguistic, and institutional structures of U.S. academia. Centering their narratives as sources of expertise, this analysis illuminates how AITEs enact justice-oriented pedagogy while navigating intersecting forms of marginalization.

To ensure rigor in this critical qualitative study, I used several strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. I triangulated data across interviews and teaching artifacts, coded the data in multiple iterative cycles, and compared cases to identify both shared and divergent experiences. I also engaged in ongoing reflexive memoing to examine how my own positionality shaped the analytic process. Although the study does not aim for statistical generalization, the intersectional framework supports analytic generalizability by offering insights transferable to similar contexts involving international teacher educators and other marginalized groups in academia.

Findings

In this section, I present the findings from six AITEs, Leina, Arjun, Derek, Mira, Tao, and Min Ji. Addressing the first research question, participants' narratives reveal how racialization and linguistic marginalization shape their identities, authority, and sense of belonging in U.S. academic contexts. In relation to the second research question, participants describe drawing on transnational experiences and critical awareness of structural inequities to enact culturally responsive, justice-oriented pedagogy. I organize the findings around three interconnected themes: (1) Racialization and the Reconstruction of Identity, which examines how U.S. sociocultural and institutional contexts reconfigure prior forms of privilege and marginalization; (2) Linguistic Marginalization and the Politics of Classroom Legitimacy, which highlights how language both constrains and enables authority, belonging, and pedagogical agency; and (3) Transnational Pedagogies, Border-Crossing Knowledge, and Strategies of Survival, which demonstrates how participants' transnational positionalities inform equity-oriented teaching and strategies for navigating structural and emotional challenges. Collectively, these themes illustrate the interplay between identity, structural marginalization, and pedagogical transformation, directly linking participants' lived experiences to the study's research questions. Guided by an intersectional analytic lens (Crenshaw, 2013; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Misra et al., 2024), the analysis highlights how systems of oppression and privilege shape participants' lived experiences and teaching practices. The section concludes with a thematic analysis that centers participants' agency as knowledge producers who resist erasure and reimagine justice-oriented pedagogy in U.S. classrooms.

Narrative Analysis

Leina's Story

I never expected that moving to the United States would reshape my sense of self. In Japan, my identity felt unquestioned; I was Japanese, and I belonged. In the U.S., however, identity became something I negotiated daily. When I began teaching in Pennsylvania, standing before a classroom of white, middle-class, native English-speaking students, I questioned whether they saw me as a legitimate professor or reduced me to my accent. Unlike in Japan, where teachers are automatically respected, I felt measured against narrow expectations of who a professor should be. Although I projected confidence, I struggled internally, worrying that my English would be seen as a limitation rather than a strength. I often felt compelled to apologize for my difference. This internalized pressure became evident when a neighbor once asked me not to speak Japanese outside my house because "it makes us uncomfortable." At the time, I complied, believing it was my responsibility to adjust, only later realizing how much of myself I was trying to erase to fit in. Moving to Hawai'i marked a shift. With a more diverse student population, I no longer felt the need to explain who I was, though I still sometimes felt like an outsider among largely U.S.-born colleagues. These experiences now inform my teaching. I intentionally create classroom spaces where students bring their cultural histories and view knowledge as coming from multiple places. Teaching has become a site of transformation, and I no longer feel the need to prove my legitimacy. My experiences and journey are central to my pedagogy, and I am no longer afraid to take up space.

Arjun's Story

I did not anticipate how profoundly my identity would shift after moving to the United States. In India, my name, caste, and educational background afforded privileges I rarely questioned. In a predominantly white institution in the U.S., however, I became racialized and marked as an outsider. As I reflected, “Every lecture I have taught, I have walked out with a racial injury since 2022.” These injuries take many forms, from students refusing to learn my name to evaluations stating, “I pay too much money to be taught by someone like him.” Such moments accumulate and follow me through semesters and job applications, where biased evaluations become an inescapable marker. My teaching context further complicates my positioning. As a gay man teaching gender studies and children’s literature, my authority is often questioned; paradoxically, my sexuality sometimes renders me more “acceptable.” As I noted, “I’ve been asked if I am qualified to teach gender studies because I am a man, but the moment they know I am gay, I become acceptable.” These tensions permeate classroom interactions and institutional spaces where my credibility is continually negotiated. Teaching, for me, is an act of survival and resistance. I introduce caste-based perspectives and “history from below” to challenge dominant narratives, while navigating institutional constraints, book bans, and cautions to temper my pedagogy. Existing between nations, identities, and expectations, where my passport, accent, and lived experiences do not align, I persist. I document microaggressions and remain committed to teaching, sustained by moments when students later affirm the transformative impact of my classes. In these moments, I find purpose and the resolve to continue occupying spaces that were not designed to include me.

Derek's Story

When I first came to the United States, I did not anticipate how deeply my identity would shift. In China, I was simply myself; in the U.S., I became racialized as Asian, marked by my accent, citizenship, and body. Despite living in the country for over 15 years, I continue to navigate a sense of partial belonging. Experiences of erasure were often subtle, from students mispronouncing my name to colleagues assuming my silence in conversations about race. As I reflected, “In this country, Asian or Asian American knowledge is being marginalized.” This realization led me to teach Asian American history and design courses that interrogate dominant narratives, including questions such as How do we teach about the “enemies” of the U.S.? My classroom became a space to name racialization and disrupt assumptions. I share aspects of my own story, not for sympathy, but to challenge what students think they know, and invite them to reflect on their own names, histories, and positionalities. Vulnerability has become central to my pedagogy, though it carries risk. I often question whether disclosing my citizenship status or critiquing American exceptionalism will mark me as “too political.” Yet remaining silent feels equally complicit. As I noted, “If I push too hard, I risk being seen as too radical, but if I do not push at all, I betray what I stand for.” Despite limited institutional support and experiences of tokenization, I continue to teach and resist by creating classroom spaces that encourage students to challenge dominant narratives, name oppression, and sit with discomfort. While I may never feel fully at home, my classroom remains a place where justice can be imagined and practiced.

Mira's Story

I came to the United States in 2019 with over a decade of experience in education and corporate training in India, confident in my ability to contribute to special education. I did not anticipate how my intersecting identities as a South Asian woman, immigrant, and single parent

would be read, questioned, and diminished in academic spaces that pride themselves on inclusion. In India, I am middle class; in the U.S., I do not make minimum wage. Although I grew up speaking English and consider it my strongest language, I have had papers docked for grammar, which marked the beginning of an erosion of how I understood myself and my professional worth. I encountered inequities that challenged my belief in education as a space of balance and fairness. In a class where I was the lead instructor, I was assigned a 25% appointment while a white male teaching assistant received 50%, despite my designing the syllabus and completing the grading. Students gravitated toward white colleagues even when I was the instructor, confirming what I had been warned would happen. As I later reflected, “I’m not white!”, a comment that was no longer humorous once it became reality. These experiences revealed a hidden curriculum shaped by race, culture, and access, where strategic silence became a survival strategy. Despite these constraints, I continue to teach with urgency and intention. I design curricula that connect policy, history, identity, and practice, drawing on equity frameworks and my lived experiences as both an educator and a parent of a child with an IEP. While multicultural education in the U.S. often feels narrowly centered on race, I push students to reflect on broader intersections of language, religion, caste, and politics. Students resist, there is guilt and fragility, but there is also growth if space is held for it. For now, I am surviving. Thriving remains the goal. I persist because I know what I bring, historical, cultural, and emotional knowledge that this system may not fully value, but that I do.

Tao’s Story

I rarely thought about identity before leaving China. Back home, I was simply a teacher, a student, an academic. In the United States, however, I became Asian, an international scholar whose accent immediately marked me as foreign. Teaching in the U.S. made me more aware of power and privilege in academic spaces, where colleagues and students often see my nationality and race before recognizing me as an educator. During my first year as a professor, I noticed that my classroom presence differed from that of my white colleagues. Some students hesitated to approach me or struggled with my accent, even though I had spoken English for years. As I observed, “Students approach white professors with confidence but hesitate before asking me questions.” I felt pressure to prove my authority in ways my white colleagues did not. Adjusting to U.S. classroom culture was another challenge. In China, education is hierarchical, and professors are rarely questioned. In contrast, students here expect open dialogue and informality. I had to recalibrate my teaching, balancing my own educational background with students’ expectations, while incorporating global perspectives and examples from China to broaden their understanding.

Being an international scholar in a predominantly white department also involves navigating subtle forms of exclusion. Although my colleagues are generally supportive, there remains an unspoken gap in how we experience academia. As I reflected, “The way colleagues interact here is different. Small talk, socializing, it all feels like part of the job, but I wasn’t trained for that.” Learning these informal norms became part of establishing professional belonging. Despite these challenges, I focus on culturally responsive teaching that values linguistic and cultural diversity. I emphasize that knowledge is shaped by culture and encourage students to reflect on how identity influences teaching and family engagement. As I often remind them, “If you want parents to engage in IEP meetings, you need to understand their backgrounds and concerns.” While uncertainties about belonging and career mobility remain, I recognize that my transnational experiences offer a critical perspective. I am still adapting and learning, but I continue to claim space as an international educator, and that matters.

Min Ji's Story

I came to the United States expecting to learn, teach, and contribute, but I did not anticipate how much I would need to redefine myself. In South Korea, I was simply a teacher; in the U.S., I became an international teacher, an immigrant, and a woman of color. These identities, once unexamined, now shape my academic and personal life. Language immediately marked me as different. Although English is the language of my professional life, my accent often leads others to question my competence. As I have learned, “people recognize me as a foreigner the moment I speak,” and in the classroom, that recognition can undermine my authority, requiring extra effort to establish credibility. I also came to understand how power and privilege shift across contexts. In South Korea, I held forms of privilege I had not recognized, including financial support and academic status. This became clearer during an early conversation with my Ph.D. advisor, who told me, “You are privileged.” Although I initially resisted this idea, my experiences in the U.S. compelled me to reconsider my positionality and how it shaped my academic trajectory. Teaching in the U.S. has required significant adaptation. Accustomed to hierarchical educational norms, I had to adjust to more conversational classroom dynamics and balance global perspectives from South Korea with content more familiar to my students. Despite supportive colleagues, I often experience isolation, reminding myself that “living as an international person means always feeling a little separate.” Over time, I have come to define myself as an immigrant, building a life, career, and family in the U.S. while continuously negotiating what it means to be both Korean and American.

Thematic Analysis

The findings illustrate how AITEs negotiate intersecting identities across ethnicity, language, nationality, gender, and minority status and how these negotiations shape equity-oriented pedagogical practices in U.S. teacher preparation programs. Participants' narratives highlight how racialization, linguistic marginalization, and immigrant precarity influence identity, belonging, authority, and professional positioning while informing culturally responsive, justice-oriented teaching that challenges U.S.-centric norms. These dynamics are organized around three interconnected themes.

Theme 1: Racialization and the Reconstruction of Identity in U.S. Academia

Participants described profound identity shifts upon entering U.S. academia, where their ethnicity, nationality, and immigrant status were immediately racialized. Several held professional, class, or linguistic privilege in their home countries, yet found themselves reclassified as “foreign,” “Asian,” or “non-citizen,” labels that reshaped perceptions of their authority and legitimacy.

Leina captured this shift: “In Japan, I was seen as a respectable teacher. But when I came to Pennsylvania, everything changed. My students questioned my English, my teaching. I started to feel like I didn't belong.” Even in more ethnically diverse locales like Hawaii, where Leina expected greater inclusion, she noted, “There are many Japanese people here, but they were born here. I still feel different.” Arjun similarly reflected on losing caste and class privilege after migration: “In India, I had caste and class privilege. But here, I became a racialized, gay man with an accent. That privilege disappeared ... Back home I'm too educated; here, I'm too foreign.”

These narratives reveal intersectionality in practice: race, nationality, sexuality, gender, and migration status intertwined to reshape participants' professional identities and experiences in U.S. institutions. Racialization emerged both structurally and interpersonally, manifesting through inequitable workloads, student resistance, and visa-related precarity. As Mira noted, "They gave a white colleague with less experience more hours and more pay."

Derek described redefining his academic identity as a transnational scholar who now teaches "from the margins" rather than from a position of established authority: "In the U.S., I had to redefine myself as a transnational scholar. I wasn't just teaching content; I was teaching from the margins." He also described his vulnerability succinctly: "I already feel disposable as a non-citizen faculty member."

This theme illustrates how AITEs' identities are actively reconstructed through U.S. racial hierarchies, institutional norms, and sociopolitical structures. Min Ji articulated the profound identity reconstruction required: "I didn't think of myself as an immigrant until I came here. I had to let go of the identity I had in Korea and rebuild myself."

Tao, too, acknowledged the newfound awareness of race as a defining and limiting factor, stating, "In China, I never thought about race. But here, I'm racialized, and my authority is questioned because I'm not white."

As participants reoriented themselves in this context, the institutional constraints shaping their professional lives became increasingly apparent. Their narratives reveal that marginalization was systemic rather than episodic, embedded in organizational cultures, evaluation mechanisms, and immigration structures that rendered AITEs' authority, expertise, and institutional belonging perpetually provisional.

Leina shared her experience of parental skepticism: "Parents asked why someone like me was teaching their kids English. It made me shrink. I didn't want to cause problems."

Her account highlights how external stakeholders also participate in the racialized policing of legitimacy, reinforcing who is imagined as a "proper" educator in U.S. schools.

Arjun recounted the damaging effects of hostile evaluations, explaining, "One student wrote, 'He doesn't belong in an American university.' These comments affect my future jobs, and there's no way to defend myself." Here, student evaluations function as institutionalized mechanisms of racial gatekeeping, ostensibly neutral tools that carry high consequences for international faculty who rely on them for continued employment and visa stability.

Derek expressed fear of institutional surveillance, noting, "I fear that my content will be seen as too radical. I already feel disposable as a non-citizen faculty member." His fear reflects how immigration status intersects with race and professional vulnerability, pressuring international educators to censor critical or justice-oriented content to maintain job security.

Mira pointed to an inequitable workload and pay, stating, "They gave a white colleague with less experience more hours and more pay. I had to fight to prove I belonged in the department I helped build." She also mentioned the loss of professional confidence and recognition, explaining, "I used to lead professional training and felt confident in my expertise. Here, I was given fewer hours, paid less, and constantly doubted." Her experience underscores how institutional decision-making reproduces racial hierarchies, devaluing the expertise of Asian women educators while rewarding less-experienced white colleagues.

Min Ji felt social invisibility despite official claims of equity, noting, "Even though my department claims to support equity, I often feel invisible. I'm not part of their social circles, and it shows." Her account illustrates the contradiction between institutional rhetoric and lived reality, revealing how claims of diversity and equity often mask social exclusion and cultural homogeneity.

Tao described exclusion through informal culture, stating, "Meetings, hallway talk, unwritten rules, it's hard to keep up when you're not part of the dominant culture." His

experience reveals how organizational belonging is often determined through unspoken norms and social practices, which disadvantage those outside white American cultural frameworks.

Together, these accounts demonstrate how institutional structures reinforce marginalization and shape identity negotiation across interpersonal interactions and broader systems that constrain recognition, advancement, and professional security.

Theme 2: Linguistic Marginalization and the Politics of Classroom Legitimacy

Language, particularly accented English, emerged as a central site through which participants experienced marginalization and questioned their legitimacy, as students frequently interpreted linguistic difference as a marker of pedagogical deficiency regardless of content knowledge.

Leina described persistent self-doubt, stating, “My students spoke perfect English. I kept wondering, do they even understand me? I doubted myself every time I opened my mouth.” Arjun emphasized that the resistance he faced was less about language clarity and more about rejection of his positionality, explaining, “It’s not about clarity, it’s about content. My students didn’t want to hear what I was teaching. They said my name was hard, and my voice was hard to follow. It wasn’t language, it was resistance to me.” Together, their experiences converge around the tension between perceived linguistic competence and social acceptance. Both highlight how students’ reactions can signal underlying biases, leading educators to question their legitimacy. The convergence shows that challenges related to accent and language are not solely about clarity, but deeply entwined with positionality, race, and cultural identity.

Derek reclaimed his accent as a political and pedagogical tool, stating, “I bring my accent into the classroom deliberately. It’s part of the lesson. I want students to see that knowledge doesn’t only come in a white, American voice.” Min Ji described the intense effort to demonstrate linguistic competence, noting, “The moment I speak, people treat me differently. I overprepare, I speak slower, I try to prove myself with every word.” Participants described varied strategies of resistance and adaptation in response to linguistic marginalization. While Min Ji’s account illustrates the extra labor required to gain legitimacy in the face of bias, Derek’s shows a deliberate use of difference as a teaching resource. Together, they demonstrate that linguistic marginalization can simultaneously constrain and catalyze pedagogical innovation, prompting educators to reframe their own identities as tools for empowerment and critical engagement.

Mira experienced inequity despite fluency, stating, “It wasn’t about grammar, it was about who I was. My white TA made more mistakes than I did, but students still trusted her more.” Tao recognized how his accent signaled difference and affected student interactions, explaining, “My accent immediately signals to students that I’m not from here. Some hesitate to ask me questions, like they’re unsure if I’ll understand them.” These accounts overlap in differential authority and recognition in the classroom. Both Tao and Mira show that linguistic difference, regardless of actual competence, shapes students’ perceptions of credibility, reinforcing structural hierarchies that privilege certain voices. The interpretation highlights how language serves as both a site of marginalization and a mirror of broader cultural and racial inequities within educational spaces. Collectively, these experiences show how language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that challenges authority and belonging, while also serving as a site of resistance through which participants reframed linguistic difference as pedagogical strength and enacted justice-oriented teaching. Over time, participants redefined their teaching from technical delivery toward critical, justice-oriented praxis deeply rooted in their lived experiences and cultural identities.

Leina encouraged multiple cultural perspectives, stating, “I now ask students to research child development theories from their home cultures. It creates space for all of us to see each other more fully.” Her approach illustrates how centering students’ cultural knowledge can foster inclusiveness and relational awareness, moving beyond traditional content delivery to create participatory learning environments.

Arjun introduced banned texts and counternarratives, explaining, “I bring in banned books and counter-histories. I know it’s risky, but it’s necessary. Students need to learn what’s been erased.” His experience highlights how confronting systemic erasure and censorship in education can be a deliberate act of resistance, expanding students’ understanding of marginalized histories.

Derek integrated personal narrative as pedagogy, stating, “My own life, my accent, my struggles, become part of the lesson. It’s how I connect and disrupt at the same time.” This demonstrates the power of vulnerability and identity disclosure as pedagogical tools, bridging personal and critical engagement while modeling how lived experience informs knowledge production.

Min Ji prioritized relational empowerment, noting, “I moved from delivering knowledge to empowering students to see themselves as agents of change.” Her practice shows the relational and agentic dimension of justice-oriented teaching, emphasizing student empowerment and co-construction of knowledge over hierarchical instruction.

Tao localized disability studies globally, explaining, “Special education can’t be taught in a vacuum. I show students how disability looks different around the world.” His strategy highlights the importance of global and comparative perspectives, linking local practice to broader structural and cultural contexts, and challenging narrow or Western-centric frameworks.

Together, these transformations illustrate how linguistic marginalization challenged participants’ authority and belonging, yet also became a catalyst for socially conscious, justice-oriented pedagogy grounded in cultural responsiveness and empowerment.

Theme 3: Transnational Pedagogies, Border-Crossing Knowledge, and Strategies of Survival

Participants’ identities as Asian, multilingual, and transnational educators shaped their teaching philosophies and pedagogical choices, as many initially attempted assimilations before increasingly embracing their cultural and global knowledge as foundational pedagogical assets.

Leina described moving from concealment to cultural affirmation, stating, “At first, I didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable, so I hid parts of who I was. Now, I invite my students to explore their cultural backgrounds and connect them to what we’re learning. Her experience illustrates how embracing one’s cultural identity can transform teaching, creating space for both educator and student growth.

Arjun incorporated Dalit histories and global social justice frameworks to disrupt superficial multiculturalism, while Derek used East Asian comparative contexts to challenge U.S.-centric narratives, explaining, “I don’t do surface-level multiculturalism. I bring in Dalit histories, caste oppression, and ask students to question what they think they know about justice.” Derek designed a curriculum to disrupt nationalistic narratives, stating, “I teach about ‘enemies of the U.S.’, Japan, China, Korea, not to antagonize but to contextualize. My story disrupts the mainstream narrative.” Their experiences converge in employing transnational perspectives to decenter whiteness, broaden students’ understanding of multiculturalism, and connect identity, power, and history across borders. While Arjun emphasizes systemic injustice and critical inquiry, Derek focuses on comparative and contextual understanding, showing complementary strategies for cultivating global awareness.

Mira connected cultural complexity to disability justice, noting, “In India, identity is about caste, religion, region, and more, not just race. I bring that complexity into class and ask my students to explore their own positionalities.” Min Ji localized global content, explaining, “I started using examples from Korea, but then realized I needed to localize too. Now I blend global and local to make the material relatable.” Tao fostered cross-cultural understanding, stating, “I use examples from China to show how autism is approached there. It opens students’ minds to think beyond their own assumptions.” These accounts illustrate intentional cross-cultural negotiation through the integration of global and local perspectives to challenge dominant narratives and foster critical, inclusive learning environments. The participants bore considerable emotional burdens, including microaggressions, isolation, and identity fatigue, but cultivated resilience and found strength in teaching and self-expression.

Leina reflected on healing through teaching, stating, “I used to feel ashamed of speaking Japanese. Now, I will write about my journey, and I will teach with pride. I’m healing through teaching.” Arjun described the paradox of pain and purpose, explaining, “Every class takes something out of me. But I keep going because I want students to know the truth, even when it’s uncomfortable.” Derek used documentation as coping, stating, “I document everything. It helps me process. I must hold onto hope, even when the system feels hostile.” Mira acknowledged vulnerability, explaining, “I’ve cried after class. I’ve questioned whether I belong. But I teach from love, and that keeps me going.” Min Ji found a connection sustaining, noting, “I feel isolated sometimes. But when students connect with what I share, it reminds me why I’m here.” Tao emphasized adaptive care, stating, “My resilience comes from adapting. I may not always belong, but I always care.” Together, these reflections illustrate the emotional labor involved in sustaining professional and personal identities and how resilience, relationality, and self-expression support equity-focused, transnational pedagogy. Grounded in intersectionality, the analysis positions AITEs as both subjects of marginalization and agents of pedagogical transformation, underscoring the inseparability of identity, structure, and teaching practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, I interpret the findings in relation to the research questions, situate them within existing theoretical and empirical literature, and outline implications for practice and future research. I examine how AITEs understand and negotiate intersecting identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020), including race, ethnicity, language, nationality, and minority status, within U.S. academic contexts (RQ1), and how these negotiations shape their multicultural, equity-oriented pedagogy (RQ2). The analysis identified three interconnected themes: (1) Racialization and Identity Reconstruction, highlighting how U.S. institutions destabilize prior privilege and force ongoing negotiation of self and authority; (2) Linguistic Marginalization and Classroom Legitimacy, showing how language constrains authority while offering opportunities for critical and culturally responsive pedagogy; and (3) Transnational Pedagogies and Strategies of Survival, illustrating how cross-cultural knowledge and resilience inform justice-oriented teaching. The following sections examine how U.S. academic contexts, linguistic dynamics, and transnational experiences collectively shape AITEs’ identities, authority, and justice-oriented pedagogical practices (Dao, 2018; Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020; Gulmezoglu, 2022).

Theme 1 demonstrates how U.S. academic contexts actively reshape AITEs’ identities through racialization, institutional marginalization, and sociocultural positioning. Participants’ narratives center on the disruption of previously stable identities: professional privilege, social status, and linguistic competence in their home countries were destabilized upon entering U.S.

institutions, compelling them to negotiate new senses of self within racialized hierarchies. Leina and Arjun highlight the loss of authority and belonging, while Derek, Mira, Min Ji, and Tao emphasize systemic barriers, including inequitable workloads, hostile evaluations, and exclusion from informal networks, that reinforce provisional status and limit recognition. Across these accounts, race, nationality, immigration status, and language intersect with gender, class, and sexuality, producing complex, multi-dimensional experiences of marginalization and exemplifying intersectionality in practice (Nguyen, 2020), and echoing Choi and Lim's (2021) observations on how multiple identity dimensions intersect to shape professional and personal experiences.

Despite these challenges, participants engage in active identity reconstruction. Derek's embrace of a transnational scholar identity, Min Ji's recalibration of self-perception, and Leina's negotiation of external skepticism illustrate adaptive strategies that transform marginalization into critical reflection and pedagogical innovation. These narratives reveal that institutional structures, from formal policies to informal cultural norms, interact with interpersonal biases to shape professional security and pedagogical positioning. Theme 1 underscores that identity negotiation is ongoing and relational, occurring simultaneously at the levels of self-conception, social interaction, and structural navigation. Ultimately, AITEs' professional and personal identities are dynamically reconstructed in response to systemic inequities, shaping both how they are perceived and how they enact teaching practice.

Theme 2 highlights how linguistic marginalization functions simultaneously as a constraint and a catalyst within educational spaces. Participants' experiences show that accents and language differences are not merely matters of clarity or fluency but are deeply entwined with racialized perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and belonging, a pattern documented by Takaki (1998), McLean (2007), and Yoon (2019). While Leina and Arjun describe self-doubt and resistance, Derek and Min Ji strategically leveraged their linguistic identities, turning difference into a pedagogical asset. Across participants, inequities in recognition and credibility reveal how classroom interactions reproduce broader social hierarchies (McLean, 2007; Park & Scott, 2022; Yoon, 2019). Yet these challenges also prompted critical reflection and innovation: educators integrated cultural perspectives, counternarratives, personal narrative, relational empowerment, and globalized content into their teaching. Together, these strategies demonstrate that embracing linguistic and cultural identities is inseparable from justice-oriented pedagogy. Negotiating language, identity, and authority is thus both a personal and political act, shaping who educators are in the classroom and the inclusive, empowering, and socially conscious learning environments they cultivate.

Theme 3 illustrates how AITEs navigate intersections of identity, culture, and pedagogy through transnational and culturally grounded strategies. Participants consistently deploy these approaches to challenge U.S.-centric or superficial models of multiculturalism. While some prioritize systemic critique and others emphasize relational or comparative strategies, all demonstrate that integrating personal and cultural experiences into teaching enhances student engagement and critical reflection. Moreover, sustaining such pedagogy requires significant emotional labor, resilience, self-expression, and connection with students, which are central to maintaining both professional authority and personal well-being. These findings align with prior scholarship highlighting how faculty of color negotiate institutional marginalization and cultivate justice-oriented, care-driven teaching (Bernal, 2024; Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Espino, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Settles et al., 2021; Stein, 2017) Transnational experiences are thus not peripheral but foundational, shaping how these educators conceptualize and enact multicultural, equity-focused pedagogy.

These findings extend existing literature on international educators' adaptation and professional marginalization (Andrade, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007), showing that AITEs do not

merely adapt but leverage marginality to transform pedagogy. Language emerges as both a site of exclusion and epistemic power, confirming raciolinguistic frameworks (Flores & Rosa, 2015), while participants' intersectional experiences validate and extend CRT and transnational theory, demonstrating that race, immigration status, language, and gender interact to shape both professional legitimacy and teaching practice (Cho & Hayes, 2024; Çetiner & Şimşir, 2024). Emotional labor is central to sustaining their work, linking resilience, relational care, and reflective practice to transformative pedagogy.

Through these first-person narratives, I center the experiences of six AITEs (Leina, Arjun, Derek, Mira, Z, and Min Ji), who actively navigate and resist systemic marginalization within U.S. teacher education (Diemer et al., 2021; Jemal, 2017; Watts et al., 2011). Their stories challenge simplistic, colorblind approaches to multicultural education by revealing how racism, linguistic bias, and institutional neglect shape daily professional realities and identity formation. Yet these educators are not merely subjects of oppression; they are critical agents who reframe exclusion as insight, disrupt dominant norms, and cultivate transformative, culturally responsive classrooms. By amplifying their voices, this study demonstrates that international educators are integral, not peripheral, to advancing equity-centered teacher preparation in the United States. Their narratives further underscore that identity is fluid (Boveda & Annamma, 2023), neutrality perpetuates injustice (Bernal, 2024; Nash, 2008; Silva, 2022; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Taylor et al., 2016), and authentic culturally responsive pedagogy must emerge from intersectional, lived experiences grounded in critical consciousness (Freire, 2009), and resilience.

While this study provides valuable insights into AITEs in U.S. higher education, it has limitations. The participant sample was geographically limited, excluding educators from regions such as Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, as well as K–12 contexts, and structural constraints like visa restrictions and contingent contracts limited recruitment. Future research should include more diverse and intersectional participant populations, such as LGBTQ+ and undocumented educators, employ comparative transnational designs, and center student perspectives to explore engagement with culturally sustaining pedagogy. Policy-focused studies could further examine how immigration regulations, hiring practices, and evaluation systems shape justice-oriented teaching. Collaborative, cross-institutional initiatives are also needed to develop decolonial, relational, and intersectional pedagogical frameworks, ensuring international educators are recognized as central contributors to equity-focused teacher preparation.

Implications for the Field

These findings urge teacher education to critically examine its role in sustaining whiteness, linguistic imperialism, and epistemic injustice and to move beyond superficial inclusion by centering race, power, history, and identity. AITEs' perspectives highlight the importance of global pedagogical assets, such as multilingualism, transnational knowledge, and non-Western epistemologies (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2014), in advancing justice-oriented and decolonial teaching. Their emotional and relational labor should be recognized as essential pedagogical work and supported through structural measures such as mentorship, affinity spaces, and trauma-informed policies. This study underscores the need to disrupt the hidden curriculum of whiteness and to protect the pedagogical autonomy of international and racialized educators from punitive evaluation and surveillance. Overall, AITEs emerge as vital agents whose lived experiences enable them to reimagine multicultural education as a liberatory practice and call for sustained institutional change beyond symbolic diversity toward meaningful structural transformation.

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Informed Consent form

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Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Notes on Contributor

Dr. Haniyeh Kheirkhah is a Middle Eastern woman scholar whose racialization shifted from being perceived as “white” in her home country to being positioned as an international woman of color after beginning her Ph.D. in the United States. This transition informed her understanding of identity and positionality as fluid and shaped by place, power, and perception. Her engagement with Critical Race Theory during doctoral training strengthened her focus on examining how intersecting identities shape the lives and work of teacher educators, particularly international scholars, and on advancing inclusive, justice-oriented educational practices.

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Appendix A

Table A

Themes and Codes Identified in the Study

| Theme | Code |
|---|--|
| Racialization and the Reconstruction of Identity | Racialized Positioning Identity Reconstruction Geographic Transition Intersectional Repositioning |
| Linguistic Marginalization and the Politics of Classroom Legitimacy | Linguistic and Accent-Based Bias Language Reclamation Legitimacy Challenges and Authority Negotiation |
| Transnational Pedagogies, Border-Crossing Knowledge, and Strategies of Survival | Transnational Knowledge Practices Border-Crossing Pedagogies and Strategic Agency Border-Crossing Pedagogies |