Supporting Your Asian and AAPI Students

Insights from Shalene Gupta, research associate at Harvard Business School and editor at MIT Horizon

In the wake of the shooting in Atlanta, Georgia earlier this year, in which six Asian women were killed, I waited for an outpouring of messages in support of #StopAsianHate that never came. With some notable exceptions, many corporations and academic institutions stayed strangely silent on the issue, especially given how many renewed their commitment to diversity and social justice last summer in reaction to #BlackLivesMatter. That silence was deeply felt in the Asian and AAPI community.

I decided to reach out to friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, and acquaintances of acquaintances for a series of interviews to learn how they were feeling about their organization's lack of response to the rise in anti-Asian racism. Here are four best practices I identified from those interviews that, as an educator, you can implement whenever students are shaken by instances of racism or hate.

1. Acknowledge anti-Asian racism, and do so with clear, concise language.

The most common theme I heard from my interviews was surprise over the silence, or disappointment that messaging came only from the highest level of their institutions, not up and down the leadership chain. They wondered what the silence meant.

Educators should not stay silent or hide behind the diversity office. Not acknowledging the issue says more to your students than you may realize. And when addressing the issue with your students, use straightforward language. You might have understandable concerns [about saying the wrong thing](#), but it really comes to down to the basics: recognize that the impacted community is hurting and make it unequivocally clear that anti-Asian and anti-AAPI racism is unacceptable.

People I spoke to pointed to [Hubspot's Instagram](#) post as an example of this kind of unequivocal messaging: "We stand in solidarity with Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. We always have. We always will. Period. #StopAAPIHate."

If a hate crime occurs, lean on this example to send out your own straightforward email—reiterate that the incident is horrifying, that you're

available to talk if anyone needs to, and that you stand against racism in all forms.

2. Let students know you're available.

Support can come in many forms, whether it's letting your students know that your door is open, allowing students time to process their feelings, or simply giving them space. Not every one of your students will have the same response when a hate crime happens.

To meet this range of needs, let your students know that you are personally available if they want to talk. That way, students who want and need support can initiate a discussion, and you avoid singling out students based on their race. You can also share out any [institutional resources that are available](#).

What We're Sharing: Anti-Asian and Anti-AAPI Racism Resources

- [Anti-Asian Violence Resources](#)
- [StopAAPIHate](#)
- [MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness](#)

3. Create a space for discussion—but don't make assumptions about who needs what kinds of support.

I recommend creating a voluntary discussion group for you and your students, meeting either online or in person, as frequently or infrequently as students make clear is necessary.

Take care not to make any assumptions about your students: who would want to be part of this discussion, who would benefit from it, or who wouldn't. Your students, like everyone else, are diverse and have varied experiences—some of the people I interviewed were not themselves Asian or AAPI, but they had spouses, children, or other family who were. They felt left out of the conversation and unseen. At the same time, there were AAPI folks I interviewed who expressed concern about feeling "tokenized" by the issue.

Ultimately, it's important to create spaces that are voluntary and open to everyone. With an issue like anti-Asian and anti-AAPI racism, you can never really know the scope of who is directly or indirectly impacted and what kind of support they need—so, offer an open, optional space for your students to come to you.

4. Commit to change.

As an educator, you're likely in a position where you can do the work to educate yourself on bias and anti-racism and provide immediate support to your students. But you may not have much say over your department's or university's messaging. Don't let that stop you.

Commit to your students that you will exert your influence, to the degree you can, by encouraging those in higher positions to speak publicly on the issue. Let your students know you are not only open to any suggestions they have about what you can do personally to create a more equitable classroom—but that you are also willing to push forward

their suggestions about how the institution overall can create a more equitable learning environment.

Remind leaders in your institution that taking a strong stance against anti-Asian racism should be noncontroversial and is an easy way to show compassion and ensure your school community feels supported. Failing to do so shows callousness and, at worst, may be seen as a betrayal of your students' trust. Remaining silent in the face of injustice is not a viable option.

Editors' Note: We also want to express our sympathies and support to our readers and colleagues in India, who are suffering through COVID's devastating surge right now. We're thinking of you, and have compiled this [list of free resources from](#)HBR that we hope you will find useful. Please [let us know](#) if there's any additional information or guidance that would be helpful to you.