

S4E7 Paulo Tan Reflection

Teddy: [00:00:00] Welcome back everyone. Shari, that was some amazing conversation we just had with Paolo.

Shari: I mean, they're getting better and better, but I think it's more, I'm learning more and more. And connecting the pieces of being Asian and navigating the world of math education.

Teddy: Yeah, I was really struck. We've had these conversations for a while about people and their Asian American identity and how sometimes, people don't even realize that it's a part of who they are, like it's something that's on their subconscious, right? And so with Paolo, like his story that he didn't, he hasn't thought about it.

His Asian American ness and his Chinese American ness until very recently.

Shari: That's what he said.

Teddy: Wow.

Shari: And we had asked him before the podcast, a couple of things, but when you connected and we talked with him, he's like, I didn't think about it, but he has a really great story.

Teddy: Yeah. I mean, his narrative, growing up in, Brazil and then Kansas, and then also being, Chinese immigrant. Right. And I can't help, but think like, part of the Asian crit narrative, is that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are not a monolith.

We don't all share the [00:01:00] same story, right? And yet oftentimes we're positioned as having very similar stories, especially East Asians, right? Like, there's one way that an Asian American immigrant looks and feels like in the way their family operates. Paolo's story, mind blowing, right?

It's so deep and so intricate. Hearing about the way that he grew up and the way he was positioned around mathematics, being one of the only Asian American kids in the school, and even one of the only Asian American teachers I think that really socialized him in a , isolating, but also powerful way that he doesn't fall into these traps,

of the ways that large groups of us are positioned.

Shari: Yeah. His journey seems more recent in terms of him understanding his positionality being Asian. What stood out to me is he started to talk about assimilation, right? I needed to assimilate. It might need it to have no accent and just be a part of. But later he used the word agitating, like, you know, then I thought we, wow, there was a mindset change there and his even questioning, like, why did I think it was okay to go to my high school?

[00:02:00] Right. When it was such a great experience. So right. Thinking about where your journey leads you and the things you see along the way that change your perspective.

Teddy: And I keep thinking back on his own personal experience, he talks about the many experiences he's had, as, children of immigrants, as someone who's moved from one country to another, being a math teacher, feeling isolated in school. But I think that the one that really, and maybe this is because I'm in the same place in life,

the one that seemed really salient was as a parent and trying to navigate the school system,

Shari: Yeah.

Teddy: To recognize the brilliance of his own child, and to support his child,

Shari: Yes,

Teddy: that seems so real. And to me, it seems to be the space where he recognized, Hey, this system that worked for me is completely failing my own children.

Shari: I think, Ma Bernadette and Jiyeong talked a little bit about looking at math education to their children. Right. And

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: Right.

Teddy: I think that's, I mean, you and I have talked about this, right? There's so many ways that we are very proud of our [00:03:00] kids, but none of your kids

have chosen to get into math education. Like none of my kids have talked about they want, as of yet.

Right. But it's, there's a part of me that's a little bit hurt by that, but also, you know, there, There's this narrative that Asian Americans value education. Or Asian American, immigrants value education a lot. And yet, it's pretty rare when we meet other people who want to jump into being a teacher or being a classroom teacher, or when we meet, first and second generation Asian American Pacific Islander teachers, and I keep thinking if we really valued education, we'd see a lot more of us in the classroom,

Shari: yeah, I wonder if it's, math education? I do remember having Asian teachers, but most of them were in elementary, predominantly female Asian, I live in an area where many people settled in terms of the mainland U. S. My family came from Hawaii, so yeah, just kind of wondering about that.

My journey in terms of my Asian ness and education really is more recent, until I went to a conference.

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: So,

Teddy: I love it. I love Shari that [00:04:00] you bring so much experience and your whole backstory of raising children and being a teacher, but also that, this other aspect of your identity is something that it's taken you up until now to really, start to question, and start to unpack. Yeah.

Shari: Kyndall will tell you my journey is more recent.

Teddy: this is, Kyndall Brown, another amazing, TODOS member.

Shari: You know, I wanted to share, it's so hard when, our guests are sharing their stories and, you've read things and want to bring it up, but, he talked about, educators needing to be bold, courageous, and take risks with working with and advocating for their disabled students.

Right? And another thing he talked about was math for all students. So I'm just really thinking about. What he said and what does all really mean, you know, I work with teachers a lot, too

Teddy: And I like the phrase, right? It's not just math for all, but math of all.

Shari: Of Move all you know math of all students.

Teddy: The math of our students, right?

Shari: another piece that [00:05:00] he was talking about was, we had and I probably had one special ed class Before being a teacher and I realized how did it help me be a math teacher? I'm not sure but I wonder if a lot of it is because of compliance, right?

Teddy: Mm hmm.

Shari: What is an IEP? What does that entail? And what might we get in trouble for not doing to me, when I think about my own as a general ed teacher, my special ed training was probably that one check-off class.

Teddy: yeah. And I think, for our generation of teaching, I remember, when I first started teaching, the inclusion model was a new hot thing, and there was such a shift, and there was a, it was a terrible time, for many students to be in that space between, being in a resource room setting or being separated and then now being pushed into inclusion.

Particularly with teachers who were very caring, but had no idea, how to do this, these supports, right? I think we're in a space now, we are using terms like neurodiverse, right? And really [00:06:00] recognizing the problems of the medical model. Of, disability, not thinking of it as something to diagnose and fix.

And then even moving beyond the social model, right? I think, in the book, Paolo talks about the revolutionary model, of disability education. I think we're in a place where the rhetoric, the research, the talk about that is there many of our teachers who can really know concretely how to do this, right?

But it's still a challenge, particularly in our field of math education.

Shari: And probably, thinking about just an IEP, for example, there's a team of people that you work with, I know it's a long process. There's a lot of voices in the room but through some of his book, he talks about, not a lot of agreement on things, right?

And the parent being the voice many times of saying, No, this is not okay. But it made me wonder, if you maybe don't know as well, or you don't have the resources then what happens?

Teddy: Yeah. And I think that to me, what has been at the core is this idea of [00:07:00] humanizing the students, a lot of times, I did this when I was a teacher, is you feel like, oh, this student is having trouble. They need to have an assessment, they need to have a diagnosis.

There needs to be something special in a way that we can support the student. And maybe that might work better if they're in their isolated situation or somewhere outside this classroom, I think that idea, that our students with particular needs need to be separated. Like Paulo said we wouldn't need special education if it weren't for the way math education operates.

I think that's absolutely right. Our systems are about comparing students to an unrealistic norm of what is normal mathematics intelligence look like. Right. And it's, about competition. It's about speed. It's about efficiency,

Shari: Yeah.

Teddy: Seeing and understanding math in one particular way.

Shari: Or just thinking about math as shopkeeper math, right? We can't even say balance your checkbook now because that is rare.

Teddy: It's a metaphor that doesn't exist

Shari: You can't even say that. Or negative numbers around your balance.

Teddy: Yeah,

Shari: you can't buy [00:08:00] what you want to buy is when you know, Oh, I overstepped my boundary.

Teddy: One thing that I've been really resonating on from this conversation and maybe it's because Paulo is a very similar, background like me, you know, children of, Chinese Americans, the understanding that, my family had a lot of drama around the cultural revolution in China.

That's, the origin story of why they ended up in the United States. For someone like Paulo to be Chinese American, like me, a Chinese American male who in the United States is often positioned as having a lot of capital within mathematics. I have a lot of privilege.

A lot of people assume that I know math, assume that I'm really good at math naturally, all my life.

Shari: Yeah.

Teddy: To be in that world and then come back and say, Hey, you know what? All these accolades you've given me are nice. All these degrees you've given me are nice, but the system. It's fundamentally flawed for me.

It might work for people who look and seem like me from the same background. And can understand how to do this work. It might work, but that is not fair for all [00:09:00] of us. The system needs to be revolutionized. He talks about, burning it down, because it is fundamentally unjust.

Fundamentally racist. Fundamentally sexist. Fundamentally ableist.

Shari: And for him to, right. Oopsie. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Teddy: That's amazing, right? Because, all of us as Asian Americans, we carry a very weird sort of backhanded compliments, right? Of mathematics in which we're told when we're good at math, and we're told that we're a good minority because we do well in math tests, right?

Shari: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Teddy: And so I think so many of us, are happy to accept that praise and Not turn around and recognize that when you're praising one group, you're also demeaning another group.

Shari: Is that really a praise?

Teddy: yeah, it's not a praise at all. Right. It's a technique for dividing and conquering. Right.

Shari: Huh.

Teddy: Positioning one minority group against another.

And I think that Paulo recognizing that and realizing that, there can, there's a better way out there. Right. It's really, really cool, but also really rare.

Shari: And that, not that you would fix it [00:10:00] in one, but once you recognize it, that it really supports all students. And just recent work with Rachel, around, her book, Rethinking

Teddy: Rachel Lambert.

Shari: Yeah, I remember really thinking about, if we use certain models, like in her case, the UDL model that she talks about, like, it really works.

It helps all students, right? And then, that California group that does lesson study, talks about mathematics for equity, excellence. Lesson study starts with really looking at students and, there are focal students, right? Thinking about the students on the margin.

Our hope is that if we address the students, we focus on in that way, we actually address all students. Math for all, you know, about what that really means.

Teddy: Maybe we should start calling it TODOS Mathematics of All.

Shari: Of all, TODOS we're going to change the little tag, like a few letters, one less letter, but

Teddy: Well, I don't know if anybody here has noticed, but TODOS's [00:11:00] mission statement has shifted a little bit. We used to talk about supporting Latina and Latino children, but now we've finally gotten with the times and changed it to Latinx and Latine students.

Shari: Yeah,

Teddy: more gender inclusive.

Shari: Teddy, that was another powerful guest we had. Thank you

Teddy: thank you

Shari: for this journey.

Teddy: Yeah, I've learned a lot. Okay, peace out y'all.

Shari: Thank you so much.