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Current Schooling Experiences in the United States

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the current schooling experiences of eight Korean high school students in the United States. By comparing and contrasting recent immigrant adolescents and 1.5/2nd generation students, the purpose of this study was to explore how their identities as Koreans or Korean Americans were formed and shifted while they engaged with American teachers and peers in mainstream contexts. The findings suggest that even in the same ethnic group, differences were conspicuous. The newcomer group desperately wished to assimilate to mainstream culture by associating with American classmates. On the other hand, the 1.5/2nd generation group lived bi-culturally with dual identities as Korean and American and shifted their identities according to their convenience. Despite these differences, both of the groups suffered a similar experience by receiving unwelcome gestures from their mainstream teachers and peers: the newcomers as invisible outsiders and the 1.5/2nd generation as visible and marked outsiders.

Keywords: Qualitative study, schooling experiences, Korean students, and shifting identities.

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Koreans began to emigrate to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, but the majority of modern-day Korean Americans arrived after the passage of the Immigrant Reform Act of 1965 (Chan, 1991). In 1990, the U.S. Census registered about 800,000 Korean Americans, but current population estimates suggest that approximately 1.08 million Koreans reside in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). The older-generation Koreans were greatly diverse and they were from all segments of Korean society. But most of recent Korean immigrants have highly educated, urban, Christian, and middle-class backgrounds (Min, 1993).

Currently, the immigration pattern is changing. More and more Korean adolescents are coming to the United States by themselves to study or coming with only one parent, leaving the other parent at home, who usually acts in a financially supportive role (Kim & Greene, 2003). It is predictable that these students will have tremendous difficulties in adjusting to American educational systems and curricula that are different from those of South Korea (Yoon, 2009). Along with language barriers, the high school Korean students, who construct and reconstruct their identities in the mainstream culture, may also experience racial discrimination and intergroup conflicts and tensions (Chiu & Ring, 1998; Goodwin, 2003).

Not only newcomer students, second-generation Korean students may also have difficulties living in the U.S. Although they may not have language difficulties like newcomer adolescents, they may struggle with dual identities as Korean and American. Living up to the standards of a model minority as Koreans and living as Americans at the same time, Korean American students may be highly conscious about their dual identities. Their identities as Korean or Korean Americans will form and shift through their experiences while they interact with American teachers and classmates.

In spite of the different educational backgrounds and experiences between newly arrived Korean students and second-generation Korean students, there has been very little research examining the identity issues of these students through their voices. Simple emphasis on similarities within the Korean group of students has often led teachers to overlook these students' complicated lives in the mainstream culture and increased stereotypical beliefs about the students. It is essential to analyze the complex dimensions of the Korean groups' differences by looking at their schooling experiences and their own interpretations of identity as they navigate the U.S. school systems.

The central purpose of this article is to report the difficulties and dilemmas that eight Korean adolescents experienced when they engaged with American teachers and peers in the mainstream culture. One overarching research question guided this study: How do high school students of Korean backgrounds who have different lengths of stay in the United States articulate their engagement with school, experiences in courses, as well as their experiences with peers, teachers, and other school personnel? By comparing and contrasting the schooling experiences of the recent adolescent immigrants and second-generation students, this study explored how their identities as Koreans or Korean Americans were formed and altered.

Theoritcal Perspectives

This study which focuses on the identities of the newly arrived Korean students and second-generation Korean students draws on Davidson's (1996) identity concept: "presentation of self in a matrix of social relationships – a pattern of social assertion that significant others recognize and come to expect" (p.2). This concept includes that identity is formed and shifts in accordance with the relationships among people in a changing society.

Davidson' identity notion, which emphasizes social relationships, is better understood when we look at positioning theory. Positioning theory (Harré & Langenhove, 1999) is defined as "the study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting" (p. 1). By paying attention to how people speak and act, this theory focuses on people's discourse and intentional acts. "Positioning" is a metaphorical term that was originally introduced to analyze interpersonal encounters from a discursive viewpoint (Hollway, 1984, cited in Tan & Moghddam, 1999). It has a specific meaning in the analysis of interactions between people. In the technical sense, a position has an effect on the possibilities of interpersonal and intergroup action.

Positioning is relational and reciprocal. When people interact with each other, assignments such as rights, duties and obligations are involved. In other words, positioning happens. For instance, if a person is positioned as powerful, this person is given a legitimate right to command and demand obligation. However, if a person is positioned as powerless, the person is not given a legitimate right to do so. Thus, there is always positioning between people. Positioning has the characteristics of a power relation.

Tan and Moghaddam (1999) discuss the positioning process of power by using the example of the boys who participated in Sherif et. al.'s study (1961) that focused on intergroup conflict and cooperation. An informative incident happened among the boys. A boy took a knife to cut a watermelon for his group, but some of the members stopped him from doing it. Another boy, who was highly regarded by the group, took the knife and cut the watermelon and said, "You guys who yell the loudest get yours last." In this example, the second boy was positioning himself as one claiming the right to cut the watermelon. He was positioning himself as having the authority to select his own criterion by which the watermelon pieces were to be distributed.

In positioning himself as the one with the power to be group leader, he was positioning the other members as followers. However, the second boy's positioning as the group leader was put to an end by another boy, who said, "You're not the boss."

The example above indicates that positioning is reciprocal. Initial positioning can be challenged, and the speakers thereby repositioned (Harré & Langenhove, 1993). The boys negotiated positions and repositioning was formed. If nobody in the group had challenged the second boy's claims to be the leader, they would have allowed him to take a privileged position and accordingly, would have allowed him more rights to exercise his power over the other members. The incident illustrates that there is a person to be positioned as powerful as long as there is a person to be positioned as powerless. As shown in the example, positioning is an active and discursive practice rather than a stable one. People position others and the others position them back. While positioning and repositioning each other, power relation is always embedded in action.

As Harré and Langenhove (1999) argued, positioning theory is a theory which allows people to reflect on many different aspects of social life in relation to people's interactions. They emphasize that it should not be treated as a "general theory" which calls for a deterministic application to several subject matters. It can be applicable to research and theories regarding reflection on human relations.

Because of positioning theory's reflective and applicable characteristics, it is often used when people understand the relationship between identity and learning. Miller (2000) conducted studies of several Asian immigrant students who recently arrived in an Australian high school. The study illustrated how the students were positioned by the dominant Anglo-Australian teachers and peers. Some students mentioned that they did not like to speak because of their

different accents which were not recognized as legitimate under the mainstream power. The

Australian classmates simply did not talk to the Asian students. Failing to be accepted by the

mainstream members, the students remained silent without challenging them. Repositioning did

not occur in this context. This example illustrates how learning, identity, and power are related.

It implies how the dominant power affects students' learning and identity.

Literature Review

A vast amount of literature discusses minority groups in terms of ethnicity, race, culture,

and education in the United States (Banks, 2004; Brown 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). However,

the voices of Asian Americans including Koreans are almost absent in the discourse of race

because the discussion of race is generally framed in terms of black and white (Asher, 2001; S. J.

Lee, 1996). Although there are several reasons why Asian voices are excluded from the

discourse of race, such as their relatively small population when compared to African American

and Hispanic people, the most conspicuous reason is that Asians have been viewed as "model

minorities" in the United States (Sleeter, 1993). Only successes by Asian students have been

depicted and praised in American societies.

Lee (1996) argues that this minority stereotype has been used as a hegemonic device

which makes it possible to maintain the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting

attention away from racial inequality and by setting standards for how minorities should behave.

The stereotype has been used in order to silence the charges of racial injustice made by African

Americans and other minorities.

Several studies (Fu, 1995; S. J. Lee, 1996; Li, 2002; Nozaki, 2000), which have

attempted to debunk the stereotype of model minority Asian students, discuss the differences

among the minority groups and between individuals in the same group. For example, S. J. Lee's

(1996) study suggests that only Korean immigrant students identified themselves as Koreans, compared to other Asian youth who identified themselves as Asian or Asian American. Korean students thought of themselves as being different from all other Asian Americans in order to distance themselves from Southeast Asians who they believe received special financial aids from the government. A notable point in such a discussion is that, in spite of Korean students' efforts to distance themselves from Southeast Asian students, non-Asian students and teachers did not recognize any differences. They saw Asians as one homogeneous group and lumped Koreans together with all other Asians. The study suggests that no matter how hard Asian groups attempt to differentiate themselves, the dominant group does not acknowledge the distinctness.

Yeh and Inose's study (2002) also suggests differences between Asian students by exploring East-Asian immigrant students' cultural adjustment. The study suggests that, compared to their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, Korean immigrant students have greater cultural adjustment difficulties. One important finding shows that Korean immigrants tend to utilize religious practices as a coping strategy more than Chinese and Japanese students do. Attending church allows not only for worship but also for a place to socialize and network with one another.

The studies illustrated above explain some of ways Korean students differ from other Asian students. The participants in the studies were mostly second generation, or 1.5 generation - those who came to the U.S. when they were elementary or middle school (Kim, 1993). Therefore, it is not known, through these studies, whether newly arrived Korean students have similar characteristics as earlier generations of Korean students do in terms of their identity formation and adjustment in the United States.

Although there are lack of studies focusing on Korean high school students' identity

issues, several scholars' (e.g., Goodwin, 2003; Kibria, 2002; Mehra, 2003; Palmer, 2001; G.

Park, 2001; Vyas, 2001) post-modernistic approach to examine minority groups' identity are

important here. For instance, Gilbert Park (2001) examines Korean American college students'

ethnic sense of selves. His findings suggest that the students' ethnic identities do not simply

equal their national ancestry or origin. The students identify themselves by using different labels

in different situations. It shows that the students' ethnic sense of selves is multidimensional and

situational. Identity appears to change according to different contexts. Palmer's (2001) study

about Korean adopted young women also suggests the complexity of identity. The students were

seen to struggle with their dual identities as Korean and American under the dominant group's

power.

As seen in the review of literature above, the Korean Americans' complex identities were

discussed more in general contexts rather than centering in on specific contexts such as schools

and classrooms. Discussions on identity issues in contexts such as schools or classrooms in

which Korean adolescents engage directly with teachers and peers are missing. A focus on

identity issues in these contexts is needed to help American teachers better understand Korean

adolescents' complicated identity development and their different needs.

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants and Contexts

I, the first author, used a qualitative approach following Creswell's (1998) perspectives

that emphasize the nature of research questions focusing on *how* or *what*, a detailed view of the

topic, and studying individuals. Among research traditions in qualitative study, I selected the

method of case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). The case study fits the characteristics of my

study of eight Korean students, which involves in-depth, detailed description. I divided the

students into two groups according to their length of stay in the United States: "the newcomer

group" and "1.5/2nd generation group." I define the newcomers as those who arrived in the

United States less than two years ago and the 1.5/2nd generation group as those who were born

here or have been here for more than ten years. I wanted to study whether there were any

similarities or differences in the high school experiences and identity issues of the two groups.

The selection criterion of participants was the length of stay in the United States. I used

two different channels to recruit participants. I contacted my own children's middle school ESL

teacher who was also teaching at a public high school. She helped me contact one high school

student who arrived eight months ago. I also contacted several Korean families who attended the

same church that I attended, to find if any had high school children or knew of other Korean

families with high school children. Along with the first student recommended by the ESL

teacher, the other seven students (three newly arrived students and the four second-generation

students) who met the selection criteria were all contacted by me and were willing to participate

in my study.

The Newcomer Group

The newcomer group's situations are unique and different in terms of their motives for

coming to the United States. Specific backgrounds of the four participants are presented below,

followed by some educational contexts of South Korea to help readers better understand the

students' backgrounds. All of the participants' names are pseudonyms

Kyung is a ninth grader in a Catholic school in western New York. She came to the U.S.

for the purpose of studying, and her parents stayed in South Korea to run their small motel. Since

middle school, Kyung has desperately pursued her desire to study in the U.S. by searching for

schools on the Internet. She kept asking her parents to allow her to study abroad and finally

obtained their permission. It was Kyung, and not her parents, who initiated her study decisions.

She is currently staying in Mr. Kim's home, who is a Korean immigrant. He is beginning to

recruit Korean students who want to study in the United States.

Eun, who is also in the ninth grade, is attending the same school and taking the same

courses as Kyung. Eun is staying with her sister, a college student, who came to the United

States by herself when she was in the seventh grade. Eun's father is a businessman who

manufactures pesticides in South Korea. Her mother is a housewife. Eun mentioned that her

father sends almost all the money that he earns for her and her sister's educational expenses.

Wook is in the tenth grade. He is also attending the same school as Kyung and Eun.

Wook is staying with his mother who came to the U.S. for graduate study at a university. After

completion of her Master's program, she is planning to go back to South Korea, where her

husband and daughter live. Wook, however, is going to stay in the U.S to continue his study at

college.

The three students above mentioned that they wanted to attend a public school. However,

the American embassy in South Korea refused to issue them visas to the United States unless

they obtained private school admissions in the United States. All three students stated that they

chose their current Catholic school because their parents thought the school cost less (about

$6,000 per year) than most of other private schools in the U.S.

The fourth student in the newcomer group, Bon, is a ninth grader. He is attending a

public school in a suburban area in western New York. He came to the United States following

his father who is a visiting scholar (art professor) at a university. Bon is the only student among

the newcomer group who is living with all of his family members, including his father, his

mother, and his two other siblings. He is going to stay with his two other siblings and mother even after his father returns to South Korea to teach at a university there.

Except for Wook, who lived in one of the most affluent areas in Seoul, Korea, the other three lived in other provinces which are not recognized as "good educational" provinces. There is a general saying among Korean people that states, "If you want to educate your children, you should send them to Seoul." There is a huge educational gap between Seoul and most of the other areas in South Korea. Even among Seoul school districts, the gap is huge. For example, a student who ranks first in his/her class in a district area outside of Seoul might be ranked as below average in a school in Seoul.

Most renowned colleges in South Korea are situated in Seoul, and Korean parents desperately wish to send their children there. If their children cannot enter one of the colleges in Seoul, it is a matter of embarrassment to many parents. The decision on whether their children can enter a good college is usually made before they enter high school. It depends on what school district students attend, but mostly, only one or two top students in a class can enter a prestigious college in South Korea. Therefore, the desire for professional jobs, such as that of a medical doctor or a lawyer, is a difficult dream to realize for most *"average"* Korean adolescents.

1.5/2nd Generation Group

Compared to newcomer students, all of the 1.5/2nd generation students live with their parents in homes that range in price from about $400,000 to $500,000. Their parents all immigrated to the United States twenty years ago. More specific students' profiles are as follows.

Two participants were siblings. Eugin is in eleventh grade and his sister, Eunji, is in ninth grade. Eugin and Eunji's father is a businessman and their mother is a minister. Both Eugin and Eunji were born in the U.S.

Daewon is in the ninth grade. He came to the U.S when he was two months old. His parents own a clothing store. Daewon attends a public school in an affluent district, where Eugin and Eunji attend.

Bokeun was born in the U.S. She is in the twelfth grade and attends a public school in one of the most affluent districts in western New York. Her father is a radiologist and her mother is a housewife.

Data Collection

As a qualitative researcher, I functioned as the primary instrument in data collection (Creswell, 1998). My identity as a middle-class Korean, as a former English teacher for middle and high school students, as a teacher educator in Korea, and as a mother of two ESL (English as a Second Language) children was my lens for processing, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. My second author, a European American colleague, was invited to provide an outsider lens as she reviewed, questioned, and helped me clarify my findings.

In this study, the primary form of data consisted of in-depth interviews with the participants (See Appendix for interview questions). Their personal narratives were my main data. The interviews were conducted for about ninety minutes to two hours at the participants' convenience at their homes or at my office. I interviewed the 1.5/2nd generation group at their houses. I interviewed using the Korean language with the newcomer group who expressed that their English is limited and wanted to speak in Korean. However, I interviewed the 1.5/2nd

generation group in English. All of the 1.5/2nd generation members said that they could hardly speak in Korean.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are two-fold. The major data depended on the students' narratives through the method of interview. If I could have opportunities to observe the students in their classroom, I could triangulate my data and provide a fuller picture of their interaction with their teachers and peers. The other limitation is related to the selection of participants. Although I did not intend to choose the students from the same school, it happened that the three students in each group attended the same school. Diverse settings in different school districts might have provided different insights of the Korean students' current school experiences and their identity formations and shifts.

Data Analysis

Data sources include interview transcripts, interview memos in which I wrote down the participants' "illocutionary force," such as their gestures and tone, and research journal logs in which I wrote down my reflections as soon as I returned from the interviews. All of the formal interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and coded. First of all, I transcribed the tapes with the newcomer group in Korean and then translated the data into English. While I was translating, I attempted to find equivalent words and nuances to match with English words since there is no exact relationship between English language and Korean language (Brown, 1987; Chu, 1999). Therefore, all interview data for the newcomer interviews shared in the following findings section has been translated into English.

For data analysis, I used Merriam's (1998) case study analysis – *within-case analysis* and *cross-case analysis* - and Spradley's (1980) taxonomic analysis. For within-case analysis, I first

treated each student's case individually within each group. Then, I tried to find common themes within the group. Finally, I compared the newcomer group with the 1.5/2nd generation group and found similarities and differences between them. The codes that emerged from newcomer groups were: "invisible outsiders," "impact of content knowledge," "assimilation desire," & "American dreams." The codes from 1.5/2nd generation groups were: "realistic dreams," "blaming teachers & school systems," & "dual identities."

In categorizing my data, Spradley's seven steps of taxonomic analysis were helpful: 1) Select a domain for taxonomic analysis, 2) Look for similarities based on the same semantic relationship, 3) Look for additional included terms, 4) Search for larger, more inclusive domains, 5) Construct a tentative taxonomy, 6) Make focused observations to check out my analysis, and 7) Construct a completed taxonomy. More specifically, I first found more general themes such as difficulties and identity shifts related to my research questions. Then, I looked for similar patterns such as teachers' and peers' mistreatments. Finally, I closely looked for specific examples to support my arguments.

Findings and Discussion

The Newcomer Group

As stated earlier, four codes emerged while analyzing my data on the newcomer group: invisible/silent outsiders, being recognized through content knowledge, the desire to assimilate to the dominant culture, and living with the American dream.

Invisible/silent outsiders

The newcomer students, who expressed their difficulties in speaking in English, often received unwelcome gestures from their mainstream teachers and classmates. For instance,

Kyung's statements below illustrated how mainstream teachers and classmates positioned her

and her Korean friend, Eun, as invisible outsiders.

> Kyung: A teacher in Global class always calls on me and Eun "ladies," instead of calling
>
> our names individually although we changed our Korean names to English names, (Kelly
>
> and Jenny, respectively). The first time, I thought he could not distinguish Eun and me
>
> because Asian people might look the same to him. But it has been a few months, and he
>
> still doesn't call on us by our English names, Kelly and Jenny. He remembers and calls
>
> the other students' [American classmates] names in an accurate way.
>
> Researcher: How did you feel when you were called "ladies?"
>
> Kyung: I didn't feel good, of course. I wanted him to call me Kelly.
>
> Researcher: Then did you ask him to call you Kelly, not "ladies?"
>
> Kyung: No, I didn't.
>
> Researcher: Why not?
>
> Kyung: 'Cause (long pause)… I don't know. My English is not good enough.

The teacher in Global class treated Kyung and her friend Eun as a categorized Asian group and

not as individual agents. By treating the two Korean students differently from the other

American students, he marginalized and positioned Kyung and Eun as outsiders. Even though

Kyung knew that it was not appropriate to be addressed as "ladies" when all the other students

were called on by their individual names, she did not reposition herself as a legitimate member

of the community by challenging the teacher.

Not only were Kyung and Eun treated as outsiders by teachers, but also by peers in their

classes. For instance, Kyung and Eun were in the same group in science class. At that time, one

boy in the same group looked at the Korean girls and said to the boy in another group, "Our team

is bad," enunciating that Kyung and Eun were not good enough to contribute to his group. This case illustrated the boy treating the Korean girls as invisible persons, as if they were not present as he made this comment.

Another example also provides evidence that the girls encountered discrimination from their American peers. Kyung and Eun mentioned in an interview that some American classmates also talked about them behind their backs. Although Kyung and Eun did not clearly understand what was being said, they could sense that their American classmates talked about them. One day, when the two Korean students turned around, a boy who was talking behind them said to his friend, "That's okay—they do not understand, anyway." This incident indicates that although the Korean students were a part of this classroom, the American classmate positioned Kyung and Eun as outsiders who would not be able to understand due to language differences making it all right to talk behind their backs.

With these unwelcome gestures from mainstream teachers and classmates, the striking point is that Kyung and Eun did not blame their teachers and classmates who treated them as outsiders. The Korean girls attributed themselves to be at fault for not being able to speak English well. The girls took it for granted that it was acceptable to be treated like that. Both Kyung and Eun mentioned that if they could speak English well, "It would be all right." This illustrates that they only blame their poor English rather than the American teachers' and peers' discriminatory attitudes towards them.

Wook's remarks also demonstrated that he blamed his English pronunciation and accent, not his peers, for this treatment. He talked about his experience with one of his classmates:

Wook: When I asked Anne next to me, "What time is it?" she did not respond at all.

Researcher: Maybe she did not hear you?

Wook: No way. She was just next to me and when I called her name to ask her the time,

she looked at me.

Researcher: Then why do you think she did not respond to you?

Wook: Maybe because of my poor pronunciation. Maybe she did not like my heavy

accent.

Instead of noting his peer's mistreatment of him, Wook blamed his pronunciation of "What time

is it?" which was stated clearly to me during this interview session.

The examples above illustrate how newcomer students experienced unwelcome gestures

from their mainstream teachers and classmates. The Korean students appeared to view that the

mainstream teachers' and classmates' ignorance and mistreatment toward them being related to

their own lack of English skills, rather than American teachers and classmates themselves.

Being recognized through content knowledge

Despite such ignorance and mistreatment by their teachers and classmates, the newcomer

students are nevertheless "happy" and "satisfied" with their new school life. It appears to be

contradictory in arguing that the students were being discriminated against, but they were happy

at the same time. A plausible answer is that, as time goes by, compared to the first semester, the

students began to have confidence by displaying their content knowledge, such as in math or

science. By proving that they were not deficient, the Korean newcomer students began to be

recognized as acceptable persons by the mainstream teachers and peers.

Three of the students who I interviewed individually were excited to be talking about

their experiences with their American peers:

Kyung: In biology class, a girl did not know even where a lung was. I showed her. Since that time, she has treated me differently. I mean, since then, she has greeted me first and acted very kindly.

—   —   —

Wook: I am taking an English language skills class with two other American.One is a junior and the other is a senior. They did not even know what the spelling of "grammar" was. One boy answered the English teacher's question, by saying, "gramm*e*r." I was speechless at that time, thinking American people may not know how to spell words correctly. We (Wook, Kyung and Eun) are all strong at spelling, and the American boys sometimes ask me how to spell some words, such as "cemetery."

—   —   —

Eun: In math class, I drew four graphs correctly and neatly by using a pencil. After the math teacher saw my clean drawings, she praised me highly. Since then, some American peers who never paid attention to me asked me whether they could borrow a pencil or angles. I was happy about the fact that they asked to borrow my stuffs.

The Korean students were all excited talking about how they proved to American teachers and classmates that they are knowledgeable. The students want to be accepted and recognized by the mainstream teachers and peers. Eun's excitement that some students asked her to borrow a pencil indicates how greatly she wants to gain acceptance and be recognized by mainstream American people in class. She said, "I am grateful that they ask me something." It appears that the newcomers' content knowledge played a limited role in making them recognized as capable rather than deficient.

Desire to assimilate to dominant culture

Most of the newcomer students were eager to make American friends to fit into a new culture. Bon's narration illustrates how he attempts to make friends despite the mainstream classmates' disinterest in him:

Bon: When I was passing by, I said, "Hi" to a boy who is in my class.

But he simply ignored me without saying, "Hi" back.

Researcher: How did you feel at that time?

Bon: I felt he was very rude. But I decided to make him as my friend. Since then, I

approached him and joked around even with my poor English. And now he has become

my friend.

Although all of the newcomer students attempted hard to associate with American friends, the results were not successful. To them, getting associated with American friends was a difficult task in a mainstream context, which only accepts standard American English and its norms. However, it was interesting that only Bon seems to accomplish the "goal": making American friends. His attempt to fit into mainstream culture by joining sports clubs and joking around appeared to make it possible for him to do so.

Kyung, Eun, and Wook also showed their eagerness to associate with Americans. Although the three students have lunch together at a cafeteria with a senior Korean student in the school, they mentioned, in individual interviews, that they wanted to have lunch with their American peers. Eun's remarks illustrate how greatly she wishes to be in the mainstream group:

Eun: I really want to get closer to American peers. If I can speak English well later, I

will *act and play like American peers do*, not thinking of myself as Asian who cannot

speak English well…. Even though I want to be with American friends for lunch, I can't

move to them because we [Korean group] already formed a lunch group. Also I am

hesitant to do that because I am concerned that I might feel stupid when sitting with

American friends and keeping silent while they are talking [because of my lack of

understanding English].

Eun's consciousness of the other Korean students' opinions and her lack of English inhibit her

willingness to join in her American peers' lunch tables. However, her eagerness to *act* like and

play like the Americans indicate that she wishes to assimilate to mainstream culture.

Living with American dreams

Interestingly, Kyung, Eun, Wook, and Bon all mentioned that they ranked about 20th out

of 40 students in a class in South Korea. From a Korean academic standard, they all ranked

below average and it would have been hard for them to enter a prestigious college that is closely

related to their future job in a Korean context. However, all of the newcomer members

mentioned they wanted to be medical doctors in interviews. They all recognized that they might

not be able to be doctors in their native country because their grades did not guarantee it at all.

However, the students were sure that their goals could come true in the U.S. once they overcame

their language difficulties. The newcomer group did not seem to show any doubt about

accomplishing their dreams. To the students who have experienced the competitive and rigid

schooling in Korea that only focuses on tests for entering college (Seth, 2002), the United States

seems to be viewed as a land of opportunity. To those who have not been recognized as top

students in South Korea, the United States is a dreamland in which they can pursue their goals.

All the newcomer students shared that they like their American schools. Everything

seems to be new and great to them. When I asked the students about the reason why they liked

American schools so much better than Korean schools, all of the newcomer students kept

mentioning that "no teacher gives corporal punishments to students." "Facilities are good." Bon

said even moving to other classrooms and having his own locker was new to him. He did not

have the same facilities in South Korea, where he did not have to move from class to class

because teachers move and students stay and have their own desks in their classrooms.

All the newcomer students were excited to share their American school experiences with

their Korean friends through chatting on the Internet. This is one way that they release their

tension in a new culture. The interesting point is that the Korean students only share exciting

experiences with their peers in Korea, not their struggles. Kyung's remarks illustrate how as she

chatted with her Korean friends, she made them long for American high school life:

> Kyung: I only tell them the good and funny things because I do not want them to feel
>
> sorry for me by telling them about my difficulties. And, I know they want to hear
>
> something new, I mean, something different. So I told them that I saw many students here
>
> kiss and hug each other in the hall way and it was quite natural. Then they say, "Really?
>
> I wish I could go there [U.S]."
>
> Researcher: To see them?
>
> Kyung: No, to do that [kissing and hugging]
>
> Researcher and Kyung: [laugh].

The newcomer group students appear to be still in a euphoric stage. Despite their

language obstacles and mistreatment as outsiders by the mainstream group, they are still in high

spirits and are satisfied with living in the U.S. society. Their strong belief that they can

accomplish their dreams in the Unites States, once they overcome language difficulties, does not

seem to be hindered even in light of their struggles and dilemmas as a marginalized group in

class.

The 1.5/2nd Generation Group

As noted earlier, except for Daewon, who was born in Korea and moved to America when he was two months old, the other three students were born and raised in the United States. Compared to the newcomer group students, adolescents in the 1.5/2nd generation group show very different perspectives and attitudes towards their school experiences. Three main codes emerged: realistic dreams, blaming their teachers, and living with dual identities.

Realistic dreams

First of all, the 1.5/2nd generation students' dreams appeared to be realistic. The students were not sure about their future. Even though most of the students' parents wanted them to be medical doctors or lawyers, they did not believe that they could be and often considered different dreams. Although they all took it for granted that they would go to college, they were not sure what they wanted to be after graduating from college:

Researcher: What do you want to be after graduating from college?

Eugin: My dad wants me to be a lawyer. I don't know. I might be an English teacher. Or involved in technology. I don't know.

–   –   –

Eunji: My dad wants me to get a good job to make good money. My mom doesn't care. She wants me to do what I like. Maybe something with the church. I don't know what I want to be.

–   –   –

Daewon: My parents want me to be a doctor. I don't know. Probably. I don't know.

–   –   –

> Bokeun: They [my parents] want me to be a doctor. But I haven't decided what I want to
>
> be.

All the remarks above illustrate that they are not sure what career path they want to take in life.

Even though their parents wish them to be doctors, the 1.5/2nd generation group students show

doubts about their future, unlike newcomer students who appeared to have confidence about their

future jobs. All of the immigrant group students made their dreams realistic in accordance with

their academic achievement. In particular, Eugin's narration indicates how he views himself and

adjusts his dream to his academic achievement:

> Eugin: I am an average student.
>
> Researcher: What do you mean?
>
> Eugin: Like, my grades are average. Sometimes 90s, sometimes 80s, and 70s, I usually
>
> go down there. My parents keep telling me I should go higher in order to get into a good
>
> college. I will go to an average college, like x university, they still accept average
>
> students, so I think I am good. I don't want to be a doctor or lawyer—what my parents
>
> want me to be. My goals are very reasonable. I should do what I can do. I might be an
>
> English teacher.

As shown in Eugin's remarks, he might get pressure from his parents who keep telling him to get

higher grades. As most of Korean parents, Eugin's parents seem to have high aspirations for

their son. They believe that his grades are not adequate enough to gain admission to a good

college and to be a doctor or a lawyer. They think that Eugin is not doing as well as he could be.

Considering that he cannot meet his parents' expectations, Eugin adjusts his dream to go to an

"average" college and to be a teacher rather than being a doctor or a lawyer.

The other students, Daewon (ninth grade) and Bokeun (twelfth grade), also reveal that

they do not dream about what they feel is hard to accomplish:

Daewon: My dad wants me to go to an Ivy League school. But I don't think so. It's really

hard to get into. I get average 90s. I don't think it is enough.

–   –   –

Bokeun: I know a lot of competition to go to a good college such as Columbia. I got SAT

1470 [current 2190]. I got average mid-90s in most AP level college classes. But it is not

enough to go there.

Researcher: Isn't SAT 1470 enough?

Bokeun: No, it's not. I should get at least over [SAT] 1500. Many students need to get

over 1500 to go to a good college. Going to a good college is very competitive.

Daewon's and Bokeun's grades are excellent from American standard points of view. However,

Daewon and Bokeun seemed to believe that their grades were not sufficient to accomplish their

goals.

Blaming their teachers

Another notable point in the 1.5/2nd Generation' attitudes about school is that most of

them, except for Bokeun, who is involved in many activities such as being vice president of a

student council and editor of school newspaper at her school, have negative perceptions towards

their school and teachers. They responded to my question about their school and teachers:

"School is school." "I have no school spirit." "Why should I have to have school spirit?"

"Teachers are boring." "So boring." "Typical teachers."

By having negative perceptions towards their teachers, the 1.5/2nd generation group

students blame their teachers when they get rather "low" scores, which was quite a different

perspective when compared to the newcomer group students who blame themselves. Eugin,

Eunji, and Daewon talk about their teachers and their impact on their grades:

> Eugin: If I am motivated, I can get high grades. Real high grades. My teachers keep
>
> telling me I am a potential straight-A student. But they are not interesting. All our
>
> teachers are very dull. They don't motivate me.
>
> Researcher: Don't you think you can motivate yourself?
>
> Eugin: No, they should be encouraging me.
>
> –   –   –
>
> Eunji: If teachers teach better, then my grades will be higher. Some teachers don't really
>
> push you to do something. Some are really bad at teaching. They just write on the board
>
> and do not explain. Especially, my French teacher, I don't think she knows what she is
>
> doing.
>
> –   –   –
>
> Daewon: They (teachers) affect my grades, like, if I don't like the way they teach, I can't
>
> really do well—as well as I can.

These students' remarks imply that schools have to provide engaging instruction. They view

barriers to their academic achievement as social, which is a different perspective from the

newcomer group students who view the barriers as personal rather than social. If the teachers

taught better, their academic achievement would improve. To the students, it is the teachers'

responsibility to serve students, and the students deserve the best educational service. Motivating

them is the teacher's job—not their job. Instead of blaming themselves, they blame the teachers'

lack of encouragement, which fails to motivate them. The 1.5/2nd generation students' criticism

towards their teachers, which is related to institutions, is quite conspicuous and in contrast to the

newcomer group students. The newcomer group students never viewed their unequal treatment—

making them marginalized outsiders—as the fault of the teachers or school systems.

Living in the two cultures/two identities

The 1.5/2nd generation adolescents live in two cultures with dual identities. Their

relationship to their American teachers and peers affects the students' dual identities as Korean

and American. The dominant group's stereotype of the model minority in regard to Koreans

influences the students' identities:

> Eugin: My blood is Korean. But, since I was born in America, I am more like American.
>
> I speak like an American, act like an American.
>
> Researcher: Act like an American?
>
> Eugin: Like say, accent, I really don't have much accent. Also study habits. I have heard
>
> that Koreans are very smart. Study hard, work hard. Me? I am just, I am just like an
>
> American. I don't try hard. I am an average student [laugh].

Eugin's remarks about his identity as American because of his study habits illustrate that he is

unable to live up to standards of the model minority. To him, the model minority stereotype

affects his identity formation. His narration implies that if he thinks that he is a model minority

student, his identity as an American might shift to that of being a Korean. It should be noted,

however, that Eugin did not dichotomize his identity as, "I am Korean," or "I am American."

Rather, he talks about his dual identity in an indirect way such as, "My blood is Korean," and "I

am more like an American." He is in dilemma between two identities. Succinctly speaking, he

lives in his dual identities as Korean and American and uses his identities differently according

to his convenience as a living strategy in American society (Palmer, 2001; G. Park, 2001).

Eugin is not the only student who feels the Asian concept of model minority is a burden which impacts individual identities. Eunji narrates how American peers view her:

> They (American peers) think all Asian people are smart. They ask me, "What classes are you taking?" I said, "I am just taking a freshman class." And they say, *"Really*?" Because I am Asian, they think I should take higher classes. I don't feel good. I want them to treat me as American at those times…In global class, we talked about North Korea, nuclear weapons, attacks—stuff like that. The teacher looked at me because I am Korean. I just felt it's not me.

Eunji's descriptions imply that she wanted to be considered as an American, not as a Korean, in the context of when she is not in a favorable situation. When the Asian model minority stereotype did not apply to her, she wanted to remain as an American. In addition, when she was perceived as Korean by the teacher in global class, she resisted her identity as Korean in that unfavorable context. She wanted to remain as American. However, her American identity shifts to Korean in a different context:

> Eunji: My American friends think I am Korean. When they saw a Taekwondo (Korean martial arts) demonstration, they shouted to me, "Eunji, Eunji, Taekwondo, Taekwondo. They think Koreans are really cool. In terms of fashion, computer games, Korean students know more. They (American friends) find out later about what *we* already know.

Eunji used the word "*we*," which means Koreans, to represent her identity. During the interview, she was exuberant to talk about how her American peers view her as Korean. Although the first example above indicated she was not pleased about her teacher's and peers' perception toward her as Korean, her narration indicates that she senses her American peers' positive perceptions towards Koreans in terms of fashion and technology. Eunji does not show any resistance to be

perceived as Korean when the situation does not hurt her Korean identity. In sum, the 1.5/2nd

generation examples show that their identity shifts are influenced by the dominant groups'

recognition.

Conclusion

This study examined the current schooling experiences of eight Korean high school

students in the United States. The findings suggest that even in the same ethnic group,

differences were enlightening. How the Korean students portrayed themselves in the mainstream

context was related to how American teachers and peers recognized them. It was interesting that

the way that the newcomer Korean students presented themselves in a social matrix was different

from that of the 1.5/2nd generation group. Both groups' different experiences might have

affected their view of themselves as Koreans or Korean Americans. The Korean adolescents'

different experiences in a mainstream context show the complex features of their identity

formation and shift as follows.

First, the newcomer group experienced serious language difficulties along with

discrimination from the dominant group and was often treated as invisible outsiders. The 1.5/2nd

generation group did not experience the same type of discrimination as invisible outsiders, but

they experienced how the dominant group positioned them as visible and marked outsiders. The

newcomer students' sense of themselves as outsiders was more evident when they worked with

American teachers and peers by communicating in English. This study suggests that English

language was used as a tool that disempowered the Korean students. As shown in the data of

Kyung, Eun, and Bon, the students felt powerless and acted passively when their American

teachers and classmates exercised their power through English language. The Korean students,

however, did not reposition themselves as legitimate and active members in the class by

challenging the mainstream power. As positioning theorists (Harré & Langanhove, 1999; Tan & Moghdam, 1999) argue about power relation, without challenging the dominant group, the Korean students allowed the group to take a privileged position, and accordingly, allowed it more rights to exercise its power over them.

Second, in spite of their mistreatment from their mainstream teachers and classmates, a notable point is that the newcomer students did not take the discrimination issue seriously. The students believe that when they have a good command of English, the mainstream people would treat them well. As Ogbu (1992) claimed, barriers are mostly overcome by concentrating on future goals. The Korean students seemed to focus on possibility, not obstacles, for their future dreams. To them, the American dream meant that individuals had an equal opportunity if they worked hard. To the newcomer students, "barriers to success are mainly personal rather than social" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 1).

Clearly, the way that the 1.5/2nd generation viewed obstacles was different from that of the newcomers. To the 1.5/2nd generation, barriers to academic success were social rather than personal. They tended to blame the school system because it did not provide effective teachers who motivated them and provided them with the best services for their learning. The 1.5/2nd generation group adolescents were very realistic about their future goals. The way that they set goals was related to their academic achievement at school.

As shown in the data from the 1.5/2nd generation, their parents' pressure on their grades is apparent. The students who did not meet their parents' high expectations tended to adjust their dreams as realistic. These 1.5/2nd generation group students' attitudes towards their dreams contrasts sharply to the newcomer group adolescents who believe that they can accomplish their goals once they overcome a language barrier.

Finally, the way that the newcomer students associate with American peers was different from that of the 1.5/2ⁿᵈ generation students. The newcomer group desperately wished to assimilate to mainstream culture by associating with American classmates. They wanted to be like Americans and to be treated as Americans. To the newcomer students, assimilation was seen as a way of integrating into the mainstream context (Kibria, 2002) and was viewed as an essential process in becoming legitimate members of the society.

On the other hand, the 1.5/2ⁿᵈ generation adolescents lived in two cultures and they were often in a dilemma in regard to their dual identities. They lived bi-culturally with dual identities as Korean and American, according to their convenience. Norton (2000) argues that the question "who am I?" can be understood from the question "what am I allowed to do?" However, this case study suggested that the answer about "who am I?" can be influenced by the question "how do you perceive me?" The 1.5/2ⁿᵈ generation group's identity formation and shifting were affected by how American people viewed and positioned them. In sum, the findings of this study support most of identity researchers' findings that identities are situational and socially constructed (Palmer, 2001; G. Park, 2001; Vyas, 2001). However, findings also suggest that the second-generation students' identity shift depended on whether they perceived the situations as favorable or unfavorable to them.

My data support several researchers' (Kim, 1993; S. J. Lee, 1996; Palmer, 2001) perspectives on identity, that it is flexible and fluid, not rigid and unchanging over time. The students shift their identities from Korean to American or vice versa. However, the shift of identity is always based upon the students' recognition and consciousness of the dominant group. Their identities shift according to how the dominant group positions them. Creating, forming, and shifting identities are all related to the dominant group's power. The students become

Korean, Korean American, or American as they develop their images on the "map" of American society (Olsen, 1997). By being positioned and repositioned by the mainstream culture, students from both groups continually have to define and redine their identities and place in U.S. school contexts. In sum, the findings of this study suggest that whether they arrived recently, had lived for over a decade, or were born in the U.S, the Korean adolescents carried with them the legacy of outsiders in the mainstream context.

The implication of this study is that the complexities and differences within the same ethnic group need to be focused on and studied more in educational contexts. In particular, American teachers might reflect on how to focus on students' individuality and develop diverse teaching approaches that address their needs. The perceptions that teachers hold about a certain ethnic group guide their practices and how they interact with them (Olneck, 2004). When teachers hold perceptions that all Asian students are strong at math or science, they may not attempt to pursue different pedagogies for the students who are not as strong in these content areas and may label them as "deficient" or "at-risk" students. Taking students into consideration as individual entities, as is needed for all students, is the way that teachers can avoid the stereotyping of ethnic minority students.

In addition, helping students develop a positive sense of themselves is significant since it affects their learning. When students perceive hostility, indifference, and discrimination from American teachers and peers, they are deterred from learning and their sense of marginality is accentuated (Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990). Even initially resilient immigrant students as shown in this study may have their optimism and confidence eroded and their engagement decreased when they continuously encounter denigration and neglect by teachers and classmates (Davidson, 1997). Teaching that fosters culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995),

allowing students to bring their cultural identities in the door, is needed to help minority students develop positive senses of themselves in educational contexts. In this sense, students become not only visible but valued members of our school communities and society.

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APPENDIX

Semistructured Interview Questions:

1. Introduce about yourself. How old are you? What grade are you in?

2. What made you come to the United States?

3. How would you describe yourself? What would you call yourself? Is there a label that best describes who you are?

4. How would your teachers/peers describe you?

5. How long have you attended this school? How would you describe your school?

6. Do you have any difficulties/successes in school?

7. Tell me about your level of participation in class.

8. What type of academic program are you in?

9. What do you think it takes to be successful in your school?

10. Describe a class/subject that is important to you. What makes the course important to you? What courses are not so important, if any? Why?

11. Do students in your school separate themselves into groups? What groups does your school have? Do the members of different groups interact? Which groups are you a part of? Can anyone become part of any group?

12. How do you feel about your teachers?

13. Are there any teachers at your school who you feel have had a particularly positive or negative impact on you? Who are they? What did they do?

14. How would your teachers describe you as a student? Is this description an accurate one?

15. How do you feel about your peers?

16. How do your peers interact with each other?

17. What do you think your peers would say about you?

18. How would you describe your parents' involvement in the daily aspects of your school

    life?

19. What do you hope to do after you leave high school?

20. Do your parents approve of your success in high school thus far?

21. What do your parents want you to do after you graduate from high school?

22. What is the occupation of your mother/father? Do your parents expect that you will

    follow in their footsteps?

23. Tell me about your daily life.

24. Is there anything that you think I have missed or that you think I should have asked you?

    Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

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