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## **Korean American Cultural Differences in Classroom Literacy Activities: Observations from an Ethnographic Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores teacher-student perceptions about cultural differences and their influence upon classroom literacy activities. An ethnographic case method focuses on a Korean American student. Secondary participants include a parent, teacher, and classmates in a white Midwestern community. The study accentuates the generalizable discourse that neglects the complexity inherent to intercultural relationships in a changing elementary classroom. Implications include how multicultural children's literature deemed appropriate for minorities can be problematically situated for effective instruction.

### **Introduction**

The authors for this study wish to advance awareness about cultural differences related to Asian American students in the public-school setting. One source of misunderstanding comes from the fact that white female teachers stand in disproportionate contrast to growing diverse student populations. Asian Americans are the third largest minority group in the US and represent about 12 million people or 4.2 % of the total US population (Barnes, & Bennet, 2000). Classrooms across the US are undergoing a demographic shift that inherently introduces changes in cultural understanding and educational processes. White norms of social behavior subtly resonate with an ideological positioning that consistently subordinates the voices of minority students who may have little choice in how they are conditioned to fit into those preconceived norms within their school environment. The study presented here acts under the assumption that the school setting could be a better space for recognizing the complex nature of diversity. Some of the observations drawn from our study should help illustrate problematic intercultural encounters. An innovation in this research is to render a more complex picture about cultural differences inherent to students of Asian descent and intersect how those cultural differences mediate literacy activities in the elementary classroom.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The operational definition of culture employed in this study recognizes how the intersection of gender and language can be very influential components of cultural identity. Students of Asian background have been stereotyped as being smart, not physically active and more effeminized (Chen, 1996). McCarthy (1998) has argued that gender can be the most compelling factor that influences all other parameters of cultural interaction. The characterization of boys as being nice or striving for academic success often targets them as also being effeminate, and may hinder their ability to achieve a more inclusive status that would favor social acceptance among their peers in school (Rodkin, et al. 2000).

Kramarae (1981) similarly argues through muted group theory that males and females inherently share different perspectives about the world and that those varying perspectives arise from their varying background related to work experience. In this regard, males are thought to enact more political power through preventing female views from gaining a public audience. Spender (1980) observes how male dominated discourse maintains more control over meaning, and thus males are more apt to impose their own world view. From the perspective of muted group theory, women are also more compelled to engage a male linguistic code in order to express their alienated views and opinions.

Another important variable would be the role that language plays in the early elementary setting. Linguistic capital accumulated during the early stages of schooling can be critical for the subsequent social trajectory of a child (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In the US, minorities still encounter problems with negotiating the boundaries between identity and language when their native language is not English. However, not too much is known about minority students who do acquire an acceptable code of English for classroom participation, yet still struggle in school with concepts of identity. A significant aspect about English supplanting a student's native language can have negative effects in terms of family relationships (Fillmore, 1991). However, the meaningful participation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the school setting has been usually suppressed in favor of other less explicit goals for indoctrination into what can be understood as a culture of power (Delpit, 1995).

On another side of the continuum, a constructivist practice that would negotiate meaning between a student and teacher could better allow for the knowledge of minority students to be made valid for classroom instruction, such as through a funds of knowledge approach (Moll & González, 1994). However, all too often, educators fall under the pressure to comply with school mandates related to standardized testing that drives curriculum. More importantly, educators may participate in cultural processes that may do a poor job of negotiating the reality of working with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

In the US, the dominant culture invokes concepts associated with whiteness as the criteria for a normalizing social process sanctioned at school (Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983). Even in light of socioeconomic class distinctions, white students in the US consistently still perform better in standardized tests in school in comparison to minority students (Berliner, 2005). Minority students in the US can be seen to be more aligned to the performance of students in developing countries with regards to standardized testing in mathematics and science (Berliner, 2005). Concepts about whiteness that are shared between teachers and students serve to maintain an academic status quo that contributes and recycles an established discourse that subtly defines notions of cultural and linguistic capital. Even interventions through multicultural pedagogy risks diverse students being redefined as the *other* while *whiteness* is still perceived and accepted as a natural occurrence (Sleeter, 1993). And, even in present situations where culturally and linguistically diverse students are beginning to surpass white students in numbers, such as in California and Texas, concepts of whiteness continue to be invoked through a nostalgic past that ignores attempts to carve out a more practical understanding about cultural differences (Rosaldo, 1993). Even the best intentions emanating from the conventional wisdom of daily classroom practice have not been sufficient for defining the sense of white normalcy within a culture of power in the US (Delpit, 1995).

### **Methodology**

The authors for this study have complied with all regulations and procedures consistent with research conducted with human subjects. Pseudonyms have been used to describe all persons and places. The present article has been developed from a more extensive ethnographic study (Choi, 2004). An ethnographic case study has been developed through three primary participants; namely, Mrs. Benson, an elementary school teacher; Min, a student in her class; and Min's mother who help triangulate information about Min's participation in school. Mrs. Benson is a white female who was born and raised in a middle-class Midwestern city. She is in her mid-forties and has about twenty years of teaching experience in various schools. Secondary participants also included Mrs. Benson's classroom of twenty students (eight females and twelve males), as well as other teachers and parents from the school. Most students came from middle-class families. The students in Mrs. Benson's classroom served as secondary participants for the study. Mrs. Benson's classroom was proportionately representative of the diversity of the entire school. The students are mostly white, except for three students, two African-Americans and one Korean American student. Besides attending Mrs. Benson's class, six students attended pull-out programs: three students received Title I reading instruction, one received special instruction in the resource room, and two went to the Extended Learning Program classroom, a supplementary program designed for academically proficient students.

Data collection took place during the fall of 2003 within a public elementary school in the Midwestern US. Central School is located in a neighborhood of mostly middle-to-low income families. At the time of the study, Central School had been one of the biggest schools in the district with an total enrollment of about 450 students who were approximately 80 % white, 15 % African-American, and 5% Asian. Central School had a staff of thirty-seven teachers, as well as six teacher associates, a principal, and four secretaries. Data collection focused on Mrs. Benson's third-grade classroom, and a case study of Min, Korean American student, was developed from these observations.

### **Subjectivity and Entrée**

The authors for this study both come from a diverse cultural and linguistic background; namely Jeonghee Choi is Korean American and Heriberto Godina is Mexican American. Jeonghee was primarily responsible for data collection in the school setting. Jeonghee and Min both share a Korean background. There had been an initial level of discomfort in dealing with Min at the beginning stages of data collection. Early in the study, Min had asked where Jeonghee was from. After he found out Jeonghee was also Korean, Min avoided speaking with Jeonghee. When students found out that Jeonghee had the same nationality as Min, they became curious and wanted them to both speak Korean, but Min consistently refused. Then, Tracy and Heather accused Min of not knowing Korean, and he defended himself by saying, "Yes, I do. It is way harder than English or Spanish." As a participant-observer for the study, Jeonghee had to be very careful when approaching Min and asking him questions related to Korean identity because Min thought of Jeonghee as someone who made him different from others. As Jeonghee spent more time in the classroom, Min seemed to feel more comfortable about talking and even initiating conversations in Korean. In a sense, a better relationship had been established due to Min's and Jeonghee's shared background. Min's mother, who also served as an informant for the study, later offered another perspective about why Min had not been willing

to talk to Jeonghee. Min's parents always encouraged him to speak in Korean as much as possible when he met other Koreans, but Min was not sure whether or not he had to speak Korean language at school because, he claimed that speaking Korean in the classroom would not be right. Min later explained that he refused his friends' requests to speak in Korean for that same reason. While the initial lack of interaction was some cause for concern, after a couple of months of regular visits by Jeonghee to the classroom, Min warmed up and confidently shared his experiences.

Born in Korea, Min came to the US when he was three-months old because his father and mother began studying at Midwestern University. After Min's father graduated and accepted a professional position in another state, his mother chose to stay and study for another year. Min lived with his mother and sister while his father made occasional visits. Because both parents had to work and study, Min had been exposed to an English-speaking day care since he was less than a year old. His early immersion to English helped him cultivate a native-speaking ability. Although Min's limited exposure to Korean prevented him from being fluent in oral or written Korean, Min's fluency in English helped him get along and communicate with white peers and teachers in school without any problem.

### **Learning Culture at Central School**

Educators at Central School made a sincere effort to promote cultural diversity, and some of the resources included a selection of multicultural literature made available for teachers. Certain performance groups had also been invited for students, such as a Chinese acrobatic team who had been invited to perform for Chinese New Year. However, these efforts simplified a more viable definition for diversity because they only integrated content about ethnic groups without creating a dialog that could interrogate the authenticity of representation of those ethnic groups within prominent white interpretations (Banks, 1993; Henry, 1994).

The categorization of social relationships revealed a certain nature of cultural awareness. Mrs. Benson categorized boys into three different groups depending on their friendship or ability level. For example, John, Robert, and Anthony, were *athletic-and-active*; Jeff, Michael, and Kurt, were *sensitive-but-playful*; and Dan, Kevin and David, were *quiet-and-nice*. "We have these three groups of boys," Mrs. Benson would claim, but her categorization excluded Min, Mike and Ron; the only two ethnically-diverse students and one boy with a severe medical condition. Mrs. Benson's general perceptions could be considered problematic, but in Min's situation his own quiet disposition could have played a larger role for him being less visible to others.

Min could be considered an academically bright student. Besides going to the academically oriented Extended Learning Program, Min demonstrated an excellent standing in mathematics. In observations, several students were heard commenting how quick and smart Min was at mathematics. Mrs. Benson described Min as someone who "cares about his work and wants to do well. He is not someone who makes a bunch of noise." Min had been compared to other smart students in the class, such as Tracy and John, who had a disposition for being similarly quiet during class discussions. Min always sat in front of the class and would not talk to anyone next to him while the teacher was reading stories, and he rarely raised his hands or shared his opinions. He often disappeared from the whole picture of students when more assertive boys made themselves more visible through more noticeable behavior.

In contrast to Mrs. Benson's perceptions, Mr. Parker, a teacher for the gifted and talented program, had a different impression of Min. He described Min as being usually active in his classroom. However, he also noticed how Min tended to sit back and just kind of "take it all in and think about it." Min was not always quiet. He expressed his opinion clearly when specifically asked and was always willing to give help to others when he thought it necessary. Min also demonstrated playfulness within his close circle of friends. Although he could not be considered very popular, Min was moderately liked by many students in the school. Care for his work and a competitive spirit toward academic success helped Min create new friendships. Mrs. Benson was also aware of Min's competitiveness when she described how John always tried to catch up with Min in academic subjects, and how they had become friends based on these collegial relationships.

Min recognized how academics could play an advantage for him to gain a certain form of status among his peers. Mrs. Benson explained how Anthony, who was known as being a bully in the classroom, tended to pick on students who were less able—academically and physically—and one of the reasons he was close to Min might have been because of Min's intelligence. Min's mother also shared her son's belief that a strong academic standing could help him make friends: "You know, he has a different skin color. But, I think, some students have some kind of attitude toward him, like respect him, because he is smart."

### **Sanctioned Literacy Activities**

Min produced two short stories during writing workshop classroom activities: one about a group of dinosaurs going camping and the other about a spaceship. The themes and characters in his stories could be considered well-

developed, but not much different from those of his white peers. One obvious characteristic in Min's writing was a lack of personal voice. The absence of cultural references in open-ended literacy activities revealed as much about the social norms in the classroom as it did about Min's disposition to blend in with his peers. Min did not need to reveal himself as a Korean *other* because he had no problem communicating with his peers in English. In class, Min was disengaged from his potential for writing stories during the sanctioned writing workshop. However, at home, Min and his best friend, Hannah, often worked together to create stories. The football game story written by Min and Hannah was hung on the wall of Min's house. Min, with Hannah's help, wrote another story, called "The War of Life." This story was an admirable effort with 15 single-spaced, typed pages which described a war between aliens and the US. The story included China, Japan and Korea as countries that fought against the US at first, but later supplied goods to the US. Min was the captain of the Korean army in his story. Min brought this story to Mrs. Benson's classroom at the end of the year when she had requested students to bring their best stories.

There were discrepancies between the stories Min was working on at school and the stories he was working on at home. Min was asked why he wrote about sports and war because he did not show any interest in sports or revealing his Korean nationality while he was in school. However, Min only responded, saying, "I don't know. I just wanted to." At home with his close friend, Min could better craft his own voice to express his genuine interests and cultural identity through writing than the opportunities he was given at school. Fu (1995) described a Laotian boy, Sy, who demonstrated a new dimension as a storyteller in his personal journal while he was passive and quiet in reading-discussion writing or free writing. Just as a personal journal was a place for Sy to express himself more freely, Min seemed to be more willing to reveal his interests and differences to a certain group of friends. How a story could cross cultural boundaries and not enter the sanctioned classroom discourse revealed Min's insecurity about demonstrating his Korean background in front of his white peers. Although Min brought the story, "The War of Life," to his official classroom at the end of the year, his peers hardly had a chance to read his story because the teacher collected all of the students' best stories and kept them as sample writings for new third graders coming in the following year.

There were many incidents when literacy activities in the classroom bordered on inappropriate stereotypes. On one occasion, Mrs. Benson implemented a textbook derived from commercially popular media in an attempt to acknowledge Asian culture through *Mulan*, a story about Chinese girl who fights for her country while disguised as a male (Bancroft & Cook, 1998). The narrative had the potential to generate a discussion about disrupting gender norms (Butler, 1990) and the corporate manipulation of ethnic stereotypes (Giroux, 2001). Sadly, after the story was read in the class, a couple of boys felt compelled to mimic representations of Asians by pulling their eyes lids to both sides and proclaiming "I am from China." This seemingly innocent behavior demonstrated some disturbing emergent ideas about stereotyping minorities that should have been critiqued by the teacher, but became formalized as appropriate instruction.

As part of a social studies unit, the class studied Japan for over six weeks. Students read and were exposed to a variety of books related to Japan, such as informational books, folktales, and literature written by Japanese authors. Students watched videos that showed Japanese students' daily lives and US students' experiences in Japan. Students looked at the world map to locate Japan, and they drew a picture of Japan's national flag. As the last activity of the Japanese unit, the class summarized factual information by making charts and writing notes in their social studies journal about sports, houses, food, and transportation in Japan. Classroom discussions and students' journal writing revealed erroneous misconceptions about their knowledge of Japan. For example, students were imagining that "kids in Japan do not learn computer until junior-high" or "boys and girls wear different colors of backpacks in schools."

Sometimes students made reference to Min and me by showing a picture of a Japanese in literature, saying, "He looks like Min," or "It was like Ms. Choi" due to our shared Asian physical characteristics. When students learned the location of Japan from the world map, they also saw how Korea was located next to Japan. While they were learning about a Japanese unit, a strategic learning experience for students could have easily supplemented a bit about Korea in consideration of both Ms. Choi's and Min's presence. Mrs. Benson was even offered a chance to plan a lesson about Korea with the help of Ms. Choi. Although Mrs. Benson appreciated the offer, there was no further consideration about having an extra lesson on Korea, and the students were relegated to learning oversimplified facts on Japan. Godina and McCoy (2000) have also described utilizing an *emic-etic*, or *insider-outsider* perspective in order to elicit a richer interpretation about cultural differences, as opposed to ignoring those mutual subjectivities. Not articulating those differences and seeing them as a valid resource remained another lost opportunity for instruction in this classroom. Of course, through such an exposure to a variety of cultures, students could learn new facts and concepts related to other cultures beyond their own, but there was not much effort to question an essentialized representation about the complexity of Asian culture. Although these examples could not tell the whole picture of how cultural discourse had been created in the classroom, these experiences raised concern about how unsaid messages and essentializing processes about other cultures could shape students' perceptions.

In retrospect, during the entire six weeks of study on a Japanese unit, not once did the teacher ask questions about Min's experiences in Korea. Interestingly, some students did initiate an interest that was not acknowledged by the teacher. Students would ask Min about physical and geographical closeness. Min told his friends about his school experiences in Korea and how it was very similar to what the class was learning about with Japan. Min had attended a Korean elementary school for two months while he was visiting Korea during the previous year. However, his voice was never heard during the wider classroom discussion, and Min never again spoke about his parents, his different cultural heritage and customs. It was as if he already knew his ideas about Korea did not have a place in the classroom environment.

For about three mornings a week over a period of two months in the fall semester, Mrs. Benson orally read *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1985). Mrs. Benson claimed that she chose the book because she believed that it contained fantasy elements that would attract students' interests and that the messages in the books would help students think. The story is about the relationship between a white boy named Omri and a small plastic figure of an Indian doll named Little Bear, who comes alive when placed inside a magical cupboard. The author describes Little Bear's culture and customs, and Omri becomes familiar with an aspect of Native American culture and builds a friendship with Little Bear. After every oral reading session, Mrs. Benson had students discuss key points with partners or write a brief reflection in their journals. The teacher never articulated specific cultural descriptions to other students during oral reading sessions. However, sometimes Mrs. Benson asked questions that might help students think about relationships. For example, she would ask, "how do you feel about the way that Omri's friend treats the Indian?" The question led to a discussion on how human beings should be treated with respect. It seemed as if Mrs. Benson's purpose for using the book was not to render a multicultural account, but as a discourse for conveying a general sense of literature that could contain a universal message. However, despite her innocent intentions, the book dealt with obvious cultural images about a specific ethnic group. With the absence of any serious discussion about cultural representation, children could believe what the author described in the text as factual knowledge, especially when the book became endorsed through the authority of the teacher.

However, *The Indian in the Cupboard* has been seen as a controversial book in both its authenticity and representations of Native Americans. Taylor (2000) has critiqued the image of Native Americans as being savage, and the paternalistic theme in *The Indian in the Cupboard*. While there was no discussion related to cultural context embedded in the text, it was hard to see how students would respond to a white boy's manipulation of a dependent Indian in the story. However, the text only served to reinforce students' perceptions of deeply problematic stereotypical images used to describe Native Americans (Baca, 2004; Connolly, 2000). For example, writing activities included how Mrs. Benson had students draw the Indian in their reading journal. She reminded students to follow what the author described in the book. Students' illustrations of the Indian were questionable. Except for a few girls who illustrated an Indian as a naïve and innocent looking guy, most of the students imagined the Indian to be warrior-like, with a fierce facial expression and with weapons on his body, such as a knife in his hands or on the waist, or an arrow or ax on his back. Even though there was no mention about face painting, some of students projected the stereotypical imagery and drew black lines all over the Indian's face and body just as the sports media has misrepresented Native American characters.

Mrs. Benson showed the illustration of the Indian in the book and had students compare what they drew to what a real Native American would look like. She even compared how Mike, an African-American student, would braid his hair with a similar style as the illustration in the book. Mrs. Benson's observation did not take into account how persons from each culture could interpret their own hair style. Culture was not recognized as a diversifying process, but rather a process to be contained and assimilated. Mrs. Benson did not inquire as to why the different students would render an illustration of an Indian in a stereotypical manner. She did not challenge how the descriptions of the Indian's physical appearance and behavior—as wild, violent, and savage-like, carrying a knife all the time—in the book and how the ways Indians spoke English and used words such as "kill" and "me take many scalp," could reinforce students' stereotypes. Interestingly, Mrs. Benson perpetuated the theme, and the following semester she orally read a sequel to the first text, *The Secret of the Indian* (Banks, 1985). At the end of the year, the class had a party that highlighted watching the movie based on the book (Oz, 1995).

### **Conceptualizing Culture in the Classroom**

The problematic issue of representation in using multicultural literature inherently exposes students to a wide range of cultural diversity. The teacher used multicultural literature without questioning the authentic representation of a certain ethnic group. Such an approach to cultural issues may be counterproductive as students develop cultural sensitivities, and could instead reinforce the acceptance of dominant stereotyped images delivered through the text. Even when literature used in the classroom matches students' cultural backgrounds; there is still the risk that students feel discomfort about having attention drawn to their cultural background (Dudley-Marling, 1997). Mrs. Benson, maybe with good intention, did not want to place minority students in risky positions, and therefore ignored their differences. However, Min's mother sensed the teacher's lack of consideration when asked about Min's low

score on a section of a standardized test: "She showed real concern. But for us, it's hard to understand social studies, history and geographical knowledge, since we, as parents, don't know much about it, and we can't talk about that as much as other parents do." Despite the teacher's seemingly good intention, her lack of attention to subtle cultural differences gave the implicit impression that what Min needed to do was to blend into the existing cultural environment as much as possible. The teacher missed an opportunity to create a space where differences could be an advantage with my difference, rather than a problem isolated through indifference.

There were only three non-white students, and cultural issues were rarely elaborated upon beyond the brief moments they appeared in the curriculum content. When attempting to gauge her understanding about her students' different cultural backgrounds, Mrs. Benson claimed that individual students could be best understood by asking questions about what foods they ate, the language they spoke at home, and the particular holidays they celebrated. Because Mrs. Benson rarely acknowledged diversity in her classroom, and she may have been approaching multicultural education through what has come to be known as a color-blind perspective (Margolis, 1968; Schofield, 1986; Miller & Harrington, 1992). Paley (1997) similarly details her struggle to deal with racially different students by believing that labels would keep her from seeing students as individuals. However, after an African American parent reminded Paley that her children knew they were Black, she grew more conscious of the responsibility teachers have for openly dealing with cultural differences. Mrs. Benson simplified how students could construct cultural identity beyond the evident white norms and she still struggled to move beyond those limitations. Diverse students in Mrs. Benson's classroom knew they were different from the other students due to their physical characteristics. For example, Mike and Amelia, two African American students, often referred to their skin color to express their belonging to the same group. Mike explained, "Amelia and I don't get along with each other well even though we have the same skin color." While these differences could be used to stress a positive aspect of diversity, failure to recognize them could do more harm than good if students were to develop sensitivities about cultural differences.

### ***Model Minority Min***

Min's perceived image as a smart and quiet student allowed him to have a secure status among his peers that could be attributed to some genuine individual qualities. However, his proficiency in mathematics and science might have also been camouflaged through a *model minority* stereotype that erroneously labels some Asians as intelligent and achievement oriented (Divoky, 1988; Ramirez, 1986; Toppo, 2002). Compared to some stereotypes that stigmatize racial groups, a positive stereotype can be more of a privilege even if it does oversimplify how Asian students experience school in the US. How does the perception of a model minority influence teacher attitudes and expectations about students like Min? In the classroom, Min never raised his hands, nor shared his opinion unless he was personally asked by his teachers. Like Min, there were a few other students who did not participate in classroom discussions, such as Anthony and David. However, Mrs. Benson would pose direct questions to these others, calling out their names and even prompting them to be more involved in a discussion. Mrs. Benson would never directly call upon Min to contribute to discussion regardless of the subject matter. During a subsequent interview session, Min's lack of participation was conveyed to Mrs. Benson, but she interpreted his behavior as positive in that Min had simply been voluntarily allowing more opportunity to other students who were academically less capable than himself.

However, Min's mother expressed concern about her son's quietness in the classroom: "I worried about his lack of participation, but Mrs. Benson interpreted that in a positive way, like he is being very patient and had a lot of inside thinking." Min's mother felt as if there was something missing about the way the teacher cared about her son's involvement in classroom activities. She explained that Min's shy personality could also explain his limited participation. However, the teacher's certainty about her expectation for Min might have allowed the teacher to care less about whether his voice could be heard by others, as long as he got a good grade and did not disturb others. Min's mother was familiar with teachers lack of awareness:

"Teachers usually don't say much about him. Because he is doing just fine? I think it's true that many Asian parents push their children more than American parents. Maybe we are shorter and have different physical features? I don't know, but most teachers seem to have a pretty positive image of Asians. But, they don't know much about us."

Min's mother pointed out how many Asian families can view education as a more functional process. Asians compose a part of the many underrepresented groups in US society that rely on education as a means to attain upward social mobility (Toppo, 2002). Therefore, teachers might not realize that institutional discrimination by the US white dominant culture upon racial minorities might be hidden within the guise of positive images about Asian students. Through the model minority categorization, teachers set high, and at times unreal, expectations for Asian students. Teachers, such as Mrs. Benson, may be overlooking Asian students' limited participation and lack of influence in the classroom. By emphasizing only Asian students' academic success, teachers may ignore other emotional and social needs (Divoky, 1988).

During recess, Min was not involved in any sports. Most of the time, Min hung around with Ivan, a Chinese boy from another third grade class. They would wander around the playground and just sit to chat. He and Ivan sometimes joined Tracy and Amy as they played a *four square* game. However, they sometimes seemed to interrupt the girls when Min and Ivan wanted to play. Even during indoor recess, Min appeared not to enjoy himself as much as other students. Many times he just sat alone. When Min was asked why he did not play games like the other students, Min responded that he was bored and had nothing to do during recess. Mrs. Benson was asked about Min's social skills and why he often played by himself, especially when Ivan was not with him. Mrs. Benson answered: "He likes to challenge himself. Some of these games are just games; there is nothing really challenging for him. He doesn't want to just sit around. He wants to work hard." Mrs. Benson reiterated how Min worked hard and liked to be challenged. However, it seemed that Mrs. Benson's perception of Min caused other sides of his experience to go unnoticed. While Min demonstrated a preference for his own racial group, he did not reject his relationship with white students. The teacher might not have understood the implications of Min's behavior.

Although Min's positive academic standing helped him gain a certain form of status, peers progressively reject of boys who possess *nerd* qualities as they move into upper grades (Adler, Kress & Adler, 1992; Goto, 1997). As Min gets older, his limited involvement with active sports, lack of social skills and his close friendship with a few girls may tag him as being effeminate or gay. With labels such as these, Min risks potentially losing his current limited status among his peers, as effeminate heterosexual males are among the most marginalized and harassed in high school (Lock, 2002). Culturally and linguistically diverse students have more to negotiate in their masculinities than white students because they live under the hierarchical duality of white and non-white norms (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). For example, stereotypical images of Asian men as not being strong, independent or masculine often appear when compared to similar images of white counterparts (Chen, 1996; Eng, 2001). Therefore, how Min understood himself as a boy could not be separated from the manner in which others viewed him as ethnic. However, Min's attitudes and behaviors did not confine him to the idealized perceptions of males and females shared by his peers. On one occasion, students had been briefly exposed to *Williams Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), a story about boy who desires to have a doll of his own. Min said, "I do like this story because it tells that boys can do girls' stuff." He was with his classmates Mike and Robert who strongly expressed their dislike for the book because the story was not interesting and not "cool." Without compromising his opinions, Min insisted that it was okay:

Mike: "I don't like this book. He is a sissy because he plays with a doll."

Robert: "Playing with a doll is a girl thing."

Min: "I can't understand. He can play if he wants."

However, even Min's mother expressed some concerns:

"I like the way he accepts the difference, but not too much. I think he is surrounded by girls more than boys too much. Hannah, she is his best friend, although she is not a typical girl-like-girl. Min even likes to play a ball with Hannah more than other boys."

Min's mother explained that most Korean men she knew, including her husband, were not very active in sports. Min's mother agreed that language barriers and cultural differences would play a role in preventing Korean men from participating in sports with whites and might explain why feminized stereotypes appeared about Asian men. Asian families in the US may be disposed to working hard and encourage educational achievement among their children, more than being good at sports and being tough. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) illustrates an example of a Vietnamese boy, whose cultural identity was shaped the way he fashioned his masculinity in very different ways from *cool* and *macho* forms of masculinity. Likewise, Min's demonstration of a less-macho masculinity and limited social relations could be due to family values that imposed a different significance on academic study and sports. Min's parents might have been familiar with the societal context where a strong emphasis on academic performance was appreciated, but they were not familiar with the different social context related to how athletic and social skills could help students become popular and achieve status in school. Min's perceived lack of masculinity should be better examined through the lens of his ethnic context, and further understood through the motivational factors that drove him to certain behaviors. Min's performance of masculinity may not be desirable within a context where dominant hegemonic masculinity has a more privileged status and cultural capital.

### ***Maintaining Korean Identity***

Although Min's Korean background was rarely revealed in the official classroom, his life around families and his relationship with close friends outside of school had centered on maintaining and developing Korean identities. Min's family preserved many Korean cultural traditions from food and holidays to teaching their children Korean history and values such as respecting the elderly. They regularly attended a Korean church not only for religious reasons, but

also for getting collaborative support and comfort as friends and other families from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds got together to socialize. Cultural elements, such as church, practiced in the home and ethnic community could help students like Min embrace strong ethnic identities (Min & Kim, 2000).

Many Korean families perceive learning the Korean language as the most important feature for maintaining their children's ethnic identity. Min went to the Korean-language school provided in one of the Korean churches once a week, where Min had been observed learning Korean. Some Korean parents were asked about their reasons for sending their children to the Korean-language school. Many parents agreed that as children speak better Korean, they can better identify with themselves as Korean and in turn be motivated to further learn about Korean heritage. However, most of the parents indicated a fear for a communication breakdown between themselves and their children. One parent explained:

"My son's grandparents live in Korea and want to talk to him over the phone a lot. But they don't understand what he says well, and he feels that they don't understand him. He often doesn't want to give them a call and we just let him not talk to his grandparents although we know it's not right."

Learning a second language, such as English can result in the loss of a student's native language and lead to a breakdown in family communication (Fillmore, 1991). Fillmore observes how: "Language-minority children encounter powerful forces for assimilation as soon as they enter the English-speaking world of the classroom in the society's school" (Fillmore, 1991, p. 342). Children are aware of their differences and desire feelings of acceptance and belonging, and may be driven to learn English at the expense of losing their home languages. Even though these children may do their best to manage an academic adjustment through learning English, they can still undergo serious social, emotional and cognitive problems.

A sophisticated interpretation of cultural diversity was clearly not elaborated upon by the teacher and such non-recognition of differences could cause Min to be less motivated to use and learn Korean. Min had wondered about whether it was appropriate for him to use Korean in the classroom setting, and he was reluctant to show his ability to speak Korean in front of his friends even when requested. Min's mother informed me that Min did not like attending the Korean-language school because he felt it was very hard to learn Korean and perceived Korean as not appreciated by his white classmates. However, Min's parents were very strict and consistent about helping their children learn Korean. Min was supposed to speak only Korean at home and with other Korean friends and adults, and he was encouraged to read Korean newspapers and write letters in Korean to his father. Min's mother admitted that she could not monitor all his behaviors and prevent him from speaking English with his Korean friends. However, she believed in their effort to help children learn their primary languages and value their ethnicity:

"Last year when we went to Korea, although it is only for a couple of months, I sent Min to the Korean school. He got stressed a lot since he didn't understand what teachers and other classmates were saying, and they didn't understand him either. But when we got back from Korea, people here were surprised that his Korean had improved. He also got some sense like, "I am not speaking Korean poorly any more."

Yuh (1996) argues that parents' performance of ethnic behaviors and parental modeling of ethnic identification are critical factors influencing children's ethnic identity formation and retaining their cultural orientation. At his age, Min might not be interested in exploring and searching for his ethnic identity. However, Min was getting the sense that he needed to learn the Korean language as the conversation with his two close Korean friends, Hannah and Sarah, illustrated:

Interviewer: "Do you think you have to read, write and speak in Korean?"

Hannah: (shaking her head to express negative response) "Huh-uh..."

Min: "Of course, we have to learn."

Interviewer: "Why do you think like that?"

Min: "Because we have to go to college in Korea. If you don't know how to write and read in Korean, you can't pass the college exam and can't get a job"

Interviewer: "Do you think you will go back Korea?"

Sarah: "We will not go back to Korea. My dad works here."

Hannah: "We will not be going either. Then we don't have to learn Korean."

Min: "No, we still have to learn."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Min: "Because-- I am a Korean?"

Min's closing utterance, "Because – I am a Korean?" could be further explained through a *double-voicedness* where his voice could reflect voices of his parents or other Korean adults who explain to their kids why it is important to learn

Korean. As Tobin (2002) has argued how every utterance can be considered a hybrid construction with multiple associations. Min was constructing his idea of why he had to learn Korean out of the small amount of the language he had learned and heard. However, Tobin (2002) also claims that these utterances may not be original, but that they have the capacity to become fresh and meaningful when used in different contexts. Min was presenting hybrid voices in a new context where he was with two Korean kids whose attachment to their own sense of Korean identity did not seem to be as strong as Min's. Thus, Min's speech could be used to exemplify some of the social norms he was struggling with and internalizing other voices into his personal sense of identity about being Korean.

Outside school, although he was occasionally invited to classmates' birthday parties, Min formed friendships with mostly Korean students and a few Chinese boys who attended the same after-school program. His friendship was initially built due to his parents' social relations with other Koreans, but in addition Min maintained strong and stable relations with them. Min & Kim (2000) declare that Chinese-, Japanese- and Korean-Americans maintain more frequent social contacts than any other ethnic group due to similar cultural and physical characteristics. Min's mother thought the reason he hung around with Asian friends would be due to more than physical similarity: "When I look at other Chinese boys and their parents, I think the way their parents have expectations for their children is similar with ours. Maybe Min and they share how they feel, why they have to do more work than most white students." Although it is possible that students just want to be with someone who looks like them, Min's mother explained that many Asian parents' pursuit of education as a means to succeed against language barriers and racial discrimination also helped them to be close. Min's mother also expressed mixed feelings about him being close with Asians. She recalled how Min had preferred Asian friends ever since he was younger:

"When I sent him to the day care, there were no minority students at all. All white, he refused to go at first, but soon after he was okay. He got along with all the white boys. But when one Chinese boy came, the peer relationship he had with others was broken as he and that Chinese boy became best friends. When we were in California, he had Korean boys as best friends, and now he is close with Ivan. Although he is not refusing any relations with whites, he always prefers Korean and other Asians. I have some concern."

Min's mother did not worry about the fact that Min made friends with Asians. She thought that since Min made friends with Asians it could imply that he was feeling a sense of difference from white students, and this feeling of difference caused him to want to be with someone whom he felt more comfortable with due to a physical and cultural similarity. What she worried about most was this feeling of difference that could develop into a feeling of inferiority that could eventually make him deny his own cultural identity. Considering the possibility that Min would maintain a preference for Asian friends, Min's mother asked, "Do we always have to think about being included in the mainstream only because we are living in the States? Yes, we do. That's why we have our children work hard and succeed."

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Classroom discourse is playing an important role in shaping how Min is developing in his identity beliefs. There has not been much support or understanding from teachers or students for Min to reveal genuine aspects about his Korean identity, and Min was perceived as being more Americanized than Korean due to his fluency in English. Min's intelligent and socially inactive personality only reinforced perceptions about a model-minority stereotype that prevented teachers and peers from gaining a sense a depth about his feelings of cultural remoteness. The potential to share more constructive interactions with his peers remained a lost opportunity. Min maintained a strong affinity to Korean language and culture through family, friends, and Korean community support. His close circle of friends, mostly Koreans and a few Chinese, provided him with a comfort zone. However, his mother expressed concern about him not fully fitting into the school culture.

Even though students may react with an initial sense of conflict and resistance toward an effort to enact a multicultural education initiative, they still eventually begin to infuse their own unique social and cultural identities into the classroom (Dudley-Marling, 1997). It is consequently the students' conscious decision about whether they will enter the officially sanctioned classroom discourse and how they choose to represent their cultural identity. However, the children's engagement may be mitigated through the subtle subordination of females by male discourse and the complex manner in which those influences evolve through muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981). It is still the teacher's responsibility to create a space where students feel comfortable talking about differences. Then, perhaps Min could have better articulated his cultural voice in the class. Students such as Min are forced to navigate between two cultures that may not easily blend with one another. Bicultural students have to juggle learning about new surroundings while still maintaining affiliations with their ethnic group. However, cultural identity is not something solely based on ethnic group affiliation, but can be "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' and undergoes constant transformation" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Therefore, students do not move from one culture to another in a clear-cut way, because the process of developing and negotiating bicultural boundaries and identities should be understood through a more multi-dimensional modality. As Hall (1990) argues, cultural identities are always constituted within representation, and students identify with one culture better than the other by performing their comfortableness and

their sense of belonging to certain cultures at certain moments. Therefore, what should be examined is the contextual circumstances and an individual's emotional state of mind that may enforce one cultural identity to be more salient than the other.

Initially, it was interesting to examine how Min's cultural differences were acknowledged by the teacher and peers during the writing workshop. However, Min's Korean cultural identity was not salient at least while he was in the classroom. He spoke English fluently and as one of the top students in the class, and he built upon moderate relations with everyone. On the surface, he seemed to be well assimilated in the white dominant culture with few problems. However, as Lu (2001) points out, the idea that middle-class Asian students have easily assimilated into the mainstream culture dominated by white values and practice is only a myth, for they are often firmly attached to their own ethnic enclave. More consideration should be addressed to the complex psychological process of being bicultural. Students' bicultural voices should be recognized and invited in the official classroom setting.

Social contexts of the classroom did not support Min revealing other identities, as a Korean. Min was seen as a competent and in a sense americanized student rather than as a student who was struggling with his bicultural identity. Although multiculturalism was included as official curriculum, it did not help Min and other racially different students cultivate a sense of pride in their own unique cultural backgrounds. Min was reluctant to show his bicultural identities and bilingual abilities with peers and the teachers. In contrast to such an absence of revealing his bicultural identities in the classroom, however, outside school Min was actively maintaining his Korean identities by always identifying himself as a Korean. He obviously preferred being with Korean and Asian friends with whom he could find comfort and a sense of belonging, and he was aware of the necessity to learn and use Korean. However, the process through which he moved back and forth between being Korean and being more like an American was not without conflict. Min's mother revealed how sometimes even his parents did not understand the challenges he was facing living in two different cultures, as the parents themselves had a more secure Korean identity than their children. Min, as a bicultural student, seemed to feel that he was not fully accepted by either American or Korean society.

One day, a counselor came to the class and had students take a self-survey. One of the questions was "I can do things well when I want to." Since Min was not a regular participant, a counselor directed him, asking, "Is there anything you can do well if you really try, but it's something you don't really want to do?" Min, after thinking for a while, said, "Yes, learning Korean." He publicly announced that he did not want to learn his home language, as if his bilingual ability was something not to be proud of. Why did Min show such a contrary response to learning Korean in front of his American friends? In contrast, with small groups of Korean students, Min insisted Koreans had to learn Korean no matter what. His contradictory attitude should be looked at in societal contexts by which a multicultural student's identity construction is influenced by power relations between the dominant group and racially marginalized groups (Lu, 2001). Within the classroom discourse, where cultural differences were unrecognized, Min might be afraid that his willingness to learn Korean and his acceptance of being different could jeopardize his status among peers. Min, by attempting to demonstrate his resistance to Korean identity in front of others, might want to confirm his sense of belonging to the mainstream culture.

Resistance toward Korean cultural identity was not something Min's mother expected to encounter, as she took for granted her son's positive attitude toward his own culture. Min, outside school, always identified as a Korean, following Korean customs and values and being involved in the Korean community. However, Min was not certain about his social identities, expressing mixed feelings about going back and living in Korea. Min was asked whether he would like to go to Korea and said, "It depends on my father. I wish I go back to Korea somehow. Well sort of, but I don't have any friends over there." Although he tried to demonstrate an affiliation with Korean culture, his experience in the school in Korea, albeit as short as it was, made Min more conscious about his differences from his Korean counterparts, his Americanized ways of thinking and behaving and his reduced capability to speak in Korean. Min could not gain acceptance to the culture of his US classroom, nor could he perceive acceptance in the Korean classroom. For Min, being bicultural meant that he needed to adjust to American culture while maintaining his Korean identity. But the process had not been without ambiguity or contradiction when Min could not feel the total sense of belonging to any one culture. The fact that Min was living under two cultures without observable conflicts should not imply that he was well-adjusted with highly developed positive bicultural identities. Rather, Min's bicultural identities and experiences drove him to strive for the right friendship, one where he could find comfort and be fully accepted in the school setting. Other studies have explored how etic and emic differences can be beneficial for augmenting a cross-cultural understanding across several sectors (Godina & McCoy, 2000; Garcia, 1992; Pike, 1954). However, another compelling implication should entail exploring how both students and teachers *internalize* particular interpretations of cultural difference that emanates from a wider discourse. Teachers should particularly learn how their perception of successful students may not reveal the struggles these students encounter or how their learning environment could be improved.

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