A COMMENTARY ON CULTURAL INFLUENCES IMPACTING THE EDUCATION OF KOREAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Korean American adolescents may find themselves caught between traditional Korean culture and demands for Americanization. Subsequently this population of students and parents may have very distinct needs in our schools as they are a growing population of students. This commentary discusses important considerations for teachers and administrators working with Korean American adolescents. It also provides effective strategies and suggestions to teachers. Teachers should be cognizant of these specific cultural tendencies and may want to adjust their expectations for performance and behavior accordingly. Korean American adolescents in particular might benefit from social skills interventions that highlight cultural differences and the effects of being between conflicting value systems.
Various studies have shown the effects of acculturation and immigration on children. It is well documented that children of non English-speaking background families are more likely to experience difficulties in school (Cox, 1978) and that if immigration occurs during adolescence, adjustment is further compromised (Boman & Edwards, 1984). Yet we know little about patterns of problem behaviors for immigrant adolescents (Harachi, Catalano, Kim, & Choi, 2001). Korean American adolescents are just one such growing group of immigrant students that teachers may struggle to understand in terms of behavior in the school setting.

**Korean American Adolescents in the United States**

The demographics of the United States have changed drastically in recent years due to immigration from all over the world. According to the 2000 U.S. Census data, among the Asian immigrant population, Korea has ranked within the top ten countries of origin during the past two decades. This is especially pertinent in light of the findings that within-group differences may be as great as or greater than, between-group differences (Sue, Sue, Sue, & Takeuchi, 1995).

To date, no comprehensive empirical study has been carried out on the emerging generations of Korean Americans. One reason for this is the relatively short history of Korean immigration to the United States. Another is the difficulty of generalizing about the socialization experiences of quite diverse groups of Korean American adolescents. It is very possible that the adolescents’ performance in school, social relations with peers, attitudes toward parents and self-identity all hinge upon the above factors.

The 2000 census revealed that more than one-third (34.9%) of Korean Americans were under age twenty, and the majority (67%) of them were born in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census). In addition, Asian-Americans represent 4.5% of the American population and are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States with approximately 94% of Asian-Americans living in large metropolitan cities. Kim and Lee (2001) stated that because there is a popular belief that Korean immigrants are a model minority group (i.e., professionally successful, financially stable, socially well adjusted), they are discriminated against. The model minority notion negatively affects Korean American children and adolescents in educational settings because these students are not seen by educators as needing counseling and other mental health support services related to issues such as academic achievement and peer relationship difficulties (Yagi & Oh, 1995).

When Korean American children and adolescents are in school, they may be referred to the school counselor because of a language difficulty or
other adjustment problems. They may be withdrawn or depressed, exhibit inappropriate behavior, lack self-esteem, or need some additional support. The school is in a unique position not only to assist these children and adolescents, but also to help other students, teachers, and administrators to understand Korean American children and adolescents (Kim, Omizo, & Salvador, 1996).

**Language Differences**
Korean American children and adolescents are taught various types of Korean language styles designed to promote and perpetuate the age-based hierarchical relationships within their culture (Lee & Lee, 1990). Korean American children and adolescents are taught to speak to elders in a respectful language style and to avoid questioning their authority, which leads to the children obeying the wishes of parents and older siblings. When learning and practicing these customs, the Korean American children and adolescents may find themselves caught in a cultural “double bind” because they are expected to retain these practices and the related values while trying to assimilate into the United States’ culture, which promotes equality and independence (Kim et al., 1996).

Korean American children and adolescents’ limited English proficiency may be a cause of major difficulties in the educational setting (Kim, 1990). They may experience difficulty communicating with other students, teachers, and counselors, which can lead to emotional discomfort such as frustration and helplessness. In an attempt to cope with these negative experiences and the accompanying feelings of discomfort, Korean American students may begin to withdraw and may segregate themselves from the rest of the students. This could further exacerbate the problems associated with lack of English proficiency, because the student will not have the interactive experiences necessary to increase verbal communication skills (Kim, 1990). Consequently, these children and adolescents may experience academic difficulties that may cause them to be labeled as deficient or as a failure, which may lead to hopelessness and depression. These negative consequences may be especially acute among Korean American children and adolescents given the often unrealistic expectations of academic achievement imposed by their parents (Kim et al., 1996).

**Family and Peer Relations**
The Korean culture’s emphasis on group affiliation and group cooperation may conflict with the Western values of independence and individualism. Korean American parents may view these Western values as inappropriate
because they may see the focus on the individual as being detrimental to
the Korean belief of striving for the benefit of the group. Consequently, a
student who is urged to make independent decisions may be caught in a
cultural bind that causes conflicts with his or her parents and with other
Korean American elders. On a more productive note, a student who is
experiencing behavioral difficulties in the elementary school setting may
be influenced to change his or her behavior through the use of peer groups
and the resulting peer pressures. This is particularly effective if the peers
are older, given the Korean emphasis on hierarchical relationships (Kim et
al., 1996). The Korean culture places a very high value on education, and
a child’s educational achievement is one of the most important goals for
Korean American parents (Korean Overseas Information Service, 2008). Ac-
cording to Yagi and Oh (1995), the Korean American parents’ most common
reason for immigration to the United States is to provide good educational
opportunities for their children. Additionally, this value on education has
forced many parents to put intense pressure on their children to achieve
academically. Moreover, failure in school is seen as bringing shame to the
family. The students’ inability to become academically successful, coupled
with the parents’ unrealistically high expectations, may cause them to suffer
from desperation and from achievement anxiety (Lee & Cynn, 2001).

Cultural Differences
The implicit rules for using language effectively and appropriately have
been shown to differ in the Korean and American cultures (Lee & Lee,
2002). In Korean culture social status is reflected in language use. Based
on Confucianism, Korean individuals are assigned a hierarchical social po-
sition reflecting their age, role, and gender that is acknowledged through
the use of honorifics (respected language) (Kim, 1991). There are also differ-
ences in Korean and American styles of communication. In Korean culture,
where harmonious relationships are valued, communication is rarely direct
or confrontational. Instead, one talks ‘around’ an issue and relies on the
other’s sensitivity to understand the point of the conversation (Kim, 1991;
Lee & Lee). Korean childrearing practice also discourages children from
expressing their own opinions or asserting themselves especially when their
ideas differ from those of family or friends (Kim & Choi, 1994; Lee & Lee,
2002). Korean children are taught to control the display of emotion, to
value group harmony, and to minimize conflict in social interaction (Kim,
1990). In contrast, in American culture, parents encourage the develop-
ment of self-reliance, self-expression, and independent action (Whiting &
Edwards, 1988) and children’s style of communication is direct, but their
social interaction may be conflictual. Cultural variations therefore, in social conventions, communication styles, and the construct of the self, can be expected to influence the nature of individual experience, social behavior, and self-expression.

### Social Emotional Differences

Among the various immigrant populations, the Asian population is underrepresented in political influence, resulting in relatively narrow access to services, including mental health services (Lin-Fu, 1988). Despite suggestions that this population has been relatively successful socioeconomically, as demonstrated by the fact that the Asian median family income exceeds that of the Caucasian population (US Bureau of the Census, 2000), little is known about their mental health needs, especially the needs and difficulties of Asian immigrant youths who must adjust to a different educational, linguistic, and socio-cultural environment.

Cultural experiences influence the expression of social-emotional functioning. Although many investigators believe that most Asian Americans have distinct sub-cultural systems (Kim & Lee, 2001), in fact, sometimes individuals label Asian Americans as model minorities whose members function well in society. Warr (1993) addressed the issue that Asian American adolescents spend significant amounts of time with their parents. This may be relevant for them in the context of collectivistic cultures and may also prevent them from engaging in delinquent activities or from hanging out with delinquent peers. This may be because they want to avoid parental disapproval and shaming. Families play an important role in the issue of delinquency, because they facilitate youth integration into the social structures of their ethnic community as well as into the larger mainstream society (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

Asian families stress the importance of obedience and conformity to elders, high achievement, and behaviors that bring a good family name. Inappropriate behaviors such as exhibiting disrespect for parents, juvenile delinquency, and failure to achieve or even psychopathology bring shame upon the entire family. Because the family name is so strongly implicated by a member's behavior, public admission of personal problems is suppressed (Sue & Kitano, 1973).

### Implications for Teachers and Administrators

In addition to all of the differences discussed, it appears that acculturation also plays an influential role (traditional norms vs. new culture norms) on the maintenance of traditional cultural social norms. For the Korean ado-
lescent that may be the display of deference. Deference refers to a reserved demeanor and family collectivism. This is in contrast to Korean American adolescents, who may model the friendly, active and social pattern of behavior of American culture. It is important for educators to understand that this may also affect the level of and/or type of participation by the student in class. Namely, raising one’s hand to answer a question may be a student participation behavior that is impacted. An additional impact may be upon whether or not the student will stay after class to seek assistance from the teacher as compared to waiting until after class to ask a friend.

Korean American adolescents as a group also may differ in the degree to which they become acculturated. This may be dependent on the rate of acculturation of their family and may include influences such as language choice at home, relations with Korean community, and parental occupations. Peer acceptance and pressure also can be major roles for adolescents in terms of the rate of acculturation. It seems that regardless of the social expectations for a particular group, if the child meets those expectations then they are perceived to have good social skills and leadership qualities by the adults.

Socio-cultural variations in the contexts in which children develop and interact are associated with children’s behavior, their self-expression, and how they experience and coordinate with their groups and partners. As schools become more inclusive and diverse, teachers must develop an in-depth understanding of cultural aspects of behavior as they relate to socio-cultural issues of students. In multicultural schools, this translates to building interdisciplinary collaborations (teachers and parents), embracing new ways of looking at instructing, and interacting with students and their families. Teachers and parents can ask questions about the effectiveness of programs and services to support these children. Specifically for Korean-American students, it is important for teachers and administrators to understand that this teacher-parent interaction would generally have to be initiated by the teacher. This is because it is typical of Korean parents to believe that the teacher is the expert and subsequently, to question the teacher would be considered inappropriate.

For professional learning communities to be successful in challenging multicultural settings, teachers must identify beliefs that drive school systems, reshape negative beliefs, model positive attitudes, and inspire interdisciplinary collaboration. They must understand the behaviors required of students to make a learning community successful and whether or not the Korean-American students exhibit those characteristics.

Finally, when teachers are culturally aware, they ensure that schools
are safe and productive learning environments for all students. Educators must increase their tolerance of interactional patterns that are different from their own culture. They need to understand their own biases, and how stereotypes influence their thinking and practices. Finally, they need to focus on the behaviors that students exhibit rather than the behaviors they expect them to exhibit.

Building bridges with the community and enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration will assist in learning the expected modes of interaction that might appear to some educators as unacceptable school behavior. A continual communication among teachers, parents, administrators, and other interdisciplinary collaborations is necessary to create safe and culturally responsive learning environments for ALL.

References


