

IN CONTEXT

IONS

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN KOREA

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[The United Nations'] committee remains concerned about the persistence of widespread societal discrimination against foreigners [in South Korea], including migrant workers and children born from inter-ethnic unions, in all areas of life, including employment, marriage, housing, education and interpersonal relationships. (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2007, p. 2)

Introduction

Today's global community encompasses interconnectivity between societies, where a development in one country affects and informs something similar in other countries. Multicultural education is not exempt from this pattern. Multicultural education was first started by concerned activists and educators in the United States as a way to secure social justice for African Americans (Banks, 2002 & 1993; Davidman & Davidman, 1997; Grant, 1994). Over time, it has been used as a tool to promote social justice for those who have been historically and presently marginalized along the lines of race, class, gender, ability/disability, and sexual orientation,

to name a few such categories (Banks, 2010; Grant & Sleeter, 2010).

Today, educators in different parts of the world also use multicultural education to better serve their own marginalized students, including immigrants (Ahn, 2009; Banks, 2007; Castle, 2007; Stritikus & Varghese, 2010). This article looks at multicultural education as conceptualized and practiced by Korean educators for cultural others who face both academic and social marginalization in that country's schools. Our goal is to suggest implications for American multicultural educators.

First, we will describe how Korean multicultural education aims to foster the integration of children from immigrant, biracial, and multicultural families into mainstream Korea. This is followed by the argument that this approach overlooks a fundamental problem facing the immigrants in Korean schools where the narrow construction of *real* Koreans excludes non-ethnic South Koreans. Lastly, we argue that a similar process takes place here in American schools where the idea of a *real* American is constructed to mean English-fluent Whites. We call for multicultural educators to problematize this to better serve our American cultural others.

Multicultural Education in Korea

In response to demographic changes as a result of a sudden increase of immigrants as well as international criticisms

about human rights, educational leaders in South Korea recently introduced a series of policies that aim for integration of cultural others called *Damunhwa* (multicultural) education. These policies aim to help incorporate the growing number of children from interracial, migrant, and refugee families into mainstream Korean society through various educational aids that focus on multicultural appreciation.

According to a 2006 report by South Korea's Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), the number of students from international families steadily increased during the early 2000s by 30% or more, and in 2005 alone went up more than 68%. Coupled with interracial marriages is the influx of roughly 350,000 migrant workers from other parts of the world, many of whom choose to stay longer than their visa. Also, a large number of refugees from North Korea continuously come to the South seeking a better life.

To meet the needs of these changing demographics, Korean educational leaders have turned to multicultural education. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) reported in 2008 that the goals of Korean multicultural education are:

1. To reduce the educational disadvantages imposed on students from multicultural families and to help them adapt to Korean society;

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2. To promote cultural sensitivity and understanding among general students; and

3. To assist students from multicultural families in becoming globally competent and bilingual.

During 2006 and 2007, multicultural education-related research and development was allocated 300 million Korean Won, or roughly three million American Dollars. The allocated funds supported multicultural education policy research, Korean language textbooks and programs, and teacher training programs. Also, a network of local multicultural education centers was planned for the targeted students and their families to provide mentoring, multicultural understanding camps, international education, aptitude classes, and school entrance counseling as well as Korean language instruction.

Finally, teacher support was planned for professional development and teaching material distribution. In 2008, Korean universities were funded to engage in policy research and to develop learning materials and programs. School-oriented and customizable education support campaigns were rolled out to include programs in Korean language improvement, self-identity establishment, and improving cultural understanding among general public students. That same year, MEST encouraged local governments

to designate regionally specialized programs.

In 2009, MEST updated its policy to assist North Korean refugees and their children to acquire basic academic skills. To enhance self-capacity for their children's education, non-Korean parents of multicultural families are to be provided with instruction in the Korean language and computer literacy in addition to counseling and interpretation services.

Further, teacher education program curricula now include more courses designed to raise awareness and appreciation for multiculturalism. Finally, the ministry planned to find better ways to accredit previous educational experiences for children of North Korean refugee families.

Criticism of Korean Multicultural Education

While the providing of academic and social support to Korean students of multicultural background is important and necessary, it is our opinion that Korean multicultural education falls short in meeting the stated goal of assisting the integration of immigrants. Indeed, the students who are not from Korean-speaking families do need assistance to acquire Korean proficiency. The previously mentioned support programs will also benefit the non-mainstream parents with limited proficiency in Korean culture

to better support their children who are struggling to succeed academically and socially in schools.

Moreover, the services and programs to familiarize the children of North Korean refugees to the culture of modern South Korean society are necessary to accomplish successful adaptations by those students to South Korea. After the decades of separation along with the different cultural evolutions in the North and South, North Korean refugees lack necessary skills to be successful in South Korean schools. Many of these students, the 2005 survey of the Ministry of Health & Welfare (MHW) reports, experience difficulties in school studies, suffer from excessive emotional negativism, and even show signs of violence and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Our Main Objection

Our main objection, however, is with the underlying assumption of Korean multicultural education that locates the problem solely on the "differences" which need to be addressed while ignoring the role of schooling in constructing and maintaining these very differences. It is our opinion that one of the main problems facing the targeted students is not the inability of the cultural others to overcome the differences, but rather the schools' othering of the targeted students as *not-so-real* or illegitimate Koreans.

Consider, as an example, how the national curriculum in Korea constructs who are and are not Koreans based on cultural and ethnic ties. Koreans, both North and South, take great pride that they are a member of a very homogenous society, and this genetic and cultural homogeneity has been maintained throughout its history, which in turn gives rise to a strong sense of nationalism.

This sense of homogeneity is justified by a mythical folktale that is a part of the national curriculum in early grades and is reinforced as one progresses through K-12 schooling. This folktale, *Dangoon Shinwha*, tells a story that the son of heaven descended upon earth to spread *Hongik Ingan* (good for all mankind). Current Koreans, the story goes, are descendents of this son of heaven. Regardless of subject matter and grade level, this story is cited to instill a sense of ethnic and national pride by pointing out how special Koreans are as one of the few, if not the only country that is made up of *Danil Minjok* (one-blood ethnicity).

Message of Ethnic Homogeneity

The construction and maintenance of defining Koreans as members of this *Danil Minjok* was useful in their resistance against the Japanese during the colonialism period in the early twentieth century, when Koreans needed to find a strong ideal behind their reasons to protect and fight for the independence of the country. This ideology was useful after the division of North and South Korea and the subsequent Korean War, seeking to legitimate the country's interest towards the *Hanbando* (justification for reunification with the North based on one culture and one blood).

However, now this continued insistence on equating Koreans with ethnic homogeneity in the face of demographic changes through Korean schools' rhetoric on *Danil Minjok* works to construct cultural others who are less than *real* Koreans. The message is that only the *real* Koreans are legitimate members of the nation because only they are, both culturally and genetically, *Danil Minjok*. *Not-so-real* Koreans, on the other hand, are illegitimate Korean citizens or residents and therefore do not share the capitalistic culture or ethnic "purity" of South Koreans. Situated as cultural others, *not-so-real* Korean students face difficulties academically and socially. From this perspective, schooling rather than the students themselves is the source of the problem that needs to be addressed.

We agree with the concern raised by the United Nation's Committee on Eliminating Racial Discriminations (CERD) in 2007 that Korean nationalism, with

its emphasis on ethnic homogeneity, fosters a sense of superiority and racial discrimination against cultural others. In other words, the main problem facing the targeted students is not their inability to overcome the differences but the *othering* of the students by the schools.

The MHW survey (2005) reports troublesome social realities for the cultural others. It reports that over 30% of the children from international marriages experience being left out in the cold by classmates, with the top ranking reason being because the child has a foreign mother. Many of these children of international marriages are not able to endure prejudicial views or discrimination coming from peer students and consequently give up their school studies.

According to the Pearl S. Buck International survey of 2001 (as cited in MEHRD, 2006), the dropout rate of general Korean primary and secondary students was 1.1%; while among biracial students, the rate rises to 9.4% in primary school and 17.5% in middle school. With these statistics in mind, CERD (2007) recommends:

[Korean schools] to include in curricula and textbooks for primary and secondary

central to democracy, and Koreans are no strangers to these. Their relatively recent collective memories include struggles for labor unions, equity for women in previously male-dominant families and the corporate world, and the right to political participation against a series of dictators who murdered countless innocent civilians.

It was only less than three decades ago that the citizens forced a popular election in the late 1980s. The turning point, according to Haberman (1987), was the death of a college student named Park Jong Chul who was tortured and murdered at the hands of military dictators because he refused to give up the names of fellow student activists in 1987. While torture was not uncommon by the dictatorship, it was the first time that they were forced to acknowledge such wrong doing in the face of massive protests that guns and tanks could no longer quell.

Only two decades later, Koreans now face a different challenge in their journey towards social justice and equity. This new challenge is the struggle against themselves to cease demarcating legitimate or illegitimate Koreans and to declare that all are entitled to the privileges of democracy,

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schools information about the history and culture of the different ethnic and national groups living on its territory, as well as human rights awareness programmes aimed to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all racial, ethnic and national groups. (p. 3)

A Challenge to Promote Democracy

In addition to such inclusion, our argument is that schools must provide opportunities for critical examination of the schooling that illegitimizes the culturally *othered* students in Korea. A critical examination of the meanings and implications of being Koreans and the role of schooling in constructing and maintaining such status may empower young students in Korea to challenge these biases and prejudices against some members of their own school and nation.

In other words, we are challenging Korean educators to promote democracy instead of reducing it to social services. Ideas like equity and social justice are

equity, and social justice. This time, instead of college students like Park Jong Chul, multicultural educators must take the lead.

Implications for American Educators

In this article we have charged that Korean multicultural education mislocates the source of problems about cultural differences and focuses on *Koreanizing* the cultural others in addressing the issues of academic and social marginalization. We argue that this approach circumvents the actual problem that normalize and legitimate ethnic South Koreans as the *real* Koreans while illegitimizing anyone else.

We feel that this has key implications for American educators as we seek to serve our own cultural others here in the United States. We challenge American educators to critically evaluate the end goal of schooling for our immigrants. Specifically, should public schools aim to make "them" like "us" culturally?

Historically, Americanizing immigrants has been one of the most important goals of our public schools. Development of common schooling in the 1800s, for instance, was in part a response to the American natives' perception of "moral" decay caused by the large influx of immigrants. Schooling was to be a way to "reduce" the threat by making them (immigrants) more like us (Kaestle, 1983; Schultz, 1973; Takaki, 1989).

This trend continues today as schools accommodate the Americanizing process for 14 million immigrant students who make up roughly 20% of school-aged youth in the United States (Child Health, 2003). Increasingly, multicultural education is associated with English instruction in their native languages and other similar efforts to facilitate the immigrants' incorporation into mainstream America (Hakuta, 1986; Mouw & Xie, 1999; Olneck, 2004; Sritikus & Verghese, 2010).

Much like its Korean counterpart, multicultural education in the United States is understood as a tool to equip the cultural others with the cultural knowledge of the nation's mainstream culture. Along the same vein, Ruby Payne (2001) locates the problem of underachievement in the culture of poor students, thereby suggesting ways for them to adapt to the ways of the mainstream.

Recognizing Power and Privilege

This approach ignores the interplay of power and privilege along such lines as class, race, and gender. Also, others (Ravitch, 1990; Webster, 2002) shift the attention away from social justice for the marginalized by focusing on forging a common national identity as Americans. The assumption here is that both biases and prejudices (e.g., racism) are based on individual attitudes, which can be altered. Together, these approaches reduce multicultural education to support programs and services that aim for the acquisition of the dominant cultural traits with a periodic celebration of cultures to promote cultural understanding and harmony.

In contrast, Grant (1994) explains that "multicultural education is an educational process that informs all academic disciplines, and other aspects of the curriculum are based on [and aim for] philosophical ideas of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity" (p. 4). From this perspective, multicultural education requires systematic curricular change instead of simply add-ons to current practices.

Further, viewing differences as the problem conflicts with the philosophical ideas of multicultural education that locate the problem in both individual and insti-

tutional biases against cultural others. In other words, multicultural education should not and does not seek to replace immigrants' culture with that of the host society. Instead of focusing only on how to make *them* like *us*, multicultural education challenges educators in both Korean and the United States to ask, how can schools truly make *us* to mean *all of us*?

The Authenticity Dilemma

A further challenge is to problematize how schools construct and maintain who are *real* Americans. In the same way that Korean schools narrowly defined Koreans to mean ethnic South Koreans, literature (Lee, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Park & Lee, 2010; Tuan, 1998; Wing, 2007) reports *real* Americans are narrowly defined in our

proximity to the American-born Whites.

Other studies (Lew, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 1998) also report that immigrants of color often use social controls to reward and punish those amongst themselves to maintain their perceived relative privilege. This end result must be acknowledged as unacceptable by multicultural educators, since it perpetuates academic and social marginalization of students of color.

Concluding Remarks

Multicultural educators and scholars (Gorski, 2006; Grant & Sleeter, 1988; McLaren, 1995; Sleeter, 2005) have expressed concerns regarding conservative educators and policy makers' increasingly successful attempts to shift the attention

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schools to mean American-born, English-fluent, middle class Whites.

While Korean schools' construction of Korean to mean ethnic South Koreans was more direct, a similar process in American schools, Perry (2001) reports, takes places through normalization of Whiteness. Perry's study of Whiteness reveals, for instance, that the experiences of middle class Whites are post-cultural and normal as opposed to cultured others. Situated as normal, the Whites in her study claimed to be without a culture and became normal and *real* Americans. In contrast, the identities of ethnic and racial minorities are usually closely associated with ethnic and cultural heritages and thus face an authenticity dilemma as Americans (Lee, 2005; Tuan, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

The authenticity dilemma is more pronounced with immigrants. Studies (Gibson, 1988; Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) on immigrant school experiences highlight how schools play a role in perpetuating the authenticity dilemma faced by Americans of color. Of these, Olsen (1997) found that structural, curricular, and pedagogical arrangement of the school fostered a perceptual hierarchy of the students along the lines of skin color and English fluency. This hierarchy, though perceptual, helped the students place one another in the spectrum of prestige and power according to one's social

away from social justice as the main goal of multicultural education. Among them, Gorski (2006) calls for:

. . . repoliticalizing multicultural education to fill the gap in perception and experience that exists between the well-intentioned educators and policy-makers and the despite-the-good-intentions-disenfranchised students. (p. 175)

Gorski (2006) further argues that multicultural education is and should be a "political movement and process to securing social justice" (p. 164).

We respond to this by saying that challenging the narrow construction of Korean and American is one way to re-politicize or *problematize* multicultural education to secure social justice for all students. Such a challenge calls upon both the cultural "insiders" and "others" to critically evaluate the constructions and implications of the narrowly defined Koreans and Americans in addition to their roles in the process.

Such critical evaluation should be followed by the analysis of relative privileges and disadvantages and as a way to prepare our teacher education students for social actions that will bring their schools and societies a step closer to being more democratic. When this critical component is coupled with service and support programs, we feel that multicultural education will truly empower future teachers to become part of the political process.

To politicalize multicultural education, we recommend that educators start with examining how they play a part in schools in constructing American to mean American-born, English-fluent Whites. This should then be followed by how this process privileges and disadvantages individuals in schools and society. Likewise, the teacher education students should be challenged to undergo similar processes in the classroom.

After future teachers examine the situation, it is important for them to be encouraged to find ways to bring about change both as individuals and as members of an institution, for the short term and the long term. These future teachers along with those educators already in the classroom must remind themselves that this is a movement and an on-going process as we continue to move closer to the goal of a democratic school and society.

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