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## Korean Transnational Students' School Adjustment: An Ecological Perspective

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### Abstract

This research explored Korean early study abroad students' school adjustment in the United States, as well as how their microsystems (family, peer, school) affect their experiences. To understand their experience, we posed two research questions: 1) What are Korean early study abroad students' experience like in adjusting to American middle schools? and 2) How do these students' microsystems (family, peer, and school) affect their experiences in the process of adjustment? Four Korean early study abroad students participated in a collective case study. Each student was interviewed three times and observed in both their content area and ESL classes. All students described tremendous challenges in adjusting to their new school in the US. Specifically, their challenges were pertaining to different aspects of learning experiences as well as school belonging. While their limited English proficiency was a primary factor in these challenges, a lack of support from their peers, parents, teachers and school also seemed to affect their school adjustment. Moreover, findings indicated disconnections among their microsystems, contributing to a lack of support in their school adjustment.

### Introduction

With rapidly increasing globalization, early study abroad, a form of adolescent transnational educational migration has become a common phenomenon in many Asian countries. As English proficiency has become a highly desired asset for better jobs in the globalized market, an increasing number of families send their children abroad to master English and obtain education in English-speaking countries (Park, & Lo, 2012). In Korea, for example, "wild goose families" are an emerging form of families where youth temporarily move to an English-speaking country with a parent (usually the mother) for education, while the other parent (usually the father) remains in Korea and financially supports the family abroad. While many families adopt this transnational lifestyle to facilitate the child's future upward social mobility (Kang & Abelman, 2011), young people who engage in study abroad are likely to experience tremendous challenges in adjusting to the new school in the host country. They are likely to encounter many challenges due to their young age at the time of migration, family circumstances (e.g., separation from a parent), temporary status (as opposed to a permanent immigrant), and lack of resources (e.g., parents' lack of knowledge of the school system). Despite these youth needing significant support given their tremendous challenges in adjusting to the new school, little is known about their

experience. While limited, evidence suggests a lack of systematic support available in American schools. For example, research suggests that transnational students in the US receive little support from their teachers and schools (Miller & Endo, 2004). Through the case of one of the most prominent groups who send minors to study abroad, we aim to explore early study abroad students' experience in adjusting to their new schools in the US. Korean early study abroad students may share many of the challenges faced by recently arrived transnational students whose native language is not English, such as language barriers and challenges related to cultural differences. We note that these youth's adjustment-related challenges are likely to be shaped by their unique circumstances as early study abroad students (e.g., English mastery as a primary migration goal, sojourner status, and separation from their family and peers) and the social contexts in which their everyday life is embedded. To address this gap, this collective case study seeks to understand Korean early study abroad students' adjustment experiences in U.S. middle schools and how their social contexts (family, peers, school) affect such experiences.

In our study, we asked: 1) What are Korean early study abroad students' experiences like in adjusting to American middle schools? and 2) How do these students' microsystems (family,

peers, and school) affect their experiences in the process of adjustment? By listening to the voices of early study abroad students, school administrators, educators, and classroom teachers will have more authentic access to the difficulties these students face in their schools, and, in turn, will be more informed about how to approach and make sense of the barriers they experience during their adjustment to American schools.

### **Theoretical framework**

Adolescents' school adjustment is likely to be affected by the interactions between an individual and his/her environment. Development of an individual always occurs in the context of relationships between connectedness and embeddedness within various ecological systems and the continual need for adaptation to the constant currents of change. In this context, as individuals adapt and develop, they change their interactions with their environment. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1986) viewed human development as occurring in the complex interactions between an individual and his/her surrounding environment. The ecological theory is helpful in conceptualizing the roles of early study abroad students' social contexts in their school adjustment experiences. Consistent with the theory, we postulate that Korean early study abroad students' school adjustment experiences are likely to be affected by their interactions with their environment, as well as interactions in various contexts, such as with their family, peers, and school.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Early Study Abroad among Korean Adolescents**

Over the past decade, a large number of pre-university students from South Korea has migrated to English-speaking countries for educational purposes. Early study abroad typically involves year-long attendance in primary or secondary schools for at least one year. These youth are usually accompanied by their mother while the fathers stay behind to provide for the cost involved in studying abroad. This phenomenon is driven by "English fever" among families due to the South Korean government's emphasis on the English language

as an important asset in globalized competition (Kang & Abelmann, 2011; Park & Lo, 2009). As a large proportion of middle-class families adopt early study abroad as an educational strategy for their children to master English and obtain Western educational credentials, the number of South Korean early study abroad students has been rising sharply (Park & Bae, 2009).

Early study abroad students' school adjustment experiences are likely to differ from those of immigrant youth or international students who arrive in the host country as young adults (e.g., college or graduate students) due to their immigration status, family context (e.g., absence of a parent), and young age. They are likely to encounter significant challenges as they navigate the foreign school system; this can be triggered by the failure of U.S. schools to meet the needs of these students (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Whereas the adjustment process of international students in universities has been well-documented (Andrade, 2006; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003), relatively little is known about the challenges for those who engage in a study abroad experience at a younger age. Moreover, most research on Korean early study abroad students has not looked at the school context in examining their adjustment experiences.

#### **School Adjustment of Korean Transnational Students**

A recent educational policy, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), requires schools to address equal access of English Language Learners (ELLs), including newly arrived transnational students, to school resources and academic success. While previous policy focused on addressing transnational students' linguistic, academic and social needs, the new policy emphasizes examining the institutional structures and practices that support these students' learning and school adjustment. Previous research suggests that both the broad school context (e.g., school support, cultural sensitivity) and positive teacher/student interactions, facilitated by the teachers' use of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994), significantly contributed to students' learning. Together, the current policy and previous research highlights the importance of understanding transnational students'

experience with their teachers and the school context as a whole to better understand their learning and school adjustment experiences; to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined Korean transnational students' experiences. Research suggests a lack of understanding and recognition of a situated transnational lifestyle by public school educators and researchers (Sanchez & Kasun, 2012). Schools are not providing enough support to these newcomers who share different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Bigelow (2010) found that newcomer student programs in certain school districts were failing due to their unfamiliarity with the U.S. school system and a complex network of educational practices. This resulted in the students' disengagement in schools.

Jackson and Davis (2000) noted adolescents' need for a sense of belonging in school as an important factor in improving academic achievement. Several empirical studies (e.g., Anderman, 2003; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) have shown a positive correlation between students' sense of belonging and their school achievement. However, there is a dearth of research on sense of school belonging among early study abroad students. There is a need to understand how they are participating in school activities and whether they are integrated with other peers in schools.

### **Method**

A collective case study (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995) was employed to understand the experiences of four Korean early study abroad students enrolled in an American middle school. Because the focus of this study was to understand these students' school adjustment-related experiences, the primary data were collected through individual interviews with the students and observations in the school setting. As supplementary data, their ESL and classroom teachers were interviewed after each class observation to confirm the findings of the observation and interview data with the participants.

### **The School and Participants**

The school, located in a suburban area in upstate New York, had 950 students enrolled. During

the data collection, the ethnic makeup was 82% White, 12% Black, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic. In that school, approximately 25% of the students received free or reduced cost meals. The school hired a part-time ESL teacher, Karen, who had over 10 years of teaching experience, and implemented a pull-out ESL program to assist 23 ESL students in improving their limited English proficiency. In a pull-out program, ESL students were removed from their regular classes to receive small-group instruction for 30-50 minutes. At the time of the data collection, Karen, the ESL teacher, did not have her own classroom space but shared a small room next to the cafeteria with a special education teacher. This room was not designed to be a classroom and was previously used as a storage room.

Our participants were four Korean early study abroad students: Jinsoo, Mina, Jihyun, and Minsoo. Their grades ranged from six to eight. They were all enrolled in an ESL class taught by Karen and were recruited from one of the pull-out ESL classes. All participants moved from Korea to the US with their mothers for their education less than two years ago. Their parents were either graduate students or postdoctoral students at one of the neighboring universities. All participants wished to continue their study in the US until they finished their college education. The educational level of their parents was relatively high (all college-graduates), and their socioeconomic status in Korea was either the middle or the upper-middle class. These four students lived with their mothers in the US and received financial support from their fathers who stayed in Korea. The students' fathers visited the US to meet their families every summer and during winter breaks.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary data consisted of interviews with the participants and classroom observations with field notes. The secondary data were informal talks with four classroom teachers (three content area teachers and an ESL teacher) and the youth's parents. The main purpose of the secondary data was to triangulate the data collected from the interviews with the participants.

Each participant was interviewed three times during the school semester. Each interview lasted one hour with one-week intervals.

Interview questions were semi-structured and focused on their daily school life, learning experiences in their current school, previous school experiences in Korea, and after-school activities in general. Interview questions included probes based on the previous interviews and classroom observations. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. To obtain detailed and in-depth descriptions of their experiences, all interviews were conducted in Korean. All transcripts were written in Korean and translated into English.

Classroom observations were conducted in Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies and ESL classes. Two classroom observations were conducted for each student. The average length of each classroom observation was approximately 40 minutes. Classroom observations focused on the Korean students' classroom participation and their interactions with the teacher as well as with other classmates, as the purpose of the classroom observations was to confirm the interview data. After each observation, the researcher conversed briefly with the classroom teacher about the participants' classroom interaction, participation, and his/her overall impression of the participants' school behaviors. In addition to the regular class hours, a one-time observation was conducted during a lunchtime in the school cafeteria to observe participants' interactions with other students outside the classroom.

The data were analyzed by following the four stages of case study data analysis proposed by Stake (1995). All instances relevant to participants' learning, school experiences and adjustment were categorized for meanings relevant to our research questions. We reviewed each single instance for meaning and looked for similar instances. This process included reorganizing the data by pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways (Creswell, 2013). After initial categorization, two or more categories were connected to establish patterns and to develop any naturalistic generalizations. For instance, the participants' dual desire to keep Korean friends and to master English caused a dilemma in their adaptation to American schools.

## Results

All youth participating in the study described tremendous difficulties and challenges in adjusting to the U.S. middle school. There were two emerging themes related to school adjustment: overall academic learning experiences and sense of school belongingness. Based on the theme, we tried to answer the two research questions posed in the beginning of the paper.

### **Research Question 1: What are Korean early study abroad students' experiences like in adjusting to American middle schools?**

#### **Academic Learning Experiences**

All students described significant difficulties in overall learning. The students experienced challenges in all aspects of learning: comprehension of class materials and instructions for assignments and exams, and necessary study skills. This includes challenges inside the classroom, such as teacher expectations and class activity objectives, and outside the classroom, such as school policy and curriculum. During class, all youth had difficulty in comprehending class materials due to their English deficiency. For example, Minsoo said, "In general, I understand only about half of what my teachers say." Jinsoo added, "I try to ask questions to my teacher when I don't understand, but my teacher doesn't even understand what I'm asking." The participants also described difficulties in understanding instructions for assignments or their teachers' expectations. Given their language-related challenges, it is not surprising that all participants attributed their limited English proficiency to their academic struggles. For example, Jinsoo said, "I wish they could explain everything in Korean. I feel like I can do so much better."

While our participants found math to be easier in a U.S. school in comparison to Korea, they found all other subjects to be extremely challenging, specifically due to their limited content-specific academic language. The students often struggled in all areas of academic measurements (e.g., assignments, portfolios, in-class tests). In terms of learning assessment, they not only struggled with the understanding

of the concepts but with the understanding of exam questions. For example, Jihyun complained that the wording of the exam questions was too difficult and that she could not even understand what the questions were asking. The students' attempts to clarify questions often failed because they felt uncomfortable communicating with their non-ESL teachers. She said, "They try to explain, but I sometimes don't understand that either." Finally, the students described their lack of study skills. Their studying often involved spending a long time looking up the meaning of the words and memorizing class materials without understanding the concepts. Minsoo for example said, "[In studying for the exam] I just try to memorize everything on the study guide." Similar methods of studying were shared by the other participants.

### **Sense of School Belonging**

The students' tremendous challenges in learning often led to negative emotions and attitudes toward their school. Our participants often associated their school with feelings of boredom and frustration. Mina, for example, said, "It's boring and frustrating to be sitting in class when I don't understand anything or what I'm learning. I don't really think it is really hard. I just think it's boring and frustrating." All participants expressed a low sense of school belonging, which was manifested in several different ways. First, the students had few interactions with people in the school setting, including their content teachers and other students. When asked to describe their typical interactions with students and teachers, all students said that they had little to no interactions with non-ESL students and non-ESL teachers in and outside of classrooms. Their social interactions in school were limited to their ESL teacher and other ESL students. Observation in the school cafeteria confirmed this separation between ESL and non-ESL students. During lunch hours, the participants congregated with other ESL students, separate from other students. There was little interaction between participants and non-ESL students when researchers visited their schools.

During the school visits, the researchers noticed that the participants often visited their ESL classroom during breaks for social purposes, such as socializing with other ESL peers or their

ESL teacher. They were seeking a way to find a sense of belonging in their new school. The lack of social integration in the school seemed to affect their ability to navigate their school setting. For example, all participants showed little understanding of school rules and teacher expectations, and determining the most basic information (e.g., how to use the bathroom, locate a locker, buy lunch) was a major challenge to them. Jihyun described her three-month-long ordeal trying to figure out how to ask permission to use the bathroom during class hours. She said:

I asked other Korean kids at first, but they were all new and didn't know themselves. So another kid from China taught me...she said I just need to take a pass to leave and bring it back when I return from bathroom. I couldn't go to the bathroom [for three months] during the entire time. I used the bathroom at home before coming to school.

Other participants shared similar stories pertaining to their struggling to adapt to the school. In addition to the lack of social interactions in the school, the students did not have meaningful school-related or after-school activities that could help them to be engaged with the school. All participants said that they did not participate in any other activities in the school context, including after-school activities.

To these students, school was a challenging and an intimidating environment they needed to struggle to figure out, rather than a place where they could focus on learning and developing friendships.

### **Research question 2: How do the students' microsystems affect their school adjustment?**

Ecological theory was used to understand Korean early study abroad students' interaction with their surroundings. We focused on family, peer and school contexts to better understand their experiences related to school adjustment as well as the underlying processes.

### **Family**

The students' accounts of their family revealed significant disconnections between their family

and school contexts, as well as a lack of active parental support in helping the participants adjust to the school. First, our analyses revealed that there was little communication between the students' mothers and the school officials or teachers. Second, their mothers had a limited ability to support them with their school work. While some said that their mothers provided supervision and assisted with their homework or exam preparation, all participants acknowledged that their mother was unable to provide much support due to the language barrier and their unfamiliarity with the new school system. It was common for them to learn and complete assignments independently, usually relying on English dictionaries. Jinsoo said, "I had to rely on an electronic dictionary [because of my mom's limited English]." He then compared this with his mom's ability to help with his school work back in Korea. He said, "Mom used to check my homework in Korea every day [but not here]. Minsoo echoed, "Back in Korea, mom used to check my homework. But here, because my mom doesn't speak English, my sister does it.... [My sister] doesn't check all the time though." A content teacher confirmed that Jinsoo had not submitted certain homework assignments on time. However, his mother did not know about his missing homework because the content teacher did not share this with his mother during the parent-teacher conference. Usually, the annual parent conferences and meetings between teachers and the mothers were short and focused on academic achievement, leaving little room for discussions on students' school adjustment.

### Peers

The participants' descriptions of their peer interactions in school revealed very limited peer support in school due to the lack of a peer network. The students stated that few interactions with non-ESL students occurred inside or outside of the school. Jihyun, for example, said, "I don't usually hang out with American friends. I only see them at school and don't see them after school," and then compared her close friendship with a Chinese ESL student who used to come to her home for sleepovers. The students expressed challenges in becoming friends with the majority of U.S. peers due to differences in shared interests, play behavior, and the perceived racism or discriminations of U.S. students. For example, Minsoo said,

"American kids don't know anything about computers. If you try to talk to American kids about computers, it's frustrating because they don't understand what you're talking about. In Korea, you do everything via the Internet. So, you understand each other...." Jinsoo agreed, "American students are boring. They don't know much about the computer." Minsoo described perceived differences in play behavior: "Back in Korea, I used to go to friends' places a lot. Here, the reason I don't go to friends' places is because they want to just play outdoors. They just do sports....I don't like sports." Participants also felt that the majority of U.S. students perceived them as inferior. For example, Mina said,

I don't like American kids...they are snobs....Girls would ask me to do things together. And if I say I can't, they would say like, 'oh, it's really easy...' you know, the subtle kind of things [that show they look down on you]. Back in Korea, kids show off if they are really good at certain things, but here in America, [kids show off] not because they are really good at something but just because they are American.

Participants also shared their experience of racism and of being bullied by their U.S. peers. Jihyun shared her experience with racism:

Some kids would say things to my face, making a mocking face and try to mimic Korean. And one girl in my class asked, because they don't know anything about Korea, whether we have a TV. I tried to explain to her but she said that she can't understand me because my English accent is so weird.

Interestingly, youth did not find their Korean peers in their school as a source of support as they sensed that the other Korean students were not in any better place than they were in terms of their school adjustment. Instead, they felt a sense of rivalry among Korean students in school, often triggered by their parents, who created pressure by comparing them with others. For example, Mina said: "It's peaceful as long as there aren't many test results or grades. But if there are reports of grades, then there is a lot of drama...there is too much competition." Jihyun added, "My mom compares me with other Korean friends. I sometimes get scolded by

mom whenever I do my homework. [name of her friend] rarely needs help [when she does homework] .... Mom always says ‘when [name of her friend] studies so hard.’” Jihyun explained her mother’s constant comparison with other Korean students: “Moms talk about other Korean kids’ schooling in the church...There are only a few Korean students, so they compare more here [because you can see the differences more]. Back in Korea, there were so many students who were so good, so my mom didn’t really compare much.” During class time, those Korean students did not sit together, although they did during lunchtime in cafeteria. Apparently, there was some tension among the Korean students.

### School

Our participants’ descriptions of the school setting portrayed a sharp contrast between their ESL classes and non-ESL classes. Overall, youth described their ESL class as a school setting where they felt comfortable and belong; this was manifested in their classroom behavior and relationships with their teachers. First, participants described their different classroom behavior in their ESL and non-ESL classes. They felt more comfortable in their ESL class, which helped them to be more engaged. Minsoo, for example, said: “In my ESL class, because I’m more comfortable and there are students from other countries, I play around all the time.” When asked his perceptions of how his teachers may think of him, he said, “My ESL teacher may think I’m loud, talk a lot, and playful in class, while my other teachers may think I do homework well and am not talkative in class.” During classroom observations, Minsoo was very active and humorous in the ESL class while quiet in the other content classes. Second, participants reported that they felt closer to their ESL teacher than their non-ESL teachers, and that their ESL teacher understood them better than non-ESL teachers did. Minsoo said, “Because I talk [in class] all the time, [my ESL teacher] knows me well.”

While participants described their ESL classes as a salient school context that provided a sense of belonging, they also described some issues with their ESL class. First, they perceived their ESL classes as academically unchallenging. For example, Jinsoo said that, “[ESL class] is too easy. I already know what is covered.” Minsoo

added, “In my ESL class, it feels like you’re playing rather than studying.” Second, the students described difficulties in switching between ESL and non-ESL classes. Specifically, the pull-out nature of the ESL program interfered with their learning and reinforced these students’ separation from non-ESL students, as they had to miss or leave their regular classes to attend ESL classes. The pull-out ESL support system did not work well with these students. Mina’s account captures this. She said:

I feel frustrated because I want to do something [in regular classes], but I have to skip it and come to an ESL class. Sometimes I skip about half of the [regular] class. Then [when I return], kids have already finished about half of the class materials. Then, I would just copy other students’ notes. So I don’t learn things because I just copy without really understanding what it means, and if I try to review these things, it is really boring and annoying.

The other three students agreed with Mina in how their ESL support system, a pull-out program, interrupted their learning in other classes. This pull-out program practiced in the school did not promote these students’ interaction but instead limited their interaction with other students and other content teachers.

### Discussion

The current study contributes to the growing literature examining the experience of adolescents who engage in early study abroad during primary or secondary education – a phenomenon affecting a rapidly growing population in many Asian countries, including South Korea. Using a collective case study method (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995), we examined the school adjustment experiences among four Korean early study abroad students. In doing so, we explored potential links between youths’ microsystems (family, peer, and school) and their school adjustments.

Our findings show that our participants experienced significant challenges in different aspects of school adjustment, including academic learning experiences and school belonging. Their limited English proficiency was a primary factor in their academic challenges;

however, the lack of support from their peers and their teachers' failure in providing practical and individualized assistance appeared to contribute to the students' challenges. Consistent with the existing research (Bigelow, 2010; Miller & Endo, 2004), school support provided for English learner students, such as our participants, interfered with their interactions with their peers and teachers, further reinforcing their isolation in the school setting. Youth felt a low sense of belonging in school, often expressing their negative attitudes and feelings toward their school, as well as their sense of alienation in the school context. Research indicates a positive relationship between students' sense of school belonging and their academic achievement (Gandara & Gibson, 2004). Students' sense of school belonging is largely affected by their attitude toward their school as well as their peer interactions, especially for marginalized groups (Delgado, Ettekal, & Simpkins, 2016; Marksteiner & Kruger, 2016). Our finding supports this body of research and highlights the great need for support from the school and teachers to foster a more welcoming and inclusive environment as well as a supportive peer culture in school.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) postulated that multiple links between different settings of microsystems facilitate better adjustment of a child (e.g., a youth may adapt better in school when her/his parents are well connected with her/his teacher), while a lack of interconnections between the child's ecological contexts may have potentially deleterious effects in his/her adjustment. Our participants' mesosystem (interconnections among microsystems) was characterized by disconnections among their microsystems (family, peers, and school), particularly between the family and school. Moreover, their peer system was largely disconnected from the majority peer group in the school setting. For these youth, these disconnections in their microsystems appeared to contribute to their challenges in school adjustment. Our findings highlight the need for understanding students' ecological contexts to obtain more comprehensive understandings of their experiences and processes related to their school adjustment.

Our findings have important implications for school policymakers and educators as to how to assist early study abroad students who

encounter significant challenges associated with adjusting to a new school in the host country. Our study indicates that most non-ESL teachers did not have a good understanding of these students' needs and challenges. All participants expressed how their communication barrier with their teachers interfered with their learning and class interactions. They received little to no systematic support from their teachers or school in their adjustment processes. Based on this finding, we recommend that teacher education programs should include preparation for teachers on effectively assisting transnational students with limited English. Given that the early study abroad population is rapidly growing, it is imperative for U.S. schools to be better equipped to accommodate transnational students. Second, our finding suggests a disconnection between early study abroad students' family and school contexts, which seemed to contribute to challenges they encounter in adjusting to the new school. Schools should find ways to actively build bridges between schools and these students' families. This should include using strategies to involve parents with limited English proficiency, which affects their willingness or level of comfort in getting involved with a school. Lastly, we recommend that schools facilitate positive interactions between early study abroad students and their non-ESL peers. While non-ESL students may be a great asset in helping ESL students with school adjustment processes, in our study, U.S. students' lack of cultural understanding and participants' negative perceptions of their U.S. peers interfered with building friendships.

Taken as a whole, the findings highlight the complexity of the challenges faced by Korean early study abroad adolescents in adjusting to American middle schools and the need for schools to better understand the unique needs and challenges of these students to support their school adjustment process.

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