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Educational Exodus: Stories of Korean Youth in the U.S.

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Abstract: An increasing number of Korean early study abroad (ESA) students are spending some of their K-12 school years in the U.S. to continue their schooling. This typical social and educational phenomenon in Korea has surged since 2000. This study aims to investigate Korean ESA adolescents' life experiences in the U.S., focusing on motives for ESA and challenges they have experienced during their staying in the U.S. A case narrative inquiry was adopted as a research methodology to examine in-depth life experiences of four focal students. For the primary method of data collection, this study employed longitudinal observation, individual interviews, and written documents. Findings indicated that various components were entangled in complex ways for explaining the students' decision-making such as escaping from competitive Korean educational situation, improving English language competence, following their parents' academic journey, and getting better education. However, it might not be a path without risks. In our study, the Korean ESA adolescents have faced various challenges and even agonies. This research will provide authentic and practical information for educators and teachers to understand this emerging group of students.

Keywords: early study abroad; Korean adolescents; English language learning; education; socio-economic class

1. Introduction

According to Korean National Statistical Office (2012), private education for elementary and secondary students in Korea has escalated, and the total expense of the education was estimated at around \$18 billion in 2012. English learning accounts for the priority among the various subjects the educational expenses have been invested in. It describes the social trend where people consider English as a social capital. Korean parents provide their children with opportunities to learn English through private institutes since they were young. As another way to improve English, they send their children to English speaking countries, such as U.S., Canada, Britain, the Philippines, etc.

A dramatically increasing number of Korean early study abroad (ESA) students are contributing to changes of the demographic map of K-12 schools in the United States. This typical social and educational phenomenon has surged since 2000 when Korea started to recover from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis. According to statistics from KEDI (Korean Educational Development Institute), the number of K-12 students who left Korea solely to study abroad increased from just over 2000 in 1995 to a peak of about 30,000 in 2006. This number did not include students whose parents work or study overseas. This increase nearly doubles that from the 2004 figures and reflects an almost sevenfold increase from 2000 ([KEDI 2006](#)).

According to [Kim's \(2006\)](#) study, the "early study abroad (chogi yuhak, ESA hereafter)" students are defined as the K-12 students who are taking the formal education in foreign countries more than

six months. In addition, Korean ESA students in the U.S. are different from Korean or any other Asian immigrant youths in terms of their global positioning. While immigrant families' migration is permanent, ESA students' transnational migration is revolving and temporary based on the axes, their parents. Following their parents, ESA students move back and forth between Korea and the U.S. However, this kind of borderline between Korean ESA students and Korean immigrant youths is getting fuzzier as time goes on.

This article looks into the adjustment experiences of Korean ESA youth with a focus on two research questions: (1) What are the reasons for Korean students to decide ESA? (2) What are the major challenges they are facing and how are they dealing with them?

Therefore, this article will examine the stories of four Korean ESA high school students who have the purposes of studying in U.S. Specifically, it aims at investigating how they identify and construct their racial/ethnic identity, and perceive their adjustment challenges. Previous studies about Korean ESA students are mainly about decision-making processes of study-abroad and academic performance and adjustment (Jo 2007; Jo et al. 2007). There have been limited in-depth studies on Korean ESA high school students' perspectives regarding their identity and adjustment in terms of academic, social, psychological challenges. Therefore, this study will examine the stories of the four Korean ESA adolescents who have lived in the U.S. on racial/ethnic identity and adjustment challenges.

This research will increase the awareness of the intra-group diversity among Korean ESA students in the U.S. For many ESA students, studying abroad in America is regarded as a lifetime opportunity for a better future. However, it is not a path without risks. Investigating studies on ESA and immigrant youth in the U.S. will provide background information for understanding ESA phenomena and Korean ESA students' lives through their voices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English fever in Korea and ESA

The influence of English on Korea has been affected by its political and economic dependency on the U.S. in the independence in the 1940s and in the Korean War in the 1950s (Shin 2004). In 1995, Korean government initiated a globalization project, *Segeyhwu*, and supported the promotion of English education for national competitiveness (Shim and Baik 2004). English competence has also become a form of linguistic capital which is an essential prerequisite for gaining advantages in job market. English fever is now more severe and competitive than any other period throughout Korean history. English is viewed as a language of power and a passport to acquire social capital in Korea.

Within the atmosphere of societal support for English education, "school collapse" which means the crisis of school education in Korea (Kim 2002; Lee et al. 2001) and thriving private education have also been crucial issues intertwined with ESA phenomena. The high school equalization policy of the 1970s was not able to fulfill the achieving desire of upper-middle class, which was formed during the dramatic industrial development period (Kim 2002). Meanwhile, in the severely competitive environment for college entrance system, the private educational markets such as personal tutoring and private institutes grew rapidly. At the end of the 1990s, government educational policies produced huge confusion among teachers, students and parents (Yoon and Jeong 2003). It resulted in Korean parents' distrust of the quality of Korean public school system and more students headed for the private institutes. Most Koreans invest every effort in educating their children, and in the severely competitive social environment, their strong ideologies create overgrown private educational market and the extreme feature is expressed through the phenomenon of ESA boom.

Research on Korean ESA students has examined their decision-making processes and adjustment to the new environment. Jo et al. (2007) examined Korean ESA students' decision-making processes of studying abroad. Negative educational experiences in Korea pushed them to choose study-abroad. Studying in English speaking countries was an advantage for obtaining a career choice. Considering the transnational experiences as a socio-cultural capital was another reason for their decision making.

Lee (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with Korean ESA students regarding their adjustments and aspirations in the U.S. This study revealed that the major problems the students have faced were language barriers, limited social networks and support, and difficulty in adjusting to new cultural and institutional norms. They were living with wounds by racial discrimination and prejudices. Lee argued that those difficulties and barriers might be potential triggers to engender frustrations, maladjustments, and even juvenile delinquency. Bourdieu's (1991) reproduction theory provides us with useful insight to understand the strong desire to ascend social status through education. Many upper-middle class Korean parents aspire to provide their children with not only English competence, but also better education by which the upper-middle class distinguish themselves from others. They attempt to create their own habitus and maintain and reproduce it by seeking better education in and outside the country. Bourdieu (1991) insists that family, school, or social education functions to sustain upper-middle class' power and reproduce it through imposing thought and perception that the social order and structure between dominant and subordinated classes are legitimate. In the socio-cultural context of Korea, acquiring good academic background or graduating specific universities means occupying guaranteed and significant position to control socio-economic capitals. Therefore, many parents are racing blindly or pushing their children to race to win higher positions. Due to this cultural climate, the symbolic violence that appreciates only people who have capitals is spread out legitimately to the whole country.

2.2. Understanding Immigrant Youth

Prior research revealed diverse academic, psychological, social adjustment experiences of immigrant youths in the U.S. Studies found that immigrant youths have suffered from numerous challenges and stresses in adjusting to the U.S. (Suh and Satcher 2005; Suh and Suh 2007; Valdes 2001). At-risk factors affecting Asian American students' high school drop-out rates encompass limited English proficiency, negative attitudes toward Asian/Asian Americans, conflicts between native-born and foreign-born Asian Americans, newly expected classroom behaviors, low economic status, high parental expectations for academic achievement, lack of parental involvement in school, and unfamiliar concept of self and low self-esteem by identity confusion (Suh and Satcher 2005). Suh and Satcher (2005) suggested that at-risk factors such as insensitive and discriminatory school personnel, peer harassment, cultural discrepancies, language deficiency, retention, lack of counseling services could bring about a sense of alienation, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. When Korean American youths face multiple at-risk factors, they might lose their motivation to do school work, and finally they might drop out of school (Suh and Suh 2007). Especially, three variables, low GPA, suspension (behavioral problems), and low SES (socio-economic status), have been identified by researchers as risk factors that have critical effect on high school drop-out rates.

Valdes (2001) pointed out that immigrant students who enter American schools in the middle and high school years face a particularly difficult challenge. She studied the academic success and failure of newly arrived Latino immigrant adolescents. The study found that in ESL classes most students were listening passively, repeating words, copying sentences, and coloring. She stressed the importance of the socio-cultural context which the immigrant youths face: family background, context for engaging in interactions with native English speakers (relatives and friends) outside of school, the design of educational programs, and teacher preparation. This study described how the immigrant children and schools together brought about "not learning".

Lew (2006) also examined factors that affected success and failure of academic achievement of Korean American youths. She conducted a case study on high school dropouts and high achieving Korean American students. The two groups interpreted their racial minority status and marginalization differently depending on the socio-cultural contexts such as socioeconomic backgrounds, contexts of school, home, and community. The socio-cultural factors played an important role in helping the high achieving students reinforce their bicultural backgrounds and bilingual ability, whereas the working-class high school dropouts had financial difficulties at home and were more likely to feel alienation in the Korean community.

Some recent research challenges the perception that foreign-born immigrant youth have difficulty in adjusting to the U.S. Studies find that foreign-born immigrant youths are relatively well adjusted academically, psychologically, and socially compared to U.S.-born adolescents of same ethnic background (Chiang-Hom 2004). Foreign-born adolescents have higher academic achievement, are less likely to engage in violence or delinquency, and have similar or lower levels of psychological distress than U.S. born adolescents. Chiang-Hom (2004) explored a variety of protective factors which could reduce the likelihood of academic failure, depression, behavioral problems of Chinese parachute youths. Parachute kids refer to foreign students who come to the U.S. apart from their parents for a better education, and they live alone, or with a relative or unrelated paid caregiver. The Chinese parachute youths attempted to overcome challenges, hardships, and complexities in the new culture by building co-ethnic supportive network, maintaining ethnic solidarity and confidence, and feeling obligation to their families.

For many years, researchers have also focused on various, complex identities of Asian/Asian American students and called for consideration of varied needs of the students. There has been racist discourse implying that students of Asian descent are all alike and high achieving model minorities as a homogeneous group (Lowe 1996; Lew 2006). The stereotype accompanies the assumption that Asian Americans have had educational success and been economically successful, and they do not necessarily require varied needs, for example, accommodations, assistance from legislation such as Affirmative action. However, there is no single Asian American experience, and various needs of the students should be considered.

In this context, this study focuses on Korean ESA students who have been a newly emerging group of students in the school environment throughout the U.S. In-depth examination of Korean ESA students' life experiences in the U.S. will contribute to existing research in social reproduction and immigrant youths with how they construct their racial/ethnic identity and perceive their adjustment challenges.

3. Methodology

Since the purpose of this study was to examine the life experiences of Korean ESA students during their high school days in the U.S., it was crucial to understand how they navigated their ESA days and how they managed their lives.

To be eligible for participation in this study, participants should be born in Korea or in the U.S. but had to be raised in Korea during their young children period and came to the U.S. continuing their formal education. This study focuses on four (two boys and two girls) Korean ESA adolescent students who attend local public high schools in a small Midwestern city. The authors have built up close relationships for several years in a Korean community which could enable them to observe the students regularly and closely and to have in-depth interviews.

This study adopted a case narrative inquiry method focusing on the life experiences of four focal students. For the primary method of data collection, this study employed longitudinal observation around one year, individual in-depth interviews, and written documents. Regular tutoring at participants' house or meeting at Korean church enabled us to observe under different circumstances. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min, and the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with each participant several times in order to collect information-rich data. Interview questions were developed to listen to participants' own experiences and stories in the U.S. which provide readers with vicarious experiences of Korean ESA students (Stake 1995). Interviews were conducted in either English or Korean depending on participants' preference. Code switching was allowed throughout interviews. For the triangulation of data sources, participants' school works such as class assignments and grade reports were also copied and collected.

In addition, for the data analysis, we employed analytic lenses of narrative inquiry. Chase (2005) statement of narrative was useful in this process:

Unlike a chronology, which also reports events over time, a narrative communicates the narrator's point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place. Thus, in addition to describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. (p. 656)

Therefore, as researchers, we tried to interpret the collected narratives from the participants' point of view to understand not only the facts but also their emotion, feeling and response to their social and family environments.

Generalizability of this study is limited, since those four participants cannot represent the larger population of Korean ESA students in the U.S. However, a rich narrative demonstrated by the multiple participants will be eloquent in connecting historical moments and personal lives (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). It is because, as Shkedi (2005) addresses, we tried to capture several case narratives and presented them as unique cases and ultimately to find some patterns. Such exploration is the goal of narrative inquiry to discover and describe the personal lives of a particular people at a particular moment in a particular space.

We audiotaped the interviews with the participants' consent. After completing data collection through interviews, we transcribed the audio-recorded data for further analysis. To analyze the collected data, we employed analytic lenses of Narrative Inquiry. Chase (2005) statement of narrative was helpful in this process:

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To increase credence of the data analysis, we employed investigator triangulation as well as data source triangulation (Denzin 1984). For investigator triangulation, the authors looked at each other's research description or interpretation. For member checking (Stake 1995) the participants had opportunities to review typed transcripts of interviews to see if any revision was required.

After conducting each interview, we transcribed the audio-taped data and coded each paragraph into themes and sub-themes to find coherent and meaningful patterns across the participants' narratives. Going through this analysis process, we found recursive and critical themes from the participants' unique voices: reasons to decide ESA, struggles in the U.S., and refuge.

4. Findings

4.1. Reasons to Decide ESA

4.1.1. Parents' Decision

Julie and Mark said their ESA was completely decided by their parents. As young children, they did not have any opinion on the decision making process.

Julie

One day, when Julie was six years old, her mom told Julie "Julie, you have a week to pack. We are going to America." Julie answered "Ok, mom." Julie's parents applied to doctoral programs at a university in the U.S., and they were admitted. At the end of the 1990s, Korea was under very serious economic crisis. In the social atmosphere, teaching profession was considered as a very stable job. Regardless, this two-paycheck teacher-couple quit everything and decided to move to the U.S. pursuing their dreams. For Julie, she had no idea of what was going on to her parents but just set out on a long journey to cross the Pacific Ocean feeling pity for her one year old sister who was crying all the way on the plane.

After arriving in the U.S., Julie entered elementary school as a first grader. The very first day of school, her father taught her a sentence of English. "Julie, repeat after me, 'I don't speak English.'

If anybody says something to you, just answer them with this. Ok Julie? Good luck.” From that day, Julie’s parents were so busy studying their course works at the university and taking care of their one-year-old baby. Julie had to survive by herself as a shy and silent girl at school. Julie’s parents never showed up at her school for any school events, and even sometimes they totally forgot Julie’s birthday. Fortunately, Julie’s elementary school had a native language support program, so every day for 40 min she could breathe in Korean class, speaking and reading in Korean. Interestingly, Julie’s father arranged math tutoring for her starting when Julie was in third grade, even though it was English that Julie struggled with at that time.

Mark

When Mark heard the plan from his parents to move to the U.S. to spend his father’s sabbatical year, he was very excited. It was not because he still had a dim and pleasant recollection of Los Angeles, where he was born, but because most of his classmates gave him their envious looks. All classmates made a collage to give to Mark as a present. Many students wrote how much they envied him. Mark still keeps it on the wall of his room as a memorable souvenir.

Mark came to the U.S. as an eighth grader, following his father who came to a university in the Midwest as a visiting scholar. He was born and raised in California for five years while his father pursued a doctorate degree. Mark’s English competence was not strong enough when he came back to the U.S. in the eighth grade, but he was able to keep up with the schoolwork during his middle school years. After a year, his father returned to Korea, leaving Mark and his mother behind. After another year, his mother also went back to Korea, and, from that time on, he lived at a guardian’s home.

4.1.2. Following Siblings

John

John is a tall, good-looking youngster. He was born in America. A year later, his father received Ph.D. degree in the U.S., and his family returned to Korea. His father gained a professional position at a university in Korea. When John was in seventh grade, he came to the U.S. with his mother and older brother. His parents purchased the house for their children in middle-class neighborhoods where the quality of schools is generally good. They lived apart from his father, who remains in their homeland to support his family financially. His father usually visits his family once or twice a year during the vacation period of the university he is working at.

John’s parents had sent his older brother beforehand to America. Several months later, when his brother made a home visit during summer vacation, John and his mother came to meet him at the airport, expecting a thrilling family reunion. However, when they saw his brother coming out of the exit at the airport, John muttered “Is this my brother?” to himself. His brother looked so pale that it was hard to recognize him. John’s brother confided in his parents regarding the conflicts with the guardian family he resided with. John’s parents, who put the family’s expectations on the first-born child, decided that his mother should accompany him when he returned to the U.S. to take care of him. John had to leave for America with his mother. John explained the reason for his ESA in an interview,

“Due to my brother . . . My brother was facing difficulties in living with guardian family at that time. When he came back to Korea during the first summer vacation, my parents realized that issue, and my mother decided to come with him to the U.S. At that time, my mother asked me if I want to go to America to study living with my brother. I said “Yes.””

Mary

Mary was a strikingly pretty youngster who towered over most of her classmates. She attends the same high school with John. She was born in America and, one year later, her family moved to Korea. Mary was the second child in her family that included an older sister who is a college student. She has lived with her grandmother and her sister in this town for four years. They lived in a three-bed

room apartment, which is located three minutes from her school by car. Her grandmother is a reliable caregiver of the two sisters. She took care of most of the household jobs. Mary and her grandmother have developed very close relationship since Mary was very young. Her parents remain in Korea and run a famous restaurant. Mary's parents use their financial resources to ensure that their children live in safe neighborhoods and attend good schools.

Mary came along with her sister, similar to John. However, unlike John, English language learning was not the main purpose for her to stay in America. Since Mary attended English kindergarten and an international elementary school from third to sixth grade in Korea, she had already developed quite good English competence. She remarked,

"My sister came first, then I decided to come along, my mom asked me, I said yes, this was a kind of my decision, but I had to do any way . . . My sister comes to this university, not the reason of learning English because I originally go to (an)international school in Korea."

4.1.3. Pursuing the Privilege of U.S. Citizenship

John

In Korea, John's academic achievement was generally ranked middle at school. His parents worried that he might not enter a prestigious university in Korea and believed that it could be better to enter an American college as an alternative education. High competition for colleges and job market in Korea drives many students to choose early study abroad to escape from the unlimited competition. According to the National Statistical Office, private education in Korea has escalated, and 88.8% of elementary school students are taking private education, and the total expense of the education was estimated at \$14 billion in 2007 (Mo 2009). John's parents made such arrangement for seeking better education, presumably in the best interests of their children. John also held negative viewpoints about Korean education, which propelled him to choose ESA. The inescapable environment suffocated John to find another place where he might feel safe and comfortable. The following reflects his feelings about Korean education.

"There are many differences between Korea and America. In Korea, there are a lot of homework from school and private institutes. I have some reasons why I want to give up Korean citizenship to keep the US one. In Korea, everybody goes to private institutes and has to study very hard. But here in the US I don't need to do much homework and go to private institutes. In Korea, it takes a lot of time to go to some places due to the ongoing traffic jams. Here it doesn't take much time to move around by car."

John perceived American citizenship as a privilege and seemed to be proud of having it. He believed there was no reason to relinquish the privilege considering many people, as he thought, aspired to gain.

"It's very difficult to earn American citizenship. Somebody said that it took more than 10 years. And if I give up Korean citizenship, I don't need to go to Korean Army. But, I can apply for Korean citizenship if I want later. It's not so difficult to earn it again. I like here and this town and living in America."

Mary

The international school provided Mary with the opportunity to enhance English language proficiency, and she did not need to learn English in other countries. Rather, American citizenship and family immigration are the reasons for Mary to choose to stay in America. She perceives American citizenship as a privilege many people aspire to gain. She does not have a reason for giving up the privilege. She said, "I am an American citizen. I don't need to live in Korea." When asked about why she likes American citizenship, she said, "Because the land is large. I don't really care. My parents will come later." Residing in the big, strong country as an American citizen is a privilege. In addition,

living with her parents, who are preparing to immigrate into America, is another crucial reason for Mary. Mary also mentioned Korea's educational circumstances, which reinforced her determination of studying abroad. The educational situation strengthened her preferences of American education. She expressed her thought regarding Korean education as follows.

4.2. *Struggles in the U.S.*

4.2.1. Academic (Dis)oriented Mind

Julie

When Julie was in the fifth grade, she realized firsthand that her parents were over solicitous for her academic progress. Julie's English literacy had improved greatly, and, one day, her writing teacher pulled out Julie to write an essay for a writing contest when her other classmates were in math class. During math class, the teacher assigned important homework, but Julie did not know about it. A few days later, Julie got a "B" for math because of her missed homework. Julie's father was so mad at the "poor" result, and Julie tried to explain to him, but it was useless. Even her parents came to the school to complain about it, and Julie had to soothe herself after being astounded at her father's unexpected response.

One day, when Julie was in the seventh grade, her mother picked up information of a high school which was a renowned public high school in the town. Although it was a public high school, to be admitted, students had to have high score of SSAT and GPA and the school accept students from eighth grade. Because there was only one month left to take SSAT, Julie's parents made her study SSAT all day long in her room, only allowing her to eat and go to the bathroom. Julie could not understand fully why she had to be grounded and cram for the exam. Nevertheless, because she heard that the high school was the best one in the town, she decided to do her best and was finally admitted. However, from that time, she had to face real challenges.

Mark

Mark showed that his academic strategy disoriented during his ESA period. School life in the U.S. was quite stressful for him because of his limited English competence. Meanwhile, he observed that many Asian students were called "nerds" by other American students stereotypically because those Asian students always studied hard and were not good at playing sports. Since Mark considered being called "nerd" a huge humiliation, he tried to stay away from the "nerd" group and focused more on doing sports and less on studying. Thus, doing sports and playing Internet games came to be the only sources of pleasure for Mike, who was living separately from his family.

Mary

"I think it's a good choice because I like America. In America, I don't need to take college entrance exam. In Korea, I heard that high school students slept only two hours a day and have to attend private academy. And it's hard to go to a good university."

In Mary's perspective, her choice of staying in America is the best choice considering various factors. The fabric of her decision was composed of complicated elements, not simple one.

Mary's parents wished that she could aim for an elite medical school to become a doctor in the future. They had higher expectation of Mary than of her older sister because Mary has shown excellent academic achievement since she was very young. They were pushing Mary to get straight "A"s and to get almost perfect score in SAT/ACT. They used to call home almost every day, and she would tell her parents what she did during the day. She does not have much to say on the phone with them. She explained,

"... they keep the fire alive, nagging every day in phone, maybe advice. They remind me of how important it (studying) is ... "

Mary's parents often reminded her of the family's pride in academic achievement. Her aunt is the first Korean female chemist who earned Ph.D. in America, and one of her close relatives is a very famous mathematician in Korea. Even her aunt often calls her and encourages her to do well at school. Asian parents tend to believe that going to elite school, pursuing higher education, and its payoff in labor market are the ticket to mobility in the U.S. (Louie 2004). Many of them believe that higher education, which is the route to technical and licensed professions, might offer financial stability in the society. Mary also comes from a family who holds strong beliefs in the value of education and hard work.

Her overall GPA is more than 4.5. However, she feels much pressure from her family and worries about grades and ACT/SAT scores. One day, she stated that, nowadays, she is very moody and cries a lot because her ACT/SAT scores were not high enough to satisfy her parents. She mentioned different cultural expectations at school and home in the following excerpt.

"If ordinary American people got 28 in ACT, they think that it is a very good score, but my parents said that because I am very bright, I can get perfect score, and 28 is not good for me."

Her parents did not allow her to have free time such as hanging out with friends and going to a Bible study group until she can get satisfactory score. Her parents hired English and math tutors to help her academic achievement and test scores. The academic support creates the environment for Mary to supplement what she needs for test scores.

Mary perceived that to accomplish the goal her family expected from her, she has to gain excellent grades at school and get high scores in SAT/ACT. Her parents' and her grandmother's sacrifice for her makes her feel obligation to them. The sacrifice of her family makes her feel a sense of obligation to compensate for their sacrifice. Satisfactory academic achievement—all "A"s and almost perfect test scores—is the only way to meet what they expect from her. Her parents' expectation is conducive to her decision-making process of choosing what to study in college and what careers to pursue. She seemed to consider her parents' wishes. She does not know what she really wants. She seemed to forge her path following her family's wishes. She knows that pursuing a field that offers big payoffs in the labor market is a way to give back something to her family. Successful life means making "much money" for her.

Interviewer: What do you think "successful life" means?

Mary: Successful life means making much money.

Interviewer: Where did you get the idea?

Mary: From the world.

Sometimes, her older sister yelled at Mary when she thinks that Mary does not study hard. One day, Mary said that, when she was lying down at her grandmother's feet and watching television, Mary's sister yelled at her. Mary did not say anything to her. She said that she just said nothing because she did not want to be a same person as her sister. However, she did not seem to look fine. She looked enraged, and was choking down her rage. There was no way out for her. The only way through which she gets her breath back was to join in activities at Korean ethnic church: mission trip to Mexico, hanging out with her friends, retreat, and praise team. She said she really liked to go to church and to join various activities in youth group of the church. She spent time with her friends who were struggling with the similar issues and concerns to comfort each other. She expanded her social networks to include English-speaking Korean American students, especially through the church environment. One day, Mary was crying because her school grades went down, and her church friends were soothing her.

4.2.2. Conflict with Parents

Julie

When Julie finished eighth grade at high school, her mother got a job in Korea as a professor in a college and told Julie “Julie, you have a week to pack. We’re going back to Korea.” It was exactly the same words that Julie heard eight years ago in Korea. The only difference was the destination of the travel. However, at this time, Julie’s response was also totally different and decisive: “Over my dead body”. Julie’s father had not finished his degree yet, so he wanted Julie to go back Korea with her mother and two younger sisters. He was so surprised and mad at Julie’s response. He had never expected and experienced such a determined attitude from Julie. He considered that it was because Julie had been Americanized too much. To him, who believes the obedience to parents is the most important virtue of children, revealing self-assertion in the face of her parents was a great shock.

“He told me “You have lived too long in the US” But I don’t know and I don’t care if I’m Korea or American. When my parents brought me here, I didn’t have any idea what was going on. However, now it is different. I have lived here for eight years. I go to school here and I have my friends here. My life is here. I hate to go back to Korea.”

Finally, they made a deal. Julie was allowed to stay in the U.S. with her father until he finishes his doctoral degree. However, both of them had to go through huge adversity without buffer zone of other family members, i.e. her mother and sisters.

After her mother and sisters left, every day Julie and her father have had warfare. Always there have been various topics of confliction such as “Julie, you do not do your best to get the best grades” or “Why are you returning home so late? You didn’t do your dishes today.” When these things happened, her father always said “Because you want to stay here, I am sacrificing myself to take care of you during my busiest period. Then, why do you fret my gizzard every time?” To concentrate on writing dissertation, he wanted Julie to return to Korea with her mother. However, Julie really wanted to stay longer in the U.S. because he agreed to keep Julie at great inconvenience. Every morning they had cereal individually and for supper Julie found food which father prepared in the refrigerator. When Julie found nothing, she just called to her friends who have cars to buy hamburger. Julie barely ate with her father at the same table for a year.

In hatred of her father, Julie planned to revenge herself on her father and put the idea in practice. It was to ruin the grade of math, the subject which Julie’s father counted most importantly. During the last semester, Julie never handed in her math homework. Actually, she did the homework at home, she said, but she just tore the papers to pieces. When the math teacher was aware of Julie’s poor progress, he sent a notice to Julie’s father. As expected, her father furiously raged against Julie and browbeat Julie into making up the delayed homework as soon as possible. Julie said yes in fear and trembling, but she did not do that. A few weeks later, in the morning, when her father gave a ride to Julie to the school, he realized that Julie still did not start anything for the homework. Right away, he turned his car home. Totally losing his temper, he slapped Julie on the cheek. Julie fell down on the floor and felt father’s kicking. Almost instinctively, Julie ran away to garage and stayed there for six hours. It was still cold at that time. In the semester, Julie got B+ for math. It was not that bad for Julie considering the minimum effort she invested, but it was still good enough to hurt her father’s feeling.

4.2.3. Hardship to Adjust to the U.S.

John

At the time when John decided to go ESA, he had little experience of learning English. He had learned English grammar at a private English academy for one year. At the middle school he attended, he learned only the beginner level of English. He regretted that he did not build up English fluency. While staying in America, he has often faced language difficulties at school. The following remark reveals his feeling.

“There were students who teased me. I felt annoyed especially when I didn’t feel good . . . When I didn’t understand what they said, I asked them to say it again. But, they said something weird and went away. They would not say it again. Mostly, they just ignored what I said and went away.”

One day, some students irritated John by throwing a paper on his head. John construed that his limited English proficiency and the ensuing communication problems were the major reasons that could make those students look down on him.

English learning is viewed as a reason for survival rather than necessity for John. He explained that English was a tool to communicate with people who have various cultural backgrounds. He searched for ways to enhance communicative competence. Two ways he found out were to avoid talking with Korean students and be involved in various afterschool activities. He has been involved in Anime club, Ping-Pong, board game, Key club, math, and youth orchestra for one semester. The involvement was also a way to get credits that could help to graduate. He has enjoyed making friends who speak English and interacting with them in English.

“In order to learn English fast, I am not talking with Koreans, but talking with Americans. It helps develop my English. Learning English makes me easy to communicate with other people . . . ”

Despite his efforts to participate in various after-school activities, several factors have impeded his learning in American school system. His limited English proficiency tended to decrease his confidence in academic achievement and appeared to deter himself from being successful in school. He has faced difficulties in keeping up with school works and completing homework assignments. John’s parents hired private tutors to support him. A native speaker of English has taught him English reading and writing for two years once a week. The English tutor helped him practice reading aloud and corrected mostly grammar in his writing. The tutoring was not directly focused on helping him keep up with school work. Math tutoring was provided by a Korean teacher to help him keep up with school work. One of the authors has helped him to prepare ACT/SAT.

His school grades were problems. When he was in 11th grade, he took warnings at school grades several times from school. School subject teachers of not only English and world history, but also his favorite subjects, math and AP chemistry, sent letters to his parents regarding his at-risk status in academic achievement. They notified that there were lots of missing assignments and low grades at exams. The course work in English and world history were too heavy for John to manage. In addition, reading novels that contain heavy English texts made him bored and less interested in reading itself. He said that it took a lot of time to read a novel.

“The book was not always difficult to read. It is boring. It took a lot of time to read a novel....I read two sentences and then listened to songs to take some rest.”

The subjects such as Math and Chemistry were his favorite ones, but at the time of interviews, he was taking the advanced courses of the subjects because he would like to challenge them following the footsteps of his brother. Therefore, he was in out of control. He did not know how to manage all of the works he had to do. In addition, while being involved in many afterschool activities, he did not have enough time to concentrate on academic works. His mother often asked John’s older brother to help John with his school work. However, John’s brother gave little help to John because he was also busy doing his own works. John began to develop the attitude of school refusal. The number of days he was absent from school has increased. John blamed himself as a lazy person about all of the negative results in his school life. He reported that he attributed all of the undesirable results such as low grades and lack of English language proficiency to his own responsibility, his laziness.

4.3. Refuge

Julie, Mark, and John showed that they were seeking a refuge or some types of hiding place to avoid their struggles they encountered during their ESA period. Julie found her comfort zone at a

Korean church she attended. For Mark and John, indulging in online games and being lazy were forms of escapism.

4.3.1. Other Korean Friends

Julie

In this circumstance, church was the only space where Julie could breathe psychologically and socially. It did not necessarily mean Julie was deeply religious or she hung out with many friends. Only at church, Julie could find somebody to communicate with. She maintained close relationships with only a few friends who were townies and ESA students. Among them, Amanda and Rick were special friends to Julie. Amanda was a Korean American and junior in college. Quite often, she provided Julie with rides and spent lots of time with her. Julie felt comfortable when she was with Amanda. Rick was senior of college majoring in Physics. He came to the U.S. as an ESA student when he was seventh grade. Julie really enjoyed having conversation with Rick because he was a good listener and mentor to Julie. Amanda and Rick were dependable friends of Julie who she could share her complicated worries with. Therefore, Julie used to endure weekdays with the hope to see them on Sundays. One day, when Julie's family went a trip and had to come back on late afternoon on Sunday, Julie was so angry because she could not make it to church on that day.

4.3.2. Online Games

Mark

When one of the researchers met him for tutoring, he found that Mark's oral communicative English was severely limited, even though he had studied in the U.S. for three years. He said because of the language barrier he had only a few of Korean speaking friends in and out of school. The limited opportunities to interact with people in English have influenced his slow improvement of English fluency. Moreover, too much freedom gradually made Mark addicted to Internet games. During winter, he could not do much outside activities. Besides, there were only females at guardian's home: the host lady and her two daughters. Therefore, Mike spent most of his time only in his small room enjoying games in the cyber space. Mark said about the reason why he increasingly indulged in playing Internet games:

"It's hard to change my lifestyle. There is nothing to do at home but playing Internet games. At the previous guardian's home, there were two young boys, and I would play outside with them. However, here, everybody is female. I don't want to come out of this room. Internet game is my only pleasure."

One day, a tutor who used to teach ACT to Mark realized that he was not able to help Mark change his life style. Thus, he had Mark write an email to his parents to tell the reality of his life in the U.S.: Internet game addiction, low school grades, and unorganized lifestyle. The tutor expected some solution that Mark's parents would suggest. However, his parents replied to Mark saying, "Just hang in there." Needless to say, Mark's writing a confession did nothing to change his chronic habit. Mark's parents believed that it was too late for Mark to come back to Korea to prepare Korean college entrance exam.

"No, I don't want to go back to Korea because I'm a (American) citizen. So, I have to be here. My elder sister told me not to give up the citizenship, never ever."

Mark had a simple logic: Because he has an American citizenship, he has to live in the U.S. It was a privilege to Mark to escape from the agony which most Korean students had to go through while studying at the cram school until late night every day.

4.3.3. Avoidance

John

His social network is very limited. On Sundays, when other family members attend a church service, he stays home alone and sleeps much of the day. He said that he liked sleeping. When I asked him why he would like to sleep, he said, "There is no joy in my life". Several factors evoked his desire to stay away from school. John believes "laziness" is an immediate reason for his lack of school success. However, his behavior of laziness leading to spending time in sleeping and increased absence from school could be understood as an escape from feelings of inadequacy and frustration. This is how he chooses to relieve his frustrations.

John's mother expects him to go to a community college and then transfer to a big university in consideration of his current academic achievement. He said, "I would challenge a university first and if I couldn't get admission, I will go to a community college. With eggs, I would hit a rock." He added, "My life is very tough. I have a lot of things to do."

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study depicts in detail investigating how Korean ESA students and their parents have developed the ideology of "English and America as power and privilege" and how ESAs positioned themselves in-between two different cultures and languages. Especially, this study found that those Korean parents of participants consider ESA as a necessary step for their children to be more competitive in the global market that privileges Westernization and English fluency.

The contribution of this study was that it enhanced the understanding of the newly emerged Korean ESA students' life experiences during their ESA period in the U.S. To achieve this goal, this study documented through Korean ESA students' voices how their parents' success-oriented ideology drove them to take their secondary education in the U.S.

Various components were entangled in complex ways for explaining the students' decision-making: to live with their sibling; to escape from competitive Korean educational situation; to improve English as a power in the global world; not to give up American citizenship, a privilege; and to maintain social, economic status with the hope of getting better education. Many students might perceive that getting Western education and holding American citizenship is a privilege many people strive to obtain. However, it might not be a path without risks. In our study, the Korean ESA adolescents have faced various challenges and even agonies. Even though this case narrative study displays life experiences of four focal students, the potential issues or challenges are applicable to other ESA adolescents. John spent much time in sleeping, and this behavior is viewed as a form of escapism. He blamed himself regarding all of negative outcomes surrounding him. Mary felt suffocated by her parents' pressure to succeed. Rather than examining what she wants, she tended to internalize her parents' wishes because she knows how much they sacrificed for her. Julie has been treated in harmful and offensive ways from parents. She was bearing hatred toward his father. She interpreted that different cultural expectations between her and her father have ruined the relationship between father and daughter. Mark, who was living separately from his parents, was exposed to the environment where he could easily fall into temptation. Overtly or covertly, the students were looking for some space to breathe freely.

A biblical metaphor, "Educational Exodus", might be used to describe the massive movement of Korean ESA students to countries abroad, typically English-speaking countries. If the immediate goal of Korean ESA adolescents is to enter a "prestigious" U.S. university, the inevitable questions arise: "What would happen then?" or even "What is this all about?". For example, while the researcher observed Mark's life closely and wrestled with him to make changes for better, he could not help but think of what thought processes were going through his mind while playing computer games day in and day out; perhaps as a way to drown out the constant reminders of Korea and his family? At the same time, Mark's obvious stated goal is to gain admission into prestigious university in the

United States. That was all; no more no less. When Mark's parents brought him to the U.S. and left him behind, they did so to provide him with more freedom and opportunities to engage in the social privilege of living in the U.S. However, he just confined himself in his small room indulging in online games to break up the unbearable monotony. Why did Mark come to the U.S.? What sustained him to live such an uneasy life? What were the driving forces that allowed for Mark's parents to leave their child in the U.S.? What do they expect from him when they have sent \$2000 every month to the U.S.? Once the parents' goal of seeing their child enter a U.S. university is actualized, what would happen then? All of these questions, entangled in so many complex ways, became the critical starting point of this research.

Many Korean ESA students might perceive that getting Western education and holding American citizenship is a privilege many people strive to obtain. However, it might not be a path without risks. [Suh and Satcher \(2005\)](#) suggested that at-risk factors Korean American Youths have faced included insensitive and discriminatory school personnel, peer harassment, cultural discrepancies, language deficiency, lack of parental involvement in school, and unfamiliar concept of self and low self-esteem by identity confusion, which could bring about a sense of alienation, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. When Korean American youths face multiple at-risk factors, they might lose their motivation to do school work, and finally they might drop out of school ([Suh and Suh 2007](#)). Some of the potential issues or challenges Korean American youths have wrestled with are also applicable to Korean ESA adolescents including the four focal students in this study.

Korean parents, students, and society need to keep an eye on the potential, visible or invisible hazards found in the seemingly specious journey. Especially, Korean parents have to provide their children with regular supervision or counseling services of capable adults and opportunities to overcome their challenges and hardships by building and/or participating in ethnic supportive network. We hope that the narratives of the teenagers will provide authentic and meaningful information for parents and students who are preparing ESA and the teachers and educators in the U.S. who are teaching those international students.

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