Marginalized Students’ Uneasy Learning: 
Korean Immigrant Students’ Experiences of Learning Social Studies

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This study explores how recent Korean immigrant students experience learning social studies and how their unique social, cultural, and educational backgrounds as new immigrants shape their experiences in American schools. Based on survey and in-depth interviews with 43 Korean immigrant students in two urban and three suburban/rural areas, this mixed methods study examines Korean immigrant youths’ perceptions about the nature of history and social studies as well as their experiences of learning social studies in their everyday classroom contexts. Our data analysis demonstrates that Korean immigrant students face varying difficulties in constructing meaning in US history and engaging themselves in social studies learning, which results in a negative learning experience and subsequent disinterest in social studies. Researchers identified three major challenges that Korean immigrant youths experience in their social studies classrooms: (1) Lack of English proficiency, background knowledge, and American patriotism, (2) White, American-centered perspectives and marginalization of their country of origin, and (3) Teachers’ lack of care and disengaging pedagogies. The findings of this study provide implications for creating more meaningful and culturally relevant social studies learning for immigrant students.

Keywords: Social studies curriculum, Korean immigrant students, US history, sociocultural contexts, multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching,

Introduction

Although the United States has been diverse since its founding, recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia have drastically changed the racial, ethnic, and cultural texture of the nation (Salinas, 2006). In 2007, about 38 million people living in the United States were born outside of the country; it is shown that 25% of all children in the nation are either foreign-born or first-generation immigrants (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). With the increase
of national demographic diversity, ethno-racial minority youth comprise a rapidly growing student population whose interests and needs must be addressed in American schools (Ukpokodu, 2006).

Social studies education, whose ultimate goal is to prepare and develop knowledgeable as well as active citizens, has the potential to address the needs and interests of our increasingly diverse students (Crocco, 2003; Levstik & Tyson, 2008). However, social studies has been frequently criticized for its perpetuations of racialized status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Nelson & Pang, 2006), ignorance of stories and voices of immigrants (Salinas, Sullivan, & Wacker, 2007), and lack of racial, ethnic, and cultural consciousness in its curriculum (Banks, 2007). As a result, immigrant students in US schools mostly see social studies learning as meaningless, unhelpful, and irrelevant to their lives (Almarza, 2001; Halagao, 2004) and experience academic failure and psychological problems including low self-esteem or identity confusion (Urietta, 2004).

Social studies scholars have emphasized the need of empowering minority students, developing more culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum, and helping immigrant students be actively engaged in learning social studies (Cho & Reich, 2008; Subedi, 2008). However, we still know very little about what personal, social, and cultural backgrounds immigrant students bring into their classrooms, how they experience learning social studies in American schools, and how social studies curriculum can better serve the needs of those students (Salinas, 2006). In particular, Asian immigrant students’ voices and experiences have been largely undocumented in the social studies scholarship (Pang, 2006). More research is needed to gain deeper insight into the experiences of Asian immigrant students in social studies classrooms and the development of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy for immigrant youths.

The purpose of this study is to examine Korean immigrant students’ learning experiences of social studies in US schools. This study seeks to answer the questions of: 1) How do Korean immigrant students perceive and experience the official and enacted social studies curriculum? and 2) How do the unique personal, social, cultural, and educational contexts of the new immigrant students affect their learning experiences? This study sheds light on the voices of Korean immigrant students, one of the largest Asian ethnic groups in the United States, but whose stories have been largely ignored in the existing literature, thus adding a new dimension to the research on immigrant students’ perceptions and experiences of social studies education (Park, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework**

Culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) serves as a theoretical lens framing this study. Culturally relevant teaching is defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) as teaching that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 17). Given the failure of American schools to address diverse concerns and issues of minority students (Epstein, 2008; Halagao, 2004; Salinas et al., 2007), educational scholars and practitioners emphasize culturally relevant/responsive teaching that utilizes the very cultural characteristics experiences and perspectives of racially diverse students can serve as a power and effective conduit for teaching those students (Gay, 2000). Moreover, considering the ever increasing diversity in today’s American classroom, culturally relevant teaching has been widely acknowledged as an essential component of educational reform since it inherently promotes academic success grounded in students’ cultural identities while cultivating their potential to engage in the critical pursuit of
Social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Advocates of culturally relevant teaching argue that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of references of students, they become personally meaningful, have a higher interest appeal, and facilitate thorough and holistic learning (Sleeter, 2005).

Social studies scholars and educators have long stressed the need for restructuring social studies curriculum and pedagogy for immigrant students. Acknowledging the problems of traditional social studies education which emphasizes narrowly defined national citizenship and Eurocentric views and addressing multiple academic challenges immigrant students experience in classrooms, they found it urgent to create culturally relevant as well as inclusive learning environments so that immigrant students engage in social studies learning in a meaningful way and ultimately develop knowledge, skills, and attitude to become active citizens in diverse American society (Salinas, Franquiz, & Reidel, 2008; Santora, 2001; Subedi, 2008).

Framed by the notion of culturally relevant teaching, this study seeks to explore challenges and difficulties immigrant students experience in social studies classrooms and discuss how social studies education can better serve their needs and interests in a culturally relevant and meaningful way.

**Literature Review**

Social studies has oftentimes been criticized for its failure to address diverse concerns of immigrants and its ignorance of their history, voices, and contributions to American society (Almarza, 2001; Author1, 2009). Scholars criticize inadequate images and prejudices against racial and ethnic minority groups and their cultures and the passive employment of racial, ethnic, and cultural issues in the school curriculum, particularly the social studies curriculum (Rain, 2006; Sleeter, 2005). Literature shows that many school teachers, who are mostly White, middle-class females, have a lack of understanding of immigrant students’ complex sociocultural backgrounds that these students bring into their classroom, avoid controversial issues of race, ethnicity, and culture, and reinforce White, Eurocentric standpoints (Bolgatz, 2005).

As a result, immigrant students receive education which silences racial construction of American society, reinforces colorblind perspectives, and thus makes social studies learning irrelevant to their personal, social, and cultural perspectives (Gunlock, 2007). In Stacy Rier’s (2006) study, Mexican immigrant students discovered that their history was being disregarded and excluded in US history curriculum and concluded that history class is “stupid” (p. 288) and rife with racism and injustice. Similarly, a Filipino student in Patricia Halagao’s (2004) study articulates, “I remember sleeping a lot through history. Our cultures did not have as much of a history or weren’t important enough to school to teach longer” (p. 467). The lack of racial, ethnic, and cultural consciousness and multiple perspectives to understand history in the school curriculum led immigrant youth to experience difficulties fitting their own perspectives on historical significance with those presented in classrooms which cause minority students’ disengagement and even resentment (Gay, 2004). Moreover, new immigrant students or English Language Learners (ELLs), faced with numerous difficulties in learning a new language and school subjects as well as in making cultural and social adjustment, have to deal with multiple hurdles, including attaching significance in learning history and experiencing academic achievements (Cruz & Thornton, 2008).

However, immigrant students do not always resist White, Eurocentric dominant discourses in the social studies curriculum. Studies demonstrate that religious backgrounds, English speaking ability, recency of arrival in the US, and level of integration into the power
structure of society play significant roles in differentiating students’ understanding of history and building of curriculum meaning (Gunel, 2007). For example, Rrierson (2006) articulates that recent immigrant Latino students recognized the limited portrayal of their own culture in social studies curriculum and are more likely to want their culture to be present so that other students - particularly mainstream Whites - would learn about them. In contrast, those from a relatively high class background tend to conform to the official narratives of the nation in textbooks, their teachers, and standard curriculum. They deemphasize conflict and see most of the nation’s behaviors as “moral, linear, and expansive” (p. 396).

Due to the model minority myth reinforcing the false belief that all Asian students are academically-oriented and therefore do not need social and emotional support, issues pertaining to Asian immigrant students have been marginalized and alienated in educational discourse and generating little efforts to connect school curriculum to their experience (Lee, 2009; Pang, 2006). However, despite their prevalent myth, Lee (2009) reveals that achievement, schooling experiences, and racial relations among Asian and Korean immigrant students greatly vary although they all seem to work hard and look fine at the surface level. Another study with Korean American students also shows that the students were barely exposed to multiple perspectives to understand history and failed to show an extensive understanding of people and events in US history (An, 2009). The studies emphasize that teachers’ awareness of Asian students’ concerns and their instructional efforts to create more inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum are the keys to encourage Asian students to succeed in school and to become knowledgeable and responsible citizens of America. However, Asian immigrant students’ experiences of learning social studies and making sense of history have not received much attention in the social studies scholarship while a growing body of research has investigated Latino immigrant students’ understanding of US history (Pang, 2006). More research is needed to better understand Asian immigrant students’ social studies learning experiences and how their experiences are similar and/or different from other ethnic groups of immigrant students.

Acknowledging immigrant students’ difficulties with engagement in social studies learning, a growing body of research investigates what curricular and pedagogical practices are effective and how teachers can help immigrant students make meaning in social studies learning. Bridging the gap between the students’ cultural backgrounds and social studies curriculum (Cho & Reich, 2008), understanding and respecting immigrant students’ prior knowledge and cultural perspectives and incorporating those perspectives into cross-cultural learning (Salinas et al., 2008), developing critical thinking skills necessary to address controversial issues (Salinas, 2006), and incorporating English language learning in social studies learning (Cruz & Thornton, 2008) have been discussed. However, research on teaching social studies to immigrant youth and promoting culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy for them is still scant (Subedi, 2008).

Addressing the need for more in-depth understanding of immigrant students of previously marginalized groups and their learning experiences (Park, 2009), this study intends to examine the case of Korean immigrant youths, one of the largest and fastest growing Asian ethnic immigrant groups in the US schools, yet whose voices have been rarely heard in educational scholarship (Min, 2005). Although our focused examination on one particular Asian immigrant group, Korean immigrant students, may present limited generalizability, this research may serve as a stepping stone for many other scholarly endeavors in the future, which will ultimately bring in more diverse voices of different immigrant students, developing more culturally relevant and meaningful social studies curriculum and pedagogy.
Methodology

This study is mixed methods research based on survey and interview data collected from 58 Korean immigrant students between 5th and 12th grade. During the summer of 2010, five research sites were selected based on their representations of the diversity of school and regional settings as well as accessibility to research data (Table 1). First, two urban areas (one in the Northeast, the other in the Southeast) were selected based on the fact that they are two of most popular destinations for recent Korean immigrants. Afterward, two suburban areas (one in the Northeast, the other in the Southeast), and one university town in a Midwest rural area were selected. At each research site, participants who met selection criteria were recruited using the snowball sampling method.

Table 1

Participants and Research Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Percentage(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Northeast</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban/Northeast</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Midwest</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Southeast</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban/Southeast</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 year</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 year</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants from the two urban areas attended schools that are located in diverse immigrant communities and therefore serve students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. In contrast, the three suburban or rural locations have relatively smaller Korean immigrant populations, and most Korean immigrant youths in these areas attend predominantly White, monocultural schools. It was expected that Korean immigrant students’ experiences of learning social studies may vary based on their contrasting regional and educational aspects.

The majority of the participants are early-study-abroad transmigrants (An, 2009), middle-class Korean pre-college-aged immigrants who choose transnational migration for Western education and globally marketable human and cultural capital (p. 765). Many of the early-study-abroad youths, often referred as “parachute kids”, come to the United States with one of their parents or live with legal guardians while their parents live in Korea and manage two homes across the borders (Waters, 2005; Zhou & Lee, 2004). The participants’ average length of residence in the US is 3.4 years.
Two triangulations strategies - method and researcher triangulation - were used to ensure the credibility of findings in our study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We collected survey and interview data from all participants, consistently comparing the two in order to develop a more holistic understanding of each participant. A survey comprised of 28 questions was administered as a means to investigate the participants’ personal backgrounds and overall perceptions about their schooling experiences in the US. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to understand how they perceive and experience the social studies curriculum and how their personal and sociocultural backgrounds influence their experiences (See Appendix for interview questions). Though the actual number of participants was 58, findings reported in this paper is based on data from 43 students because the rest 15 students did not discuss their social studies class during the interview.

Our research team utilized researcher triangulation throughout the data analysis process. This study employed inductive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify and develop patterns and themes by which Korean immigrant students internalized and made meaning of social studies curricula. In the process of open coding, three researchers individually read and analyzed transcribed interview data to determine what had been said and to label each passage of data with an adequate code (Ezzy, 2002). Then, the research team collectively examined all proposed code and developed a list of initial codes based on mutual consensus. Using this list of codes, each researcher analyzed 18 to 20 transcripts while serving as a reviewer for another researcher’s analytic result. At the conclusion of these exercises, the research team compared similarities and differences between code fragments within and between each participant’s data source. Interesting themes and apparent contradictions were noted and reflected upon following the coding process (Creswell, 2003). Through the axial coding process of interrelating categories and subcategories, the major findings of this study were generated.

Findings

Korean Immigrant Students’ Perceptions about the Nature of Social Studies

As a whole, Korean immigrant students in this study experienced a significant challenge in engaging themselves with their social studies curriculum. They found little value or meaning in learning social studies and failed to attach significance to the subject content. Thirty (30) out of 43 Korean immigrant students identified social studies, particularly US history, as their least favorite school subject while only 13 students stated that they like or feel ‘OK’ with social studies. Incidentally, 10 out of these 13 with a favorable view confessed that they only like to learn world history, not US history. As a result, approximately 90% of Korean immigrant students interviewed (40 of 43) expressed in part a negative perception and experience of learning social studies, especially US history.

Many participants had not developed their own ideas about the nature of history and social studies as a subject (19 out of 43) or tended to perceive social studies as ‘all about facts’, ‘things that happened in the past’, or ‘content knowledge which is not relevant to their current lives’ (18 out of 43). The most frequently cited words to label social studies by those 18 students were boring, meaningless, disengaging, and useless. The students did not see the purpose or utility value of learning social studies for their future goal. Hyunsoo, a 16 year-old from the Midwest, stated “I don’t think history is relevant to whatever I will do in the future. Studying history will never benefit me anyway.” Yunho, a senior in a suburban Northeast school also
complained that “I can’t find any reason why I need to study history. Teachers seem to know why. But they never explained to me why.”

Moreover, a majority of the participants believed that ‘memorization’ and ‘cramming’ are the best strategies to survive in social studies classrooms. And those strategies seem to make learning and studying social studies even more boring and meaningless. Even high-achieving students, defined as those who are in the top 10 percent of their school and have taken honors or AP courses in this study, argued that they simply memorize the material and receive good grades without ever trying to discover meaning in what they learn in social studies. Yoonbin, a 14 year-old boy from Southeastern suburb, said “Once you memorize key points, like years, events, and important people, social studies is easy.”

Regional differences were witnessed in their perceptions of US history. Participants who attended schools in a rural Midwestern area and Southeastern urban as well as suburban areas strongly demonstrated negative perceptions and experiences of social studies. Aside from four students who did not reveal their attitude toward social studies, all students in the Midwest region expressed their dislike of and difficulties with learning history. In the urban, Southeastern area, the number of students who did not like social studies (9) outpaced the number of students who were ‘OK’ with the subject (4). This finding suggests that monocultural school environments comprised of mostly White, middle-class social studies teachers in Southeast and Midwest tended to generate an exclusive or uninviting social studies learning atmosphere and failed to provide positive experiences of learning US history to those participants.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Least favorite subject</th>
<th>Feels OK</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Like world history only</td>
<td>Like Social studies in general</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Northeast</td>
<td>4 (57%)</td>
<td>2 (28%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban/Northeast</td>
<td>4 (57%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Midwest</td>
<td>6 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Southeast</td>
<td>9 (70%)</td>
<td>4 (30%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban/Southeast</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30 (69.8%)</td>
<td>10 (23.3)</td>
<td>3 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meanwhile, six high-achieving students who each have a relatively high English proficiency level and attend schools in urban and suburban Northeastern areas expressed more positive and informed ideas about the nature of history. As mentioned earlier, only six adolescents out of the 43 who participated perceived that history is ‘story’, ‘cause and effect’, or ‘interpretation’, relaying that studying the subject fun because they can learn through primary sources, media, and variety of other courses rather than textbooks. The students also expressed that family influence and cultural frames of references were their primary motivating factors for learning history. Concurrently, their social studies teachers and the overall educational climate in the Northeast seemed to have a significant impact on the students’ ideas about the nature of history. The prolific number of multiethnic and multicultural schools in that region appeared
more conductive to the promotion of inclusiveness as well as multicultural history learning. Social studies teachers in these areas seemed to be more cognizant of students’ cultural and racial diversity, thus students in these regions had more opportunities to interact using a diverse set of voices and histories to learn about different perspectives to understand historical events, and to develop more informed ideas about the nature of history and social studies learning.

Despite regional differences, a majority of Korean immigrant students in this study tend to have negative memories and experiences of learning social studies, particularly US history in American schools. In the following section, we will take a closer look at what difficulties and challenges the Korean immigrant students faced in their learning of social studies and to what extent different social, cultural, and institutional contexts and interactions with teachers and classmates influenced their negative learning experiences.

Major Challenges in Learning Social Studies

Researchers identified three themes in the difficulties that Korean immigrant youth experience in social studies classrooms in US schools: 1) Lack of English proficiency, background knowledge, and American patriotism, 2) White, American-centered perspectives and marginalization of their country of origin, and 3) Teachers’ lack of care and disengaging pedagogies.

Lack of English proficiency, background knowledge, and American patriotism. Our participants understood that as recent immigrants, their limited English proficiency, modest background knowledge of US history, and lack of ‘inborn’ American patriotism were major obstacles of learning social studies and constructing meaning in US history.

Not surprisingly, many participants expressed that they felt daunted and extremely challenged to participate in classroom activities or group projects that required active language skills. As a result, they often chose to remain silent hardly expressing their thoughts or opinions during class in fear of experiencing embarrassment. In addition, the participants had challenges understanding new academic terminologies and concepts and learning how to communicate with teachers and students effectively. Those who experienced linguistic discrimination or any other negative experience due to their ‘incorrect’ English accents in the past showed a more passive and withdrawn attitude. Linguistic discrimination from teachers and classmates led to lack of voluntary participation and subsequent silence of Korean immigrant students in their classrooms.

Yuhee, a 14-year-old girl from an urban, Southeastern area reflected on one such incident:

Once we had a group discussion. I had no idea what we were supposed to do. Then a girl in my group talked to other group members that I could not participate because I could not speak English. Then, another boy opposed, saying ‘she can understand so we should discuss all together’… I was so embarrassed. I was just waiting for the period to end.

Unfortunately, many of their social studies teachers either did not understand the breadth of the challenges faced immigrant students or were simply not willing to provide extra help for them. Jihee, a 14-year-old from a rural-Midwest town, expressed frustration about her teacher who instantly assumed that she was unable to speak English and even avoided any conversation or eye contact with her.

My teacher automatically assumes that Asian students cannot speak English because Asians are quiet…I cannot say the teacher treats me unequally, but she seems to avoid
me. I mean I don’t have a close relationship with her. She barely smiles at me. She was very short with me even when I asked questions.

If limited language proficiency created technical difficulties in learning social studies, lack of background knowledge about US history and patriotic mindset caused attitudinal or dispositional hurdles. Korean immigrant students felt that they possess limited background knowledge about American history and lack naturally-developed American patriotism compared to mainstream students. They considered these as main obstacles that prevented them from developing deeper understanding and appreciation of US history. Chan, a 14 year-old boy who has lived in a Southeastern urban area for about one year, experienced this dilemma:

I have barely understood social studies contents. For me, it is unbelievably difficult…

Background knowledge definitely matters. We are learning state history this year. For me, it is all new stuff, so I don’t really pay attention in social studies class.

Compared to his classmates who had learned historical and geographical contexts of the state, its government, and community issues since second grade given the state-mandated standards, a recent immigrant Chan who encountered with the state history in his eighth grade for the first time felt a sense of embarrassment and alienation in the social studies classroom.

Yuri who has been living in the US for 10 years and is now a junior in a Northeast suburban high school still feels that she is not American enough to appreciate US history.

Yuri: American kids have kept hearing that America is good since they are young…so they have known some sort of pervasive idea…that America is the best. Even though I came to America when I was young, I do not have that basic mindset, patriotism…

Interviewer: Hmm, maybe.
Yuri: So… honestly, history, it can’t be helped.

Chan, Yuri, and others indicated that because of their lack of English proficiency, background knowledge of US history, and American patriotism, it is hard to excel in the social studies classroom even if they study hard. They believe that unlike math or science, which does not require advanced language skills and historical backgrounds, social studies, by its nature, is designed to fail immigrant students like them.

White, American-centered perspectives and marginalization of their country of origin. According to the data, White, American-centered perspectives in the social studies curriculum created exclusive, uncomfortable, and even hostile learning environments for Korean immigrant students and contributed to their loss of interest and disengagement in learning social studies. Among the 43 participants, high-achieving high school students who have lived in the U.S. for a relatively long around of time (4 to 8 years) poignantly criticized social studies curriculum for being biased, selective, and written from White, American perspectives.

Seunghwan, a 17-year-old from a suburban, Northeastern region recalled his experience:

US history is biased by American perspectives a lot. When we learned about the Mexican War, it simply concludes that ‘Yes, we were wrong back then.’ And that is it! Sometimes, history textbook describes the war favorably. As an immigrant, I am trying to be very careful about those perspectives…Once we learned about Japanese colonial control over Korea. Then, the textbook describes that Japan took over Korea, and it brought peace and better consequences to America. As an Asian, I was like ‘How dare you!’ Even though I have lived here for a long time, I mean, as a Korean, this is so not true.
Jinsu, a high school senior in a rural, Midwest region, also expressed his discontent with Eurocentric, American-centered perspectives and biases reflected in inadequate images and descriptions about his homeland, Korea. Jinsu expressed his frustration with inappropriate images of Korea found in his US history textbook. He felt his ethnic origin and culture are devalued and ignored in America.

I was upset. The description about Korea was less than a page, like a half page or so? I mean, what is this? Then, a picture in the page is like what? Korea in the 1960s? Are you kidding?

Yongyu, a 17 year-old boy from an urban, Northeast area, displayed more cynical view toward American-centered, nationalistic approaches in US history.

Youngyu: I prefer global history. It sounds more reasonable.
Interviewer: Is American history not reasonable?
Youngyu: It can be. But it is like, it is trying to fit too much into democracy, and the whole thing does not make any sense... American history looks weird from its beginning.

The participants criticized the nationalistic narrative and blind patriotism in official US history curriculum which sacrifices “truth” in order to make the United States look good. As Seunghwan highlighted, our participants’ sociocultural background impact their making sense of official and enacted social studies curriculum in US schools.

**Teachers’ lack of care and disengaging pedagogies.** Though challenges derived from cultural and linguistic barriers, lack of prior knowledge, and White, American-centered perspective are primary stumbling blocks to the participants, it is important to point out another critical axis of classroom environment- the teacher’s instructional and relational support for these immigrant students. As Pang (2006) and others stress, the critical role played by teachers who can challenge the Eurocentric world views in the official curriculum and enacting caring, culturally relevant pedagogies for immigrant students should not be ignored. However, 15 out of 43 Korean immigrant students in this study mentioned that they had never met a good social studies teacher who really cares about minority students and tries to help them find meaning in learning history in American schools. Teachers’ lack of understanding of and care for these immigrant students generated another layer of challenge in the form of instructional method. These students found their social studies teachers simply adopted traditional teaching methods, such as textbook-based lecture, note-taking, and teacher-centered approach. The teachers rarely modified their classroom instruction or learning activities considering the educational backgrounds of immigrant students who were vulnerable in a traditional and authoritarian learning environment. As a result, the teachers failed to develop more effective instructional strategies that would possibly help immigrant students build better understandings of US history and engage them in a meaningful learning process. In the following quote, Yunho, a 19 year-old from a suburban Northeastern area, illustrated the following point well:

I failed 11th grade US history. My teacher was a former military officer, and he treated us like college students. He did lecture, but taking notes was individual student’s responsibility. As an immigrant student, it was not easy for me to listen, think, and take notes at the same time. History is my least favorite subject, and I am not good at note-taking. So I failed.

Like Yunho, a majority of Korean immigrant students indicated that their teachers’ traditional, conventional teaching methods and teacher-centered approach were boring and prevented them
from developing interest in the subject or attaching significance to what they learned in their social studies classes. They confessed their disappointment that their social studies teachers did not seem to care about what they, as new immigrants, wanted and needed to learn, what concerns they might have, or at least whether they in fact were learning something in their social studies class. Soojung, a high school senior living in a highly multiethnic urban community in the Northeast, articulated her resentment toward her US history teacher by saying that:

I don’t like my US history teacher. She is an old lady, like a grandmother. She teaches nothing. She just stands there and writes something on blackboard. Then we take notes. It is so boring. I can’t be good at social studies because I learn nothing. She is the worst teacher that I have met in my life. I wish I have a history teacher who has passion for teaching and cares for students like me.

Though many student narratives describing their hardship in a social studies class reflected multiple layers of challenge (e.g. linguistic barrier, their lack of prior knowledge), the teacher’s unreflective use of traditional teaching method was indicative of their lack of awareness and instructional sensitivity, which added an additional layer of challenges to the immigrant students. Those Korean immigrant adolescents felt that their social studies teachers and their classes presented uninviting learning atmospheres and did not provide meaningful history learning tended to choose self-study, memorization, and cramming as strategies to survive through their social studies classes.

**Discussion and Implications**

This study explored how Korean immigrant students perceive and experience learning social studies in American schools. Unfortunately, a majority of Korean newcomers in this study experienced multiple challenges engaging in social studies learning and considered social studies as their least favorite school subject. Given the previous research on immigrants’ disengagement from social studies (Almarza, 2001), it is not surprising but still disappointing to witness the findings that almost 90% of the participants still reported negative experiences of social studies learning despite social studies educators’ advocacy of multicultural education and long standing effort to promote culturally responsive teaching and learning during the last several decades (Banks, 2007; Marri, 2005).

It is noteworthy that Korean immigrant youths attached little significance to US history contents taught in their classrooms. Some participants voiced their frustration and discomfort toward American-centered perspectives, misrepresentation of their culture, and social studies teachers’ lack of concern and culturally meaningful pedagogies. They were often discouraged and felt uninvited to learn social studies since its textbooks and teachers reinforce White, Eurocentric views and do not value the stories and voices of Korea (Rain, 2006). This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that ethnoracial immigrant students’ lack of background knowledge of US history and linguistic barrier, teachers’ lack of understanding about the immigrant students’ needs, and a lack of cultural consciousness and inclusiveness in the official social studies curriculum contribute to recent immigrant students’ feelings of discomfort and negative experiences in their social studies classrooms in a complex way (Almarza, 2001; Banks, 2007; Cruz & Thornton, 2008; Pang, 2006).

Many participants viewed social studies as ‘all about facts’ and chose memorization and cramming as strategies to survive in social studies because these were the only ways to overcome their perceived weaknesses of lack of linguistic, cultural, and political capital. These attitudes and perceptions toward the subject seem closely related to the mixture of their previous
experiences with history education in Korea and their current experiences with social studies learning in American schools. As research on Korean education and immigrant students from Korea demonstrates, the main goal of education shared by students, parents, and educators in Korea has been preparing students for high-stakes tests and eventually national college entrance examination (Kim, 2001). An (2009) argued that Korean immigrant students’ experiences of history learning and test-driven curriculum in Korea play a significant role in shaping their perceptions of social studies content knowledge. Therefore, the newcomer students in this study who used to learn social studies for multiple choice tests and memorize content knowledge in Korea might maintain their beliefs that social studies is all about fixed knowledge. When they were faced with multiple challenges in learning history in American schools, they chose memorization to survive in social studies classes.

Our multi-site investigation that includes a large number of research participants also provided valuable insight into possible variations in students’ perceptions and experiences across regions, school contexts, and achievement levels. Compared to their counterparts in urban/suburban Northeast regions, Korean immigrant youth in Southeast and Midwest exhibited more negative perspectives on social studies and frustration with their monocultural, exclusive learning environment. As Table 2 shows, while about a half of the students from urban/suburban Northeast regions listed social studies as their least favorite subject, almost every student from the Midwest and 70 percent students from the Southeast chose social studies as their least favorite. This finding suggests that social studies classes in the Southeast and Midwest may be more exclusive and less multicultural than those in Northeastern regions and, therefore, generate more discomfort and frustration among new immigrant students.

Interestingly, academically successful students in the Northeast expressed a more critical perspective about the nature of history and the American-centered, nationalistic ideology in the social studies curriculum than the other students in the same region. The recent Korean immigrant youth in our study who came from high socioeconomic family backgrounds and used to be a member of the racial majority in their homeland, now in the minority, experience numerous difficulties in learning a new language and school subjects as well as in making cultural and social adjustment. Despite their academic excellence in American schools, these high-achieving Korean newcomers presented critical standpoints in their understanding of US history and hardly accepted, rather rejected White, Eurocentric perspectives presented in the official social studies curriculum. This finding is noteworthy because it is in line with An’s (2009) demonstration of the influence of academic achievement on historical understanding of recent Korean immigrants. An (2009) revealed that the academic achievement level of new Korean immigrants made a difference in the depth and the scope of their knowledge about US history. However, it is difficult to know how best to interpret this finding in a broader context because few previous studies on recent immigrants, especially Korean immigrants, had addressed the relationship between their academic performance and historical perspectives. It is important that future research examine diverse personal, cultural, economical, social, and educational backgrounds of immigrant students and what factors influence the students’ understanding of history and constructing of curriculum meaning making (Pang, 2006; Subedi, 2008).

We acknowledge that this study presents several limitations. While we intend to elicit young immigrant students’ rich voices and narratives about their social studies learning, this study does not include the perspectives of their social studies teachers who are critical informants in providing complementary information about the curriculum adopted in their classrooms and
the actual interactions and responses to the official as well as enacted curriculum in the actual classroom contexts. Scholars suggest that there is often a gap between how teachers perceive their own practices and students’ learning and how students understand their teachers and classrooms, thus researchers should understand the complex relationship among teachers’ beliefs, their practices, and adolescents’ learning in order to generate more balanced understandings (Adler, 2004). Although our study highlights the lived experiences of the participants and their authentic narratives, this study illuminates only one facet of their classroom experience leaving several important tasks for future investigation. Future research incorporating teacher interviews and classroom observation would address this limitation.

Despite the limitation, this investigation of Korean immigrants’ unique voices of social studies learning adds a new insight into our understanding regarding the impact of personal, social, and cultural contexts upon immigrant students’ experiences of learning social studies. The in-depth examination of recent Korean immigrant youths underscores the complexities of learning experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and the profound impact of the intersectionality of those sociocultural identities upon their learning experiences (Szpara & Ahmad, 2006). Our findings strongly suggest that social studies educators need to consider how sociocultural backgrounds and contexts of recent immigrant students influence their social studies learning and how teachers can better support immigrant students to actively engage in social studies learning in a culturally relevant way (Waal-Lucas, 2007). In this ever-shrinking global world, it is important that these transnational students learn multiple perspectives on American and world history and develop more critical, yet balanced perspectives on history.

We hope that this study will generate more in-depth research on social studies learning experiences and curriculum meaning making of newly arrived immigrant students whose voices have been largely marginalized in social studies scholarship (Pang, 2006). Moreover, this study hopes to generate continuous efforts and scholarly discourse exploring more culturally relevant ways to teach social studies for a growing number of newcomers who come from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds. This will be one of the most urgent tasks given to social studies education whose ultimate goal is to educate responsible and engaged citizens in this multicultural, global society through culturally relevant and inclusive social studies curriculum.

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References


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Web-Based References


Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Warming up Questions to Establish Rapport
   1) Can you briefly introduce yourself so that I understand who you are?
   2) List three adjectives that best describe you. Why are they good terms to describe you?

2. Family Background & Relationship
   1) Please tell me about your family.
      A) Who is your best friend in your family? Who do you feel most close in your family?
      B) How much time do you spend talking on the phone or chatting on-line with family in Korea?
      C) What was your parents’ biggest concern about you?
   2) How much money do your parents usually send you for financial support? How much is your monthly allowance? (Add probing questions to learn about their family’s SES and parent occupations)

3. Decision to Come to US & Current Family Life in US
   1) Why did you or your family decide to come to (or to send you) to the United States?
   2) What did you and your family think as the benefits of American education then?

4. Schooling in South Korea
   1) What kind of person or student were you in South Korea? (Add probing questions to learn about their academic status, salient identities from different angles from their teacher’s, parents’ and peer’s points of view)
   2) What were your favorite and least favorite subjects in Korea? Why?

5. General Schooling Experience in the U.S.
   1) Tell me about your first day in your new American school.
   2) How much English were you (and are you now) able to understand?
   3) What are the challenges that you had (and still have)? How did (do) you manage the challenge(s)?
   4) How did (do) your teachers and American peers treat you?
   5) How is your academic status in your school?
   6) What type of student do you think you are in your current American school?
7) What do you like most about American education?
8) What did you find good (or not good) about American schools?
9) What do you see when you compare your current American School with your Korean schools?
10) Have you been treated unfairly by someone?
11) Why do you think the person (people) treated you unfairly then? (nationality, immigration status, or race/ethnicity, academic status, etc)
12) Tell me about that incident. What did you learn from that incident?
13) What did feel then?
14) How did you react to that unfair treatment then?

1) How do you like social studies?
2) What is history? What is it like learning history?
3) Describe your social studies classrooms and teachers.
   A) How do your social studies teachers teach social studies?
   B) How do you like it?
4) What are the challenges you have when you learn social studies?
5) How do you manage the challenges? Is there anyone who helps you to manage the challenges?
6) How do your social studies teachers and/or textbook describe Korea? How do you feel and think about the descriptions?

7. Ethno-racial Identities
   1) How do you define your ethnic identity (e.g. Korean, Korean American, Asian American, American, etc)? Why?

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