Preparing programs for intercultural education: An ethnographic study of ‘returnee class’

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Abstract
Today, intercultural issues have gradually been perceived as the key to understand the situations of the world. It means that we have to concern about the change our practices in order to become consistent with existing circumstances. The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of the intercultural education in concrete context. This article bring to the focus on the difficulties of returnee students in Korean school and the process of dealing with them. Finally, I'll propose a necessity of intercultural education program for teachers and students, which will play a crucial role in the reciprocal understanding process. The study has been carried on by the ethnographic research, especially
participant observation and in-depth interviews in a 'returnee class', which has an intercultural significance as exemplified by the cultural contacts.

Key Words: intercultural education, returnee student, intercultural contact, relationship

I. Introduction

Over the last decade the world has witnessed greater flows of human movement than ever before in its history. The accelerating process of international migration is drawing people from different cultural origins into close relationships. Up to recent times, Korea has been indifferent to the intercultural issues due to its monocultural society. But now the situation is changing rapidly. It means that we have to concern about the change our practices in order to become consistent with existing circumstances.

At a time when intercultural interactions are becoming increasingly, Korea is facing with the task to resolve the intercultural issues followed after that. Especially, the tendency has rising a question in current educational system, which has passed over the intercultural issues of whom it may concern.

Statistics compiled from authentic sources, fifteen percent of returnee children have quittd Korean school for the maladjustment (Incheon Metropolitan Office of Education, 1998). In recent years the numbers who have returned to Korea with their school age children are increasing continuously. Some of these children were born in the abroad; others were born in Korea but lived in the abroad for a period of time. Upon returning to Korea, these children who grew up in other countries must adapt to what has become for them an unfamiliar culture. These children are exposed to new educational environments, especially schools. We can guess that the difficulties of returnee students owe to the dearth of appropriate programs, which are considering their intercultural experiences.

Recently, I conducted a research study of Korean returnee students, and particular attention is paid to their school life. From my research, I found that interpersonal relationships
characterize returnee students’ adjustment in the Korean school. Especially teachers have played an important role for conducting reciprocal understanding that has an effect on students’ adjustment.

This article is a composition and revision of above research. The Korean schools that have some returnee students have an intercultural significance as exemplified by the cultural contacts, which are constituted by members from different cultural experiences. Especially, teachers and students contact as agents for their own cultures.

The study has been carried on by participant-observation and in-depth interviews in a ‘returnee class’. Ethnographic research has allowed me to explicate, and therefore come to understand, the cultural contexts as a background for behavior. It lends itself well to the study of the difficulties of recently returned students and the process of their reciprocal understanding in concrete context.

The field was one returnee class that have instituted in Sangrok elementary school (a pseudonym) in Pucheon, Korea. A returnee classes is aimed to help returnee students adjust by providing with proper education, which take their conditions into consideration. It was the first time Seoul National University Elementary School has established a returnee class on 1992. Since then there have been a few classes in 11 elementary schools and in 4 middles schools (2004), which are instituted as special classes.

The participant observation was carried out from March of 1999 to June of 2001. The 2 classroom teachers and 2 parents of students in the study expressed their point of view regarding the role of intercultural programs in being effective with the returnee students. The students are admitted at any time into this class; equally they are transferred to another class or school on occasion. Therein lies the crux of choosing the key informants. So I observed and interviewed with the all students during the research, if that’s possible.

Field notes were written or tape-recorded immediately before and after each participant observations and interviews. They included descriptions of the participant, the interview context, and my thoughts and feelings about the situation and possible questions for future observations and interviews.

Analysis of data occurred in five stages: organizing, coding, generating categories,
examining emerging categories, and searching for alternative explanations. All coding emerged from the data themselves rather than from prescribed categories. Inconsistencies in coding, such as coder drift, were checked through three returns to the data.

In the study, the point I want to make is that educational system must meet the needs of the times. To do that, it is necessary first to acquire some sense how returnee students have experienced the schooling in the Korean school. It would be an accurate reflection of the practices how to manage the intercultural education in the Korean school. I'll begin by explaining the difficulties of returnee students in Korean school. Then, I'll describe the process how the class members dealing with the cultural tensions as well. It presents what is the most important to lead to a positive interaction. Finally, I'll propose a necessity of intercultural education program for students and teachers that will play a crucial role in the reciprocal understanding process.

II. Circumstances of the returnee class

1. Members

The returnee class is composed of 2 teachers, 25 students, and their parents at the year of 2001. They are homogeneous in terms of their abroad experiences, but the characters of experiences are very diverse. For example, the places of residence in abroad are made up 13 countries, U.S.A., Australia, Canada, South Africa, Russia, U.K., Germany, Guam, the Philippines, Japan, India, Brazil, and Colombia. Besides they have one’s individual opinions, and feelings of satisfaction about the Korean school. For this reason, the students should be regarded as individuals who have a special ability and needs.

The teachers play an important role in controlling the situation that the needs between school and students are clashed. The office of education appoint returnee class teacher on the recommendation of a schoolmaster. There are two teachers, one is Mr. Hong who has
charged the class since 1998, and the other is Mrs. Jang who has charged the class since 2000. They have relative autonomy in managing the class and make a standard of judgment for adjustment. However, they can’t have a power to change the basic regulations that are focused on the one-sided adjustment of students.

The parents of students are very important in context of returnee class. They have cultural experiences in common with their children and intervene in a process of school life. Actually the attitudes of parents toward Korean school affect their children.

2. A focal point of activities

A returnee class is a kind of institution that is aimed for serving personal and social needs. There have been few schools to provide for the students with proper education, which take their conditions into consideration. From the students’ viewpoint, it is necessary to develop their multicultural experiences without a sense of alienation. On the other hand, society has to incorporate the students as members of the Korean society. A returnee class was adopted to meet the both of needs but the latter has weighed more heavily in practice. It is because that the class is under the rule of a context of Korean school and a given condition for cultivating, the students’ experiences leave something to be desired.

The activities of the class are divided into two categories. One is for “adjustment to the living area”, the other is for “adjustment to the subject area”. These categories affect the curriculum and to be reference for judging the stage of students. To be concrete, the domain of adjustment to the living area is constituted of “ability of communication”, “the extent of relationship”, and “character of reference group”. The domain of adjustment to the subject area is constituted of “acquisition of the learning style”, “internalize the tacit rule of schooling”, “participate to the scholastic competition”. This categorization that implies the concept of adjustment of members have a close relation with specificity of Korean school.

III. The difficulties of returnee students

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Students who have returned to Korea from abroad perceive the world differently than other Koreans do. So many children have difficulty in changing their attitude or viewpoint, especially if they had not been trained adequately. Besides the climate of Korean school do not open easily to the ‘differences’.

1. The need for systematically organized programs

The returnee students were quite aware of the ways in which their education had been different from the experiences awaiting them in Korea. It makes them uneasy beforehand. Usually, they got the information about Korean school through the two channels. The one is from their experiences once they have attended the Korean school; the other is from the knowledge of their parents and an acquaintance. Whether the former or the latter acquires it, the students had typical images that are representative as ‘strict teacher’, ‘keen competition for an academic career’ and ‘alienation’.

There are hardly preliminary programs to introduce them to a comprehensive perception on the Korean school. Even though overseas Korean schools attempt to prepare the students for adaptive programs, usually they couldn’t pass the limit the literacy program (Kwon, 1994). Likewise, we can’t find any systematically organized programs, which are linked with each other in a broad context.

Usually both departing and returning students have no chance to get any educational orientation about diverse culture that they shall be confronted. It means that most students have no chance to prepare themselves for a culture shock. Culture shock does not result from a specific event or series of events. It comes instead from the experience of encountering way of doing, organizing, and perceiving, or valuing things which are different from one’s own. It builds up slowly, from a series of small events, which are difficult to identify (Adler, 1975). For this reason it is impossible to suggest details about the every problematic situation, but well-organized program.

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As a matter of fact, educational program of the returnee class is attached to the normal classes in Korean school. These characteristics of the returnee class have affected to the practical activities. The class represents dual goals officially; the one is called ‘adjustment to the Korean school’ and the other is ‘maintenance of the cultural capacity’. As above-mentioned, however, institutional circumstances have forced the class to emphasize the former goals. One teacher of the class who is called ‘Hong’ spoke of their difficulties in relation to the dual goals:

Hong: I think it is very difficult to reconcile the ‘adjustment’ and the ‘maintenance’. Frankly, I think that it is impossible to accomplish the ‘maintenance’ in the returnee class. Under the existing circumstances, our greatest concern is not to serve the chance to maintain the cultural capacity, but to let them adjust to the Korean school quickly. If we are going to accomplish the dual goals, we have to establish the school for the returnee children only.

As he mentioned, most of the Korean teachers understand the values of the children’s capacity, but they reported that real life classroom situations are not very flexible. And they suggested that special school should be set up to accomplish the dual goals. We see, hinted in above extract, the teachers cannot help but force the students to struggle to be a ‘normal Korean students’. The students have been assigned a lot of task that include learning the Korean language, to acquire the appropriate attitudes in school, and to attain higher school records. Although we cannot but accept these tasks as the conditions for adjustment, we have to consider their cultural background.

As Anderson and Powell (1991) pointed out: “Being culturally sensitive means being able to view the world from the standpoint of a culture other than one’s own”. Culturally relevant
program is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of culturally diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2001).

For educators, teachers and designers, this means accepting as valid the culturally different learners’ values, their motives, rewards that are meaningful to them, their locus of control, their linguistic systems, their learning styles, and their cognitive styles. Incorporating these issues into program designs, prizing this diversity and seeing it as a true asset to meaningful and effective instruction are key components for relevant instructional design. Generally returnee students have own learning style, which is based on the cultural background, which is diverge from the Korean normal standard.

2. School climate of disapproval for ‘difference’

Often, other school members call returnee classes as “noble classes”. The reason is because they perceived that students of returnee classes get some advantages from the school relatively. Examples of this are small strength, up-to-date facilities, and the ratio of students per teacher. Sensitive they have acted upon in English program for returnee students, which opened as maintenance program. They argue that returnee students already have had diverse experiences, therefore assisting them further in schools will increase their advantage in society, and that is not fair to other students.

These perceptions, however, haven’t considerations the fact that returnee or regular, each person has a right to receive an education which will enhance ability. These recognitions are also connected very closely to the orientation of the adjustment of students and influenced to the practices of classrooms. So far most people recognized the returnee students as the ones who have to adjust themselves to the Korean school system as soon as possible. They don’t have some alternatives to choose their schools. Some of them are currently studying in normal class in Korean school in direct. Others, whose needs are clearly unmet by Korean school, have left their Korean schools, and study at English-speaking foreign institutions. Actually, the school climate, which not accepts the diversity, pushed the students to consider themselves as strangers. Still others have become frustrated enough to leave Korea and go
back to the abroad.

According to the result of my research most of returnee students and their parents want to maintain cultural competencies including language, which have acquired during their sojourn abroad. They, however, are compelling to modify the attitudes and perspectives what they had developed in abroad. Raising the students’ cultural capacity including linguistic is pushed out from a matter of primary concern in the class. The extract dialogue situation between teachers and students is a case in point:

Jinsu whose mother is a Filipina entered the class one year ago. He has been scolded for his inattentive attitudes in the class frequently.
Hong: (starring at Jinsu who play pranks on his friend) Jinsu, I think you have to study now. Stop the prank.
Jinsu: Yesterday, I studied with my mom as hard as I could. English, math, and writing English.
Hong: How about Korean language?
Jinsu: What Korean language?
Hong: Why don’t you study Korean language? It is Korean language that is more important to you.
Jinsu: No, My mom said that the most one is English.
Hong: No. I don’t think so. You have to study Korean language more and more. You still can’t write your diary in Korean. You forgot Korean language again and again because you study English and Korean at a time.

The above extracts show that children have been forced to choose either Korean or another language. Even though teachers understand the fact that students’ bilingual ability is worth for maintaining, they cannot help pressing their students to choose one alternative. Actually the idea that one language has to be firmly acquired before the brain can take in another language and that abstract and complex thinking will not develop if more than one language is acquired during childhood is unscientific and unrealistic (Maher, 1994). Look at all the children around the world who are growing up bilingually or multilingually. In fact,
there are more children growing up bilingually than monolingually. In the same way, learning Korean does not mean that students do not have the right to maintain languages they already know, some of which may be their mother tongues. The students have been expected to divorce themselves from their cultures and learn according to Korean cultural norms. Likewise, the education program has forced the students to divorce from their past days. This places them in double jeopardy having to master the academic tasks while functioning under cultural conditions unfamiliar to them. Removing this burden should be regarded as a significant issue in the Korean school.

Personal life is continuous and holistic. The present of students can’t help being understood with their past days which have been based on some culture. Still most member of Korean school thought that the returnee students should forget their cultural background. The students have struggled with cultural discontinuities occur in the areas of cultural values, patterns of communication and cognitive processing, task performance or work habits, self-presentation styles, and approaches to problem solving. It is necessary to think about why cultural discontinuity is required as a premise for cultural transition in the Korean school. I think the premise is relevant to a demand of ‘uniformity’ of the school. Even though to equip uniformity is important to be Korean students, to urge children to endow with it is just neither appropriate nor effective.

So far, we have seen how the returnee students carry on their school life facing with the difficulties and what is the required for their education. All of this amounts to saying that we have to concentrate the educational system considering the children’s intercultural experiences.

IV. Positive interaction: Interpersonal and intercultural understanding between members
I wish now to look at some of the aspects how returnee students make a reciprocal understanding with class members dealing with the cultural tensions. It is connected with the process of interaction in concrete context. The literature in the field of culture learning (Cushner & Brislin, 1996) suggests that it is only through significant and long-term experiences with people different from oneself can one become effective at living and working across cultures. Although formal system demands one-sided change of the students, the members have had a new angle on the problems and tried to understand each other through the lived experiences.

1. Students changed themselves according to their relationships

As above-mentioned, the transition from abroad to Korea presented a number of concerns and problems for the children. Perceptions of the transitional experience are similar among members of the group, but each subject expressed his or her perceptions in a unique way. Most of subjects were scared and sad when they heard from their parents that they were to return to Korea. Besides, most of the returnee students were not participated in the decision-making process, but informed by their parents (Noh, 1988). This fact made the students deepen their shock.

Usually, the returnee students were very critical of the Korean schools, and their comments reveal the difficulties what they had in adjusting to a Korean school system. Some student criticized the school system for being unnecessarily rigorous and complaints about the lack of facilities and extracurricular activities; other students criticized the educational method used in the normal classrooms. The following serves as an example, which is offered by Min who is 5th grade:

Min: In America, I can study at my own level. But I can’t do that in normal class of the Korea. Instead, everyone learns the same thing. Teacher’s lecture is quite tedious. So, I don’t like to go to the normal class. I would like to go back to the Canada or at least I would like to remain in the returnee class.
For returnee students, the Korean schools are perceived to be very different in teaching methods, discipline, teachers, and facilities with their former times. All students in the research field reported that the schools were different from previous ones, and that they have experienced adjusting difficulties. In the circumstance, some students took a defiant attitude toward the teacher or tried to alienate themselves from the environments.

Jang who is one of the teachers in returnee class explain the diverse reaction of children:

Jang: Whether for severe or not, I think, all children come from abroad have experienced the difficulties. For example, someone has developed symptoms of physical pain; others have assumed a defiant attitude toward their parents and teachers.

Even though the deviant attitudes of children have confused the teachers, still there are possibilities of them changing their viewpoints and attitudes. Actually the students changed themselves according to their relationships with members of the class. Especially the relationships with teachers have influenced on their attitudes. The next citation show the case.

Miha’s Mom: I was so embarrassed when I have heard that she had never talked in school. In the mean time, she was very talkative at home. --<abbreviation>-- But now, she is O.K. I know that I indebted to Mr. Hong for the situation. She likes him.

In case of Miha, since she came from Russia eventually never communicated with anyone in verbal during six months. Being well acquainted with her, teacher tried to talk about mere trifles, and to make a joking relation. Eventually it have worked gradually, she got a close relationships with not only with teacher but also with peers. In this way, promoting the appropriate interaction between teachers and students is usually started from the teachers’ understandings. And the understanding let the students trust the teachers, so that they have more chance to interact reciprocally.

Daily contacts and conversations are very important route of the reciprocal understandings.
The forms of conversations could be characterized the switchover of the speaker and listener. As usual, teachers play a role of a speaker and students play a role of a listener in the Korean school. In the returnee class, the setting of the conversation is more informal than the normal class, and often the students regard themselves as the speaker. The students who are confronted with difficulties want good listener, the teachers try to satisfy the needs of students. At that time, the teachers grasp the situations by which the students suffered also. The most important one that can help their school life is teachers’ concern and understanding on them through the personal contact.

2. Teachers understand students individually

At first, the teachers have met the students as the cultural agents; sometimes they have exposed extreme confronting. Noh (1988) points out that teachers who expect all children to act in a particular way, or to exhibit particular traits, are prejudiced against those students who do not have these characteristics. Hong who has been two months since he became a teacher of the class, made this remark about the manners of the students:

Hong: Most of them don’t even know how to talk to the teachers. They don’t know how to behave in front of the teachers. I think if their parents are Korean, they should discipline their children in the Korean manner. Once one boy talked to me, ”If you don’t teach us very well, you will be fired”. How dare he talks to his teacher! I knew he came from abroad, but it was hard for me to understand his rude manners.

This example shows that teacher experienced culture shock for a period time as well as students. But in the length of time, teachers started to consider students not only as a member of special group but also as individuals who have characteristic experiences. This understanding is closely connected to the experiences, which are sharing in daily routines with the students. The following extract shows how teachers have changed his attitude toward the students:
Hong: There is a usual phase to teach returnee children. At first, we tried to inculcates the students with patriotic sentiment strictly, but with taking in the children’s situation we can’t keep the attitude always. I have been aware of the fact that the students are just students not the special beings.

Another teacher, Jang, also records that she had a similar experiences:

Jang: I have been take charge of this class since last year. Now I realized that we should wait and wait for their adjustment, although we don’t have any time to spare. I think that they are making sense of the environment of Korean school slowly. Of course, raising the academic achievement is important. But it could be achieved on condition that they are well acquainted with school. Usually it takes plenty of time. At first, I didn’t know that.

In this example we can discover that teachers have changed their perceptions and attitudes toward the students, which influenced their teaching strategy. I confirmed their change during the research period as well.

On the other hand, the teachers have chance to reconsider the aspects of the schooling on the viewpoint of the students. Through the process, the teachers have understood diversity of the students gradually. Teachers have conversed their viewpoint, which is resulted in the change of the children’s school life. The students have trusted the teachers who understood them, and have relieved of the fear and unfamiliarity.

As we examined, the returnee class teacher can’t help understand the cultures what have organized experiences of the students. So, teachers must first recognize and understand the culture in the classroom, including the experiences and everyday ways of behavior that students bring to the classroom. And they perceive ways to guide cultural awareness and understanding of their students so the positive relationships could be evolved.
V. Conclusion: Preparing for intercultural education program

How can we approach to the problematic situation of returnee students? First of all, the programs must be well organized to satisfy the diverse needs around the returnee students harmoniously. So if we look for the effective programs we should focus on the intercultural understanding through which one would be willing to go in order to have the pleasures of experiencing diverse cultures in depth. If these programs are connected with normal curriculum in a daily schooling, it could be more successful and more effective. For that, we have to pay attention to the teacher education.

For teachers to create a community of learners who affirm diversity and work toward consensus and shared understanding, they must become reflective decision makers, using past experiences to shape future actions in the recurrent cycle of planning, implementing, evaluating, and modifying learning (Diamond & Moore, 1995).

Likewise, the plain undeniable fact is that teachers’ genial understanding let returnee students to open their mind and promote positive attitude. To promote understanding and appreciation of their students who especially have the other cultural context, the training program should be provided for prospective teachers with a depth of knowledge and perceptions of cultural diversity. Learning and reflection challenge teachers to look inward and to try to understand students.

Successful innovation is more likely to occur when teachers make the effort to adapt what is known about specific cultural issues and effective schools to their own situations. For this reason, the teachers’ education must be a catalyst of successful intercultural understanding. Besides, social well being in the classroom is created by teachers who facilitate expression of ideas and knowledge in a variety of ways. Thus the teachers’ role has a special significance in returnee class, where all must find their voice.

It is obvious that intergroup or intercultural contact does not always lead to positive
interactions. Increasing intercultural interaction can lead to conflict in communities, schools, and the workplace. It can result in miscommunications and misunderstandings and can lead to increased mistrust. We cannot save children, teach them well, or ensure a healthy future for our country if educational system continues to overlook the necessity of intercultural understanding programs.

Intercultural implies a give and take: a multilateral appreciation, understanding, accommodation and ability to interact effectively with people different from oneself (Cushner, 1998). Many people, including those who do not harbor intense prejudices, admit that interactions with culturally different others tend to be more anxiety provoking than interactions with very similar people. For a smaller number of people, this anxiety leads to strong preference for interactions with similar others and an active avoidance of intercultural interactions. Such people, however, will not fare well in today’s world in which intercultural interactions are increasing commonplace. It is in such a context that the role of education for intercultural understanding becomes critically important.

Intercultural understanding programs can work on many fronts as it strives to eliminate prejudice and racism by creating an awareness of the diversity and relative nature of viewpoints and thus a rejection of absolute ethnocentrism; assists people in acquiring the skills needed to interact more effectively with people different from themselves; and demonstrate that despite of differences that seem to separate people, many similarities do, in fact, exist across group.

Although education alone cannot change the face of many problems that exist today, it can influence the future by preparing minds of young people to include a diversity of viewpoints, behaviors and values (Cushner, 1998). This is the point at which intercultural education become critical. Without supporting systems in education, coping with the challenge of global world has proven to be difficult (Mitchell & Salabury, 1996). Through careful and thoughtful planning, intercultural goals and concepts can be developed. We have no choice but to intercultural education if teachers are to be sufficiently prepared to rise to the occasion and meet these challenges.

From these remarks one general point becomes very clear. Public education (often in
combination with social service or other community or government agencies) can play a critical role in building peaceful societies. Fortunately, there have been movements for intercultural understanding in the public education gradually quickening pace. For example, the 2001 national curriculum revision added “Education for International Understanding” as an elective course in high schools. The ministry of education offers short-term training to prepare teachers to teach the course. The ministry and several regional education offices also have begun to produce textbooks and teacher guides.

We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that preparing intercultural understanding programs for schools and community is one of the most exciting and rewarding endeavors in the world. It is through such approaches as intercultural education that elements essential for developing a democratic, inclusive society can be addressed, thus enabling all communities to learn to live peacefully with one another; to maintain their unique cultures, languages and religious without facing discrimination; and to develop mutual solidarity and undertake common activities aimed at solving shared problems.
References


국문 초록

문화간이해교육 프로그램의 필요성:
‘귀국반’에 대한 문화기술적 사례연구

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오늘날 활발하게 이루어지고 있는 국가간 인구이동과 다양한 축면의 문화적 접촉은 많은 유익과 더불어 더 많은 해결해야 할 과제들을 가져오고 있다. 이처럼 급속히 변화하는 환경은 교육장면에도 문화간이해와 관련된 새로운 과제들을 제기하고 있다. 이 연구에서는 다양한 문화적 배경을 가진 귀국학생들이 한국 학교에서 겪는 어려움과 그것을 다루어가는 과정을 살펴보고, 그에 기초하여 교사 및 학생을 위한 문화간이해교육 프로그램의 필요성을 제기하고자 한다. 문화간 접촉 과 상호작용 속에서 이루어지는 역동적인 일련의 과정들을 이해하는 일은 시대적으로 요청되고 있는 문화간이해교육의 방향을 설정하는 데 도움을 줄 수 있을 것이다. 이 연구에서는 이해지향적 패러다임에 속하는 문화기술적 사례 연구를 맡았으며, 구체적으로는 참여관찰과 심층면담 기법을 채택하였다.

주제어: 문화간 이해교육, 귀국학생, 문화간 접촉, 관계성