

What's Your Name?

Why do students from the Korean Culture change their name when enrolling in American schools?

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Puzzlement

It is a hot summer day in late August. While the distant sounds of summer still fill the air there is also an air of excitement. It is open house at the local elementary school. A day to put a face (hopefully with a smile) to the name of your teacher, to see where your classroom is, what it looks like, and most importantly to see the names of the other students who will share your third grade class with you. The desks are arranged neatly with nametags on them, the job chart is already filled out with names ready to be put to work, and books and folders have computer printed labels on them and are anxious to be used for learning. This is the scene in a third grade classroom. It is not unlike many classrooms across the county.

As the students file in they politely introduce themselves and their parents to their new teacher. Many students are shy and not sure what to say, some are in a hurry to roam the room and 'check things out', and some are excited and glad to be starting school. One student timidly walks around the room. He is with his mother and sister. They are quietly whispering to each other about various items in the room. The teacher notices they are speaking Korean. This must be the new student from Korea. Wanting to make this family feel comfortable the teacher goes over and introduces herself. The family is all smiles, but very quiet. The sister introduces herself, her mother, and her brother to the teacher. Her brother's name is Jung Hoon, he will be in third grade this year. The sister says he does not speak much English. The teacher smiles and welcomes them all. Then the sister asks if the teacher would please call her brother 'Kevin'. The mother nods her head in agreement. The teacher continues to smile, welcoming the family and calls "Kevin" by name hoping to show the family that the name chosen will be respected and used in the classroom (Choi, 2001).

After the open house the teacher makes changes to the nametag on the desk, the name on the job chart, and the labels on the books and folders, all the while wondering why Jung Hoon would change his name. It is a very nice name; there is probably a great deal of honor in his name (Choi 2001). It is his name! Why is it being changed? Nevertheless, Jung Hoon now becomes 'Kevin.'

The above scenario illustrates the puzzlement of this teacher-researcher: Why do some students from the Korean culture change their given Korean name to a more 'American' name?

Background

This elementary school has 32 classrooms, 14 of which are homerooms to the current ESOL population. Though many of the Korean students at this school are not enrolled in the ESOL program; a better understanding of the Korean culture is needed because they represent the highest minority group at this school.

The total school enrollment is 846. The highest minority group is Asian/Pacific Islander with 122 students or 14.4% of the total school population. Of those 122 students, 18 different languages are spoken in the home. Of the 122 students listed as Asian/ Pacific Islander, 40 students list Korean as their primary language – the highest number within this minority group. The Korean students make up 5% of the total school population. Though these numbers may seem small, this mostly Caucasian non-diverse school is seeing changes in its student population. The total minority population at this school is currently 36%. The staff needs to and wants to learn more about its diverse students.

The setting of this study takes place in an elementary school in a middle class, mostly Caucasian, non-diverse neighborhood. The school's philosophy is teamwork. The school and the community work well together to ensure the students are well educated in the core subjects with technology as their tool. The development of the whole child to become independent, lifelong learners who use critical and creative thinking, and are risk-takers and problem solvers with respect for themselves and others is the goal for all. The school motto is: "Expect the Best."

This elementary school began providing instruction for students who were English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in academic year 1999-2000. This allowed ESOL students in the school boundaries to attend their neighborhood school for the first time. This population was large enough to warrant the hiring of a full time ESOL teacher. The ESOL teacher worked very hard to set up a quality program for the students and went above and beyond on many occasions to provide support for the ESOL students and their families. Knowing that the transition to a new country and new way of life is difficult, the ESOL teacher was very passionate about providing a safe, comfortable, and respectful environment for all students at school.

This teacher-researcher would like to look more closely at the Korean population at this school. The teacher-researcher would like to understand one of the basic elements about a person from the Korean culture – their name. Students from many cultures come to the United States and change their name for a variety of reasons. A closer look at these practices within the Korean culture is the focus of this study.

Cultural Questions

Why do some students from the Korean culture change their Korean names to a more "American" name?

When studying the student records of this local elementary school it is noted that 28 out of 40 students from the Korean culture, 70% of the Korean students, have American first names. The Korean culture represents this school's highest minority group. What are the cultural implications of this name changing, both Korean implications and American implications? Taking a closer look at this practice involves investigating Cultural Negotiations (CIP 3.5) and Cultural Identities (CIP 3.5.2) (Jacob, 1999).

This cultural question is raised because of the multiple instances this teacher-researcher has encountered at the start of the school year when parents have requested their child be called by a name different than the name on the school enrollment forms. These name changes are usually not a similar version to the student's given name; rather they are an entirely different name (Kim, 2003). It has been confusing when the student does not respond to the "new" name though many strategies have been tried to help the student respond to it. On one occasion, after three weeks the student still did not respond to the "new" name and the parents chose to resume using the child's given name (Yeh, 2002). Other occasions have resulted in the student responding to the new name without difficulty. Many times the "new" name is not shared with the school at registration time but shared with the teacher at the beginning of the school year after the nametags, charts, and supplies have been labeled with the registered name (Kim 2003). It can be a puzzling practice to remove someone's given name and replace it with an entirely "new" name. A part of that person's cultural identity is gone when their name is replaced (Kim 2003).

It is important to respect the many cultures represented in one's school. Respect of a culture allows the pathways of communication, understanding, and support to be open. The best way to respect and honor a culture other than one's own is to learn about that culture (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Though there are many ways to learn about a culture, it is best to gather information from authentic sources and not through hearsay or generalizations (Kim 2003).

This research is taking place at a school that opened ten years ago as a very non-diverse and mostly Caucasian school. Over the past ten years the diversity has begun increasing slightly. The students receiving ESOL services have been brought back to their base school in 1999 and the minority population has increased annually. The minority population is currently 36% of the total student population of 846. The Korean population accounts for 5% of the school population. Because of these increases in minority populations, the school community and staff need to become better educated about the various cultures represented. It is the goal of this teacher-researcher to provide some insight into the Korean culture to be shared with the staff and community so better communication and understanding can prevail (Yeh & Inose, 2002).

Data Collection

Identifying the students attending this school who were of the Korean culture was the first step of data collection. A permission slip was sent to the parents asking permission for their child to participate in this research study. A survey was developed for the parents and students. Based on the results of the survey students and parents were chosen

to be interviewed. To cross check the findings throughout the research, multiple methods of data collection were used. Though only a few students and parents were actually interviewed it is believed others would have mirrored their responses if they had been included.

Membership of the Research Group

The Students and Parents.

The study took place in an elementary school in a middle class mostly Caucasian neighborhood. There is little socio-economic or cultural diversity. The students and parents of the Korean culture were the focus of the study. The Korean culture was chosen because it represents the highest minority group at the school at this time. In order to collect the data for this research, parent permission had to be granted. The data reflects the students whose parents gave permission and who responded to the survey in a way that lead this researcher to believe they would have information to share about their name change.

Other Staff.

Additional support was provided before, during, and after this research project by the teacher research group sponsored by the school. The members provided expertise from their field, which greatly enhanced this project. All group members acted as critical colleagues by providing feedback, support, and guidance to this research project through monthly meetings. The parent liaison and ESOL teacher were also instrumental in contacting parents and collecting data from both students and parents. Classroom teachers also provided great insight into the practice of Korean students changing their Korean names to more "American" names.

Research Methods

Data was collected in a variety of ways to ensure a complete representation of the impact of a student's name change was represented. Some data sources proved to provide better information than others. Data was collected through a review of school records, conduction of surveys and interviews of parents and students of the Korean culture, student work samples, and staff observations.

School Records.

The school records were reviewed to find the number of Korean students attending the school. All the Asian/Pacific Islander students are listed into one category in the school records so further review of the records was needed to isolate the Korean student data. This researcher, with the assistance of the school records operator, separated out the Korean students by sorting the Asian/Pacific Islander students by home language survey results. The data presented in this research project is based on this information. If the data is skewed, it is unintentional.

After the list of students of the Korean culture was generated, a letter was sent home to these students to obtain parent permission to survey and possibly interview the students. The school's parent liaison, who is Korean, was instrumental in translating and making this initial contact with the families a positive one.

Survey.

Once parent permission was granted for contact and data collection from the students this researcher had the students fill out a survey. The survey was administered with the assistance of the English Speakers of Other Languages teacher (ESOL) who is Chinese and the parent liaison who is Korean.

The survey asked the students:

- Who chose your American name?
- How do you like your American name?
- Do you use your American name outside of school? If so, where and when?
- Do your family members call you by your Korean name or American name?
- Does your name have the same meaning in English and Korean?
- What was your goal in changing your name?

Student Interview and Parent Interview.

After the initial survey was given the information was coded to find patterns and rationale supporting the reasons students of the Korean culture changed their names to more American names. Surveys were also given to Korean students who have not changed their names. This was done to provide a contrasting view of the practice of name change. Based on the information collected in the surveys a list of prospective students and parents to be interviewed was compiled. Data was collected during the interviews with the use of notes and an audiotape. This allowed the researcher to actively listen and focus on the person being interviewed without sacrificing the loss of information.

The types of interview questions were similar for each of the people interviewed. Two sets of interview questions were developed: one for students and one for parents. It was felt the parents would be better able to provide information about the reason for the name change than the student but the student could better respond to how it felt to have his/her name changed.

Student Work Samples.

Student work samples were collected to show that the students did indeed use the American name when in school to identify themselves.

Staff Observations.

Staff observations were collected as a means of data collection. The staff members of the Korean students were asked to observe for any social or cultural implications they noticed about their Korean students in relation to their name change. They were also asked to provide information on any Korean students in their classes that did not change their name. Staff also included information they had received through contact with parents about this topic as well as personal insight they have had by sharing a learning community with these students.

Table I shows the data collection matrix. This matrix lists the questions being studied and the data collection source used to gather the information. As is demonstrated by this matrix, data was collected in a variety of ways with cross-references to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

Table I

Research Questions	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3	Data Source 4	Data Source 5	Data Source 6
1. Why do some students from the Korean culture change their given Korean name to a more 'American' name?	School Records	Survey	Student Interview	Parent Interviews		Staff Observations
2. What factors play a roll in the decision to change their name or not change their name?		Survey	Student Interview	Parent Interviews		Staff Observations
3. How do the students feel about changing their name?		Survey	Student Interview		Student Work Samples	Staff Observations
4. Does this name change have social and cultural implications?	School Records	Survey		Parent Interviews		Staff Observations

Data Collection Results and Analysis

School Records.

The school records were a vital part of the data collection process. The use of the school database made it possible to identify the Korean students. It was difficult to determine if all Korean students were identified because the school system combines all the Asian/Pacific Islanders into one ethnic category. A home language sort showed that 18 different languages were spoken in the ethnic category of Asian/Pacific Islander. The students who were Asian/Pacific Islander and had a home language of Korean were the ones included in this research. It was found that 40 students met these criteria out of a total student population of 846. Information was then pulled to find the birthplace and citizenship of each of these students. An interesting pattern emerged; students born in the United States (25 students) all had "American" names. Students born in South Korea (15 students) all had Korean names. This data appears to show that the practice of a name change occurs after Korean families move to the United States. Students of the Korean culture born in the United States have always had an American name. Of the students who were born in Korea and then moved to the United States more than half have changed the name used in school to an American name, though their school records are still in their Korean name.

This answers the question of who is changing their names, but not why they are changing their names.

Student Work Samples/Staff Observations.

Student work samples and staff observation did not contribute much new information to the data collected. The students did not vary the way they identify themselves at school. If they use a Korean name or American name they were consistent in its use.

Surveys /Interviews

The surveys and interviews provided a great deal of quality information for this research. The surveys were only given to the families of the students born in Korea (seven families) since they were the only ones who had a name change. There were five students who were interviewed. The results showed that they had been in the United States less than five years. They moved to the United States for a variety of reasons: to be with family, for work, and for a better education (Handbook for Teaching, 1992). They all speak English some but not well. The parents themselves did not have American names. Some of the children had American names they used at school and with friends but continued to use their Korean name at home and with their families.

The most interesting information was how the American names were chosen. Some very heartwarming stories were shared about the honor these families paid to people who had helped and assisted them. Some Korean families chose the American name of the person who assisted them for their child or the children chose it for themselves. After one family had moved to the United States a neighbor in a downstairs apartment lent a helping hand by allowing the children to come to her apartment after school while both parents worked to make ends meet. The oldest daughter chose the neighbor's name as her own American name. This was her way of saying "thank you" for all the neighbor had done for them. Some of the names were chosen at random. They thought of names and picked

one. One boy said, "My dad said William, I didn't like it and it was too hard to spell. My sister said Kevin and I liked it and it was easy to spell, so that is my name." One Korean student acting as an interpreter during some of the interviews, though he still uses his Korean name, shared that his whole family is thinking about changing their names to American names. His family is looking through the bible to find Christian names. They haven't decided if they will change their names but they are considering it.

The initial research question was: "Why do some students from the Korean culture change their Korean names to a more "American" name?" The answer found at this school was simpler than this researcher expected. Potential reasons this researcher anticipated include but were not limited to: reasons for immigration, socio-economic status, names difficult to pronounce, and fear of prejudice. The reasons stated by the students "we are in America – we should have an American name." They did not seem to feel any sense of loss by changing their name; it was a natural response to living in the United States.

Interventions

This elementary school is very non-diverse and is new to having many cultures represented in the school building. Five years ago the ESOL students were no longer being bussed to a neighboring school and were brought back here to their base school. Along with the return of the ESOL students, annual increases of students from other cultures have been enrolling at this school. Initially, due to a lack of training, the teachers were uncomfortable trying to bridge the language and cultural gaps that are often present when instructing students from other cultures. Communication with the parents was often passed off to the ESOL teacher. Some classroom teachers found it was frustrating trying to balance these new time consuming issues of communication with students and parents of another culture – many non-English speaking - with the day to day demands of teaching. The teachers felt the ESOL teacher was responsible for making the students' transition to the school smooth and passed along many responsibilities to her.

Over time the teachers have learned to provide a safe, comfortable, and respectful environment for students of other cultures. The cultures represented at this school are numerous and trying to balance the day-to-day needs of teaching with learning more about the cultures here in the school still presents a challenge.

The results of this research are being used to provide much needed information and resources for the teachers so they can better meet the needs of all of their students. Information about the Korean culture was the starting point of the cultural study because the Korean population is the highest minority group represented at this school.

The information from this research will be shared at the teacher-research round table discussions that take place at the last staff meeting in May. This researcher hopes that the sharing of this information will demonstrate the critical need to understand all of our students the best we can regardless of culture. It is hoped that receiving this information

will spark some teachers to do research of their own about other cultures at the school and share it with the staff the in the following years.

Monitoring

At the conclusion of this year's teacher-research presentation this researcher will poll the audience to see if there is interest in researching about other cultures, about aspects of certain cultures that are puzzling, or about how the school population is changing and what we can do to embrace its diversity.

This teacher-researcher will continue to seek ways to find more information about the diverse cultures represented in this elementary school. Hopefully other teachers will want to explore the views and beliefs other cultures have about education, parent involvement, family life, language and children (Handbook for Teaching, 1992). As information is researched and collected more presentations to the staff at critical times can help bring the school together as a true community for all learners and the motto of "Expect the Best" will continue to ring true.

Conclusion and Implications

Different cultures acculturate to the United States at different rates and in different ways (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Judgments should not be placed on the practices other cultures see as a part of living in the United States. Respect needs to be displayed every step of the way. Learning more about different cultures and why they have specific customs when they immigrate to the United States is part of learning about our own cultural assumptions and ourselves as well as respecting those of others (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Information is knowledge and we need to continually learn as much as we can about the students in our class, especially those who are from diverse cultures. We need to learn about the customs and rituals of the students in our classrooms. We need to use primary source information so we can avoid generalizations and respect all who share our learning community (Kim, 2002).

Learning that the students changed their names because they were in America and they should have American names leads this researcher to the next level of questions: Why do these students want to be American? Are they escaping from ideals or other things in their own culture? What does it mean to be American?

Good teacher-research more often than not leads the researcher to more questions. This is the true art of classroom reflection.

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