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Identities of Young Korean English Language Learners at School: Imposed or Achieved?

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ABSTRACT

Gee's (2000-2001) analytical framework was used to describe the constructed identities of two young Korean ELLs (English language learners) within the school context and were considered to gain insight into their academic success. The author argues that the "model minority" stereotype was influential in shaping the imposed identities created by the school community despite some contradictory evidence of the ELLs' developing academic performances. Findings suggested that (a) teachers viewed the participant students as model students with exceptional academic capabilities, (b) participant students were often struggling to decipher implicit classroom rules and their language learning, and (c) peer group acceptance became a crucial factor in their access to academic learning and maintenance of social standing within the group. The paper concludes with critiques of current realities of US education and instructional approaches that fail to meet the needs of ELLs, both in the academic and affective domains.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are sites where learning involves more complex dimensions than cognitive development and engagement (Luke, 1995). Lave and Wenger (2002) perceive learning to involve identity construction as a "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (p. 53). Similarly, Gee's (1996) notion of Discourses (with the capital D) suggests that our identities are constructed across various domains of our lives, such that each of us has multiple identities in different Discourse groups in which we participate. Each Discourse embodies a set of social practices that are based on "tacit rules" that guide us in the acceptable ways of being a part of various Discourse communities. Within these Discourse communities, identity construction is a two-way process—an individual may construct or be constructed by others in different ways. Moreover, an identity is not fixed but shifts, and is formed and unformed through a negotiation process of an individual's ways of presenting oneself and the degree to which the representation is taken up, rejected, or reshaped by others in a community (Gee, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 2002).

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In viewing schools as a site of social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996), I focus on how notions of identity and learning interact in positioning two young Korean ELLs in their school context. Generally, students of Asian heritage in the US schools have been academically successful (for examples of academic failures, see also Lew, 2004, 2006). Asian American students hold the highest proportional representation in gifted programs (Kitano & DiJiosa, 2002). The group's academic success has been encapsulated in a persistent stereotype—*model minority*—reproduced in various aspects of our society. Since the writers of popular magazines (e.g., *US News & World Report*, *Time*) began using the term in the 1960s to describe the academic and socioeconomic success of Asian Americans, it has been a persistent stereotype.

On the surface, this stereotype appears to be beneficial and well-serving for Asian Americans. However, scholarly investigations of racial treatments of Asian Americans (S. Lee, 1996; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007) suggest the model minority stereotype has served to isolate Asians in the US from other minority groups, and has increased tensions among minority groups. Moreover, coupled with consistent identification as a “foreigner/other,” this stereotype has effectively isolated Asian Americans from the White-Black binary that positions them in relative terms to Anglo Americans and African Americans (Kim, 1999). Hence, researchers have argued that the model minority stereotype should be critically examined instead of being internalized and accepted by Asian-American students and accepted by others (S. Lee, 1996; Park, 1997).

Herein, I apply James Paul Gee's (2000-2001) analytical framework of identity construction to examine how two elementary grade Korean boys learning English as a second language are positioned in the school context by teachers and peers as they move in and out of legitimate participation (Lave & Wenger, 2002). According to Gee, identity construction is a dynamic process that is only possible when recognition occurs (see also Taylor, 1994). A person is seen as a particular kind of individual through a “combination” of speaking, interacting, valuing, believing, and using artifacts (among others). An individual may practice agency by presenting oneself in a specifically combined ways to be recognized a certain way to gain access into a community of practice. Such recognition may be achieved by the individual's actions or aspects of a particular identity may be imposed by others.

Gee (2000-2001) presents four ways in which identity construction might be analyzed: *Nature-Identity*, *Institutional-Identity*, *Discourse-Identity*, and *Affinity-Identity* (Table 1). Any constructed identity can be viewed through the four analytical lenses—what it means to be a certain type of person can be viewed through institution, nature, discourses, and how the individual demonstrates allegiance to an affinity group. For example, being an Asian American can be viewed through the ways institutions such as schools perceive them to be mathematically gifted students. This Institutional-Identity is the filter in which the school community evaluates and recognizes the Asian-American students and their actions. Being Asian American can be constructed through how the school community talks about how well these students perform in math classes and exams, their positive attitudes toward learning, and so on. On the other hand, in viewing what it means to be an Asian American through the Nature-Identity lens, their math competency can be construed as a characteristic that comes naturally to them. As a result, it would be counterintuitive for an Asian-American student to be bad in math. Moreover, Affinity-Identity may be constructed through one's participation in a group holding common interests and values. As such, being an “Asian-American math genius,” for instance, can be constructed through participation in a math club and actively partaking in activities shared by group members

(e.g., competitions, solving problems together, and watching movies on math personalities together).

Table 1. Interconnected Perspectives of Identities

Perspective of Identity	Views of Construction
Nature-Identity	Characteristics of participant students are attributed to their biological factors. That is, characteristics are seen to be “natural” to them.
Institution-Identity	Positions the school community imposes on participant students; Positions constructed through focal students’ active bid or agency.
Discourse-Identity	Ways in which teachers and peers talk about the participant students; How teachers and peers recognize participant students’ talks and actions a certain way.
Affinity-Identity	By participation within a group formed for the purpose of sharing common interests and experiences.

Note: Modified from Gee’s (2000-2001) framework.

According to Gee (2000-2001), these four strands of identity constructions are interwoven, and it is important to ask “which strand or strands predominate and why [?]” (p. 4) All four identities (Nature, Institutional, Discourse, and Affinity) can be imposed on or achieved by individuals. There are two scenarios that might be considered here in exploring identity construction as an imposition or as an achievement. First, the identities imposed on individuals by others are consistent with the identities achieved by the individuals; as long as individuals talk and behave in the ways expected of them, identities are maintained. Second, when the identities imposed on individuals by others are inconsistent with the identities achieved by individuals, these fragmented facets of identities must undergo reconstruction. In other words, when students’ actions do not fit well enough into their Institutional-Identity, how do teachers adjust the constructed identities of these students? Moreover, are young students able to effectively “accept, contest, and negotiate” (Gee, 2000-2001, p. 109) the imposed identities? Are they able to “practice agency” (Peirce, 1995) in constructing their identities in desirable ways?

Before discussing the study’s findings, I turn to the specific trends within the US Korean community to contextualize the two focal students in this study.

Korean Students in the US

Many Korean immigrant/migrant parents in the US elevate the value of English language, and are willing to do what it takes for their children to acquire this valuable skill. Since 2007, over seven million South Koreans are living abroad, and many reside in the US and other English-speaking countries (The Korea Times, 2009). This mobilization is creating challenges to the traditionally intact Korean family structure; pre-college children are dropped off in foreign

countries (i.e., parachute kids) and mothers travel to foreign countries with their children while the fathers remain in Korea to financially support them, leading to the term, *geese families* (Digital Chosunilbo, 2006; The Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, 2008). South Korea's drive toward rapid globalization has created "shape-shifting portfolio people" with English literacy as a main component of their collection (Gee, 2002; Young, Dillon, & Moje, 2002).

If English language is indeed so highly valued, then how do parents feel about maintaining the Korean language as they learn their second language? Although most Korean immigrant/migrant parents claim that they value their heritage language and wish to communicate with their 1.5 and second generation children (i.e., those who arrived as children and who were born in the US, respectively) and in their mother tongue, *hangeul*, their practices are not consistent with what they say (Shin, 2005). Researchers have explored the need of maintaining heritage language (Cho, Cho, & Tse, 1997; Jeon, 2008; Lee, 2002; Lee & Shin, 2008; Wong Fillmore, 1991) and the importance of connecting ELLs' home cultures with school learning (Commins, 1989; Iddings & Katz, 2007). Although most parents believe that developing Korean literacy is just as important, such maintenance of their native language is nevertheless compromised. In our current climate of English-only policies in US schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2007), knowing languages other than English is commonly seen as an obstacle rather than an asset to learning English. The common message communicated across the nation is that it is imperative to learn English as soon as possible if ELLs are to succeed in the US schools.

To researchers interested in investigating social practices of specific cultural groups, it is important to disaggregate the data on Asians and Asian Americans in order to more closely examine the specific social structures that shape language learning of individual minority groups (e.g., Lew, 2006). Furthermore, I will argue later in this paper that it is equally important to conduct a closer look into how individual students experience the language learning process. By treating the Asian American student population as a homogeneous group, we can overlook important differences. Additionally, experiences of Asian American students may differ geographically. A majority of Asians in the US live in either the western or eastern coastal states, while smaller numbers inhabit the states in between (Shin, 2005). Hence, the school experiences of Asian English language learners living in states where there is no systematic support in the form of bilingual/immersion programs or teachers and peers who speak the same language are quite different from others who have such access to educational resources. The more likely scenario is that they are the only ESL student speaking that language in their classes, which can make the school learning experience an isolating one. In the next section, I describe how two ESL students met the challenges of navigating through their US school.

METHOD

Study Participants and Setting

Data discussed in this paper are derived from an intensive multiple case study in which I followed four Korean ESL students in their schools, homes, and Korean language school over a period of 13 weeks, resulting in over 250 hours in the field. Data sources consisted of the following: (1) observational notes, (2) interviews with focal students, parents, and teachers, and (3) students' written work. In this paper, I focus only on data collected in the school of two

participant students, Harry (pseudonym, 9-years-old, third grader) and Danny (pseudonym, 10-years-old, fourth grader) from different families. These two participants were selected because the processes of identity construction at the school site were dynamic. Also, the two boys' families represented different kinds of Korean families living in the US. Danny's family represented a traditional family structure (family moved together for the sake of his father's graduate studies), while Harry's family represented a newer Korean immigrant family structure in the US (mothers brought children to the US for the primary purpose of English literacy). A brief family background is included below.

Harry's Family

Harry, his young brother, and mother came to the US only seven months prior to the beginning of this study. Harry and his family represented one of the "geese families" referred to earlier. Upon arrival, Harry's mother moved urgently to expose her sons to English. Harry was taught by a reading tutor and enrolled in an after-school reading program offered by the school. Initially, their mother wanted someone to tutor them using English rather than Korean texts during their heritage language classes.

Danny's Family

Danny, the fourth grade boy, had been in the US for about three years at the time of this study. His father was a graduate student at a local university. Danny was further along in his process of developing English literacy skills than was Harry as he had no difficulty in conversing with his English-speaking friends and teachers. After three years of living in the US, he had forgotten much of his Korean language, and displayed a strong resistance to speaking it at home. His mother reported, "He kept complaining why he needs to learn Korean if he is going to live in America?" (Parent interview) When asked why he was resistant, Danny responded, "'cause, like, they're forcing us to do it. They're forcing us to, and we feel like we have to do it. And, like, we say, 'We have to do this again?'" (Student interview)

The Boys' School

The school was located in an intersection of residential and commercial areas in a suburban university town in the Southeast US. The school was built in 1957, and then in 1990, several trailers were added to make additional classroom space for the increased student population. The school housed about 450 students in kindergarten through grade 5 (59% African American, 25% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic American, 6% Asian American). Approximately 10% of the students, representing nine languages, were identified as English language learners. The classroom doors were usually closed during class sessions, and the hallways were always very quiet. Accelerated Reader (AR)—the reading program which requires students to read independently books that are assigned points according to difficulty levels and to answer a few multiple choice questions on the computer—was used in the school. A few hallway bulletins displayed individual student's AR points earned. Overall, a very serious attitude toward school work and celebration of individual achievement were two impressions I formed while walking around the school. At this school it was considered inappropriate to speak languages other than English. In my first week of data collection at the elementary school, I was told by the principal

not to interact with my participants. She did not want any kind of “interference” with instruction because the ESL teacher did not want me to speak in Korean to the students since she did not know whether the answers students were giving were coming from the students or from me. The school’s English-only policy was clearly articulated.

Findings

In this section, I highlight findings that pertain to the two ESL participants’ experiences of negotiating access into valued school practices. I do this by incorporating how identities (Institutional, Nature, Discourse, and Affinity) were imposed on the boys by others in some situations and how the boys exercised agency in their active bid for their own identity construction in other situations.

Teachers’ High Expectations of Students

As soon as we hear that we’re getting an Asian student, you know, the first reaction is excitement. That we’re getting a student who is a real academic student, who is used to work and won’t complain, but will be very good. You know, will do the job and will exceed expectations. (Personal communication)

The above excerpt illustrates an identity imposed on Asian students by a teacher illustrating a particular set of underlying academic standards and behavioral expectations. This teacher was not alone in expecting Asian students to fulfill certain expectations; other teachers I interviewed also seemed to ascribe to this widely-appropriated ‘model minority’ stereotype as their Institutional-Identity. The expectation expressed in the teacher’s statement above also appears to be a Nature-Identity imposed on the students. She attributes characterization such as a real academic student, a hard worker, and a non-complainer as static traits for all Asian students. Measured against such high expectation for Asian students’ performances, Danny fell short, and was a source of puzzlement for this teacher. She considered Danny to be highly unusual, stating that he “broke the mold!” (Teacher interview) For this teacher, the “mold” that was broken by Danny was the “model minority” stereotype upon which she so steadfastly built her Institutional- and Nature-Identities.

Such high regard for Asian students’ “natural” abilities worked to shape the ways in which teachers decided to address (or not address) the ESL students’ acclimation into a new community of practice of their classrooms. Harry’s teacher reported that she relied on her other students to address his needs: “He figured out how to communicate with his peers more than he did with me. I don’t know exactly how that happened” (Personal communication).

Despite such ‘hands-off’ approach toward the newly arrived English language learners, teachers expected high academic performances from them. Teacher comments such as, “I know you know Harry,” and “[Danny, you] can do better if [you] tried” were made on a regular basis (Observational notes). Both Harry and Danny were in the gifted program (along with the other two student participants in the study—one student was receiving gifted services and the other student, Harry’s brother, was scheduled to enter the program). The method by which the students were selected for the gifted program included teachers’ assessments of students’ motivation to learn. Hence, teachers’ determination of students’ abilities to do higher level work was one of the major factors in placing both students in the gifted program. Danny’s gifted class consisted of only White and Asian students. Clearly, the pattern I witnessed during this study was an early

form of tracking of students according to perceived abilities. Based on my observations, however, this tracking-type system did not help the ESL students receive the instruction they most needed.

Isolating Instructional Environment

The work in which the student participants engaged in their classes consisted mainly of tasks they had to do alone (e.g., independent reading, filling-in worksheets, and writing). Even in the gifted class, much of the time the students worked individually with only occasional interaction. For newcomers to the community, the implicit rules of class instructional practices posed challenges in accessing resources. Harry's ESL classroom was highly-controlled, and anything brought up by students that did not adhere to the teacher's instructional plans seemed to be rejected. Harry volunteered his answers often, yet was often reprimanded for not following the teacher's directions. In the following example, the teacher posed a question to the group of English language learners after reading a selection in their book about an animal community near a river:

Teacher: Why is river important?
 A Student: To drink. [Teacher nods her approval.]
 Harry: Ocean.
 Teacher: No, we're talking about river now! [Teacher sharply corrects him.]
 Harry: Rivers make ocean. [says under his breath, then, he quickly covers his mouth.]

In another exchange with the same teacher, Harry attempts to explain why he did not do his homework to his ESL teacher:

Harry: Ms. A., I didn't understand.
 Teacher: No, Harry, you forgot to do your homework. I explained it to you.
 [Holding paper close to his face]
 Harry: No.
 Teacher: I explained it to everyone in class. Look at me. You didn't understand?!
 [Teacher goes over the homework with the class, and asks Harry to create a sentence with the word "can't."]
 Harry: I can't do my homework.
 Teacher: Because?
 A Student: Because he can't remember?
 Teacher: [to Harry] Because you did not pay attention.
 [Class laughs.]

In this exchange the ESL teacher constructs Harry's Discourse-Identity by exerting her power as a teacher and positioning him as a non-compliant student. It should be noted that in both examples Harry attempted to maintain his position and status as a legitimate participant in the regular discursive practice of the ESL class. Although his bid for access was not always recognized, Harry continues to actively seek access to class discussions. Although his ESL teacher is repressive, it does not silence Harry. In yet another example in his regular class, a student teacher introduced the Venn diagram of John Henry and Paul Bunyan, and Harry was the first to raise his hand. He offered, "John Henry is black people and Paul Bunyan is white."

However, other students interrupted, “You can’t say that!” (Observational notes). The implicit rule in this setting was that discussion of color was inappropriate. Despite many awkward and at times very restrictive moments in his classes, Harry did not seem discouraged to participate in every way possible. He seemed to be able to shrug off the negative teacher responses and mistakes, and was willing take risks to participate.

In a different classroom in the building, another ESL student was still struggling to gain legitimate participation despite having been in the US for three years. In his gifted class, Danny worked on a research report paper that he had been working on for a month. The report showed three lines of written text:

*John Adam’s was the vice-president that time.
And people needed his leadership skill’s people wanted him to be the president. For his 3
year but he refused, and went and live with his family.*

While others in his gifted class wrote a much lengthier report on their own, Danny spent most of the time trying to figure out the tasks involved in the research process that was largely elusive to him. The task in the gifted class was too beyond his current abilities. Similarly, in his regular class, Danny constantly misunderstood tasks assigned by his teacher. Danny had to work frantically to make his poster book report about his book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1983). As others were presenting their posters, Danny hid his poster under his desk and began to erase and add more text to it. He realized that the teacher told the class to write two paragraphs—not two sentences—about their book. In his poster it showed, “I like the story because it had lots of details and neat things in the book. It is very fun. Exciting.” It was evident that Danny was struggling in both his regular class and gifted program because his instructional needs were not addressed—he needed a more focused individual or small group instruction. Moreover, the implicit rules that appear to be understood by the students of mainstream background seem to remain somewhat of a guessing game to Danny, even after three years. The isolated instructional approach commonly practiced in all of their classes did not seem to benefit these two ELLs.

Accessing Affinity Groups

Affinity groups are formed around a common interest. For young students whose lives are largely divided between home and school, however, access to someone outside the immediate family and school-based social network is limited. For Harry and Danny, their social network was primarily composed of boys who went to the gifted class with them. Although this affinity group was “sanctioned” by the school (Gee, 2000-2001), the ongoing interacting and sharing of practices within it operated to maintain the group’s cohesiveness. Harry took an agentive role of positioning himself as a popular boy who was “athletic, funny, and smart” (Observational notes). Reflecting on the six times the family moved in Korea, his mother recalled Harry telling her when they came to the US, “Don’t worry about me because wherever I go I know how to adjust” (Parent interview). Eventually, peer acceptance allowed him to be associated with the “right” group of students who were doing well academically. Harry’s teacher described the group of boys in her class:

The whole group is in there together. But, kind of the kids that are in gifted. And they sort of, in our school, overall, respect you more if you're, you know, the smart kids are respected. (Personal communication)

His teacher clearly understood that everyone knew which of the social groups held the highest status in the class. Soon, his teachers considered him to be a part of the group and addressed the boys as a group. There were several ways in which Harry bid for access to this affinity group. His teacher attributed his peer acceptance to an event that occurred during the beginning of the school year. One of Harry's classmates had a birthday party, and he was invited. At the skating party, Harry impressed his peers with his skating antics. When everyone returned to school the next day, his classroom teacher recalled, "Everyone wrote about Harry being a great skater and being so funny" (Teacher interview). After this pivotal incident, his teacher recalls, Harry became a permanent member of a group of popular and "smart" boys who went to the gifted program. Thus his Affinity Identity as a funny and smart student emerged. He also displayed his athleticism out in the playground. He often took on the role of the team captain. Non-sporting trading cards (Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh) were often traded within his affinity group, as well as sharing internet sites and watching TV shows. However, Harry stated "They are talking about things that I played with two years ago [in Korea]" (Student interview). Harry positioned himself as an expert of trading cards and this expertise was acknowledged by the boys in the group. Overall, Harry used different strategies in his bid to be recognized as a legitimate member of his affinity group—sometimes taking central role in the group's activities.

Like Harry, Danny also associated with a group of boys who went to the gifted class and played sports together. He was able to receive, at times, solicited and, at other times, unsolicited help from his affinity group peers. Harry was gently persuaded by his group of friends when he did not perform a classroom task correctly. Danny constantly received individual help from his more able peers. Below is one such encounter in his gifted class where one of his peers, Peter (pseudonym), is helping him write down bibliographic information about the book Danny used for research:

Peter: You have to use the encyclopedia.
 Danny: I did.
 Peter: No, you didn't
 [Danny walks to the shelf holding the encyclopedia book.]
 Peter: You have to get W.
 Danny: No, I'm getting G.
 Peter: You have to find the last name.
 [Danny returns with a book and looks up "Washington," but can't find it.]
 Peter: Did you bring a dictionary?

With practiced patience, Peter helped Danny with his research on George Washington. Peter and other members of Danny's affinity group accepted the fact that Danny needs their assistance. In another exchange with his affinity group member, Danny was again able to access a peer's help. This time, Danny and Chris, were in their regular classroom working together on their writing:

They exchange papers and take a few minutes to read. Chris is finished first and waits for Danny to finish reading. Danny looks up from reading and asks, "Well, do you have any suggestions?" Chris nods and answers, "You need to put more words that are descriptive and imaginative. For example, you just say you went to Greenwood Gardens and that it was boring. You should write more about what you saw and felt. You know, like use more adjectives like Mrs. M. told you to do." Danny says "Okay, fine." Chris asks, "You have suggestions for me?" Danny says, "No, just keep writing." (Observational notes)

While Danny received guidance like the example above constantly, he was rarely able to reciprocate that help to his peers. Yet, not being able to reciprocate help in school practices did not seem to affect his status. Moreover, his peers did not seem to view having to help him negatively. Danny was very active in sports and his athletic prowess contributed to his popularity among his affinity group. According to his gifted class teacher, Danny is a "social leader. And they're willing to listen to him" (Teacher interview). She added, "And they're willing to help him to get his work done. And I think that's why he keeps his grades up." When I asked Danny to critique his own English language-learning experience and his skills, he stated:

When I first came here, people were like, "Whoa, look at that kid speak English!" And now, I'm like half-half. I'm okay in Korean and I'm okay in English. But, I'm not that perfect.... I have a long ways to go until I'm perfect. I mean, nobody's perfect. (Student interview).

In his statement he presents himself as a person on a journey who is traversing through life of two languages. However, unlike students who demonstrate powerlessness or take up a submissive stance when addressing their own language use (Iddings & Katz, 2007), Danny reframes his situation favorably with the disclaimer "nobody's perfect." Despite the pressures of learning a new language in both their homes and schools, these two ESL boys had confidence in themselves, exercised agency, and were resourceful in gaining access to what they needed to do well in school.

DISCUSSION

The school success of the two young ESL boys in this study should be reexamined to reveal the complex nature of how such successes are constructed. The Institutional- and Nature-Identities imposed by their teachers (model minorities who will meet and even surpass high expectations) were evident in their discursive identity construction of the two boys. Even though there were ample amounts of evidence that both Harry and Danny were still struggling in their second language and academic tasks, they were placed and kept in the tracked gifted program. In the case of Danny, even after being in the US school for three years, he was still grappling with implicit rules of his classes, and struggling with his literacy skills (e.g., grammar, spelling). In turn, the two boys actively accepted, contested, and reshaped their imposed identities. It is important to note that both boys presented challenges to the process of their teachers' maintenance of their identities as model minority students. For Danny's gifted class teacher, he was an "exception" and she had to readjust her construction by explaining and reframing Danny as a social leader who "naturally" belongs with the elite group of gifted students. In Harry's situation, his ESL teacher appeared to be frustrated when this newly-arrived Asian student did

not fit into her stereotype of a student who ought to quietly do his work and not cause problems in her scripted lessons. For a teacher who seemed to approach instruction with only one correct answer in mind, almost everything Harry did was deemed incorrect.

Harry and Danny exercised agency most actively in their respective elite groups of boys who went to gifted classes with them and in constructing their Affinity-Identity (Gee, 2000-2001; Peirce, 2005). As a newcomer, Harry was actively bidding for acceptance in this affinity group by purposefully presenting himself in locally valuable ways. As a 9-year-old boy new to the environment, he demonstrated an impressive array of strategies and resourcefulness in gaining acceptance by the 'right' group of peers. Perhaps the experiences of his past six moves in Korea have equipped him with this survival skill of making ties with peers with locally-valued status. In both cases, becoming a member of a group holding the highest status among their peers has helped them in their constructed identities as academically and socially successful students. Such socially-based achievement has served to further confirm their imposed identities related to academic success.

The findings of this study suggest that the academic successes of the two Korean English language learners were not based solely on their academic achievements. Demonstrating valued school practices, such as showing motivation toward school work and not being silenced by some teachers' repressive instructional practices or by negative peer pressure, have impressed upon the school community that these students were doing well and had no problems to be addressed. Although students were still developing English proficiency and needed focused and scaffolded instructional structures (Vygotsky, 1978), they were left largely on their own to learn in both their regular classes and gifted program. By positioning these ELLs as academically capable and motivated through the appropriation of Institutional- and Nature-Identities, the conflicting evidence of their difficulties was overlooked.

It should be noted that the elementary school used several pieces of information about the prospective students considered for the gifted program. The body of information was divided into four categories: mental ability, achievement, creativity, and motivation. Along with the classroom teachers' assessments of the students' motivation, there were various standardized tests (e.g., WISC III, ITBS, Stanford) that were used to make the decision. The students had to meet three of the four criteria to be admitted. Danny's gifted class was composed of only White- and Asian-American students. This finding is consistent with the other studies that point to overrepresentation of Asian students in gifted programs in the US (Kitano & DiJiosa, 2002). This is a troubling observation when considering the other patterns of overrepresentation in special education programs (i.e., African-American and Hispanic-American students). Both Harry and Danny demonstrated the requisite skills and dispositions to be recommended into the gifted program, but, how many students of other minority groups may have been overlooked for the same opportunities?

There are a number of educational implications that can be drawn from the findings. First, the school community needs to understand the various ways in which students' identities are constructed; their role in opening or closing learning opportunities and the different ways in which teachers position their students during instructional events. It is important for teachers to heighten their awareness of the social practices that are visible in school settings because doing so may lead to uncovering the social injustices to everyday practices that become normalized. Teachers need to not only focus on foundational academic skills, but on the social dynamics embedded in schools as well.

Second, pedagogically speaking, academic learning experiences for ELLs (and all students) need to be less isolating and more supported by teachers who pay closer attention to the students' needs. It is well documented that conversational language proficiency develops first, but it takes an average of 5-7 years for ELLs to develop academic oral and written skills (Cummins & Swain, 1986). Based on this information, it is not surprising that both Harry and Danny were still developing their English language skills, and needed their teachers' help. Instead of being instructed in a gifted program, they needed a more guided instruction to develop their English proficiency. Furthermore, in the case of literacy instruction, Luke (1995) and others point out the serious limitations of the outdated psychological model of reading instruction created in the US industrial-era. Instruction should encompass new demands of being literate in this complex world of differing power relations in various social domains. Simplifying approaches to literacy instruction as a matter of decoding, and dichotomizing answers as either correct or incorrect does little to empower students with academic tools to survive in their new worlds. The past several years under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has worked to greatly restrict exploration of meaningful instruction and learning. Instead, education should expand its current narrow focus to explore the interplay among power relations, positioning of students and of social groups (especially ELLs), and instructional structures.

Currently, Asian students are the fastest growing population in the US (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; US Bureau of the Census, 1999), and, if the current trend in Korean immigrant/migrant (e.g., geese families, parachute kids) continues, it will contribute to the rising number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in US schools in the future (Hawkins, 2004). Within this period of rapid demographic changes, it is timely to address the relationship between identity construction and academic achievement of individual ELLs.

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