Moving Between Two Cultures
HeeSang Kim
Annandale High School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
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Research Question
“What are some of the challenges that ESL students face as they move between two cultures, and what are the educational implications of those challenges?”

Context
As much as I love the environment of Annandale High School where diversity in various aspects is appreciated as an asset to the whole school community, I must admit that my ignorance of most of the cultures that my students are rooted in has always troubled me. From the very beginning of this year, I had been feeling quite strongly the need to explore this topic and get some first-hand knowledge before my superficial impressions become a fossilized misunderstanding.

My interest in the cross-cultural understanding, which was merely a strong curiosity at the outset, developed into a class project entitled, “Living in Two Cultures.” First, I had my two beginning ESL classes reflect on ten questions related to: the differences between their home cultures and the culture as they see it here in the US; what changes, if any, they experienced as they were adjusting to a new culture; and how they felt about such changes. The second step was for them to find two individuals who were from their own ethnic and religious communities and interview them with the same ten questions. The results of the interviews were to be reported in a five-paragraph composition.

The total number of students who completed the project was 28. Of the 28, there were 9 Africans (5 Moslems, 4 Christians), 5 Latin Americans (all Christians), 6 West Asians (4 Moslems, 1 Sikh, 1 Edizy – a religion practiced by Kurdish people), and 8 East/Southeast Asians (3 Christians, 5 Buddhists)

Obedience vs. Freedom
Regarding the differences in relationships between parents and children, every single one of the students and their interviewees responded by saying that “obedience” was very important in their home culture whereas “freedom” was the rule here. Only one interviewee said that he became much closer to his parents because of the influence of the new culture by opening up and talking more. The rest of them felt that there was no rule about respecting the elders in the U.S. culture; therefore, even though they did not see themselves changing, they saw some teenagers in their communities losing respect for their parents and elders. One student mentioned that sometimes parents had to send the children back to their home countries because children were turning “bad.” The same student said that sometimes immigrant children called the police when they had been
punished by their parents, and that’s why parents couldn’t say anything to the children anymore in this country when the children misbehaved. Although most students and interviewees said that “hitting” was a common form of punishment by the parents, they said they didn’t mind as it was a form of parental love. They saw “losing respect” as a more serious problem than “getting hit.”

Respect for one’s parents seemed to be extended to the respect for all the elders in most of the home cultures. A large number of the students and their interviewees said that children in their home countries respected the elders in the community as their own parents. Anyone in the community could approach a misbehaving child and discipline him/her. The community was like an extended family, and they shared problems and joys, as well as food and other material things (Korea). In Ghana, as in many other countries, it was impossible to call anyone older than oneself by their first names; they should be called Sister, Brother, Auntie, or Uncle, even though they were not from the same family. Old people were seen as wise and treated with the greatest respect. When an old person walked into a classroom, for example, all students would stand up to show respect (Vietnam). In Paraguay, people cared about and respected the elders because the older generation had fought for their country in the past. This spirit of extended family, however, seemed to be losing its influence in the immigrant communities. A few students said that they were witnessing changes in this country as the young people followed the new custom of “not respecting the elders.”

Teachers as “The Second Parents”

In most home cultures, teachers were regarded as “the second parents” and thus students needed to obey them as they would obey their parents. A student from India even said that teachers in her country were considered as “the second gods.” She said, “When the teacher was talking, you had to say to yourself, ‘This is your second god speaking to you.’” Whether the teachers were seen as “the second parents” or “the second gods,” they were treated with the greatest respect. There was no arguing with teachers. Many students said that they had been troubled by the students in the U.S. schools, as talking back to the teachers and arguing with them were unthinkable behaviors in their home countries. Although most respondents made positive comments about the relationship between teachers and students in the U.S. schools as “friendly” and “more relaxed,” most of them still commented that teachers here “had no control whatsoever over any student” and they added that teachers needed to be more strict. One student complained, “In the US, the classroom behaviors are bad and I don’t like it. Discipline is not good.” (Bolivia) A father from Sudan said, “A teacher’s job is more difficult here in the US if he is a good person, and easier if he is a bad person, because teachers don’t have to do much. Some teachers here don’t tell students right from wrong, as if they didn’t care.” A few students said that teachers here seemed to be afraid of being sued by parents and that’s why they didn’t use discipline hard enough.

All the students mentioned that in their home countries, corporal punishment was commonly used. “Hitting the hand with a ruler” was most
frequently mentioned. Sometimes students were hit for being absent the previous day: “Here, you just call school when you are absent. But in India, if you are absent one day without telling the teacher, even if you were really sick, when you return to school next day they beat you very bad.” Two students mentioned the punishment of kneeling down on the floor for a long time when students didn’t have homework (Vietnam). No matter what the punishment might have been, however, teachers were still “the second parents,” and students feared and obeyed them. “It was just like when you were punished by your own parents,” one added. Another student said, “In Ghana, teachers can’t call students’ homes when there is trouble, but they can beat you. Here in the US, they just call your homes. They don’t beat you.”

As much as the teachers punished students more severely in home cultures, they cared more, many felt. A few East Asian students pointed out that in their home countries, teachers would frequently go out of their way to visit the sick students’ homes. They said that in the US, teachers care less and get less respect in return. In their home countries, teachers were respected so highly that Teachers’ Day (November 20 in Vietnam and May 15 in South Korea) is a national holiday. In Vietnam, although it is a holiday, all the students still go to school to celebrate the day, and it is a day to visit old schools and look for their old teachers. An interviewee said that she had been keeping in contact with her teachers from elementary school for over twenty years. Most of the Vietnamese students quoted an old saying in their country, “If someone teaches you one word, they’re your teacher. If someone teaches you only half a word, they are also your teacher for ever.”

Not all the respondents missed their old teachers, however. One positive note about teachers in the US came from a student from India. She said, “In India, teachers will be good to you if your father owned a large land (“a lot of fields”), but they will treat you very bad if your father did not have “a lot of fields.” In the US, nobody treats you differently because you are rich or poor. All people are equal. Here, teachers treat you well. They love you like their own children.”

In general, students and their interviewees who had some experience of schools in the US seemed to feel dismayed at the fact that in American schools, teachers did not have much control, which would include corporal punishment, over the students. Most students and parents seemed to believe that there was a correlation between what they called “lack of discipline” and “lack of respect” in the U.S. schools. But one student from Pakistan was making connection between his loss of respect for teachers in this country with the fact that many of his teachers here were women, whereas in his country, boys’ schools did not have women teachers.

Other School-related Issues

Most students and interviewees seemed to have been amazed at the fact that parents didn’t have to pay children’s schools directly here in the U.S. One student from China mentioned that in his country, some good students had to quit school because they couldn’t pay the school tuition. Quite a few people also expressed appreciation of the facilities and school equipment in this country; one
Sudanese father mentioned that the U.S. schools had a better system of education because allowing freedom and emphasizing responsibility were the best ways to educate people. He commented, however, that this system in the US was “for the good and well-mannered students; for the indifferent, disobedient, and the bad, the system of a restricted freedom may work better.” Another positive note about the U.S. schools came from a Korean interviewee. She said that in her home country, there was more emphasis on being one’s best according to “societal” standards, whereas the U.S. schools teach kids to do their best, not what the society considers to be “the best.”

Interestingly, most students were from schools – both public and private - where there were strict dress codes, which probably reflected the societal expectations for the youngsters. They had to follow standardized hairstyles, and they could not wear makeup. Their fingernails had to be checked regularly by the teachers and they could not use nail polish. Although most students did not express strong feeling for or against the strict dress code, one student said that it was better with uniforms because they could not tell who was rich or poor in uniforms (Vietnam).

In terms of the role of education in a society, one student from Korea made an interesting comparison between the two cultures. He wrote that in his home country, Korea, education was more than a means to guarantee a better future. He explained that once colonized by Japan in the past, some Koreans saw education as a way to build their country strong. They thought the cause of colonization was ignorance on the part of the Koran people. One important motif in education, therefore, was that the country would never be subject to another colonization, and the same spirit still prevails in the educational environment of Korea. This student said that in the U.S., the focus seemed to be more on getting good jobs in the future. He commented that education was important in the U.S., but not in the same way as in Korea.

Any Place for Religion?

Of 28 students who completed the project there were 12 Christians, 9 Moslems, 5 Buddhists, 1 Sikh, and 1 Edizy. Other than four Buddhist students who said, “Our religion does not have any influence on our lives,” every one of them said that religion was very important in every aspect of his/her life, including human relationships and schooling. However, not one of them provided specific examples on how religion affected human relationships or school life. Their answers mostly remained at the level of religious dogmatism, and interestingly enough, they were very similar across the religions.

Moving Between Two Cultures

Most of the students and their interviewees who participated in the project seemed to be at a transition point between two cultures. They had mixed feelings about the culture and schools in the U.S. On one hand, they were complaining that there was “lack of respect” because there was “lack of discipline” in the U.S. On the other hand, they expressed appreciation of the “friendly” and “relaxed” relationships between elders (including teachers) and the
young. The mixed feelings that they were expressing seemed to display the common confusion between initial rejection of and attraction to the new cultural norms that many newcomers to any society may experience.

Looking at the answers more closely, I have come to suspect whether the respondents are still oblivious of the rules and expectations of the U.S. society in general and schools in particular. For example, many regarded corporal punishment in their home cultures as part of “control” or “parental love,” which may be a partial reason why they had to say the U.S. schools (which did not use corporal punishment) had a problem called “lack of discipline.” It seemed to me that as the rules and expectations here are not expressed in the same explicit ways that my students had been raised with, it would be easy for them to stay oblivious of the fact that there are in fact rules and expectations, no matter how many times they are told about the “Student Rights and Responsibilities.” The expectations of the new culture and school may still be “invisible” to them, as these are not part of them quite yet. And this also seems to explain, in part, why ESL students sometimes keep trying out behaviors that they never dared in their home countries; in those cases, only when disciplinary measures are imposed upon them officially, they seem to begin to understand that there are, in fact, rules and boundaries.

In terms of the role of schools, all the students and their interviewees did not question the role of the U.S. schools in providing good education and training for students’ future careers and jobs. In fact, the positive role that the U.S. schools were playing in its citizens’ lives was one point on which there was a very strong consensus.

Final Reflections

Initially, when I launched on this project, I wondered whether there might be a close connection between the religion and schooling. From my superficial observations in the classroom, most of my students seemed to be intensely involved in religion, and I was hoping to get some answers for different behavior patterns among the different religious groups even from the same ethnic community. From the reports, however, I did not find specific examples on how different religions influenced their education, behaviors, or relationships. It just might have been that my students were not quite at the point of analyzing their own religions or belief systems in relation to other issues, and this issue might have to be dealt with later in a whole new research. At this point, I am glad that the student reports kept me from developing my preconceptions any further about different religious groups.

About living in and moving between two cultures, in general most of the students and their interviewees said that it helped them appreciate their own culture more, and at the same time learn about different cultures that they had not known before. Except for one mother who said, “The only thing positive about living in two cultures is that you learn more and more how special your own culture is. You learn that you had better stick to your culture very tight, not change a thing about it, and not become like those Americans” (El Salvador),
most people appreciated their home culture and yet were open-minded about
different cultures, including that of the U.S.

Although the reports opened my eyes anew to the challenges that my
students face daily in their new cultural/educational environment, it still remains a
task for me to help bridge the gap between the kind of cultural expectations and
behaviors that my students were brought up with and the seemingly “invisible”
rules and expectations of this culture where they are going to spend a significant
part of their future years.