

Young Children's Racial-Cultural Identity Negotiation and Development: A Phenomenological Case Study

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Abstract

This article reports on a phenomenological case study following one Korean-American child's negotiation and development of racial-cultural identity in the United States during the first three years of school. This study aimed to closely explore, understand, and explain the critical incidents experienced by a Korean-American child to recognize and negotiate her racial-cultural identity, and the strategies she used to navigate through the school culture. As a result, four themes were identified with the following metaphors: (a) Just give me a sandwich – Avoiding attention; (b) I must have been a slave – Trying to fit in; (c) It is my cultural water – Speaking up; and (d) I can be both – Reconstructing flexible identities. This study offers a glimpse into a complex nature of a Korean-American child's racial-cultural identity negotiation and development in the United States calling for an expanded discourse around the issue, and sheds a light on what roles teachers and parents can play to collaboratively address and scaffold the experiences.

Keywords : young children; Asian-American; racial-cultural identity; case study

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According to the recent data from the Pew Research Center and U.S. Census Bureau report (2012), the overall population from non-White racial-cultural groups, and the school-age population in particular, is exponentially increasing. With this rate, it was projected that children from non-White backgrounds will outnumber their White peers in 2014. Among others, it was reported that “Asian-Americans” which refers to all individuals having their roots from Far East, Southeast Asia, and Indian continents are the fastest growing population in the nation. Over the past decade from 2000 to 2010, Asian-Americans grew four times faster than the overall U.S. population and began to take over Hispanics as the biggest immigration group, making Hispanics and Asians the largest student population in U.S. schools.

As we experience such an increasing number of young children coming from diverse racial-cultural backgrounds, multicultural education for young children has come a long way. A repertoire of existing instructional approaches and strategies can be analyzed in two common categories: colorblind approach and celebration of diversity approach (Doucet & Adair, 2013). On the one end, colorblind approach puts the emphasis on sameness or similarities of human being, relying on the traditional developmental psychology paradigm. We had once assumed, and some people still believe, that taking a colorblind approach is the best, or at least the least harmful, stance to take when working with young children because they do not yet see racial or cultural differences. Nonetheless, such assumptions are proven to be untrue. Many researchers have found out that young children are able to not only notice those differences but also to make sense out of them whether it is fair or not (Boutte, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2012; Park, 2011; Ramsey, 2004). On the other end of the spectrum is the celebration of diversity approach, which puts the emphasis on recognizing and representing the differences among human being (i.e., special holiday, custom, food, etc.). Researchers have cautioned that such intermittent exposure often called as a ‘tourist approach’ may lead to significant stereotypes or misunderstandings about different group of individuals (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ramsey, 2004).

In an effort to foster anti-bias or anti-racist education approach, early childhood educators have begun to study how young children engage in a conversation about culture, race and racism, and how they develop racial awareness and attitudes (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson,

& Powers-Costello, 2011; Husband, 2010, 2012; Park, 2011). Most of these studies to date, nonetheless, have primarily focused on White and Black dichotomy in the United States, allowing little to no room for other racial-cultural groups of children's voices to be heard. As such, in an effort to expand the discourse to include more diversified perspectives, the purpose of this study is to understand how a Korean-American¹⁾ child went through her racial-cultural identity²⁾ negotiation and development in the early schooling years through a phenomenological case study. This study is aimed to closely explore, understand, and explain two interrelated types of phenomenon: the critical incidents experienced by a Korean-American child to recognize and negotiate her racial-cultural identity; and the strategies she used to navigate through the school culture.

Theoretical Background

Development of Racial-Cultural Identity

To better situate this study within the broader literature on racial-cultural identity, it would be helpful to begin with reviewing the Racial-Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model proposed by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1989). Originated from counseling psychology discipline, the RCID model explains the processes individuals go through in life, which consists of five stages: (1) conformity, (2) dissonance, (3) resistance and Immersion, (4) introspection, and (5) integrative awareness. According to this model, an individual in each of these stages is characterized as having corresponding beliefs and attitudes about four groups such as: the self (based on the salient identity characteristic); other individuals with the same characteristic; individuals from the dominant culture; and individuals of other marginalized groups. In *conformity* stage, the individual completely embraces the dominant culture's

1) Asian-Americans share much in common as a distinctive racial-cultural group in the U.S.; however, each sub-group has a unique history, culture, language, and pathway to the U.S. which makes it different from one another. Hence, in this study the term *Korean-American* is used to address the particularities of this specific case, while the term *Asian-American* is used whenever it is necessary to address broader meanings for the entire group.

2) The term *racial-cultural identity* is used throughout this study, as there are similarities in perspectives on race and culture in educational research. The term *ethnic identity* is also synonymously used by other researchers.

beliefs and customs. At the same time, characteristics of her or his own culture are rejected and viewed with contempt. This stage has the most “profound negative impact upon (ethnic) minority groups” (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 96) as individuals experience low self-esteem for not being a part of the majority group. *Dissonance* is characterized by conflicting messages and observations that are inconsistent with the view of one’s own culture and the dominant culture. This inconsistency leads the individual to question the beliefs from the conformity stage. Typically the movement into this stage is gradual; however, traumatic events (e.g., the incarceration or assassination of a major leader) can propel the progression. When an individual enters *resistance and immersion* stage, he/she will completely embrace his/her culture’s values and beliefs and reject those of the dominant culture. The values and customs that were once shameful become “symbols of pride and honor” (Sue & Sue, 1990, p. 103). In *introspection* stage, individuals realize the extreme nature of the feelings associated with prior stages and how those feelings interfere with the development of self-identity. In this stage, the individual attempts to understand herself or himself better, tries to become more objective about the cultures’ views and attitudes and strives to integrate the values of the minority and dominant group. In the *integrative awareness* stage, rather than seeing conflict between one’s culture and that of the dominant group, individuals realize that there are acceptable and unacceptable factors from both. Individuals develop an “inner sense of security and now can appreciate unique aspects of their culture as well as those in U.S. culture” (Sue & Sue, 1999, p. 106). This model, while critical in portraying the overall racial-cultural identity development process, is inherently based upon a linear developmental paradigm. Moreover, it is limited to represent only the adolescents’ or adults’ experiences. Given that no individual enters adolescence period without any racial-cultural experience or understanding during their earlier lives, the model that considers and reflects children’s perspectives is imperative.

Among the additional models that have been proposed for different racial-cultural groups in the United States, Kim (1981, 2012) proposed an identity development model specific for Asian-Americans. It consists of similar yet distinctive five stages: (1) ethnic awareness, (2) White identification, (3) awakening to social political consciousness, (4) redirection to Asian-American consciousness, and (5) incorporation. The *ethnic awareness* stage begins around the ages of 3-4 when the child’s family members serve as the significant ethnic group model. Positive or neutral attitudes toward one’s own ethnic origin are formed depending on the

amount of ethnic exposure conveyed by the caretakers. Identity is formed through family structure, prior to integration of school and peers. The *White identification* stage begins when children enter school where peers and the surroundings become powerful forces in conveying racial prejudice, which negatively impacts their self-esteem and identity. The realization of “difference” from such interactions often leads to self-blame and a desire to escape their own racial heritage. Individuals actively attempt to assimilate and identify as Whites to avoid criticisms of differences. The *awakening to social political consciousness* stage means the adoption of a new perspective, often correlated with increased political awareness. The primary result is an abandoning of identification with White society and a consequent understanding of oppression and oppressed groups. The *redirection to Asian-American consciousness* stage means a reconnection or renewed connection with one's Asian-American heritage and culture. Individuals develop a sense of pride within themselves with support of their family, friends, and social networks. The *incorporation* stage represents the highest form of identity evolution. It encompasses the development of a positive and comfortable identity as an Asian-American and consequent respect for other racial-cultural heritages. Identification for or against White culture is no longer an important issue. Individuals establish a healthy self-concept, integrate and interact with others outside of their own race. Provided that there is a huge variation among Asian-American population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), this model serves as a foundational framework to better understand the unique process Asian-Americans go through and how it is associated with the overall racism in the country. Moreover, this model acknowledges the experiences of an individual during the early years, which could be especially helpful for early childhood educators. This model, nonetheless, is yet inherently representing a linear paradigm and does not fully capture active roles and strategies embraced by individuals experiencing the process.

Children's Experiences and Understanding of Race and Culture

Historically, early childhood education has been long influenced by the developmental psychology, Piagetian perspective in particular, which presumed that young children are too young and innocent to notice race or culture (Bloch & Popkewitz, 2000; Cannella, 1997; Ramsey, 2004). As a result, it was permissible for early childhood professionals to ignore the

impact of race and culture related issues in children's development. It is not surprising that colorblind approach continues to be widespread among many early childhood educators with the rationale that it is developmentally appropriate (Boutte et al., 2011; Han, 2010; Han, West-Olatunji, & Thomas, 2011; Kelly & Brooks, 2009). Within the United States, however, the growing number of young children from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds has allowed us to shift the professional discourse. Supported by the reconceptualization movement in early childhood education, which called for moving away from a heavy reliance on developmental psychology towards an incorporation of more critical perspectives, researchers began to study in what ways young children notice and assess racial differences and ultimately what roles teachers can play in the process (Canella, 1997; Doucet & Adair, 2013; Park, 2011).

Research findings on children's understanding of race and culture clearly suggest that young children develop a keen understanding of race and culture early in their lives through a variety of avenues, including direct interaction with peers or adults, observation of social events, and exposure to media. Findings also overwhelmingly suggest that young children quickly formulate negative biases and even reproduce them, although they are provided with more positive portrayals of people from different race or culture than before (Connolly, 1998; Earick, 2008; Tenorio, 2007, 2008). As one of the influential studies, Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) found out the children in early childhood, as early as 3-4 year-olds, go through "racializing process" in their everyday experiences by not only receiving racial messages but also actively producing their own racial knowledge. In another study by Park (2011), similar findings were reported such that preschool children were aware about physical racial identity markers, were able to enact their own racial identities, and made sense of various messages within their classroom setting. Taken altogether, it becomes certain that young children are not colorblind, they use racial markers when interacting with others, and their identities are influenced by race and culture related factors.

With regard to Asian-American children's experience and understanding about race and culture, little has been studied in general, let alone their identity development in the United States. Only recently have researchers begun to examine Asian-Americans as a racial-cultural group that face a unique experience compared to their African or Latino counterparts. Two distinctive stereotypes are frequently reported for Asian-Americans: the model minority and

the perpetual foreigners (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007; Tuan, 1988). Although seen as a positive image, the model minority stereotype often puts Asian-American students in a pressured situation to constantly be successful at schools. On the other hand, the perpetual foreigner stereotype implies that Asians are not true Americans and thus they need to prove their country of origin. Such questions as "Where are you originally from?" or "Where are you really from?" are frequent examples of microaggressions faced by many Asian-Americans than others. In one of the studies about Asian-American students, Yoon (2012) reported that the adolescent Korean immigrant students' academic and social success in the United States was related to their identity awareness, identity negotiation, and external confirmation. As Korean immigrant students in a new context, they experienced an identity dilemma which was developed through teachers' and peers' positioning of them as different; yet, this awareness facilitated them to negotiate their identity through active and effective adaptation to the dominant culture. Further, receiving acknowledgement and confirmation of their unique talents or abilities promoted their motivation for success. Given that the majority of current studies concerning Asian-Americans are addressing the socialization experiences of adolescents or college students (Covarrubias & Liou, 2014; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Yoon, 2012), this study is anticipated to contribute to this small body of work.

Method

The main mode of inquiry for this study is a phenomenological case study. Case studies are well suited to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular case within a bounded system (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Phenomenology is a study of lived experiences and the meanings participants attach to their daily experiences (Marriam, 1998; van Manen, 1997). Under the umbrella of case study, phenomenological case study seeks to understand the perspectives and experiences of those involved with a particular case at a particular time and space (Sokolowski, 2000). This study is phenomenological in nature because the goal of the research is to describe and explain perspectives and experiences of one Korean-American child living in the Southeastern region of the United States in early 2010s. In this study, this approach can provide thick descriptions of a Korean-American child's racial-cultural identity

negotiation and development.

Participant

The participant of this study is CO, a Korean-American girl born and raised in the Southeastern region of the United States. Her parents are both first generation immigrants who were born and raised in South Korea. Being the first child with a younger brother, CO possesses a caring yet firm leader-like personality. She is very independent, articulate, social, humorous, and easy going. Her teachers often describe her as “a bright girl who is very responsible for herself and easily gets along with everyone in the class”. The duration of this study included the first three years of her formal schooling from kindergarten through second grade (Fall 2010 – Spring 2013), when CO was 5-8 years old. She lived in a middle-class neighborhood and the schools she attended were diverse in terms of students’ racial-cultural or linguistic backgrounds but not so much in terms of socio-economic-status. Combined with her preschool experience where there was greater diversity in both race and socio-economic-status, CO has been decently exposed to diverse group of individuals. At school, she is academically talented and started to participate in a gifted education program offered by the district since first grade. CO is bilingual in Korean and English, yet she does not receive any language services as her English competency was assessed to be proficient by the school standards. Outside of school, her family is a regular member of the local Korean Catholic community where CO attends Sunday Korean school and gets along with several friends who are also Korean-Americans like herself.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher and author of this study, referred to as I hereafter in this study, is CO’s mother and early childhood educator. I came to the United States in 2003 from South Korea to pursue my doctoral study and stayed here since then going through obtaining a doctoral degree and moving into a faculty position. Acknowledging my own identity and subjectivity might be critical given my dualistic roles in this study. As the first generation Korean-American immigrant woman living in the United States, I have personally experienced many

racial-cultural episodes described in the aforementioned Asian-American identity model. Whereas there were moments when I was proud of and comfortable about who I am, there were also moments that I felt discriminated or misunderstood by others due to my Asian heritage and/or an accent in my English. In most cases, though, perhaps being an educational researcher interested in socio-culturally responsive pedagogy, I was able to take a positive spin in those frustrating moments without taking them too personally. Over the years, I have become comfortable in adjusting and switching between Korean and American cultures in various contexts.

There is a complex and ambiguous area for parent-researchers to maintain the professional distance to not influence the participant while being close enough to accurately understand the participant's experiences. As a parent-researcher is a total insider in this kind of study, it is plausible that an outsider perspective that allows for making the invisible visible could be limited. A few notable examples exist how parent-researchers took on this complicated endeavor successfully (e.g., Long, 2004; Yoon, 2012). Despite the critique on research validity in such research design, it was suggested that a parent-researcher is allowed access to an incomparably rich contexts to gather authentic data generated in natural settings, which ultimately raises the "ecological validity" of the research study (Carpenter, 1997).

Data Sources and Analyses

The primary data for this study included my journals that have been written periodically over the years, numerous informal observations and conversations with CO, and one interview with CO. The journal started originally for me, as an early childhood educator and researcher, to organize and record my analytical thoughts as CO's formal education journey began. Hence, the journal entries were not specified for racial-cultural identity topics. At the end of CO's second grade year, one semi-structured interview was conducted to provide an opportunity for me to confirm my perspectives and for CO to share her perspectives about the topic. This interview was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Given the variety of data sources and extensive amount of data collected over the three-year period, data were first analyzed holistically (Stake, 1995). During this initial phase, themes such as slavery, food, bilingualism, wanting to belong, avoidance, confusion, and

reconstruction emerged. Next phase of analysis focused on detailed description of the key themes in order to fully represent the complexity of the case. This was followed by the phase of eliciting assertions that describe the meaning of the case, when I also employed a metaphor approach. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), metaphors are powerful tools to capture how an individual constructs meaning out of the lived experiences, and thus, it was a suitable approach to present the findings of this study. Once the themes and metaphors have been elicited, since the data are about my child, I was careful with interpreting data in order to avoid personal biases through frequent conversation with CO's father who is not an educational researcher. Careful on-going member checking with CO herself, especially during the interview, served as additional means to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

This phenomenological case study is aimed to understand how a Korean-American child went through her racial-cultural identity negotiation and development in the early schooling years in the United States. As a result, four themes of critical incidents and associated strategies were identified, and are presented with the following metaphors: (a) Just give me a sandwich – Avoiding attention; (b) I must have been a slave – Trying to fit in; (c) It is my cultural water – Speaking up; and (d) I can be both – Reconstructing flexible identities. The specific examples that illustrate and support each finding are provided in this section. I also describe how I, as CO's mother, tried to facilitate or mediate the situations, whenever applicable. This is not to divert the focus of this study, but is only intended to provide a thicker description of CO's experiences.

Just Give Me a Sandwich – Avoiding Attention

It is well documented in the literature that a sense of membership, that we belong to a certain group and are accepted by the group members, is an extremely important element in an individual's positive identity formation (Kemple, 2004). Although there is not a clear articulation of race or culture yet, CO was experiencing that there is something different about

her just a few weeks into the kindergarten year, which can be viewed as an early awareness of racial-cultural identity. One day, she wasn't happy that her lunch is catching her peers' attention.

CO: Mommy, what was inside my lunch today?

Me: Today, it was a chicken pot-sticker.

CO: I mean, what was inside that pot-sticker. Was it really chicken?

Me: Yes, it was chicken and other vegetables. Why, what's the problem?

CO: They think my lunch smells disgusting. OL asked what's inside, but I didn't know, so I couldn't explain.

Me: So, you mean someone said your lunch smells disgusting? What did you say?

CO: Well, just don't pack it [chicken pot-stickers] again. Just give me a sandwich. [Conversation with CO on Sep 2010]

This is not an only example that CO was being sensitive to her lunch, but it was the most direct critical incident she explained why. CO's strategy to navigate this particular critical incident of being questioned about her lunch was avoiding attention. When I was asking her questions to probe more so that I could figure out a better way to explain this incident to her, CO simply walked away from my question answering "Well, just don't pack it again. Just give me a sandwich." In other words, CO was attempting to avoid this attention by choosing a sandwich, probably in hopes that it will resolve the issue. As I am aware that lunch time at a school cafeteria is one of the most powerful socialization opportunities for young children, CO's concerns about looking different and getting unwanted attention by the group were totally understandable. Given that it was early on in her kindergarten year, I decided to listen to her opinion and did not pack that chicken pot-sticker in her lunch.

Although I did not want to make this issue too big, I could not help but thinking that this is a perfect teachable moment for young children to be taught about cultural diversity. In fact, the chicken pot-sticker which was at the center of this entire episode was an Americanized Asian food from Costco. In other words, it could have been a lunch choice for any other child. So, I met with CO's teacher to carefully share the episode (since she was not present at the scene and thus was unaware about it) and discussed how I thought this might be a good opportunity for her kindergartners to learn about respecting differences. At the same time, I

asked to volunteer as a parent story reader and purposefully chose a book that could bring about such conversation. Thankfully, CO's teacher was responsive to my ideas and we collaboratively put together a plan.

I Must Have Been a Slave – Trying to Fit In

During February, which is designated as a “Black History Month” in the United States, it is almost a tradition for children to learn about the civil rights movement. For CO, learning about slavery and the Black history for the first time in her life in kindergarten, the issue of skin color became enormously salient. I recall this was one of the most direct critical incidents she had with regard to race. She spoke to me one day, almost full of excitement, that she had learned something new at school.

CO: Mommy, I am so glad that I wasn't born 100 years ago.

Me: What do you mean? [very puzzled]

CO: Mom, do you know that if I were born 100 years ago, I must have been a slave [no sense of doubt in her confident voice].

Me: [surprised] Wow, why do you say that? What makes you think so?

CO: Long time ago, people with darker skin had to be a slave. [CO rolls up her sleeve to show me her skin, and says] See, I am dark.

Me: That's really interesting... [Conversation with CO on Feb 2011]

As can be seen in the above excerpt, I was completely unprepared how to respond to CO's misconceptualization of slavery, her skin color, race, and ultimately her racial-cultural identity. While the slavery topic might not be a new concept for some children, others might find it completely foreign. I could see that CO was firstly surprised to learn that people could be treated unfairly based on their skin color and then felt relieved that slavery no longer exists. She was engrossed with figuring out where she would belong if it were 100 years ago, and it appeared that her sense of Asian or Korean identity has completely vanished at the moment. In short, she was making an unnecessary effort to make herself fit into the dichotomy of White vs. Black, which resulted in misidentification of herself. I honestly did not know how to respond and felt like I needed to process this first. Instead of following-up with CO on the

spot, I reflected on my journal later that day.

I knew the conversation about race would come when it is most unexpected; yet, this is probably the most unexpected comment about race I was anticipating from CO. How can she identify herself as Black?? The theory suggested that most minority individuals begin with identifying themselves with Whites. Apparently CO is proving herself to be an outlier from the theory. It is possible that she doesn't realize the power differentials between Whites and Blacks yet. Or, it is possible that she somehow does feel less powerful than White peers. Or, it is also possible that she simply thinks of her skin being darker than her White peers, so defaulted herself as a Black. All of a sudden, I am getting curious and disappointed about how Mrs. M instructed this lesson about slavery. Did she consider that some children who don't belong to either White or Black group may have a different frame of reference and can get confused like CO?? [My journal entry on Feb 2011]

As an early childhood educator myself, I again took this as a teachable moment and made careful efforts to explain the history of slavery in the United States, of course to the level I thought was appropriate for CO to understand; however, as it turned out later, the whole incident was still very confusing for CO. She appeared to be under the impression that there are only two racial categories accepted in the United States, and thus she needs to fit into one of them to secure her position. This particular critical incident about slavery must have stuck with her for a long period of time, as she brought back the issue multiple times at quite random situations, as below.

Mom, were you a slave? I know slave children don't have time to play sports or do anything fun. Is that why you didn't learn to ride a bike when you were a child? [CO's Comments on Apr 2011]

I know we're not slaves because we are not totally dark. Black people with really dark skin were slaves. I think I am just in the middle, about 7 or 8 out of 10. I think we could have been owners of slaves, except that we would be nicer than White people. White people were really mean, but we are not really White. Black people were trying to be nice, but White people weren't. I like my color because we're both – we're both White and Black. [CO's Comments on Feb 2012]

The above excerpts demonstrate CO's continued efforts to conceptualize slavery and negotiate racial-cultural identity within her own frame of reference. Although it is still

inaccurate, her understanding of slavery and racial identification has evolved over time, which confirms prior research that young children are active producers of racial knowledge. Especially, from the second excerpt it can be gleaned that CO begins to realize that she belongs to neither category, expresses confusion, yet attempts to secure her position somewhere along the spectrum.

It Is My Cultural Water –Speaking Up

According to the racial-cultural identity models reviewed earlier (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Kim, 1981, 2012; Sue & Sue, 1999), it is reported that individuals go through a period when they experience a sense of pride associated with their own racial-cultural backgrounds. While the existing models suggested this to occur much later in an individual's life, it was noticed that CO was experiencing some of these and began to express herself more freely. One of the interesting critical incidents was about the water.

Mommy today AM made a very rude comment about my water. He asked if I was drinking apple juice, so I said no. Then, he said it looks like I'm drinking pee. Seriously? How could that be possible? Everyone knows that is just not true and he is still making a mean comment to make me look bad. I explained it was my cultural water, it is like a special type of water my mom makes. Then he said nobody **makes** water. I told him it was like a tea that you make and I like it because it keeps my throat from being dried up. [CO's Comments on Sep 2012]

As I was listening to CO, I had two mixed feelings. I was very disheartened by some of the overtly discriminatory comments made by a 7-year-old, and wondered where these attitudes are coming from and how much more we have to do. At the same time, I was extremely proud to hear how CO explained her water to AM. Particularly, 'my cultural water' was a very creative term I never used before, so I had to assume she came up with it by her own as she was speaking up for herself. During the earlier years of her school, when CO was picked on by a peer about her chicken pot-sticker lunch, she had avoided the problem and just wanted to have a sandwich. Now she is actively exhibiting who she is and articulating why she is making certain choices. This example, the way CO handled a similar incident completely differently, is a great representation of young children's growing resiliency and active agency

in negotiating their racial-cultural identity. A few weeks later, two related critical incidents were brought to my attention again.

Mom, why do we look like Chinese? CH keeps calling me that I am Chinese. I told him, I am not; I am Korean. But he keeps saying that over and over again.... I think we [Chinese and Korean] have the same skin color, and that's why. But I don't want to be called a Chinese lady! [CO's Comments on Sep 2012]

Mommy, did you know what happened today at school? PK and CH both knew 'Gangnam Style'! They were dancing and showing off. I told them it was a Korean singer's popular song, my mom and dad are from South Korea, and my mom actually lived in Gangnam. And guess what? They were so surprised! I'm so happy that they will finally know that Korea and China are different! [CO's Comments on Nov 2012]

One of the initial interesting points from these incidents is that it reminds us of the reported findings about Asian-Americans, such that one of the frequent microaggressions experienced by Asian-Americans is to confide our original ethnicity (Covarrubias & Liou, 2014; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010). Previous literature further reported that because the country of origin is often questioned of them as part of their status in American society, Asian-Americans had a greater tendency to find it offensive when others confuse their original ethnicity (e.g., Korean, Chinese, etc.). CO was clearly representing such tendency. From a different vantage point, however, CO's voices in the above excerpts illustrate her development of racial-cultural identity in a more minute way. In the first excerpt, CO expresses frustration of being misidentified as Chinese by her friends, whereas in the second excerpt, she expresses almost a sense of accomplishment that her racial-cultural identity can now be correctly distinguished by her friends. She was also able to seize the perfect opportunity by using a popular music of the time and connecting it to explain her racial-cultural background. Taken altogether, when navigating this series of critical incidents where racially-culturally derogatory comments are made or country of origin was misidentified, CO demonstrated herself to be a competent agent whose selection of strategies have become more sophisticated and nuanced in accurately defining her racial-cultural identity to her friends.

I Can Be Both – Reconstructing Flexible Identities

Language is widely documented in educational research to be not only a communication tool but also a critical medium for cultural preservation for immigrant families (Espinosa, 2010; Tabors, 2008). As such, as an immigrant parent raising Korean-American children in the United States, one of my personal commitments was to promote their bilingual proficiency. However, once CO began formal schooling in the United States schools, she quickly recognized that English is the language of power in this society. I tried to introduce many successful Asian-American role models in the United States, so that CO would appreciate being a bi-lingual and bi-cultural individual. Given this history, it was interesting to find out CO's reconstructed understanding of racial-cultural identity associated with her bilingual competency, during the interview with me at the end of her second grade year.

Me: How would you like to describe yourself? Do you feel more connected as Korean or American?

CO: I think I am both. I can speak English and I can speak Korean, so I can be in both groups. I think it's good to speak both languages so that I can communicate with both English and Korean people. It's actually good that I can choose what language I would like to use at different situations.

Me: If language is such a big deal, what if you were better at one language than the other? Would that make you more like one group and less like the other group?

CO: Yes, speaking the language is important. I mean, you cannot say you are an American when you don't speak English. It is pretty simple. So, at school, I am more like American because I am with my American friends and I speak English. But, when I'm at Korean school or at home, I am more like Korean because that's who I am getting along with. Like I said, you can be both at different times. [Interview with CO on Apr 2013]

Reconstructing one's racial-cultural identity as a contextually modifiable construct is an interesting finding that was not represented in any prior identity models. Confusion still exists for CO to distinguish racial-cultural identity and linguistic identity, such that she believes speaking a particular language will grant her a particular identity. Nonetheless, this voice poignantly illustrates that CO has gradually evolved in her thinking about racial-cultural identity as a rather fluid construct such that an individual could have multiple identities depending on contextual situations. Darder (1991, 2012), a pioneering researcher on bicultural

children, reported that negotiation, which is referred to as children affirming both identities while maintaining a careful balance and critical stance of both, is the most positive outcome for children growing up with more than one cultures. The notions about negotiation and flexible identity have also been discussed in an aforementioned study by Yoon (2012) that an individual's identity can be dynamic, and that "... when students are aware of who they are, they are able to effectively negotiate their identities between self-chosen identity and assigned identity." (Yoon, 2012, p. 993). Unlike the existing identity development theories where multiple identities are only described as a contradicting relationship between the dominant group and marginalized groups, the nature of multiple, flexible, and dynamic identities described in this study by CO were complementary of each other. This study illuminates that CO, even as a young child, actively negotiated and positioned herself differently on different occasions. CO's example of actively negotiating and labeling her own racial-cultural identity, as well as attempting to reconstruct flexible identities could be recognized as noteworthy.

Discussion and Implications

In an effort to understand the delicate and complex nature of young children's racial-cultural identity development process, this phenomenological case study aimed to identify the authentic experiences of one Korean-American child and examine the strategies utilized through a metaphoric representation. In this section, key findings of this study and implications for early childhood teachers and teacher educators are discussed.

This study illuminates the experiences of a Korean-American child living in the Southeastern regions of the United States in early 2010s, and reaffirms the previous research findings(e.g., Husband, 2010, 2012; Kelly & Brooks, 2009; Park, 2011;van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) that young children are fully aware about differences with race and culture. In other words, documentation of CO's experiences and various strategies contributes to the growing body of research that challenges the traditional beliefs that young children are incapable of understanding race, racism, and racial awareness. Yoon's (2012) study highlighted the Korean immigrant adolescents' identity agency, and suggested that they are not inactive or passive members in the school or larger society. In this study, CO has similarly demonstrated her

identity agency as early as 5 years of age. The findings of this study could extend and challenge the existing literature base that young children not only notice racial-cultural differences and sense whether certain things are fair or not (Boutte, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2012; Park, 2011; Ramsey, 2004), but also can play an active and agentic role in his/her own racial-cultural identity development process.

Additionally, it would be worthwhile to revisit the strategies utilized by CO. The strategies included avoiding attention when her lunch was questioned; trying to fit in when learning about and conceptualizing slavery; speaking up when her identity was devalued or misunderstood; and reconstructing flexible identity based on her bilingual competency. It is interesting to note that these four strategies represents a shift from a passive and simplistic approach to an active and sophisticated approach during the 3-year period. For instance, when CO first felt a sense of embarrassment for her chicken pot-sticker lunch, her initial strategy was to avoid the attention and assimilate by having a sandwich; and when she first learned about slavery and racial differences, she immediately tried to fit herself into the White or Black dichotomy which resulted in misidentifying herself as Black. Over time, however, when she felt a similar sense of embarrassment for her water, she actively articulated it as ‘my cultural water’; and her narrow categorization of race evolved into a more dynamic understanding of racial-cultural membership such that she associated herself with both Korean and American groups. It is well known that a child’s development is influenced by multiple layers of interrelated factors (i.e., individual temperament, family surroundings, parents’ roles, school culture, societal culture, etc.), and therefore, it won’t be feasible to explain what has affected CO’s understanding and use of strategies that evolved positively over time. Nonetheless, what can be gleaned from this study is that young children have a potential to become an active navigator and negotiator of their own racial-cultural identity development, and it would be the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers to be engaged in this process.

With the growing number of racially and culturally diverse young population in the United States, most teacher education programs offer multicultural education or diversity courses, and many address the concept of racial-cultural identity development as part of the course to prepare teacher candidates to understand the complexity of issues (Aveling, 2006; Lecompte & McCray, 2002; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Park, 2011; Tatum, 1992). However,

the majority of teachers, especially early childhood teachers, are reported to find it uncomfortable and avoid engagement in such ways of thinking presuming that young children are too young and naïve for such issues (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2012; Han, 2010). It would be, therefore, imperative to broaden the discourse among early childhood educators to carefully and purposefully engage young children in the discussion of race and culture, and pay closer attention to their evolving thinking. An action research by Goss (2009), a second grade teacher who utilized a famous Disney movie *A Bug's Life* as a medium to introduce and discuss about slavery, oppression and social justice, is one of the few excellent exemplars for early childhood teachers to think outside of the box and make these topics relevant for young children. As evidenced by CO's initial misconception about slavery and her on-going confusion to sort out the different racial categories, the lack of careful instruction and attention could lead to a child's significant misunderstanding or misconceptualization of his/her own racial-cultural identity. Early childhood teachers' intentional instruction that can promote critical thinking and counter taken-for-granted ideas about race and culture among young children are solely needed.

Two particular findings of this study are noteworthy for additional attention that may lead to further research. One is that CO identified herself as Black. It is in direct contrast with the existing theories (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Kim, 1981, 2012; Sue & Sue, 1999) that suggest most individuals from minority background go through a developmental stage where they identify themselves as Whites. Although it is not feasible to theorize anything based on CO's experience and her decision making rationales, psychological theory predicting that all individuals would prefer to be identified as a dominant group may not be universal for all individuals, especially for young children. The other is that, while CO reconstructed a flexible and positive identity over time, it appears that language competency may have played a critical role in the process. How would this experience differ for those who are not yet fluent in English? What roles could or should parents have during this process? How can early childhood teachers encourage parents to have a conversation about race, culture, and racial-culture identity with their children? In part, I recognize that my familiarity with the school system and position as an education faculty could have afforded me an advantageous platform than some others, but it still wasn't any easy task, letting me only to imagine how difficult it would be for parents when faced with these conversations with their

children, likely to be at the most unexpected moments. These questions, therefore, need to be further studied given the vital roles of family, school, and the larger society to provide positive support and influence for young children in this sensitive endeavor.

Finally, on the basis of a single case study, it is not intended to offer any generalized suggestion or implication. Instead, given the power of a case study that can invite people for a new conversation and deeper exploration (Marriam, 1998; Yin, 2009), a few directions for early childhood teachers and teacher educators could be considered. One of the possible directions for future study is to examine Korean or other Asian-American children's experience in different geographical locations. Critical incidents experienced by any individual are likely to be dependent upon a specific time and place where the phenomenon took place; hence, experiences might differ for other children living in different regions of the United States than what is reported in this study. In an effort to portray a more comprehensive understanding of Asian-American children's experiences in the United States and ultimately to propose an alternative theoretical paradigm, a broader investigation could be considered. Another area of study could be to examine the experiences of parents and/or families of Asian-American children. By listening to their voices, challenges, and expectations with regard to supporting their child's healthy racial-cultural identity development, early childhood educators could better collaborate with family members on this important issue.

To conclude, this study offers a glimpse into a complex nature of a Korean-American child's racial-cultural identity negotiation and development in the United States, and supports a portrait of young children as active agents of their own development and learning, including even the sensitive issues around racial-cultural identity. Findings and implications of this study can add to the growing body of literature that challenges traditional theoretical perspectives of what young children know and can do for themselves. It calls for an expanded discourse around the issue, and also sheds a light on what roles teachers and parents can play to collaboratively address and scaffold the experiences. More purposeful and critical examination on the topic seems timely, not just to scaffold young children but also to better support teachers and families, altogether.

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