

“Raising a Socially Competent Child”: Unpacking the Concept of Social Competence

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Abstract

This paper investigates how social competence, as a discourse, has been constructed in the field of early childhood education (hereafter ‘the field’) and how the conceptualization of social competence in academia has been applied to educational practices. Based on Bruner’s (1996) notions of folk psychology and folk pedagogy and Foucault’s notion of discourse (Foucault, 1972), I identify the cultural values and beliefs in the dominant discourses about raising “a socially competent child”, comparing and contrasting them with cultural psychological studies on cultural practices of socialization and teaching. By doing so, I discuss both relatively overemphasized and neglected perspectives of young children’s socialization in the field. Finally, I discuss the educational implications of cultural diversity in the conceptualization of and cultural practices of social competence and call for the appreciation and empowerment of diverse values and characteristics of social competence.

Keywords : social competence, social development, cultural psychology, socialization

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Introduction

In the spring of 2011, I was participating in an international conference. One night, I met some Korean scholars and had a casual conversation with them. When I introduced young children's social development and competence as my area of interest, one of my male colleagues immediately responded, "Oh, please give me some advice. My son lacks social competence; he is too girly." Although I could not grasp the meaning of his immediate comment, he seemed to have certain beliefs and assumptions about this concept and made the connection between the notion of social competence and gender norms by stating "too girly" as a reason for his son's supposed lack of social competence.

Bruner's (1996) notion of *folk pedagogy* explains a part of the father's reasoning. According to Bruner, when interacting with others, we are deeply affected by "our everyday intuitive theories about how other minds work" (p. 45). These, in Bruner's words, are *folk psychologies* which "reflect some deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about 'the mind'" (p. 46). Bruner explains that *folk pedagogy* is an accumulated set of assumptions, beliefs, and notions "about how the child's mind learns and even what makes it grow" (p. 46). Based on the assumptions and beliefs about the minds of learners, the practice of teaching and attempts at instruction and guidance are shaped and followed. *Folk psychology* and *folk pedagogy* are rarely discussed at a conscious level, although they have a significant influence on people's everyday educational activities.

The father's response about his son's social competence in the above excerpt reflects his *folk psychology* about his son's social competence—his son's performance in terms of social and cultural norms for boys. His assessment of his son's social competence shows how he conceptualizes social competence and what aspects of social competence he expects his son to embody. In this case, just as he mentioned "too girly," the components of social competence that this father values are directly related to the socially acceptable male behaviors.

The meeting with him caused me to investigate what cultural values and beliefs about young children's social competence exist in the academic discourse and how these are reflected in educational practices of the field. By reviewing numerous works of literature related to children's social competence and relationships, I first attempted to identify the prevalent image of "a socially competent child" in the field. This literature review led me to

explore social and cultural value-laden selections in conceptualizing social competence by making a connection with cultural psychological studies on teaching and socialization of children (e.g., Rogoff, 2003; Shweder et al, 2006; Tobin, 1992). The value-laden selections in characterizing social competence in academia reflect which aspects of social competence are generally promoted in the definitions and attract researchers' attentions and, at the same time, which other aspects are disregarded and devalued. Therefore, the investigation of the cultural image of "a socially competent child" helped me to recognize the marginalized and neglected values in dominant discourses, which can also be important characteristics of social competence and of effective social functioning children employ in their peer culture.

Mode of Inquiry and Data Sources

I reviewed literature related to children's social competence published from 1950 to the present to identify dominant conceptualizations of social competence in the academic discourse of the field. I searched for literature, mainly on Google Scholar and EBSCOhost, using the following keywords and phrases: "social competence (development)," "socialization," "social competence & assessment," "children's social skills," "sociometric (peer) status & children," "social temperament," "influence & social competence," "attachment and social," "teacher child social competence," "social competence & context," and "social competence & culture." When needed, I retraced some primary sources referenced in the books and articles I found through the initial literature search. The primary books that I reviewed include *Children and Social Competence: Arenas of Action* (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998), *Children's Peer Relations and Social Competence: A Century of Progress* (Ladd, 2005), *Childhood Social Development: Contemporary Perspectives* (McGurk, 1992), *Fostering Children's Social Competence: The Teacher's Role* (Katz & McClellan, 1997), *Handbook of Social Development: A Lifespan Perspective* (Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1992), *Peer Rejection in Childhood* (Asher & Coie, 1990), and *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Social Development* (Smith & Hart, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Bruner's (1996) idea of *folk psychology* and *folk pedagogy* guided me to the necessity of investigating the embedded cultural values and beliefs within any thoughts or practices we have in our ordinary lives. According to Bruner, even what we believe as common knowledge or universal truth is also culturally grounded. He states, "Consider for example the issue of what knowledge is, where it comes from, how we come by it. These are all matters that have deep cultural roots" (p. 50). Although people might easily think that the notion of and knowledge of social competence are universal, these seemingly universal knowledge are also related to certain beliefs, assumptions, and expectations with regard to social competence that they hold. Even if academic discourses have been generally based on scientific findings and evidence, which many people have regarded as an essential factor for satisfying the condition of truth, scholars and researchers bring with them their beliefs, assumptions, and expectations, which are inevitably culturally grounded. All of these beliefs, assumptions, and expectations are combined into a collected notion of social competence. Therefore, the notion of social competence can be defined very differently across cultures and reflected in people's life practices, particularly in this paper, practices of teaching. And, how teaching is practiced in reality can vary a great deal from one cultural context to another.

This paper is also grounded in Foucault's notion of discourse (Foucault, 1972). In the same sense as the cultural aspects of knowledge previously discussed, while giving discourse a special meaning, Foucault affirms that knowledge is the aggregate of individual interpretation through discourse, which is the human activity of social-cultural meaning making. Lemke (1994) points out "what we call knowledge is a special kind of story, a text, or discourse which seem pleasing or useful to a particular culture, or even just to some relatively powerful members of that culture" (p. 69). In particular, Foucault dealt with the relationship between knowledge and power and their interaction. Shifting away from the question "What is knowledge?" Foucault asked, "What counts as knowledge?"; "Who determines knowledge?"; and "How is knowledge constructed?" For these questions, Foucault investigated historically and socially constructed knowledge through a kind of "archaeology of knowledge" or "genealogy of knowledge" (Cannella, 1997). Then, he revealed the superiority of specific perspectives or discourses on a certain phenomenon, exposing historically and socially

justified forms and hidden conditions for the formation of dominant discourses. In other words, Foucault especially emphasized the production of knowledge and concentrated on power, which is hidden within discourses. Founded on Foucault's notion of discourse, through deeply delving into the meanings of "raising a socially competence child" in academic discourse, this paper explores what cultural values and beliefs are implicitly embedded in the dominant discourse of social competence, particularly in European American society. However, my position is not as critical as Foucault's in that I do not directly point out a certain group or community of people who are empowered and disempowered. Nevertheless, I do take a somewhat critical stand as Foucault does. The findings of this paper will broadly imply such power relations and will be followed by a discussion of social power circulating throughout a culture and a society.

Discourse of "Raising a Socially Competent Child"

The Definitions of a Socially Competent Child

In previous studies of the social aspects of children's development, many scholars pointed out that there are a wide variety of prevailing definitions of social competence (e.g., Anderson & Messick, 1974; Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998; Ladd, 2005; Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Schneider, 1993; Yeates & Selman, 1989). A sample of researchers' definitions of social competence is presented in Table 1.

The diversity of definitions reflects the various different emphases researchers place on the concept of social competence. In order to depict the implicit cultural values within the academic discourses in the field, I first discuss such diverse notions of and approaches to social competence in academia by referring to Rose-Krasnor's (1997) four general types of approaches that are helpful in comprehensively understanding the complex nature of social competence: (a) specific social skills, (b) sociometric status, (c) relationships, and (d) functional outcomes.

Table 1. *Definitions of Social Competence*

| Author (year) | Definition of Social Competence |
|---|--|
| Chen & French (2008) | “the ability to attain personal or group success in social situations” (p. 592) |
| Katz & McClellan (1997) | “an individual’s ability to initiate and maintain satisfying, reciprocal relationships” (p. 1) |
| Ladd (2005) | “a range of behavioral and relational proficiencies, including children’s abilities to (1) initiate or sustain positive interactions with peers and inhibit the use of negative behaviors, (2) form affiliative ties such as friendships and peer-group acceptance, (3) sustain positive peer relationships and relationships and roles and negative social-emotional consequences” (p. 193) |
| Lillvist, Sandberg, Björck-Åkesson, & Granlund (2009) | “a combination of traits or skills within a person and the effective social interaction between a person and his or her environment” (p. 55) |
| Rubin & Rose-Krasnor (1992) | “the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across situations” (p. 4) |
| Schneider (1993) | “the ability to implement developmentally-appropriate social behaviors that enhance one’s interpersonal relationships without causing harm to anyone” (p. 19) |
| Semrud-Clikeman (2007) | “an ability to take another’s perspective concerning a situation and to learn from past experience and apply that learning to the ever-changing social landscape. The ability to respond flexibly and appropriately defines a person’s ability to handle the social challenges that are presented to us all” (pp. 1-2) |
| Waters & Sroufe (1983) | “an ability to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment” (p. 79) |
| Yeates & Selman (1989) | “the development of the social-cognitive skills and knowledge, including the capacity for emotional control, that mediate behavioral performances in specific contexts, which are in turn judged by self and others to be successful and thereby increase the likelihood of positive psychosocial adjustment” (p. 66) |

Social skills approach. The social skill approach regards social competence as a set of desirable skills or traits (Rose-Krasnor, 1997) to produce positive social outcomes. Children who regularly show pro-social behaviors, such as sharing, cooperating, and helping, are considered socially competent. In contrast, children who rarely show pro-social behaviors or who regularly show anti-social behaviors, such as aggression or other behaviors linked to

negative relationship outcomes, are considered socially incompetent and deficient in social skills (Ladd, 2005). Katz and McClellan (1997) describe social skills as "the ways that children approach each other" (p. 5) and present the examples of "giving positive attention to others, requesting information from others about their activities, and contributing to ongoing discussions among peers" (p. 5). Researchers adopting this approach (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham et al., 2003; Denham & Grout, 1993; Garner & Estep, 2001; Katz & McClellan, 1997; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007) have used a competence correlates strategy that recognizes which components of abilities and personalities are considered social competence and what elements are regarded as indicators for measuring social competence (e.g., emotional regulation, social cognition, language acquisition, and social temperament).

Sociometric status approach. According to this approach, children who are popular or liked by peers are considered socially competent, while children who are often rejected or neglected by peers are considered lacking in social skills and viewed as socially incompetent (Asher, 1983; Asher & Coie, 1990; Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, & Hymel, 1979; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Research on children's sociometric status primarily has focused on behavioral correlates of social competence, such as prosocial behaviors, social knowledge, emotional competence, communication ability, and interactional types (e.g., Asher, 1983; Bonney & Powell, 1953; Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Dodge, Murphy, & Buchsbaum, 1984; Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975; Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967; Markell & Asher, 1984; Sebanc, 2003). For example, early research conducted by Bonney and Powell (1953) reported that popular children conformed more to classroom requirements and expectations than unpopular children, who were less frequently nominated as desired playmates. The popular children smiled more frequently, engaged in cooperative group participation, and made voluntary contributions to the group.

Relationship approach. From the perspective of the relationship approach, the nature and the quality of children's social relationships reflects social competence, and children's abilities to form positive social relationships are considered critical for their healthy development (Ladd, 1999; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Recognizing the importance of children's friendships for social development and adjustment, many earlier researchers attempted to

identify aspects of social competence or behaviors that correlated with children's relationships, still supporting the social skills hypothesis (i.e., not only do social skills produce improvements in children's peer relationships, but problematic relationships are also explained in terms of deficit of social skills). More recently, studies have been conducted on the nature and functions of peer relationships in children's development (Ladd, 1999). Researchers (e.g., Berndt, 2004; Sebanc, 2003) differentiated the features of children's friendships, dividing them into positive—companionship, validation, help, guidance, and intimacy—and negative—betrayal, conflict resolution, and exclusivity—features, and investigated these features in terms of behavioral characteristics.

Functional approach. The functional approach to social competence focuses on children's social goals and social outcomes and is concerned particularly with processes and specific contexts, which are viewed as leading to certain social outcomes (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). This approach poses that children's social competence is determined not just by their final social behaviors, social status, and/or social relationships that are visible but also by their social goals, their cognitive social knowledge, and their decision making abilities at each step of the social problem solving process. For example, the information-processing model of social skills developed by Crick and Dodge (1994) adopts this functional approach in that their model stipulates that children's social behavior "results from a multistep social-cognitive process" (Rose-Krasnor, 1997, p. 117) and "is a function of sequential steps of processing, including encoding of social cues, interpretation of social cues, clarification of goals, response access or construction, response decision, and behavior enactment" (Crick & Dodge, 1996, p. 993). They attempted to evaluate children's social cognitive tendencies at each step of the social problem solving process that might lead to children's social behaviors. As a result, they reported that aggressive children more frequently attributed hostile intent to peer provocateurs, evaluated aggressive acts in more positive ways, and were more likely to prefer self-enhancing goals rather than relationship-enhancing goals, compared to non-aggressive children.

Cultural Values in the Discourse of "Raising a Socially Competent Child"

Based on the literature review, I identify six underlying cultural values in the field's

dominant discourse of "raising a socially competent child": (a) individual orientedness, (b) dyadic interactional styles in relationships, (c) high appreciation of social initiative, (d) emphasis on emotional regulation and verbal interaction, (e) devaluation of shyness and sensitivity, and (f) the necessity of adult intervention.

Individual orientedness. Many researchers' definitions of social competence primarily place the emphasis on individuals' abilities and personal goals in social interactions and relationships. For example, several scholars' definitions show individual orientedness by including such words as "an individual's ability to initiate and maintain satisfying, reciprocal relationships" (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p. 1), "the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction" (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992, p. 4), and "a person's ability to handle the social challenges" (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007, p. 2). Such individual orientedness is also represented in a great deal of research that adopts the social skills approach or correlates social status and relationships with a child's social behavioral characteristics. Many researchers, who are interested in children's social competence and development, have primarily been paying attention to individual children's social behaviors and skills, which are regarded as representative of children's social abilities.

The components of social competence principally include an individual capability of emotional regulations and social knowledge and skills. For example, the observational instruments to measure children's social competence and development (e.g., Cummings, Kaminski, & Merrell, 2008; Denham et al., 2003) focus on an individual's behaviors, such as frequency of social interaction, cooperative and social initiative behaviors, and negative social behaviors, without consideration of the social and contextual situations in a group or a community. Moreover, many researchers have linked children's social competence to academic performance and have asserted that children's social competence is an important predictor for children's school adjustment and academic success in concurrent and later school grades (e.g. Birch & Ladd, 1996; Galindo & Fuller, 2010; Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2010; Shernoff, 2010; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001; Wentzel, 1991; Williams & Galliher, 2006). Children's social competence has also been considered associated with their emotional well-being (Parker & Asher, 1993; Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997) and having an effect on their functioning

throughout adolescence and early adulthood (Foulks & Morrow, 1989). These studies regard an individual child's improvement of academic performance, school adjustment, and emotional well-being as an expected result or goal of social development. Likewise, the foci of the conceptualization of social competence were placed on an individual's abilities and goals to build satisfying and positive relationships, not on the collaborative and harmonized characteristics of a group or social members.

Individualism prevalent in European American cultural community is often discussed in many cultural studies (Chen & French, 2008; Hatano & Inagaki, 1998; Rogoff, 2003; Shweder et al. 2006). These studies have revealed that a variety of cultural practices reflect individualistic values in Western societies. Individualism is considered *the ontological basis of self* in most European American cultures (Shweder et al., 2006), and this "ontology is extensively incorporated in most child-care practices and the main societal institutions such as schools" (Shweder et al., 2006, p. 752). The conceptualization and the cultural practices of social competence are deeply associated with this concept of self, because how the self is formed in a culture includes the social self, which is related to the social functioning within a group and social relationships. Based on beliefs and assumptions about the meanings of the self and of an acceptable or good self, children are raised through everyday cultural practices meeting such social expectations (Shweder et al. 2006).

Shweder et al. (2006) contrast the good European American self and the good Asian self. According to their distinction, a middle-class European American child is raised to be an individual who is independent, "separate from others and autonomous, efficacious, in control of his or her actions" (Shweder, 2006, p. 753). However, from the Asian perspective, "the self is not and cannot be separate from others or the surrounding social context, but is experienced as *interdependent* with the social context" (p. 753, emphasis in original). Shweder and his colleagues explain that this interdependent and connected self does not mean any conjoined unity of self and others. Rather, the interdependent self is needed to adjust oneself to a variety of interpersonal events with a high degree of self-control and self-discipline as well as sensitivity to and empathy for others.

Some people might then ask, "Isn't it also focusing on the individual by emphasizing self-regulation, self-control, or self-discipline?" Shweder et al. (2006) unravel this issue:

Control, however, is directed primarily to personal desires, goals, and emotions that can disturb the harmonious equilibrium of interpersonal transaction. This understanding of self stands in contrast to a European American notion of control that entails asserting our desires, goals, and emotions, and attempting to change features of the social situation. (pp. 753-754)

According to Shweder et al., the European American perspective of self focuses on personal goals rather than harmonious equilibrium of society or community. This ontological basis of the independent self is also reflected in the conceptualization of social competence whose foci were placed on an individual's abilities and personal goals to build satisfying and positive relationships, not necessarily on the collaborative and harmonized characteristics of a group or a social member as the primary concern.

Dyadic interactional styles in relationships. The values placed on the culturally different ontological self are also reflected in the cultural prototypes of interactional structures in social relationships. Many cultural psychological studies show that, in the Western mainstream society's ontology of self, children are acculturated to the individualized and dyadic interactional style through their social practices in their early experiences and school lives. In contrast, other communities' relational structures are more multidirectional (Hatano & Inagaki, 1998; Rogoff, 2003; Shweder, et al. 2006; Tobin, 1992). For instance, Hatano and Inagaki (1998) discuss U.S. teachers' inclination toward individualized lessons, which is opposed to Japanese teachers' inclination toward sharing students' experiences and ideas with their peers in a large group. According to these authors, U.S. teachers tended to believe that "students benefit most from individualized lessons, [and the U.S. teachers] tried to optimize their instructions by individualizing [them]" (Hatano & Inagaki, 1998, p. 90). Such belief in individualized lessons influences the characteristics of classroom interactions; U.S. teachers interact with an individual child rather than encouraging discussions among children.

This description of social interaction in classrooms by Hatano and Inagaki (1998) is comparable to Rogoff's (2003) discussion of typical U.S. classroom interaction. According to her, U.S. children are substantially accustomed to dyadic, face-to-face, one-partner-at-a-time interaction in their very early years of interactions with their care-givers. Even though the use of cooperative structure in U.S. classrooms has recently begun, this dyadic *cultural prototype of the structure of relationships* is still prevalent in classroom interactions (Rogoff, 2003).

Rogoff demonstrates this prototypical structure of dyadic interaction by affirming that “U.S. classrooms are commonly structured with the teacher taking a speaking turn between each child turn” (p. 148). This culturally preferred interactional structure is presented by another Japanese teacher’s comment about student/teacher ratios in Tobin’s (1992) study: “I believe a teacher should emphasize relating to the class as a whole, rather than to each student” (p. 31). Tobin notes that the “loss of dyadic intensity ... is an intended effect. [Intense dyadic relationships] would threaten the group ethos that Japanese expect preschools to provide and interfere with children’s play with peers” (pp. 31-32).

Cultural structures of relationships and interactions imply social expectations regarding the individual’s roles and social functioning. The cultural practice of interactions influences how social competence is conceptualized and which social dispositions and skills are more valued and promoted than others in raising socially competent children. In a culture of dyadic interactional styles in mainstream European-American culture, certain social characteristics and behaviors including social initiative and speakership are valued, while others such as silent participation, listenership, and “sensitivity to and empathy for others” (Shweder, 2006, p. 754) in a group are not necessarily valued and considered to be an important aspect of social competence that should be taught to young children.

High appreciation of social initiative. In the dominant discourses about children’s social competence, social initiative is considered important, as the researchers define it. For example, as a definition of social competence, Ladd (2005) suggests “children’s abilities to initiate or sustain positive interactions with peers and inhibit the use of negative behaviors” (p. 193). Katz and McClellan (1997) define social competence as “an individual’s ability to initiate and maintain satisfying, reciprocal relationships,” which also implies a value on children’s initiative behaviors in social relationships. Many cultural psychologists have affirmed that in the European-American community, children are expected to acquire autonomy and assertive social skills, which are regarded as an important index of socially matured and adaptive beings (Chen & French, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). In contrast, children who appear to show less initiative or are less active in social participation are considered maladaptive and socially incompetent.

However, in group-oriented or collectivistic societies, social initiative may not be as highly

valued or appreciated as it is in an individualistic society. Rogoff's (2003) example of Pueblo Indian students demonstrates how social initiative can be perceived differently in group-oriented communities. When the teacher told the children to introduce themselves to the school visitor, no one spoke, even when the teacher called on one of them to speak. According to Rogoff, in the Native American Indian community, the children avoid being singled out of the group. Rather, they prefer to blend into the whole group, while trying to serve the benefits of the group. As individuals' expected roles in a group are different, based on the cultural values, individuals' group participation behaviors are influenced and promoted differently by these cultural values.

Emphasis on emotional regulation and verbal interaction. Children's emotional competence, involving awareness of one's own and others' emotions as well as emotional expression and regulation, is regarded as an essential factor for social competence (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham, 2006; Denham et al., 2003) and for the development of peer relationships (Garner & Estep, 2001). Katz and McClellan (1997) emphasize children's abilities to regulate their emotions as a major achievement of their early childhood years and a crucial component of children's social development. They refer to aggression as the result of children's lack of social abilities, insufficient impulse control, or high levels of anger and as the most problematic cause of children's social difficulties, which requires teacher intervention.

Many researchers in the field have recognized children's linguistic development as having significant influences on children's social competence (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham et al., 2003; Denham & Grout, 1993; Garner & Estep, 2001; Katz & McClellan, 1997; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). For example, Semrud-Clikeman (2007) posits language use and the ability to have a conversation as a key element of social competence. Katz and McClellan (1997) guide teachers to intervene and encourage children to express their thoughts and emotions in words to each other when a child is in conflict with another child.

Meanwhile, many cultural studies reveal that the ways in which children express and deal with their emotions are affected by cultural norms (Miller & Sperry, 1987; Rogoff, 2003). How children should behave under a certain emotional state and what level of expression is allowed in the culture influence children's aggression. According to Miller and Sperry (1987),

children are socialized to acquire socially and culturally appropriate and allowable ways to express their anger and aggression through various social experiences consisting of very delicate and subtle interactional contexts. The interpretation and evaluation of children's aggression in different cultural contexts may vary, and different standards of appropriateness may apply. Therefore, their behavioral characteristics, including aggression, can be due to the social and cultural contexts to which they have become accustomed in their early lives and where they are placed at that moment. Labeling children's aggressive behaviors as socially deficient and problematic without consideration of an individual child's social and cultural contexts can result in making hasty and insensitive judgments.

Devaluation of shyness and sensitivity. Individual-orientedness and high appreciation of children's initiative and emotional regulation and expression are associated with the devaluation of certain personalities and social dispositions. Several researchers have pointed out how cultural contrasts in practices of socialization or teaching guide us to different perspectives and values applied to social behaviors and characteristics. For example, with regard to children's shyness, Chen (2009) explains that sensitivity and shyness "are usually considered to be indicators of being mature and well-behaved in traditional Chinese culture" (p. 29). In contrast to such perceptions of sensitivity and shyness in traditional Chinese culture, children's shyness is viewed negatively in the dominant discourse in the field and considered as a weakness that has to be overcome (e.g., Chen, 2009; Katz and McClellan, 1997).

In many American schools, children are encouraged to be expressive, particularly in verbal language. For example, describing a Japanese class's whole group discussion, Hatano and Inagaki (1998) affirm U.S. schools' high inclination toward *speakership*: "American students have been trained to be good speakers, for example, to express their ideas clearly and persuasively" (p. 91) in contrast to Japanese children who are trained to be careful listeners. Hatano and Inagaki emphasize the significance of *listenership* and silent social participation in Japan. They argue that silence is neither always passive participation nor an indicator of lesser competence. Rather, in other cultures, it is another way of active social participation and is more valued by the culturally different emphasis with regard to social behaviors and functioning in a group.

The necessity of adult intervention. Finally, the conceptualization of social competence is associated with beliefs in how to promote social competence. In their teacher's guide book, *Fostering Children's Social Competence: The Teacher's Role*, Katz and McClellan (1997) explain principles of practices and teaching strategies and interventions for developing and strengthening children's social competence. All of the contents of this book reflect the assumption of the necessity of adult's individual interventions for children's social development and for overcoming social difficulties. However, Tobin's (1992) example of an interview with a Japanese preschool teacher reveals that this assumption of adult intervention is also culturally grounded. Tobin explains that Japanese teachers did not intervene even in children's physical fighting because they believed children should learn how to negotiate and make common agreement amongst themselves. While Japanese teachers believe that children's fighting is more or less natural and does not require any adult intervention, Katz and McClellan emphasize teachers' individualized interventions for enhancing children's social competence. The authors recommend that teachers give young children direct and straightforward suggestions and directions about rules and expectations that young children need to follow for participating in a group. Likewise, adult intervention in children's social difficulties is interpreted differently based on cultural values and assumptions, and these *folk pedagogies* are reflected in such cultural practices of raising a socially competent child.

Empowering Diverse Characteristics of Social Competence

In this paper, comparing and contrasting the values predominantly addressed by the literature related to social development with other cultural communities' different practices and their underlying values, I attempted to unpack and challenge the current dominant discourse around social competence. Through this exploration, I reaffirm that the conceptualization of children's social competence reflects cultural values of a broader society and can be, therefore, better understood with the consideration of cultural values and belief systems and address the call for the appreciation and the empowerment of diverse values and characteristics of social competence.

Discourses about how social competence is conceptualized and which aspects of social

competence are studied in academia are all culture-based. Moreover, how the concepts of social competence are manifested in practices is culturally rooted, as well. Lillvist et al. (2009) report that teachers' definitions of social competence are similar to the definitions in academia. As implied in their argument of the cultural ties between academic and practical areas, the conceptualizations of children's social competence reflected in both academia and educational practices basically share common ground, and this common ground is often referred to as cultural values or belief systems.

With regard to social and cultural values in educational practices, Bruner provides profound insights in his book *Culture of Education* (1996). He explains that a school classroom itself is a sociocultural context in which children's knowledge and experiences are shared, negotiated, and constructed. Rather than being the physical setting of an instructional environment for young children, it is a living context that reflects implicit cultural values of the larger society. Bruner adds that "education is never neutral, [...] education is always political" (p. 25); therefore, social values reflected in the school curricula and classroom culture cannot be free from moral-political considerations of social class, gender, race, and other prerogatives of social power. I consider that certain ways of children's social participation and certain socialization practices of children are implicitly or explicitly promoted or restricted by cultural discourses and practices in schools, which reflect the social value systems of the broader society.

The different perspectives, values, and practical approaches to children's social competence, relationships, and the socialization of other cultural communities discussed above imply that the dominant cultural conceptualization of social competence might neglect or devalue other potential values of social competence or personalities. By the notion of "the double-sided effect of culture" (p. 275), Hatano and Miyake (1991) explain that when we are more accustomed to a certain thing, we are simultaneously getting away from other possibilities and losing them. In other words, while we become capable of a certain thing that our culture values and practices, we might lose other potential capabilities that are not valued by the culture. Such cultural valuation and devaluation is associated with social and political stratification of power, distinctions, and rewards.

Considering this notion of *the double-sided effect of culture*, I argue that a cultural historical approach to children's social competence is necessary not only for opening up a

variety of perspectives and values but also for appreciating diverse individuals' voices and potentials. Respecting and considering other possible world views and voices would lead academic discourse to a critical consideration of which values currently dominate academia and which cultural beliefs and practices are taken for granted in the field. When the academic discourses of social competence consider and include diverse cultures, world views, and voices, cultural constraints can be brought to our attention, and "cultural power to adapt to change" (Bruner, 1996, p. 15) will be animated. Moreover, the diversity in cultural communities includes various ranges in cultural groups such as different ethnicities, different regions, and different age groups. As researchers or teachers, we come to class with our own beliefs and values influenced by those accumulated and shared in our own cultural communities involving our ethnic, regional, and adults' communities. In order to understand children's social competence, their social relationships and experiences in schools, and the cultural nature of social competence and school socialization practices, I argue that we need more appreciation of diversity in cultural practices and concepts of social competence. In our culturally diverse classrooms, empowering diverse social characteristics that all children possess and display in their social relationships is essential for social and cultural equity in education.

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