

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A study of the life and culture of young Korean students studying in the United States**

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**The number of young Korean students studying abroad – many moving to English-speaking countries – has increased. This article describes the lives of young Korean students studying in the United States. For data collection, unstructured interviews were conducted with young Korean students studying in the Northwestern states of the United States. According to these findings, most young Korean students studying in the U.S.A. live as though they are still in Korea: passively participating in extra-curricular school activities, taking many private lessons, socializing with Korean kids, and so on. Parents also plan their children’s study schedules and lead them. These phenomena, spurred by the goal to improve their English competency skills – the Korean students’ motivation for studying abroad – yield a comparative advantage in unlimited educational competition.**

**Key words:** Parental involvement in Korean education, “Kirogi” family, transnational family, transnational education, Korean education, young students studying abroad, globalization of education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1990s, the number of elementary and secondary school-level Korean students studying abroad has rapidly increased. Statistically, it has increased 13 times from 2,259 in 1995 to 29,511 in 2006 (Korean Ministry of Education, 2007). This number does not include children of overseas workers, emigrants, and short-term language course students. If these types of students were included, the total number of elementary and secondary school-level students studying abroad would therefore, predictably be much higher.

Categorizing this massive number by academic level, the youngest group has the largest and most rapidly increasing population. The number of elementary school students studying abroad has increased over 30 times from 432 in 1999 to 13,814 in 2006. Moreover, the number of middle school students grew 5.3 times and high school students grew 4.3 times during the same period of time. It has to be noted that many of these young students studying abroad are moving to English-speaking countries, not only the United States but also the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New-Zealand (Korean Ministry of Education, 2007).

As shown in Table 1, 31.9% of students studying abroad from elementary and middle school-levels moved

to the United States in 2006. Distinguishing the number by continent, the North America Region takes up 45% out of the total students. Based on language, English-speaking countries, like the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, take up 54.8% of students studying abroad. The data indicate that English-speaking countries hold a definite majority. This reflects Korean parents’ transnational education fever.

The reasons for the drastic increase of young students studying abroad are that they are able to improve the young students’ English competency skills and escape the competitive, rigid, and expensive Korean education system. For example, survey results from the Korean Educational Development Institute 2001 show that 36.4% out of 500 parents sent their children overseas in order ‘to improve their children’s English competency skills’ and 35.5% of parents were ‘unsatisfied with the Korean education system’.

The seriousness of the phenomenon has an impact not only in education but also in the politics, economy, society, and culture of Korea. As the number of young students studying abroad drastically increases, in particular, the patriarchal family-centered social system

**Table 1.** Destination of Korean young students studying abroad by country: 2005-2006.

		Total	English-speaking countries					Sum
			U.S.A.	Canada	Australia	New Zealand	United Kingdom	
2005	N	35,144	12,171	4,426	1,674	1,413	504	20,188
	%	100.0	34.6	12.6	4.8	4.0	1.4	57.4
2006	N	45,431	14,474	6,155	2,196	2,082	598	25,505
	%	100.0	31.9	13.5	4.8	4.6	1.3	56.1

Note: The statistics includes overseas workers and emigration. Thus, this table does NOT reflect ONLY the purpose for early education.  
Source: Korean Ministry of Education, 2007.

underlying Korean society is crumbling. That is, segments of Korean families are shifting into a “wild geese-type” family, called “Kirogi” family.<sup>1</sup> The “wild geese phenomenon” is a new social problem that has never been seen before (Finch and Kim, 2007; Onishi, 2008). In the past, children were separated by their parents’ occupations, causing the multinational family (Parrenas, 2001; Ong, 1999; Piper and Roces, 2003), while the “wild geese phenomenon” arose from the sole purpose of improving a child’s education.

Unfortunately, there has not been enough research on young Korean students studying abroad and, in fact, academic approaches on the diverse problems of young Korean students studying abroad are very limited. The few research that has been carried out only pointed to the reality and problems of young students studying abroad (Cho, 2004; Choi, 2003; Kim, 2006; Kim and Chang, 2004; Lee, 2008) instead of research on the actual aspects of young Korean students studying abroad. Based upon this perspective, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze in-depth the lives and cultures of “Kirogi” families living in the Northwestern states of the United States.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, eleven participants were focused on. This analysis was driven by ethnographically oriented, unstructured interviews with the participants (Bernard, 1994). All interviews were conducted in person, using a set of open-ended questions as initial probes on a wide variety of Korean education-related topics. Each student was interviewed separately and at least weekly from February 2006 to October 2006. Interviews generally lasted 90 min, although many extended beyond 90 min. The interviews were held in coffee shops or the participant’s home with the student himself or herself and his or her family.

Open-ended interview questions encouraged the participants to offer interpretations and explanations of their realities. As the research continued, additional questions were developed in response to salient topics identified by the participants. The questions were directed toward the construction of the meaning of the life and culture of young Korean students studying in the United

States. To identify what had the most salience for them, this work was guided by the participants’ responses.

Each of the participants was deeply identified with. Positive rapport was easily established, and the interviews were preceded and followed by discussions that ranged from the exam-oriented learning of Korean schooling to the college entrance system in Korea. Although great care was taken in interpreting the results, the author’s identification with the participants may have impacted this interpretation.

Opportunities for observations of young Korean students studying abroad were extremely limited due to the participants’ work schedules and restricted access to the classroom. In this work, a positioned subject approach was utilized, which assumes that “people, as positioned subjects....actively interpret and make sense of their everyday worlds” (Conrad et al., 2001).

The author found a narrative framework useful in gaining a deeper understanding of Korean students’ lives and culture (Hunter, 1997; Majors, 2001; Phillion, 2002; Villenas, 2001; Watson, 2001). All transcripts were reviewed, and emerging themes were identified. The interpretive account presented here was ultimately a “polyphonic text” (Tyler, 1986) in that, there was a dialogic quality in “the relationship between the producers of the text and their intentionality, the text itself and reader’s interpretations” (Fairbanks, 1996). Ultimately, this was an interpretive exercise that sought to “persuade rather than prove” (Fairbanks, 1996).

In the process of the final analysis, the author showed the information gathered to the participants for confirmation. He also asked for additional information if the participants wished to elaborate on their lives in their point of views. Finally, the information gathered was continuously analyzed and cross-checked with others throughout the research.

## Understanding participants

Five criteria were employed in selecting participants. They must be (1) young Korean students studying abroad who went to the United States in order to study English during their elementary and secondary school levels, and their parents or guardians; (2) students who lived with either both or one of their parents or guardians; (3) students who were in public school, and their parents or guardians; (4) students who were expected to return to Korea in a short period of time, and their parents or guardians; (5) students whose parents or guardians did not have jobs in the U.S., and their parents or guardians. These criteria were selected because they were typical characteristics of young Korean students studying in the U.S.

The participants resided in Northwestern cities of the United States such as Northern Oregon and Southern Washington. The number of young Korean students studying in these regions gradually increased because these regions were geographically close to Korea and compared to other states, the living costs were lower. The researcher personally contacted the participants directly and, in some cases, indirectly through a mutual acquaintance. Through this process, 11 families were chosen, as shown in Table 2.

<sup>1</sup> This means that while the child leaves for abroad and the mother leaves with the child as a guardian, the father remains in Korea, financially supporting the child’s education.

**Table 2.** Participants' characteristics.

Name	Sex	Grade	Period of studying abroad (months)	Guardian
Alice	F	6 <sup>th</sup>	18	Parents
Betty	F	8 <sup>th</sup>	6	Mom
Chris	M	4 <sup>th</sup>	12	Mom
Davis	M	6 <sup>th</sup>	24	Parents
Eddie	M	9 <sup>th</sup>	6	Mom
Fedro	M	2 <sup>nd</sup>	8	Parents
Gail	M	7 <sup>th</sup>	18	Mom
Henry	M	5 <sup>th</sup>	12	Mom
Iris	F	8 <sup>th</sup>	18	Mom
Jane	F	4 <sup>th</sup>	10	Mom
Keys	M	10 <sup>th</sup>	60	Mom

Note: The name is a pseudonym.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Life of Young Korean Students Studying in the U.S.A" (hereinafter named as "Korean students") was influenced by how well they adjusted to the U.S. education system. The following observation was about their personal point of views regarding their school life, extracurricular activities and daily life.

### School life: Liberal and happy, but ESL-centred activities

Most Korean students believed that a U.S. education had better qualities than a Korean one. In the beginning, this belief might contain a blind adoration of the U.S. educational system but as they had studied and stayed in the United States, their vague beliefs turned out to be a reality as they realized that the U.S. education system was comparatively free and loose to the Korean education system, which was fierce and competitive. The students who had studied in the United States described U.S. schools as a perfect place to be educated:

First of all, I feel that U.S. school has much more freedom than a Korean school. The classes, teachers, and even kids, seem so free and are kind. They don't make fun of me even though I cannot speak English well (Alice).

Korean students were surprised by U.S. schools' educational activities and their teaching methods because of its openness. They were also fascinated by the U.S. school grading system because unlike Korea, which was more focused on each student's grade relatively compared to each other, they did not classify them depending on their performances. They appreciated this system because teachers were concerned with the students' improvements and changes rather than academic achievements. Thus, those students viewed the U.S. educational system,

schooling, and teachers in a very positive perspective. Such thoughts solidified and were clearly considered as they participated in various domains of school activities:

There is a big difference in the grading system, especially performance evaluation. When I was in Korea, it seemed like I was graded by my test scores only. But here in the United States, they are grading me by how much I have improved. I think U.S. teachers have more control than Korean teachers (Davis).

This statement shows the difference between the U.S. and Korean educational systems. A Korean education places more importance on its grading system that is based on student rankings. This means that the grade given by teachers is based upon comparing every score and answer among students, which results in ruthless competition. Influenced by this surrounding, teachers are pressured to grade students precisely. In this cycle, therefore, the classroom becomes an intense battle and the students compete with their classmates.

When Korean students meet American classmates, they are also fascinated by them in terms of attitude and friendship:

Kids here are really kind to me. If I did not bring something for class, they let me borrow theirs. In Korea, this is unheard of because my classmates treat me like an enemy. When I do school project, lots of kids help me out. There is no back stabbing and ignoring peers like in Korea (Jane).

The kindness of U.S. students is also an attractive part of the reason they like school. This may be partially based on cultural differences. However, it is closely related to the fact that this kindness can be caused by a peaceful classroom atmosphere because unlike Korea, competition among students for going on to the next stage of education in the United States is less fierce.

In addition, the teaching methods of U.S. schools impressed Korean students studying abroad even more. One of the participants felt that the lessons were fun, and the atmosphere was so free. He also felt that teachers did not force him to study and there were more classes where he could participate.

As time passed by, the Korean students' fantasy toward the U.S. schools started to fade. This means that they realized that not everything in the U.S. schools is better or more ideal than Korea. However, this realization does not bring regrets of their choice to come to the United States or mistrust of the U.S. education system. This is just a process to break out a portion of their earlier perceptions.

Unlike regular students, Korean students who were not fluent in English must complete an ESL (English as a Secondary Language) course. This might be unnecessary to those students who were good at English but a majority of the new incoming students normally started off in the program. Going through an ESL course influenced not only their academic record but also their peers as they attended classes with students with similar problems. ESL students were likely to have a separate curriculum, a schedule without history or social studies, as well as more chances to be friends with other ESL students.

However, there were some cases in which some students did not take an ESL course because of their parents. There was a trend in Korean parents to shy away from ESL programs. This was due to the notorious belief among Korean parents where they thought being in an ESL class would not help their children improve their English competency because they were associating most of the time with other ESL students:

When I got here, I went to the ESL class but soon after, my mom got a call from my English instructor in Korea saying that I will not be able to improve English in ESL. My mom came to my school the next day and asked the teachers to take out the ESL class from my schedule. Since I was assigned to newcomer school to take ESL course, I moved and ended up going to another school that did not have an ESL course. I don't know anyone here and I have to eat lunch by myself. I wish I could go back to my old school..... I feel so foreign here (Eddie).

The Korean parents believed that spending a short time in ESL classes was better for their children. This was due to the belief that their children would improve faster outside the ESL classroom. Thus, Korean parents usually wanted their children to complete the ESL course as soon as possible.

Whether they took the ESL course or not, the biggest problem Korean students faced in the beginning of their study abroad was understanding the different jargon and language used in the classroom. As students became familiar with the language, however, they adjusted to the

class rapidly. For example, the teacher later deemed a student who was previously considered ordinary as an outstanding student after the student became familiar with the language.

The students in elementary or middle schools tended to adjust more quickly because the number of classes taken and the workload were far less than those of the high school students. As a result, they had less difficulty in completing their work. This had a close relationship with the structure of the U.S. education system. That is, their consideration for foreign students, such as level-oriented classes and ESL programs, was always present.

Although students might attend similar classes due to the ESL curriculum, another major factor affecting the quick adjustment into the schools was closely related to their parents' influences. Korean parents continued to show interest in their children's academic world as they had done in Korea and collected information about classes. As parents formed a small network with other parents and shared information about classes with each other, their children also ended up taking the same classes.

Due to their language barriers, Korean students exhibited passive characteristics in the classroom. Most students sat quietly without actively participating in the class activities. Their behaviors in group projects clearly displayed these characteristics. Although students did not actively participate, they were, however, diligent and hardworking when executing a project. For example, if students were given a chance to do a presentation in class, they would practice continuously with a tutor. This enabled them to overcome any language, content or presentation problems. Because of these reasons, many Korean students were judged as being quiet but brilliant.

After overcoming initial language barriers, most students achieved high academic levels because it was easy for them to compensate for previous drawbacks. It was not difficult for them to study in regular classes besides classes related to U.S. social studies because they studied most of the other subjects in Korea. In this study, it was noted that most of the students received academic awards given to students with a B+ grade point average or higher.

However, it is difficult to conclude objectively that their grades were outstanding because the school subjects were comparatively easy. For example, not only were the students assigned to lower level classes, but they also did not take subjects related to U.S. social studies or culture. Nevertheless, parents and students became encouraged by their achievements and took pride in successfully adjusting to an U.S. education.

### **Out of school tuition: Similar hectic routine of life**

The Korean students studying in the United States had similar tutoring schedules as they had in Korea. Most students had three to four private tutorials after school

every day. While English was considered normal, mathematics, art and sports were also taken, with practice at-home worksheets being also common.

Most students received private tutoring to become familiar with English. They usually had two or more private tutorials related to English. One was for English conversation and the other was for writing. A native speaker commonly taught English conversation, but for writing, university or graduate school students were preferred. The reason why an ordinary native speaker was hired for speaking lessons was because they were more readily available and more enthusiastic while teaching.

Choosing tutors varied depending on the students' level. For the younger students and those who came unprepared from Korea, the second generation of Korean-Americans worked better as tutors. For older students who wanted to learn formal English, however, essay-writing tutors with college English majors or U.S. graduate students were preferred. Many families invested their time and money for an English education in the United States. The tutors usually came to the student's home four to five times a week, for 60 - 90 minutes, and were paid from 10 - 20 dollars an hour.

Investing in an English education seemed to be a common trend among all families in this study and additional tutoring sessions occurred depending on the child's individual needs. In one case, a parent even paid money and hired a playmate for their child in the hope to improve their child's English:

My child seemed to waste time after school so I hired him a high school baby sitter. He seems to feel better when he's with him than be with me because he plays with him. Also, his English seems to be improving. So it's working out well (Fedro's mom).

Acting as if they were still in Korea, parents assigned tutors not only to improve their children's language skills but also to help their school activities. In the elementary level, the students who completed practice at-home worksheets also had teachers who visited them, and for older students, private tutors came and helped them with various subjects in school:

School work is so hard and it's not only because of the language barrier. Subjects like social studies and science are hard to follow. The U.S. kids get it straight away but it's hard for me to understand what the teacher is talking about. So I have a tutor who's a graduate student and he teaches me U.S. literature, history, and geography twice a week. (Eddie)

Although parents could help if their children were in the elementary level, it was nearly impossible for them to help older students with their academic studies. Because the Korean students' parents had a tendency to be passionate about their children's academic well-being,

they believed that tutoring was inevitable. Aside from academic subjects, parents got involved in their children's art subjects as well. Despite the fact that most students in this study already knew how to play at least one instrument, they chose to receive more tutorials for their music classes in the United States:

I used to play the piano when I was in Korea. Here, I'm learning to play the flute and have two lessons a week. It helps because I have band class at school and I learn English along the way. Other kids are doing it too. (Betty)

The parents' interests and supports did not stop there. For those students who had plans to return to Korea, the workloads were much higher because they had not only to improve their English competency skills, but also to study Korean subjects. Many Korean students received tutoring from Korean overseas students, and they also enrolled in Internet lectures to keep up with their Korean peers:

Well, I study from practice at-home worksheets and listen to lectures on line. My father in Korea sends me exercise books on Korean subjects like math, Korean, and science every semester so I study a lot with those. (Iris)

For these reasons, there were no easy days in the life of a Korean student. Many Korean students thought that life in the United States was not different from Korea in that they had to take so many tutorials. Yet they still believed that the United States was better than Korea.

My life in the United States is not much different from the one I had in Korea. I finish everything on my schedule around 8:00 p.m. If possible, I would probably be forced to study longer but in the United States, they don't open schools or academies at night. (Chris)

Many of the students believed that the U.S. system was more humane than that of Korea because U.S. schools did not evaluate students in comparison to each other. Because there was no added pressure of competition, students were able to adapt well to their schoolwork and build a foundation needed after they left school.

However, not all students felt positively about their realities. Similar to their former situations in Korea, many Korean students faced the pressure of their studies. With the parent's unceasing concerns and desires over their children's education, it made some of the students feel wary and sick of the U.S. lifestyle.

### **Everyday life except studying: Life in a small community**

Most Korean students hung around with other Korean

students because they did not have American friends or did not want to make them. In fact, it was difficult for Korean students to form a friendship with American kids, especially at the elementary level, because they could not hang around without the presence of their guardians. The situation got easier for middle school students because not much adult supervision occurred. However, it became even more difficult to make friends in high school because most American students were busy, working part-time or participating in extracurricular activities. After school, they were so busy with their own schedules.

As students' grades increased, the school curricula became more challenging. As a result, making friends was more difficult than ever. That is, as most students had already formed cliques or groups in their younger days, it was difficult for newcomers to fit into the existing friendship bonds. Consequently, sometimes, some parents even tried to help their children make friends for the purpose of improving their children's English skills:

My mom is paying him to be my friend. For hanging out after school, my mom pays him ten dollars an hour. Of course, we don't talk about it but I think of him as a guide for U.S. life. I sometimes go over to his house but I don't feel as comfortable as when I am with my Korean friends. (Eddie)

Many high school parents were not obsessed with their children making American friends. One of the reasons why they were less enthusiastic was because they were concerned mainly about the improvement of the children's English competency. However, the main reason Korean students did not make friends was that they themselves did not have enough time to hang around friends. This was mainly because they had to go to after-school tutoring and other extra-curricular activities. Therefore, Korean students usually socialized with their Korean neighbors.

In reality, it could be said that the parents of the students adjusted their lives outside the household around their own little community. Most of the students' parents attended language education centers. As most parents believed that it was better to lessen the expenses, they enrolled in institutions that were cheap and relatively easy to get into, such as community colleges or language programs at small universities. Since agents in Korea recommended most of these programs, these classes comprised mostly Korean parents. Although the programs are designed for parents to study English, it is a way for them to remain legally in the country and to meet other parents. For these reasons, Korean students' parents form small communities and share their information, not only regarding their children's education but the lifestyle as well.

In this study, many Korean students went shopping with their families, and in many cases, they went together with other Korean student families in the district. Families

also often went to the local museums or exhibitions held by the local community centers. Many Korean students' families purchased an annual pass to participate in such community support programs. Most families in their community participated together in these activities earlier mentioned.

Another important community that influenced families was the Korean church. Regardless of their religious background in Korea, most of the families went to church every Sunday. Not only did the church provide moral and spiritual support for parents, but also for those parents who were separated from their spouses, it provided a temporary opportunity to escape from their burden of raising the children and other responsibilities.

Many Korean students made a lot of friends at church. Depending on the region, there were relatively more Korean churches compared to the Korean population. These churches also had Korean school during the weekends for second-generation Korean immigrants and actively tried to encourage youngsters to participate in missionary work (You, 2005). Therefore, families of Korean students naturally attended such programs.

Unlike their adult counterparts, as young second-generation Korean-Americans and those who had arrived in the United States at a young age spoke in broken Korean but were fluent in English, becoming friends with church members enhanced the new students' English skills. At the same time, they also received tips needed in school or life in general. Besides these advantages, parents viewed a church as a safe place for their children to play:

There is a limit to what I can do for my kids. I know it's hard for them to make U.S. friends and I feel sorry for them but U.S. culture is so different. I'm scared to leave them alone together. I feel safer when they hang out with their church friends who are Korean-Americans. The parents know each other and there are hardly any bad kids at church, though I did hear that some of the high school kids do drugs... (Keys' mom)

Consequently, church had become one of the most important parts of Korean students' lives. Parents of the students built their own community. At the same time, the church community itself helped them to satisfy their children's needs that they themselves couldn't fulfill.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study sought to describe the lives of young Korean students studying abroad living in the North-western states of the United States. I examined the ways in which Korean students' lives were managed in aspects of their school and daily lives and out of school activities. Based on these findings, three themes emerged: students' passive school life, ceaseless need for private

tutoring, and life in a small community. These can be summed up as follows.

### **The students' passive school life, revolving around ESL classes**

Most Korean students thought that an education in the United States was of a higher quality than one in Korea. However, this recognition did not make them participate actively in class activities. A majority of the students studying abroad showed an inactive attitude at school. This was due somewhat to the language barrier and cultural differences they faced which, in turn, limited them from actively participating at school and interacting with their peers.

As most students were enrolled in ESL courses, their class schedules were also similar to other ESL students in the class. This limits them in making other relationships outside the classroom and restricted them from meeting regular American students. As a result, students managed their school lives revolving around the acquaintances made in the ESL class.

### **Their ceaseless need for private tutoring**

Most Korean students continued to receive tutoring as they had received in Korea. Most Korean students had private English lessons and private tutorials related to other subject matters. Korean students' private tutorials were driven by their parents' ceaseless desire for obtaining the top ranking in academic achievement. So, Korean students spent most of their after-school activities receiving private tutoring and did not find time for making American friends. The students were fairly stressed from the workload but acknowledged that it was far better than the lessons they had in Korea. This was closely related to the fact that the U.S. educational system does not evaluate students solely according to their grades and how U.S. schools try not to stimulate competition amongst students.

### **The formation of their own networking community**

Most Korean students preferred to hang around with Korean students or Korean-American kids. Although the reason why Korean students did not actively make American friends was connected to their cultural barriers, their tight schedules were also an important influential factor. Unlike Korean middle class parents who tend to be very selfish and secretive when it comes to their children's education, the parents of Korean students showed a networking characteristic in their own small community. This was possibly due to the fact that the first generation of immigrants had a negative view on families of young students studying abroad, as well as the fact

that they did not adjust well into the U.S. culture. However, the reason this networking community exists is due to the U.S. educational system that does not heavily place importance on competition and rank.

In conclusion, most young Korean students studying in the United States lived as if they were still in Korea: participating in school activities passively, taking many private lessons, only socializing with Korean kids, and so on. Parents also continued to plan their children's study schedules and guide their educational paths. These phenomena resulted from Korean students' motivation for studying abroad - wielding a comparative advantage in unlimited educational competition through the improvement of their English competency skills.

As it has observed so far in the lives of young Korean students studying abroad, on one side, they tried to catch up with school work while, on the other side, trying to keep up with Korean subjects, leading to various types of tutoring. These heavy workloads usually became a burden to many Korean students. However, students studying in the United States feel less burdened participating within the U.S. educational system. Compared to the competitive and rank-oriented Korea, the American educational system's emphasis on students' individual achievements and freedom within the school mitigate the burden felt by the young students studying abroad. This had led to many young students becoming infatuated by the U.S. education system and shy away from returning to Korea.

The phenomenon of transnational education is a representation of globalization. Nevertheless, Korean transnational education is different from general principles of globalization in that many Korean parents seek to hold a dominant position in educational competition in domestic level, not in worldwide level. However, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to the general population of young Korean students studying abroad, since the data were not representative of all young Korean students studying in United State.

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