A Study on the Factors Affecting the Intercultural Sensitivity of Middle and High School Students in Korea

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Abstract. This study measures and analyzes the intercultural sensitivity of middle and high school students in Korea, using the scale developed by Chen and Starosta. By looking into the effects of different variables (gender, age, location, and level of multicultural experience), the study aims to provide insights into the intercultural sensitivity of the students, which can serve as useful guide in developing and managing multicultural programs at school. The study is based on 450 responses submitted by students in Seoul and Kyungki province, Korea. The results of the multiple regression analysis show that the students’ intercultural sensitivity is affected differentially by individual variables, and that there is a high correlation between the students’ level of intercultural sensitivity and their level of multicultural experience. This suggests that it is important to provide the opportunities for the students to engage and interact with different cultures in order to develop and nurture their intercultural sensitivity.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, middle- and high-school students, multicultural experience

1 Introduction

As Korean society is becoming culturally and racially more diverse, there has been a growing need for multicultural education in Korea, which would help integrate minority students, and improve intercultural communications at school. In response to such demand, a large number of academic researches and programs have been conducted in recent years to find solutions and policy supports for multicultural education. However, these efforts tend to cluster around a limited number of areas: researches are focused mainly on theoretical issues related to curriculum reforms, and empirical studies that aim to understand the realities of multicultural education are concerned mostly with primary schools (kindergartens and elementary schools). Hence, it has been pointed out that the discursive field of multicultural education in Korea needs to expand to cover more diverse subjects and approaches [1].

This study responds to such need by taking the students in secondary schools as its subject. Based on the survey conducted on 450 middle and high school students, the study looks into the relationships between the intercultural sensitivity of the students and multiple variables such as gender, age, location, and levels of multicultural
experience. By identifying statistically significant variables, and analyzing their effects, this study aims to provide insights into the intercultural subjectivity of Korean students, which can serve as useful reference in developing and managing multicultural educational programs for students. To achieve this end, the study will address the two following questions:

1) Does the intercultural sensitivity of the students change its value according to background variables (gender, age, and location) and levels of multicultural experiences?

2) What effects do these variables (gender, age, location, and level of multicultural experience) have on the intercultural sensitivity of the students?

2 Background

Intercultural sensitivity refers to the affective ability of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences. In conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity, Bawuk and Brislin emphasize the willingness of the subject to modify one’s behavior in accordance with the given culture [2]. Chen and Starosta’s model of intercultural sensitivity includes 6 components: self-esteem, self-monitoring, empathy, open-mindedness, nonjudgement, social relaxation [3]. Intercultural sensitivity is considered to be a crucial element in the development of intercultural communication competence, and people with intercultural sensitivity are expected to communicate more effectively with people from different cultures, and form better relationships.

Previous studies on intercultural sensitivity have shown that multicultural experiences such as hanging out with diverse groups of friends [4], living in a culturally diverse neighborhood [5], and traveling abroad [6] played significant roles in the development of intercultural sensitivity.

3 Methodology and Data Collection Analysis

For this study, a survey was conducted on middle and high school students in Seoul and Kyungki province, Korea through random sampling. Out of 464 questionnaires originally collected, 14 were eliminated due to their incomplete nature, and my analysis is based on 450 responses submitted by the students. To measure the intercultural sensitivity of the students, the intercultural sensitivity scale developed by Chen and Starosta [7] was used. Chen and Starosta’s scale consists of five subcategories with 24 items in total. The five categories are (1) interaction engagement, (2) respect for cultural difference, (3) interaction confidence, (4) interaction enjoyment, and (5) interaction attentiveness. A five-point Likert scale was used for each item, and descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used to identify the factors affecting intercultural sensitivity and assess their effects.
4 Results

The results showed that while the correlation between the background variables (gender, age, and location) and the intercultural sensitivity of the students was low with the correlation coefficients ranging from .00 to .40, there was a statistically significant correlation between the students’ multicultural experience and their intercultural sensitivity.

The stepwise multiple regression analysis conducted to assess the effects of individual variables generated a four-step model with four statistically significant variables which accounted for the 22% of the intercultural sensitivity variation: experience of hanging out with multicultural people, exposure to multicultural issues at school, exposure to multicultural people through media, and experience of working with multicultural people as a team.

In regards to interaction engagement which was a subcategory in the intercultural sensitivity scale, the analysis ended up with four statistically significant variables with 24% accountability: experience of hanging out with multicultural people, exposure to multicultural issues at school, having multicultural role models through media, and participating in multicultural events and activities.

In the subcategory of respect for cultural differences, the results showed that three variables - exposure to multicultural people through media, exposure to multicultural issues at school, and school locations - were statistically significant with 9% accountability.

As for the interaction confidence, three variables were statistically significant with 22% accountability: experience of hanging out with multicultural people, experience of working with multicultural people as a team, and exposure to multicultural issues at school.

Regarding interaction enjoyment, the analysis showed that three variables - experience of hanging out with multicultural people, exposure to multicultural people through media, and exposure to multicultural issues at school - were significant, accounting for the 10% of the variation.

5 Conclusion

This study aims to provide useful reference points for the future development and management of multicultural programs in Korean secondary schools by looking into various factors that affect the intercultural sensitivity of the students. Based on the survey conducted for this study, there were a few notable points to be made.

First, the results showed that students of Seoul and Kyungki province scored above average in interaction enjoyment and respect for cultural differences. However, their scores in interaction engagement and interaction confidence were relatively low and they had the lowest scores - close to negative - in interaction attentiveness. These results were reflective of the current multicultural educational programs conducted at schools which focused mainly on promoting intercultural understandings and respected for cultural differences [8]. The results suggest that a more diverse approach
to multicultural education, one that encourages various intercultural engagements is needed for the overall improvement of the intercultural sensitivity of the students.

Second, the study showed that individual variables had differential effects on the intercultural sensitivity of the students, and that the students’ multicultural experiences played a significant role in the development of their intercultural sensitivity. These findings need to be taken into consideration when developing multicultural educational programs for the students. For example, the high correlation between intercultural sensitivity and multicultural experience shown in this study suggests that schools should provide more opportunities for the students to interact and engage with different cultures in order to nurture their intercultural sensitivity.

References