“A Model Minority”
A Culture-General Framework Analysis

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A Model Minority
(Case Study)

Willington Chang was a sixth-grade student in San Francisco neighborhood elementary school. Recently arrived from Hong Kong, he spoke very functional, though accented, English.

His sixth-grade class was multiethnic with students of African American, Latino, and various Asian backgrounds, as well as a few European Americans. His teacher, Mr. Fenwick, was a competent teacher with more than 25 years experience in the classroom. Of German heritage, Mr. Fenwick had watched as the district’s population was transformed into an incredibly heterogeneous mixture of ethnic and linguistic groups. He prided himself on his ability to adapt to the ever-changing and complex environment.

Though Willington seemed quiet enough at first, he increasingly exhibited what Mr. Fenwick described as disruptive behavior, including talking, laughing, and teasing other students. This perplexed Mr. Fenwick since his experience with Chinese young people was that they were among the most hard-working and diligent students. Far from being disruptive, Mr. Fenwick found most Chinese students to be relatively passive individuals whom he had to encourage for more participation. Thus, Willington’s behavior seemed to him particularly disturbing and he punished him more severely than other non-Chinese students, even though his behavior was no worse than theirs. The principle noticed this discrepancy during a recent observation and brought it to Mr. Fenwick’s attention.

Culture-General Framework Analysis

The objective is to analyze this cross-cultural encounter by addressing the cultural forces at work and identifying, using Cushner’s 18-Theme Culture-General Framework, all possible themes in this situation.

Categorization: People involved in intercultural/cross-cultural interactions often categorize one another according to whatever category system they have. However, this categorization, whether involving individuals or groups, often generates more
heat than light. Thus as they do so, people’s emotions are quickly aroused when
they meet with unpredictable behavior, a behavior that is outside the scope of the
alleged social/cultural category, on the part of others.

In this critical incident at hand, which is a perfect example of what goes on in a
multicultural school environment, we found ourselves vis-à-vis the negative
consequences of hasty cultural predictability and categorization, even when the
subject involved is a perfectly competent professional whose intentions are at worst
neutral and at best justifiably well.

Mr. Fenwick, the teacher, is described as “a competent teacher with more than
25 years experience in the classroom.” Moreover, he “prided himself on his ability to
adapt to the ever-changing and complex environment.” Was he wholeheartedly
contented with the district’s population transformation into a “heterogeneous mixture
of ethnic and linguistic groups”? We are not certainly sure.

Willington Chang, the newly arrived sixth grader from Hong Kong, on the other
hand, seems to have quickly adapted to the new environment as if he slid on the U-
curve right into the ‘home phase’, “talking, laughing, and teasing other students.”

Anxiety: Willington, as he found himself attending the new school, meeting new
people, and facing new circumstances, naturally experienced some degree of
anxiety. This is reflected in his initial quietness. However, the child was able to
overcome this anxiety fairly quickly, thanks to his English functionality, which
enabled him to communicate with his peers, and to the multiethnic environment he
found himself part of, which reduces the feeling of being under the spotlight of
others.

Ambiguity: It is evidently clear that Mr. Fenwick is not so effective at working
across cultures and, therefore, his tolerance for ambiguity produced in such
environment is fairly low. The child’s behavioral change might be a reflection of that
ambiguity.

Disconfirmed Expectations: Most people interact with others expecting that
others will think and behave according to preconceived, often inaccurate, notions.
The young boy, Willington, was born and raised in Hong Kong, a highly urbanized
region of China whose residents are largely distinct from those of the mainland in
terms of social and economic development. However, Mr. Fenwick seemed to have failed to realize this distinction and asserted that all Chinese must behave similarly.

**Belonging/Rejection:** It’s obviously clear that after the brief period of quietness and isolation, due to the cultural shock caused by the new environment, Willington had begun feeling somehow ‘at home’. Had he faced a rejection from the other students, he would not have dramatically changed his behavior to coincide with the groups he felt he belonged to. However, Mr. Fenwick’s reaction and his respond with undue exercise of power indicate a feeling of alienation and rejection. Could his severe reaction against Willington be a reflection of his feeling toward all Chinese students? This is a possibility that could not be ruled out.

**Confronting Personal Prejudices:** The principal’s observation of the incident and his/her conversation with the teacher might force Mr. Fenwick to acknowledge that his believes about Chinese students’ behavior maybe inaccurate. It should also be a wake up call for him to change his own attitude and behavior toward others before he ruins his long-standing career as a teacher.

**Values:** Mr. Fenwick’s observation and interpretation of his Chinese students’ behavior, as passive and less participatory than the rest of the students, is based on his own set of values. Activity and passivity are very relative concepts. What we consider as active behavior could very well be interpreted in a different culture as rude and impolite! The teacher must not overtly brand a whole ethnic group of students as “passive” just because they do not meet his definition of activity. He also should not make judgments that would have lasting effects on the student’s academic standing or well being based solely on his own values.

**Situational Behavior:** We should not rule out the possibility that the child is experiencing behavioral instability due to the change of home and school environment. The rules for behavior at home and school could be broken under the pressure of the new rules he is facing, especially at school.

**Relationship to the Group versus the Individual:** It’s clear that Willington Chang is acting according to his individual interests, which is very normal taking into account his national background (individualism is highly valued in Hong Kong). This is one of the reasons why his teacher perceived his behavior as abnormal, in
comparison to the Chinese students who generally act according to their group allegiance.

**Ingroups and Outgroups**: Based on initial categorization and differentiation as well as on continuing interaction with other students, Willington seems to have identified himself as a member of an ingroup, which is probably a non-Chinese one, who might consider him as an outgroup, due to his individualistic behavior.

**Attribution**: Mr. Fenwick’s long-term encounter with Chinese students from the mainland helped reshape his preconceived notion about the generally acceptable behavior of all Chinese. Thus Willington’s activeness and openness, as opposed to the relative passivity of his cultural counterparts, had been perceived by the teacher as a “disruptive behavior” that warranted a severe judgment based on the behavior he had been observing. The child’s distinct background was completely ignored by his teacher when he committed this fundamental attribution error.

**Acculturation and Identity**: Willington’s behavior as a non-Chinese student, in terms of activity and participation as perceived by Mr. Fenwick, and the harsh punishment he received because of that suggests that the teacher was trying to force the child into behaving like the rest of the Chinese students. This could be interpreted as an indirect forced segregation of Willington from the rest of the students.
References
