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## **Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education: Exploring the Role of Korean American Cultural Beliefs and Practices Using the Figured Worlds Approach to Support Learning Success for All Children**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the significance of parental involvement in early childhood education, with a specific focus on the cultural practices and values of Korean American parents and children in schools in the United States (US). It discusses the critical issue of the learning gap among different ethnic and racial groups and how, through the recognition and integration of various cultural beliefs and values, educators can help parents to close this gap. The paper focuses specifically on Korean American children and their parental involvement in the US through the lens of the “figured worlds” approach, in order to better understand differences in educational practices and to support the success of all diverse groups of children in the learning process in American schools.

*Keywords:* parent involvement, early childhood education, cultural beliefs, Korean American children, figured worlds approach

## Introduction

Parent involvement in early childhood education refers to the active participation of parents in their children's learning and development during the critical early childhood years. Numerous studies have shown that parental involvement in education is linked to better learning and developmental outcomes, social skills, and self-esteem for children (Castro et al., 2015; Chun & Devall, 2019; El Nokali et al., 2010; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lara & Saracostti, 2019; Ma et al., 2016). Understanding the importance of parental involvement in early childhood education is crucial for both parents and educators to appreciate. However, the role of cultural practices and values in shaping the experiences of children from diverse backgrounds is often overlooked.

The learning gap existing among different ethnic and racial groups in early childhood education is a significant issue with long-term implications for individuals and society as a whole. Parent involvement is a vital factor in understanding this gap, as cultural beliefs and values can shape how parents approach their children's education (Gonzalez-dehass et al., 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). By utilizing the “figured worlds” approach, which acknowledges the cultural and social context in which individuals operate, educators can better understand how cultural beliefs and values affect parent involvement in early childhood education. Educators reaching out to promote parent involvement are able to gain insight and understanding of different cultural beliefs and values and then capitalize on integrating these themes/values into the schooling context on behalf of each child’s well-being and learning success.

This paper will examine the significance of parental involvement in early childhood education, with a specific focus on Korean American children and their parental involvement in the United States (US). The article will provide insights on Korean American parental involvement within the US context, utilizing the concept of “figured worlds” to frame the discussion for a better understanding of differences in educational practices.

## The Figured Worlds Approach

The term "figured worlds" was first introduced by sociolinguist James Paul Gee in his book, "Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses" (Gee, 1990). Gee developed the concept as a way of understanding the cultural practices and values that shape individuals' experiences in social and educational contexts (Gee, 2000). He argued that the ways in which people understand and make sense of their world are molded by the cultural practices and values of the communities in which they participate. Since then, “figured worlds” further developed as a theoretical approach in sociology, anthropology, and education fields. Scholars such as Holland et al. (1998) used the concept of “figured worlds” to understand the process individuals use to construct and negotiate their identities within social and cultural contexts. For example, Nasir (2011) used the concept to explore the experiences of African American youth in educational contexts in understanding how their racialized identities impact their academic achievement. Nasir employed the *figured word* “racialized identities” to elucidate the intricate and diverse experiences of African American children within educational settings, and to conduct a detailed examination of the influence of race on academic success. The use of this *figured word* facilitated a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the topic at hand.

In the field of education, the “figured worlds” approach helps educators to understand the cultural practices and values that shape children's experiences and expectations in the classroom. By understanding the “figured worlds” of children from different cultural backgrounds, educators can better understand and support children’s learning experience in educational settings. Using this approach, educators can comprehensively analyze the factors that contribute to the learning and development gap between children of different ethnic groups. For the purpose of the current discussion regarding parent involvement in early childhood education, Korean American parents and children are explored.

### **Early Childhood Education and Parent Involvement Among Korean Americans**

Parental involvement in early childhood education remains critical for children's success in school. Research consistently demonstrates that parental involvement links to better learning outcomes, social skills, and self-esteem for children (Jeynes, 2005; Liu et al., 2020). However, the impact of parental involvement may vary across cultural contexts. For Korean American parents, involvement in their children's education is ever more critical due to cultural differences and language barriers (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Korean American parents have been shown to be highly involved in their children's education, often setting high learning expectations and prioritizing a strong emphasis on the value of education (Lee, 2014; Paik, 2008). This high level of parental involvement has been linked to the strong learning performance of Korean American children, who have been found to have higher levels of learning success compared to their peers from other ethnic and racial groups. For example, studies show that Korean American children outperformed their peers from other ethnic and racial groups in early childhood education, and parental involvement was a significant predictor of their learning success (Kim et al., 2010; Kwon, 2017). Another study by Hahm and Lee (2017) showed that Korean American parents' high expectations and involvement in their children's education positively influenced their learning outcomes.

Understanding the cultural and social factors shaping parental involvement among Korean American families provides insights into effective strategies for promoting parental involvement. An examination of the unique cultural and social context of Korean American families through the lens of the “figured worlds” approach highlights the important role that parental involvement plays in promoting positive learning outcomes for Korean American children.

### **Cultural Practices and Values**

Sok and Schwartz's (2021) study on Korean American families with successful heritage language maintenance supports the importance of understanding cultural practices and values in promoting positive educational outcomes for all children. The “figured worlds” approach is a helpful framework for educators to gain insight into the experiences of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Cultural practices and values, such as prioritizing learning success and placing high value on discipline and hard work, can significantly impact the learning success of children from different ethnic groups (Hahm & Lee, 2017; Otto, 2017; Sok & Schwartz, 2021; Villenas & Crespi, 2015).

For example, Korean American children often come from families that value working hard and succeeding in learning. According to Otto (2017), Korean American parents tend to be highly involved in their children's education and often provide a supportive home environment that fosters learning success. This high level of parental involvement can be attributed to the cultural value of education, which is seen as a pathway to upward mobility and social status.

However, Korean American children may also encounter cultural pressures to excel in learning (Park et al., 2018). Korean American children may experience cultural stress, which refers to the psychological distress arising from the conflict between the demands of the culture of origin and the culture of the mainstream society. The cultural value of learning success can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety among Korean American children, which may impact their learning outcomes.

In sum, knowing the cultural beliefs and practices of Korean American children is critical for teachers to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that fosters learning success and well-being for all children. The “figured worlds” approach can be a helpful framework for educators to gain insight into the experiences of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds and promote positive educational outcomes.

### **Language and Communication**

In addition to cultural pressures to succeed in school, Korean American children may have additional language expectations and communication differences. While Korean American children may speak English as their first language, they may also be fluent in Korean and as well may demonstrate a different communication style from their peers from other ethnic groups (Lee & Shin, 2008; Lim, 2012).

According to Park et al. (2014), Korean American children may value respect for authority and conformity, which can impact their interactions with teachers and peers in the classroom. An example of how the cultural value of respect for authority and conformity can impact Korean American children's interactions with teachers and peers in the classroom is illustrated in a study by Lee (2017). Lee found that Korean American children tend to prioritize their relationship with their teacher and may avoid challenging or questioning authority figures to maintain harmony and respect. This cultural trait can sometimes result in a lack of engagement or participation in classroom discussions, leading teachers to misinterpret the children's lack of contribution as a lack of interest or ability. Teachers can use this knowledge to create a classroom environment that values respectful communication and encourages all children, including Korean American children, to participate in discussions and express their ideas.

Additionally, parental language barriers can be a significant factor in the learning performance gap and in the development of a partnership with other stakeholders (Lim, 2012; Park & Kim, 2019). For example, Korean American children may struggle with learning English, which may impact their performance on standardized tests and in classroom tasks. Moreover, the lack of access to language resources and societal pressures to assimilate may hinder the efforts of Korean American parents in promoting their children's heritage language maintenance (Kim et al., 2016; Kwon, 2017). In addition, Yoo and Lee (2008) reported that Korean American children

(and their parents) may also experience negative effects on their psychological well-being due to cultural conflicts and discrimination, which can impact their learning process.

Despite facing these challenges, Korean American parents place a high value on education and often have high expectations for their children's learning success (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

However, cultural differences may make it challenging for Korean American parents to navigate the United States' (US) educational system. Korean American parents may be unfamiliar with the expectations and norms of US schools, and language barriers may further complicate communication with teachers and other educators.

### **Strategies for Promoting Understanding of Diverse Backgrounds**

To promote understanding and thoughtful consideration in educating every child, valuing each child's unique background, it is essential to recognize, comprehend, and appreciate the cultural practices and values that shape the experiences and learning outcomes of children from diverse backgrounds (King, 2012). Park and Jung (2019) recommend that educators use culturally responsive teaching practices, which incorporate culturally relevant materials and experiences into the curriculum to better engage and support children from diverse backgrounds.

According to Kim et al. (2017), Korean American parents believe in maintaining Korean cultural traditions and instilling Korean values in their children while, at the same time, balancing the demands of the US context. The authors discuss two strategies that Korean American parents use to achieve this balance between cultural maintenance and bicultural socialization. The first strategy is "cultural maintenance," which involves teaching children about Korean cultural practices, values, and beliefs. For example, Korean American parents may teach their children how to speak Korean, celebrate Korean holidays, and practice traditional Korean customs. The second strategy is "bicultural socialization," which involves preparing children to navigate the cultural differences between the Korean and American contexts. This strategy emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating both Korean and American cultural values, beliefs, and practices. For example, Korean American parents may encourage their children to participate in both Korean and American cultural activities, learn about both cultures, and develop communication and social skills that are relevant in both contexts. Their findings suggest that culturally sensitive interventions incorporating both Korean and American parenting strategies can be effective in promoting an understanding of differences.

Moreover, family engagement and language support are also additional strategies that can enhance the understanding and valuing of differences. For example, educators can foster strong relationships with families and provide language support and accommodations to children who are bilingual or struggling with learning English (Otto, 2017; Villenas & Crespi, 2015). By implementing these strategies, educators work towards promoting a more positive learning environment for all children.

Dantas-Whitney et al. (2020) maintain dual language education can promote learning outcomes and linguistic and cultural proficiency for both language minority and language majority children and, furthermore, it can also contribute to greater understanding of the rich language and cultural diversity of children, valuing diversity in the process. Lee and Hakuta (2018) emphasize the

importance of educators' awareness of the challenges that bilingual children face and also provide them with appropriate support and accommodations.

In summary, relevant literature emphasizes the importance of promoting an understanding and valuing of children's diverse languages and backgrounds and supporting the education of language-minority children through culturally sensitive approaches, implementing appropriate language frameworks and accommodations, and partnering with families (e.g., Hakuta, 2011; Lee & Hakuta, 2018; Otto, 2017; Villenas & Crespi, 2015). Educators who utilize these strategies can create a more positive and caring learning environment for all children. By partnering with parents on these issues, educators can provide not only learning advantages, but also support children's overall well-being.

### **Implications for Educators Working with Diverse Groups**

This current discussion, which explores the educational experiences of Korean American children, illustrates several important implications for all educators working with children of different ethnic groups.

**Learning Outcomes.** Learning outcomes vary significantly among different ethnic groups; As noted, parental involvement remains as a critical factor in promoting children's learning and learning success. However, the role of cultural practices and values in shaping the experiences of children from diverse backgrounds is often overlooked. Parent involvement is the open door to understanding each child's cultural values and practices.

**Figured Worlds.** Through the lens of the "figured worlds" approach, educators can also better understand the cultural practices and values that impact the learning outcomes of children from different ethnic groups and develop strategies for promoting a deeper understanding of each child's diverse language and culture in order to support each child's learning success.

**Incorporating Cultural Traditions.** To effectively target the educational needs of children from diverse backgrounds, it is important for educators to recognize and appreciate cultural differences. For example, a teacher working with Korean American children might incorporate cultural traditions and practices into the classroom to make the curriculum more meaningful and relevant. An example of incorporating Korean cultural traditions and practices into the classroom could be including Korean literature, art, and music in the curriculum. Teachers can select texts by Korean authors or books that showcase Korean culture and history, providing children with an opportunity to explore their cultural heritage and identity.

Additionally, teachers can introduce Korean traditional art forms, such as calligraphy or painting, to teach children about Korean aesthetics and history. Another example of incorporating Korean cultural practices into the classroom is to celebrate Korean holidays, such as Lunar New Year or Chuseok, by organizing cultural events or activities. For instance, teachers can invite Korean American parents to share traditional Korean foods, songs, and dances with the class, providing children with an opportunity to learn about Korean culture and connect with their peers.

By incorporating diverse cultural practices and values into the children's learning process and experiences, all children can feel recognized and valued.

**Eliminate Discrimination and Bias.** With parental input and support, teachers can take steps to eliminate discrimination and bias, thus preventing actions that can result in a significant and deleterious impact on the learning success and well-being of children from diverse groups. Educators can promote a positive and inclusive environment for all children. These positive actions might also include engaging teachers in anti-bias training, implementing policies to prevent bullying and harassment, and promoting diversity and inclusion strategies in the curriculum.

**Social Capital.** Educators can also promote social capital which refers to the resources, networks, and connections that individuals can access through their relationships with others. Teachers promote social capital by providing opportunities for children to engage with their communities and build connections. For example, a teacher might invite community leaders and members to come to the classroom to speak about their careers or provide opportunities for children to engage in service-learning projects that focus on community needs.

For Korean American parents and children, social capital can take many forms. Korean American families often prioritize maintaining close ties with their community and culture, which can provide them with a strong source of social capital. This can include access to community organizations, religious institutions, and cultural events, which can provide opportunities for social networking, emotional support, and cultural enrichment (Kim et al., 2016). Korean American parents may draw on their social networks to provide learning support for their children. For example, they may enlist the help of family members or friends to provide tutoring or mentorship, or they may seek out connections with educators or community leaders who can offer guidance and advice on navigating the education system.

**Growth Mindset.** According to Dweck (2006), promoting a growth mindset emphasizes the belief that intelligence and ability can be developed through effort and hard work. A growth mindset can be a powerful strategy for building confidence and resilience in children, regardless of their background or ethnicity. Furthermore, promoting a love of learning can help children develop a lifelong passion for knowledge and personal growth (Martin & Marsh, 2018). By instilling a growth mindset and a love of learning into their teaching practices, educators can help children develop the skills, attitudes, and resources needed to succeed in school and beyond. With these measures in place, educators work towards promoting learning success for all children, regardless of their background or ethnicity.

**Involve Families.** Finally, as discussed in this article, family involvement remains a critical factor in promoting the learning and learning success not only for Korean American children, but for all children from different ethnic groups. Hopefully, educators will work to support and involve all families in their children's education. This might involve sponsoring family nights or parent-teacher conferences, providing resources and materials in multiple languages, and developing strategies for communicating with families from diverse backgrounds.

**Summary.** Overall, this article emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding cultural factors, eliminating discrimination and bias, fostering an understanding of the rich diversity of each child, supporting the learning process with a growth mindset, promoting social capital, providing an inclusive education for all children, partnering with parents, and encouraging family involvement. By taking these actions, educators can better support the learning success and well-being of young children from diverse backgrounds and promote a more positive and inclusive learning environment for all.

### **Future Directions**

The implications of the studies exploring the educational experiences of Korean American children suggest several important future directions. The following future directions involve conducting additional research and related actions for all ethnic groups.

First, future research might explore the intersectional identities of Korean American children and other children from diverse groups to further understand the ways in which multiple aspects of a child's identity interacts to shape his or her experiences in educational settings.

Second, educators may continue to explore innovative ways to engage families from diverse backgrounds in their children's education. Engaging families might involve leveraging technology to improve communication with families, developing culturally responsive curricula, and providing resources and materials that are accessible and relevant to families from diverse backgrounds.

Third, teacher education can design programs to prepare educators to work effectively with children from diverse backgrounds. This might involve teacher candidates with training in culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-bias education, and the use of "figured worlds" and other theoretical frameworks to more deeply understand the experiences of children from different cultural backgrounds.

Fourth, policymakers may consider the impact of implementing policies on the educational experiences of Korean American children and children from other diverse groups. These policies have the potential to foster a comprehensive understanding of diversity and inclusion within the educational context, bolstering endeavors to mitigate discrimination and prejudice. Furthermore, these policies ensure the provision of sufficient resources, such as mentorship from experienced educators, providing teaching assistants, curricula, literature, technological tools, and tailored pacing strategies, all of which contribute to the learning success of every child.

Finally, schools and communities can work collaboratively to promote positive and inclusive education for all children. Schools can develop partnerships with community organizations, leverage the resources and expertise of families and community members, and promote community-based research and action to provide for the needs of diverse populations of children. By using culturally responsive teaching, providing language support, promoting diversity and inclusion, and fostering family engagement, educators can support the learning and learning success of all children, regardless of their cultural background or language ability. Children's

well-being in school is dependent upon a plethora of changing attitudes and practices including re-examining our current educational system.

### **Changing our Educational System**

The restructuring of our educational system is recommended so that children no longer need to face discrimination or marginalization (Glaude, 2020). It is also important for educators and policymakers to consider eliminating policies and practices that contribute to inequality and discrimination within the education system. Some of these discriminatory policies and practices include tracking or streaming, unequal funding of schools, biased disciplinary practices, biased standardized testing, inadequate support for English language learners, and lack of diversity among educators and curriculum. On the contrary, recommended policies and practices should encompass those that promote equity and inclusion in education, support efforts to reduce discrimination and bias, and provide adequate resources for every child.

In conclusion, taking a more holistic and intersectional approach to understanding the educational experiences of diverse children, as well as partnering with parents, can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges children face and the strategies educators need to promote children's successes. By incorporating inclusive approaches and the "figured worlds" approach into research and practice, educators and policymakers can work towards creating a more equitable education system that supports the learning success of all children, regardless of their background or identity.

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