

English for What and for Whom?: Parental Dilemmas and Struggles with Their Children's English Learning in Korea

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Abstract

This paper explores how ideas related to children's learning are conceptualized and practiced by examining Korean parental perspectives. Many Korean parents' high expectations for their children in education are based on a unique combination of Korean parenting and Korean social values. As a result, this paper reports on discussions of what Korean parents' think about their children's English proficiency and preparation for global society. It also investigates their perspectives of young children's English learning in such Korean contexts as their parental struggles and expectations in relation to different socio-economic statuses, regions, and children's gender. This endeavor attempts to fully understand how young children's education-in this case, English learning-is situated within the complex dialectic of Korean society in which the parents' perspectives about social values and familial expectations are intertwined.

Keywords: Korean early childhood education, English learning, parental perspectives

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Young children learn various social values, beliefs, and skills in their family settings. Such learning opportunities therefore result in children acquiring a knowledge base valued by society (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Through their familial experiences, young children become familiar with social expectations and are encouraged to cultivate cultural adaptation strategies. From this perspective, the home environment and parental expectations play a critical role in supporting young children's cognitive development, academic performance, and the social that are necessary for them to become competent citizens in a given society (e.g., Chan, 2005; Chung, Walkey, & Bemak, 1997; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Halgunseth, 2009; Midgett, Ryan, Adams, & Corville-Smith, 2002). As young children bring this knowledge with them to school, such knowledge has the potential to support their school experiences and impact their chances of participating successfully in society.

Given the importance of the relationship between children's knowledge and learning and their experiences at home, this paper explores how ideas connected to young children's English learning are conceptualized and practiced by examining Korean parental perspectives. For instance, what role does young children's education play in Korean families? What do Korean parents think of young children's second-language learning—namely, English? How different or similar are parental approaches of young children's English learning between the families in wealthy areas and the families in non-wealthy areas in Korea? This paper focuses particularly on Korean parents' standpoints of these questions in a way that closely connects with their children's competence in Korean society, as well as in the global world. As a result, this paper investigates how Korean parents support their young children's English learning by scrutinizing the parents' personal experiences and their family dynamics as they relate to a Korean context. By doing so, it attempts to investigate fully how young children's education is situated within the complex dialectic of Korean society, in which perspectives about social values are intertwined with familial expectations.

Contexts: Young Children and English Learning in Korea

The importance of young children's English proficiency has been discussed and addressed in specific socio-political contexts of Korea. First, many Korean parents' high expectations of their children in education, which are based on a unique style of Korean parenting and Korean social values, are inevitably entangled with learning English in Korea (e.g., Jung & Norton, 2002; Mejía, 2002; Park & Abelman, 2004; Shim & Baik, 2004). These parents convince their children that academic success is indispensable for their future occupations and the stability of their lives in Korea. Moreover, because it is essential for Korean youth to have at least a Bachelor's degree or even an advanced degree with good English proficiency in Korea today, Korean parents know that it is difficult to get a decent, professional job without higher education and English skills. Korean parents consider their young children's preparation for high academic success imperative, including their level of English proficiency. As a result, most Koreans consider English to be essential for success in Korea and around the world.

Second, Koreans' emphasis on learning English is intertwined with the ideas propagated by the national leaders of Korea who returned to the country after earning American higher education degrees during the mid-20th century (Baik, 1992; Kim, 2011). This phenomenon created a symbolic representation of learning the American language and having an American degree as being an integral dimension of membership in an intelligent, successful upper class—namely, it represented a position of power in Korea (Kim, 2011). This was influenced in part by positive perceptions of the United States, which emerged after the US offered military support for South Korea during the Korean War; this is also related to the current economic boom in Korea. This positive perception of the United States, a country once viewed as merely an ally, has expanded to encompass a similar recognition of its cultural capital and products (Kim & Min, 1992; Lee, 2010). These elements of the U.S. were seen as good, beneficial, and instructive when compared to those of Japan, whose cultural products were considered bad and immoral in light of the Japanese colonization of Korea (Lee, 2006). Although some anti-Americanism sentiments started around the 1980s due to several social changes, the positive view of speaking English still exists and persists in Korea. American political and economic power led Koreans to value such cultural capital

as American English.

Third, Korean children's learning English has been accelerated by "globalization," which was the official doctrine that the Kim Young-Sam government in the mid-1990s chose. With the opening up of the national economy, a considerable variety of foreign culture and information has been introduced rapidly to Korean society. This type of globalization has exposed the Korean people to a broad range of diverse foreign influences (Kim, 1999). It is not surprising, then, that the influence of globalization can be found in English learning as well. Since the mid-1990s, the importance of learning English in Korean society has reflected the social changes related to such a view by focusing on children's understanding of others, and their ability to cope with and be competitive in various social, economic, and political phenomena to prepare them for the processes of globalization (Korean Ministry of Education, 1998; Lee, 2006).

This paper will address such socio-cultural factors as social expectations for education, financial resources, different regions, and children's gender as important frames of reference through which to analyze some Korean parents' perspectives of young children's English learning.

Method

Participants

Since this research focuses on Korean parents' points of view of children's English learning, 26 Korean parents (from 26 different families) whose children are in preschool, kindergarten or primary grades (grades 1 to 3) participated. The participants were from three different cities of Korea: Seoul, Dae-Jeon, and Dae-Gu (Table 1). I chose these cities not only because they are three of the five big cities in Korea, but also because they are traditionally well known for high levels of interest in education. The participants from Seoul were from the "Gangnam" areas in which many parents spend a relatively high amount on private education expenses: its average cost is 1.22 million won per month for each household with children aged 6 to 18 (Gangnam-Gu, 2015). I used snowball sampling

for recruiting participants. The participants of the other two cities identified themselves as middle-class. All of the participating parents were mothers, since in Korean society, it is the mothers who usually take responsibility for their children's general educational activities and outcomes, such as taking care of homework and after-school activities, parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering at schools (Lee, 2006). In addition, a couple of fathers who wanted to participate could not come to the interviews due to their busy work schedules.

Table 1. *Participant Information*

Seoul (15 parents)					
Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex
A	3(8)/M	B	3(8)/M	C	3(8)/F
D	2(8)/F	E	2(7)/F	F	1(6)/M
G	1(6)/M	H	1(7)/M	I	1(6)/F
J	K(5)/M	K	K(6)/M	L	K(5)/F
M	Preschool(5)/M	N	Preschool(4)/M	O	Preschool(5) /F
Dae-Jeon (8 parents)					
Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex
P	3(7)/F	Q	2(7)/M	R	2(7)/F
S	2(7)/F	T	K(5)/M	U	Preschool(4)/M
V	Preschool(4) /F	W	Preschool(3)/F		
Dae-Gu (3 parents)					
Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex	Parent	Child's Grade (Age)/ Sex
X	3(7)/M	Y	K(4)/F	Z	1(5)/M

Data Collection

This study was carried out by interviews with the participants. As Kvale (2008) noted, "An interview is literally an inter-view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a common theme" (p. 21). Such interpersonal discourse is crucial in understanding that knowledge is constructed by the relationship between a person and his

or her world (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Derrida, 1973; Lyotard, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This perspective is important for this study, because it explores what Korean parents think about their children's English language learning, how those thoughts are different or similar among parents, and what led them to have these thoughts in their specific context, Korea.

In addition, the interview as communication allowed me to know "what is in and on someone else's mind" (Merriam, 1988, p. 72). Interviews have become a means to disclose one's authentic inner discourse in responding to certain questions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). As a result, in order to reveal Korean parents' innate thoughts in this study, interviews served as a good tool through which to expose their responses and attitudes about their children's learning English and education.

In this study, I organized individual interviews with all the participants. Each participant had one interview, which was semi-structured and lasted approximately 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours. Because I am fluent in Korean, there was no need for a translator. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. I started each interview by asking introductory questions about the children, such as "How many children do you have?" "How old are they?" "What are their favorite subjects at school?" and "What is their hobby and what do you do with them during the weekend or on vacation?" By beginning the interviews with these questions, the participants and I had some time to get to know each other and to make sure that they felt comfortable in the interview with me. At this point, I guided them by asking questions related directly to the study. These questions included: 1) Do you think that your child's English learning is important? Why/Why not? 2) What does your child do to learn English? and 3) What challenges or concerns do you have for your child's English learning?

Data Analysis

The research questions provided above guided the data analysis. The research analysis was based on certain major categories. For example, the parental thoughts, expectations, roles, and concerns about their children's English learning, including those of their children's future, Korean education, globalization, social responsivity for early childhood education, and familial financial burdens for education. These categories represent concepts that describe each category (Merriam, 2009). These categories were continually revised and

modified throughout the study. Since this research took a grounded theory approach and utilized “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the process of data analysis accompanied that of the data collection. The interview data were reviewed initially for repetitive themes, and later, for anomalies, in the parents’ responses. I read all the transcriptions several times in order to look for the parents’ different and similar perceptions, concerns, and interests in order to formulate possible answers to my research questions.

My analysis of the Korean parents’ perceptions of their children’s learning English was more than merely discovering new knowledge about an unknown issue (Christians, 2002; Denzin, 2005). Rather, it emphasized the characteristics of my participants’ socio-cultural context, because “what is acceptable and what is not acceptable research, text, and/or process is determined and defined in reference to the cultural context within which it operates” (Bishop, 1998, p. 211).

After settling on certain themes, I used a “negative case analysis” method (Carspecken, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), by checking which information did not fit into a specific theme to minimize the possibility of formulating an invalid construction of meaning. By using these strategies, therefore, the interview data were reviewed and newly categorized in succession, in order to classify them according to more appropriate and accurate themes, and to make my interpretations more truthful (Glaser & Strauss, 1975; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Strauss, 1987).

It is necessary to note that all parents’ statements and answers for the analysis were very often led by them. Because of this, the data analysis of each interview took a constructivist approach.

Results

My analysis demonstrated that Korean parents shared a strong consensus on the need for their children to learn English; this consensus was related to their concepts of what it means to be ready and prepared for participation in a global world. Therefore, in this section, three major themes are discussed: 1) the values of children’s learning of English in the global

world; 2) the various struggles of parents related to support children's learning of English; and 3) the social pressure and competition the parents faced for their children's English proficiency.

Children's Learning of English in the Global World: Its Meaning in Reality

All Korean parents in this study first indicated their children's "need" for English fluency due to the current social atmosphere of globalization, which encourages Koreans to be competent and competitive in the global world. In order to accomplish the goals, their children need to develop the abilities to "compete not only [as] Koreans but also [to be able to navigate through] the [cultural contexts] of many other countries," because "many people will use English more and more as an official world language," as parent B told me. For instance, 23 parents of 26 parents used the term "globalization," and conceptualized it as something that will let their children "meet and talk to different countries' people" and "probably have some chances to work in those countries."

However, they did not offer any further ideas on what their children's global citizenship might look like for having learned English. Instead, most of them echoed a parent's perspective conceptualizing their children's need to learn English. When I asked about how important learning English would be for a child, parent K said:

We are now living in global society. Speaking English is basic. Everyone should do [it]. I don't even want my children to be a leader only using English or something. But it can be better to have it for them later. Like...when a child performs well, that child would win a prize later, too.

Such a vague concept as "But it can be better to have it for them later" was made more specified when the parents discussed current Korean educational structures and practices. All were extremely interested in enhancing their children's abilities, including that of English proficiency, so that they could pursue higher education; the parents hoped that they would be admitted to well-known colleges in Korea. Parent R, who had 7-year-old daughter, told me:

As you know, we have the frenzy of English. The need of that ability [for English proficiency] is always told here [Korea] so much. I mean...too much. But that is reality. That is all in Korean mothers' mind. Without it, they can't get into good colleges or get a job. So, we often decide to

send our kids to English learning centers beginning when they turn 4 years old. Getting a good grade on English at school...especially at middle and high school is very important for her [her daughter].

Therefore, the reasons for young children's English learning frequently derived from Korean parents' intentions to make their children better prepared for higher education and a career path. This tendency is not surprising when we consider the fact that 66% of the total Korean population aged 25 to 34 has a Bachelor's degree, which is the highest percentage among OECD countries (OECD, 2014), and approximately 71% of all Korean high school graduates go on to university (Youn & Howang, 2015).

Given the majority in Korea who hold a higher education degree, these Korean parents' strong inclinations toward their children's English fluency did not merely manifest as a perceived linguistic asset that would serve them well as citizens in global society. Rather, English proficiency was seen as a social mechanism that played the role of tracking and sorting children's abilities in Korea (e.g., Blommaert, 2010; Graddol, 2006; Ricento, 2000). More precisely, to these parents, the importance of the children's "being global" was marginalized when they encountered their children's actual "reality" in Korean society. Therefore, English proficiency has become significant for children's academic performance in that the English subject comprises a large portion of what will determine what college they can go to. Furthermore, it plays an important role in establishing socioeconomic status in their future, because prestigious colleges' graduates too often get better and more opportunities in Korean job markets, as opposed to preparing to "live in the global world."

In addition, the parents' perceptions of the actual purposes for their children learning English were revealed when they talked about what they considered to be "preferred" English, in response to my question of how well children should speak English from their perspectives. Except for one mother, whose husband earned his doctoral degree in Europe, all would want their children to learn "American English" more than any other variety of English, such as that of "England," "Australia or New Zealand," or "Southeast Asia." They told me that the other types of English were hard to understand, as they were familiar mostly with American English accents in Korea. Even when their children had different accents of American English, they had to "learn English again to correct them" since the Korean social preference of American English extended to academia as well as job markets.

However, none of them reflected on what their preference for American English actually meant and whether it was connected to the phenomenon of Americanization and not globalization. Rather, some, such as parents A, C, H, and L even explicitly expressed their preference by saying “English means only American English here [in Korea],” “Americanization is everywhere,” “It is not happening only here [Korea] and it is getting more and more because of TV, internet, and something” when I asked about their thoughts on any relationships between their preference and American imperialism. Their opinions echoed the perceptions of “good English,” which indicated the higher value placed on American Standard English more than many other variations of English (Park, 2010, p. 193). Therefore, the definition of “good English” is not completely objective: instead, what can be considered proper English in a given society is very subjective and contextual (e.g., Bhatt, 2002; Holliday, 2005; Norton, 1997), as a result of the connotation of having several external variables related to its socio-cultural, historical, political, and economical factors and perceived value.

This perspective of the parents then indicated that the meaning of globalization was not a critical matter for them to consider or, at least, their conceptualization of it was too narrowly developed. It was defined and justified mainly by a current need for children’s academic performance in English—only American English—which they thought would prepare them for higher education in Korea without any serious consideration about any understanding of different countries and peoples and their roles as global citizens.

Children’s English Learning and Various Struggles of Parents

As discussed previously, all parents in this study understood and took the importance of their children’s English proficiency seriously. However, the concerns and the ways of educating their offspring were quite different depending on the regions of the participants and their spouse’s opinions.

Regions: the capital city, Seoul vs. the other cities. First of all, there were significantly different attitudes and strategies between parents in Seoul, the capital of Korea, and those of the other two Korean regions. For the former, the quality of the private

English program and the level of the children's stress in learning or their opinions were their main criteria for decision making. There was a variety of English program choices from which to select: they could choose a center that employed American/Canadian native speakers, groups that were considered to have one of the "best" qualifications to teach their children's English. Although they complained about the expensive private tuition for their children's English learning, it was not a critical factor that had an impact on their decision. Given that all participants in Seoul lived in some of the wealthiest areas of Korea, their concerns about the expenses might not be significant. This is more convincing when we consider the recent survey data in which the families of young children aged under 7 (before going to elementary school) in some of the wealthiest areas in Seoul, the so called "Gang Naam," spent approximately ₩1,157,000 (\$1,022.83) per month for children's English learning. This is much higher than the average Korean expenditure on these young children's English learning programs, which was approximately ₩795,732 (\$703.46) per month (Lee & Choi, 2014). Therefore, Seoul parents considered how their children would feel about a certain program or the frequency of taking lessons as more important criteria. Some of them (parents F, H, J, and K) selected or switched to a program for these reasons. Furthermore, several parents of Seoul, such as parents A, D, E, G, F, L, and M, had international experience or connections. For instance, they had lived in different English-speaking countries for years due to their husband's work or college sabbatical year, sent their children for a month to six months to other countries for the purpose of English learning, or had relatives in such English-speaking countries as the United States and Canada so they could get English learning materials and plan their children's future study abroad.

However, the parents in the other regions of this study confessed that the expensive private tuition and the lack of various program options were their main concerns. In spite of their middle class economic status, a couple of them (parents V and Z) told me that they even considered taking a part-time job to pay for tuition, which was a huge financial burden for them. Moreover, the insufficient educational resources for their children's English learning seemed to cause tension for them when comparing their situation to that of "Seoul mothers." When I asked about her concerns about English learning for her children, parent Y told me:

We don't have much here. I mean...less variety or quality of English programs than Seoul. They [people in Seoul] have far better programs and facilities, I've heard. We [don't have programs] those like Seoul mothers [do]. And that is really something I don't know what to do about as a parent.

These parents were frustrated since they were fully aware of the fact that their children should compete with those in Seoul despite their own limited resources and information. This unequal economic distribution and regional disparity illustrated a statistical study of private education for all school-aged children in Korea (Statistics Korea, 2015). It showed that the average monthly private education expenditure per student for a household income of more than ₩7,000,000 (\$6,188.28) per month was ₩420,000 (\$371.30), almost 6.5 times the amount of ₩66,000 (\$58.35) that those who had a monthly household income of less than ₩1,000,000 (\$884.04) spent for private education. Household income and private education spending, then, appeared to be proportional. When thinking about this, based on each family's SES, children from a low- to middle-class background would have a significant disadvantage participating in private education: only 32.1% of children from a monthly household income of less than ₩1,000,000 (\$884.04) were in private education, while their counterparts (children from a household income of more than ₩7,000,000 [\$6,188.28] per month) had an 83.5% participation rate in private education (Statistics Korea, 2015). Therefore, acquiring such a form of linguistic and social capital as English proficiency relies greatly on economic capital, which is related to parents' financial affordability and geographic area in the Korean educational context.

Spouses' viewpoints. In addition to the differences based on the regions mentioned above, participants' husbands' points of view played an important role in the decision making process. This was particularly true when the mothers were young or lived in regions different from Seoul. In this case, the fathers were more educated and had more experience abroad than did the mothers. Because of this, the wives tended to accept the husbands' decisions or opinions easily. For instance, although a mother, parent T, wanted to provide intensive private English instruction, she couldn't do so when her husband said "that [sending their children to the private English learning center] is useless because children's ability to speak English doesn't always go with how successful they can be later in their

lives,” which is similar to what parent P mentioned. Many Korean mothers were inclined to take responsibility for their children's general educational activities and outcomes, such as taking care of homework and after-school activities, parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering at schools (Lee, 2006). But English proficiency was closely related to the area of making crucial decisions about their children's education (e.g., choosing schools and careers), which is mostly done by fathers for maintaining and improving the status of their families in society (Kim & Choi, 1994).

However, the matter of children's learning English seemed to cause conflict between some of the married couples in Seoul. Unlike those who lived in different regions from Seoul, many of the Seoul mothers countered their spouses' different ideas because they believed that they had “more recent, systematic and better information and resources” about education that were circulated “among mothers” than did their spouses, as a couple of participants stated. Some of these participants, such as parents A, C, D, F and O, told me that they had seriously considered divorce before due to different values and strategies for parenting, in particular their children's learning English. Parent F confessed when she expressed her concerns about children's English learning:

He [her husband] doesn't really know what a child should do in Korean society to go to a good college and get a job. Because...he does not spend much time with her [her daughter]. You know...he has to work and come home late very often. So he has no idea how hard and competitive it is for a child. So he doesn't understand me.

As the participant implied above, some of the mothers in Seoul were frustrated because they did not seem to closely communicate or to have enough opportunities to discuss with their husbands such a matter as their children's English learning, because they were at work extensively. From this perspective, their children's English learning was not merely an issue of the children's future to prepare any more. It significantly affected their marriage and family life and caused marital conflict.

Social Pressure and Competition for Children's English Learning

Insufficient support in community and society. As successful English acquisition during early childhood has been considered an essential element of children's education in

current Korean society, Korean parents in this study felt burdened by their children's need for English learning. All of the participants indicated that, regardless of how much information or strategies these parents had, they still had concerns about their insufficiency of specific knowledge, advice or support for their children's English learning. They continued struggling with no proper help offered by the school or by society in terms of what to do with their young children's English learning. The pressure, stress, and concerns were tremendous. Parent T shared her concerns by telling me:

When I decided to send my child to an all-day English kindergarten, I had to give up on something...like many other moms. You know, there are several other things children should learn in the kindergarten such as...building friendships and character education, things like that. But the English kindergarten mainly focuses on teaching English and the main teachers are foreigners. Whenever I send my child there, I feel extremely guilty and nervous...always think why I am doing this to my child and if he is okay every day. But I continue to send him like the other moms. We [those Korean mothers] are worried about them but at the same time, if we didn't send them, we would also worry if my children are [academically] left behind. I feel very stressed and concerned imagining that every child is doing that [learning English in the English kindergarten] except my child...What if my child couldn't catch up with the others because of that and would regret it and blame me later? I hate this country's educational system but what else can I do?

As this participant indicated, young children's social development was seen as less of a priority because of its insignificant relationship with a child's getting a good grade or a decent job in future in Korean society. Because of this, more than two thirds of all parents in this study felt as if they were forced to choose between their children's English learning, since it was emphasized in the Korean school curriculum and society, and education that could advance their children's fundamental social skills, morals, and character early in their lives.

The burden of children's English learning on parents. Moreover, parent T's dilemma brought up another important cultural value to reflect upon: Korean parental responsibility and sacrifice. Like many other participants in this study, this participant considered her attention and devotion the key to her child's success, and therefore, in her own mind she was saddled with the responsibility for her child's inadequate achievement

attributes. This logic made this participant apprehensive about her child, worrying that her child might have low academic performance achievement without her complete sacrifice and devotion. She would feel ashamed later by thinking of herself as being neglectful and irresponsible concerning her child's future.

This Korean parental devotion was also intertwined with these mothers' career decisions. Only two mothers (parents I and X) of 25 in this study had a job, and one of these two was a part-time employee. Several participants stated that they chose not to work after having a baby so that they could devote their time to the complete support of their children and their involvement in parenting. It seemed difficult-almost impossible, particularly for those who had a full time job-to support and provide devotion to their children like many of the participants in this study. Parent E told me:

I don't work so my time is all for my children. [...] I am participating in their school PTOs, various subgroups' at school, extra curriculum activities, parent blogs for children's better academic performance, several summer/winter English program discussion sessions...you name it. [...] They [the mothers who had a full time job] can't. They can't participate much. Many of these activities happen during the day so you know...they can't get out of their work.

According to Kim and Choi (1994), many Korean mothers feel little or no conflict in sacrificing their careers for their children. This sense of obligation may derive from the belief that their children are not separate from them. Rather, their children are another self, or what Kim and Choi (1994) have called "extensions of themselves," who can give them "vicarious gratification" (p. 242). As a result, their children's academic achievement and career accomplishments are not only their children's but also their own. Even though this tendency is changing in Korean society today, it is still true in the context of this study that many Korean women renounce their careers in order to raise their children because "if a mother had a full-time job, it would be hard. Her kids would hardly catch up with the other children." This participant's statement echoed the current Korean married women's work situation accurately. According to Statistics Korea in 2015, the women's labor participation rate dropped from 64.5% among Korean women in their 20s to 58.5% in their 30s. The major reason for this decreasing employment rate, was due to the heavy burden of childbirth and care, as well as difficulties in reemployment after maternity leave (Korean Industrial Development Institute, 2014).

Different social expectations of English learning for children's gender. It is also interesting to find that the degree of social pressure that many participants had was somewhat different depending on their children's gender. This difference was more clearly revealed when many parents pointed out that they felt more pressured to cultivate the sons' English learning than the girls'. When I asked about the reasons, a parent told me:

A girl can marry to a decent man regardless of having a successful, professional career. But they [the sons] are different. They should have a good job even when they want to get married. So, they have to know how to speak English which can make them get a good job and be successful. (Parent R)

A couple of mothers (parents L and S) who wanted their daughters to have a career, still had lower or different expectations to a certain degree in considering their daughters' suitability for marriage to meet "a good husband" and wanting them to "be near me, not going away or staying in a different country or region." To most of these mothers, excellent English proficiency was perceived as being essential and necessary for men whereas, for their daughters, it was important, too, but it could be optional or less significant than for boys. Therefore, children's learning English, which was often justified as the most important preparation concerning children's participation in a future global society, became critical not only for the children's economic and financial future, but also their future marriage and family.

Conclusions and Implications

This study discussed the perspectives of Korean parents on their children's English learning. In Korean society, children's English learning was closely intertwined with their families' socio-economic status. Parents' discussions clearly demonstrated that each child's educational opportunity and quality can be distorted and problematic, since they depend tremendously on social class, region, sectarianism, parental cultural capital, and gender. Therefore, unequal distribution of resources and status in education contributed to significant social inequalities. The importance of English in Korea has not been merely engendered by the phenomenon of globalization. English education functions as a site for

the unequal allocation of power by means of English proficiency in Korea, as it does in many other countries (Park, 2006; Phillipson, 2003).

The actual reality of young children's education did not correspond with the Korean society's public idea of a democratic learning environment which is "an education supporting system that reflects students' characteristics, developmental stages, family backgrounds, thereby providing an educational service sensitive to people's needs" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2015). They regarded children's learning English as the parents' important responsibility, not that of school or society. Korean society should reflect upon an essential question about how to reconstruct the current educational system on which the micro-level of instruction and learning is mostly focused. It should develop a comprehensive education mechanism to diminish the enormous gap that exists between the ideas of democracy as a social ideal and the conditions of an actual lived familial reality. Because of their sole responsibility for children's English learning, the parents considered their attention and devotion the key to a child's success, and therefore, they felt guilty in believing that their child's inadequate level of achievement should be attributed to them and a lack of devotion toward their children.

The phenomenon of globalization and learning English is not prevalent merely in Korea. However, Korea has a unique, complex situation related to globalization because of the many social and educational issues that are related to learning English. Of course, it is not possible to generalize these parents' points of views as a factual truth due to the small-scale nature of the study. Rather, the study's findings should be treated as these participants' ideological representations of their current reality. By acknowledging this limitation, I discuss some suggestions for Korean parents and early childhood education considering the complex Korean socio-cultural contexts where difficult tasks and tensions exist for parents. First, it is necessary for Korean parents to have access to systematic supports for children's English learning with accurate information provided by the Korean government and educational institutions. According to the participants, they felt very frustrated that they had to search for all information by themselves without any professional help. After they got to know me better as the interviews went on, their foci were shifted from what they thought about their children's learning English to what my advice was for them because they wanted to have some guidance in having reliable information for their children. In addition,

the lack of educational support can cause a much deeper discrepancy regarding resources between people who live in Seoul, the capital city, and the people who live in other cities. As a result, there is a significant need to develop resource systems that are suitable for each parent's inquiry about and interests in their children's English learning.

In a related matter, community building that allows Korean parents to feel comfortable sharing their concerns and ideas about children's English learning can also be useful. It is important for parents to be part of a community where they can think about their problems and concerns with others, including teachers and policy makers, and resolve them together, instead of having a perception that they are isolated in addressing and dealing with the issue of their children's English learning. In this community building, it would also be beneficial for parents to have ample opportunities to communicate with schools and policy makers openly. In Korea, it is imperative to overcome a social issue related to young children without each parent feeling isolated. By knowing that other parents have the same struggle and by understanding that such a struggle is not an individual matter, they are able to view that all Korean parents should act together and deserve the same access to English learning. This can lead them to avoid significant pressure and responsibility as well as allay feelings of guilt in making important decisions for their children's education and future. As a result, it is necessary for them to have a community where their shared struggle can lead to their stronger understanding of how to bring about compassion and care for young children and their education.

Furthermore, Korean society should rethink how English as an essential subject can ensure children's meaningful learning and experiences with equal opportunity. Levels of English proficiency have been used extensively as a basic criterion for Korean college admission. They have also been used for hiring and promoting in the job market. Of course, it is not a simple task to discontinue to use English as a social sorting mechanism, because Korea has been using it for several decades. However, Korean society should be clearly aware of the fact that this mechanism has complicated consequences for its role in the reproduction of an unequal class structure, as access to better opportunities for learning English is, too often, constrained by material and financial resources. For instance, strategies for English learning that are widely believed to be the most effective in inculcating marketable competence in English are often the most expensive ones, such as

studying abroad, attending a private international school, and tutoring with American English native speakers, all of which are more affordable for families with higher incomes. It is imperative for Korean society to understand that, without thorough and consistent governmental interventions, young children from low-income families or who live in regions other than Seoul, will continue to have disadvantages, not only in their English learning, but also, in their future education and career options in the Korean context.

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