The Figured World of Globalization and Cosmopolitanism and Korean Temporary Migrant Parents’ Practices of their Children’s Language Education

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Abstract

This study explores Korean parents’ narratives and practices for their children’s English education through the theoretical lens of “figured worlds” (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain, 1998). Figured worlds, collectively shared sets of ideologies and practices among members of a group, help to analyze the practice from the participant’s perspective. The study focuses on Korean temporary migrant families with 3- to 8-year-old children who have already arrived in the United States. From 2003 to 2006, I conducted an ethnographic study of Korean international families in a university town in the Midwest. I investigated what motivates parents to implement this extreme practice of English education, that is, migration. The analysis discloses the parents have somewhat exaggerated beliefs on effectiveness of English education for their children. Those beliefs have been justified and intensified through their shared narrative in the figured worlds of globalization and cosmopolitanism. The parents also construct this narrative by psychologically interacting with their past experience and present situation.

[Key Words] English education, Migration, Figured worlds

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INTRODUCTION

The study explores Korean parents’ narratives and practices for their children’s English education in a social phenomenon of temporarily moving to an English speaking country for their children’s English education—“Korean English Fever and Temporary Migration” (Chang, 2006; Chung, 2008). To highlight one aspect of the migrating phenomenon, my study focuses on Korean temporary migrant families with children 3- to 8-years-old who have already arrived in a university town in the United States. All participant families of the study have one parent involved in the university for 1-2 years as a graduate student, a visiting scholar or a post-doctoral fellow. My previous study found that even though the families officially moved to the U.S. for a higher academic degree or for a better career opportunity for a parent, their hidden but true motivation for moving was for their children’s English education (Chung, 2008). The opinion of Korean public at large considers this type of migration as over-zeal of Korean parents toward their children’s education (e.g., Hyun, 2003). Public discourse regards the educational practice extreme in view of parent’s willingness to relocate their family in a foreign country for their children’s education. Instead of blaming the parents for their over-zealousness, I would like to examine the phenomenon from the parents’ perspective by using the theoretical lens of “figured worlds” (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain, 1998). Figured worlds are collectively shared sets of ideologies and practices among members of a group. The framework helps to identify dominant narrative and practice of the participants and also shed lights on how they are constructed.

The purpose of my study is to investigate what motivates parents to implement this relatively extreme practice of English education, that is, migration by using the framework of “figured worlds.” The analysis reveals Koreans’ ideologies about English that drives this phenomenon. Through this process, I will also explain the theoretical and practical implications for using the term figured worlds.

My research questions are:

1) What belief system do Korean temporary migrant parents have to justify their migration for their children’s English education?

2) How do Korean temporary migrant parents construct the belief systems?

The paper is organized into five sections; (a) introduction of the phenomenon and extreme educational practice of Korean parents, (b) introduction of the theoretical framework of “figured worlds” in comparison with the previous approaches studying the phenomenon, (c) methodology, (d) analysis and interpretation of data based on a “figured world,” and (e) theoretical and practical implications for using “figured world.”