Formation of Polycultural Capital through Sport Participation: Korean Immigrant Families’ Involvement in Taekwondo

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Scholars have examined how sport participation accelerates immigrant acculturation, highlighting sport’s contribution in building social and cultural capital. While the theory of acculturation emphasizes a unidirectional process of immigrants’ assimilation into host culture, it has been argued that the relationship between immigrants’ home and host cultures is interactional (Kim et al., 2001). Despite abundant research on the effects of social and economic background on sport participation, insufficient attention has been paid to the relationality between the role of ethnic backgrounds and the cultural impact of sport participation on a specific ethnic group (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). In this study, we focus on Korean immigrant families in the US whose children participate in Taekwondo, a Korean ethnic sport. Understanding how Korean immigrant families negotiate between home and host identities, and maintain their home (ethnic) identity through sport participation provides a counter-narrative by ethnic minorities, which has not received sufficient academic attention (Cunningham, 2014).

This study is guided by the concept of polycultural capital (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010), which denotes the potential advantage immigrants may accumulate from ongoing exposure to more than one culture. Culturally distinctive social spaces and practices, including cross-cultural resources, knowledge, skills and agency, allow immigrants to selectively choose or effectively respond to more than one culture, depending on their contexts and purposes. Using this concept, the purpose of the current study is to better understand how Korean immigrant families use sport participation (i.e., Taekwondo) as a polycultural practice to negotiate Koreanness and Americaness in their everyday lives.

This study prompts the following research question: How does the participation of Korean immigrant children in Taekwondo provide a cultural space in which Korean immigrant families develop polycultural capital? Using a qualitative method, diverse data was collected: semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Korean immigrant parents whose children participate in Taekwondo; observations at Taekwondo academies; and textual narratives from online communities exclusively for Korean immigrants and Korean Americans. Data were analyzed through open, thematic, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings identified that Korean immigrant parents wanted their children to learn their heritage language, Korean, through Taekwondo participation. In Taekwondo classes, masters use Korean terms to indicate skills due to the sport’s ethnic nature. Parents highlighted that their children also learned cultural and ethnic practices such as greetings in the Korean style and to show respect to the elderly. Taekwondo’s cultural aspects were appreciated by the parents as they often struggled to teach Korean language and culture to their children. Parents also revealed that they found Taekwondo academies to be safe spaces for both themselves and their children, where they were perceived and respected not as minorities but majorities who could teach Korean terms and cultural aspects to parents and children from other ethnic groups. We argue that, based on these findings, children’s participation in Taekwondo provided Korean immigrant families with cultural competence and polycultural capital, which was described in the data as preferable to monocultural alternatives. Theoretical and practical implications will be suggested, followed by directions for future research.