

 Research Article

A Heritage School for Young Korean American Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand how a local heritage school in a rural area supports young Korean American students' learning of heritage language towards the maintenance of cultural identity through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. This study addresses three research questions: How has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through competence support? How has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through relatedness support? And how has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through autonomy support? This study was guided by a qualitative case study following Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to produce a holistic description through multiple forms of data collection including interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings provide the context of the heritage language learning experiences of young Asian American students in the United States, addressing their unique challenges. Findings also highlight that participation in the heritage school created a bridge, connecting Korean and American cultures with community, among a minority population in a rural area; built students' self-identity; and enhanced the competence of participants' mother-tongue-language as well as their cultural literacy. This study emphasizes the significance of creating environments where young Asian American students feel a sense of belonging to aid the development of these competencies, especially in rural areas.

Keywords: Heritage Language, Heritage Language School, Korean School, Young Korean American Students

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jin Sook and Adrienne Lo, organizers of the 2005 International Association of Applied Linguistics conference in Madison, Wisconsin, identified a need to identify and address needs in heritage language education, specifically among Korean Americans (Lee & Shin, 2008). Heritage language refers to immigrant, indigenous, or ancestral language that has personal relevance for the learner and that motivates a desire for connection with that language or culture (Wiley, 2005). This effort is important because studies have shown that students who learn a heritage language often develop a positive attitude and motivation to learn the language along with its culture (Carreira & Kagan 2011; Hur et al., 2021). Similarly, when young Korean American students simultaneously learn about their Korean culture alongside the language, they can cultivate positive attitudes toward their cultural heritage and their own identity while attending public schools in the United States.

Furthermore, in accordance with findings from the National Language Research Center, students proficient in multiple languages frequently exhibit a competitive advantage over their monolingual peers, achieving higher scores on standardized assessments and demonstrating augmented cognitive abilities (Bin-Tahir et al., 2018; LRC, 2023). Moreover, students equipped with heritage language skills, as an additional language skill, can elevate their self-esteem and enhance their engagement in school by embracing bicultural

adaptation, a process that empowers them to feel comfortable and thrive in two cultures (Heisler, 2020). Similarly, research on the topic underscores that students who have strong competence in their heritage language tend to exhibit “higher self-esteem, a greater sense of belonging, and greater ability to seek support” within public school settings (Lee & Shin, 2008, p. 160).

While there are benefits to learning a heritage language, multicultural students often lack opportunities to learn about their own heritage and culture (Otto, 2016; Siu, 1996). Moreover, while they may be able to speak their heritage language, the opportunity to use the language typically exists only within their family environments. In rural areas, the opportunity to communicate in the specific language can be especially scarce due to a smaller population of mother-tongue speaking residents. Without opportunities to engage with other native language speakers, heritage language speakers can feel quite isolated (Kim, 2016); they have limited opportunities to build their heritage language competence and are hardly related to their cultural groups. Research suggests that because heritage learners represent diverse situations – ranging from a heritage native born, an adopted individual into American families, to an American born yet living in heritage language-speaking homes – heritage learners have differing socio-psychological needs in learning a heritage language as compared to second language learning peers (Lee & Shin, 2008).

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2017) is the theoretical framework used in this study. SDT posits that humans are innately curious and motivated to learn and grow (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) further suggest that humans have three innate basic psychological needs – competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Experiencing satisfaction of these three needs facilitates motivation toward their actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As individuals interact in various social settings (e.g., work, school, or relationships), these social environments have the potential to either support or undermine these three needs. Individuals’ motivation, well-being, and ability to integrate into a social environment, including a school environment, are all contingent upon the satisfaction of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Competence is the psychological need to experience mastery in one’s environment and to feel that one is able to accomplish tasks that are personally meaningful and challenging. Relatedness is the need to feel belonging, connection, and shared commitment in a social setting (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy reflects the need to feel a sense of agency, volition, and relevance in one’s actions. SDT also explains that “autonomous extrinsic motivations share with intrinsic motivation the quality of being highly volitional” (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 3). Through the motivation process, extrinsic motivation could be internalized gradually (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The difference between intrinsic motivation compared to extrinsic motivation is based on “interest and enjoyment” and students could become more intrinsically motivated when the learning environment supports their autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 3). Thus, utilizing SDT as a framework guided researchers in the exploration of how a heritage language school in a rural area in the midwestern part of the United States supports student motivation to learn a heritage language and to develop their cultural knowledge.

1.2. Korean Schools in the United States

According to a study from Yi and Kim (2018), a total of 1,788 Korean schools existed in 2017 in 113 different countries. Among those countries, the majority of the schools (47.82%) are in the United States, followed by 8% in Japan and 6% in Canada. In the United States, approximately 1,200 Korean schools have been opened by local Korean churches and families across different states (NAKS, 2021; Yi & Kim, 2018). These Korean schools support the learning needs of immigrant and Korean American students whose families have transitioned to the United States (Yi & Kim, 2018).

In recent years, the total number of Korean schools in the United States has decreased (Yi & Kim, 2018), yet participation in Korean schools can show positive benefits for students. For example, these schools can support students as they transition into American culture. Additionally, these schools provide a “heritage connection” for those students born in the United States but living in Korean-speaking families (Kang, 2013; Yi & Kim, 2018). While building heritage language skills is challenging, learning the language

can facilitate cultural competence and awareness and can also support family relationships as students become English dominant from engagement in public schools in the United States (Shin & Milroy, 1999).

Meanwhile, the Korean language has specific terminology used only for older people; therefore, by learning this linguistic factor, students can acquire parts of the Korean culture reserved for the treatment of older people, such as their parents or older relatives, in a different manner than in the United States (Lee & Shin, 2008). These understandings are important because they reinforce cultural connections and enhance relationships within the home. Consequently, young Korean American students have greater potential to thrive as healthy society members/citizens in the United States when afforded the opportunity to cultivate their proficiency in their heritage language and deepen their understanding of their cultural heritage.

1.3. Problem and Purpose Statement

In a rural area in the Midwest of the United States, one resource that has been available to young Korean American students is a Korean school that was founded in 1987 by a local church and family members of young Korean American students (Study Korean, 2021). The local Korean church provided the space for classes until the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Support has also come from Korean national organizations: the National Association for Korean Schools (NAKS) and the Korean School Association in America (KSAA) (Yi & Kim, 2018; You, 2011). The goal of this Korean school aligns with goals of all Korean schools supported by NAKS and KSSA – to enhance students' Korean language competence and cultural understanding (Yi & Kim, 2018). The school offers the space where young Korean American students can learn the language and build relationships with peers. Students who attend the Korean school were either born in the United States or came to the United States because of their parents' study or work at a nearby university. Korean American students attend the Korean school on Saturdays while simultaneously also participating in local public schools during the week. Most students are much more comfortable speaking in English than Korean.

This cultural learning opportunity is quite unique as the number of Korean schools across the United States has decreased (Yi & Kim, 2018), and no study has been conducted in this specific Korean school. Moreover, little is known regarding the influence of this school on student motivational support to “connect” with the Korean language and culture. It is possible that the opportunity to engage with other Korean speaking individuals provides the psychological support needed to facilitate student competence, sense of belonging, and autonomy as they grow in heritage language ability and their cultural knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand, through Self-Determination Theory, how this Korean school supports student motivation in learning a heritage language and building student cultural identity (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative case study design following Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to produce a holistic and rich description through multiple forms of data collection. Quantitative descriptive data and qualitative data were analyzed according to a modified convergent design described in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in which each data source provided mutually reinforcing insight into the study.

2.1. Research Questions

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), the study asks the following research questions.

1. How has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through competence support?
2. How has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through relatedness support?
3. How has this Korean school nurtured student motivation for learning their heritage language and culture through autonomy support?

2.2. School Setting

The Korean school began in 1987 at a local Korean church building in the Midwest of the United States (NAKS, 2021; Study Korean, 2021). In this rural area, the Korean population is small – approximately 2.4% of the local Asian population and about 0.2 % of the statewide Korean population (State Demographics, 2023) out of the State’s 6.4% of the Asian population (U.S. Census Bureau). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the classes were offered at the local Korean church; during the pandemic, the classes were offered online until spring 2022. As of 2023, the Korean school rents a place at a community center to offer the classes in person. A total of four different classes are being offered to students based on their ages and Korean language levels. The individual class size varies depending on the number of registered students.

2.3. Data Collection

This qualitative case study utilized multiple sources of data including interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants in this study included school stakeholders, church members, and parents. Some participants held more than one role such as a teacher and parent. The primary data came from the interviews with eight participants. Purposeful criterion sampling was used to select participants for interviews. The criterion for sample selection specified school community members who had been involved at the school for at least one semester. This criterion helped to ensure that the participants had been at the school long enough to experience the processes and outcomes of the school. All interviewees followed this criterion and had been involved with the school for at least one year except for one family participant who had only been active in the school for one semester. Table 1 shows the interview participant profiles, their roles, and the duration of the participation in the Korean school.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Role(s)	Participation Period
Participant 1	Teacher, past principal, past church member, and past parent	More than ten years
Participant 2	Principal, teacher, parent, and past church member	More than five years
Participant 3	Teacher, church member, and parent	More than two years
Participant 4	Teacher and church member	More than one year
Participant 5	Parent	More than one and a half years
Participant 6	Parent	More than one and a half years
Participant 7	Parent	More than four years
Participant 8	Parent	One semester

Approximately one hour of interviews was conducted per participant, with transcriptions completed within one week of each interview. This study followed the methodology established by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Interviews were conducted online using Zoom because of pandemic protocols. In addition, the Korean language was used for the interviews as the participants preferred to speak in their native language. The data from these interviews were used to identify salient themes and categories. Additional data from the observations and documents were utilized for triangulation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). For example, online observations of the ten classes were conducted in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022. Students’ facial expressions, interactions with teachers, and their learning activities have been recorded on the reflective notes. Documents for data analysis comprised educational resources, encompassing textbooks, artifacts resulting from learning activities, and email correspondences.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to Merriam’s (1985) constant comparative method, by collecting and analyzing data simultaneously. The first step of data analysis was open coding. All of the open codes were typed in a spreadsheet, then axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to recognize and relate codes that emerged in the open coding process. All of the open codes were systematically sorted and consolidated into a single column within the spreadsheet (Figure 1), with each group assigned a distinct

color code to enhance visual organization. This approach facilitated the grouping and analysis of related codes. In a continuous fashion, categories were made from the condensed codes, and then the categories were merged to identify themes (Merriam, 2009). Categories and themes were compared with the data set including observations, documents, and interviews. Throughout these processes, reflective memos were created to capture meaning from the data.

Figure 1. Visualization of the Coding Process

The themes that emerged from the data included language acquisition, cultural experience, challenges young Korean American students faced, comfortability earned through the Korean School, extrinsic motivation through rewards, and autonomous support by parents. The themes were utilized to answer research questions. Data collection and analysis was an iterative process as data were collected until no new meanings emerged. Finally, to best secure confidentiality of the participants in this study, an application to the Institutional Review Board was submitted and approved. One potential constraint of this study lies in the fact that interview participants did not involve the students themselves, given their age range of 6 to 12 years, which may be considered relatively young. While future research may include those young students, in this study, the interviewee pool comprised parents and teachers who were able to observe their children or students closely, a strategy employed to gain insights of the students' perspectives. As a result, the study indirectly captured students' viewpoints through the intermediary perspectives of their educators and parents.

3. FINDINGS

Themes that emerged from data analysis included language acquisition, cultural experience, challenges young Korean American students faced, comfortability earned through the Korean School, extrinsic motivation through rewards, and autonomous support by parents. Each theme was used to answer the research questions.

3.1. Language Acquisition

To aid students in their language development, a theme of language acquisition emerged as the school provided "supportive conditions" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70) such as customized classes and quality educational materials to students. Four different classes were provided according to students' language levels. In this way, students were able to learn with peers having similar Korean language levels by feeling comfortable speaking in the Korean language even if sometimes they used broken Korean words and sentences.

Quality educational materials were also provided to every student; some of the textbooks were sent by the Korean government to the school. Further, most instructional materials consisted of main textbooks along with workbooks and multimedia tools including videos and CDs. The document analysis reveals that the textbooks effectively support language learning through the use of vibrant, color-rich visuals that help young students better connect with the language. The textbooks employ a systematic approach, starting with core vocabulary and providing opportunities for students to practice through shadowing, writing, and creating sentences using these key words. The textbook also integrates both English and Korean, facilitating comprehension for English-speaking students and enhancing their engagement with the language. Furthermore, it incorporates cultural content, such as *Chuseok*, with comparisons to familiar holidays like Thanksgiving, helping students relate to and deepen their understanding of Korean traditions.

Before attending this school, parents usually bought the textbooks when they visited Korea. Through attending this school, all students were able to access free quality educational materials. One parent participant mentioned,

“I thought the textbooks were really good. Each grade had two textbooks, and they covered various contexts...some focused on learning Korean words and writing, and others went more into detail...it wasn’t just about learning Korean; they (the textbooks) also had plenty of materials prepared for special activities, so there were lots of great learning tools available.”

Most of the parent participants also had tried to teach the Korean language at home, but they shared that it was difficult; attending a Korean school significantly helped their children acquire basic spelling and writing. For example, one parent participant stated, *“My kid now knows how to write his or her name in Korean. I tried hard to teach, but he did not learn. After attending the school, he now writes [his name], and I am so happy about this.”* Additional interviews and observational data revealed that students’ language competence strongly increased after attending the heritage language school. One teacher explained, *“The kids did not know the spelling in the beginning of the semester, then later, it touches my heart to see kids reading the vocabulary and passages written in the textbook.”* Another participant stated, *“Now my children can understand the Korean language and speak in Korean like other kids. Before she used English most of the time... My kid always used to switch to speaking in English... whenever she was not confident... Now she speaks in Korean like other kids.”* Further, the observational data indicated that one student, who initially used incorrect subject markers in Korean at the beginning of her first semester, gradually began to use the correct subject markers as the weekly courses progressed. Data supports the theme of student language acquisition as a result of attending a Korean school.

3.2. Cultural Experience

Data from interviews and documents including observational notes suggest that students learned and applied cultural knowledge into their daily lives. It was observed that students were able to utilize specific gestures and languages that are only used for older people as a cultural behavior/courtesy. For example, to greet teachers, students bowed their heads at the heritage school. One parent participant had a hard time teaching this cultural gesture to her child and was also concerned that her child would get confused between American and Korean culture. This participant stated,

“My kid used to refuse to bow with her head as it seemed weird to her... While attending a school, she had chances to watch how other people bow to each other... She seemed to be paying attention... observing people at school... teachers and other parents... Now she sometimes asks questions about the gesture of the bow and other cultural things from what she observed... It is so meaningful to me.”

This participant also added, *“Jon-dae-mal (a term indicating very formal vocabulary words used for older people)...my kid did not use it at all...after seeing how other kids use it to the teachers at school, she sometimes uses it... I think naturally she uses it.”* Another participant stated, *“I like the way my kids can learn the greeting manner [at school].”* One more participant added that their children *“learned not just the Korean language but also the Korean cultures and being motivated [to learn].”* These quotations highlight the significance of cultural experience that students have learned, demonstrating how attending the heritage school contribute to their broader understanding of Korean cultures.

The school also taught cultural knowledge through hands-on activities and outdoor activities. For hands-on activities, the school offered quality educational materials to each student through the financial

support by the Korean national organizations, so that students could join activities such as drawing the Korean national flag, making Han-bok (a traditional dress and suit), and crafting village wards and a traditional hunting map used around 1000 years ago. One parent added, *“It is meaningful... My children do not forget their heritage language... They also become aware of the special days that are celebrated in Korea... Also, they learned specific foods for Korean Thanksgiving Day!”*

In addition, when exploring Korean outdoor activities, the school taught students traditional games that are played on Chu-seok (Korean Thanksgiving Day) or New Year’s Eve in Korea. Je-gi-cha-gi is one of the traditional games in which people use the top lateral side of the foot to kick Je-gi. Parent-participants expressed how meaningful it was to them that their children learned these traditional games they used to play in Korea. One participant expressed,

“Having cultural classes is so meaningful... because my kid has been away from Korea for a long time. Well, when I talked about Chu-seok, she did not have any ideas about it. If we were in Korea, she would know what it is as she would experience it... It is impossible to just talk about it to help her to learn... so we [me and my husband] almost gave up (before attending this Korean school).”

Through the school, the students were able to experience the culture which could facilitate cultural understanding and knowledge. One teacher explained several games that her students played at school and said, *“Students looked lively and had a lot of fun learning the traditional games... they loved it.”* One of the students shouted in an outdoor activity while playing a traditional game, *“My best day ever!”* These enjoyable cultural experiences at school equip students with their heritage language and cultural knowledge. Students were able to learn their heritage language, personally connecting them to their ethnicity and identity through culturally rich activities, including traditional games which their parents and family groups used to play in Korea.

3.3. Challenges that They Faced

Through the interviews, challenges young Korean American students faced in this rural area emerged. The challenges came from their lack of exposure to the same ethnic groups in public settings, particularly as minority students in a rural area. Involvement in the school helped to alleviate this challenge as students had exposure to other young Korean Americans. Particularly, they may get confused by the fact that people surrounding them look similar (same ethnicity) and only she and her family have different appearances (different ethnicity) than others. For example, one participant stated,

“My kid went to a fully white school... and at that time Jane (pseudonym) struggled a lot... she was young, three to four... coming home and asked me to change her hair color... she said her classmates asked why only her hair color is different... Jane asked me why her eye was a dark color... she hated that she looked different than any other classmates... she talked about those things a lot... so in the end, I had to drop her out and send her to the day-care center where at least some multicultural kids were in the class.”

Another parent had a similar experience: *“In class, my kid is the only Asian student... One day she asked why her eyes and nose look different... she was five or six at that time... I feel like when she sees other Korean kids... like similar looking kids... It seems like she feels relieved or safe or something.”* It could be important for young students to see similar ethnic friends and family surrounding them through the Korean school especially when they are young.

One participant shared the worries and concerns about her daughter; this student faced challenges to feel related to her classmates at school. *“When we visited Korea, my kid told me that she wanted to live here. ‘People here look the same as me, having the same face and hair color. I am not too outstanding here, and I feel I am one of them here.’ I felt so heartbroken when my daughter said this to me.”*

When young students are still new to the world, they only see themselves or their family as speaking a different language or having a different appearance than others around them. Thus, it is natural that young Korean American students may raise questions about their appearance compared to others at school. Students’ parents at this heritage school are mostly immigrants, so they grew up in their home country and thus, have seen a lot of the same ethnic people using the same languages.

On the other hand, their children usually were born in the United States and grew up in a rural area in the United States. These children have not been exposed to their parents' cultures and have only met a few other people of the same ethnicity. To those young students, this Korean heritage school provided a place where they could meet the same ethnic groups of people including children and adults. In addition, these students were able to be exposed to the heritage language and cultures, so that students could feel connected and included, even in the rural area. One participant shared her child's positive perspective on other Korean people:

"In this area, it is not common [for my kids] to meet Korean adults... compared to the state where we stayed before... very rarely to see Korean even Asian people here... then [my kids] got excited to see young adults like university students at the Korean school."

3.4. Comfortability Earned Through Korean School

Interview data strongly reinforced that students received emotional support through attending this heritage school. Previously, the specific challenges that young Korean students faced were discussed while living in a rural area. Young students seemed more comfortable when gathering with other students of the same ethnic group. Because young students are still in the stage of building their identity (Eseta & Kerry, 2021), these types of interactions with similar students helped to reinforce individual Korean identity.

One parent participant explained, *"I think in this Korean school, just through meeting each other, just gathering together at school... the challenges kids face are resolved."* According to several other parents' interviews, it seemed that gathering young American Asian students together at the Korean school in a rural area meant much more than the students in a city area such as Atlanta, New York, or Los Angeles, where the Korean population is high in the United States. Additionally, one parent participant shared her sentiment, *"I think when my kids are around some other friends who look similar to them, they look very peaceful and seem to like that environment... It is like visiting Korea... to feel home!"*

Another parent participant shared that her child acts differently in the heritage school. For example, this parent mentioned, *"My son was the only Korean in his class when we moved to this area... He seems to talk more in Korean school than in public school."* This might be just the perception of the parent, but still it is interesting to know that there is a possibility that students might have different behavior expressions at the public school than at the Korean heritage school. Another participant added,

"Well, here at school, kids are running around and playing... when they are at the public school, they do not behave like this... they rather are shy and quiet at the public school, or well... They seem to be introverted at a public school."

However, during class in the Korean school, students actively chatted a lot by sharing how their week was going, telling daily/personal stories, and talking about fun things they were doing. Young children appeared to be comfortable with the teachers as they sometimes could be seen sitting on the laps of the teachers. One participant stated that *"kids seem to feel free and comfortable, actually, being here at the school."* During observations, students appeared more comfortable as they related to and connected with other Korean American students at the heritage school. No specific activities were required, just seeing each other was a great help for students to know they were not alone.

3.5. Extrinsic Motivation through Rewards

Extrinsic motivation mutually reinforces internal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2020) explain that students with "extrinsic motivation that has been partially internalized" could choose their actions based on "the internal rewards of self-esteem for success." In classes at this Korean school, stickers were used as a simple token to indicate that students had completed the assignment, and the young students loved to see what they had completed by checking their stickers. As a result, some of the students worked hard to finish homework without their parents' supervision.

Participants stated that in the beginning of the semester they had to take the lead in checking to see if their children had completed their assignments or not. However, as the semester went by, the parents

were able to observe that their children voluntarily sat at the desk during the week to complete the assignment by themselves. For example, one parent stated,

“My kid talked about stickers a lot and I did not have any idea what that was... she said she has to do homework to get stickers... She really wanted to get stickers, so she did homework by herself sometimes... In the beginning of the semester, I had to tell her to do homework... Later on, she continued working on homework and it seems like she was really satisfied with her performance... gaining stickers.”

According to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020), extrinsic motivation can generate autonomous behavior. The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is when students are able to recognize the value of the work as they begin to have a sense of values even though it is not as enjoyable to students. Through the stickers that students received, it seemed like the recognition that they received through completing their work helped students to become more autonomous in their motivation. This autonomous extrinsic motivation may gradually emerge from external factors such as a reward (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

An additional participant mentioned the certificates that students received upon the completion of the school year also aided in the development of a more autonomous form of motivation. *“My kids took care of the certificates they received... They showed them to their grandparents through facetime... I love the Korean school... it seemed like... really motivating my kids to learn Korean in a way that I could not do.”* The certificates served as visible outcomes for the progress that students made, and young students continued to be committed to attending the school.

3.6. Autonomous Support by Parents

In Korean schools, the autonomous support by parents has affected student learning in Korean. Through the interviews, it was evident that much support came from parents who have helped students to attend the Korean school to learn the language and culture. Most of the parents tried to teach the Korean language by themselves at home. They hope that their kids can communicate with their family members including their grandparents. Parents provided opportunities for students to speak in Korean with their grandparents. For example, one parent participant shared that she makes an opportunity for her children to talk to their grandparents every week, and she mentioned that,

“My kids collect their certificates and show them off during video calls with their grandparents, as if they’re receiving an award. They really enjoy the Korean school—the school seems to provide motivation that even I, a Korean-speaking mom, can’t offer. Haha”

In addition, parents tried to use the Korean language at home as much as possible. Even though they are fluent English speakers, they wanted to have available resources that their children could utilize in improving their language skills. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020) emphasizes the role that needs-supportive contexts and social environments have in increasing autonomous motivation in students. This aligns closely with the environment that parents aim to provide for students in Korean schools, where efforts are often directed toward creating spaces that encourage self-motivated learning. By nurturing conditions that fulfill students’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, parents in these settings work collaboratively to promote intrinsic motivation, helping their children engage more deeply and meaningfully with their learning.

4. DISCUSSION

At the Division A business meeting at the 2022 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference, the speaker stated that there is currently a lack of studies related to Asian American students and asked the audience to submit to the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) meeting. This was a critical reminder that the Asian American students’ unique needs and experiences may be often overlooked. Responding to this need, this study sought to build an initial understanding of how the local community could support young Asian American students by teaching them their history, cultures, and the languages which are hardly accessible in public education. Findings of this study could help uncover the difficulties that young Korean American students face in traditional schooling environments as well as

the benefits of the heritage language school for resolving the challenges. This study suggests that the community can play active roles to support students in education as in the example of the heritage language school (Becker, 2013; Shin, 2016).

While Korean schools may be well-known within the Korean community in the United States, they have not been extensively discussed in academic research. This study addresses the gap in the literature by focusing on young Asian American students, particularly those in rural settings where there are limited opportunities for interactions with other Asian Americans. Not only do the findings reveal how a community supported these students' language acquisition and cultural identity, but they also explain how elements of the heritage school environment influenced student motivation. These insights could lead to enhanced heritage language programs and support services, tailored to the needs of young Asian American students, helping them succeed in U.S. public schools.

Though not generalizable, findings could be transferred to similar contexts for other minority ethnic groups who might benefit from learning their family languages and cultures, especially rural areas due to the lack of resources related to their cultures and languages. Nevertheless, further research is essential to propose practical approaches that can benefit not only other ethnic groups but also local students who may have remained in rural areas without international exposure. This further research could identify effective strategies for actively engaging with community members from diverse cultural backgrounds, extending outreach beyond one's own heritage groups. Additionally, a limitation of this study is that the experiences of young Asian American students were primarily conveyed through parent interviews, despite the inclusion of class observations of the students. This reliance on indirect data collection may have impacted the accuracy and richness of the students' perspectives. Therefore, this limitation could be addressed in future research.

Cultural identity includes heritage such as a name, a language, food, and religion (Eseta & Kerry, 2021); Family and community play a key role in building young student identity (Eseta & Kerry, 2021). This study suggests that the heritage school in this case study located in a rural area has provided a safe place where students can build a healthy identity; A safe place where bilingual learners can "perform their identities" and feel "a sense of belonging" (Conteh & Brock, 2011, p. 140), particularly built by the local community members and put their efforts to support young descendants over decades. Similarly, this study presents a unique case, a Korean heritage school provided by community members as a safe place where minority young students can feel a sense of belonging and develop their cultural identities (Jeong & Jeon, 2022; Shin, 2016). This practice can be collaborated with or expanded into other minority ethnic groups of the students, as mentioned earlier.

Through findings, implications for theory, research, and practice are as follows. First, this qualitative case study applied SDT into a specific setting, demonstrating that autonomy, competence, and relatedness support are crucial for developing cultural and language skills among young minority students in a heritage community school. Additionally, this study explored a unique educational setting, a heritage Korean language school in a rural area. Although Korean schools exist in rural areas in the United States, they are often known only to a small number of local community members, which may result in a lack of research on this context. This case study filled up the gap by exploring a very specific educational setting, a heritage language school in a rural area which builds an understanding of minority students and their needs along with the roles of heritage schools. As an extension of this research, this study opens avenues for further research by exploring additional datasets from other heritage schools, deepening our understanding of the experiences of young minority students and the ways to support their psychological needs.

Toward practice, this study introduced a place that built a sense of belonging for young Asian American students in a rural area. This school played a role as a bridge between young Korean and American cultures and identity (Shin, 2016). It was clear that through learning the cultural languages and behaviors, including playing traditional games, young Korean American students built their cultural identity while assimilating to the American cultures by attending public schools. Children can develop a healthy sense of identity when their identity matures in a wholesome manner (Shin, 2016), becoming an asset in public school settings and their community. Additionally, it is meaningful that this local Korean school provided a place where students could acquire the Korean language and its culture, which could be a relatively rare chance in a rural area. This could, in turn, potentially serve as an additional cultural asset within their local community.

Finally, when young Asian students had experienced struggle or confusion in their identities, through this Korean school, they were able to feel a sense of belonging in this school by seeing other students who have had similar situations and experiences. Along with this, this school provided a social environment where students' parents can meet each other to share their common struggles and to help their kids to learn the heritage language and culture in the United States. Therefore, this study contributes new knowledge by highlighting the role of heritage language schools not only as educational spaces but also as vital support systems for both students and parents, fostering identity development and social cohesion. These findings advance understandings of how culturally specific educational environments promote not only language acquisition but also emotional and psychological well-being. This is important as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains when students' psychological needs are met, their performance improves in learning.

Considering the roles that both psychological need frustration and satisfaction have on student motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), future research might explore how these contrasting experiences interact. For example, students seemed to experience feelings of isolation as they interacted with very few children in their public schools who shared their cultural identity. It could be assumed that these feelings of isolation are associated with psychological need frustration. While the Korean heritage school appeared to support their psychological needs, there is a need to understand how this support may interact with the psychological need frustration that occurs in the public school setting and whether the support mitigates student isolation or if these feelings tend to coexist. This understanding may reveal how external partnerships and community efforts (Curry et al., 2023) might further mitigate the challenges Korean American students face in rural settings. Further, it is also possible that this Korean school might help meet parental psychological needs as well. This could constitute a viable avenue for future research. Additional practical approaches are also needed, examining how this type of school can extend its services to communities beyond their own heritage groups in the United States. To explore these subjects thoroughly, it may be necessary to use alternative theoretical frameworks.

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