

Single-Parenthood and Educational Achievement in Five Asian Countries – Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Thailand – in PISA

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In the U.S, numerous studies have shown the disadvantages of children from single-parent families in their educational outcomes that those from two-parent families (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). The negative effects of living in a single-parent family have been also found in some European countries (Dronkers 1994; McNab and Murray 1985; Murrays and Sandqvist 1990). Recently, by comparing cross-national differences in the extent of detrimental effects of single-parent family, a few studies have extended our understanding of the relation between family structure and education (Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson 2003; Hampden-Thompson and Pong 2003). These studies showed how national contexts of family policy mediate the impacts of single-parenthood on children's academic achievement.

Despite their important contribution to comparative knowledge on the association between family structure and well-being of children, however, those studies have two major limitations. First, our knowledge has been limited mostly to American or European contexts. We cannot deny substantial variations in culture and policy environments across those Western societies. However, if we are to understand further the roles of institutional contexts for mediating the effects of growing up with a single parent, we need to extend our focus into non-Western countries with significantly different social and cultural

structures (Pong 1996). For example, Buchmann and Hannum (2001) referred to empirical studies that documented no negative effects of single parenthood in developing countries. Even *greater* advantages of children from a female-headed household than those from a household headed by men were found in some societies. This finding may be associated with their extended kinship networks that help children from a female-headed household continue their education with material supports available through the networks (Buchmann and Hannum 2001: 83).

Second, we know little about cross-national variations in the relative importance of economic conditions and parental involvement for explaining the negative effects of single parenthood. Previous literature has suggested two main reasons children from single-parent families are less likely to succeed in schools than those from intact families. Single-parent families are often considerably poorer than two-parent families. Given that economic resources are critical for children's schooling, lower economic position of single-parent families is a major cause of disadvantages of children living in a single-parent family.

Some studies in the U.S. have found that children from intact families still enjoy educational advantages over those from single-parent families even after various kinds of economic conditions are taken into account (Lee 1993). This led researchers to pay attention to the mediating role of parental involvement as another aspect of family background related to educational outcomes (Zill 1994). Parents from single-parent families usually have to work full-time to meet their economic needs and thus have less time spent for their children than those from two-parent families. The lower levels of

parental involvement among children living with a single parent are associated with their lower academic achievement (Astone and McLanahan 1991).

Analytic strategies employed in earlier comparative studies (Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson 2003; Hampden-Thompson and Pong 2003) are not appropriate provide detailed information on possible cross-national variations in the extent to which economic differentials between the two types of family structure explain the negative effects of single parenthood. Even worse is that they did not include any measures of parental involvement as a factor affecting educational achievement. Depending on public policies for supporting single-parent families, countries may differ in their patterns of the mediating roles that each of economic resources and parental involvement plays for the association of family structure with children's educational outcomes.

Taking into account limitations of previous studies, this paper addresses the extent to which children from single-parent families experience disadvantages in their educational achievement in five Asian countries – Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Thailand – participating in the first round of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). Conducted in 2000 (but in 2002 for other non-OECD countries including Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Thailand), PISA assessed reading, mathematic, and scientific literacy among 15-year old students in 28 OECD and 14 non-OECD countries. Because the first round of PISA focused on reading literacy, the analyses in this paper are limited to reading literacy for an outcome variable.

These five Asian countries have social and cultural contexts distinct from those in Western societies: only for a few examples, considerably lower levels of welfare provision and relatively small proportions of single-parent families with strong emphasis

on family networks. However, significant differences among those five Asian countries should not be neglected. In terms of the levels of economic development, Japan and Korea (these two countries are members of the OECD), along with Hong Kong, are distinguished from the other two. In addition, Japanese and Korean students achieve the higher mean scores on various international tests, while students in Indonesia and Thailand are often located in the bottom. Thus, the five Asian countries provide interesting contexts of comparison.

An important feature of PISA relevant for the current study is that it contains detailed information on family background including parental education, occupation, educational resources, and possession of material resources. In addition, some questions were asked to students to measure the extent of parental engagement with them in such activities as discussing how well they are doing at school, spending time simply taking with them, and eating the main meal with them around a table. Representing parent-children interactions at home, these items indicate an important aspect of parental involvement.

This study examines the gaps in reading literacy between students with a single parent and those from two-parent families using ordinal least square (OLS) regression that takes into account complex sampling design. By assessing the extent to which the difference between the two types of family structure in each country is reduced after controlling for economic conditions of family and then parental involvement, the study addresses cross-national variations in the mediating roles of economic conditions and parental involvement for explaining the effects of single-parenthood.