



Korean-American Parents' Perspectives On Teacher-Parent Collaboration

by

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Abstract

This paper examines Korean-American parents' satisfaction with special education services in America and their experiences with teachers and other school staff. A thorough literature review analyzes the history and cultural factors that may influence the way Korean-American parents experience the current American special educational system, as well as their reactions related to teacher-parent collaboration. A sample of Korean-American parents who have children with disabilities were surveyed through the use of questionnaires and participated in follow-up interviews in order to ascertain the obstacles they identify as creating a barrier to teacher-parent collaboration, as well as to determine what suggestions they would recommend for improvement. The findings were organized into 6 themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis: linguistic factors, cultural factors, lack of information, time factors, service provider factors and financial factors.

Korean-American Parents' Perspectives On Teacher-Parent Collaboration

Collaboration between teachers and parents who have children with disabilities is of primary importance in modern education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) strengthened parents' roles for educating students with disabilities (IDEA, 1997). The current issue is not whether teachers should collaborate with parents, but how they can collaborate more effectively. In a recent study, Dodd and Konzel (2000) found that most major reforms in special education have come about as a result of parents' efforts to obtain the best education for their children. However, many parents of children with disabilities often felt alienated by their children's schools while attending and negotiating the various programs, such as the Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Valle & Aponte, 2002).

Since many people from various countries immigrate to the United States, teachers have to collaborate with racially and culturally diverse families. According to the population survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, there are 28.4 million immigrants living in the United States, and they make up about 10 % of the U. S. residents' population. Immigrant parents, however, report having difficulty working with professionals whose beliefs, values, practices, and language differ significantly from theirs. Indeed, the U.S. special education programs still lack active involvement and participation from parents of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002).

Korean-American parents have additional factors that impact their ability to truly collaborate with school professionals. Traditionally in Asian culture, a disability is interpreted as a "punishment from God," (according to Buddhism), or is due to parents' carelessness for the child or to their own genetic problems (Park & Turnbull, 2001). Children with disabilities are considered the parents' fate. This often makes Asian parents regard their children with disabilities as a burden and an indicator of inferiority (Park & Turnbull). Even in recent times, children with disabilities may be hidden from the public because the disabilities are an embarrassment and symbolize the parents' supposedly inappropriate behavior (Sileo & Prater, 1998).

Another factor, which impacts the collaboration between teachers and Korean-American parents, involves Confucianism, which was originally a Chinese religion, but has become a prescribed way of life in many Asian countries, including Korea. In this philosophy, obedience to a superior is regarded as natural and one of the most admirable virtues in order to become a "perfect gentleman" (Chan, 1998). Thus, many Korean people show absolute respect and deference to authority and elders such as teachers, doctors or public service personnel. In the United States, this reverence can create a barrier between parents and professionals because parents will agree to professionals' opinions and recommendations without engaging in any discussion. This philosophy, therefore, hinders the possibility of a free and open dialogue between Korean American parents and U.S. prepared teachers. There is hope, however. In a recent study by Park and Turnbull (2001), geared to Korean-American parents, the participating parents showed enthusiasm about their role as partners to make a difference for their children, in spite of the long tradition of Confucianism that still resides in traditional Korean people and the fact that they may be unfamiliar with the special education system in America.

Language is the greatest barrier in cross-cultural communication. Families with limited English proficiency are seriously disadvantaged because of the frustration caused by the language barrier (Park & Turnbull, 2001). Researchers found that many Korean-American parents reported frustration in trying to communicate with teachers because teachers used a significant amount of special jargon, and did not appear to fully understand parents' needs and fears (Soodak & Erwin, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to examine Korean American parents' perspective on teacher-parent collaboration, and to look for ways to overcome obstacles and collaborate effectively. More specifically, this paper examines Korean American parents' satisfaction with special education services in America, their experiences with teachers and other school staff, and their identified needs. Prior to identifying the specific perceptions of interviewed parents, it is first important to recognize the historical and cultural background that may influence their responses.

Special Education In South Korea

In South Korea, people with disabilities are expected to (but not forced to) enroll at the local government office to let federal and local governments establish an effective welfare system based on the number of people with disabilities. The government estimates that about 1,449,000 people are identified to have disabilities (about 3 % of the population) in South Korea (Park, 2002). Park found that only 16% of children with disabilities in Korea who qualify for early childhood special education are receiving special education, often because their parents cannot get financial and government support. Though a number of children with disabilities of elementary and secondary education age are served in special schools and special education classes, many students with disabilities in Korea receive no special education services at all. These days, many Korean parents who have children with disabilities try to immigrate to developed countries such as America to better the educational opportunities for their children with disabilities (Sileo & Prater, 1998).

Korean Immigrants In America

The history of Korean immigration began in 1903, when 101 Koreans arrived as laborers for Hawaii's sugar plantations (Choy, 1979). At that time, Koreans came to the United States for better economic opportunities and to help the Korean independence movement (Hurh & Kim, 1984). The largest Korean community in the United States during the early 1900s was an area in Los Angeles, California, which developed as Korea-town. Now, Korea-town serves more than 250,000 Koreans living in Southern California (Park & Chi, 1999).

Today the majority of Korean immigrants come to the United States for better educational opportunities for their children and themselves. Korean parents consider education the most important issue for their children's future success. Koreans who have children with disabilities often want to immigrate to the United States because America has better equipment and social supports for individuals with disabilities, as well as a more positive attitude toward disabilities in general (Cho, Singer & Brenner, 2000).

Asian Representation In Special Education

Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) surveyed the percentage of minority and White representation for the disability categories of Emotional disturbance (ED), Learning disabilities (LD), and Mental retardation (MR) for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In this study, Asian representation was the lowest among all disabilities. While Asian's underrepresentation may appear to be positive, Park (2002) worried that the number of Korean people with disabilities identified may be far less than the actual number of people with disabilities because of some parents' unwillingness to register their children with disabilities at an early age. The underrepresentation may also have been due to a stereotype of Asian Americans as the "model minority" and generally good students (Sileo & Prater, 1998, p.324).

Methods

Recruitment of Participants

In order to first identify Korean-American parents of children with disabilities, several schools within the Los Angeles, California area that are known to have many Korean-American students (such as those in Korea-town) were contacted. In addition, Korean-American churches also were contacted as they often have ministries for children with disabilities. Final permission to conduct this survey was eventually obtained from three elementary schools in Korea-town and five Korean-American churches in the Los Angeles area.

All research participants were told that the questionnaire was voluntary and would remain anonymous. On the last question of questionnaire, participants were asked if they would be willing to provide more specific information by telephone interview. For those willing, telephone numbers and schedules were exchanged, and nine of the questionnaire participants signed up for the telephone interview.

Study participants

Fifty-two parents within the Los Angeles area indicated a willingness to participate in this study. Among them, 13.5% (n=7) were male and 86.5 % (n=45) participants were female. This was not surprising as, in the traditional Korean family, the wife is expected to remain home and bears the major responsibility of performing household tasks, whereas the husband is expected to be the breadwinner (Hurh & Kim, 1984). All participants reported that the primary home language of almost all families was Korean. Demographic information on parents' age and education, as well as students' age, grade, and disability status are provided in Table 1. (see page 34)

Instrumentation

The questionnaire provided to parents contained 20 questions and was presented in both English and Korean. All participants chose to use the Korean questionnaire. The first three questions were demographic in nature and asked about the participants' general background including gender, age and educational level. The next three questions were about the children's age, disability and parents' knowledge about their children's disabilities. The rest of the questions attempted to ascertain what parents thought about the American special education system, and the teacher-parent collaboration they had or had not experienced. Some questions were open-ended questions to elicit the most natural and rich responses. For the phone interview, a telephone with a speaker-phone and a recorder were used to make a transcription of the conversation. Interviews were conducted in Korean, as it was the parents' preference and is the first author's native language. (Copies of the survey and interview questions are available through contact with the first author.)

Procedures

Survey packets were prepared for each participant. The packet included questionnaires in English and Korean, Parental Informed Consent Form, Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights, a return envelope, and stamps. The return envelope and stamps were distributed in order to reduce the school staffs' and pastors' efforts and to get the questionnaires back

Table 1. Demographic Information on Questionnaire participants

Parent/Guardian	Male	N=7 (13.5%)
	Female	N=45 (86.5%)
Parent's age	30-40 yrs	N=12 (23%)
	40-50 yrs	N=27 (52%)
	50-60 yrs	N=8 (15.4%)
	Above 60 yrs	N=6 (11.6%)
Parents' highest education	Junior-High	N=5 (9.6%)
	High	N=9 (17.3%)
	College/ University	N=29 (55.8%)
	Graduate school	N=6 (11.5%)
	Other	N=3 (5.8%)
Children's school level	Pre-school	N=2 (3.9%)
	Kindergarten	N=4 (7.6%)
	Elementary School	N=31 (59.6%)
	Junior-High	N=5 (9.6%)
	High school	N=7 (13.5%)
	Other	N=4 (7.6%)
Children's disability category	Autism	N=19 (36.5%)
	Mental Retardation	N=14 (26.9%)
	Down Syndrome	N=2 (3.9%)
	Learning Disability	N=9 (17.3%)
	Speech Delay	N=2 (3.9%)
	Cerebral Palsy	N=1 (1.9%)
	Epilepsy	N=1 (1.9%)
	Multiple Handicap	N=2 (3.9%)
	Jacob Syndrome	N=1 (1.9%)
Deaf	N=1 (1.9%)	
Parent's Knowledge about their child's disability	No information	0
	Little information	N=5 (9.6%)
	Some information	N=29 (55.8%)
	A lot of information	N=18 (34.6%)
Families' U. S. residency	Less than 5 years	N=15 (28.8%)
	5-10 years	N=12 (23.1%)
	11-15 years	N=11 (21.2%)
	More than 16 years	N=14 (26.9%)
Reasons to come to the United States	For Business or economic issues	N=16 (30.8%)
	For children's education	N=24 (46.2%)
	Due to political issues	N=2 (3.8%)
	Immigration	N=5 (9.6%)
	Missionary or other	N=5 (9.6%)

as soon as possible. Fifty-two questionnaires were collected out of 120 questionnaires distributed for a return rate of 43%.

After gathering the questionnaires, the nine individuals willing to participate in follow-up phone interviews were contacted at a time convenient to them. Consistent with qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), the author attempted to facilitate the conversations in order to make the parents feel free to share their experiences. The duration of the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to an hour. Prior to the beginning of the interview, permission was obtained from each parent to tape record the interview to capture an accurate record of the interview. In cases in which parents were hesitant to allow the tape recording (n=5), a transcript of the conversation was made directly after the phone conversation in lieu of tape recording.

Data Coding and Analysis

The multiple choice questions on the survey were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics, consistent with quantitative analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the overall trends of the data. Open-ended questions and the phone interview data were analyzed according to Bogdan and Biklen's (2003) qualitative analyses. The open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the transcripts were analyzed to identify major themes and core categories. After reading through all the transcripts, the transcripts and the units of data were cut up and divided into separate folders, which were divided by core categories. When the participants answered the question about obstacles to teacher-parent collaboration, multiple responses were allowed, which resulted in a total number of 112 answers, rather than the expected 52.

Results

Most of the participants reported clear concern about their children's disabilities, and wanted to give better educa-

tional opportunities to their children. Parents read books related to their children's disabilities, as well as attended University affiliated programs and regional centers to learn about the American special education system and children's disabilities.

Satisfaction with the American special education system

All of the participants expressed their satisfaction with certain aspects of the American special education system and its disability related policies. Forty-four out of 52 (85%) participants preferred the American special education system. The parents said that American educators treated their children with disabilities equally to children without disabilities. They also said that America had better equipment and more educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Some of the participants said that they were impressed after the first school meeting because they were surprised that so many people gathered to discuss her or his child. Meetings of that type are not common in Korea. On the other hand, a few participants said that there were different merits to American and Korean special education systems, and could not say which one they preferred.

Responses to questions related to the relative importance of teacher-parent collaboration are portrayed in Table 2. Forty-eight of the 52 parents (92%) surveyed indicated that collaboration between school and home was either "very important" or "important." Only four participants (8%) said that teacher-parent collaboration was "A little important," while no parents reported thinking that it was not important for their children's education.

Participation in school volunteer work

Although all of the parents stated that they wondered about their children's daily school life, only 34.6% (n=18) of the participants had experienced any type of volunteer work at their children's school. Most stated that they were very satisfied with their volunteer work and thought it was a helpful

Table 2. Responses to Collaboration-related Questions

How important do you think teacher-parent collaboration is for educating your child?	A little important	N=4 (7.70%)
	Important	N=16 (30.76%)
	Very important	N=32 (61.54%)
Were school meetings with teachers effective in increasing collaboration with you and the teacher?	Yes	N=17 (32.69%)
	No	N=31 (59.62%)
	No answer	N=4 (7.69%)
If you feel that teacher-parent collaboration was not effective, what were the obstacles?	Limited English Skills	N=34 (30.36%)
	Cultural and racial differences	N=17 (15.18%)
	Lack of knowledge about the American special education system	N=23 (20.54%)
	Time problem	N=15 (13.39%)
	Frequent teacher turn over	N=14 (12.5%)
	Financial support	N=9 (8.02%)

catalyst for making good relationships with teachers and other school staff. Only two participants said that their volunteer work was not good for their children because their own children were very distracting and sometimes demanded too much attention. One parent said that she had difficulties communicating with other volunteer workers and school staff because of her limited English skills. The remaining 65.4% (n=34) of the parents who had not participated in any kind of volunteer work reported that they were willing but could not because of their lack of English skills, their jobs, or in one case, a health problem.

Satisfaction with school meetings

When asked how frequently they met with their child's teacher or other school staff members, responses ranged from one to four times a year (n=17), five to nine times a year (n=19), more than ten times a year (n=10), to daily (n=6). Table 2 indicates parental opinions of the effectiveness of these meetings. While some thought they were effective (n=17), others (n=31) found the meetings ineffective and sometimes even felt discouraged afterwards. One of the participants said that she visited school every month, but was not pleased with the results. She felt that she could not ask about her children or explain her feelings well because of her limited English skills. She also felt that the teacher underestimated her child's ability because of his lack of English skills and different cultural background.

Obstacles to parent-teacher collaboration

Korean-American parents were encouraged to identify all of the areas that created obstacles for them, thus resulting in multiple answers (shown on Table 2). These findings were organized into 6 themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis: linguistic factors, cultural factors, lack of information, time factors, service provider factors and financial factors.

Linguistic factors

Thirty-four of the 112 answers (30%) regarding obstacles to parent-teacher collaboration centered on the linguistic factors involved. Limited English proficiency was the biggest barrier for many of the participants in forming partnerships with school personnel. Language barriers are the basis of many issues. Thirty-four participants said that their limited English proficiency isolated them from meaningful partnerships with teachers and staff. Limited English proficiency also prevented them from participating actively in school events, meetings and volunteering in the classroom.

In spite of numerous examples given in which language was a barrier to collaboration with teachers, almost half of participants reported never using interpreters, attributing their hesitation to several reasons. Some parents said they felt ashamed to ask for an interpreter or reported not wanting other Korean-Americans to know about their child and their family matters. Two-thirds of the participants who had difficulty communicating in English had used interpreter services for official meetings with school professionals, but were not satisfied with the interpreter services for several reasons, to include interpreters who interject their own personal opin-

ions, those who are unfamiliar with the special education jargon, and the length of time it took to translate back and forth from Korean to English.

Cultural factors

Seventeen of the 112 responses (15%) cited cultural factors as a major barrier to parent-school collaboration. These Korean-American parents described their desire for school professionals to understand their traditional values and practices. A personal example of a cultural disconnect was reported by one of the participants who had a negative experience with a home visit by a teacher. Koreans are taught not to express public display of affection to their children in front of others, and children should not interrupt parents' conversation with any visitors. During the visit, the parent did not interact with her child while the visitors were in her home. However, the home visit teacher misunderstood her attitude as being uninterested and unresponsive.

Lack of information

Many of the participating parents reported not having a basic understanding of the special education system and related laws. Some parents, especially those who came to America recently, did not know what IDEA (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) was or what FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) meant. Some parents who already knew about IDEA and FAPE were not familiar with many related laws. Because of their limited English skills, they tried to learn about the American special education system by getting information from other Koreans, sometimes misunderstanding the professional jargon.

Given the significant lack of information, about two thirds of the participants did not have the advocacy skills needed to represent their children's interests. Many parents compared the improved services in America with the poor services available in Korea and were thankful for what they had been given, and felt guilty for asking for more.

Time factors

Sixty five point four percent (n=34) of the participants did not have time to participate in volunteer work or other school events because of their lack of English skills and their jobs. If school meetings were held during the day, many of the parents could not participate as they ran small businesses like grocery stores, Korean restaurants, dry cleaners, and auto repair shops. In many cases, both parents worked together. This unavailability made the parents report feeling apologetic toward the teachers and school staff.

Parity with service providers

Successful collaboration is possible when there is an equal partnership between teachers and parents, however, most participants felt that they were not equal with school professionals. One key reason given was that many Koreans feel the need to be obedient toward teachers due to their cultural background. Another reason given was that they reported not knowing much about the American special education system or special education jargon due to limited English skills. They felt that they were inferior to teachers

regarding their children's education. This became a barrier to teacher-parent collaboration.

Financial factors

Unfortunately, constant conflict exists between schools and parents because of financial constraints on the schools and the parents' demand for the best care for their children. Some participants said that their children needed services the school was unwilling to provide on a regular basis. While a few parents hired a private tutor, they reported that it was very expensive. Although there are many financial benefits provided by various government and other agencies, most parents surveyed were not aware of the opportunities for financial assistance or were too embarrassed to ask for them. For the few who were aware, the education budget cuts in the last few years had substantially reduced the services made available to them.

Discussion

Language factors

The findings indicate that the extent of English proficiency is a significant deterrent to successful collaboration between parents and professionals. To expect all teachers to learn Korean is certainly not realistic; however, finding ways to enhance collaboration with parents is not optional.

It is recommended that school personnel prepare for longer meeting times with parents who are using an interpreter, so that these parents can have the same amount of conversation and interaction with the faculty and support personnel as other parents who are not using an interpreter. Some parents in this study reported being very nervous when they talked with the teachers, and asked that teachers be more patient and wait for them to finish any stories they are trying to tell.

The findings suggest that effective training and use of interpreter services should be considered before attempting teacher-parent collaboration. For example, state and local educational agencies or private organizations could provide training for Korean-American parents who are willing to work as an interpreter. If possible, an interpreter could contact the family prior to the conference to explain the purpose and to let them know that their participation is important. Within the field of Special Education, interpreters need to be familiar with the jargon and special terms unique to this field and able to accurately describe them with parents who are less familiar with the terminology.

In addition, educators can encourage parents to improve their own English skills. Providing lists of free adult school or university courses, ESL programs, or easy-to-read books in English would be appropriate for teachers to share with their Korean-American parents. In addition, websites or Internet cafés also are an excellent venue for improving English skills.

Cultural factors

All parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities in the United States is a legal right, mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17, 1997) (Al-Hassan, 2002). Despite this mandate, U.S. special education programs still lack active involvement and

participation by parents of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Al-Hassan). This finding was certainly validated in this study on Korean-American parents.

Additional efforts by professionals are necessary to enhance the school-home collaboration. When working with families from other cultures, teachers should try to read about those cultures. They can ask bilingual parents, especially those who have children with disabilities, about their experiences with the educational system in their native country. Children's academic success depends on the degree to which teachers understand and accept the divergent cultures of the communities they serve. Thus, teachers need to be culturally inclusive, and trying to understand the background of children's behavior and lifestyles (Lim, 2001). Parents can help in this way by openly sharing their culture and values with the teachers of their children.

Lack of information

According to IDEA, educators are required to inform parents of their rights and the importance of their role in their child's education. School districts should provide district-wide orientation sessions with useful information for culturally diverse families in their native language. A session specific to special education policies, procedures, and jargon would be greatly beneficial.

Korean-American parents also have to learn about the American special education system and education laws, so they can advocate for their rights. Teachers need to recognize this need and help parents with self-advocacy. School personnel can offer direct or indirect support, such as providing parents with the names of journals and other sources that can provide them with additional information. For example, *The National Association for Bilingual Education* and the *International Journal of Special Needs Education* journals offer various articles about immigrant families and their situations. Faculty also could help parents identify helpful resources available on the World Wide Web, while parents can be encouraged to establish a Korean-American parents' network. Through frequent meetings, parents can help each other negotiate the American educational system.

Time factors

Some parents worried that they were unable to visit their children's school. It is recommended that, when teachers or school staff members decide to have a meeting with parents, they should consider parents' availability. If many parents cannot make meetings during the day, school personnel should consider alternative times to meet with them.

Instead of always requiring school-based meetings, parents and teachers can communicate in written form, such as using a letter, email, or daily journal. Written materials are very helpful for busy Korean-American parents. On the other hand, phone calling is not necessarily a good idea for all Korean-American parents because people who speak English as a second language may have difficulty understanding conversation if they cannot see facial expressions and gestures (Park & Turnbull, 2001). For effective collaboration with Korean-American parents, teachers can send out brief weekly newsletters, homework activities or grading procedures to parents, so parents can keep up with their children. When

teachers inform parents about important matters, teachers should use the parents' own language whenever possible (Al Hassan, 2002).

Parity with service providers

Because Korean-American parents tend to defer to educational professionals as part of their Confucianist culture, teachers need to recognize this trend as a potential barrier to true parity. Making overtures to elicit parental opinion through the use of surveys, interviews, informal discussions, and the like will help to ensure that parents have a voice in the education of their children, without putting them in a philosophically precarious position of having to question educators. Meetings, both formal and informal, should begin by the educator reinforcing the importance of having parental input and the expertise the parent brings to each meeting.

Financial factors

In order to comply with the federal mandate that all children with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), a school district must provide special education and related services at no cost to the child or his/her parents (P.L. 102-119). Many Korean-American parents feel embarrassed or guilty about asking for something from their children's school or state, because in Korea they had to pay for everything related to their children's special education. Educators should work with parents to provide their children with the services they need and to mollify their concern or feelings of guilt about helping their children.

Conclusion

In the current educational climate, many parents and teachers try to collaborate in order to offer better education for students with disabilities, but sometimes they find themselves in two separate worlds. Parents of Korean descent often have a hard time collaborating with teachers whose culture, language and life style are different from their own. Successful collaboration is based on an equal partnership between teachers and parents, but in order to be an equal partnership, parents need to be empowered. By recognizing the potential barriers to parent-teacher collaboration and applying these suggestions for overcoming those obstacles, Korean-American parents can participate more effectively in their children's education and faculty can derive the benefit from working in collaboration with, rather than at odds with, parents. Teachers cannot fully achieve their teaching goals and meet students' learning needs without such parental help. Together, through more effective parent-teacher collaboration, all individuals will benefit.

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