

Cross-Cultural Competency and Special Education: Perceptions and Experiences of Korean Parents of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to record the perceptions, levels of satisfaction, and concerns of Korean parents of children with disabilities in regard to the special education services they have been receiving or seeking in the US. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight Korean parents of children with disabilities. Main themes refined from the analysis of the data include (a) parents' satisfaction with special education services in America, (b) experiences related to exchange of information with professionals, (c) need for a mediator, and (d) parents' perceptions of inclusion. Discussions of the findings with practical implications for serving Korean children with disabilities and their families are provided.

The rapidly changing demographics of the US with the increasing numbers of children from diverse cultural groups served through the special education system tell us that professionals will be faced with increasing numbers of families whose beliefs and practices differ in significant ways from those of the majority of American families (Harry, 1992b).

Although one cornerstone of family-centered special education is respect for ethnic and cultural diversity (NEC*TAS, 1991), few studies provide an empirical basis from which services can be tailored to successfully support families from diverse ethnic backgrounds in a manner that builds family strengths (Hanline & Daley, 1992). Over the last several years, the literature in the field has increasingly addressed the issue of cultural diversity in the area of special education.

Though the majority of the literature has been based on African-American and Hispanic families, a small but growing body of literature also gives insight into other families' interactions with the schools, such as Asian Indians, Southeast Asians, and Native Americans (Harry, 1992a).

Though there are idiosyncratic differences

between and within diverse cultures, Harry (1992a) suggests some common themes that apply to culturally diverse families and their children with disabilities. Two key themes are (a) assessments and evaluations, which are directly related to overrepresentation issues (Bailey & Harbin, 1980; Midgette, 1995; Nuttal, Landurand, & Goldman, 1984; Obiakor & Schwenn, 1996), and (b) communication (Hanson, Lynch, & Wayman, 1990; Thomas, Correa, & Morsink, 1995).

Referral and assessment validity is one of the major issues surrounding the disproportionate special education placement of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). Many research activities have asserted that students with cultural and linguistic differences are most affected by the process of standardized testing; therefore, norm-referenced assessment systems should be replaced with a more efficient assessment process (Galagan, 1985; Messick, 1984; Walker & Favre, 1987) that allows for greater cultural freedom (Maheady, Algozzine, & Ysseldyke, 1984). Innumerable court cases have called for more appropriate assessment of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. As a result, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) determined assessment must be nondiscriminatory, both racially and culturally, and must be in the child's native language or primary mode of communication (IDEA, 1997).

Language is the greatest barrier in cross-cultural communication. Families with limited

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English proficiency are seriously disadvantaged because of the frustration caused by the language barrier. When the time necessary to collaboratively share, plan, and implement services is cut short because of difficult communication, some of the goals can be lost (Hanson et al., 1990). Though the use of translators or interpreters may appear to solve the problem of miscommunication in working with children and families who speak a language other than English, there is a great deal inherent in many messages that cannot adequately be communicated even in the most textbook-perfect translation (Thurman, Cornwell, & Gottwald, 1997). Therefore, it is recommended that professionals must learn and make time to practice strategies that facilitate communication.

Because language is more than words, the style of communication has been identified as another issue, in addition to translation. The Anglo-American culture represents a low-context culture that focuses on precise, logical, verbal communication and values direction, speed, and "getting the job done" (Hall, 1976). Alternatively, high-context cultures (which include Asian, Native American, Arab, and Latino) tend to rely on situational cues, established hierarchies, and nonconfrontational responses in their communication with others (Hall). When families and professionals differ in the level of context that they use in communication, there may be misunderstanding. Thus, professionals should become aware of the level of context that families use in their communication with outsiders and should adapt to the style that is comfortable for the family (Lynch & Hanson, 1998).

From these points, there is a clear need for special education professionals to listen to the perspectives of families who have cultural differences in order to learn how they perceive the special education system and what they expect from professionals and from the system. The present study was designed to meet this need by documenting the perceptions, level of satisfaction, and concerns of eight Korean parents in regard to the special education services they have been receiving or seeking in the United States.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight Korean parents from seven families of children with special needs. Nominations of families were sought from many sources, such as parent support groups, researchers with a long history of conducting family studies, and a Korean special education web page. Table 1 provides demographic information on the participants. Among the seven families, four families were US citizens, one family was US residents, and the other two families were in F-1 (Foreign student) status. The age range of their children was from 4 to 14 years old. Five families had a child with mental retardation and the other two families had a child with a hearing impairment. One child was getting home-visit services only, one child was in preschool, three were in elementary school, and two were in secondary school.

TABLE 1
Family Demographic Information

<i>Family #</i>	<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Citizen Status</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Age of Child</i>	<i>Child's Disability</i>	<i>School Placement</i>
1	Mother & Father	F-1	Married	5	Hearing Impairment	Preschool
2	Mother	US Citizen	Married	8	Mental Retardation	Elementary
3	Mother	F-1	Married	8	Hearing Impairment	Elementary
4	Mother	US Citizen	Single	14	Mental Retardation	Secondary
5	Mother	US Citizen	Married	13	Mental Retardation	Secondary
6	Mother	US Resident	Married	8	Mental Retardation	Elementary
7	Mother	US Citizen	Single	4	Mental Retardation	Home

Data Collection

The questions used to facilitate and guide the interviews were developed by the researchers based on the purposes of the study, a review of the literature on culturally diverse families of children with disabilities, and discussion with several experts in this area. The interview questions are summarized in Table 2. To gauge how clear the interview questions were, a pilot interview was conducted with an Asian mother of a daughter with special needs. The mother was asked about the difficulty and understandability of the questions. Then, the interview questions were revised with her input.

After nominations were received and consent obtained from the parents, all of the parents were contacted and informed of the purpose and

procedures of the study. Participants were also given a summary of interview questions by mail two to three weeks before the scheduled interview to allow time to think about answers. All papers, including interview questions, demographic forms, and consent forms, were written both in English and in Korean so that family members could read them in their preferred language. A mutually convenient time was scheduled for the interview with each participant.

The interviews were completed by one of the authors in the participants' native language, Korean. The interviewer was a native speaker of Korean and was certified as a special education teacher in Korea and in Kansas. A telephone call recorder was used to record the phone interviews for subsequent verbatim transcription. The interviewer also took notes during the interview.

TABLE 2
Summary of Interview Questions

1. Tell me brief history about your child and family.
 - how did you begin to suspect your child had some special problems or might have disabilities
 - how did you finally get a diagnosis
 - how did you go about finding services (help) for your child with special needs
 2. What do you think the (a) strengths (b) weaknesses are of special education services in USA? In terms of:
 - law and policy related with disability and special education
 - quality of personnel
 - funding
 - how school systems deliver services
 - resources (books, journals, web pages, adaptive equipment, etc.)
 - parents or other helpful organizations
 3. Do you think there were differences in the special education for your child that occurred because you are a Korean family? Did cultural differences between you and professionals you worked with influence your experience? In terms of:
 - relationships with professionals (formal or informal)
 - meetings (including IEP meeting, parents conference, evaluation meeting, etc.)
 - assessment (from referral, screening, assessment, and review of IEP)
 - paper work and information (too much or not enough, the degree of clarity, the way of delivering information, etc.)
 - relationships with other parents
 - relationships between your child and his/her siblings
 - impact on siblings of the child
 - overall comfortableness that you feel in communicating with professionals
 - home-visit, videotaping, difference in father's role, grandparents, child-rearing practices, discipline practices
 4. If you could tell American professionals working in the field of special education how they could best work with you and your child with special needs, what would you tell them?
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Each interview session lasted an average of approximately 90 min, and the range was from 60 to 180 min. Each of the eight participants (seven mothers and one father) was interviewed two to three times, which made a total of 20 interview sessions. The interview questions were open-ended, and the interview followed the parents' initiative without limiting the interview to prepared interview questions only. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in Korean. To transcribe the interview conducted in Korean language, the Hangul 96 software for Korean was used.

Data Analysis

The interviewer made transcripts of interviews. An independent listener, a college student who was a native speaker of Korean, reviewed each transcript for accuracy and discussed discrepancies with the interviewer until consensus was reached. In addition to the transcripts, a letter from one of the participants who wrote about her experiences regarding her daughter's education was used to complement the data.

Transcripts of interviews and the one letter from the mother were analyzed using the "cut-up-and-put-in-folders" approach described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). This approach involves cutting up the notes so that the unit of data can be put in separate folders, each labeled with one code. Since some of the data units can be coded for more than one category, multiple copies of transcripts were made. The categories were constantly checked against each other to get a general framework that properly interpreted the data and the emerging interpretation was gradually reduced to produce a small set of higher-level concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Early analysis began with finding about 25 codes, which were gradually refined and reduced to four themes.

For the credibility of the analysis, a second reader, a doctoral student who was also a native speaker of Korean and had experience in qualitative research, checked the tentative 25 codes while she was reading the verbatim transcripts. The interviewer, as the first reader of transcripts and developer of the codes, and the second reader discussed and resolved disagreements through consensus.

Results

Findings focus on how Korean parents describe (a) their satisfaction with special education services in America, (b) their experiences related to exchange of information with professionals, (c) their need for a mediator, and (d) their perception of inclusion. Table 3 summarizes the themes and presents illustrative quotes for the themes.

Satisfaction with Special Education Services in America

All of the participants expressed their satisfaction with certain aspects of the American special education system and/or its disability-related policies. Three families especially came to or decided to stay in the US for the purpose of getting better special education services for their children with disabilities. This clearly shows high expectations about the delivery of good quality services. The other parents also seemed relieved that they were living in the US, where best practices of special education exist. Their satisfaction can be categorized into three sub-themes: (a) adaptation and individualization, (b) parents as partners, and (c) entitlement to benefits.

Adaptation and individualization. Most of all, parents' satisfaction seemed to begin with the quality of the education their children were getting. Among the many aspects of special education, the participants most frequently praised the adaptation of the curriculum tailored to the needs of each child, and the individual attention that their child was receiving. For example, one parent said that she was very happy to see that her daughter with severe/multiple disabilities could participate in "keeping a diary program" conducted by the school thanks to the adaptation made by the teacher. She said,

As you know, my daughter does not know how to write yet. However, her teacher was so considerate. She asked parents to do lots of activities with their children and to write a diary about what children were doing on the day... for example, 'I went to McDonald and ate a cheeseburger.' or 'I baked a cake with mom.' My daughter was able to win a pizza coupon at

TABLE 3
Korean Families Interview: Summary of Themes and Quotes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Illustrative Quotes</i>
Satisfaction with Services	
Adaptation & Individualization	"It was the first IEP meeting that I had in the US. I was so moved by the fact that these eight people gathered only for my daughter."
Parents as Partners	"All of the parents of the class and the teacher made individual calls to the Board of Education to assert the need of extended field-trip hours and finally our assertion was accepted. We made it as a team!"
Entitlement to Benefits	"Anyone who applied for the housing had to wait at least six months. Thanks to Sophia, we were able to get a priority in getting apartment. We moved in the apartment only after one month!"
Exchange of Information with Professionals	
Knowing about Child's School Life	"I don't know how he is doing at school. Parents just do not know. I do not know how his teacher scolds him when he does something wrong. My son does not, cannot tell me."
Limited English Proficiency	"A bunch of papers are coming from the school. I don't know what is important and what is not. So, I always stack them on the table, hoping my husband can read them to find really important papers. My child often misses field trips because I could not read the directions in the papers. English is such a problem."
The IEP Meeting	"I feel I become passive at the meeting. Teachers talk about many things, but I don't get all of them. Some words are hard to understand."
Communication Style	"You know, our culture totally trusts and obeys school. We do not express even though we have complaints. There are many moms like that."
Need for a Mediator	
The Problem of Interpreter	"He may interpret what I am saying correctly. But he cannot deliver my assertiveness to them [professionals]. He paid more attention to what they were saying and explained why they could not accept my suggestion. Is he their interpreter? It is because he also is a Korean who has learned to respect teachers. I prefer to go with my husband, therefore, but he is not always available."
Mediator's Help	"It was great to go to the meeting with her because she helped us [husband and me] ask succinct and essential questions and pointed out what's missing or wrong in their statements. Without her, we would have said "okay, okay" and signed. This actually happened the next time when we went to the meeting without her."
Assistance with Orientation	"It would be great if there could be an orientation for foreign parents of children with disabilities delivered in their native language. There were so many things to figure out when we first arrived in the US. If I had a chance to get such an orientation, I would have been able to save a lot of time that I spent to understand the system, services, terms, and my rights."
Making Sense of Inclusion	
Opposition to Inclusion	"It was good to see him get along with other normal children, but the problem was...He cannot distinguish good words from bad words. He just follows his classmates. Let's say, if one boy approaches him and whispers to his ear "Bad boy, SOB!" then my son repeats it with loud voice. Then, everyone laughs at it, which makes him think that this is a real funny word."
Support for Inclusion	"After the long battle, she was included at last. Tell you what! She did a wonderful job after being included. The environment and peers were challenging enough for her to work harder. She became the most popular girl in the class after a while."

the end of the week just like the other kids who were in general education classroom. After this experience, I came to believe that there would be no program where my daughter and I cannot participate.

Other parents also described being impressed, when they first attended the IEP meeting, by the fact that this many people cared, talked about, and planned only for their children. They also appreciated professionals' efforts to learn about their children through attentive observations. For example, one mother of a child with a language delay said that she was very thankful when the teacher observed her son with careful attention everyday and let her know that her son had produced this sound or word on that day.

Parents as partners. Asian families are often said to have extreme respect for and trust in the school and its teachers (Cheng, 1991). Sometimes, this reverence creates a barrier between parents and professionals because parents agree to professionals' opinions and recommendations in the belief that professionals know better than themselves. This agreement occurs even when their ideas are very different from those of professionals. This may result in discontinuity of the intervention between home and school when parents do not implement the recommendations after they agreed to follow through with the intervention procedure.

In spite of this concern, Korean mothers in this study showed a change in their attitude toward the school and professionals. Instead of being compliant listeners, they seemed excited by the fact that they were regarded as a part of the team for their own children. Two mothers confirmed that silence and obedience is not a virtue any more in this country though they were taught those virtues since childhood.

Entitlement to benefits. Traditionally in Asian culture, a disability was interpreted as a "punishment from God" or genetic problem in pedigree or parents' neglect for the child (Kim, 1998). Parents are blamed or pitied by relatives and neighbors. This often makes parents regard their child with disabilities as a burden and an indicator of inferiority.

Surprisingly, this conventional notion was found to be dramatically changed in the minds of these parents. Many of them appreciated their children with disabilities instead of regarding them as someone who increased financial, physical, and/or emotional hardship and tension in the

family. This appreciation resulted partly from the fact that the families were eligible for various benefits because of the existence of the family member with a disability. For example, when the parents are engaged in the US Army, there is a set of additional benefits for those who have a family member with a disability, as well as the basic legal benefits insured to all individuals with a disability. Since three mothers in the study had husbands or ex-husbands who were in the US Army, they are or were recipients of some of these benefits (e.g., free taxi services, housing priority, or medical check-up and treatment with no or very low cost).

Other families, though they were not military families, also indicated that they often thanked their children when they did not have to stand in the line in the hospital (i.e., appointment is scheduled for their children separately from the other outpatient clients so that their children can see the doctor faster) or when they parked their car at the closet place to the building in a handicapped-designated space while others could not even find a place to park. These small privileges in daily life seemed to help the families accept their children with disabilities more positively and willingly.

Four families were getting Medicaid benefits that seemed very helpful to them by relieving their worry about medical costs. One single mom was in the process of applying for Social Security Income (SSI). She expected this benefit to help her financial hardships. All of them mentioned, at least once, their appreciation for free education or free transportation. It appeared that they regarded these services as a "boon" rather than as a "right" assured by the law.

Another benefit mentioned by participants was the lending of assistive technological devices free of charge. One mother said that her daughter with a hearing impairment was provided with an expensive hearing aid free, which did not add any financial burden to the family. Though her daughter has to return the hearing aid when she leaves the US since she is not an American citizen, she can use the hearing aid as long as she stays in the US.

On the other hand, another family whose daughter has a hearing impairment recently faced a significant difficulty. In her father's words:

The doctor says that my daughter's hearing problem is progressive, which means that her hearing ability gets worse and worse gradually. In this case, we were told that a hearing aid would not be useful. Doctors recommend surgery for her. Of course, we

were concerned about the cost... approximately \$40,000 dollars. Even before discussing about the surgery, we already spent considerable money to see the audiologist. It cost us about \$400 each time.

Since this father came to America to be a university student, the family did not have American citizenship. Lack of citizenship excluded this family from many common financial benefits such as Medicaid or SSI. This family did not intend to stay in the US after the father finishes his education here, but they were sorry that there was no financial alternative for their daughter while she is in the American special education system.

Exchange of Information with Professionals

Since the English proficiency of these eight Korean parents varied significantly, the preferred channel of communication also varied from parent to parent. Some liked face-to-face communication; others preferred written communication. However, no respondent showed an inclination for communication through phone calls. This was because they could not clarify the content of conversation by another means of communication such as gesture, facial expression, or written content.

Four sub-themes were identified from the analysis concerning the exchange of information, including (a) a desire to know about their child's school life, (b) limited English proficiency, (c) the IEP meeting, and (d) the communication style coming from a compliant culture.

Desire to know about their child's school life. Parents all agreed that they have been getting too many written materials and that they did not have time to read all of the papers or they did not have enough English proficiency to read them in a timely manner. Nevertheless, many participants expressed their eager aspiration for knowing about their child's day at the school. That is, they all wanted more information about how their child was doing, what he or she said, and what he or she learned in the school. The fact that almost all of the children were nonverbal (unable to tell their parents what happened in the school) seemed to make their parents more eager to know about their child's school life. These conflicting thoughts—the feeling of “getting too much” along with “wanting more” at the same time—about the amount of written material, that co-exist in parents' minds, seemed to

prevent parents from describing their exact needs for written information, such as ‘less brochures and advertisement papers but more notes about my own child's school life.’

In spite of desire for knowing more about their child's school life, many parents expressed hesitation in visiting the child's classroom because they were afraid the teacher might feel uncomfortable if they were there or if they looked through the window. It seemed that this kind of hesitation was one of the reasons why they welcomed and anticipated so much the notes from school about their child's day.

Some parents needed notes more than other parents. When the child had some needs in feeding or toileting, the note between parents and teacher was regarded as a “desperate thing.” For example, for one mother it was important to know that her nonverbal child who is in the toilet-training process had already had a bowel movement at school, so the mother would not have to seat her child on the potty again after coming home from school.

While a note is such an anticipated thing to these parents, the issue of limited English proficiency is posed at the same time. One mother told a very interesting story about another Korean family in her daughter's class.

One day, teacher put another girl's home-note in my daughter's bag by mistake. I opened the note and read it before I found it was not for me. It was filled with many circles, triangles, and x's. Aren't you curious? I asked the teacher about that in the next meeting. That was the code system developed by the mother and the teacher because the mother didn't have fluent English yet. Since the child was supposed to eat as little sweet things as possible to control her hyperactivity, the mother needed to know what kind of snack and how much the child ate at school. Teacher marked a circle on the day when the child ate lots of sweet food, an 'x' when she ate no sweet food, and a triangle for the middle point.

From this comment, it can be inferred that with creative collaboration between families and professionals, communication can be made easy and efficient even when the family has limited English proficiency.

Limited English proficiency. Some terminology has been used so often by professionals that sometimes parents come to use the terms without

being informed about or clearly understanding the exact meaning of the term in the special education system. This issue can be further complicated when the parents are not native speakers of English. For some participants, the absence of this subtle level of functional meaning was recognized frequently during the interviews. Some of these mothers learned English words by pronouncing them orally in their daily life rather than by spelling the same words on paper. Depending on how long they have been in the US, their speaking and listening comprehension varies. Reading and writing skills of English had less improvement than speaking skills even after longer years of living in the US because for these women there is often little chance in daily life to practice reading and writing skills. This phenomenon may thus restrict ability to get information from written materials.

As a result, these mothers were completely dependent on husbands, who had better English skills, to explain information given by the school. This may have positive effects on the family in that fathers may be involved in their child's education through this role as an interpreter. However, sometimes this reliance evokes conflict between husbands and wives.

Doctors said something seriously, but I couldn't understand what they're saying. My husband nodded his head and talked with them with same seriousness. I was so frustrated because I didn't know what's going on for my daughter. You know, mother knows better than anyone else, even than father, about the child. However, I couldn't participate in the conversation. I argued with him after coming back home from hospital. He said that he was not able to translate the conversation because he also had to concentrate on the conversation and was afraid that he might miss something in the discussion. I am so sorry that I have to rely on him in everything here.

Making the IEP work. An IEP meeting is another place where the issue of "meaning" creates a difficulty. Because parents may not have an understanding of the terms used in the field, conversation in meetings tends to be led by professionals with uninformed agreement from parents. Also, many abbreviations that parents may never have heard the original words before abbreviation are commonly used in the meetings. This is a more serious issue in the case of new

parents who have just entered into the American education system.

Even the three well-educated parents interviewed in this study said they got nervous when sitting in a meeting to hear professionals give a progress report or outline new objectives including criteria and special instructional support. All agreed that they wanted to be prepared before the meeting instead of jumping into the substantive content directly on the date of the meeting. One mother commented that she wanted to get some information before the meeting about what they would talk about in the meeting so that she could have time to summarize her concerns, wishes, and suggestions for new objectives.

Communication style coming from a compliant culture. In spite of increasing awareness in perceiving themselves as team members, as was described in the first theme, many Korean parents admitted that they were still influenced by traditional values which placed emphasis on respect for authority (Kim, 1996). Asking questions or proposing an opposite opinion is against this value, which these parents have been very familiar with for a long time. One mother said that it was impossible for her to interrupt professionals' serious-looking explanations to say, "Would you say that again? What do you mean by that?" even though she did not comprehend the meaning of what was being discussed.

Another mother, when asked to say what she expected from American special education professionals, expressed her wish that professionals would check for understanding regularly during the conversation. She wished that professionals could ask questions of parents instead of assuming that asking no questions means everything is clearly comprehended.

Need for a Mediator

Except for two families who found their way to searching for education services and working with professionals for their children by themselves, the other five families had experiences with getting help more than once from Korean-American mediators who were mothers of a child with a disability and who were proficient in both English and Korean. These families all acknowledged the mediator's help by saying that they could not imagine how they could have survived without her help. The need for the mediator is examined according to three topics: (a) the problem with

interpreters, (b) examples of the mediator's role, and (c) assistance with orientation.

The problem with interpreters. Even those respondents who were not familiar with their parental rights for the child knew that they were able to request an interpreter for important meetings (e.g., IEP meetings). However, only one mother actually used an interpreter and this mother only used an interpreter once because of her dissatisfaction with the process. She complained that the interpreter had paid more attention to delivering the message of the professionals rather than caring what she wanted to say.

This study found that these parents did not perceive direct translation to be enough. They expect someone who could help them more than in simple language translation. The illustrations of the help that five Korean families have gotten from mediators render some insights into what kind of help they needed and welcomed.

Examples of mediator's help. Five families presented a variety of situations in which they truly appreciated mediators' support. This figure, five out of seven, is so high because we located participants through mediators. It is unlikely that most Korean families have access to mediators like these participants did. The common characteristics of the mediators who helped their five Korean families were: (a) they also had children with disabilities, (b) they experienced the special education system in the US for a long time, and (c) they were knowledgeable about parental legal rights and procedural safeguards. Another similarity among families in the process of getting to know the mediator was that they came to be acquainted with the mediator through an informal source, such as through a church, a friend, or through other parents rather than through a formal agency's referral.

The activities mediators helped with were going together with families to the hospital or school, providing transportation, utilizing resources (e.g., calling service agencies or service providers to ask questions or request services on behalf of the family), assisting with the application process for benefits (e.g., SSI or subsidy), and providing occasional respite care. Parents interviewed seemed quite comfortable in getting mediators' help without feelings of "losing face" because the mediators were parents of children with disabilities and were Korean just like them. In addition, the Korean parents appreciated that the mediators connected them with other Korean families of

children with disabilities, which broadened their social network for instrumental and emotional support.

Assistance with orientation. Three families stressed the need for a mediator to orient them to the special education system. They were all sorry that they did not have a chance to attend such an orientation when they first entered the special education system in the US. They perceived that an orientation would be helpful in learning the special education system in the US, including implications of legal requirements and an explanation of frequently used terminology in their native language. They believed that this might provide a basic foundation of knowledge enabling them to enter the system with much more confidence and to handle difficulties when the mediators were not available.

Making Sense of Inclusion

Against the trend of inclusion in this field, five Korean parents exhibited a preference for a self-contained class. Though they did not think inclusion was a bad thing, they revealed concern that their children with severe disabilities may not get enough attention from teachers if placed in an inclusive setting. For these parents, the one-on-one attention from a special education teacher had a very similar meaning to them as one-on-one assistance from a doctor (i.e., the more their children spent time with a special education teacher, the more they believed their child could be "cured"). These parents could not surrender the hope of their child being "cured" from the disability. However, there was one mother, a strong advocate of inclusion, who shared an example of a positive view on inclusion. The theme of inclusion is discussed on the basis of these conflicting perspectives about inclusion.

Opposition to inclusion. Two participants represented the desire for a "cure" more markedly than others. One of them enrolled her baby in a private early intervention program located in another state, where she would go by airplane. The program involved interventionists training parents to be therapists for their own babies. The training was held once a year. Parents stayed with the interventionist for one week to establish intervention plans for the baby, with consultation from interventionists, doctors, and nutritionists. Parents then returned home, implemented the plan, kept a daily log, and sent the log regularly to the

center with videotape showing how they implemented the plan. She said that she and her son devoted all the time to implement the intensive intervention, which included physical exercise, strict diet, and academic activities for the child's cognitive development, over the past two years with a hope that her son's disability would be cured. At the time of the interview, the mother was disappointed with the program because of her son's slow progress. So, she said that she was searching for a renowned neurologist and a physical therapist in her community. The other mother expressed her interest in brain surgery for her son though professionals were in doubt whether the surgery could really improve his condition, because she interpreted the absence of language in her son as an indicator of brain damage.

To some extent, the effort to "cure" the child's disability may result in a positive impact on the child by encouraging parents to follow the recommendations of professionals at home and by providing parents with greater motivation to work with their children. Sometimes, however, this therapeutic perspective also can create barriers to receiving an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for the child by encouraging parents to stick to intensive therapy and individual instruction. This can become a serious obstacle to inclusion since some families believe that children who are included in general education will not get sufficient therapy and special instruction.

Highest trust in teachers, as well as profound concern with improving or correcting the physical and cognitive condition of their child, seemed to make some parents oppose inclusion. Alternatively, one mother was a strong inclusion advocate.

Support for inclusion. One mother wanted her daughter with a hearing impairment to be included in a general education class. Professionals, however, urged her not to do so, by telling her that her daughter would not be able to keep up with peers because of her different mode of communication (i.e., signing).

They recommended me that she had better stay at the same classroom where she was last semester. I was so upset. I wrote a long letter to them asserting, "I know that she may not do a good job if included. However, I want her to learn how typical children behave and interact with each other. If she would have to stay with small number of children with same

disability and received lots of attention from adults, she may not learn appropriate social skills and her dependency would be increased after all. Because I am a parent who must go with her throughout her lifetime, my goals are more long-term ones than yours. Rather than learning some academic skills, I want her to know how to survive in the hearing world." In the long run, she was included. Tell you what! Young did a wonderful job after being included. All wanted to be her friend. Her teacher gives 5 min to Young everyday so that all other children may learn sign from Young.

Discussion

In this section, we address limitations of the study and we discuss the findings according to four main themes: (a) satisfactions with special education services in America, (b) communication with professionals, (c) need for a mediator, and (d) making sense of inclusion. Suggestions for culturally competent special education practices are also provided.

Limitations of the Study

Though this study provides information on parents' evaluation of current practices and directions for change in the special education services and system for families from a different cultural and linguistic background, this study was subject to limitations. First, the number of parents (i.e., seven mothers and one father) who participated limits the heterogeneity of Korean families. Consistent with the premises of qualitative research, these findings cannot be considered representative of all Korean parents. Though considering the findings of this study in working with children and families from Asian cultures, including Korean culture, might be helpful, the existence of considerable within-group variation should be kept in mind.

Another limitation comes from the fact that the interview was conducted via telephone, which may restrict the source of data only to verbal communication with the participants. This was inevitable because participants lived in diverse places, ranging from far west (Washington), to east (Virginia). This study would be able to provide richer information through direct observation of the parents and their children in the school setting with professionals and with the examination of

documents related to their children or the families to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

Finally, limited participation from family members other than mothers limits the study. In spite of the increasing recognition of family-professional partnerships, these mothers described taking major charge of their child's education. This may be especially characteristic of many Korean families who take it for granted that wives are responsible for everything related to children and household matters (Kim, 1997).

Satisfactions with Special Education Services in America

All of the participants were first-generation immigrants to the US, which meant that they were educated in Korea many years ago, when one teacher had to take care of more than 60 children at a time. The parents often compared the school life of their children to their own experiences and appreciated the individualized attention their child received.

It is interesting to note that the Korean parents interviewed in this study 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. Confucianism was originally a Chinese religion, but it became a prescribed way of life (i.e., philosophy rather than religion) in many Asian countries including Korea (Chan, 1998). In this philosophy, the ideal is the "perfect gentleman" who can be characterized by the "five virtues": benevolence and humanism, righteousness, proper conduct, wisdom, and trustworthiness (Chan). Among these, the third virtue, proper conduct, which includes absolute respect and deference to authority and elders, is a powerful force determining Korean people's thinking and attitude toward professionals such as teachers, public officers or doctors. That is, in spite of this traditional belief, which makes parents hesitate to become equal to professionals and to "speaking out" in front of professionals, Korean participants of this study liked the idea of "working in partnership" with professionals.

The parents showed a great amount of appreciation about entitlement to benefits. Medicaid, Social Security Income (SSI), and free special education services were mentioned recurrently. In addition to these cashable benefits (e.g., Medicaid and SSI), which save considerable

amount of money that could be spent for their children, small but considerate privileges were valued too. These benefits also contribute to the families by helping them accept their children in more positive ways.

The financial concern related to enormously expensive surgery, however, indicates lack of available benefits for legitimate aliens (such as international students, visiting scholars, and temporary workers) who have dependents with disabilities. Though it is understandable that public policy allocates available funds to serve first citizens who belong to the country, thoughtful considerations should be made to help these "left-out" families of legitimate aliens. This is not only for the interests of children and youth of legitimate aliens, but also for the interests of all American children in that these foreign children are those who interact with, have influences on, and share the same experiences with American children in the school and the community. Sound learning communities cannot be established without empowering all stakeholders.

Communication with Professionals

All participants spoke English as a second language. Therefore, though the English proficiency of each parent varied, the parents had in common uncomfortableness in exchanging information with professionals. It was notable that parents were eager to get notes from school teachers to know how their children were doing in spite of their difficulty in reading written materials received from school in a timely manner. The parents called for professionals to develop an effective system for information exchange that would not overwhelm parents but that would keep them informed. The simple symbol system (which was mentioned in the findings section); a short video clip of the child's school life; and writing down important numbers, nouns, and names on a piece of paper while talking to parents can be good examples of these information exchange systems.

Similar considerations are required in preparing for IEP meetings or other kinds of meetings with parents. Because IEP meetings can be the most worrisome events, where these parents with limited English proficiency are expected to have both the listening skills to understand what professionals say and the speaking skills to express their needs or to ask questions, attentive preparation for the meeting is needed. Even

experienced parents agreed that providing written materials (e.g., a progress report) about a week before the meeting and the written names of all expected participants (because English names are unfamiliar to Koreans and are hard to remember or pronounce) would facilitate the participation of the parents from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds. In situations with new parents who will have their first IEP meeting soon, they would like provision of training workshops about IEPs delivered by professionals and veteran parents. It would be better if the veteran parents who will help those new parents were Korean parents, in that they could explain the importance and process of the IEP meeting in their native language, which would enable the new parents to catch even the subtle things they might miss if they were instead trained only in English. A mediator, which we will discuss in the next section, may be able to take this role, too.

Need for a Mediator

The parents in this study highly valued the help from two mediators. They said that they felt more comfortable in getting help from someone who had gone through the same difficulty in the US as a foreign language-speaking parent of a child with a disability. Examples of mediators' help were so diverse and essential that it was understandable when parents said, "She was the savior of our life."

If families from diverse backgrounds so desperately rely on mediators, current service delivery systems should take action to enable families to get assistance from mediators, rather than requiring families to locate and get help from mediators themselves. For example, a list of mediators who are available in the community for families from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds can be maintained at service agencies and schools and given to those families at the first contact (Turnbull, Blue-Banning, Turbiville, & Park, 1999). In addition, school systems need to provide proper training and payments for the mediators to ensure that families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds will have on-going, consistent, and quality assistance.

Parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds also can get help from national parent organizations that are committed to working with culturally diverse families. The Grassroots Consortium on Disabilities is a network of 15 programs in culturally and linguistically diverse

communities that are specifically focused on providing support to families of children with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 1999). For example, the Parent to Parent Power in Washington, a member of the Grassroots Consortium, has supported Korean families of students with disabilities for over 15 years. Some examples of the supports include advocacy, training, interpretation and translation, and transportation.

Though not an organizational support, the senior author of this article has run a web page written in Korean to provide information and support for families of children with disabilities in the US and in Korea for the last five years (URL: <http://sped21.com>). Information provided by this website is primarily about special education in general and pertinent legislation for individuals with disabilities. For more individual and specific supports, parents can access the Bulletin Board of the web page and write about concerns or questions. A member of the web page consultant team, composed of special educators, lawyers, a doctor, and parents of children with disabilities, will respond to the parents in a timely manner. When there is no mediator available in the community, Korean parents may visit this website and ask for help through electronic communication.

Making Sense of Inclusion

Considering that the parents so welcomed and appreciated individualized attention and adaptation, it was not surprising to hear that they were reluctant to place their children in inclusive settings. The parents, especially, seem to believe that their children cannot get enough attention from teachers if included in the general curriculum and fear that their children will not progress adequately as a result. Though one mother's successful experience with her daughter's inclusion was encouraging, suggesting the changing attitude toward inclusion among some Korean parents, this remained the exception rather than the rule. Most parents still desired specialized education, rather than interaction with diverse children in natural environments.

Though special education has been perceived as "a place" for a long time in the past and even now, schools and parents should understand that special education is a service. If schools provide legally mandated supplementary aids and services to those with disabilities included in general education classrooms, parents may change their

perceptions. Parents' ultimate interests are in their children, not in special education classrooms. In order for this to happen, the inservice training of paraprofessionals, the preservice training of general education teachers, and collaborative teaming among general and special educators, related service providers, and families should be accelerated.

Though the therapeutic perspective of these parents (i.e., the strong belief in "curing" the disability) sometimes becomes an inhibitor of an appropriate education and collaborative relationships between parents and professionals, they should not be criticized for traditional beliefs and their hope that a cure will manifest. Instead, culturally competent special education practices should look at parents' anxious desire to improve their child's condition as a strength and help build their empowerment skills, such as setting great expectations for their child, celebrating every indication of progress the child makes, appreciating the child as he is, and planning a transition plan to accentuate success (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Obiakor and Schwenn (1996) advise us that any effort to deny diversities that individuals bring to school is also an effort to deny their multidimensional cultural and linguistic strengths, capabilities, and intelligence. In the process of interviews, parents provided resourceful ideas about how to incorporate cultural diversities into state-of-art special education practice. These parents made many suggestions, which we have presented here that, would enrich US special education practices.

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