

Multicultural Parental Involvement: A Case Study of Korean Immigrant Parental Involvement in their Children's Schooling

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Abstract

This study examines the characteristics of multicultural parental involvement in their children's education and explores the factors which contribute to a pattern of parental involvement among Korean immigrant families. This study investigates the variables as analytical tools that describe the nature of parental educational aspiration, difficulties and barriers to participate in their child's schooling, and social capital as parental network. This study used qualitative interviews and its coding process as following a model of "naturalistic paradigm." For the sample, this study selected immigrant parents and teachers in a medium-sized city in the southeastern United States. Results show that the biggest barrier for Korean immigrant parents to participate in their child's education was cultural deficit or cultural difference as they confront their child's teacher. It is cultural difference that the relationship between teacher and parents is vertical or hierarchical in Korea, whereas in the U.S. the relationship between teacher and parent is more like horizontal or equal. Korean immigrant parents have also difficulties to participation in their child's schooling because of their language skills, lack of school information, and no time. They communicate with teachers by written document such as a notice they prepared at home, email by internet, or letter. Most of Korean immigrant parents in this study tried to visit and talk with their teachers individually. Korean immigrant parents in this study had their homogeneous ethnic group network. For the new families to the U.S., social network was considered to be essential and helpful. However, the relationships were not maintained continuously because of the lack of correct school information and competitive consciousness among Korean parents.

Introduction

Today the importance of parental involvement in their children's education is becoming more and more appreciated and better understood by parents, teachers, and educational leaders. Parental involvement is supported by varied rationales that target mutually reinforcing relationships between individual parents and teachers, and by linking educational programs and the parent community. In American families, parents' economic resources, occupational conditions, cultural endowments, and educational backgrounds all affect child-rearing practices. These differences in family life can be seen not only in the material advantages parents provide their children, but also in the skills parents transmit to their children as they mature and negotiate their individual life pathways. Compared to American families, multicultural immigrant parents may have different models and expectations than those found among mainstream American parents.

Multicultural immigrant parents have a different perception about the goals of childhood education than do mainstream U.S. parents'. They believe that it is not their business to micromanage the schooling of their children (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). They believe that teachers are responsible for what goes on in school. Immigrants, as social outsiders, feel less secure about questioning the judgment of school authorities (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition, immigrant parents do not realize that the schools want their children to know their ABCs before they enter school and they do not see this knowledge as part of what it means to be involved in their children's education (Valdes, 1996). Multicultural immigrant parents are very often working outside the home and just do not have the freedom to go to the school and become involved in

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their child's education on a regular basis. They often lack both the cultural understanding of American schools and the language skills to communicate with teachers and school officials. And teachers often have low achievement expectations for immigrant children and children from economically poor homes. The research literature indicates that it is important to propose alternative ways of involving language minority parents in homework and home activities which celebrate these families, consider minority parenting styles, and respect the linguistic socialization children receive at home, rather than prescribing one-size-fits-all activities that all parents should employ at home (Daniel-White, 2002).

Many researchers have concentrated on parental involvement, home resources, and peer influences (Murnane et al., 1981; Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Fehrman 3t al., 1987; Rumberger et al., 1990; Astone & Mclanahan, 1991). However, they have paid little attention to explaining how multicultural parental involvement is different. Accordingly, this study is to explore the multicultural parental involvement, especially Korean immigrant parents in their children's schooling. This study will pursue six lines of questioning to explore the factors which contribute to a pattern of parental involvement among Korean immigrant parents:

- Are there differences in parental involvement between multicultural immigrant parents and mainstream U.S. parents?
- How can the differences of parental involvement be explained?
- What do multicultural immigrant parents experience in a new American school system?
- How do Korean immigrant parents become involved in students' learning and schooling?
- What are some barriers that multicultural immigrant parents face in participation in their children's schooling?
- How does the relationship between parents and teacher differ, particularly multicultural parents and mainstream U.S. parents?

Conceptual Framework

This study examines the characteristics of multicultural parental involvement in their children's education and explores the factors which contribute to a pattern of parental involvement among multicultural immigrant families. Measures of multicultural parental involvement include (a) parents' educational value/aspiration, (b) cultural differences, (c) barriers to participate, (d) communication with teacher/school, and (e) social capital as social network. In this section, literature on parental involvement is summarized to provide the conceptual framework for the study.

Parental Involvement and Educational Aspiration

According to Epstein (1992), students at all levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors when their parents are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and are actively involved in the education of their children (p. 1141). Epstein (1996) identifies the six types of parental involvement: 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with community² (p. 216). These types explain how schools can work with families

² Parenting type assists families with parenting and childrearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Communicating type communicates with families about school programs and student progress with school-

and communities to assist them to become or stay informed and involved in children's education at home and at school. Parental involvement should be implanted through building a community of mutual cooperation between teachers and parents.

Multicultural Family and Cultural Difference

In the research, Valdes (1996) found that Mexican parents could not anticipate that in this country, teachers expected the children to know their ABC's, that is, to be able to recite the alphabet by the time they began first grade (p. 167). Moreover, they did not know that knowing the alphabet was an indicator of parents' involvement in their children's education. For Mexican immigrant families, an appearance at school was limited to ceremonial occasions at which there are little time for teachers to talk about a child's progress (Valdes 1996, p. 161). Mexican parents made an appearance to please their children, to whom those things mattered, and felt that they had done their duty (Valdes 1996, p. 162). Valdes states that "none of the families knew about PTA, about volunteering to work at the school, or about other ways in which they might become 'involved' in their children's education" (p. 162).

Barriers of Immigrant Parental Involvement

The Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (2001) discusses some of the principal barriers and misconceptions preventing parents from becoming more involved in their children's school. There are four principal barriers to parental involvement: 1) lack of time; 2) uncertainty about what to do; 3) cultural barriers; 4) teacher attitude (The Southeastern Regional Vision for Education 2001, p.51). Suarez-Orozco (2001) states that immigrant parents working two or three jobs can't attend school activities in the middle of the day as teachers often expect (p. 150). Because immigrant families are adjusting to new cultures and because they usually have inadequate resources, they feel overwhelmed. Suarez-Orozco also explains that the lack of English skills makes the expected participation in school activities quite problematic (p. 150). Lower-status immigrant parents with little formal schooling may feel self-conscious and socially uncomfortable when interacting with authority figures in schools (Suarez-Orozco, p. 150).

The National Parent Teacher Association (2000) discusses that many immigrant parents are unfamiliar with the U.S. school system and do not know what rights they have or how they can become involved. Schools rarely provide information about the school system, rules, procedures or policies for immigrant parental involvement. Even though the immigrant parents are eager to help their children succeed in school, they really do not know where one enters or begins a relationship with the school and teachers. According to Potter (2001), schools often leave participation entirely up to parents, who may not know what their options are and feel awkward finding out (p. 6). Immigrant parents are not familiar with the social codes and rules, and they don't know how to play the role that is expected of them. Moreover, they don't know

to-home and home-to-school communications. Volunteering type improves recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs the school and students. Learning at Home type: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities and decisions. Decision making type includes families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through PTA, committees, councils, and other parent organizations. Collaborating with Community type coordinate the work and resources of community businesses, agencies, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (J. L. Epstein, 1996, *Perspectives and Previews on Research and Policy for School, Family, and Community Partnership*, p. 215).

what type of contribution is meaningful. Thus, they end up being passive rather than involved in their child's school (Potter 2001, p. 7).

Shannon (1996) presents the personal narrative of a Mexican immigrant mother who reports her dilemma and frustration when attempting to assist in her child's classroom. According to Shannon, Mexican immigrant mother learned how to behave like a parent with the power of decision making in her child's education but the teacher would not recognize and act on the decisions of the mother (p.81). Shannon explains that teachers all too often did not respond to the mother but determined that she was irrational and even harmful to her own child (p. 83). The Mexican mother, finally, ignored the teacher and continued her struggle to have her child's needs met at school. Shannon concludes that the Mexican mother must learn that resisting the powerlessness of her low status requires persistence, patience, and continuing with a sense of dignity (p. 82).

Social Capital as Social Network

Coleman (1988) argued that social capital is a form of capital that exists in the relationships between people. An individual's relationship with another person, for instance, provides a set of obligations and expectations between the two individuals. Coleman (1988) discussed that parents can provide social capital to children by spending more time with them or by promoting activities that are conducive to their children's educational outcomes. One of them is social capital within the family, indicating the relations between parents and students called by "closure" within family. Parents' attitudes and values are the basis for students' expectations on education and for their school performance. The other is social capital outside the family, called "intergenerational closure," that exists among parents in different households. With this line of thinking, several researchers have examined social capital as an important predictor of student outcomes (Coleman 1991; Coleman & Hoffer 1987; Loury 1977; Carbonaro 1998).

Korean Parental Involvement

Viadero and Johnson (2000) explain that Korean educational values focus on high achievement, afterschool programs, test scores, and homework (p. 11). Based on a cornerstone of centuries-old Confucian values, storing schooling has helped Koreans rise from the lower classes in their native country by preparing them for the exams needed to qualify for respected government jobs (Viadero & Johnson 2000, p. 12). Korean-American³ parents typically push their children to achieve, relying on tutors and other supplemental education to eventually win highly competitive college placements. Korean-American parents in Los Angeles, for instance, use afterschool programs to build their children's credentials so that they can qualify for prized spots in the city's respected magnet school program, or win acceptance to a private school, for those who can afford it (Viadero & Johnson 2000, p. 13). However, some low-income immigrant Korean parents can not provide tutoring and other supplemental education to their children because of the limited finances. Even though they have some limitation and difficulties to

³ The Korean population in the United States grew from about 799,000 in 1990 to 1,077,000 in 2000, showing a 35% increase (Korean American Coalition, p. 2). Among the Asian groups, the Koreans are the fifth largest group (1.07 million), trailing the Asian Indians (1.7 million), Vietnamese (1.12 million), Filipino (1.8 million), and Chinese (2.4 million). The Japanese are the sixth largest Asian group with 796,000 (Korean American Coalition-Census Information Center in Partnership with Center for Korean-American and Korean Studies, 2003, *Population Change by Race and Ethnicity, 1999-2000 USA, California, Southern California, LA County, Orange County, Korea town*, p. 2).

participate in child's schooling, most of Korean parents have high educational aspirations and school achievement.

Method

Sample

This study considered the samples and the major topic concerns to be those of (a) a multicultural, parental involvement study in the education of elementary school children at the macro level in American public education and, (b) Korean immigrant parental involvement at a micro level. This study selected a community of Korean-American immigrant parents in a southeastern city of the United States. The southeastern region of the United States is the fourth largest area where Korean immigrant population lives in North America. The process of selection of students and the teachers was purposive sampling which is helpful in answering the basic research questions and the technique fit the basic purpose of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The sample for this study was six Korean immigrant parents and two elementary school teachers. Criteria for the involvement of parents are not related to age, gender or race, parents' socio-economic status, their educational level. Also they are not related to years the families resided in the United States, the number of their children, or the age of their children. Criteria for teachers are: (a) they must have experience teaching immigrant children and (b) they must have experience interacting with immigrant parents. The teachers are not necessary those who teach children for the Korean families. The criteria are not related to teaching years, gender, race, teaching grade, teaching subject, social background, or educational level.

Data Analysis

In this study, qualitative interviews and its coding process used to examine the characteristics of multicultural parental involvement. For this study, I took a model of "naturalistic paradigm." Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the "naturalistic paradigm" in four ways: 1) realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic, 2) knower and known are interactive and inseparable, 3) only time-and context-bound working hypotheses are possible, and 4) all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effect (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). In this study, the context of the study was natural setting that looks at the whole context of the issue. The data were collected through purposive sampling, which was helpful to increase range of data exposed and to devise a better grounded theory that fits local contexts of Korean immigrant parental involvement. The analysis of data was an inductive data analysis that moves from data to theory, rather than theory to data. Inductive analysis procedures are helpful to identify multiple realities, describe their setting fully, and identify their mutual shaping influences.

Results

This study found that Korean immigrant parents had high educational value and aspiration. They tried to participate in class activities, field trips, parenting at home, communicating between school and home, volunteering and learning at home such as extra curriculum and tutoring. They typically pushed their children to achieve, relying on tutors and other supplemental education to eventually win highly competitive college placements. In this study, most of Korean parents showed high educational aspiration and school achievement. Six Korean immigrant parents I interviewed were practicing, more actively, in parenting,

communicating, volunteering, and learning at home. However, they rarely do participate in decision making in school decisions and advocate activities through formal PTA, committees, and other parent organization.

There are two difficulties for Korean immigrant parents to participate in their child's schooling: 1) unfamiliarity with the U. S. school system and 2) cultural differences. Most of Korean parents in this study have difficulties to know the U. S. school system. Especially, the parents who have high school students say that lack of school experiences in the U. S. is the most difficulty to participate in their child's schooling. The study found that cultural difference is one of the difficulties when Korean parents confront teachers. For example, Korean immigrant parents mention that attitude to face teachers is different from Korean culture. In the U.S., the relationship between teacher and parents is perceived as horizon relationship, rather than veridical or hierarchical structure. This cultural difference is retardant of Korean immigrant parental involvement. This seems to affect their perception of the schools differently and their involvement in their children's education. It seems to make them more to focus on extra curriculum or tutoring as their participation.

There are two barriers for Korean immigrant parents to participate in their child's schooling: 1) lack of English skill and 2) lack of time. Most of Korean immigrant parents in this study say that the lack of English skills is the biggest barrier to participate in schooling. They say that the lack of language skills makes them to diminish their participation in their child's schooling. For example, one of mothers who had language barriers to her participation participated in physical help rather than verbal or speaking in English. This study found that Korean parents hesitate to participate in schooling because they worry about mistakes while participating. With high educational aspiration, Korean immigrant parents communicate with teachers and schools by written material such as email, notes, and letters. Korean immigrant parents in this study tried to visit and talk with their teachers individually. However, their visits to school reduced when their children went to middle and high school because teachers control meeting with parents. This study found that most of Korean immigrant parents had no time to fully participate in school activities such as volunteering work and attending PTA meeting. Korean immigrant parents mention that they rarely go to PTA meeting because of late time meeting, fatigue, a lot of works, unstable work position, and economic condition.

For social capital as social network, Korean immigrant parents had their homogeneous ethnic group network. For the most of Korean families, this social network was considered to be essential and helpful. However, the relationships were not maintained continuously because of the lack of correct school information and competitive consciousness among Korean parents. One of the parents in the study indicated that disadvantage of social network may be the subjective interpretation of school information, rather than the objective interpretation. In addition, the study found that the lack of English skills makes them difficult to have relationship with the mainstream U.S. parents.

Significance and the Findings

The significance of this study is to enhance our understandings of multicultural immigrant parental involvement and their barriers to participate in their children's schooling. This study is expected to contribute to the role of multicultural communities for new immigrant families. For multicultural parental involvement, school administrators should have more attention to multicultural parents and their barriers, and provide school information and translators for them if needed. Schools should respect the linguistic socialization children receive

at home and contextualize involvement in ways that consider individual family characteristics of multicultural parents.

This study provides the characteristics of multicultural parental involvement. In particular, this study provides factors which contribute to a pattern of parental involvement among Korean immigrant families. In this study, I found that Korean immigrant parents have high educational aspiration on their children's schooling and they push their children to achieve, relying on tutors and other supplemental education. However, the barriers for Korean immigrant parents are cultural difference as they confront their child's teacher, lack of school information, and the language skills. This study found that Korean immigrant parents communicate with teachers by written document such as a notice they prepared at home, email by internet, or letter. Korean immigrant parents have their homogeneous ethnic group network. This social network is considered to be essential and helpful. However, this study found that the relationship is not maintained continuously because of the lack of correct school information and competitive consciousness among Korean parents

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