

The Role of Korean Fathers: A Study of Korean Fathering Practices in the United States

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This study explored Korean immigrant fathers' perspectives on their involvement in children's learning and schooling in the United States with the intent to suggest for early childhood educators and teachers to consider the importance of involving the immigrant fathers in children's learning and schooling. In-depth interviews were used to explore of three Korean fathers involvement both at home and at school settings. The results of the study overall indicated that three Korean fathers commonly experienced difficulties and frustration when they participated in their children's learning, schooling, and playing. Additionally, the Korean fathers reported to encounter acknowledged challenges in terms of language issues, cultural differences, and negative experiences in their involvement in children's learning and schooling.

Key words : Korean fathers in the U.S., father's role, fathering practice, cultural adjustment

Introduction

Over past decades fathers' involvement in children's learning and schooling has been viewed and established as one of the crucial contributing factor towards children's success development (Lamb, 2000; Pruett, 2000). Consequently, many educators and teachers including Koreans are steadily building interest in the role of fathers and attempts to involve fathers in children's learning and schooling are mounting. Despite of this recognition in Korea fathers are largely excluded compared to parents' involvement and discussions in most of the early childhood programs (Jay, 1996; Turbille & Marquis,

2001).

Studies on fathering in Korea are limited and have primarily focused on fathers' role in cognitive development, emotional development, academic accomplishment, and moral development of children. Few studies have investigated the role of the Korean father in children's education in the U.S. In traditional Korean society, the roles of fathers are largely influenced by Confucian philosophy which offers ethical teaching for human relationships. In the spirit of Confucian teaching, the children are expected to be obedient and respectful to their parents (Lee, 1998). In that case the role of the Korean fathers is basically that of a strict, unemotional educator and disciplinarian while the maternal role is that of a nurturer.

This paper argues that the perspective of Korean fathers is different from others essentially because of their location and cultural context of Korean. And that the immigrant Korean fathers while in the U.S. are

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likely to play a different role in their children's learning and schooling than when in Korea. Therefore, the immigrant Korean fathers working in early childhood programs in the U.S. might be bound by the traditional Korean roles and Korean cultural context rendering them likely to face conflicts when working with their children essentially because of cultural mismatch. This paper therefore reports about the study examined perspectives of immigrant Korean fathers' in regard to their involvement in children's learning and schooling and provide suggestions for early childhood educators and teachers.

Review of Literature

Importance of Fathers' Involvement

The growing interest of fathers' roles in children's lives at home and at school is evident in recent research and academic writing. A report from the National Center on Education Statistics is one of many recent research reports that detail the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's educational programs (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Berger's (1998) study concluded that the roles of a father in children's learning and development include: model, encourager, guider, protector, care provider, breadwinner, teacher, story-teller, play partner, and standard setter. Other similar claims supporting the roles of fatherhood in children development report trend of an increase in interest and associated changes in regard to the role of fathers in children's development in early childhood education programs. According to Lamb (2000), the interest in the father's role in the lives of children has increased and that men have responded to the changes within U.S. society by assuming roles of nurturing caregivers and active teachers of their children. Other studies while noting the centrality of fathers' role in children development, yet, they find explicit or implicit downgrading of fathers' role and/or consideration particularly in the early childhood education programs. League and

Ford (1996) posit that fathers play an important role in enhancing their children's development, yet they have tended to be neglected by school professionals in the past. It was further observed that when fathers are involved actively with their children, the children are free to pursue more of their own interests in their learning. And fathers may support their children's homework and reading through social coaching with peer interaction. Indeed, fathers' involvement in the educational process allows children to be exposed to a greater variety of educational experiences than if only the mother is actively involved (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997).

The Role of Korean Fathers

Ho (1987) explicates that there are Five Cardinal Relationships of Confucianism: ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brothers, and friends. According to his view, Confucian culture has had a strong influence on sex roles, producing the stern and extroverted male, and the loving, introverted, and submissive female. This Confucian culture has resulted in the development of physical and psychological boundaries between men and women in Korean society (Yang, 2000).

Kang (1993) posits that the role of Korean fathers is mainly focused on working hard as a breadwinner while their wives take care of their children. Korean fathers typically focus on earning more money as a means to constantly increase financial security and consider supporting and contributing to their families as virtuous. Although they work hard for their families their lack of involvement in their children's activities including education can cause strained relationships with their fathers and children. Traditionally, it is reinforced that a good Korean father is the one who works hard and earns a lot of money for his family. However, concentrating solely on the role of the breadwinner, the Korean fathers can experience loneliness and emptiness when grown children come home to visit later on in life (Kim, 2008).

Studies have investigated the role of Korean fathers

as a critical factor in their children's learning and social success. Lee (1998) concludes that the father's behavior is the primary determinant of children's social competence at home and at school. She also demonstrates that preschool boys whose fathers are actively involved in their children's learning and schooling are more socially competitive than other boys whose fathers are less involved. Indeed, boys with active involvement of their fathers tend to have stronger sex role identification than the other group of boys. Flouri and Buchanan (2004) study concur that father's absence can adversely affect the children's sex role identification and sex typing of male children.

Apparently, it is crucial that fathers are involved in children's activities right from the time of birth and through the early years of their growth and development. Radin and Sagi (1982) reported that father involvement associated with increase in intellectual development in male young children, and that "the more nurturing the father, the more the young boy models him and internalizes his modes of thinking and problem solving" (Radin & Sagi, 1982, p. 112). Although these studies are important to enhance father-child relationship, there is limited research on father involvement in Korea; indeed, investigation of father's child-rearing involvement only began in the mid-1980s (Yang, 2000).

Immigrant Korean Fathers

Like most of immigration groups, the immigrant Koreans in the U.S. are not quickly or easily accepted in the diaspora U.S. and encounter difficulties in acclimating to American culture. As argued above, cultural mismatch and language barriers are the likely causes behind of the difficulties they encounter while in the U.S. In spite of these obstacles, Immigrant Koreans have contributed in many ways to American history and continue to be one of the large new immigrant groups today (Kim, 2008). Korean students in particular have shown a remarkable degree of success in making cultural and social adjustments to mainstream American society when their fathers

actively assist them with their learning and schooling (Jung & Honig, 2000; Kim, 2008). This suggests that strong relationships between immigrant parents and children would be a critical factor in dealing with the difficulties and conflicts which the children face. In another study about immigrant Korean fathers' roles, the most recent immigrant Korean fathers tend to interact with their children with more nurturing, accepting, and flexible behaviors than their grandfathers' generation (Kim, 2008; Yang, 2000).

Identity Theory

Identity theory is based on an idea that a person's identity is shaped, inhibited, and reinforced through various social interactions. Status identity and role identity help define one's overall identity. Status is defined as an individual's position in society, such as student, employee, or parent (Fox & Bruce, 2001). Role is "a set of expected behavior patterns, obligations, and privileges attached to a particular social status" (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995, p. 76).

A status identity may be related to multiple role identities (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995). For example, the status identity of father may be linked to the role identities of provider, nurturer, and disciplinarian. According to Identity theorists, status identity and associated role identities can be ranked by assessing salience and centrality (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The salience of an identity is the likelihood of a particular identity being enacted in any given situation (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Researchers usually measure salience by identifying what would be the first thing an individual would tell someone to describe himself (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995). The centrality of an identity is the value that an individual assigns to it and is usually measured through importance ranking of different identities.

Fathers' involvement in activities of their children can be attributed to perceived paternal identity which is an important factor as far as role of father in child is concerned (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Rane & McBride, 2000). Outcomes of father involvement in children are

closely related to the meaning and importance assigned to such involvement (Rane & McBride, 2000). The application of identity theory is beneficial because it addresses the dynamic nature of paternal roles as well as the multiple statuses and potentially conflicting role (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The theory sheds light on how individual fathers incorporate their paternal identities into their lives and differ in their degree of commitment to particular paternal identities.

A number of studies have applied identity theory to paternal involvement (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1995; Rane & McBride, 2000). Fathers' self-identity has been assessed in terms of various factors such as competence and satisfaction with fatherhood, role clarity, and willingness to invest time and resources in fatherhood (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1995).

Several father studies examined levels of paternal involvement in relation to the salience of participants' father role as well as participants' satisfaction with, investment in, and self-perceived competence in that role. These studies found that satisfaction, investment, and perceived competence all positively correlate with involvement. Rane and McBride (2000) found that centrality of the father role, but not of father status, positively correlated with paternal involvement.

This study employed the concept of centrality over salience because it focused on fathers' perceptions and awareness of their role as a father, and the concept of role identities over status identities because it aimed to measure paternal competence and role perception within the father status. As Fox and Bruce (2001) mentioned, it is important to understand the influence of choices of actions in varying circumstances and contexts on men's commitment to the fathering role. Employing identity theory provides one avenue to link men's attitudes and perceptions about fatherhood and parenting behaviors.

The increased interest in the roles of immigrant Korean fathers in the U.S. has exposed a shift in societal expectations for fatherhood both from Korean

and to American education settings. This shift is calling for men to assume a more active role in raising their young children and is being conveyed to the general public in multiple formats of their roles and involvement. As a result, this study examines various perspectives of Korean immigrant fathers' involvement with their children's learning and schooling in the U.S.

Methods

Collected data through in-depth interview from three Korean fathers were interpreted through themes relating to father issues which emerged from the interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed dealing with one overarching research question and two research questions. The overarching research question is: How are Korean fathers involved in their children's learning both at home and at school in the U.S.? This overarching question is broken into two sub-questions:

- 1) What are the Korean fathers' beliefs and roles to support their children's learning and schooling?
- 2) What are the barriers and cultural difficulties faced by Korean fathers in the U.S. for fathering practices?

Participants

The participants are three Korean fathers living in the U.S. The participants meet the following criteria: a father who has at least one child between the ages of 6 and 15 years

One of the participants is studying at a University; the other two are visiting scholars in the U.S. All three Korean fathers are temporary immigrants from South Korea who will be returning when they have completed their studies. We tried to select fathers who have different backgrounds and have children of varying ages. The following paragraphs provide descriptive information about the three participants.

Participant A is a doctoral student aged thirty-six years, husband of one wife and a father of two children. His daughter is five years old and his son is an infant. At the time of the study he has been living in the U.S. for four years. His daughter (YW) was born in Korea and attends a Pre-K class at an elementary school. His new baby was born a few weeks ago. He and his wife were teachers in an elementary school in Korea. He is very interested in his daughter's education and physical development.

Participant B professor and writer aged forty five years. He is a husband of one wife and father of two children: TH, a fifteen-year-old male, and TS, a twelve-year-old female both of them were born in Korea. At the time of the study he and his family have been living in U.S. for eleven months. He is a visiting scholar and was going to return to his home country in Korea in the next the summer because his sabbatical year was about to come to an end. As a professor and a novelist, he is interested in his children's reading and learning of English.

Participant C is also a professor aged forty three years. He is a husband of one wife and father of two children: BC, a seven-year-old male, and BH, a five-year-old male who were both children born in Korea. At the time of the study his family has been living in the U.S. for four months. He was on sabbatical leave from a university in Korea and is a visiting scholar at a university in the U.S. He and his family were going to return to Korea in the next spring. His main concern is focused on his children's English skills and transition to new school environments.

Findings

Korean Fathers' Beliefs and Roles

Three participants view their paternal role as "being a moral leader", "supporter", and "financial supporter." For Participant A, a father of a young child (girl), his beliefs and roles are best summarized in the following statement from the interview:

When I was in Korea, supporting my family financially and educationally was my main concerns. I was just supporting my child's needs. When I returned, home I didn't talk much with my daughter because I was always tired from my job. Instead, my wife mainly took care of my daughter. I thought that my involvement was restricted to Korean traditional fathers' image such as breadwinner and financial supporter. When I started my doctoral study in the U.S., my wife expected me to play more active roles in my child's learning and schooling like American fathers. As a result, I was confused between my role as a Korean father and expectations coming from comparison to American fathers.

Korean fathers who lived in Korea are facing a period of transition into new roles of fatherhood in families when living in the U.S. For many years, good fathering images in Korea have been in large part defined as hard workers, social and political leaders, and not as good caregivers and a family man. All three Korean fathers encountered new model of fathers' role following their stay in the U.S. They acknowledged that accepting new expectation and fatherhood was needed to engage in a good and successful life in a foreign country. However, it is not giving up their Korean traditional fatherhood, but accepting new expectations and responsibilities. The three Korean fathers always gave rides to school and listened to their children's difficulties at school. In addition, they were more involved in children's learning and schooling through checking homework or assignments for their children's school success.

Children's academic success is the one of major concerns of three Korean fathers. The three Korean fathers became aware of the factors affecting successful cultural transition into U.S. education settings such as providing assistance for their children in a new environment. For example, Participant B and Participant C hired personal tutors for their children. The tutors teach English and help with their children's homework. In addition, Participant B and Participant

C often visit libraries with their children in order to improve reading and writing skills. These two fathers want to create a good literacy learning environment for their children's studying through library visits.

Actual shift from Korean traditional fathers' image to new fatherhood is related to fathers' individual aspects of their fathering practice in the U.S. Participant A is adapting to meet expectations for paternal care giving during this period of cultural transition to new and active roles. One interesting thing we have found is that unlike other participants, Participant A spends a lot of time with his child in both indoor and outdoor activities. While, Participant B and Participant C spend a lot of their time supporting their children's learning environment, Participant A is more holistic in his approach to child care engagement. For example, he not only reads books with his daughter before going to bed but also go for walks in the college park together and participates in various activities.

Barriers and Cultural Differences

The participants were given opportunities to share their personal experience with and perceptions of U.S. schools. Development of a social support network in U.S. schools was crucial to Korean fathers' successful involvement and cultural adjustment. Participant A reported that welcoming atmosphere was a critical factor to participate his child's school activities. When U.S. teachers ask him to attend the Pre-K classroom as a volunteer or to participate in teacher-parent conferences, he readily consents. He is able to freely discuss with his child's teachers about his daughter's relationships with peers in the classroom and consults with the teachers about physical, academic and socio-emotional development of his child. He knows that parental involvement is important to children because he has worked at an elementary school for eight years in Korea. Indeed, he tries to improve his conversation skills in English in order to better communicate with his daughter's teachers. Participant A's attending school activities as an enthusiastic attendee was one of

the prominent aspects that we found in his interview.

There are different expectations about Korean fathers' involvement between Korean and U.S. schools. Participant A argues that U.S. schools frequently invite fathers in their children's classroom compared to Korean schools in Korea. When he was in Korea, he once participated in 'fathers' day' school event. However, only a few Korean fathers attended and were not comfortable interacting with their children in the assigned classroom activities. Additionally, limited interactions with Korean fathers and Korean teachers may not have been equipped to facilitate between father and child as well as between other fathers.

On the other hand, Participant B and Participant C have some problems when were invited to attend school functions in the U.S. Language barriers and shyness are the most prominent problems in teacher-parent conferences. They face difficulties communicating and sharing the problems their children face with U.S. teachers. While they were mostly welcomed at U.S. schools, they felt discomfort with the U.S. teachers due to unfamiliar U.S. school settings and atmosphere. Consequently, they shy away from teacher-parent conferences and regular meetings. It is common for U.S. teachers to extend invitation to Korean fathers for school activities, PTA meetings, and volunteer programs. However, participation in activities is new and daunting experience for the three participants.

Participant A and Participant B have a relatively better relationship with their children's teachers than Participant C. Participant C has some problems with his older son's teacher because he thinks that the teacher has no enthusiasm for teaching. Participant C said that:

I don't like my older son's teacher because she is not interested in my son's language problems and his achievement in the classroom. Whenever I send a letter which includes my son's health conditions or questions about assignment, she never replies to my letter. When I visit her classroom, she gives me a short

answer, "Your son is getting better in the classroom."
I don't like her indifferent manner and attitude.

Participant C encountered less welcoming atmosphere in his children's U.S. schools. Had been Participant C experienced a warm welcome and positive interaction with U.S. teachers, he might have been more willing to participate in his children's schools and spend more time to improve linguistic and social skills which are important improving his participation level.

Discussions and Implications

This study applied identity theory as a guide to the relationship regarding fathers' roles and their involvement in children's activities. The value of fathers' involvement influences their attitudes and behaviors towards their children (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995). In line with the identity theory, the three Korean fathers' identity partly depends on their view of Korean fatherhood. And that fathers' involvement largely depends on the meaning and importance that the fathers assign to such involvement in U.S. schools. For example, Participant B and C's roles were centered around providing basic needs for their children's academic success particularly around English learning and school adjustment and set their identity as providers. However, Participant A's role was not only focused on providing for educational needs, but also play partner stemming from his valuing of physical development of his child.

The common interests among the three fathers are focused on their children's linguistic problems. Three Korean fathers pay attention to their children's reading and writing skills, specifically how their children can acculturate to U.S. school settings. Moreover, two of the participants (Participant C and Participant B) have communication problems with U.S. teachers. These findings are very similar to Delgado-

Gaitan's (2004) findings that immigrant parents whose experience with U.S. schools are minimal or associated with negative attitude feel intimidated because of language problems. Language is key determinant for immigrant parents' participation in their children's school activities in the U.S. At the same time, Korean fathers' social skill is also a main indicator for their level of involvement in U.S. schools.

As predicted, overall, the three Korean fathers were more involved in their children's learning and schooling rather than when in Korea. The participants have a more active role in the U.S. and shared much parental roles with their wives. Participants were supportive and participated in most of their children's activities such as reading books, providing a ride go to the libraries, helping their children's homework, and hiring personal tutors. Rather than abiding strictly to Korean traditional fathers' expected roles of hard workers as financial supporter, the three participants accepted new expectations and made a cultural adjustment to adopt the new fathering practice embedded in the American culture of fathers' roles. However, the participants encountered some barriers and problems, including cultural challenges and diverse needs from American schools. For example, language barriers hindered involvement of three immigrant Korean fathers to attend school activities such as parent-teacher conferences and other school events. The lack of understanding of the American behavioral sub-cultures, such as those related to reactions about American humor and American teachers and parents' jokes and funny behaviors, limited the participants involvement in school activities together with their children.

The results of the study have implications for U.S. early childhood educators working with Korean fathers. American educators should consider the potential barrier of language, and cultural differences as well as struggles arising from adjustment to fathering expectations when interacting with Korean fathers. It is important that teachers and school administrators in the U.S. understand immigrant

families' cultural background with respect for diversity. Additional education, training, resources to educators and Korean fathers may be need to better facilitate Korean fathers' involvement in children's learning and schooling.

Further, there is a need for flexible personal leave policies for fathers to allow for more active participation. For example, Korean fathers hardly attend father involvement programs because many school activities occur while Korean fathers are at work. Also, employers should be encouraged to provide fathers with some flexibility in their work schedules so that fathers can participate in school events and PTA meetings.

This study has significant limitations. We relied only on fathers' self reports and did not include their wives' and children's perceptions of fathers' roles and involvement. Indeed, this study used data only from a single interview from highly educated Korean fathers. Thus, additional contextual father studies incorporating multiple reports of fathering practices from various sources such as mothers' interviews and observation at home and school should be conducted. In addition, disparities between Korean parents' and children's identification with Korean culture predicted children's anti-social behaviors and maladjustment in U.S. school (Kim, 2008). Further exploration of Korean father's role in children's identification with Korean culture and its implication should be considered. Future studies will be required in developing more diverse approaches of fathers' roles and involvement using various research methods.

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