Unpacking Parent Involvement: Korean American Parents' Collective Networking

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which a group of Korean American parents perceived and responded to institutional inequalities in a family–school partnership. In their school, which had a growing Asian population, the dominant group's middle-class perspective on parent involvement became normal and operated as an overarching structure. Drawing from critical inquiry and Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological theory, this study unpacks the ethnic networks of a Korean meeting and the interactive relationships between the Korean group and the school. By focusing on the complex negotiations the Korean group constructed as they engaged in their children's schooling, this study reconsiders conventional avenues of parent involvement that often reinforce inequalities in building effective family–school partnerships across diverse families.

Key Words: community forces, family–school partnerships, Korean Americans, parental involvement, diverse families, parents, collective networking, ethnic groups, linguistic minority, languages, cultural barriers, Asian students

Introduction

Building partnerships with diverse families has been a pressing issue for teachers and administrators who serve increasingly diverse student populations. While parent involvement has been considered a crucial factor conducive to better educational achievement (Berger, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007), evidence of the effectiveness of school-based involvement

is not conclusive. For instance, Mattingly and her colleagues' evaluation study (2002) found that parent involvement programs did not necessarily improve student learning or change teacher, parent, or student behavior. In contrast, Lee and Bowen (2006) reported a high level of association between parent involvement at school and their children's academic achievement, but noted significant group differences in levels of parent involvement at school. Parent involvement at school occurred most frequently among middle-class European Americans and those who had attained higher levels of education. In a research synthesis of 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded that parent involvement at home more consistently promotes children's academic achievement than does parent involvement at school. Similarly, Kim (2002) noted that school-based parent involvement, such as school contact and PTA participation, had no significant impact on Korean immigrant children's achievement, whereas home-based involvement was positively related to their achievement.

To address this inconsistent effect of school-based parent involvement, many researchers have challenged its dominant definition, which is deeply rooted in a middle-class perspective of what parent involvement means and looks like (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Valdes, 1996). In the U.S., the dominant perspective on parenting and parent involvement tends to presuppose a universal model of child-rearing that positions White, middle-class women as ideal mothers (Coll & Pachter, 1995; Prins & Toso, 2008). According to this White, middle-class perspective, ideal parents demonstrate responsiveness by investing intensively in their children's education. Such a perspective imposes a moral logic on parents by emphasizing that "being successful as mothers meant being attentive to schools and teachers" (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 40).

In school contexts, this middle-class definition of parent involvement often privileges parent participation over other forms of involvement, such as home-based learning. Although schools continue to promote parent involvement by planning and implementing various programs in and outside of schools, these practices are likely to focus on what parents do to engage with their children's schooling (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Parent involvement has been defined as parents focusing on classroom and school needs—and otherwise becoming invisible (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this middle-class construction of parent involvement, minority groups of parents—such as those who are working-class, poor, racial/ethnic minorities, or speakers of English as their second language—tend to be constrained in active ownership within schools due to their lack of knowledge about the "legitimate" forms of parent involvement (Bernhard, Freire, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Villanueva, 1998; Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001).

These studies charge schools with redefining family–school partnerships in a professionally responsible manner, posing the question of what is meant by parental involvement. This requires a paradigm shift in defining avenues of parent involvement from a linear, unidirectional emphasis on the part of parents to a notion of "shared responsibility" within and across the contexts of school, family, and community (Epstein, 2001, p. 40). As a cultural representation of parent involvement, ethnic communities can generate distinct modes of reciprocal relationships with schools. Immigrant studies show that a close-knit community in which members maintain strong intragroup relationships and preserve cultural values can provide community-driven benefits conducive to better social adjustment and academic achievement (Portes, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For instance, in Lew's (2006) study, Korean American parents at an elite high school gained access to structural resources embedded in strong intragroup networks, such as information on schooling and the school system, as a means of compensating for their limited English skills and scant bilingual assistance.

Few studies, however, have examined the intragroup networking of ethnic parent groups in school settings, a factor that influences minority parents' access to institutional resources and relationships with schools. Although it is an oversimplification to assume that people of a particular ethnic group have one universal identity and all act in a similar way, a close examination of the interactions within ethnic intragroup networks nevertheless reveals the complex negotiations the members construct as they engage in parent involvement.

This article examines the ways in which a group of parents who had emigrated from the Republic of Korea perceived and responded to institutional inequalities in family–school partnership. In this study, inequalities in family–school partnership remained unchallenged, as the dominant group's perspective on parent involvement was normalized in the school. Critical inquiry and Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological theory serve as the theoretical bases for describing how these Korean American parents negotiated the dominant perspective of parent involvement within the school community. I will show how the collective networking of these parents represented community forces that influenced the members' response to the dominant discourse. In conclusion, I will consider implications for educational practices and future research focusing on building effective family–school partnerships across diverse groups of families.

Minority Parents' Involvement in Education

Family and school, two primary sources of child development, can positively influence children's learning by offering a synergistic partnership (Epstein,

2001). Research shows that, regardless of their ethnic background or socioeconomic status, students with involved parents are more likely to perform well academically, attend school regularly, and advance to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Nonetheless, research shows that families with linguistic and cultural backgrounds different from that of the host culture are likely to be less actively involved in school activities compared to their "mainstream" counterparts (Edwards & Dandridge, 2001). The tendency toward "passive" participation among minority families has been largely conceived as a phenomenon rooted in structural and cultural barriers between home and school. Most minority families who lack knowledge about the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988) within the mainstream schools encounter more obstacles in their access to institutional resources compared with native-born parents (Turney & Kao, 2009). In one study, even immigrant parents without language barriers reported challenges in understanding school culture and routines due to their lack of cultural knowledge and school-specific language (Isik-Ercan, 2010). Lee (2005) identified both structural and cultural barriers to participation among groups of Korean American parents in a Korean–English two-way immersion program: structural barriers included communicative competence issues such as lack of linguistic knowledge and confidence, time conflicts, and limited institutional support; cultural barriers involved different norms and values related to parental participation and respect for authority.

Parents whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from those of the host culture often employ distinct patterns of involvement practices that may not fit with traditional forms of parent involvement. For example, in Siu's (2001) study, Chinese American families used a variety of community resources and informal networks to support their children's learning in and out of the home, while they did not participate actively in school functions such as volunteering or policymaking. In another study, immigrant Latino parents emphasized the social and moral development of their children, yet tended to consider academic instruction at home inappropriate, as they believed education should be the teachers' role (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Li's (2006) study of Chinese parents' involvement in literacy and schooling illustrated the cultural conflicts occurring between Canadian teachers and Asian immigrant parents. Unlike the widely researched, lower SES minority families, the middle- and upper-class Chinese parents in this study actively resisted school practices that did not match their own views on education. Their interventions at home were intended to counterbalance their children's failure to acquire the literacy skills necessary for academic success. However, rather than creating the desired remedial effects, the cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications between the teachers and parents intensified the differences between school and home.

Moreover, schools often maintain and reproduce social inequalities in a broader society, since unequal power relations between minority families and schools reaffirm mainstream perspectives and practices (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Villenas, 2001). Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) challenged the deficit model regarding minority parents by arguing that parental engagement should be understood through parents' presence in schooling, regardless of the types of spaces they occupy. Research reveals how immigrant parents' limited knowledge and understanding of school practices prevent them from building collaborative family–school relationships (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Ramirez, 2003) and problematize their cultural values and practices that differ from mainstream school culture (Chin & Phillips, 2004).

Theoretical Perspectives

Critical Inquiry

In this study, I adopt critical inquiry as a means for locating "the meaning of events within the context of asymmetrical power relations" (Thomas, 2003, p. 46). Critical research assumes that "all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139). It aims to "unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces" situated in meaning construction (Crotty, 1998, p. 12), thereby effectively disclosing the complexity and power asymmetry embedded in family–school relationships.

Accepting this critical perspective, I understand parent involvement as the process of negotiating contested meanings and actions among multiple social actors within schools. As a collective mode of social interaction, intragroup networking within a particular ethnic group affects the members' interplay with the school. Simultaneously, the dominant perspective valued and practiced by the school creates an overarching structure that influences actions and meanings among the group members. Thus, a critical examination of the workings of power relations between the school and a minority group can reveal "broader social processes of control, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others" (Thomas, 2003, p. 48).

Cultural Ecological Theory

According to Ogbu, cultural ecological theory postulates two sets of factors that affect minority school performance: "how society at large and the school treat minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces)" (1999, p. 156). Based on

this presupposition, two types of minority groups are distinguishable by the groups' orientations toward the host society and schooling: broadly speaking, voluntary minorities (whose migrations were voluntarily chosen) adopted an adaptive, instrumental approach toward the host society and its institutions; involuntary minorities (whose migrations were forced) developed an oppositional approach to the host society and its institutions (Ogbu, 1991).

Ogbu's notion of community forces is useful for examining the social interactions between an ethnic group and an institution. As products of sociocultural adaptation within a particular ethnic community, community forces entail a set of specific beliefs, values, behavioral patterns, and coping strategies in response to adverse societal treatment (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1995). Foster (2004) suggested that cultural ecological theory can unveil complexity embedded in minority groups' experiences by recognizing the dynamic interaction between community and system forces.

Specifically, the individualism and collectivism framework is appropriate for describing the way a group of Korean American parents operates community forces. While the dominant U.S. culture is undoubtedly individualistic, emphasizing individual fulfillment and choice, two-thirds of the world's cultures, including Korean culture, can be regarded as collectivistic (see Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). In collectivistic cultures, fitting in with others and fulfilling the obligations inherent in various interpersonal relationships is regarded as an ideal construal of self. To maintain harmonious relationships with others, a high degree of self-control and self-discipline is required; personal desires, goals, and emotions are subject to control (Shweder et al., 1998). Drawing from this collectivistic framework, this study examines community forces adopted by a group of Korean American parents as they interacted with their children's school.

Method

The Setting

This study took place at North Creek Elementary School, located in the city of Jackson, a southeastern, suburban, mainly middle- to upper-class, predominantly White community with a large Asian population including Chinese, Koreans, and Indians, with a smaller percentage of African Americans and Hispanics. (Note: Pseudonyms are used throughout for the school, all locations, participants, and individuals mentioned by participants.) North Creek Elementary School was selected because of its proportion of Korean student enrollment: approximately 11% of the student population was identified as first or second generation Korean American. The school is a one-story building

built in 1997, serving 828 preK–5th graders from mainly middle- and upper-class families (the free and reduced lunch rate was 3%). The community had "nice, stable" parents who were, according to the principal, "very supportive but…not demanding." There were 103 staff members working at the school, and the average class size was 20. The school was renowned for its academic excellence and active PTA, being ranked by parents as one of the top schools in the area.

At the time of this study, North Creek Elementary School was in transition. Beginning in 2003, the Asian influx and the declining number of White families in the neighborhood transformed the school's demographics. According to the 2007–2008 State of the School Address, 55% of the student population was categorized as "Other," a category consisting mainly of Asian (30%), Asian Indian (20%), Multicultural (3%), and Hispanic (2%) students. The White student population steadily and significantly decreased from 81% in 1997 to 38% in 2007. The Black student population increased from 2% in 1997 to 7% in 2007.

To cope with this demographic transformation, North Creek Elementary School organized several initiatives to reach out to Asian families: an International PTA committee (including 57 members from 15 different countries in 2008), a Get Smart About Culture program (parental presentations about world culture in classrooms), the North Creek 3.0 Committee (a task force to address demographic change), an Adult ESL course (a one hour per week conversation-focused program), and a foreign language translation service staffed by parent volunteers. Asian families joined these efforts to create strong family–school partnerships; one group of Korean parents voluntarily organized a Korean parents' meeting as a means of improving their efficacy in participation through intragroup networks.

Participants

The participants consisted of a group of Korean American parents whose children were enrolled in North Creek Elementary School. Access to a primary parent informant was granted through the principal's referral, and this parent linked me to other Korean parents who were acquainted with one another through the Korean parents' meeting. Along with this "snowball sampling" (Patten, 2002), advertisements recruiting research participants were posted in the school's newsletter. In all, 12 Korean parents—11 mothers and 1 father—participated in the study. All of the Korean parents had at least a Bachelor's degree, and six of them held Master's degrees earned in either Korea or the United States (one was enrolled in an American graduate school at the time of the study). Length of residence in the United States varied from 2–27 years.

In addition to the Korean participants, five school personnel (the principal, the assistant principal, and three teachers), three White parents who served on the PTA board, and one Taiwanese mother participated in the study. They were selected in an effort to gain a contextual understanding of North Creek Elementary School and to provide institutional perspectives in relation to parent involvement.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected was part of a critical ethnographic case study intended to examine issues in the general context of immigrant parents' involvement in schools. Fieldwork spanned Fall 2007 through Spring 2008 and included several methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Individual interviews lasted from 1–1½ hours and were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews with Koreans were conducted and transcribed in Korean and later translated into English. Along with the interviews, I observed school events and parent meetings (including PTA meetings), the Adult ESL course, and family nights. I regularly attended Korean parents' meetings and participated in several Korean parents' volunteer activities, including presentations to classes and lunch for teachers. In the final phase of data collection, I also conducted a focus group interview with attendees of the Korean parent meeting.

In order to access comparable perspectives distributed throughout social groups, thematic coding as outlined by Flick (2002) was used for data analysis. First, a brief description of the participants and main themes was produced for each case and continuously modified as necessary. By using open and selective coding, I next developed a series of categories for the single cases that were representative of thematic domains. Then, I crosschecked successive cases based on the developed thematic structure for cross-case comparison. Negative cases were identified and preserved in order to avoid the "superficiality" that often results from aggregating or averaging multiple cases (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 435). Lastly, results of case comparisons were displayed in matrix form according to social group (Korean parents, non-Korean parents, and school personnel), thereby demonstrating the social distribution of perspectives on the issues.

Researcher Role

Indigenous ethnographers who study their own cultural groups need to be cautious about their presupposed insider status and their potential for distorting meaning construction (Jones, 1995). While I benefited from sharing an ethnic background with the Korean participants in terms of easy access and a

precise understanding of cultural meanings and demeanors, my insider "familiarity" also had the potential of leading to taken-for-granted and exaggerated interpretations (Mercer, 2007). I was somewhat careful to avoid sensitive topics in order to maintain positive relationships with my Korean participants, especially those associated with the Korean parent meeting. I consciously maintained a reserved demeanor and tried not to interrupt conversations while participating in the Korean meeting. My deliberate self-representation may have been ethically inappropriate, yet this presentation of self allowed me to be accepted into the collectivistic culture of the meeting.

Additionally, studying my own ethnic group offered both advantages and challenges in data generation. As a speaker of English as a second language, I could capture the subtle meanings and intentions between the lines of their words as I communicated with Korean participants in the Korean language. However, translating their words into idiomatic English language was a daunting task. Although I consulted on my translations with native English speakers, the precise meanings of words and sentences may be lost in the process of translation.

Findings

"We Want the Parents to Be Part of the Classroom."

North Creek Elementary School has been recognized as a National PTA School of Excellence and has received several awards for academic excellence. As Lareau (2002, 2003) points out, middle-class families coordinate intensive interactions with schools on behalf of their children's academic success. Middle- and upper-class families at North Creek are actively encouraged to volunteer for classroom and school activities and join PTA-organized fundraiser programs. According to the principal, more than 90% of the school's parents had joined the PTA, and through this organization, a substantial proportion of the school's activities (e.g., the Accelerated Reader program, Fall Carnival, Science Force, and Field Day) had been organized and implemented by parent volunteers. The school also operates the Foundation, a non-profit organization for parents, the public, and business community donors, along with a local school council consisting of the principal and representatives of parents, teachers, and business partners. All school staff and parents in this study revealed their pride in the school and considered family–school partnerships as the most influential factor in maintaining the school's tradition of academic excellence. As a White parent who was actively involved in classroom activities and served on the PTA board decisively concluded, "A strong school needs strong teachers, strong students, strong administrators, and strong parents."

The notion of parent involvement prevailing in the school reflected the middle-class mothering discourse of parental responsiveness to institutional needs. Despite a positive partnership between families and the school, there was a clear boundary preventing parents from accessing certain classroom practices. Families were frequently invited to volunteer for the school and within classrooms, yet classroom visits were strictly limited by a preappointment policy. The school website provided the following policy regarding classroom visits: "We value every minute of instructional time with our students. Unless you have an appointment or are volunteering in the classroom as scheduled by the teacher, please do not enter your child's classroom." Classroom volunteering was a legitimate opportunity for families to observe what was going on in the classroom, often fulfilling their hidden motive of monitoring teaching practices in order to protect their children from possible disadvantages. Another White parent explained her reasons for active involvement in volunteering:

> I don't want to turn my child over to someone….They [teachers] are teaching book knowledge and raising my child just as much as I'm raising my child. That's why I can't just say, "OK, you do it, you teach them."

The teachers in this study considered middle-class parents' intensive support and high expectations beneficial, but also considered it "extra work" that placed them under scrutiny from families who constantly monitored the quality of the curriculum. In particular, the teachers perceived Asian parents as excessively academically oriented and believed that American parents appraised their children's achievement more objectively. A prekindergarten teacher explained, "American parents…want their children to do well, but more realize that sometimes their abilities are different.…International [Asian] parents… are not always disrespectful, but they just push, push."

Research shows that Asian families tend to engage in a variety of educational activities in and outside of the home in order to promote their children's learning but are less involved in volunteering or decision-making at schools (Kim, 2002; Siu, 2001). Similarly, Asian families at North Creek Elementary School tended to be less actively involved in school activities and volunteering compared to White families. Presumably, limited English proficiency and uncertainty about the school system contributed to Asian families' low levels of participation. However, culture-based beliefs about the appropriate role of parents also likely influenced their choices about how to be involved in their children's schooling (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Asian families' active involvement at home did not receive much recognition from the school, even as these families' strong academic focus was taken for granted due to the parents' high overall expectations.

Because North Creek Elementary School relied greatly on parental support in school functioning, the increase in the Asian school population and its tendency to participate less in school affairs resulted in frustration on the part of the school staff. The principal stated:

> Some Asian cultures, they generally tend to bring their children to the school, and they don't come in or help the teachers, like what we expect, what we want here. So there has just been a kind of difference in the role of parents playing out at school. Here in North Creek, we want the parents to be part of the classroom.

As revealed in the principal's statement, parent involvement in school, which consisted of coordinated institutional actions between the school and families, took priority over other forms of involvement at North Creek. The assumption underpinning this notion of parent involvement legitimates the middle-class mothering discourse of parental responsiveness to institutional needs. Even the outreach programs which aimed to promote Asian families' participation in the school (e.g., the international PTA committee, adult ESL class, and Get Smart About Culture program), relied exclusively on parent volunteers. The emphasis on parents serving classroom and school needs was taken for granted within the school context.

Asian families have often been labeled as "non-participating" or "less involved" by school personnel and White parents. White parents in this study viewed Asian mothers, not fathers, as needing to "build confidence that makes it easier for them to volunteer in the classroom" and "be part of their kid's education, because here we are part of our children's education." They insisted on Asian parents' further engagement in the school in order to maintain the tradition of a strong PTA. The chair of the international PTA committee expressed her disagreement with the stereotypical assumption of "passive" Asian families held by many Americans, including teachers and administrators at the school:

> We have many nuances in our culture that we just take for granted….We have culture, too. They [Asian families] are trying to adjust, and I think the hardest one is that teacher saying, "They're not trying." I haven't yet met *a* parent at this school who *isn't* trying to adapt to being in the United States. They are *all* trying.

Korean parents, whose children comprised approximately 11% of the total student population, had contributed to reinforcing this image of "passive" or "less involved" Asians. While several Korean parents actively participated in the classroom and school activities, only one Korean served on the PTA board, in contrast to the five Indian and six Chinese parents, respectively, among over 55 positions listed on the board. Historical cultural contexts provide a more

comprehensive understanding of what underlies Korean American parents' perceptions and actions in parent involvement. What follows illustrates how historical and cultural situations have influenced the ways in which Korean parents have viewed education and parental roles within the school.

Korean Americans' Perspectives on Parenting

The Korean American parents appeared to share the middle-class perspective on ideal parenting that emphasizes parental support for schooling. They coordinated daily schedules based on their children's needs and interests in order to provide extensive opportunities for educational development. They knew American schools expected parents to be involved in schools and participated in school activities tailored to the school's requirements as much as they could. Most of the Korean parents did research to select the best school for their children, perceiving North Creek Elementary as an ideal place for promoting their children's learning. One Korean parent described how her family decided to move to this city in search of a better educational environment: "Many Mexican families moved to my town. Among 18 students in my child's first grade class, seven kids went to the ESL class. Too many ESL students would not be good for my child's education. So, we moved." She regarded having a middle-class family background as a key component for academic excellence and fewer disciplinary issues at school.

The idea of parenting constructed by the Korean parents aligns with Korean historical and cultural contexts. Historically, Koreans view education as a means to success, power, and status (Sorensen, 1994). Kim (1993) found that Korean American immigrant parents regarded "prestige [as] synonymous with the academic achievement of their children" (p. 228). In addition, Park (1998) reported that Korean immigrant parents held very high educational and occupational aspirations. The Korean American parents in this study tended to reflect this Korean value of educational success, regardless of their length of residence in the United States. For example, Diane, who immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was in middle school, admitted her parenting perspective was similar to the traditional Korean one. While she had largely assimilated into American society and had a Caucasian husband, Diane put a great deal of pressure on her two children to get good grades: "I am quite similar to Korean parents in terms of pushing my children…I used to say to them, 'I did a good job even though I could not speak English when I came here. Why can't you do that?'"

Despite the high value Korean families placed on education, their cultural assumptions about proper family–school relationships differed from the perspective held by mainstream schools rooted in individualistic cultures. In the

collectivistic East Asian culture from which the parents came, a school tends to represent an authoritative, separate space demarcated from home by a clear boundary (Walsh, 2002). The collectivism-based perspective of respect for authority (Trumbull et al., 2001) influenced the ways in which the Korean families interacted with teachers and administrators at North Creek Elementary. The school staff generally portrayed Korean families as "respectful," "supportive," and "valuing education" while also identifying them as being reserved and self-conscious in their ways of interacting. One teacher, expressing her difficulty in communicating with Korean parents, stated "it's a very one-sided conversation." Another Korean parent, who was a music teacher in Korea before she immigrated to the United States, seldom attempted to influence her children's school experiences. Although she had taught professionally in the past, she rarely challenged teachers' pedagogy, instead showing them a great amount of respect: "I ask questions, but do not oppose their opinions. All of the teachers are very nice and give me a lot of advice. And the things they tell me really are my child's weaknesses." She had been surprised by American parents' overt demands for their children to be favored when she volunteered for a classroom party and came to realize cultural difference in defining parent involvement:

> This may be a kind of American way of parental involvement.…Volunteer mothers' children came forward and gave the teacher flowers and gifts one by one. "Thank you," the teacher hugged each of the volunteer mothers' children.…I've never seen anything like it before. Ah! American mothers make their children stand out very openly, and they may do this other times when I am not in the classroom.

In addition to these cultural differences in parent–teacher interaction, successful parent participation was challenging for the Korean parents in this study, as in similar findings reported in Korean immigrant studies (Kim & Greene, 2003; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Although the parents were highly educated and willing to be involved in their children's education, traditional American forms of participation such as attending parent–teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, and fundraising for the school tended to be difficult for immigrant parents. One Korean parent, who had two daughters in the 6th and 2nd grades, spoke of the difficulties that resulted from her limited knowledge about educational activities in the school:

> For example, when there was a Christmas party in the classroom.…We are not familiar with the kinds of games played at the party because we did not grow up in this culture. It's much easier for Americans to prepare a Christmas party because that's the way they live.

She said that in her second daughter's classroom, where 11 of the 17 students were Asian American, a White mother who worked full time had to perform the role of room mother (who hosts the classroom parties) because no Asian parents volunteered to do it. Another Korean parent, whose active participation had been acknowledged by the school staff, expressed her persistent anxiety about visiting the school even after 12 years of residence in the United States: "Once I plan to go to the school, I become nervous. What if I smell bad? I actually try not to cook before going to the school.…Seriously, I'm worried that I might stink." While both parents spoke English well enough to communicate with the teachers and administrators, most of the Korean parents, except for those who were studying or had studied in the United States, often encountered language barriers in their interactions with Americans which contributed to their hesitation to participate.

Such commonly shared challenges to active involvement motivated some Korean parents to pursue intragroup collaboration. In spring 2006, a group of Korean parents who had become acquainted through an international school event voluntarily organized a Korean parent meeting. As a collective mode of parental participation, this intragroup network affected the members' perceptions and actions in response to the dominant perspective on parent involvement at North Creek.

Living Up to Being Voluntary Minorities: Community Forces Within the Korean Meeting

The primary function of the Korean parent meeting was to make it easier for its members to participate in the school. The meeting took place monthly or bimonthly, and on average 10–12 Korean mothers attended. The members were able to access information and support grounded in mutual relationships and shared cultural beliefs and values (Coleman, 1988). In particular, the meeting focused on helping new members adjust to the school system. New members were welcomed by parents with children in similar grades and were able to gain access to various information about the school system. A new member in her second year of living in the United States explained her motivation for attending the Korean parent meeting:

> Through the meeting, I get specific information about school volunteer opportunities and work that couldn't be done by me alone. Some mothers know more about the school because they've been in the school for years. They are very helpful to me. I like this meeting because we can volunteer and help each other.

In sum, the Korean parent meeting helped to fortify Korean families against the disadvantages they might encounter as a minority immigrant group. While to some extent the Korean parent meeting attempted to meet the school's call for reviving parental participation, ultimately it represented community forces that provided the members with useful coping strategies which helped to improve individual parents' efficacy in parent involvement.

As expected from its collaborative nature, the consolidation of community forces within the Korean parent meeting appeared to valorize collective harmony rather than individual conspicuousness. Opposition to this collectivistic, interdependent norm implies standing out from the group, immaturity, and selfishness (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Members were likely to identify with the collective goals regulating the Korean parent meeting, and disagreements or conflicting ideas were seldom mentioned during the meetings themselves. One member described her acceptance of the collective norms: "If there are orders from the top, following the rules is a shortcut to peace. Well, you do feel bad sometimes, though."

The collectivistic community forces affected the ways in which the Korean parents perceived and responded to the dominant perspective on parent involvement at North Creek, which prioritized institutional goals over other forms of involvement. The parents who played active roles in the Korean parent meeting strove to fit the school's standard, explicitly emphasizing joint conformity to the school among their fellow members. During the meeting time, members were frequently instructed, "This meeting is not a separate Korean PTA; it is not appropriate for us to exert any control over the school." Supporting the school, specifically by active volunteering, was the ideal of good membership. Given their middle-class status and strong academic focus, it is possible that some Korean parents would have wanted to influence or control their child's school experience through the collective action of the meeting. However, opposition to a normalized perspective implies that one would stand out from the group, in this case both the larger school community and the Korean meeting. In individual interviews, some members revealed resentment against the derogatory labeling of Asian families as "non-participating," yet such criticisms were never shared at the meeting.

In many ways, the Korean American parents of the meeting appear to fit well into Ogbu's (1991) typology of voluntary minorities. They successfully provided their children with an enriched learning environment and initiated intragroup collaboration to ameliorate their challenges with school involvement. Moreover, they were eager to be part of the school community despite the school's insensitivity toward cultural differences. Even though their conformity to the dominant perspective within the school may maintain and

reinforce inequalities between Korean families and the school, they wanted to live up to being "model minorities" by supporting the school community as a whole. One Korean parent, who initiated and led the Korean parent meeting, expressed her desire for Koreans to be acknowledged as exemplary within the school community:

> Wouldn't it be great if Korean parents volunteered out of Korean pride?…If I were an American, I might not be involved as much as I am now. Because I'm a Korean, I hate people to think that Koreans do not volunteer, never attend the school events, and don't care.…Because of that, I do my best.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Korean American parents as a group perceived and responded to inequalities in the dominant perspective on parent involvement in a public school in the southeastern United States. In a suburban elementary school with a growing Asian population, Asian families were perceived as a problem, since the school normalized the middle-class notion of parent involvement that prioritized parental responsiveness to school needs over other forms of involvement. At the school, parents played supplementary roles in operating school functions, and the recent increase in the Asian population and its tendency to participate less in school affairs made the school's tradition of strong parent involvement problematic. According to Ogbu's (1995) cultural ecological model, most of the Korean American parents were voluntary minorities who had voluntarily migrated to the United States and considered education a means to achieving social mobility. Despite the challenges they encountered while engaging in their children's schooling, historical and cultural beliefs on education lived in the Korean parents' minds as an ideal form of parenting. As a coping strategy against structural and cultural barriers to parent involvement, a group of Korean parents organized a Korean parent meeting as an avenue for collective participation through intragroup networking.

Collective intragroup networks within the Korean parent meeting unveil the complex negotiations the members constructed while engaging in the school. Strong ethnic solidarity and cultural bonds among this group activated community forces that influenced the members' relationships with the school both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the collaborative ethnic networks of the Korean parent meeting promoted the members' efficacy in parent involvement by compensating for their lack of familiarity with American schools. Immigrant studies (e.g., Lee, 2005) have identified structural barriers (e.g., the language barrier, time constraints, and lack of knowledge about school culture)

as major impediments to minority immigrant parents' participation in schools. These structural barriers were certainly present in this study. However, most participant parents involved themselves in intragroup collaboration to overcome these challenges and were acknowledged as "active participants." On the other hand, the community forces within the Korean parent meeting were likely to exacerbate asymmetric power relations between the Korean parents and the school which already exist in any school–parent dyad (Fine, 1993). Rather than amplify individual voices against the institutional status quo, the collectivistic orientation within the Korean parent meeting led its members to become quiet, obedient, and responsive to the school's needs for the sake of group solidarity.

The findings of this study offer several implications for schools. First, it is important for administrators and teachers to examine their "taken for granted" notions of parent involvement. The current definition of parent involvement prevailing in most schools is grounded in the middle-class, White perspective which focuses on parental participation in schooling. However, notions of parent involvement are socially and historically constructed. Cultural studies reveal how parenting is constructed by and evolves with constituents in a particular cultural and historical context (see Coll & Pachter, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). Different cultural communities may have different ideals of good parenting, and as such, no one "right" way of parent involvement exists. This study unpacked how the school privileged one certain notion of parent participation emphasizing parental responsiveness to institutional needs over other types of involvement. Although Asian families in general and Korean parents in particular did not usually actively engage in school activities in the same ways native-born American families did, making a judgment about parents based on the school's standards may reproduce the deficit model that already prevails in views on minority schooling.

Second, schools should initiate a genuine dialogue to connect effectively with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The Korean American parents in this study rarely attempted to position themselves as teachers' equals due to their cultural value of respect for authority. Despite their strong educational backgrounds and middle-class status, they were unlikely to engage in discussions about the curricular, assessment, and instructional methods that most influence their children's learning. If schools utilize many methods of communication, such as informal contacts, dialogue journals, discussion groups, parent–teacher–student conferences, oral and written family stories, and classroom projects using family funds of knowledge, teachers and families will be able to learn from each other regardless of their differences (see strategies suggested in Allen, 2007; Kyle et al., 2002; Trumbull et al., 2001).

Finally, schools need to be aware of cultural differences among diverse families and build culturally relevant home–school partnerships. Families from cultures in which parental participation has not been emphasized as much as it is in the United States may be overwhelmed by teachers' demands for them to partner with the school. Asian families, for instance, tend to employ different avenues of parent involvement that are more accessible for them, such as home-based involvement. Even though home-based involvement has been considered a better predictor for academic success than school-based involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), the school staff in this study gave less recognition to Korean families' active involvement in their children's learning at home. Careful consideration of historical and cultural contexts will help schools gain a more culturally responsive understanding of family–school relations and provide multiple ways to partner with their students' families.

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