

Invisible Americans: Exploring Asian Parents' Perception about School Discrimination in the U.S.

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Abstract

As American schools have become increasingly diverse, school-based discrimination toward immigrant students has gained wide scholarly attention. While Asian Americans are the second fastest-growing racial group in the nation and need closer attention, the study of Asian Americans has been limited, perhaps because of a "model minority" misconception.

The present study explores school-based discrimination toward Asian American students in the U.S., as perceived by their parents. The data was collected using three means: (1) preliminary content analysis of Korean American parents' community weblogs, (2) self-reported structured questionnaire surveys, and (3) in-depth personal interviews. The survey participants were 67 Korean American parents in the U.S. Eight of those 67 participants were interviewed.

The results show that Korean American parents perceive discrimination by school staff, unfair punishment, and improper handling of complaints. Examining Asian parents' perceptions of their children's educational experiences provides a unique view of the challenges faced by Asian American youth and insight into possible interventions schools could put in place to reduce discrimination and to enhance immigrant students' well-being and academic achievement.

Introduction

American schools are becoming more diverse racially and culturally. According to census data for 1940 to 1960, non-white students accounted for only 11-12% of the total enrollment. By 1996, non-white enrollment was at 36%, and by 2020, the population of minority students is expected to reach 46% in public schools in the U.S. (Ford & Harris, 1999). Asian Americans are the second fastest-growing racial group in the nation, growing 63.24% from 1990-2000, and recent data projected almost one in ten residents will be of Asian descent by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Surprisingly, Asian American issues have gained little attention (Nakanishi, 1988; Ong, 2000). The common “model minority” misconception depicts Asian Americans as educationally successful, overrepresented in higher education, and generally a “successful or model minority” (Hacker, 1992; Takagi, 1992). This myth creates a significant barrier to understanding the depth of discrimination against Asian Americans (Chow, 2011).

Asian students do, in fact, face discrimination and unequal treatment in educational settings (Teranishi, 2002). Recent empirical literature on discrimination issues of Asian American high school students (Fischer, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000), Asian American college students (Lee, 2003; Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004), and Chinese American college students (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2004) provide clear empirical support to the finding that perceived discrimination has a negative impact on mental health. School-based discrimination, especially, has been found adversely to affect academic achievement among minority children in general (Fischer et al., 2000) and children of immigrants in particular (Padilla & Duran, 1995; Stone & Han, 2005; Szalacha et al., 2003), including those of Asian descent (Fist & Carrera, 1988; Olsen, 1988). Because of the importance of academic achievement for higher education and a student’s future life, Asian American students’ experiences at school need to be adequately examined (Farkas, 1996).

Among the 50 distinct Asian American ethnic groups, Korean Americans are one of the fastest growing. Approximately 1.1 million Korean Americans lived in the United States at the time of the 2001 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). One-third of this population was made up of children and adolescents. The rapid growth of the Korean American population and the limited study of this group also demonstrate the need for more scholarly attention.

Thus, the present study is to explore school-based discrimination toward Korean American students, as perceived by their parents. Although it is important to distinguish between perceived and actual discrimination, how an individual perceives his or her environment may be more important than “objective reality,” in that one’s perceptions will influence how one responds to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). If parents perceive unfair treatment, then that perception could be their reality (Marcus et al., 1991).

Recognizing the importance of the above issues, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1. What type of school-based discrimination toward their children do Korean parents perceive?

RQ2. According to the parents' perspective, how does perceived school-based discrimination impact Korean American students?

Korean Americans tend to place young immigrants into two different categories. The "1.5 generation" (*ilchomose* in Korean) refers to Koreans who immigrated in childhood or adolescence with their parents, having been educated both in Korea and in America (Hurh, 1998), while "second-generation" refers to those who were born in the U.S. to Korean parents. Since second generation children generally have more competence in the English language and American culture than 1.5ers, many people assume that they would be less likely to experience discrimination in school. However, many Asians are still perceived as foreigners, no matter how many generations their families have lived in the U.S. (Mineta, 1997). Thus, the following research question is formulated:

RQ3. How does the level of perceived discrimination vary between U.S.-born students ("second generation") and immigrant students ("1.5ers")?

Methods & Procedures

The present study used three means of data collection to address the research questions: (1) preliminary analysis of the content of Korean American parents' community weblogs, (2) self-reported structured questionnaire surveys, and (3) in-depth follow-up personal interviews.

Preliminary Content Analysis

Two major Korean American parents' community weblogs (*missyusa.com* and *mizville.com*) were selected and content-analyzed, specifically the sections where parents share their children's school experiences. The purpose of this analysis was to find common issues of school discrimination among Korean Americans arising in public schools. In terms of parent testimonials, the authors could focus more on issues that are closer to the reality of Korean Americans. While researchers must have some reservations about taking websites as truthful records because one cannot verify the accuracy of the web contents or the identity of the writers, blogs do fascinatingly allow researchers to examine and enter a new realm of communication and self-representation (Ibrahim, 2006). The author chose these two particular websites because they are widely known among Korean American parents and they allow members only after strict identity confirmation procedures.

Any cases of perceived school-based discrimination posted on the two websites between January and December 2008 have been selected and content-analyzed for this study. During this period, a total of 40 parents posted on these two websites their experiences of school-based discrimination and racial incidents toward their children at

schools. Following standard practice for deriving emic categories/patterns (Miller et al., 2003), the authors reviewed and re-reviewed the 40 posted testimonials. Then the data were grouped into common categories based on emerging themes. In case of contradictory and ambiguous themes, the authors discussed and refined the themes based on mutual agreement. The data was originally written in Korean, and the major themes were translated into English. Common major themes found included unequal treatment, unfair grading, and unfair disciplinary action. All these themes were used to design survey and interview questions. In addition, important cases were also presented in the result section.

Questionnaire survey

Because of the difficulty of obtaining a reliable complete list of Korean immigrants in the area, this study employed convenience sampling combined with a snowball technique to recruit participants. The investigator contacted Korean church leaders and parents in the central Tennessee area and asked them to encourage participation in the study. Upon the participants' written consent, the questionnaires were administered and collected by the investigator in person. The respondents were then asked to suggest other potential participants for the survey. In total, 100 questionnaires were administered and 67 were returned, resulting in a 67% return rate.

Out of these 67 parents, 25 were male (37.3%), 40 were female (59.7%), and two did not answer the question about gender (3.0%). Of the 67 children, 40 were male (59.7%) and 27 were female (40.3%). The average parents' age was 41.92 years (SD = 5.43), while the average age of the children was 11.64 years (SD = 4.04). Thirty-one of the children were born in the U.S. (46.3%), while 36 were not born in the U.S. (53.7%). In the case of the children who were not born in the U.S., the average age when the child first came to the U.S. was 7.17 years (SD = 4.78).

The survey questionnaire was originally written in English and was translated into Korean by a Korean American bilingual interpreter. Then, following Brislin's (1980) suggestion, the Korean language version was *back-translated* into English again by the bilingual interpreter to ensure equivalence of meanings across the two language systems. In all cases, the respondents chose to complete the Korean version. It took 25-30 minutes to complete the survey.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included nine items assessing perceived school-based discrimination (e.g., unequal treatment, unfair grading, and disciplinary action). Three items about unfair disciplinary action and unfair treatment were adapted from the study of Ruck and Wortly (2002) and modified. The rest of the items were created by the investigator after consulting with other parents prior to the research and based on prior preliminary content analysis. The format was a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree); the smaller number indicated a higher degree of perceived unfair treatment or school discrimination. There were three open-ended questions, dealing with whether parents had perceived any discrimination,

more details about it, and how they dealt with those issues. The last part of the survey was comprised of the personal demographics section for both parents and children.

In-depth Personal Interviews

The questionnaire survey was followed by in-depth personal interviews of eight of the participants, based on their availability. The average age of the interviewees was 47.4 years old (SD = 2.61; range 44-52 years). Two interviewees were male, and six were female. All interviews were conducted by the author in Korean. The shared background of the interviewer with the interviewees (same ethnic origin and experience of having school-aged children of Asian minority) helped to draw more frank and candid opinions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety with the consent of the interviewees. Among the topics covered in the interview were open-ended interview questions that dealt with types of perceived discrimination toward their children, any effects of those discriminatory actions, and the parents' reaction. Based on the responses, follow-up questions were used to elicit specific incidents, typical experiences, and their reflections on the issues.

In analyzing the qualitative interview data, the same procedure was used as with the weblog content analysis. All of the questions and responses to open-ended questions were transcribed in their entirety by the investigator and then were grouped into common categories based on emerging themes. Before being presented, the findings from the Korean interviews were translated back into English by the investigator and verified by a Korean bilingual.

Results

Upon grouping the results of the preliminary weblog content analysis, the questionnaire surveys, and the in-depth interviews, three major themes developed, namely unfair treatment by school staff, disproportionate disciplinary action, and improper handling of complaints/injuries. To analyze the difference between the experiences of U.S-born children ("second generation") and non-U.S.-born children ("1.5ers"), a crosstab analysis was conducted. The analysis showed no significant difference between these two groups for all three issues.

Unfair Treatment by School Staff

The most common type of discrimination perceived by parents of Asian American students dealt with what they saw as unfair treatment by teachers and other school staff.

In the survey, all five questions regarding unequal treatment of Asian students showed significant agreement by the parents, ranging from 22.4% ("diminishing students' accomplishments") up to 40.3% ("unwillingness to give a referral to gifted program"). In response to the open-ended questions, 14 parents (20.9%) disclosed the specific type of treatment, and seven of them described it as unequal opportunities.

Eight parents out of 31 who had U.S.-born children showed agreement that they perceived unfair treatment, while 10 out of 36 parents who have non-U.S.-born children

reported the same experience (Pearson $X^2(13, N=67) = 16.3, p = .23$). This finding suggests that there is no significant difference between perceived discrimination toward Korean American students who came to the U.S. at an earlier age (“1.5ers”) and those who were born in the U.S. (“second generation”).

The personal interviews revealed cases of unfair treatment. One interviewee explains:

When my son was in high school, the counselor was not kind at all. If my son had questions, the counselor would say that he didn't need to know. The counselor acted like the student could not even approach him, but he was very kind to others [white students].

Another interviewee reported her experience:

When we asked if my daughter was eligible for the gifted program, the teacher said that my child would get into the program if her grades were good enough. However the teacher did not even look at my child's grade or score; neither did she explain what the criteria were. Later in another school, my child was admitted into the gifted program.

A respondent explains her child's experience of perceived unfair grading:

The teacher gave a zero twice because she could not find my child's assignment. However, my child was sure about turning in the assignment. Even my child's classmates saw her turn it in.

The same respondent describes how the teacher alienated her daughter:

The teacher treated my child as a total stranger....as stupid and incapable.... She once cried during school [after mistreatment by another student], and the teacher stated that in American culture, you are only allowed to cry when your parents die.... The teacher would not listen to my child's story. She only listened to the other student's versions of the story.

One interviewee reports unequal treatment regarding school athletic activities:

My son was recommended for American League baseball because he had talent. Even though his credentials had been evidenced by this objective criteria, he didn't even make the school baseball team.... He was very disappointed, hurt, and lost interest in sports for the rest of his school days.

In the blog, two cases of unequal treatment are presented here:

My middle school student C's teacher doesn't like Korean students, especially those who study hard. Whenever C asked a question of the teacher, she ignored it or said “I'm too busy to answer.” When C asked for her grade, the teacher said she couldn't answer that. But a few seconds later, white students asked for their grades and she answered them all one by one.

When D ran for vice president in his school he had to give a speech. All the kids made a video of their speech. However, when D made and gave

it, they played all of them except for D's. The teacher said that she was sorry and had forgotten. The teacher said that his homeroom teacher would later play it in class, but he didn't give it to the homeroom teacher, so the homeroom teacher was unable to play it.

Disproportionate Disciplinary Action

A second major theme dealt with parents' perceptions that their children had received harsher punishment than non-Asian students.

In the survey, in response to related survey questions, 17 parents (25.4%) indicated that they perceived heavier punishment being given to Asian students, and 16 parents (23.9%) felt that lighter punishment was given to white students, specifically. On the open-ended questions, among the 14 parents who explained what type of unfair treatment they perceived, seven described it as unfair disciplinary action toward their children.

Seven parents who have U.S.-born children reported that they had experienced this, while 11 parents of non-U.S.-born children reported unfair/disproportionate disciplinary action (Pearson $X^2(15, N = 67) = 11.76, p = .69$). This shows that there is no significant difference between perceived discrimination toward Korean American students who came to the U.S. at an earlier age ("1.5ers") and those who were born in the U.S. ("second generation").

In the personal interviews, the same sentiment about unfair discipline was revealed, as one parent described:

My child was in Kindergarten and was going to music class in a portable. The door shut before he got to it, and he was unable to open it. The music teacher did nothing about the other children's comments of 'K is not here.' For the entire class period K was outside, unable to get in. When the substitute teacher came to pick up the class and found him outside, she immediately sent him to the guidance counselor. The counselor was under the assumption that K had "boycotted music class" and refused to go in, so she gave him a stern talk.

Another incident of unfair punishment is reported as such:

For several weeks a student was bothering my child by pulling his shirt and kicking his foot. The student hit my child's stomach so he hit back in self-defense, but the school only gave my child ISS.

In the blog, a parent reported:

During lunch hour, B and friends played cards. They were a group of Koreans with one white student. They all received ISS except for the white student, even though the white student had brought cards also.

Improper Handling of Complaints/Injuries

The third major issue involved schools not properly handling Asian students' mistreatment by other students.

In the surveys, nine parents (13.4%) agreed with a question about unfair handling of personal injury to Asian students, and 23 parents (34.3%) showed their agreement regarding a lack of concern for minority students' safety.

In the personal interview, findings also revealed cases of Asian students being injured at school and the school handling the case improperly or unfairly. One parent mentions his experience:

My child was playing basketball and jumped up for a shot. He was intentionally pushed in the back by another student, fell head-first onto the asphalt, and scraped up his face. The teacher came over and even received evidence from a kindergarten parent (who had been watching) that he had been intentionally pushed. For some reason, the school nurse was not available and the school only called the student's father's office but did not leave any messages. They did not try to call home, although that was one of three emergency contact numbers in the student's records. Later, the school downplayed the incident in its accident report to the school board. Also, the school did not even punish the child who pushed my son.

Another parent also reported an incident of injury:

During PE class, my child was playing basketball and was hit with a ball and broke his glasses. However, my child wasn't sent to the school nurse, and no notification ever reached us [the parents].

The limited number of these cases reported is reflective of the common Asian cultural trait of "saving face." The author (himself Asian) assumes that the parents felt that such experiences would reflect negatively on their children. Also, limited English ability might be another factor that discouraged them from raising their concerns with the school authorities.

In the blog, only one case was described (in the time period that was analyzed), saying that the school did not take any steps when the parent reported that her son had been called "idiot" and other bad names all semester long.

Effects of the Discrimination

The parents in this study reported adverse effects on their children's confidence, self-image, and academic/activity goals. Most Asian immigrant students come from racially homogeneous countries and, therefore, may find being discriminated against very confusing (Levy-Warren, 1996), which magnifies the negative impacts.

In the personal interviews, one parent who experienced a teacher's unfair treatment, explained how the case affected his child's self-esteem:

My daughter once said to me, "Dad, I never realized that I was smart, I thought I was just an average student." I was shocked and was able to see how discriminating teachers can seriously influence the lower self-esteem of my child.

The parents felt it serious enough that they eventually transferred their daughter to another school.

Another parent who experienced unfair treatment in the area of athletic activity also commented about the effect on his future goal:

Later, I realized that it made a really serious impact on my son's life...
He was very disappointed, hurt, and lost interest in sports for the rest of his school days.

In case of unfair disciplinary action, one father said it "took quite some time and energy for the child to recover from the shock."

Discussion

The present study examined Korean parents' perceived discrimination toward their children in school settings. Preliminary analysis of Korean American parents' weblogs, surveys, and personal interviews were used to collect the data. In contrast to the notion that Asian Americans are free from discrimination, the findings reveal that Korean American parents perceive prevalent and varying types of school-based discrimination toward their children.

Regarding perceived patterns of discrimination, the most significant form of discrimination was found to be "unwillingness" to give referrals to the gifted program; 27 participants (41.5%) out of 67 parents reported this problem. This finding is consistent with existing literature indicating that children of color are underrepresented in gifted education programs (Ford & Harris, 1999) while being overrepresented in special education programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Failure to give correct grades and/or recognition to Asian students was also revealed, which could be an example of Luken's (1978) theory of communicative distances between majority (dominant) and minority (non-dominant) groups. Luken illustrates that when the majority group sees a serious threat from an ethnic minority group which succeeds in higher achievements than the dominant group (e.g., academic performance, position, and status), the majority group tends to display "disparagement," which is related to intense ethnocentrism, ethnophobia, and belittling/deriding outgroup members (refer to Luken (1978)).

Regarding disproportionate disciplinary action, the present findings suggest that Korean American students sometimes receive harsher disciplinary action than white students do. This is consistent with a study suggesting zero-tolerance policies are applied inequitably to ethnic/racial minority students (e.g., Verdugo, 2002). Research shows that there are many instances of disproportionate discipline issues involving minority students ("Opportunities suspended," 2000; Skiba, 2000; Cartledge, Johnson, & Tillman, 2001; Ruck & Wortley, 2002). Ethnic/racial minority students have higher numbers of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions than do whites (Koch, 2000; Mendez, Knoff & Ferron, 2002). While a white, middle-class youth caught in possession of drugs is likely to be referred to

counseling and rehabilitation, an immigrant youth convicted of the same offense is likely to be deported (e.g., Suarez-Orozco, 2000, p.22).

Regarding improper handling of complaints/injuries, in the cases of personal injuries presented here, the interview findings indicate the lack of interest of school authorities for minority students' well-being. Research also shows that schools tend not to pay attention to immigrant students, their parents or their needs (Lee, 2006; Cabrera, 2006). Even if parents complain, some issues are never resolved (Louie, 2001).

Regarding the effects of this perceived discrimination, the parents in this study clearly reported negative impacts on their children. Studies suggest that perceived discrimination has been related to violent behavior (Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Scheelk-Cone, Chavous & Zimmerman, 2004), substance use (Gibbons et al., 2004), and increased depression levels and reduced academic achievement in early adolescence (Ying & Han, 2006). Particularly, improper disciplinary action of schools can ruin minority students' academic careers ("Opportunities suspended," 2000).

Contrary to the researcher's expectations, the findings of the present study showed no significant difference between perceived discrimination toward Korean American students who came to the U.S. at an earlier age ("1.5ers") and those who were born in the U.S. ("second generation"). Since second-generation immigrants generally have more language competence and cultural assimilation and therefore should be more accepted into the dominant society, this finding is interesting and needs revisiting in future research.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study explored school-based discrimination toward Asian minority students as perceived through the eyes of their parents. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, with the small sample size (67 survey participants and 8 interviews), the present findings are to be interpreted and generalized with some caution. Future research would be richer if it involved a larger sample size and surveys/interviews with Asian students themselves. Future study could also be expanded to other Asian minority groups (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, or Laotian).

Practical Considerations for Multicultural School Settings

By examining Korean American students' educational experiences at school through their parents' responses, the present study provides a unique view of the challenges they face and a better understanding of the attitudes of Asian parents and students towards public education. This exploratory study will prompt further research of the overlooked ("invisible") Asian population and will provide insights into possible interventions schools could put in place to reduce discrimination and to enhance Asian minority students' well-being and academic achievement. Only when educators understand how Asian students' experiences affect their quality of life and learning at school can they take pedagogically sensitive actions to help the Asian children become successful members of the school community.

Schools can do two things to tackle these issues. First, districts should provide more cultural sensitivity training for school staff and students to reduce prejudice toward minority students. Second, schools need to establish more services for minority students so that their needs and concerns could be heard and handled properly. This could include, for example, a social worker or counselor specifically assigned to minority students.

Conclusion

The present study shows that Asian minority students are frequently underserved because they are overlooked, prompting the term “invisible Americans.” Educators often fail to provide effective interventions to Asian American students, assuming they are well adjusted and do not face racism like other minority groups. All students should be able to have faith in school systems’ seeing that justice is served and should be given proper respect and protection from any harmful factors, regardless of their ethnic/racial backgrounds.

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