



Parenting and Education Involvement of Korean Mothers During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic quickly forced us to adapt to a new normal. As schools switched to distance learning, parents experienced increased childcare responsibilities and were thrust into new roles as teachers at home. This unexpected shift to new roles brought extraordinary disruption that becomes more challenging for families living apart, especially Korean families who represent more traditional beliefs. One of these values is to highly regard education. In this study, researchers explore the unique experiences of Korean mothers who were geographically distant from their spouses during the COVID-19 lockdown. Through interviews with the participant mothers with school-age children, researchers explore how the COVID-19 lockdown created changes in childcare and education involvement of Korean mothers.

Introduction

After shutting down for nearly two years because of COVID-19, schools are just beginning to reestablish in-person learning. During the shutdown, parents became full-time caregivers, entertainers, and teachers. This transition from in-person to online schooling dramatically affected parents' mental health because of social isolation, economic challenges, anxiety, and burnout which also often affected child well-being (Lee et al., 2021). In general, these challenges for parents become greatly exacerbated for single parents with sole responsibility for parenting and education of children, family safety and health, and homeschooling (Hertz et al., 2021).

Traditionally, Korean parents evidence strong beliefs in education as the tool that advances their children's social-economic status and predicts future success. After the Korean War, these strong educational beliefs enabled rapid economic and educational development in South Korea (Hyun et al., 2003). Because of this commitment to education, South Korea is currently ranked as one of the high-performing countries in education (OECD, 2017). When Korean married couples choose to live apart for their children's education, it is increasingly typical for mothers to be the primary caregivers in Korean society.

This case study provides insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parenting and educational experiences of Korean mothers with school-age children. Through a series of three interviews, these narrative data examine four Korean mothers' parenting and educational involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Single Mothers with School-Age Children During a Pandemic

Childcare responsibilities during the pandemic indicate to be especially challenging for single mothers. Family routines and parental roles and responsibilities quickly shifted in response to the social and economic changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lian & Yoon, 2020). Survey data ($n = 833$) suggest single mothers were impacted much more negatively by the pandemic than multi-adult households (Hertz et al, 2021). These findings describe how single mothers who lived alone with children expressed extreme difficulty finding time for both childcare and responsibilities of childcare at home.

Education and the Pandemic

The academic achievement gap between single-parent and two-parent families is significantly narrower within Asian as compared with American families (Park, 2007). As discussed above, the high value of educational attainment within Asian society and their dedicated education support may have contributed to this result. For example, a typical South Korean family spends about 16% of their monthly household income on private lessons or their children's education (Yi, 2013).

While various approaches to distance learning rapidly emerged during the last 20 years (Singh & Thurman, 2019), the COVID-19 pandemic aptly demonstrated that a significant gap exists in teacher preparation related to remote teaching (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Wohlfart et al. (2021) described how teachers primarily utilized technology for basic communication rather than productive learning. This challenge contributed to significant parental exhaustion, particularly with mothers, during the pandemic (Marchetti et al., 2020).

Korean females are among the most educated in the world along with Canada and Norway (OECD, 2017; WorldAtlas, 2019). As Curtis et al. (2022) note, Korean parents, especially mothers, place great importance on children's educational success and higher school achievement. However, Korean parents also exhibit higher stress and anxiety because remote learning requires a family's active engagement (Lian & Yoon, 2020). Hong and colleagues

(2021) suggest that social support may significantly decrease the parental stress of Korean immigrant families.

Methods

Research Questions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents of school-age children confronted additional challenges such as increased parenting duties and education responsibilities (Arowoshola, 2020). This current study explores perceptions of changes in parenting duties and educational involvement of Korean mothers with school-age children during the pandemic. The guiding research questions include: (a) how were the experiences of Korean mothers from three countries different during a lockdown? and (b) how has COVID-19 changed the childcare and education involvement of Korean mothers of school-age children?

Participants

Researchers, Dami and Cheri (pseudonyms), met at an online support group for Korean American mothers in academia. During one session, commonly shared anxiety about childcare and parents' educational involvement living apart from spouses while raising children became a major topic. As discussed in the Literature Review, Korean families highly value education, and mothers are often considered the primary caregiver for their children's education. Researchers, Dami and Cheri, questioned how other Korean mothers in similar situations were involved in education during the pandemic. Using purposive sampling (Suri, 2011), researchers recruited Korean mothers of school-aged children who were geographically distant from their spouses. Potential participants were introduced through friends and colleagues. The first author made initial contacts through email with information regarding the study. Finally, additional participants were recruited: Aram from Toronto, Canada, and Bora from Seoul, South Korea. In addition, researchers of this study (Cheri from Illinois [IL], USA, and Dami from Minnesota [MN], USA) consented to participate. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participants' information as unidentifiable. Table 1 below summarizes four participants of this study.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

	Aram	Bora	Cheri	Dami
Residence	Toronto, Canada	Seoul, Korea	IL, USA	MN, USA
Participant Age	38	39	42	42
Child (Age, Grade)	Son (13, Grade 8)	Son (13, Grade 6) Son (9, Grade 2)	Daughter (11, Grade 6)	Daughter (12, Grade 7) Daughter (9, Grade 3)

Marriage (Year)	14	14	15	16
Lengths of Long Distance	2 years	7 years	4 years	12 years

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began after approval for the study was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each participant was invited to participate in Zoom interviews via email containing an IRB approved consent form. Each participant had three Zoom interviews with two researchers. Interview questions were based on Seidman's (1998) *Three-Interview Series* model. Interview 1 focused on life history; the context for each participants' experience was described by asking each participant about herself in the light of the topic. In Interview 2 (the details of experiences), questioning concentrated on the participants' current lives relating to the topic. In Interview 3 (reflection on meaning), the participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Field notes were made during and immediately after each interview. The field notes further contributed to revising interview questions based on participant responses.

Similar/different parenting and education involvement experiences during the pandemic were analyzed. Each interview lasted about an hour, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Researchers independently conducted initial open coding to identify words, concepts, or themes that frequently appeared. Then, researchers reviewed each set of coding together and conducted axial coding to reveal categories and subcategories from the collected data. Codes were organized and represented in interview summary tables.

Results/Findings

Preparedness for Transition to Lockdown

Immediately after the pandemic started, the educational activities of all participants changed to home-based education. All four participant mothers indicated that they quit all in-person extra-curricular activities such as Taekwondo, piano, playdates, and math or English lessons. Aram and Bora kept their children at home. Cheri and Dami both said that they planned to keep their children home, whether distance learning was an option or not. Dami said, "I immediately prepared for homeschooling. I was not surprised when our school was locked down and began offering distance learning." Due to sudden changes, the role of the participant mothers transitioned to full time caregiver and educator.

Fears as a Single Parent During a Pandemic

Challenges of participant mothers agree with Lian et al. (2020)'s statement about high levels of stress and anxiety among Korean parents due to working parents' active involvement in children's distance learning. The challenge most mentioned was "fear" as a single parent without a spouse present or family support. Aram said, "When my son was sick, my mom used to help me when I was in Korea. However, I have no one I can rely on now." Bora expressed, "Knowing that no family help is available, I was quite frustrated with any unexpected challenge." Dami also

said, “I have no family or close friends here who could help in case I get covid.” Cheri’s story shows how serious the anxiety was for her and her daughter. “I thought about what if I was unconscious, who would care for us? If I am sick, our life and family economy would be jeopardized. My daughter worried that her daddy would not be available if I were sick. So, I went over my contacts with her and talked about whose door she would need to knock for an emergency.”

Another unique fear was expressed because of being Asian in foreign countries. Racism against Asians became another politically contrived danger during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee & Waters, 2021). Aram stated that Toronto is a diverse community and that she never felt uncomfortable as a foreigner until an outbreak of COVID-19. She continued, “When the elevator door opened, people who were already in the elevator often shook hands giving signs of ‘do not board.’ I felt weird.” Dami also shared her uncomfortable experience: “I noticed people were giving extra distance from us at the grocery store. It’s hard to explain but I definitely felt ‘the look.’ I felt intimidated.”

Mothers’ Role as Teachers During Distance Learning

The common challenge all participants indicated was the lack of schools’ readiness for distance learning. Aram stated, “My child never used a computer until the pandemic broke.” Likewise, Bora said, “My children had to learn from starting a computer.” For children to learn content through a computer device, they must rapidly become familiar with using the technology. Because of this, Bora had to stay with her son the whole time during class hours. She stated, “It was not only the technology issues, but more of the teachers’ limited ability to deliver content through technology.” When not clear with the content, Bora helped her son with supplementary materials such as maps, photos, and even YouTube and Google searches. Reactions suggest that there were major differences in the way school districts approached online instruction. According to Aram, “An announcement was sent to families indicating teachers did not have the ability to teach online. All materials were posted on *ClassDojo* in PDF forms. Students downloaded the materials, completed homework, and uploaded their works on *ClassDojo*.” Aram continued, “Students never received instructions on learning nor feedback on homework. My children were not motivated to complete their homework.” The impacts of teachers’ lack in technology skills during online teaching on students’ learning are well documented in previous studies (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Watson, 2020).

Transition to distance learning for Dami’s family appeared smoother than Aram and Bora’s transition. Dami described how teachers in her school district were given extensive training in their online platform (*Google Meets*) during extended breaks. In addition, each student was given a Chromebook. Synchronous class meetings were held Monday through Friday for one hour with the classroom teacher. In the afternoon, her daughter had 30-minute small group meetings with the ELL (English Language Learner) teacher and optional small group sessions for math support. The whole group met for Friday Fun Day every Friday for about 40 minutes. Unlike the situations with Aram and Bora, Dami’s children were more comfortable using Chromebooks because they had used the devices as a part of their school curriculum prior to distance learning. Dami further stated, “Although there were a few times my daughter needed help when WiFi got

disconnected, I barely found her or her teacher struggling.” Similar to Dami’s daughter, Cheri’s daughter managed remote learning well. Teachers’ readiness for online instruction and student familiarity with technology appeared to be critical variables for student learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Watson, 2020; Wohlfart et al., 2021).

Childcare and Education Involvement During Pandemic

As Lian and Yoon (2020) described changes in family routines during the pandemic, the four participant mothers evidenced significantly increasing childcare and educational tasks despite existing responsibilities. Bora shared her challenge, “I had to teach my two children to cook and clean while I still worked from home.” Dami also stated, “People think it is easier to work from home but the truth is the opposite. I was working full time and became a 24/7 stay at home mom at the same time.” Cheri also said, “There was no clear line between work and home chores. I had to work from home from early morning to late evening while taking care of my daughter.” These experiences clearly show how single parents are increasingly challenged in finding time to manage work and home with their school-age children. Other research findings confirm disadvantages for single mothers due to significantly increased childcare and education responsibilities (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010; Hertz et al., 2021).

While Bora, Cheri, and Dami were in a similar situation having full responsibilities of work, childcare, and education, Aram shared some responsibilities with her sister. She added, “My sister was a teacher in Korea, so she took care of most of the education-related work while I did most of the cooking and house chores.”

Challenges and Strategies of Korean Distant Families

Bora seemed to be experiencing the highest stress and anxiety. She indicated she had no support from anyone, which considerably elevated her stress. She said, “I do all by myself-- working remotely, childcare, tutoring my children, and I do all the house chores. I have no support from anyone.” She also expressed her regrets, “I wished I continued my full-time job as a teacher. I gave up my career after having a baby. Since then, no one has valued my hardship as a mom and wife.” She now has a part-time job working from home. Yet, her family (especially her husband’s side) disregards the value of her work. She continued, “I sacrificed myself to become a stay home mom so that my husband could keep his career.” She also shared that her husband was the primary decision-maker, even from a distance. “My husband warned us not to go outside during the lockdown. I even gave up seeing my mom and thought about seeing a mental health counselor.” Her experience suggests that a single mother may need support in dealing with the pandemic as a perceived disaster while being a single parent in charge of childcare and education without family support.

Unlike Bora, Aram seemed to have a different relationship with her husband, which may have impacted her stress levels. She stated, “We have persistent communication.” In response to a question regarding what she usually talks about with her husband, she answered, “Mostly about our daily routines—what we did, what we ate, where we went, and when my son challenges me, I ask my husband to talk to him.” Aram has been independent since her marriage because her husband has always been away for his military duty which is common in South Korea. She said,

“I got used to this life. However, dealing with emotional difficulties is challenging at times, but I can handle this. I even did fine when my husband served in the GOP (General Out Post: in charge of outside the DMZ).” She also showed a growth mindset by saying, “I wasn’t stressed too much thinking it will end soon. Rather, I focused on enjoying playing with my boy, playing soccer, running around, you name it.” Perhaps the main differences between Bora and Aram’s resilience were emotional support from spouses. This was especially found from the contradictory attitude of their spouses; Aram’s spouse was fully supportive by listening and showing empathy, whereas Bora’s spouse was found to be controlling, prioritizing income and disregarding staying home responsibilities.

Cheri and Dami also demonstrated similar resilience regarding parenting during the pandemic. Some common strategies they shared were time management and education involvement of their spouses. They seemed to quickly adapt to handling both full-time jobs and parenting during the lockdown. One strategy included a regular schedule for themselves and their children. For example, all were waking up at the same time every morning and following the daily routines respectively. Their children were capable of working by themselves. Cheri stated, “We plan our schedule together. My daughter follows her schedule to reach goals for the week and complete her work on her own.” Likewise, Dami stated, “My children have their own monthly duty chart. They put up a star when they complete each duty. Duties include: gym, laundry, math, reading, journaling and music.” Another strategy Cheri and Dami shared was to check their children’s work at frequent intervals. Both help their children only when they struggle or need extra support. This contrasts with Bora’s case as she stated, “I always got exhausted after helping with my sons’ study. I tutored English, Math, Science, and History. I even sat with my son when he practiced playing piano.”

Perceptions of Geographical Distance

Participants indicated different perspectives of long-distance parenting when responding to the question, “What family support would help you overcome stress, anxiety, and challenges?” Aram and Bora seem to bear all parenting responsibilities due to physical distance from their spouses and families. For example, Aram said, “Because of the physical distance, I do not expect any help from my husband or other family members.” Bora added, “I really wish that my parents and husband would stay closer to support each other.” In South Korea, the extended family is an important resource for parenting. Bora lived with her parents to receive immediate support from her parents while her husband moved across the country because of his job duties. She was able to pursue her career, and her children did not need to transfer to another school. However, since she could not see her parents for about two years because of the COVID-19 quarantine, she was especially challenged.

On the other hand, Cheri and Dami shared how their spouses are remotely involved in children’s education. Dami said, “He works very hard during the week, so I hope he will talk with them more during the weekend, at least an hour.” She also shared, “I would like to ask my husband to provide more support in math for our daughters.” Cheri said, “I feel I got a pretty decent amount of support from my husband although we are living apart. During our family zoom time every evening, we debrief what happens daily, and my husband helped my daughter with

her homework for about a year and a half. I feel this has given much support to my daughter's academics and also my well-being as a single mom.”

Discussion

In this study, four Korean mothers in long-distance marriages participated in a series of three interviews. Participants' experiences suggest common challenges of single parents residing in the US, South Korea, and Canada. How participant mothers changed their daily routines to adapt to unexpected lockdowns and their efforts to be actively involved in childcare and education during lockdowns are described.

The current narrative data adds to our existing knowledge of the growing challenges of parenting and education involvement of families separated by distance. These findings also expand our understanding of the unique challenges of Korean mothers raising children apart from their spouses during a pandemic. The current study also confirms the findings of the previous studies (Park, 2007; Hyun et al., 2003) describing how Korean parents highly value education. Despite unique challenges, all four participant mothers maintained high expectations for their children's development and achievement.

Additionally, this study suggests what *post*-pandemic education might look like for long-distance families. These current data support the conclusions of Singh and Thurman (2019) that suggest distance teaching and learning will increase, and teachers and students will be required to become more familiar with alternate modes of education. Importantly, parents in long-distance relationships need to identify new ways to share childcare responsibilities. Next, Korean mothers' high value in education for their children will continue through their active involvement in childcare and education regardless of the challenges. Finally, this study suggests that educational and parenting challenges brought on by the pandemic can positively affect family dynamics with support from extended family members and communities of long-distance families.

The findings of this investigation provide support for multiple recommendations for post-pandemic education. First, schools and teachers need to continuously improve distance teaching strategies and become more confident in better utilizing technologies. Second, both parents need to share parenting duties and become more involved in education. With the technology, this may become more doable for parents physically distant from their families. Families of Cheri and Dami are positive examples of how families might connect through video calls, reading with children, and even tutoring a child synchronously with devices. Thirdly, shared understanding and emotional support may help reduce mothers' significantly increased responsibilities in long-distance marriages. With these suggestions, long-distant families and communities can make a positive difference in the lives of future global citizens.

Limitations

This qualitative researcher-participant study included two authors as participants. They engaged in dialogue with other participants during each interview. This may have caused an internal power differential where non-researcher participant mothers might not have responded to what

they do rather than what they think is right to do as Korean mothers. The first interview focused on building relationships and trust between participant mothers to avoid this issue. Researchers may also have interpretation bias when analyzing data. This study used the triangulation method that two researchers independently completed open coding and then validated the interpretation.

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