

“Children with Special Needs of Chinese Descent, their Parents, Culture, and the Obstacles
Faced in Education in the United States”

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Today there are about 3.8 million people of Chinese descent living across the United States, with about half of the population living in either California or New York. Although there is a large population of Chinese immigrants in the United States, not much is known about Chinese children with special needs. This is due to a variety of reasons, with Chinese culture playing a big role. However, as more Chinese immigrants come into the United States, it is vital that special needs educators in the United States familiarize themselves with how to interact with Chinese parents whose children have special needs. This research will attempt to examine the reasons why interacting with immigrant parents is often different from interacting with parents who have grown up in the United States. Specifically, this research aims to uncover the relations and feelings between families and their children with special needs and how this plays a role in education.

In the United States, the special education system is much more structured to allow for more growth and support of each child with special needs. In the United States, students with special needs receive a wealth of support from a team of professionals including teachers, psychologists, and physical or occupational therapists, among others. Students with special needs are placed in their least-restrictive environment. This means that students are placed in an environment which will allow them to grow the most both educationally and socially. Once a child qualifies for special education services, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is created. An IEP, "...provides the student with all of the support that they might need to be successful academically. These supports include appropriately designed academic and functional goals for the child, placement in their least restrictive environment, and services such as counseling, assistive technology..." (Kritzer, 2012, p. 53). With a structured IEP plan specifically designed for each child, teachers are able to further help students reach their goals by the end of the school

year. Additionally, IEPs are reviewed at the end of every school year; and every three years, students are reevaluated to determine if they continue to qualify for services. With this government-mandated program, students across the country are able to receive services if they qualify. The IEP was a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) passed in 2004 requiring all schools to create an IEP for students with special needs (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014, p. 59). In addition to the implementation of IEPs, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act also put into effect policies such as zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation, least restrictive environment, due process, and parent participation (Chiang & Hadadian, 2007, p. 20). The implementation of IDEA provided further support and protection for children with disabilities. Under this new act, no student with disabilities would be excluded from a free and public education, while parents were given the opportunity to sit in on IEP meetings and further advocate for their child. In addition to the IDEA, laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 were all created to further protect the rights of children and adults with disabilities in the United States. As adults, these laws ensure that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against by potential employers because of their disability. As children, individuals with disabilities are granted a free and appropriate education. The United States is continuously improving the standard of education for students with disabilities through the implementation of new and improved acts and through the use of new teaching methods. While previously it was common for students with disabilities to be placed in self-contained classrooms, it has become increasingly popular to place students in mainstream classes when possible and appropriate for the child. According to McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014), "...the percentage of students with disabilities who are educated for most of the school day (i.e., 80% or more) in the general education classroom has

increased from 34% in 1990-1991 to 58% in 2007-2008” (p. 59).” Inclusion classrooms are becoming increasingly popular in schools in the United States. When deemed appropriate and fit, a student with disabilities is placed in a mainstream classroom. By placing a student in a mainstream classroom, the student is able to further grow both academically and socially while reaching goals set forth for the school year in their IEPs. Although the United States education system is far from perfect, it is a system that many immigrant families are thankful for because it is a superior system to the ones they have in their home countries. Many Chinese immigrant parents with special-needs children feel grateful that their child is able to receive an education in the United States because of the stigma attached to individuals with disabilities in China.

In order to better understand Chinese families with children with special needs, it is pertinent that we look at how disabilities are viewed in China. Only six disabilities are recognized by the Chinese government. These disabilities are: visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric, and multiple impairments (Kritzer, 2012, p. 52). In comparison, the United States government recognizes thirteen disabilities, which are: autism, developmental delay, visual impairment, hearing impairment, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, language and speech disorders, deaf-blindness, multiple handicap, physical handicap, intellectual and developmental disabilities, other health impaired, and specific learning disability (Kritzer, 2012, p. 53). Because the Chinese government does not recognize all forms of disability, many individuals living in the country are unaccounted for. Moreover according to Jeffrey B. Kritzer (2012), “...China is an agriculturally based culture and the majority of people live in rural areas. Physical labor is the primary work in these rural areas where people can function productively even if they cannot read or write” (p. 52). In rural areas, education is very informal and many individuals never make it past middle school. The primary focus of people living in rural areas is

the amount of agricultural production they can turn over in a given season. As a result, individuals living in rural areas often rely on physical labor more than intellectual power. Therefore, intellectual disabilities such as autism can often go undiagnosed in individuals. However, even in urban cities like China's capital, Beijing, students with disabilities are still often neglected in the educational system.

In the United States, each child who qualifies for special education services is immediately given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This plan is a document created by a team of education professionals including psychologists, teachers, special education teachers, principals, speech therapists, and occupational therapists. However, in China, there is no government-mandated program that requires schools to give students with special needs an Individualized Education Plan. Therefore, services provided to students with special needs fluctuate from school to school. While there are schools in China that do provide a version of an IEP to students with special needs, the majority of schools don't have such paperwork for students with special needs. In addition, students with disabilities in China are often placed in general education classes as self-contained classrooms are not common. This is a result of the lack of special education teachers in China. Many colleges simply do not offer programs in special education, while general education teachers often are not adequately educated on how to teach students with special needs (Kritzer, 2012, p. 55). This lack of education among educators is detrimental to students with special needs as they are not receiving the appropriate services and resources needed to achieve success. Moreover, this has jeopardized the future of students with special needs. *New York Times* journalist Lara Farrar interviewed a student, Mike, who is blind. Mike and his family live in the area surrounding Beijing where Mike attends school. However, the school that Mike attends provides him with no extra support or assistance. Mike,

who was 13 when he was interviewed, was not able to take exams in school because he was unable to read the exam questions. As a result, Mike does not receive a grade in his classes, and without recorded grades, Mike's parents fear that their son will not be able to make a life for himself in China. As Mike's mother is quoted as saying, "Maybe he can go abroad or study art, but it seems there is no way for him to have access to higher education in China" (Farrar, 2014, p. 1). Students with disabilities in China often face a dead end at the conclusion of their high school career as many colleges refuse to admit students with a disability. Moreover, it is extremely difficult for students to continue through primary and secondary school without the proper assistance and resources from educators. Although laws have been enacted in China to prevent discrimination against students with disabilities, disability advocates and lawyers often see these laws as empty promises as the government often fails to punish colleges and schools for not enrolling students with disabilities. Many disability advocates criticize the government for a lack of support of people with disabilities; however, disability is viewed by Chinese citizens as a very unfortunate mishap. This view of people with disabilities can be an explanation as to why China is lacking in support and resources for people with special needs.

In China, people often view a disabilities or any illness as a misfortune not just for the individual but for the family as a whole. Families often "...do not acknowledge the disability to others in their community and may even go to the extent of hiding the individual with a disability from others" (Zheng et. al., 2015, p. 112). Families often feel embarrassed to acknowledge that they have a child with a disability, as this symbolizes bad luck for the family. Additionally, it represents a family who performed a bad deed in the past and ancestors are punishing the family by giving them a child with a disability.

The birth of a child with physical or intellectual disability is perceived as evidence of a parents' bad karma from the past, or a curse from ancestors. Traditional Chinese mothers who gave birth to a child with a disability have been reported to blame themselves for violating cultural taboo, for examples using sharp instruments, visiting a cemetery, or eating the wrong kind of food (Chiang & Hadadian, 2007, p. 19).

It is often hard for parents to accept that their child has disabilities. In China, parents of children with special needs face an extra burden as they know that their family will be viewed differently because of perceptions of children with special needs. Some Chinese parents even believe there were supernatural reasons for their child having a disability. One parent was told by her neighbor that, "...it was because I dredged mud and sand too often during pregnancy..." (Ryan & Smith, 1989, p. 282). Parents feel more comforted when they believe that there was an outside force that cause their child's disability, as it makes them feel less guilty. Raising a child with a disability is often a challenging task, and for Chinese parents this challenging task comes with the extra pressure of societal and familial views toward a child with special needs.

However, it is difficult to compare the special education systems in the United States and China due to differences in both government involvement in education and population. In the United States, there are government-mandated programs and paperwork that must be completed by all schools across the country, creating a more consistent set of services given to students. In contrast, there are no set mandates in China that schools must follow; therefore, services offered to students will vary based upon school. Additionally, with its dense population, it is hard for teachers in China to provide individualized attention to students. These stark differences in education system make it difficult to compare special education systems in the United States and China.

Although the special education system in the United States has helped many students with special needs, this system still comes with its own set of flaws. The United States is a very diverse nation with new immigrants entering the country daily. Many immigrants come into the country speaking little to no English, creating a language barrier between parents and teachers. This is especially true of parents of children with special needs. Parents are often left confused and with more questions than answers after IEP meetings. When non-English-speaking Chinese parents were interviewed, many expressed frustration with regard to a lack of communication with the school because of the language barrier. One parent interviewed said, “I don't know English. Someone told me that I could write to the teacher in Chinese and someone at the school could translate the message to her, but the teacher never responded. I don't know other ways to communicate with the teacher” (Lo, 2008, p. 3). Many parents felt helpless because of the inability to communicate with their child’s teachers and service providers. Due to this lack of communication, parents also stated that it has caused them to refrain from attending school events as they couldn't communicate with the teachers,

I always want to go to Open House. That’s the best opportunity for me to speak with the teacher, but there was nobody who could help me. I wish there were a person who could interpret for me...follow me around. I tried several times to go and speak with the teacher by myself, but it didn't work. It was very difficult because of my English (Lo, 2008, p. 3-4).

Parents are eager to educate themselves about what they can do to help their children succeed as well as connect with teachers. However, for parents who don't speak English, it is often difficult to do this. Additionally, many teachers don't speak a second language and are not properly equipped to interact with parents and children of cultures different from their own. Furthermore,

because parents required translated documents, there was always a delay with the information received about their child's IEP; at times the information was delayed for up to five months. One parent recounted, "I didn't know that her PT (physical therapy) services were terminated. One time, I spoke with a Chinese paraprofessional at my daughter's school. I asked her how come I never received a progress report from PT. She told me that my daughter has stopped receiving PT since last month..." (Lo, 2008, p. 4). Other parents who were interviewed also recounted the same stories. Without adequate representation, it was often hard for parents to properly advocate for their child, which resulted in a loss of services that parents never consented to. Additionally, parents who have been interviewed also spoke about a lack of awareness that teachers have displayed when interacting with children of varying cultures. In one instance, "The speech teacher said that Katherine didn't have eye contact, so she didn't teach her pronunciation...I told her that there are many cultures in this world that students don't look at the teacher in the eye because it's impolite, and you can get whacked" (Lo, 2008, p. 6). Because the United States is home to people from all different cultures, it is imperative that educators are able to connect with students and parents from all cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, some parents also reported feeling isolated by the teacher because of the language barrier. One mom of a nine-year-old boy with autism recounted, "Sometimes the teacher sent home notes about class field trips. I used to check the box saying that I could go with the class. However, the teacher never wanted me to go...I don't want to think that it's because I am Chinese" (Lo, 2008, p. 4). For many non-English-speaking parents, getting involved in school activities was hard, as teachers seemed hesitant to allow these parents to join in on school events. The majority of parents interviewed have stated that a difference in culture and language has made it difficult for them to interact with their child's teachers and school staff.

Additionally, it is not only Chinese parents who feel a disconnect with their child's teachers and school staff. When immigrant families of different cultures and backgrounds were interviewed, they also reported feeling disconnected with the staff at their child's school. A primary reason for this is the language barrier experienced between parents and staff. Secondly, parents also feel that teachers are not culturally aware. In an interview with African American families with children with disabilities, "These families felt that many teachers, especially the Caucasian teachers, did not have a solid cultural understanding of them and their children. Some families also reported that cultural sensitivity did not exist in their children's school" (Lo, 2008, p. 2). Many immigrant families interviewed felt that a lack of cultural sensitivity by the teachers caused them to feel unwelcome in their child's school. Additionally, as one parent pointed out, "...the objectives professionals developed for her child were unrealistic. One objective was for the child to explore the texture of different foods with (his or her) fingers. However, in Korean culture, touching food with hands was not encouraged" (Lo, 2008, p. 2). Parents felt that, in asking students to complete tasks that didn't fit their cultural norm, teachers demonstrated a lack of cultural knowledges. Non-English speaking parents also felt unwelcome in their child's school because of the inability to communicate with school staff. Parker Elementary School in Texas serves a predominately Hispanic community. Although the school states that it is a dual-language facility, parents who were interviewed commented that they often left school meetings confused because the meetings were solely in English. As one parent recounted, "...there were a lot of parents there, but all the time that Mrs. Caro (school principal) was talking, she talked in English. She never once spoke in Spanish and half the people there didn't understand English" (Peña, 2000, p. 47). Non-English-speaking parents often refuse to attend school meetings because they are in English. Without translators present at these meetings, parents who do attend are confused

and are left to figure things out on their own. The involvement of parents in their child's education is highly important; however, for non-English-speaking parents, the language barrier and cultural differences often deter these parents from being involved.

Furthermore, not only are parents struggling to communicate with teachers, they are also struggling to communicate with doctors and other healthcare professionals. As one parent recounted, "...Very difficult, because we don't understand English and the doctors don't understand Mandarin. We did not know how to ask questions...I still don't know why he won't speak and I am sure he knows how" (Ryan & Smith, 1989, p. 290). Non-English-speaking Chinese parents often find it difficult to interact with individuals who provide care for their children because of a language barrier. Parents often don't fully understand their child's medical diagnosis and are therefore unable to adequately help them. However, even with all the struggles, Chinese parents are still very optimistic about their child's educational future in the United States. Parents believe that in the United States there is, "...rich educational and community resources available...and the legal protections provided by the U.S education system. These two factors gave families security and hope with regard to their children's disabilities" (Chuang, Huer, & Parette, 2004, p. 120). Chinese parents believed that by educating their children in the United States they were providing better resources and opportunities for them. These opportunities gave them a renewed faith that their child can still progress despite disabilities.

Although problems have arisen between Chinese parents and their child's teachers, there are many ways in which these problems can be solved. By solving these problems, parents and teachers can work more cohesively together in order to create the best learning environment for each child. Parents interviewed reported that they would like teachers and school staff to be more culturally aware and sensitive when interacting with students (Lo, 2008, p. 6). This is especially

important for educators and school personnel to understand as students come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. It is imperative that educators become more culturally aware so that they can better interact with the students they are teaching. Furthermore, this will ensure a successful partnership between schools and home. Additionally, in order to have a more successful school and home partnership, parents suggested that there should be an interpreter in the school at all times. Non-English-speaking parents raised concern over not being able to get time-sensitive information translated for them. This led to students missing out on services or parents feeling confused after meetings and having no one to turn to (Lo, 2008, p. 6). Being able to successfully communicate with parents is vital because parents play a crucial role in the success of their child. Additionally, parents deserve to know what is happening while their child is in school. Students benefit from the added support and advocacy of both parents and school personnel, which enhances their educational experience.

Children of special needs of Chinese descent and their parents face more obstacles to acquiring a quality education due to reasons including language and culture. In Chinese culture, having a child with a disability is a sign of misfortune for the family, a sign that the family is being punished for a wrongdoing. This belief has led many Chinese parents of children with special needs to hide their children or to pretend their children don't have disabilities. Parents also blame themselves and supernatural forces for a child born with a disability. In the area of education, many Chinese parents indicated that a language barrier, along with cultural differences, have presented obstacles to effectively interacting with teachers and other school personnel. In many interviews, parents have stated that a difference in language has caused a delay in information being accessed by them as translations aren't readily available. In addition, it is often hard for parents to communicate with their child's teacher as translators are not always

available at schools. Parents feel that they have no one to turn to when they want to ask a question or request clarification on certain issues. Furthermore, parents felt that teachers were not sensitive to their culture, as many cultural differences exist between Americans and Chinese. However, even with all these considerations, Chinese parents still felt fortunate to be able to provide their child with an education in the United States. As teachers and school administrators work to improve their cultural awareness and communication efforts with parents, the hope is that parents and teachers will be able to work together cohesively to provide the best possible education for each child.

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