

# Korean American Children with Disabilities and Their At-Home Distance Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from a Survey of Parents

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## Abstract

This study investigated the at-home distance learning experiences of Korean American children with disabilities and their families during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 53 Korean American parents with children with disabilities residing in Southern California completed an online survey. Results revealed that their children with disabilities did not receive all the special education and related services they were entitled to during the pandemic. Compared to the pre-pandemic period, these children received fewer hours and a smaller number of related services. The survey results further identified the lack of resources and services in the Korean language as one of the greatest related challenges. Analysis of the open-ended survey showed that language barriers and lack of teacher preparation were the main challenges of the distance learning parents utilized for their children with disabilities during the lockdown. The findings advance understanding of disparities in special education services and resources and the unique challenges of Korean American students with disabilities and their families.

*Keywords:* Korean American parents, COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, disabilities

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The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis that altered education systems worldwide. Similar to many educational institutions across the globe, K-12 schools in the United States (U.S.) abruptly switched from in-person instruction to distance learning in March 2020 to try to stop the spread of the novel COVID-19 virus (Tremmel et al., 2020). Although distance learning is not a new concept, such an abrupt and widespread shift to distance education created new challenges for the roughly 14% of U.S. public school students with disabilities and their parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Students and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, such as Korean Americans, may have experienced additional challenges due to cultural and language differences. Korean Americans are one of the largest and fastest-growing minority groups in the U.S. with about one million Korean Americans living in the U.S. (O'Connor & Batalova, 2019). There is limited literature on the distance learning

experiences of Korean American children with disabilities and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This group is potentially vulnerable to educational challenges due to linguistic and cultural barriers and lack of resources.

## FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) laid the foundation for this study. Family systems theory posits that the family unit is a complex and dynamic social system where family members, including children and parents, interact with and influence each other (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). According to this theory, the changes in modality and disruption in the child's special education services could impact the whole family instead of the child alone. Even before the pandemic, CLD families of children with disabilities who migrated to the United States already faced additional challenges, such as economic and sociocultural discrimination (Reyes-Blanes, 2001; de Leon Siantz, 1990).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption of services for children with disabilities may have further impacted CLD families, compounding the pre-existing challenges of navigating the system as a CLD family with children with disabilities.

### **KOREAN AMERICAN PARENTS AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Korean Americans, including Korean immigrants, hold unique views and experiences regarding the disabilities of their children, which stem from their traditional beliefs and cultures. Traditionally in Asian culture, including Korean culture, a disability was interpreted as a punishment from God for one's ancestors' sins, genetic problems, or parents' neglect of the child during pregnancy (Matsuda, 1989). These Confucian beliefs are deeply rooted among Koreans, and the "pride and shame" and "collective family shame" principle adds another burden to parents who have children with disabilities (Morrow, 1991).

In a study by Cho et al. (2003), Korean American parents expressed a belief that the general U.S. public had more knowledge regarding disabilities and were more accepting of individuals with disabilities than they were. These parents also reported that non-Koreans had higher tolerance levels for their children's misbehavior and less concern about atypical appearance. According to Gibb et al. (1999), the difference between the more restrictive Korean culture and the more open American culture in regard to education, socialization, values, and parenting can also create friction between the parent and the child and between the parent and special education service providers. Korean Americans also experience challenges due to language barriers as they navigate the U.S. education system (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Hong et al., 2021a; Joo, 2020; Park & Turnbull, 2001). Even Korean Americans who are fluent in English tend to defer to teachers' decisions as, generally, Koreans culturally respect teachers' authority (Joo, 2020). These cultural differences between Koreans and Americans regarding disabilities have shaped the experiences of Korean American parents and their children with disabilities.

### **DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Research on K-12 distance learning is still in its early stages and previous studies tend to focus on the general education population who received distance learning with less than full-time delivery of schooling or in specialized online schools where teachers were already trained to teach distance learning courses (e.g., Dichev et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2022). Even before the pandemic, an increasing number of students with disabilities attended virtual schools and participated in distance learning (Burdette et al., 2013). A review of the literature by Vasquez and Straub

(2012) reported no significant differences in the academic performance of students with disabilities in face-to-face and online instruction. More recently, Tomaino et al. (2022) reported that children with moderate to severe developmental disabilities maintained and achieved progress on most of their Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals even when they participated in distance learning. In summary, findings from the distance learning research conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that when participation is elective and when the teachers are trained to provide online instruction, students with disabilities can learn through distance learning.

### **DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Emergency distance learning options implemented in response to the COVID-19 crisis are distinct from distance learning options provided before the pandemic. While students chose to participate in distance learning activities before the pandemic, the modality of instruction was not elective during the pandemic, and teachers developed temporary distance learning activities with little time and resources for planning (Kim & Fienup, 2022).

Although not all special education is transferrable from traditional face-to-face to distance learning formats, the U.S. Department of Education stressed the importance of providing mandatory special education services to students with disabilities through distance learning amid a pandemic. Yet, survey data by ParentsTogether (2020) revealed that only 20% of children in the U.S. received all the services to which they were entitled, and 39% received no support during the COVID-19 school closure. Similarly, Willcutts (2020) reported that only 69% of parents in the U.S. responded that their children received minimal special education services. Similar to the U.S., children in other countries, such as Turkey, Canada, Brazil, and Kenya, received insufficient levels of special education services during the COVID-19 school closure, although the degrees of service they received varied greatly across different parts of the world (Givigi et al., 2022; Moyi, 2020; Yakut, 2021).

Such insufficient special education services continued for about a year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey study of 78 caregivers of children with disabilities from January to May 2021, 32.65% of parents reported that their children either did not receive the special education services outlined in their IEP or received reduced special education services. About 50% of parents expressed dissatisfaction regarding the special education their children received with school staff, including special education directors (Harkins et al., 2022).

Reduced and altered special education services during the pandemic left parents of school-age children with disabilities the burden of filling service gaps (Iovino et al., 2021). Parents played the role of teachers, paraprofession-

als, and related service providers to facilitate specialized instruction and related services for their children without typical external sources (Chafouleas & Iovino, 2021), even though they felt unprepared to do so (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Consequently, studies worldwide reported heightened stress levels of parents of children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alhuzimi, 2021; Andrew et al., 2020; Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Stadheim et al., 2022; White et al., 2021). In the U.S., Stadheim et al. (2022) examined open-ended survey responses from 122 parents of school-aged children with autism during the early months of the pandemic. During this time, parents reported distress and changed family dynamics as they tried to meet the educational needs of their children with autism during the lockdown. Similarly, the Education Trust-West (2020) reported that parents of children with disabilities showed a higher level of stress (44%) than parents who did not have children with disabilities (35%). Although subgroups of CLD families (such as Korean Americans) were not examined, about 25% of non-native English-speaking students did not receive materials in their languages, limiting students' and parents' ability to navigate distance learning.

Such distress was also reported in other countries. For instance, Alhuzimi (2021) showed that parents of children with autism in Saudi Arabia reported distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to studies in the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Gulkaya and Sorakin (2021) also reported parents of children with disabilities felt fatigue and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Korean American Parents and Their Children During the Pandemic**

Although not specific to parents of children with disabilities, Hong et al. (2021a, b) surveyed Korean immigrant parents living in the U.S. and examined parents' stress related to educating their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In their first study, Hong et al. (2021a) surveyed 341 Korean immigrant parents living in the U.S. and found that these parents showed a high stress level when meeting their children's education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Korean parents also experienced language barriers when trying to meet their children's needs for at-home distance learning, which was also significantly associated with their stress level.

Hong et al. (2021b) further surveyed 48 Korean immigrant parents regarding the stress of raising school-aged children with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 85% of the parents reported difficulties educating their children with special needs and 72% reported language barriers as one of their main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, caution must be used when interpreting the findings by Hong et al. because

their definition of children with diagnosed special needs goes beyond those with disabilities, and includes those with giftedness, and/or limited English proficiency. Thus, only a portion of their participants had children with disabilities who qualified for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.

### **PRESENT STUDY**

Given the lack of research on the experiences of Korean American children with disabilities and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research aimed to capture perceived changes and challenges Korean American parents experienced as they supported the at-home distance learning of their children with disabilities during the initial stages (March-May, 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Compared to before the pandemic, what special education and related services did Korean American children with disabilities receive during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the challenges and experiences of Korean American parents providing at-home distance learning support to their children with disabilities during the pandemic?

### **METHODS**

#### **Participants**

The survey sample was drawn from a homogenous convenience sample of one of the largest parent support groups (approximately 200 members) for Korean American parents of K-12 grade children with disabilities in Southern California. Of the 200 parents, 53 respondents were included in the final analysis (27% rate of return). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and all participants provided electronic informed consent before completing the survey.

#### **Materials**

**Survey.** An online survey was designed using Qualtrics to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The first and second authors developed all the survey items in Korean based on the literature review on the parental experiences of children with disabilities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., ParentsTogether, 2020; Willcutts, 2020). Quantitative survey items measured demographic information (multiple response items with categorical responses; 7 items), special education and related services that children received before and during the pandemic (multiple response items; 6 items), support that parents received for at-home distance learning for their children with disabilities during the pandemic (five-point

Likert Scale items; 8 items), and parental perceived challenges in supporting at-home distance learning during the pandemic (five-point Likert Scale items; 11 items). To gather qualitative data, two open-ended items were developed asking parents to describe their perceived changes and challenges in supporting at-home learning of their children with disabilities during the pandemic. All the survey items were provided in Korean, the first language of the Korean parent support group.

The development and validation of the online survey followed procedures and recommendations in the literature on survey development (e.g., Rea & Parker, 2014). First, Cronbach's alpha was computed to determine internal consistency and values ranged from .86 to .96 for the constructs guiding the development of the survey. Second, the Korean translation and the content of the survey items were further validated by a director of a nonprofit organization for Korean families of children with disabilities.

**Procedures.** The survey was available via Qualtrics between June and July 2020, about ten weeks after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic. The link for the online survey was sent to the Korean parent support group members through KakaoTalk, a popular mobile South-Korean text message app all the parental support group members used for regular communication.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed based on data type. First, the descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, of the multiple-response items were computed. Second, the percentage of parents who responded strongly agree and agree, as well as rating averages and standard deviation for the Likert-scale items, was calculated. Finally, t-tests were used to compare the items asking about the children's special education and related services before and during the COVID pandemic.

Qualitative survey data (i.e., two open-ended questions asking parents to add comments) were analyzed using grounded theory methodology, which is used to study and discover new theories for collecting and analyzing real-world data (Glaser, 2001). Both researchers worked with local Korean parent support groups as consultants and had a close relationship with them. This helped the researchers understand participants in real-world settings.

To interpret the open-ended responses, each response was reread to code and seek common themes. The sets of codes were assigned to theme names. For example, code #1 was assigned to the first theme, "lack of experiences in distance learning." When a passage was attributed to more than one code, it was assigned to multiple themes. The process continued until all the data had been divided into the main themes and the initial coding was completed.

Finally, all segmented data under themes were translated into English.

### Author Positionality

There are two authors for this study. Both authors led the data collection and analysis processes and are bilingual in Korean and English, which allowed the participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with children with disabilities in a way they felt could best express their thoughts and feelings. Both authors worked as a team, having regular discussions to ensure their collective cultural knowledge and expertise guided the study. This collaborative team project confirmed the study was sensitive and appropriate to the context in which it was conducted.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Results

Table 1 profiles the respondents and the demographics of their children with disabilities. Most of the respondents were female (87%), stay-at-home parents (77%), and had more than one child (74%). Their children with disabilities were primarily in elementary grades (53%). All their children had an IEP, mostly under the category of autism (80%).

**Special Education and Related Services Before and During the Pandemic. *Special Education Services.*** Regarding how many parents were asked to report how many hours of mandated special education services their children received per week, the most frequent response was 22 or more hours (43%) before the pandemic compared to less than an hour of special education services (28%) during the pandemic. Additionally, 13% of parents reported that their children received no special education services during the pandemic (see Table 2). When the total number of special education services received was compared, the paired sample t-test results showed a significant difference,  $t(64) = 3.051, p < .05$ , before ( $M=1.25, SD=0.48$ ) and during the pandemic ( $M=1.00, SD=.56$ ).

When parents were asked to rate their children's distance learning experiences during the pandemic, about 47% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that special educators were in contact with them to share their distance learning plans for children with disabilities. However, only 6.5% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children received all the special education services mandated by their IEPs (see Table 3).

Less than 5% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that distance learning materials were provided in Korean. However, about 40% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that receiving materials, resources, or interpretation

Table 1.  
Profile of parent respondents and their children with disabilities

Categories	Demographics	n (%)
<b>PARENTS</b>		
<b>Gender</b>	Male	7 (13.2%)
	Female	46 (86.8%)
<b>Primary Language</b>	Korean	41 (77.4%)
	English	2 (3.7%)
<b>Employed</b>	Both Korean and English	10 (18.9%)
	Yes	12 (22.6%)
<b>CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES</b>		
<b>Grade levels</b>	K-5	28 (52.8%)
	6-8	11 (20.8%)
	9-12	14 (26.4%)
<b>Services</b>	Special education services/IEP	53 (100%)
	EL services	20 (37.7%)
<b>Disabilities</b>	Autism	42 (79.3%)
	Speech or Language Impairment	3 (5.7%)
	Other Health Impairments	2 (3.7%)
	Specific Learning Disabilities	2 (3.7%)
	Deaf-Blindness	1 (1.9%)
	Emotional Disturbance	1 (1.9%)
	Intellectual Disability	1 (1.9%)
	Multiple Disabilities	1 (1.9%)
	Traumatic Brain Injury	1 (1.9%)

services in Korean would make distance learning more successful for their children with disabilities (see Table 3).

**Related Services.** When parents were asked the type of related services their children received, speech-language support was the most frequent response both before (92%) and during the pandemic (62%). While no parent indicated that their children received no related services before the pandemic, 13% of parents indicated their child received no related services during the pandemic (see Table 2). A paired-sample t-test comparing the total the total number of the different related services their children received before and during the pandemic conditions showed a significant difference in the numbers for pre-pandemic ( $M=1.79$ ,  $SD=1.249$ ) and pandemic ( $M=1.09$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ) conditions,  $t(52) = 5.23$ ,  $p < .001$ .

When parents were asked to rate their children's distance learning experiences during the pandemic, 50% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that related service providers were in contact with them to share their distance

learning plans for children with disabilities. However, only about 9% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children received all the related services mandated by their IEPs (see Table 3).

**Parents Experienced Challenges.** Using a 5-point Likert scale, we asked parents to indicate their perceptions of the challenges of supporting distance learning for their children with disabilities during the pandemic. Table 3 represents the challenges in descending order, with a higher mean representing parents' perceptions that it is a more significant challenge than one with a lower mean. Of the eleven potential challenges, the lack of resources in Korean was rated as the most difficult challenge, with a mean value of higher than 4.00. To a lesser degree (mean value higher than 3.50), parents also reported challenges setting up routines and choosing appropriate resources for their children with disabilities.

### Qualitative Results

The researchers analyzed two open-ended responses from thirty-five parents who responded to the open-ended survey items. Although there was a broad range of responses about their degree of participation in distance learning, Korean American parents' personal challenges and experiences in distance learning were categorized into four themes: (a) lack of experiences in distance learning, (b) parents learned about their child's needs, (c) children's unique needs during online learning, and (d) Korean-speaking parents and language barriers during distance learning.

**Lack of Experience in Distance Learning.** Fourteen parents noted that they had some degree of difficulties in online settings. During the pandemic, they had multiple roles as caregivers, paraprofessionals, and teachers to support their children's at-home distance learning. These parents expressed concerns that they were unprepared for these roles and felt extraordinarily stressed. One parent responded, "I have received many emails from the school and the teacher. It was long and wasn't easy to understand because there were lots of professional terms I had never heard." Another parent said, "My child only speaks English and needs speech therapy, but I am not a good English speaker, so I can't correct his pronunciation or sentences."

Many parents also responded that they needed to dedicate a significant amount of time with their children to complete the virtual lessons and homework. One mother said:

I should quit my job because I need to take care of my child with autism and two other siblings. They all have zoom lessons simultaneously, and we should buy another computer for this need. I don't have any personal time until they finish the lessons. I am afraid of how long I should do this. I have no life.

Table 2.  
Special Education and Related Services Provided Before and During COVID

Demographics	Before COVID n (%)	During COVID n (%)
<b>SPED Placement/Service</b>		
Special Day Classroom	27 (49.1%)	22 (41.5%)
Resource Specialist Program	6 (11.3%)	4 (7.5%)
Autism Specific Classroom	4 (7.5%)	3 (5.7%)
General Education Classroom with some inclusion	15 (28.3%)	8 (15.1%)
Fully included in the General Education classroom	11 (20.8%)	13 (24.5%)
<b>Related Service</b>		
None	0	7 (13.2%)
Occupational therapy	18 (34%)	7 (13.2%)
Physical therapy	6 (11.3%)	4 (7.5%)
Speech-language support	51 (96.2%)	33 (62.3%)
Assistive technology support	4 (7.5%)	1 (1.9%)
School psychologist support	4 (7.5%)	4 (7.5%)
Social worker support	3 (5.7%)	1 (1.9%)
Counseling	6 (11.3%)	4 (7.5%)
Orientation and mobility support	2 (3.8%)	1 (1.9%)
<b>Number of Hours for SPED Service</b>		
None	1 (1.9%)	7 (13.2%)
Less than 1 hour	3 (5.7%)	15 (28.3%)
1 to 12 hours	23 (44.4%)	26 (49.06%)
13 or more hours	30 (56.6%)	0 (0%)

**Parents Learned About Their Child’s Needs.** Eight parents mentioned that they were unclear about the relationship between lesson goals and their child’s needs before the pandemic. As they supported at-home distance learning of their children during the pandemic, these parents had an opportunity to understand their child’s essential needs and what he/she needed to do to meet the learning goals. One parent explained:

I had no idea what my child was doing at school before the pandemic, but I had a chance to understand my child’s learning goals and tried to collect some resources to support my child’s learning [during at-home distance learning].

Another parent said, “I found out my child’s intellectual level and needs, so I tried to manage the time for my child based on the learning goals for distance learning and collected the resources to support.” Other parents also indicated that they had an opportunity to understand their child’s goals and needs during this time.

**Children’ Unique Needs During Online Learning.** Eight parents responded that their child had difficulty focusing on the online lessons via Zoom due to poor attention span. One parent commented, “My child was not able to finish the assignments due to her poor attention

span. There was no specific schedule for each subject, and I (the parent) could not plan for the schedule.” Another parent mentioned, “I needed to motivate him to concentrate, but he seemed very stressed. Distance learning (Zoom) is not effective for children who have a short attention span.” Parents’ responses clearly showed that supporting at-home distance learning of children with disabilities was a major challenge during the pandemic.

In addition, five parents shared their concerns about their child’s challenging behavior and lack of social interactions with peers. One parent explained, “My child is getting more inattentive and aggressive.” The other parent commented, “His aggression is increasing since he fails to get engaged with the teacher and peers during distance learning.”

**Korean-speaking Parents and Language Barriers during Distance Learning.** Nineteen parents commented on the language barriers they encountered while supporting at-home distance learning of their children with disabilities during the pandemic. These parents considered their limited English proficiency a direct barrier to participation in distance learning. They perceived that teachers did not expect or welcome opinions from parents who spoke “only some English words, sometimes

Table 3.  
Perception of the support and challenges of at-home distance learning during the pandemic

Items	% of A or SA	M	SD
<b>Potential Support</b>			
My child received the mandated special education services, based on the IEP via distance education.	6.5%	2.39	.88
My child received all the mandated related services, based on his/her IEP via distance education.	8.7%	2.41	.84
The special education teacher was in contact with parents.	46.7%	3.38	.96
The related service provider was in contact with parents.	50.0%	3.37	.97
The distance learning materials from the special education teacher were provided in Korean.	4.2%	1.29	.69
My child's distance learning would be more successful if the materials were provided in Korean.	37.6%	2.88	1.43
My child's distance learning would be more successful if the resources were provided in Korea.	38.7%	2.97	1.47
My child's distance learning would be more successful if a Korean interpretation service were offered.	37.5%	2.97	1.45
<b>Challenges</b>			
Lack of resources in Korean	77.1%	4.04	1.01
Completing all the homework from school	70.9%	3.71	.97
Accommodating for the distance learning setting for my child	66.7%	3.69	1.10
Choosing the appropriate resources from the recommended resources from the school	62.5%	3.63	.89
Setting up routines	58.4%	3.62	.87
Lack of time to support my child	64.6%	3.58	.96
Understanding school assignments that are provided in English	43.8%	3.02	1.12
Not having a Korean interpreter when communicating with teachers	39.6%	2.98	1.31
Using the same technology that teachers use in online learning	31.3%	2.98	1.06
Timing or scheduling of my child's daily routine	33.3%	2.90	1.15
Accessing to school personnel if needed	23.0%	2.81	.98

mumbling with strong accents.” Consequently, they believed that teachers did not consider parents’ opinions on their child’s needs during distance learning. One mother said:

My child is a first grader and has been in the U.S. for only two years, but the contents are still difficult for me. He is currently receiving speech therapy. Often, I need to translate what the teacher is saying in Korean because he doesn’t understand. He is still learning Korean. It is difficult to explain in both languages based on his level. It seems I am doing his homework, and he expects I am the ‘answers’ without trying. I am often not able to control my tempers and fight with him. I really want to discuss my concerns with his teacher, but it is not easy due to my poor English skill. His teacher talks too fast, so I have often missed the important points and directions. It frustrates me, and I feel helpless, but I do not want to request or demand services only for my son. I do not want to interfere. . . .

Another parent also shared her similar experience, “I have not received any specific directions for distance learning from the special education teacher or other school staff at all. I wish I could talk to the school districts, but I could not. . . due to my poor English ability.”

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore special education and related services Korean American students with disabilities received during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic and to understand perceived challenges Korean American parents experienced as they supported at-home distance learning of their children with disabilities. The data revealed that Korean American children with disabilities received significantly less varied and fewer hours of special education support than they did pre-pandemic. Although schools provided support to students with disabilities, their support was not tailored to address Korean American

parents' unique challenges to providing home-based support, such as the language barrier.

### **Special Education and Related Services Before vs. During the Pandemic**

The disruption of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic does not mean that schools do not need to adhere to the IEP and provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) (Harkins et al., 2022; Yell & Bateman, 2022). Yet, the findings in this study clearly demonstrate that Korean American children with disabilities did not fully receive their entitled special education services during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are similar to previous studies that showed the lack of, or partially implemented, special education services during the pandemic (Harkins et al., 2022; Yell & Bateman, 2022).

The results are not surprising, given that the abrupt transition to distance learning due to COVID-19 left teachers practically no preparation time for distance education (Kim & Fienup, 2022). Yet, it is alarming that 13% of Korean American parents still reported that their children received no special education services even about two months after the school shut down in March 2020. These findings were consistent with, and indeed lower than, a recent study in which only 69% of parents reported that districts provided special education during school closure (Willcutts, 2020). In short, the present findings clearly demonstrate that schools did not meet the obligation to provide FAPE under the IDEA, even though the U.S. Department of Education did not provide waivers from these special education related obligations (Yell & Bateman, 2022).

### **Challenges of Distance Learning**

Quantitative and qualitative data showed that Korean parents faced language barriers and a lack of distance learning experience. Their Korean American children with disabilities also demonstrated challenges related to attention and behaviors during at-home distance learning.

**Language Barriers.** The findings regarding lack of resources in Korean and challenges in understanding assignments in English are consistent with the previous study by Hong et al. (2021b) that 72% of Korean immigrant parents reported language barriers as one of their difficulties in providing support for their children with special needs, including giftedness and English Language Learning, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their difficulties with English seemed to further influence them to take a more passive role in their children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present findings emphasize the need to better support Korean American parents to be partners in educating their children with disabilities, regardless of the modality of instruction.

The results of the current study are consistent with the findings from the two studies by Hong et al. (2021a, 2021b) indicating language barriers as a stress source for Korean American parents during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hong et al., 2021a; Hong et al., 2021b). Moreover, the findings from the present study add to the literature by examining Korean American parents in Southern California, where the highest Korean American population resides. Unlike Hong et al. (2021b), our participants were exclusively parents of children with disabilities. Additionally, the present study indicates that even those living within a more ethno-cultural clustered community identified language barriers as one of their main challenges in supporting at-home distance learning for their children with disabilities during the pandemic. In short, the findings from the present study are noteworthy because they emphasize the criticality for schools to acknowledge the importance of meeting language demands of CLD families of children with disabilities, including Korean Americans. Lack of resources in Korean and language barriers can be also generalized to other CLD students worldwide, for example, by emphasizing the importance of providing resources in students' heritage language to facilitate parent participation in the distance learning of students with disabilities.

### **Teaching Related Challenges: Parents as Teachers.**

The shift to online learning during the pandemic forced Korean American parents of children with disabilities to play multiple roles as teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers. Consistent with recent findings documenting parents' increased responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2021; Iovino et al., 2021) and their struggles to meet the disability-related needs of their children during the lockdown (Garbe et al., 2020), over 50% of Korean American parents in the present study felt challenged to provide teaching-related support to their children with disabilities, such as helping their child complete schoolwork, accommodating the distance learning setting, choosing the appropriate materials, and setting up routines. Analysis of the open-ended questions found parents lack of distance learning experience to be one of their main challenges in supporting at-home distance learning of their children with disabilities during the pandemic. Korean American parents also spent extensive personal time on their children's at-home distance learning, leaving them exhausted. Such parental exhaustion is consistent with findings of burnout in parents during the COVID lockdown (Marchetti et al., 2020; Swit & Breen, 2022).

Previous research has found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, child independence and parental emotional regulation were the strongest protective predictors to prevent parental burnout, while COVID-19 restrictions were not one of the predictors (Swit & Breen, 2022). Considering that children with disabilities typically require



more assistance in their daily living and academic work than their peers without disabilities, it is understandable that Korean American parents in the present study felt exhaustion and burnout during the pandemic. Additionally, such burnout of the study parents may also have increased parental stress as they attempted to meet their children's educational needs (Hong et al., 2021a).

Another important finding of the present study is that educators cannot simply expect parents to play the role of teacher during an emergency situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when these parents did not receive resources and proper training. As family system theory suggests, a child with disabilities should be understood and served as part of a larger family system. Although family involvement benefits the educational outcomes of children with disabilities (Hirano et al., 2018), expecting parents with no proper training to play a teacher role for their child with disabilities can further negatively affect parent-child interactions due to parents' distress, exhaustion, and burnout. Therefore, it is critical for schools to acknowledge such parental challenges and the need to be equipped with proper trainings for any other emergency at-home distance instruction in the future.

#### **Child's Unique Needs in Attention and Behavior.**

Korean American parents in the present study reported that their children had difficulty staying focused during distance learning due to their short attention span, isolation and lack of in-person interaction with teachers and peers. The findings align with previous research that children with disabilities demonstrated moderate to severe behavior challenges, low motivation, and a lack of attention during at-home distance learning (Stadheim et al., 2022). In short, our findings support other recent research that at-home online instruction during the pandemic negatively affected the attention, behavior, and social interaction of children with disabilities (Chafouleas & Iovino, 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021).

#### **Positive Changes During the Pandemic**

In addition to the challenges reported in the previous sections, several Korean American parents in the present study also reported that distance learning provided a positive opportunity for parents to learn about their child's disability-related needs and ways to support their academic needs. In other words, these Korean American parents of children with disabilities demonstrated resilience during the highly challenging time of the COVID-19 lockdown as they provided educational support for their children's at-home distance learning.

Such positive experiences reported in the present study align with previous studies worldwide that some parents of children with disabilities demonstrated resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alhuzimi, 2021;

Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Ludgate et al., 2022). Such resilience could be because parents spent considerably more time with their children with disabilities during the lockdown. Such time together helped parents better understand the needs of their children with disabilities (Ludgate et al., 2022). Although it is beyond the scope of the findings from the present study, these Korean American parents with high resilience may have experienced a lower level of stress than parents with low resilience (Hong et al., 2021b).

Research has shown that Korean American parents focus on providing the highest quality of education to their children with disabilities through in-person or distance learning (Park & Turnbull, 2001), and similarly, in this study, parents also demonstrated resilience during the challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

#### **Practical Implications**

The findings from the present study have three critical implications for teachers, school districts, and policy-makers who serve CLD children with disabilities and their families, including Asian Americans in the United States, or CLD students worldwide. First, the language barrier of these CLD parents should be addressed to provide more equitable educational opportunities to CLD children with disabilities. Second, schools need to have an emergency plan to provide mandated special education services to students with disabilities through distance learning if a crisis similar to the COVID-19 pandemic occurs. Their emergency plan should be tailored to the individual and unique needs of CLD students and their families. Third, educators should be cognizant of these cultural tendencies and may want to adjust their expectations for performance and behavior accordingly.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present study has several limitations. First, although the present survey data is from the largest group of Korean American parents of children with disabilities living in Southern California, the current sample may not capture the diverse perspectives of Korean American parents of children with disabilities who live in other parts of the U.S. In particular, a homogenous convenience sampling was employed to capture the experiences and voices that may not be captured by conventional randomized design. Nevertheless, such sampling methods challenge the generalizability of the findings from the present study to a larger population of Korean American parents of children with disabilities (Jager et al. 2017).

Second, the presence of children with autism was over-represented in the present study (79.2%). Finally, although an expert review and statistical analysis ensured the validity of the survey, the current survey items were not

systematically validated. The present study is also limited in terms of reliability of the measures as well. This is primarily due to the novelty of emergency distance learning caused by the pandemic and the scarcity of research on Korean American students with disabilities. Therefore, future studies should survey the distance learning experiences of Korean American children with various disabilities who live across the U.S. and in other countries. Additionally, the survey items could be revised and validated to better capture the experiences of Korean American parents and their children with disabilities during the pandemic.

### CONCLUSION

Findings underscore that Korean American children with disabilities did not receive all their entitled special education services through at-home distance learning during the first months of the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the findings highlight challenges parents faced in supporting the at-home learning of their children with disabilities, coupled with the complexity of cultural attitudes toward disabilities and the language barriers faced by many Korean American parents. Thus, Korean American parents need to be equipped with linguistically accessible materials and support to provide equitable educational opportunities for their children with disabilities. Finally, although the focus of the present study is Korean Americans in the U.S., the findings of the present study can provide a foundation for future research in the areas of special education for CLD students who have been historically marginalized and under-researched as well in other countries.

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