A JOURNEY INTO SELF-DISCOVERY: INVESTIGATING THE AFFECTS OF CULTURE AND PARENTAL PRESSURES ON CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT EXCEPTIONALITIES

by

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A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Special Education

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

Introduction: The Beginning to My Self-Discovery

Before entering into my graduate studies I placed little value on my ethnicity. I am a Canadian-born Chinese, and, in my experiences, my ethnic background did not create any obstacles in being included into peer groups and community activities. I felt respected and welcomed in my schools. Consequently, I believe that Canada is a multi-cultural nation and fosters an acceptance of all peoples.

During my graduate studies, and for the first time in my adult life, I began to reflect and analyze my personal ethnic identity and how it influenced my sense of self. Connecting to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, characterized by a model explaining the relationships between the individual and her environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), I gained some insight on how my individuality was developed. Within my research interest, my own personal stories and experiences surfaced and became exposed. I realized that my culture and parental expectations shaped my character and sense of self. Using narrative inquiry, I have gained some insight on development of self-worth; and by sharing my own stories and experiences in this project, I hope to share some insight on how culture can impact a person.

One of my intentions behind this research is for others to realize the importance of being culturally sensitive to international students and students with immigrant parents. More specifically, I am speaking to the effects of Asian cultures, including Korean and Chinese, and the influential powers these cultures have on the person while acculturating to Canadian culture. Teachers in North American schools have different expectations, practices and philosophies from teachers in Asian schools. Families living in Canadian and Asian cultures also have different expectations and beliefs in their children’s academic performances. It is important for teachers in Canadian schools to be aware of the contrast of the various expectations between Western and Eastern societies in order for students to be able to develop healthy identities while living between two cultures. I have a goal to bridge the gap between cultural, parental and school expectations.
I approached my project from a narrative inquiry perspective. It was an appropriate fit because I wanted to explore, analyze and clarify meaning on a subject that was personal. Using a narrative research approach allows the researcher to make meaning out of lived experiences. In other words, the researcher identifies the connections between lived experiences and their social contexts (Moen 2006). This qualitative research method allowed me to understand the influences Asian cultures have on families with children with exceptionalities, and who live in a society that does not necessarily share the same values. In addition, narrative inquiry enabled me, as the researcher, to comment on three stories: my personal story, my sister’s story that I witnessed while growing up with her, and the story of Soon-Ei, a Korean student living in Canada, whom I had the privilege of knowing over eight months. For the purpose of research, the names of my participants are fictitious in order to protect their identity.

Initially, I hesitated to explore the personal experiences which affected and shaped my views on parental expectations; however, after multiple consultations with professors, my vision for my final project kept returning to this initial thought. The hesitation that delayed my process was my fear of reliving an emotional journey I had worked through in order to come to terms with my past. However, despite my fears, I decided to embark on a self-discovering journey that shaped and shifted my perspective on the influences Asian parents have on their children. This inquiry is my story and it is braided with three interrelated stories.

My Story

My parents were born in China, and both their families lived in poverty. My mother was born in Hong Kong living on a farming village with her brother, sister and parents. On my mother’s side, my grandmother is illiterate and worked as a farmer; I never had the chance to meet my grandfather. My father was born in a small village in China and immigrated into Canada when he was 10 years old. His mother passed away from tuberculosis. His father was able to get sponsored to immigrate and live in Montreal, QC, and eventually able to sponsor his son (my father) while leaving his daughters behind. My
grandfather remarried in Montreal and the family became a blended family. My aunts remained in China for a number of years after.

My childhood experiences and the way I was raised were very different from my parents. I was born in Canada, where most of my needs were met and provided by my parents. However, I am from a family with traditional Asian values that prioritizes excellence in education, and during our upbringing, my dad always reminded me to obtain a good education and get a good job because that is the Chinese way. I was expected to follow his way of thinking and agree to the “Chinese way”. I often had a curiosity around Chinese parents and their strong desire for their children to achieve a high level of excellence in academia. For example, I wondered why my parents would only feel proud of my school performance if I brought home nothing less than a straight-A report card. They did not appreciate my grades that were merely “satisfactory” or “good”. I was constantly reminded of my potential and the ability to do better; however, I did not share the same belief in my potential because the results on my assignments and exams did not reflect how hard I studied or the efforts I put forward. I remember one incident when my parents were proud of a family friend’s daughter receiving a perfect report card and I was reminded that mine was not good enough. I was an average student receiving satisfactory grades throughout grade school. My parents criticized my performance not only about school but also piano and other activities I participated in. It was a constant battle trying to meet my parents’ expectations. Chinese families are eager to show others their children’s success. In my opinion, I feel these parents validate themselves through their children’s achievements because it shows that their children are diligent and obedient.

I am nine years older than my sister, Jenny, and I have always felt protective over her. Jenny was born prematurely and has learning difficulties. She is now diagnosed with anxiety with borderline schizophrenia. My parents struggled to come to terms with the fact that their children were not Honour Roll students. I did not appreciate the expectations they placed on us. I felt we always had to do better
and our efforts were not good enough. I did not want Jenny to experience the same negativity on her learning and I felt resentment towards my parents while helping my sister and her school work.

There have been times where I regret not being able to shield Jenny from our parents’ harshness. My parents felt frustration towards her progress in school, and being much older, I felt like a second mother to her and tried to defend her against my parents’ constant criticism. I received the same constant criticism throughout my childhood and I wished differently for my little sister. I was a teenager at the time, and I wanted to spend more time on interests other than helping my sister with her homework. I wanted to live selfishly and disregard my sister’s needs; however, I was torn because I also wanted to help Jenny and avoid her experiencing the same feeling of disapproval and disappointing our parents. I wonder, had I been more understanding and put more effort in helping my sister throughout her school experience, could she have had a more positive school experience? Could that have led to having more positive self-concept and higher self-esteem? I believe my sister and our childhood experiences inspired me to become a teacher. The desire to become a teacher came from wanting to help children who struggled through school like me; and to improve their experiences in hopes to help their self-esteem.

I often wondered why my parents were “hard” on us. I can understand my parents had our best interest at heart and wanted what was best for us. They wanted me to get into a university, obtain a good job and raise a family. I do not object their life goals for me; it was their approach and forceful attitude that was not appreciated. Setting high standard for children may sound like good parenting; however, my parents’ attitude and demeanor were not motivating. I felt a sense of obligation to my parents that I needed to meet, and I put pressure on myself to meet their expectations in fear of their disappointment. I felt it was my responsibility as a daughter in a Chinese family to please my parents. Would I have felt differently and obtained a different attitude towards my learning experiences if I had a warmer attachment to my parents?
Prior to entering my graduate studies, I had some unresolved emotions around my self-esteem. I believe my self-esteem issues evolved around the pressures placed on my academic achievements, which affected my sense of self-worth. Also, my parents placed some expectations on me helping my sister through school - expectations which I resented. After having gone through the process of evaluating my childhood experiences, connecting them to theories and social contexts, I am able to bring closure to those unresolved feelings. I can say with confidence that I am grateful for this self-exploring experience and the insight I gained throughout this journey. “Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.” This quotation by Greg Anderson rings true to my experience in finding my purpose through the graduate program.

Jenny’s Story

Jenny spent her first 15 days of her life in an incubator. The doctors discharged her as a healthy baby with no known health concerns. Her limitations and challenges became apparent when she entered Kindergarten. Physically, Jenny appeared as a typical child; however, her cognitive abilities were atypical. Although she met the developmental milestones, it was her lagging social development that flagged our attention. Jenny felt the most comfortable playing and interacting with children younger than herself; the type of play she chose to participate in did not match that of her peers, and she was not interested in participating in similar social activities with same aged peers. Her lack of social development was a small portion of her life’s obstacles. It is her academic challenges that continue to impede in her life. Even to this day, my sister continues to have difficulties expressing herself understanding orally or in written form.

Jenny struggled throughout her entire schooling. Her borderline academic abilities did not warrant a learning disability designation at school. She was not eligible for accommodations as recorded in an Individual Education Plan or additional support by an Educational Assistant. Jenny did, however, receive support through resource room teachers and was placed on a modified curriculum throughout high
school. She worked through a high school leaving program; her teachers provided class assignments at her level and the school allowed accommodations such as providing extra time for tests.

I tried tutoring her in math and writing assignments and my parents enrolled her into Sylvan Learning and hired private tutors. All the assistance provided to her proved to be ineffective. Reading comprehension, summarizing facts and math were her toughest subjects in school. At the age of 17, my sister faced an emotional turning point in her life. She went into a spiral depression as she watched her friends move onto post-secondary schools. She did not have the qualification to attend college or university. It was then she realized she was different, and did not understand why.

My parents shared one goal for their two children, which was to achieve excellence in academia. My parents were proactive in Jenny’s education. They went into her school to investigate why her academic performances were low and what they could do at home to support her learning. They felt the public education system lacked sufficient resources to help my sister and registered her into a private school. My mother had the impression that class sizes in private schools are smaller and proper attention could be provided for students who can benefit from extra assistance.

I believe my parents adopted a survival attitude at a very young age due to living in poverty throughout their childhood. They had to meet family obligations such as tending to farming responsibilities and obtaining employment to help their family’s income; and simultaneously attended school on top of their family responsibilities. My parents believe education is the answer to a better life; in other words, higher education leads to better opportunities.

My parents are hard-working people and believed anything is achievable if one puts in the effort and motivation towards that goal; which may be a reason why it was difficult for them to understand Jenny’s inability to overcome her challenges in school. She continued to struggle with reading comprehension, writing and arithmetic assignments even after copious hours spent on homework and tutoring sessions. It was difficult for me to watch my sister struggle throughout grade school, and I can
only imagine how difficult it was for my parents. I remember my parents feeling frustrated as they had a hard time accepting Jenny’s limitations. She became the centre of family tension in the household as I tried to defend her against my parents’ demands while my parents fought for what they felt was best for my sister.

Soon-Ei’s Story

For part of my final graduate project requirements, I created a video presentation at the request of a mother, Su-Dae. After eight years living in Canada, Su-Dae was preparing her family to move back to Korea. Su-Dae intended to find a special school designed for children with special needs for her daughter, Soon-Ei. The purpose of the video was to inform Soon-Ei’s future educators with a better understanding of who this child is. Soon-Ei is eleven years old, but she is non-verbal, developmentally delayed, and requires assistance in most areas of her daily functioning.

Soon-Ei was born in Pusan, Korea in 2000, and came to Canada in 2004 with her mother Su-Dae and older brother Jung-Oh. Soon-Ei’s father remained in Korea supervising a factory that he owns and operates. Su-Dae is the main caregiver. Soon-Ei was born healthy with no complications, and at six months old, she began to randomly jerk her shoulders. The doctors reported the jerking motions were caused by seizures. Soon-Ei was quickly diagnosed with West Syndrome or some may know it as Infantile Spasm. West Syndrome is a rare epileptic disorder in infants (Sakakihara, 2011). The syndrome is age-related, generally occurs in infants between four and seven months old and results in brain damage. Most patients with West syndrome have some degree of developmental retardation.

Su-Dae did not realize the severity of her daughter’s condition because Soon-Ei did not cry or show any signs of pain. Soon-Ei was immediately hospitalized and the seizure stopped after a one week stay; however, she continued to stay in the hospital for a second week while doctors monitored her behaviours. The medication prescribed to Soon-Ei, at the time, was not effective in controlling her seizures because the episodes became more frequent, longer in duration and more intense. Su-Dae tried
all the recommendations suggested by doctors and specialists. Eventually, she took her daughter to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Su-Dae heard it was the best hospital to treat patients with epilepsy.

While being treated at Johns Hopkins hospital, Soon-Ei was heavily sedated in order to help her rest and recover. The doctors believed she would not develop the abilities to walk if the seizures did not stop. They had very little hope of recovery for Soon-Ei. The treatments at the hospital did not progress as well Su-Dae had hoped; however, they did not discourage her search in finding the correct medical care necessary for Soon-Ei. Upon returning to Korea, Su-Dae sought advice from a doctor who practices Western and Eastern medicine. This doctor believed that every individual fits a certain body type, and ailments can be treated depending on which type. In other words, treatments are to cater to the person’s body type. The doctor recommended the medication called Sabril and advised against combining other medications. Today, Soo Bin continues taking Sabril to manage her seizures. However, Soon-Ei is a child who requires assistance with feeding, dressing and toileting.

At the time when Soon-Ei was ready for preschool, Su-Dae continuously faced obstacles in attempt to register Soon-Ei into a Korean preschool. Repeatedly, Su-Dae found the schools commenting on their lack of resources and inadequate training necessary to support Soon-Ei. Also, the school’s reason for prohibiting registration into its preschool program was because Soon-Ei was not toilet trained and the other parents felt uncomfortable having Soon-Ei in the same classroom as their children. Su-Dae was displeased with the parents’ and schools’ attitudes towards her daughter.

In 2004, Su-Dae made the decision to move to Canada. She packed up her two children and moved when Soon-Ei was four years old. In 2005, Soon-Ei attended a Montessori school and is currently finishing her seventh year. The staff at this private school treated Soon-Ei and her family graciously, with respect and care from the very beginning. Other students with special needs attend the Montessori school. A child development centre is affiliated with the school and provides a speech and language pathologist
and occupational therapists to make school visits. In addition to receiving support from the development centre, Soon-Ei is in contact with a private speech and language pathologist, private occupational therapist, music therapist and occasionally horse-back riding therapy. Soon-Ei also participates in community programs designed for children with special needs, such as Special Olympics. While living in Canada, Soon-Ei is involved in services that benefit her communication skills, daily functioning and general well-being. These services and attention have provided Su-Dae hope that her daughter will one day acquire the necessary skills to integrate into the real world.
Telling My Story: Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method

On the last day of our graduate program, my instructor gave her students a notebook as a means to record personal experiences and reflections. It was a thoughtful gesture and very fitting to our profession. I believe an effective teacher is a professional who continuously questions and reflects on her practices. A teacher is motivated to have the ability to reach her students, no matter what the challenges or obstacles may be. I am inspired by the fact that I have the power to influence children and make a difference in their lives. I intend to take advantage of this capability to impact young people and be a supportive role model. In hopes, my enthusiasm will leave a positive impression on my students’ school experiences.

As a teacher, I can only control the experiences occurring at school; however, school experiences affect only a portion of the students’ lives. Their home life impacts just as much, if not more, in shaping who children are. As much as I want to be a positive force in my students’ lives, I am cognizant of the impact home life can bring to their self-esteem and sense of self-worth due to my own personal experiences. I was fortunate enough to be taught by positive, supportive teachers throughout grade school; however, they were not able to shield me away from the negativity my parents placed around my education. I want share my experiences with other teachers and parents to avoid deflating the self-esteem of students who may be in situations similar to my own upbringing. By researching through a narrative method, I bring forward lived experiences for others and myself to learn from. Real-life situations can provide invaluable elements to further understanding. My goal is to transform my lived experiences into new meaning and for others to reflect on.

Moen (2006), suggests research through narrative belongs in the framework of sociocultural theory, where researchers examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur- how and where they occur through growth. Human beings are social creatures who
enjoy interacting with others, sharing our experiences and learning from each other. Sharing experiences with others in a narrative fashion allows for opportunities to relate with one another. Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of dialogue implies that we are constantly responding to our environment and connecting individuals to context. In other words, we place meaning to our experiences while relating to others.

In narrative research, the researcher’s objective is to collect stories of experiences in order to study how humans experience the world (Gudnundsdottir, 2001). The First Nations’ people are known to share knowledge through stories and storytelling. They believe in preserving their culture and wisdom by passing their knowledge onto the next generation through stories. As a result, cultural understanding is painted by the experiences and perspective of the individual conveying the knowledge. A classroom teacher in Western society is similar in the fact that her wisdom and expertise is influenced by her experiences and perspective. Perspective on experiences constantly changes form as she gains new experiences and engage in dialogues with other people (Heikkinen, 2002). The process of interpreting my past has re-formed my understanding of my upbringing and brought new light to my childhood experiences.

Leggo (2004) mentions in his article on narrative research that the heart of this method is the construction and creation of writing in order to convey the intent behind the research. Essentially, a researcher utilizing narrative inquiry as her method is engaging in an active process of writing. This is the reason why I chose this method of research; because throughout this process, while I am investigating the connections between my own lived experiences and the social context they occurred in, I am making meaning and reflecting on personal experiences through the perspective of time and personal growth.
Stories from a Literature Review

Canada is a multi-cultural nation. The country is made up of people belonging to various religions and ethnicities. Canada is part of a Western society that is privileged and developed with ample opportunities. The Chinese, Koreans and other Asian cultures belong to an eastern society that is rich in religion and philosophies guiding their way through life. The cultural differences between Eastern traditions and Western ideals can make it difficult for foreign students and children of immigrant parents acculturate into a new culture.

*The best men are born wise, Next come those who grow wise by learning: then, learned, narrow minds. Narrow minds, without learning, are the lowest of the people. Confucius.*

When I came across this quote, I was struck by how well it summarizes the idea behind the Chinese valuing education so highly. My interpretation of Confucius’ words is that the Chinese aim to be the best as an indication of life’s success; and to gain that success, is through learning and obtaining a high education. Without education, a person is weak and unworthy.

My parents honour their heritage through their traditional customs and beliefs, and because they are proud of their heritage, they yearn for their children to continue those traditions. A study about expectations in Chinese families found that parents ground their expectations for their children in Chinese tradition. Li (2001) interviewed seven sets of Chinese parents who recently immigrated into Canada, and one of the parents Mr. Chen, suggested that Chinese people historically had a high respect for formal education. He stated, “Our five thousand years of Confucian heritage have formed a firm belief that nothing is more important than formal education [wei you du shu gao]” (Li, 2001, p. 482). A second participant, Mr. Lin, stated, “Our Chinese history, five thousand years of feudal society, has produced unique cultural beliefs, such as academic achievement leads to higher social status [xue er you ze shi]. So
in China, all parents want their children to achieve privileged positions through academic excellence [wang zi cheng luong]. The meaning of this Confucian motto is that only if you excel in your studies will you have a good future” (Li, 2001, p. 482). I believe the Chinese people are loyal to their native culture. They are determined to maintain and preserve their heritage by instilling the tradition and beliefs of their culture into their children born or brought into a different country. As a result, children born outside of the parents’ home country may have difficulties building a cultural identity because they are torn between their social and home life, which is acculturating into a new culture versus embracing their parents’ culture. It is best when both can occur simultaneously.

In a study investigating ethnic identity, acculturation and psychological functioning between Chinese, Japanese and Korean American participants, the researchers found ethnic identity was positively correlated with psychological well-being (Chae & Foley, 2010). Chae and Foley (2010) found the Korean, Chinese and Japanese participants who were able to weave their Asian and American cultures together to develop a blended identity are able to demonstrate cognitive and problem solving abilities in daily social interactions. There are many bodies of research outlining the importance of embracing an individual’s ethnic identity. Phinney, Chavira and Williamson (1992) found individuals born to immigrant parents having the ability to attach themselves to their ethnic background while acculturating into a new culture, and therefore bicultural, demonstrated higher levels of self-esteem and self-concept. Respecting the Asian identity in students of immigrant families and valuing their parents’ values can engage the students into building a healthy sense of belonging while residing in Canada.

When comparing the mannerisms between students of the two different cultures, one can notice a difference. For example, the Chinese value authority figures at school; therefore, children of Chinese heritage seek their teachers’ approval, rarely challenge teachers in class or seek help when needed. Also, they may be reluctant to volunteer to share their opinions and ideas without being asked (Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010). Their style of learning may conflict with the way western classrooms in North American schools operate. For example, students in North American school are often encouraged to engage in
group discussions, participate in active questioning and be proactive with their learning. This is a reason why teachers in North American schools need to be sensitive to cultural differences; they need to be aware and understand learning patterns of children from different cultures are different due to cultural values and not to mistaken them as developmental deficits.

Asian cultures and North American cultures are also different with their own values and beliefs. It is imperative for educators in North American schools be aware of these differences in order to effectively teach Chinese, Korean and other Asian students. Parents immigrating into Canada place their cultural expectations onto their children. Chinese parents have an influence in forming and shaping their child’s personality and outlook in life while they find their place in a predominantly Caucasian culture. As a visual minority, Asians generally feel it is important to be hard workers in order to stand out and apart from their Caucasian competitors. Chinese parents regard achievements as a family honour, and view success as a source of happiness (Li, 2001). Two participants in Li’s study stated although Chinese cultural expectations place pressures on their children, it is necessary and productive because it produces desired outcomes. The intentions behind these expectations on children may be beneficial in some ways; however, can cause psychological harm if the expectations are set too high and are too demanding.

Generally, children born to immigrant parents become aware of the sacrifices their parents made to transition into a new country and have an opportunity to live a fruitful life; in which, the children feel the pressure to excel in school (Zhou, Peverly, Xin, Hugan & Wang, 2003). In an interview (Li, 2009) 12 Chinese Canadian adolescents after residing in Canada for less than ten years spoke of the pressure they felt from high expectations their parents held for their achievement. They felt their parents promoted the importance of achievement and it was more important than pursuing other interests. They also regretted that their parents did not understand their desire for greater autonomy. Stifling the children’s ability to develop autonomy and emphasizing achievements may lead to stress and display symptoms of depression (Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010). There is a possibility that these children are unable to live up to their parents’ expectations; therefore, placing disappointment on themselves and internalizing failure.
I believe one way to protect children of immigrant families from damaging their self-esteem are by fostering their ethnic identity and developing their sense of belonging. These youths may have a more positive self-concept and the ability to make connections to a social group that allows them to maintain a positive sense of themselves despite lower achievement. For youths with lower levels of ethnic identification leaves them more vulnerable to a poorer self-concept and feelings of depression when achievements are not meeting expectations (Costigan, Hua,& Su, 2010). Attention is brought more onto academic failures than academic success. It is important to note the possibility of one masking their failures in fear of disappointing themselves and others. The theory of self-worth, researched by Covington (1992), outlines the motive behind one’s desire to establish and maintain a positive sense of worthiness and value to themselves and others. According to self-worth theory, to protect children from deflating their self-worth is by encouraging a sense of academic competence. It is important for children to believe they are competent and have the abilities to reach their potential. Without that belief, children may attribute failures to lack of ability; which may lead to avoidance behaviours (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Children may avoid a task in fear of failing. This is one reason why high demands and unreachable expectations placed on children can be detrimental to a child’s well-being and are best to be avoided. Teachers in North American schools need to be aware of avoidance behaviours in students of immigrant families because it can be mistaken for the student being lazy when in fact they have a fear of failing and is protecting their self-worth.
Discussion

Reshaping My Past

I believe raising children is the utmost noble task an adult can acquire. Raising children with exceptionalities involving physical, emotional and intellectual needs is an even greater feat to accomplish. Children with exceptionalities are vulnerable and rely on their caretakers. Their well-being is in the hands of others. We can only hope all parents and guardians have the intentions of providing the best possible care for their children, with and without exceptionalities. An essential piece to a healthy well-rounded upbringing is prioritizing the child’s best interest; however, some parents may neglect this idea and bring forward their own motives and beliefs instead. It may be easy for parents to place their beliefs and values onto the child; however, a parent should always question who is benefitting from the parenting action and discipline: the child or the parent?

Children with learning disabilities, developmental delays, or other limitations may not have the mental capacity to voice their concerns and communicate their needs. It is up to the caretaker to know their child’s needs. I believe the parents and caretakers have a responsibility to become well-versed with different ways to support their child’s disabilities. I understand it may be overwhelming to accept a child having limitations; however, it is necessary for the adults to set aside their fear and pride in order to attend to their child’s needs. The adults in a child’s life have the power to positively and negatively influence the experiences in their child’s life. Asian parents sending their children to North American schools may need a lesson on the education system in Canada to reset their expectations around academic achievements. Setting too high expectations and placing demanding pressures on children may cause psychological harm and leading them to demonstrate negative behaviours in order to protect their self-worth.
Being an educator myself, I came to learn the complexities of the teaching profession and the support all students require in order to be successful in their school experiences. While developing my professional education in the special education field, I believe I have even more empathy towards Asian families raising children with exceptionalities or children who are failing to meet the parents’ expectations. I have the education background and personal experiences to relate to these families.

After processing a narrative inquiry and placing meaning on my childhood upbringing, my perspective on the effects culture have on people is enlightened. I am now aware of the potential influences that cultures has on people’s lives, and I see my ethnic identity under a new light. Before, I felt included and part of the norm and culture had little impact on my development. Now, I see the opposite: that my entity was very much shaped and developed by cultural influences. In my process of self-discovery, I gained a clearer perspective of my past and brought closure to any emotional turmoil I had after working through understanding my childhood. The process of organizing and connecting my personal experiences to meaning was therapeutic. It was an opportunity to reflect and I am now at peace with my past.

I now understand the perspective on education I have is different of my parents. This may be due to cultural differences; my sister and I are Chinese-Canadian, and we were born and raised in a developed country with cultural expectations different from my parents’ expectations. It is common for Chinese parents to exert pressures on their children. Due to cultural expectations, they feel it is necessary and positive because it produces desired outcomes (Li, 2001). My parents felt it was important that their children obtained high marks in school, proceed onto post-secondary and acquire a high paying job in order to take care of family.

Learning about a child’s deficits can be devastating. It is how the caretaker processes that information is the key to the child’s success. My sister has learning difficulties that caused her to struggle throughout school, and my parents had a hard time understanding and accepting her limitations. It took a
while for them to accept the fact that obtaining a university degree was virtually impossible for her. I regret counseling was not made available for my parents to help them grieve the loss of my sister’s potential in the academic field. It would be beneficial for parents and the child to receive counseling in order for everyone to confront the situation in a healthy manner.

While reflecting on my past I can see the conflict between my parents and I stemmed from cultural differences. My parents valued doing well at school and obtaining a post-secondary education. I, on the other hand, had different priorities. I wanted to socialize and gain travel experiences, and gaining a post-secondary education was likely at the bottom of my list of goals to achieve. Also, during my process, I compared my studying habits with my mother’s while she attended school in Hong Kong. At the same age, she and I had different work ethics. When I was a child, completing homework was always last on my agenda after school. I wanted to play or watch television instead of working on homework. My mother explained to me that when she was my age, she had many responsibilities and had little time for fun. Each day after school, she started her farming duties and household chores; and once her responsibilities were completed, she then worked on hours of homework until bedtime. She always reminded me to work first then play.

At the end of my graduate project, I take gratification in the transition tool I created for a Korean family because I am motivated to help families raising children with special needs. I was, however, anxious in hearing their feedback after watching the video presentation. I needed their validation before I was able to experience a sense of accomplishment and feel proud of my work. I believe my need for validation from others stems from the fact that, as a child, I yearned for my parents’ approval in all of my accomplishments. Consulting Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, my parents did not fulfill my need on the level of affection and love. My attachment to my parents was out of loyalty and obligation. I did not feel attachment through comfort and tenderness. I was repeatedly reminded of the “Chinese way” and I had to be a “good daughter”. The message I kept receiving from my parents was that everything I did, it could have been done better. I believe the lack of love and affection throughout my childhood affected
my self-esteem. Achieving positive self-esteem is possible when one has acquired their need of love fulfilled.

A parent’s good intentions can motivate and encourage positive gains in their children’s lives. Soon-Ei has a mother whose determination in seeking the best possible care for her daughter led to the family moving to a different county that holds a more respectful attitude towards children with special needs. Comparing Su-Dae with my parents, she was a more positive influence on her daughter’s life. Her motivation in wanting the best for her family led them to living in Canada where she was able to gain access to services that are not available in Korea.

During an interview with Su-Dae, I asked if she found other acts of intolerance directed to her daughter or if it was isolated to schools’ narrow-minded attitudes. Su-Dae described an incident at the train station. A well dressed, middle-aged woman pushed Soon-Ei aside while walking towards her destination and showed no signs of patience. I find this disheartening and it is unfortunate that individuals with exceptionalities are misunderstood. I feel grateful living in Canada where there is a tolerance of all peoples. Soon after arriving in Canada, Su-Dae quickly noticed that the key difference between Western and Eastern cultures regarding to people’s attitudes toward individuals with special needs is acceptance. This acceptance is possibly due to Canada’s valued multiculturalism, allowing people to be accepting of each other’s differences.

**Findings**

I had the privilege to work with Soon-Ei, her family, teachers and therapists since November 2011. During this time, I learned about her history, daily life and therapeudic supports while living in Canada. While engaged in this work, the major discovery I had from this experience was the vast difference in cultural attitudes toward individuals with special needs. From Su-Dae’s experience, she explained how people in her home country have low to non existing levels of tolerance or patience
towards individuals with special needs, and how different it is in Canada, where she received quite the opposite treatment towards her daughter.

While working closely with Su-Dae, I saw some similarities between her and my parents. Her determination to do what is best for her family motivated her to seek the best advice and services. Both sets of parents did not settle until their expectations on assistance and support were met. Su-Dae looked into receiving speech and language, occupational, physiotherapy, horse-back riding and music therapies. She also followed advice from teachers and specialists to register Soon-Ei into community programs for children with exceptionalities. Once my sister was diagnosed with mental health, my parents immediately sought a team of counselors, a psychiatrist, a psychologist and medical doctors to support her, the family and her condition.

My family and Soon-Ei’s family are similar in many ways; however, one that stands out to me is the fact that Su-Dae and my parents have higher expectations on their oldest child. In both families, the oldest child has typical development and has the abilities to be independent. The oldest child in both families is open to opportunities and can excel in life. The youngest child in both families has special needs and will require assistance throughout her entire life. In both families, high expectations on academic achievements and other life’s goals are placed onto their capable child because the opportunity for the parents’ expectations to be carried out is now limited to the one child. Provided with the opportunity, I might have interviewed Jung-Oh, Soon Ei’s brother, and questioned whether we shared similar experiences and what his thoughts on parental pressures were.

**Supporting Students in Immigrant Families**

Teachers in North American schools can support students born outside of Canada or students of parents from another country by being culturally sensitive. Teachers being aware of immigrant parents’ values and expectations around education can begin bridging the gap between school and parents’ cultural understanding. Teachers may invite parents into the schools to, not only open the communication
between home and school, but also to show them what happens within the classroom and the accomplishments their children have made in the school. It is important for these parents to learn and understand that a Canadian education system may be drastically different from the experiences they had while living in their home country; therefore, immigrant parents may have a different frame of reference around education and it may not necessarily match the learning their child is receiving while living in Canada.

Exposing the Canadian education system to Asian parents can help them re-evaluate their academic expectations on their children and may alleviate pressures their children may be experiencing. Outlining the curriculum and describing classroom activities and academic expectations set by the Canadian government can illustrate how a Canadian classroom operates and allow the parents to bring their expectations in-line to a realistic and attainable level. Re-evaluating expectations can protect children’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Teachers may want to bring in translators or may need to be creative when communicating with parents from another country when a language barrier exists. Nonetheless, it is imperative for teachers to communicate with parents on a regular basis. Consistent communication is even more crucial in cases where students with special needs are involved. Teachers may want to describe the strategies and interventions used to support the child with special needs to avoid assumptions that nothing is being done to help them achieve school success. In a study on Chinese families of children with disabilities and their expectations of American schools, the parents placed the responsibilities of advocating services for students with special needs on the teachers (Lo, 2008). Lo (2008) observed the parents in her study felt it was the teachers’ role and responsibility to provide the necessary services and supports because they are professional and have the knowledge on how to support students with special needs. I agree in some respects; however, I also believe their sense of entitlement on receiving supports for their child with special needs is inspired by the fact that Asian families value education highly. Asian families are hyperaware of their child making progress in school.
Communication is also necessary in educating Asian parents of children with special needs. If they have limited understanding and knowledge of their child’s exceptionality, then it is difficult for them to support the child at home. Parents may practice the methods used by their teachers and parents while they were students in their home country (Lo, 2008). These practices may not be effective; therefore, it is best to educate the parents and maximize the support around the exceptionality.

**Conclusion**

I am very thankful for the direction I chose and the experiences I gained throughout my process of my final project. I mostly appreciated the therapeutic value in this journey of personal exploration. It proved to be invaluable, benefitting myself, Soon-Ei and her family. My new learning enabled me to resolve any resentful feelings toward my parents and childhood experiences; and the project I created became a tool used to support a family with special needs. I have a new perspective on Asian parents and the influence they have on their children. My understanding of the impact culture has on families has grown. I believe sharing personal stories is a powerful learning tool. Not only can others learn from one’s experiences, but also, one can learn and grow from reflecting on personal experiences. I also believe all teachers and specialists have a responsibility to minimize, if not close, the gap between school and home life of students. Fostering a relationship with open communication between teachers and parents can prevent assumptions and misunderstandings. Having parents and teachers working collaboratively allows for the possibility of optimal support for the children. Sharing and exchanging knowledge between parents and teachers can lead to a better understanding between the all parties involved.
References


